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## You Still Can Have It All, But Just in Moderation: Neoliberal Gender and Post-Celtic Tiger 'Recession Lit'

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**Abstract:** This essay reads 'Chick Lit' of the post-Celtic Tiger recession as a central cultural site contributing to the logics of neoliberalism and the gendering of Irish national identity. The economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger saw dramatic social and economic transformation in Ireland. Neoliberal principals resulted in rapid economic growth and the development of a new consumerism. This was reflected in Celtic Tiger 'Chick Lit', which foregrounded the woman as an icon of excess. In tandem with this, postfeminist values implied that these consumer-driven lifestyles were available to everyone. This centering of choice in postfeminism is a key site where the gendering of neoliberalism occurs. In 'Chick Lit', socio-political interests converge on the body of the woman to become stories of individual empowerment based on market-based choices. Centrally, this essay considers how a recent sub-genre of 'Recession Lit' adapts the generic trope of 'having it all' in the post-Celtic Tiger economic downturn. It explores three works from 2013: Cathy Kelly's *The Honey Queen*, Sheila O'Flanagan's *The Things We Never Say* and Cecelia Ahern's *How to Fall in Love*. These books centralize individual adaptation in the boom to bust period. Their protagonists are resourceful women, who through their emotional strength and enterprising nature can still have it all, however, in moderation. To varying degrees, these works draw attention to the role of neoliberal policy in the current recession, as they reconcile it. Doing so, they serve to naturalize the structural causes of inequality and intensify the rhetoric of neoliberal choice.

**Keywords:** Chick Lit, postfeminism, neoliberalism, gender, recession, Ireland

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## **You Still Can Have It All, But Just in Moderation: Neoliberal Gender and Post-Celtic Tiger**

### **'Recession Lit'**

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#### **Introduction**

'Chick Lit' is a term used to describe a genre of popular Women's fiction that is marketed in a particular niche way perceived to reflect the parameters of the genre and appeal to its readership. Generally, its characteristics can be said to be a focus on young to middle aged, predominantly white, middle class women and an emphasis on personal growth in the context of romantic and family relationships and the bonds of friendship and community. In *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young take a dual perspective on the genre by considering its development as 'the new women's fiction of the twentieth century' as well as the ways in which it operates to define its reader: 'Chick lit is simultaneously fiction about and for the "new woman," the contemporary reader of our postfeminist culture, and a new "woman's fiction," a form of popular literature (largely) written by women for a female audience.'<sup>1</sup> Hugely commercially successful, these works provide an important cultural site for the negotiation of contemporary social issues. However, the culture of postfeminism that frames much of twenty-first-century 'Chick Lit' produces a particular set of gendered and racialized fantasies about what it means to be a desiring individual in the twenty-first century. In particular, dominant 'Chic Lit' centralizes the white, middle-class subject and emphasizes freedom of choice in the spheres of personal, family and professional life under the assumption that feminism has succeeded.

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, 'Introduction', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-13 (p. 12).  
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As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra note: 'Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the "pastness" of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated.'<sup>2</sup> In recent criticism, reaction to 'Chick Lit' has largely been divided between those who read it as a sign of a postfeminist and consumerist worldview, and those who argue for the potential inherent in the genre as a space to represent difference. For example, Ferris and Young draw attention to the multitude of subgenres of 'Chick Lit', which include: 'Mommy Lit', 'Hen Lit', 'Ethnick Lit' and 'Lad Lit'.<sup>3</sup> In their view, as a mainstream genre, but also one that is open to alternative voices, 'Chick Lit' and the scholarship that pertains to it hold the potential to raise questions about issues of 'subjectivity, sexuality, race and class in women's texts'.<sup>4</sup> In this vein, Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai read 'Chick Lit' as a cultural site that creates a particular '(trans)national, racialised feminist subject'. However, their analysis of South Asian American 'Chick Lit' problematizes this construction. Their approach seeks 'not to find an "outside" to neoliberal formations, but rather to read for contradictions internal to the logics of neoliberalism that suggest potential spaces for resistance, and for re-imagining the ways in which subjects are produced'.<sup>5</sup> Taking these analyses as a starting point, this essay brings these considerations of gender and neoliberalism to a study of another recent subgenre of 'Chick Lit', 'Recession Lit'.<sup>6</sup> In the global economic crises of the early twenty-first-century, 'Recession Lit' represents a new turn in the 'Chick Lit' genre, in which a significant loss of income threatens the generic trope

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<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'Introduction', in *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-25 (p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> Ferris and Young, pp. 5-7.

