

## **Stepping Out from the Margins: Ireland, Morality, and Representing the Other in Irish Chick Lit.**

By Mary Ryan

In her introduction to a study on Irish writer Kate O'Brien, Adele M. Dalsimer cited the two structures that have long been identified as the heart of Irish culture: as she says, the 'family is at the centre of communal life' and "Catholicism is the anchor of unquestioned orthodoxy and cohesive moral standard" (Dalsimer: 1990, xiii). 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; both Church and state in Ireland maintained that people should hold a certain morality, particularly relating to areas of sexuality and reproduction:

Single motherhood was considered shameful in Ireland at that time and children born outside of wedlock were discriminated against in the law. Domestic violence was widely considered a private issue to be dealt with primarily within "the family", and use of contraception/artificial family planning was illegal. (Connolly: 2005, 3)

Irish society became so fixated on issues of so-called "morality" that they took even further precautions to ensure the moral values of their people were upheld:

As part of the continuing campaign to control the personal morality of young people, the Free State took measures to limit the number of public houses and to reduce opening hours; film censorship was also introduced to protect young minds from corrupting influences. However, the craze for modern dancing, which provided the opportunity for young men and women to associate together in venues outside the control of the Catholic hierarchy, was a particular cause of alarm. (Hill: 2003, 106)

Such strict codes of moral behaviour resulted in Irish people often feeling limited and repressed by society. Such "ideals" for morality among Irish people were even encouraged in various other formats; even the Irish television and radio broadcasting company, RTÉ, was advised 'to defend traditional ideals of marriage and motherhood' (Hill: 2003, 143-144), which were intrinsic to the notion of Irish morality. Irish people therefore felt enormous pressure from a wide variety of outside influences – Church, society, family, even television – as to the path their life should take.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, Irish society underwent many changes which had a direct impact on Irish family life and which were seen to lessen the call for so-called morality, such as easier access to divorce and remarriage, and so ‘the nature of family life for many was radically different at the century’s end’ (Hill: 2003, 243).

However, while progress was undoubtedly made as Irish society became more accepting of behaviours which deviated from the “norm”, issues such as those of lone-parent families (particularly single mothers) and single-sex relationships, among other things, have taken longer to be acknowledged, and have been the source of much controversy and objection. This paper will outline the difficulties “marginal” groups – such as homosexuals and single mothers – faced in an Ireland obsessed with morality, and will then use the example of a selection of Irish chick lit novels to demonstrate how these issues are being acknowledged and voiced by such authors, and how, in doing so, they are helping to distance such groups of people from their currently marginal and largely ignored status.

### **Single Motherhood**

The Irish puritan morality mentioned above spread itself through a huge part of Irish culture, and the development of popular culture was hindered by the application of strict censorship laws. For example, many books, particularly by female writers, were banned for containing scenes which were deemed “unsuitable” for Irish society. Irish writer Kate O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* (1936) was banned for obscenity in Ireland, while her later novel *The Land of Spices* (1941) was also banned due to a ‘brief allusion to a gay male relationship’ (Garnes: 2002, par. 6). Edna O’Brien’s *Country Girls* trilogy was similarly censored, ‘not least because all three books were banned under Ireland’s Censorship Law. In particular, *Girls in their Married Bliss* contains explicit sex scenes that surely must have stuck in the censors’ craw. Reading them today, one must wonder what all the fuss was about’ (Imhof: 2002, 73). Feminist magazine *Spare Rib* was banned in Ireland on numerous occasions, once because it ‘showed women how to examine their breasts’ (Wolf: 1991, 138), and again ‘because it carried information on contraception’ (Connolly: 2005, 39). Films did not escape Irish censorship laws as:

*Gone With the Wind* was not screened in the Republic of Ireland when it was released because the official film censor, James Montgomery, required so many cuts that the distributor withdrew it. Ironically, Montgomery vigorously objected to the childbirth scene! Thus, while the state of maternity was formally recognized with the Irish constitution, the embodied processes of becoming a mother – sex and childbirth – were deemed obscene. (Pramaggiore: 2006, 120)