<sup>4</sup> Ferris and Young, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai, 'Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras: Chick Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism', *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 8:2 (2008), pp. 1-31 (p. 8-9).

<sup>6</sup> Marion McKeone, 'The Rise of Recession Lit.', *The Irish Times*, 26 September 2009 (p. 15).

of 'having it all'. This article examines recent Irish 'Chick Lit' as it approaches the inequalities of the post-Celtic Tiger recession, arguing that despite some internal contradiction the genre adapts to maintain the middle-class neoliberal subject produced in the boom period.

Neoliberal ideology refers to a set of economic principles that have steadily taken hold since the 1970s and include deregulation, a reduction of public expenditure on social welfare, and the privatization of state owned services. It creates an economic system that centralizes the rule of the market as opposed to state intervention, and individual responsibility as opposed to public services. In this context, social status is perceived as a personal choice rather than as a consequence of structural inequality. This overlooks the issue of the unequal distribution of power, in particular in the form of crony-capitalism, in which self-serving ties between the government, the financial sector and property elites place economic influence in the hands of a few, at the expense of wider public interests. In Ireland in particular, the post-Celtic Tiger years have lain bare how such economies can manipulate trade interests at devastating social cost. First tracing a brief history of Irish 'Chick Lit' as it inflects thirty years of social change, this essay will then focus on the current phase of 'Recession Lit' that has come out of Ireland. In the face of changing economic circumstances brought about by financial crises, popular culture of the recession maintains postfeminist, neoliberal subject formations by reinstating particular gendered assumptions about women, men, and domestic and paid work.<sup>7</sup> 'Chick Lit' is no exception. However, it is an important site of meaning creation that has been somewhat overlooked, as it falls between fields of popular culture and literary studies. Irish 'Chick Lit' inflects gender and neoliberal ideologies in particular ways for an audience that, though it has experienced

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<sup>7</sup> Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity* (London: Duke University Press, 2014).

rapid economic and social change over the second half of the twentieth century, is also involved in an ongoing struggle with the Catholic ideology that informed the social policy of the State. In particular, these texts reconcile a history of loss and dislocation, notably recent revelations about the Church and State run mother and baby homes, through fantasies of return and reconciliation. To varying degrees, they contain reference to the inherited political, economic and social contexts that inform the current crises, drawing attention to the role of neoliberal policy in recent history as they reconcile it.

### **Phases of Irish 'Chick Lit'**

'Chick Lit' by Irish writers has been hugely commercially successful in Ireland and abroad. The work of Cecilia Ahern is a case in point. Since the publication of the international bestseller *PS, I Love You* in 2004, Ahern has produced 10 bestsellers in 10 years. *PS, I Love You* was adapted to a film in 2007, followed by a film version of her second book, *Where Rainbows End*, in 2014. With other such projects in development and over 22 million books sold to date, Ahern's popularity and influence continues to grow. Yet despite the success of Ahern, 'Chick Lit's' reception by media and cultural institutions is ambiguous. Commenting on the popularity of a genre with expanding boundaries and searching stories 'capable of packing a powerful punch', the message in the *Irish Independent* newspaper in November 2011 was a celebratory one, urging, 'don't fear the pink'.<sup>8</sup> However, in February 2012 the same newspaper claimed: 'Chick lit has turned into a kind of giant self-destructive and self-perpetuating dying star whose gravitational pull is taking down everything in its path,

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<sup>8</sup> Lorraine Courtney, 'Chick lit vies for top book awards', *Irish Independent*, 7 November 2011 <<http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/chick-lit-vies-for-top-book-awards-2927028.html>> [Accessed 23 December 2014].

polluting the world with a landfill of pink high-heels'.<sup>9</sup> Contradictory reactions such as this are, however, nothing new. Anxious and derogatory attitudes have long been applied to the popular narratives of women writers. In 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne, referring to a bestseller market dominated by sensationalist fiction, described how: 'America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed'.<sup>10</sup> This is representative of a wider set of prejudices and assumptions in the history of the novel in English and an anxiety about the woman writer whose texts hold the potential to disturb dominant subject formations. Since its rise in the eighteenth century, the novel has been broadly implicated in middle class economic and moral concerns, as well as an important site for negotiating the problems and possibilities of prevailing notions of identity. 'Chick Lit', as Stephanie Harzewski demonstrates in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, appropriates and departs from the novel of manners, the popular romance and the Bildungsroman (coming of age) novel.<sup>11</sup> Given this heritage, this essay draws on the work of Nancy Armstrong, who theorises the cultural power of the novel to propose that a desiring subject is formed in and through the novel.<sup>12</sup> Through the novel, according to Armstrong, the criteria pronouncing sexual desirability evolved from fortune and family name to 'virtue'.<sup>13</sup> Following fiction, social and political writings asserted an ideal of domesticity, and social experience came to mirror this, defining contrasting male and female spheres. In

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<sup>9</sup> 'Is the chick lit train running out of steam', *Irish Independent*, 19 February 2012  
<<http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/is-the-chicklit-train-running-out-of-steam-3023801.html>>  
[Accessed 23 December 2014].

<sup>10</sup> Faye Halpern, 'Notes', in *Sentimental Readers: The Rise, Fall and Revival of a Disparaged Rhetoric* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2013), pp. 165-96 (p. 166).

<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Armstrong, 1987, p. 8.

other words, the domestic novel antedated an ideal of desire as universal with the illusion that this ideal was subjective and independent of politics.<sup>14</sup> The main point of Armstrong's argument is that modern consciousnesses are a construct of domestic fiction: 'written representations of the self allowed the modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality.'<sup>15</sup> In this view, subjectivity is constituted through strategies of representation. Following this, she argues that cultural hegemony is central to the formation of the modern political State. Armstrong therefore proposes reading the novel as a history of the operations of hegemony in order to expose them. Such a reading of 'Chick Lit', which considers narrative as a discourse producing history and therefore broadly implicated in the logics of neoliberalism and the gendering of national identity, allows for the examination of the extent to which these authors press against aesthetic structures and by implication unsettle dominant representations. This essay considers Irish 'Chick Lit', therefore, as it signals changing social and economic conditions in Ireland over the past thirty years and in particular the inequalities of the post-Celtic Tiger recession. The central question in my analysis, then, is how Irish 'Recession Lit' dramatises the consequences of neoliberal policies in public and private spheres and in what ways its solutions adapt the principal of living a life of ones choosing; I consider the tension between feminism and neoliberalism to ask whether expressions of personal choice in these works serve wider emancipatory goals or instead divert political and economic critique to converge with the values of neoliberalism.

The Irish 'Chick Lit' genre can be said to have appeared in two phases in the latter twentieth century, the first in the 1980s and the second in tandem with the Celtic Tiger. In

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<sup>14</sup> Armstrong, 1987, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Armstrong, 1987, p. 8.

each case, it provides a window into changes in Irish society. Most recently, a third, recessionary phase can be identified in contemporary Irish 'Chick Lit'. It was Patricia Scanlan who started the boom in Irish 'Chick Lit' in the late 1980s, and, in an article on Irish Women's Popular Fiction, Kathy Cremin applies a psychoanalytic perspective to demonstrate that Scanlan's work dramatises an important set of transitions within the private and public sphere.<sup>16</sup> These novels assume 'a kind of feminist folk knowledge'<sup>17</sup> in the life of Irish women and draw attention to the new place of consumerism in the Irish economy. Their emphasis lies in consumption, as it guards against the loss that derives from the shift away from home. As Cremin puts it: 'It is the symbolic destruction of the home that facilitates these excessive narrative consumptions: yearning, wanting, shopping, eating, buying and so forth. In terms of Irish women's social history the heroine's repudiation of abstinence and martyrdom is exceptionally striking'.<sup>18</sup> Centrally, these novels play on need.<sup>19</sup> They draw on the principals of liberal feminism to demonstrate the lack of opportunity for female expression of desire within the conventional romance narrative. Instead, they foreground women's relationships with each other as their best hope in providing the emotional support necessary for personal growth.

The second phase of Irish 'Chick Lit', occurring in the years of the Celtic Tiger, presented anxieties of a more individualized kind. Dominantly preoccupied with women's affluence and sexual expression, the woman as an icon of excess may be seen in works from the boom period. In tandem with this, postfeminist values implied that these consumer-driven lifestyles were available to everyone. In postfeminist thought, gender equality is a

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<sup>16</sup> Kathy Cremin, 'Satisfaction Guaranteed? Reading Irish Women's Popular Fiction' in *New Voices in Irish Criticism*, ed. by P.J. Matthews (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 75-83.