It is ironic that *Gone with the Wind* was banned because of its childbirth scene, when we consider the sanctity of family and motherhood that was upheld in Irish society. Ireland, however, long viewed sex as a sin, and the only situation which allowed women sexual freedom was within marriage and even then only with a view to conceiving. Even childbirth, with the perceived “uncleanness” of birth, was imposed with purification rituals, such as ‘the ceremony of churching (blessing after childbirth)’ (de Beauvoir: 1997, 178), which supposedly cleansed the woman from the “sin” of having had the sex which resulted in the baby being conceived. Despite assertions regarding the sanctity of motherhood, the reality was that, considering Ireland’s emphasis on chastity and self-restraint, ‘children were only welcomed when born within a union legalised by marriage’ (Hill: 2003, 27); illegitimacy was considered socially acceptable and the unmarried mother found herself “punished” by society for her “deviant” ways. For many women in various societies, the prospect of ‘illegitimate motherhood is still so frightful a fault that many prefer suicide or infanticide to the status of unmarried mother’ (de Beauvoir: 1997, 505). Such fears resulted in many Irish women being conservative in their pre-marital relationships. The Catholic Church maintained that ‘illegitimacy rates were low because of the shame and humiliation with which such a condition was associated’ (Hill: 2003, 29). However, with the absence of reliable, accessible, and affordable contraceptive methods for a long time, it is more likely that other precautions were taken to assure that a child conceived out of wedlock was not considered “illegitimate”, largely in order to protect the mother (and her family) from shame:

It is likely that in many cases couples – Catholic and Protestant – legitimated their expected child by marriage, either through preference or under pressure from family and Church, passing off the ‘early’ birth as premature. Illegitimate children were also frequently brought up by their grandmother or other family member, or in the workhouse or other charitable institution. (Hill: 2003, 29)

Of the women who suffered so much shame and guilt at falling pregnant that they gave their babies up for adoption, their experiences have often remained hidden, their “wrong-doing” silenced. Those women who did fall pregnant outside of marriage – and who remained unmarried and kept the child – had to rely on their families for economic survival, and this was only when the woman in question could depend on her family’s tolerance and acceptance of her “sexual nonconformity”; many Irish ‘parents, particularly those of the middle classes – fearful of public contempt or reluctant to support the economic burden of an unmarriageable daughter – cast their daughters from their homes’ (McCarthy: 2000, 104). Up until the early

1960s, in fact, ‘women who had children outside of marriage were perceived as “Magdalenes”, and were cut off from the community for most of their lives in institutions under Church control’ (O’Connor: 1998, 119). As well as creating shame and controversy for both families and society in general, the unmarried mother is also viewed as problematic in Irish society because it is seen to undermine the sanctity of the family that was inherent to Irish morality:

The pregnant woman evokes not only the fragility of the public/private divide (because her condition makes sexuality visible), but by self-consciously performing pregnancy in defiance of social norms, she implies that national, religious, and gender identities are less stable than they appear. As a multiple and split subject, she acts as an emblem of the underlying indeterminacy of all identities. (Pramaggiore: 2006, 118)

Single motherhood was once considered so shameful in Ireland that ‘children born outside of wedlock were discriminated against in the law’ (Connolly: 2005, 3). However, this situation has changed in Ireland in the last few years, largely due to the fact that ‘the number of unmarried mothers in Irish society continued to increase during the last two decades of the [twentieth] century’ (Hill: 2003, 193). In these early years of the twenty-first century:

Ireland’s birth rate outside marriage is among the highest in Western Europe. There is no simple explanation for these statistics. In the South, everyone over sixteen has had the right to contraception since the early nineties, and with AIDS making it a public health issue, condoms could be bought from machines from 1993. (Hill: 2003, 193)

Whatever the reasons for the high birth rates outside of marriage, it is clear that the consequences of pregnancy outside of marriage are now considered less catastrophic than in earlier decades. Some theorists, such as Pat O’Connor, have even depicted lone parenthood in a positive light, stating how it has the potential to reflect ‘the ability of women to survive on their own, and their willingness to redefine the family, excluding a residential heterosexual tie as the basic element in that unit’ (O’Connor: 1998, 119).

Irish chick lit appears to have similar opinions to Pat O’Connor, as such authors attempt to remove the negativity surrounding single motherhood. It portrays women who become single mothers either by circumstance (in Marian Keyes’ *Watermelon* (1995), 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 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). However, 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 the “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.

## **Homosexuality**

As well as the stigma which was once attached to single mothers, another area which was once the cause of great controversy in Ireland was the issue of homosexuality, which was, ‘according to Catholic theology [and Irish law], a sin’ (Breen: 1993, 170). It has already been stated how books were banned by Irish censorship laws for depicting homosexual relationships. This was often in spite of the fact that, in some cases, homosexuality may not necessarily be approved of, or the word “homosexual” may not even have been used, as in the case of Kate O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices*. In such instances, it was argued that ‘even to mention or suggest the possibility of homosexuality could be read by some as a promotion of it: whether or not homosexuality is approved of in the novel was irrelevant to those who