<sup>17</sup> Cremin, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> Cremin, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Cremin, p. 82.

given and feminism imposes limitations on the individual; the emphasis lies in individual choice, whereby fulfilment may be achieved through family life as much as through paid employment. Paradoxically, this centring of choice in postfeminism is a key site where the gendering of neoliberalism occurs. The notion of self-creation through consumption complements government policy that foregrounds the idea of self-interested citizens with agency over their own lives. In 'Chick Lit', socio-political interests converge on the body of the woman to become stories of individual empowerment based on market-based choices. As Alison Phipps describes the politics of the body in neoliberalism: 'Success is measured by individuals' capacity for self-care via the market, and those who do not achieve their potential are viewed as failures rather than as victims of oppressive social structures'.<sup>20</sup> In 'Chick Lit', this successful, responsible individual is predominantly heterosexual, middle class and white. As in the Victorian novel that represents an ideal of womanhood in the 'angel in the house', she represents dominant middle class political and moral interests, which she exerts upon her family and society more broadly. Angela McRobbie describes the new neoliberal feminist subject as embodied through the figure of the middle-class mother:

This idea of active (i.e. *en route* to the gym), sexually confident motherhood marks an extension of its pre-maternal equivalent, the ambitious and aspirational young working woman. It is also consistently pitched against an image of the abject, slovenly and benefit-dependent 'underclass' single mother, the UK equivalent of the US 'welfare queen'.<sup>21</sup>

As McRobbie hypothesises, this figure is informed by 1970s liberal feminism with an emphasis on equality, however, drawn into popular neoliberal hegemony, she is realigned

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<sup>20</sup> Alison Phipps, *The Politics of the Body* (Cambridge; MA: Polity Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Angela McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism', *New formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 80-1 (2013), 119-37 (p. 120).

with the interests of the political right. The evolution of the neoliberal feminist subject as theorised by McRobbie may be viewed in the genealogy of Irish 'Chick Lit', which in its first phase is inspired by liberal feminist principals, later developing into a form of conservative feminism that affirms the project of neoliberalism. For example, Sorcha Gunne considers 'Chick Lit' of the Celtic Tiger period with particular reference to 'Chick Lit' author Melissa Hill. Gunne argues that 'Chick Lit' of this period reaffirms patriarchal-capitalism by continuing a tradition that positions the woman as allegory for Ireland in nationalist literature, as this exerts a form of symbolic violence on women:

Re-animating the allegorical image of Caitlín Ní Houlihan in novels like *All Because of You* reasserts – both implicitly and explicitly – the atavistic claim in the Constitution that a woman's place is in the home. The domino effect of this is profound for individual and collective reproductive rights; childcare; labour and employment markets; and personal relationships.<sup>22</sup>

There are, of course, exceptions; Mary Ryan argues that there are authors who are experimenting with the generic formulae of 'Chick Lit' to represent sexualities and ethnicities that are largely marginalized in Irish society.<sup>23</sup> Ryan refers to the work of Marian Keyes in particular, an important figure in the Irish 'Chick Lit' market. However, without underestimating the importance of representation, it might be argued that these depictions offer individualized solutions to problems of discrimination, containing little critique of systems of institutional power and privilege.

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<sup>22</sup> Sorcha Gunne, 'Contemporary Caitlín: Gender and Society in Celtic Tiger Popular Fiction', *Études Irlandaises*, no. 2, 37 (2012), 143-58. <<http://etudesirlandaises.revues.org/3202>> (page 9 of 13).

<sup>23</sup> Mary Ryan, 'Trespassing on Ireland's "Norms": Irish Chick Lit and Ireland's "Others"', *Trespassing Journal: an online journal of trespassing art, science, and philosophy*, no. 1, (Spring 2012). <[http://trespassingjournal.com/?page\\_id=170](http://trespassingjournal.com/?page_id=170)>.