chose to be offended by it' (Breen: 1993, 168). Even when Irish censorship laws became less severe, to speak of, for instance, 'sex between women would still have been inflammatory' (Enright: 2005, v) as it was seen to provide a threat to 'Catholic nationalism, whose ideal of the lovely Irish girl did not include her falling in love with other women' (Enright: 2005, viii). Of course, it was hardly surprising that homosexuals felt alienated in Irish society; along with 'adopting a censorious attitude towards sexual behaviour and stressing the importance of marriage and family life' (Hill: 2003, 104), homosexuality was another area which saw the Church and state working in accord with one another. Both Irish Church and state argued that the criminalisation of homosexuality served public health, Irish morality, and the institution of marriage, and homosexuality remained illegal in Ireland until as recently as the 1990s. Even feminist discourse was divided on the matter because although meant to liberate all women from patriarchal confines:

Feminist discourse was and still is dominated by heterosexual women, and the area of sexual identity itself was often neglected as a potentially divisive subject, which meant that lesbians felt alienated and unrepresented by mainstream feminism. Heterosexual women themselves appeared to be threatened by lesbian dissenting voices in the movement. (Whelehan: 1995, 160)

Homosexuality has, of course, proved a problematic area for both men and women. Men are, for example, expected to live up to a certain standard of a "masculine ideal", and a gay man is seen as not performing his gender "correctly":

Those men who do not live up to the hegemonic masculine ideal (particularly gay men) may find themselves disadvantaged by the operation of double standards. Heterosexuality is an important component of hegemonic masculinity and gay men's sexuality is evaluated in relation to it. Thus, while prolific sexual activity by heterosexual men may be condoned, the alleged prolific sexual activity of gay men is vilified and forms an important part of homophobic discourse. (Pilcher: 2004, 36-37)

A recent novel by Irish author Colette Caddle, *Between the Sheets* (2008), highlights the negativity surrounding homosexuality in Irish society, as the protagonist learns that, when her brother was young, he was subjected to cruel treatment by their father after he learnt that his son was gay:

'Oh my God! Is that what it was all about? He treated you that way because you were gay?'  
'I'm afraid so. He did everything he could to knock it out of me – literally. He even dragged me down to Father Flynn and made me confess. He asked him what saint we should pray to in order to turn me back to normal. If he caught me even looking at another boy he dragged me out to the shed and took the belt to me.'

‘Oh, Ed, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. Did Mum know that was the reason he treated you so badly?’

He frowned. ‘I’m not sure. We never talked about it. I’m not sure she ever did either – too disgusting to put into words. When Dad was angry or drunk, though, he’d refer to me as a perverted little bugger.’ (Caddle: 2008, 414)

Irish society has also typically rendered lesbians invisible, an occurrence which is ‘rooted in pervasive gendered societal attitudes to Irish women and their sexuality’ (Connolly: 2005, 173). Particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was noted that the ‘Irish women’s movement was not prepared to address the issues and experiences of lesbian feminist activists in Ireland [...] the question of lesbian feminism became one of the points of dissonance within the Irish women’s movement’ (Connolly: 2005, 176). Nevertheless, feminism (and the related bodies of lesbian theory and gender studies), did much to render portrayals of homosexuality in a more positive light. Because lesbianism ‘requires a way of writing about girls that is not solved by marriage’ (Enright: 2005, vi), it connotes a sense of freedom for women, allowing the number of options available to them to increase. It brings women closer to equality with men as it ‘allows their lives to be treated with as much uncertainty and rigour as the lives of boys’ (Enright: 2005, vi-vii). In this sense, lesbianism could be likened to ‘an instance of utopian freedom from inauthentic and repressive bourgeois sexual norms’ (Coughlan: 1993, 77). In Irish terms, writers such as Kate O’Brien ‘render homosexuality unexceptional’ (Dalsimer: 1990, 117) by normalising ‘same-sex love by presenting it with the equal portions of objectivity and sensitivity that infuse her presentation of heterosexual love’ (Dalsimer: 1990, 113). Homosexual relationships are frequently depicted as ultimately more durable and fulfilling than their heterosexual counterparts.