The gendering of neoliberalism comes to the fore in 'Recession Lit', a recent sub-genre of 'Chick Lit' invoked in the third phase of recessionary Irish 'Chick Lit'. In an article on 'Chick Lit' of the Great Recession, Jennifer Scanlon explores the way the recent global crises features in US 'Chick Lit'.<sup>24</sup> She argues that the genre has adapted to promote consumerism and prudence simultaneously. US 'Recession Lit' largely considers a wealthy social sphere, typically centred on Wall Street, where it is likely to be millionaire husbands who have lost their jobs. The protagonist must scale back her spending and adopt middle class moral values in order to live out her dream. However, 'the recession does not serve to critique the American dream linking money and happiness'.<sup>25</sup> Instead, it reinforces one of its essential components: 'being rich may corrupt the wealthy, but will, likely, only enhance the lives of the less-well-off'.<sup>26</sup> Although the rich may have caused the economic meltdown, 'Chick Lit' protagonists can be wealthy and live 'good' lives:

Each one, for example, learns that she could survive living more economically if she needed to, but thanks to her solid ethical core, combined with her female intelligence, her middle-class values, and perhaps some of her husband's or ex-husband's resources— well, thank goodness, she will not actually have to.<sup>27</sup>

The recessionary phase of Irish 'Chick Lit' demonstrates some features that are continuous with those outlined by Scanlon, in particular, an emphasis on middle-class values. However, many of its aspects are particular to the Irish socio-political situation. As Cremin argues, although in many ways popular fictions are generically fixed, '[the] way that genre conventions are inflected for their Irish audience allows us to explore the accommodations

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<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, 'What's an Acquisitive Girl to Do? Chick Lit and the Great Recession', *Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal*, no. 8, 42 (2013), pp. 904-922.

<sup>25</sup> Scanlon, p. 908.

<sup>26</sup> Scanlon, p. 908.

<sup>27</sup> Scanlon, p. 908.

between what is culturally new and what is culturally typical'.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, these works allow us to reflect on Irish citizenship in a global community, as well as how the rise of neoliberalism in Ireland provides insight into the wider world.

The Celtic Tiger years of the mid-nineties to mid-noughties saw dramatic social and economic transformation in Ireland. Neoliberal principals centralised deregulation and the rule of the market, resulting in rapid economic growth, the development of a new consumerism and, in the latter years, a housing and property boom. The boom was led by Irish developers and capitalised by Irish banks that relied heavily on loans from European banks. It was characterised by greed and cronyism that placed economic influence in the hands of property and financial elites. In recent years, as the world has seen global financial crises, Ireland has experienced a dramatic recession. As a small, open economy, Ireland was particularly susceptible to the fluctuations of international markets. However, the home-grown property bubble exacerbated this. The bubble burst and the State borrowed massively to bail out the banking sector, with disastrous social consequences. This included significant cuts in public sector spending and social welfare services, dramatic unemployment, unfinished 'ghost estates', and a crash in house prices.<sup>29</sup>

The boom years also saw an increased number of women enter the Irish workforce, unsettling traditional gender roles. However, the lack of state subsidised childcare promoted a system of inequality where the burden of domestic duties continued to fall on women. When recession came, unsurprisingly, the gendered division of labour was reasserted. It is not a coincidence that the economic fallout of the Celtic Tiger has seen a

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<sup>28</sup> Cremin, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Rob Kitchin, Cian O'Callaghan, Mark Boyle, Justin Gleeson, Karen Keaveney, 'Placing neoliberalism: the rise and fall of Ireland's Celtic Tiger', *Environment and Planning A*, 44 (2012), pp. 1302-26 (p. 1302-3).  
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renewal of cultural debates centring on women's bodies and on motherhood. The inequalities that follow from recession affect women in particular. As Debbie Ging states:

Now that the 'party' is over and Ireland is facing an unprecedented economic crises, the persistence of a postfeminist 'logic' built on consumerism, individualism, and genetic determinism arguably poses an even greater challenge to gender equality as the lippy catchphrases of Girl Power recede and many women find themselves hardest hit by recession, despite the ubiquity of 'mancession' rhetoric.<sup>30</sup>

Under neoliberal ideology, the question of whether to remain in paid employment is seen as a matter of individual choice, a rational deliberation about costs and benefits without reference to constraints such as legal restrictions on migrant workers, lack of reproductive rights, and limited welfare benefits. Such structural constraints are conspicuously absent from the works of recessionary Irish 'Chick Lit' that this essay considers: Cecelia Ahern's, *How to Fall in Love*,<sup>31</sup> Sheila O'Flanagan's, *Things We Never Say*<sup>32</sup> and Cathy Kelly's, *The Honey Queen*.<sup>33</sup> Published in 2013, these works centralise individual adaptation in the boom to bust period and reflect on the consumerist values that characterized the earlier era. With references to Ponzi schemes, ghost estates, redundancy, alcoholism, bullying and suicide, the authors deal with dark subject matter. They also share a preoccupation with the theme of adoption, recalling the history of the Magdalene asylums, and the importance of the bonds of family, home, and community for self-development. Their protagonists are resourceful women, whose emotional strength and enterprising nature ultimately leads to personal happiness. Through their entrepreneurial

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<sup>30</sup> Debbie Ging, 'Culture on the Edge: The Postfeminist Challenge', in *Theory on the Edge: Irish Studies and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, ed. by Noreen Giffney and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 209-20 (p. 209).

<sup>31</sup> Cecelia Ahern, *How to Fall in Love* (London: Harper Collins, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Sheila O'Flanagan, *Things We Never Say* (London: Headline, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Cathy Kelly, *The Honey Queen* (London: Harper Collins, 2013).

actions, these women provide for their own and their families' needs, asserting a particular neoliberal feminist subjectivity. They realize their ambitions in spite of the social and economic powers that might hinder them. While they recognize a history of loss that has haunted Ireland since before the current crises, these novels regenerate the values of neoliberalism by asserting characters that recover from rather than reform the inequalities of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

### **Neoliberal Gender and Post-Celtic Tiger 'Recession Lit'**

The story of Kelly's *The Honey Queen* centres on the interconnecting lives of three women Frankie, Lillie and Peggy. Frankie, although she manages people for a living, struggles to understand her husband, Seth's, experience of redundancy. With Frankie's redundancy to follow, both their dream house and their marriage are under threat. The couple find relief in the discovery of Lillie, Seth's previously unknown sister, and her visit from Australia. Lillie is recently widowed. In Ireland, helping her family and enveloped in the community, Lillie learns to help herself. Twenty-seven year old Peggy is just setting out in life. Determined to make her own way, she has saved enough money to open a craft shop. However, in order to succeed, Peggy must first face the darkness in her past. In *The Things We Never Say*, by O'Flanagan, Abbey is stuck in a rut in San Francisco, recently dumped and struggling to realize her creative potential in her current job. A handsome young solicitor from Ireland brings the news that an Irish grandfather she did not know she had wishes to make amends for the sake of her grandmother who was interned in a Magdalene home many years ago. On her grandfather's death, an unexpected inheritance represents a life changing opportunity for Abbey. However, their denial of this inheritance threatens her grandfather's Irish family, who are crippled by the debts of their irresponsible investments. Ahern's *How*

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*to Fall in Love* begins against the dark backdrop of a ghost estate and the shock of a sudden suicide. When the protagonist, Christine, gains a second opportunity to save a life, she is desperate to help. She makes a pact with Adam, who is about to jump of the Ha'penny Bridge in Dublin, that she can prove life is worth living. In the process, Christine learns how to fall in love.

In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, unemployment has risen dramatically while house prices have crashed. Due to job loss and mortgage payments they can no longer afford, many people in Ireland worry about keeping a roof over their head. *The Honey Queen* emphasizes the impact that redundancy and long-term loss of earnings has on health, wellbeing and lifestyle, in particular in the figure of Seth. Seth was made redundant from his job a month after he and Frankie had moved into the basement of their dream home. With Christmas looming, an eighteen-year-old on 'gap year', a twenty-two-year-old travelling the world, and a crumbling Edwardian villa on a rambling half acre, '[redundancy] had settled over their house like a heavy grey storm cloud'.<sup>34</sup> This affects Seth deeply at a level that Frankie is unable to effect and their marriage suffers as a result: 'If she was shocked, then Seth had been devastated. 'I've failed you,' was all he could say'.<sup>35</sup> His detached behaviour reflects many of the consequences of long-term unemployment. In *Austerity Ireland*, Kieran Allen describes how, 'small daily timetables give meaning, purpose and help organise our mental life. Once they are removed, resignation and purposeless can take their place. [...]Research points to a higher incidence of alcohol disorder, depression, divorce and family conflict'.<sup>36</sup> *The Honey Queen* attributes such problems directly to redundancy because of the recession:

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<sup>34</sup> Kelly, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Kelly, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> Kieran Allen with Brian O'Boyle, *Austerity Ireland: The Failure of Irish Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), p. 66.