It is hardly surprising then that Irish chick lit writers portray homosexuality in a positive light, considering the trend was arguably already started by such Irish literary fore-sisters as O’Brien. In traditional chick lit novels, homosexuality is visible, thanks to the gay best friend cliché. However, it has been noted that, while these men only serve the purpose of giving the heroine advice on fashion and relationships, in typical chick lit novels they never have any real plot of their own, therefore presenting homosexuality in a one-dimensional representation that lacks any real depth. Additionally, typical chick lit has been criticised for ignoring the existence of lesbians. This is not the case with Irish chick lit. Keyes’ *Last Chance Saloon* (1999), in particular, is unique in that one of the main characters, Fintan, is a homosexual male, and, of the three main protagonists in the book, Fintan’s relationship is shown as the strongest and most loving. *Last Chance Saloon* discusses the link often made

between homosexuality and AIDS. Although he is eventually diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease, a form of cancer, when Fintan originally repeatedly complains of not feeling well, the automatic assumption is that, as a gay man, he has contracted AIDS:

That was the problem whenever a gay friend became sick. The A-word always cropped up. Then she felt uncomfortable with her train of thought – did she think gay people and Aids were uniquely linked? (Keyes: 1999, 130)

Fintan, however, is quick to remind Tara that someone in a heterosexual relationship is just as susceptible to AIDS as homosexuals:

'Look me in the eye,' she interrupted forcefully, 'and tell me that you've had an HIV test recently.' [...]

'Have *you* had an HIV test?' Fintan surprised her by asking.

'No, but...'

'But what?'

She paused delicately. How could she say this?

Fintan interrupted, 'Do you always use a condom with Thomas?'

In different circumstances Tara might have laughed as she remembered the song-and-dance Thomas had made on their first night when Tara had tried to get him to wear a condom. 'Like eating sweets with the wrapper on,' he'd whinged. 'Like going paddling in your shoes and socks.' She'd never suggested it again. Luckily she'd still been on the pill from the Alasdair days.

'Well, no, we don't always, but...'

'And has Thomas had an HIV test?'

As *if*, Tara thought. He'd be the last man on earth to have one. 'No, but...' [...]

She said nothing, damning her misplaced, knee-jerk concern. There was probably more chance of *her* being HIV positive than Fintan. (Keyes: 1999, 158-159)

As well as providing a warning about the dangers of unprotected sex in both hetero- and homosexual relationships, extracts such as this are also helping to normalise homosexuality and lessen the stigma that has traditionally been attached to it, in this case by showing how HIV and AIDS are no longer "gay diseases". This "normalising" of homosexuality is also witnessed in novels such as Caddle's *Between the Sheets*, in which, as the following extract shows, a gay man discusses his feelings about a previous relationship. Although he is having the conversation with a heterosexual woman, both characters can empathise with each other, therefore portraying gay and straight relationships as being no different from one another; in other words, love and feelings are the same, no matter the gender of the people involved:

Dana squeezed his hand sympathetically. It was almost two years now since Wally had broken up with his partner. They had been together for an astounding twelve years when he discovered that Giles had been unfaithful at least twice. Even then, Walter was ready to forgive the love of his life but Giles decided to leave anyway. The agent hadn't dated since,

and although he pretended interest in every gorgeous young man he met, Dana knew that it would be a long time before he trusted anyone again.

She could relate to that now as she never could before. (Caddle: 2008, 31-32)

Representations of lesbians in chick lit are still quite rare; as the protagonist in *Watermelon* points out, ‘lesbianism hadn’t been done to death yet. People still got a little bit hot under the collar about it’ (Keyes: 2003b, 343). Nevertheless, Irish chick lit is beginning to make attempts to remove the silence surrounding lesbianism, as well as voicing the mixed reactions and views it often provokes. From Anna’s mother in *Anybody Out There?*, we are told that, ‘bad and all as her daughters are, at least they’re not lesbians who French-kiss their girlfriends beside suburban leylandii’ (Keyes: 2006, 8). The lesbian relationships themselves are, however, shown as being more enduring than heterosexual unions. The surprise lesbian affair that begins in Kate Thompson’s *Living the Dream* (2004) – between the protagonist’s sister and her partner’s ex-girlfriend, both of whom were thought to be heterosexual – is still going strong in her next novel, *Sex, Lies and Fairytales* (2005), and shows no signs of ending any time soon. By associating lesbianism with positive and desirable attributes, as Irish chick lit is doing, these novels are helping to portray lesbian existence as ‘a healthy lifestyle chosen by women’ (Zimmerman: 1981, 79), thus helping to eliminate the stigma historically attached to it.

Although attempts are now being made to compile a specific history of what it is to be gay, lesbian, and bisexual in Ireland, this process is still in its very early stages. It proves to be problematic when we realise that a ‘marked difference between contemporary LBT communities in Ireland and those in other Western countries can be discerned in terms of the age profile of such groups – there is not a visible presence of “out” lesbians/bisexuals over the age of sixty in this country, which is telling’ (Connolly: 2005, 192). Perhaps this is because, while the decriminalisation of homosexuality occurred in Britain in 1967, it was not decriminalised in Ireland until as recently as 1993. Additionally, while there have been remarkable changes in the Irish attitude to LGBT communities in the past decade or two, it is nevertheless obvious that some prejudices remain:

So for example, although current equality legislation guarantees protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, there have been few cases taken so far involving lesbians. To make such a case involves taking a public stand, and clearly few lesbians are ready to take this step. (Connolly: 2005, 173)

Despite such difficulties, the ‘ongoing development of LGBT communities and cultures in a variety of locations is indicative of a thriving and active community moving into the twenty-first century’ (Connolly: 2005, 193). In terms of this realisation, we can be optimistic that Ireland will continue to advance its tolerance and acceptance of homosexuals, just as it has raised its awareness of other areas which were once considered to deviate from the “norm”.

### **Race: The Next Step?**

Racial prejudice, it is said, ‘is often based on ignorance or fear, particularly when there is little contact between people of different nations or ethnic groups’ (Fitzgerald: 1992, 249). Although becoming more diverse in terms of ethnicity and cultures in recent years, Ireland, in particular, is recognised as a society that has traditionally been, and perhaps to a point still is, predominantly white, and its struggles with racial prejudice have therefore tended to be just as problematic as its battles against sexism:

The emerging struggle of minority groups for equal rights and protection against discrimination in Ireland has its parallel in the feminist movement. After long and hard battles sexism is now at least recognised as existing, though we have not yet managed to free Irish society of sexist thinking and behaviour. Racism is still struggling to be recognised as an inequity. (Fitzgerald: 1992, 253-254)

That much typical chick lit tends to only depict predominantly white characters is an example of how racist attitudes have, albeit unconsciously, been transmitted. In order to combat racism, we are encouraged to ‘change both our thinking and our behaviour in order to develop anti-racist practices. We need to monitor our conscious and unconscious attitudes if we are to bring about individual and collective change’ (Fitzgerald: 1992, 252). Although not yet as common, Irish chick lit also is also showing a recognition that we live in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society, thus altering the assumption that chick lit characters are unquestionably white. In Keyes’ *Sushi for Beginners* (2000), Lisa’s husband originally caused quite a commotion when he was first introduced to her mother:

Though her heart had nearly stopped with fright the first time she’d met Oliver. If only she’d been *warned* that her daughter’s boyfriend was a hard, gleaming, six-foot-tall black man. Coloured man, African-American man, whatever the correct phrase was. She had nothing against them, it was just the unexpectedness of it. (Keyes: 2007, 39)

Keyes’ latest novel *The Brightest Star in the Sky* (2009) also contains a large number of characters from various parts of Africa and Eastern Europe. In doing so, Irish chick lit novels are acknowledging that the races and ethnicities located in Ireland are expanding in recent

years, and it is refreshing that these changes are being portrayed in novels by Irish writers. Though still in early stages, that Irish chick lit is making attempts to acknowledge the existence of other races and cultures is a positive step forward for the genre, and for Irish fiction in general. If such trends continue – and, as Ireland is becoming more diverse in terms of race, it is likely that they *will* continue – Irish chick lit authors may be viewed as actively influencing ‘the role Ireland plays in ensuring that we live in a society which respects fundamental rights and rejects all forms of discrimination’ (Fitzgerald: 1992, 265).

## Conclusion

It has been suggested that any discussion of the changes in Irish society over the past few decades ‘tends to elicit two views: that it has changed completely, and that it has not changed at all’ (O’Connor: 1998, 1). While it is certainly possible to argue for the latter view, it is also important to note that life in Ireland has undoubtedly changed considerably in recent decades, and ‘in modern Ireland things which were once hidden are now being told’ (Hill: 2003, 218). This exploration of Irish chick lit is demonstrating how such novels are allowing authors to speak loud and clear about Irish issues, particularly those which were once hidden and silenced, and were largely related to the notion of Irish morality and purity, which has pervaded many areas of Irish life. Until recently, there existed a ‘notion that the only sexuality compatible with Irishness is marital heterosexuality’ (Pramaggiore: 2006, 118), and issues of race and ethnicity were rarely discussed in Irish fiction. That Irish chick lit writers are attempting to tackle such topics is a huge step towards portraying Ireland as a more tolerant and racially-aware society, therefore helping to diminish the traditional ‘homogeneity of the Irish nation in terms of race, gender, and sexuality’ (Pramaggiore: 2006, 118). Irish chick lit is thus developing into a socially-aware genre in terms of positively portraying, and promoting, difference and individuality, and, in doing so, may finally help to break the restraints of the notions of Irish “morality” that have repressed and controlled Ireland for so long.

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