'During the day, he watched TV and there'd been a program on redundancy and its effect on people. He had all the worst symptoms and then some. With nothing being built because of the recession, nobody had any use for an architect, especially a fifty-four-year old one'.<sup>37</sup> In this manner, Kelly draws attention to the structural causes of private suffering.

However, the novel maintains postfeminist repolarisation of gender in the different ways the experience of redundancy affects Seth and Frankie. In her discussion of post-Celtic Tiger gender formations, Ging notes that '[the] perception that men are becoming increasingly feminised and disempowered is central to a politics of gender that is underpinned by strict sex-role stereotyping based on biological difference'.<sup>38</sup> As Seth is shown to retreat, Frankie, in contrast, grows in strength. In the face of dwindling finances and a dissolving marriage, Frankie realizes that the loss of her job has given her a greater gift, that of time. Seth's redundancy, it is suggested, is a bigger blow. His psychological security is tied to his role as breadwinner. Frankie, although a high-powered executive, realizes sooner that she is happier in her new domestic life. Effectively, this reinforces cultural assumptions about men, women and paid and domestic work. With Lillie's help, both women succeed in getting their own lives on track as well as pulling Seth out of his depression. Slowly but surely, Lillie and Seth find the drive and DIY skills to realize their dream home. The social causes and effects of redundancy, depression and marginalization are largely sidestepped in this resolution. Although this text gestures that their economic circumstances did not solely arise from patterns of personal decision-making, it essentially supports a neoliberal economy in which structural problems are addressed at the level of the individual.

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<sup>37</sup> Kelly, p. 96.

<sup>38</sup> Debbie Ging, 'All-consuming images: new gender formations in post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland' **\*\*Modified FXC\*\*** in *Transforming Ireland: challenges, critiques, resources* ed. by Debbie Ging, Michael Cronin and Peadar Kirby (Manchester University Press, 2009). <<http://doras.dcu.ie/4545/>>

In recessionary 'Chick Lit', the neoliberal principal by which individuals' success is measured via their capacity for self-care is particularly notable in the culture of entrepreneurialism. This provides an intuitive generic adaptation, as it maintains the tropes of self-fashioning and self-realization in ways that are economically viable. The texts of Kelly, O'Flanagan and Ahern demonstrate a number of parallels in this regard. For example, in *The Honey Queen*, Peggy opens a craft shop called 'Peggy's Busy Bee Knitting and Stitching Shop'. In *Things We Never Say*, Abbey realises her creative potential in nail art. In Ahern's *How to Fall in Love*, Christine has a secret goal to write a self-help book. Meredith, another protagonist in *The Honey Queen*, loses everything she has worked to achieve when she inadvertently becomes accessory to and victim of a Ponzi scheme. Having previously shunned her family for a high-flying career in the city, home now becomes a place of safety from which Meredith reevaluates her life. She is going to run an artists' retreat on the edge of a cliff in Co. Clare, and start painting again. Family and friends agree that the trouble in the city was the best thing that could have happened to her: 'I once heard a businessman say that, for a business to work, first you had to survive two bankruptcies and a fire'. Life's a bit like that – if you can weather the storms, you come out a lot stronger than when you went in.'<sup>39</sup>

Though the protagonists win out in the end, each of these stories is set against a dark backdrop. Peggy is escaping an emotionally bullying father, Abbey has been afraid to tell her unpredictable mother how she feels about a past life of travel and uprooting. Christine's mother died of suicide, and the self-help books are guides that she applies not only to her own life but also to protecting the people around her. In Kelly and O'Flanagan in particular, female bonds are of central importance in the characters' ability to realize their

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<sup>39</sup> Kelly, p. 396.  
Assuming Gender 5:1

goals. Such proactiveness and assertiveness appears progressive in terms of the construction of gendered identity in Irish society. However, as Negra and Tasker argue, ‘recessionary images of female resourcefulness have proliferated in forms that seek to retain traditionalist femininity under conditions of financial exigency, leading to phenomena like the privileging of the female cupcake baker (widespread in media discourse) as the exemplar of adaptive economy and safe female entrepreneurialism.’<sup>40</sup> In this regard, we might ask whether such representations also serve to maintain traditional notions of acceptable femininity. While the protagonists of Irish ‘Recession Lit’ appear to challenge sexual conventions, arguably, they serve to maintain them.

To explore this further, it is illuminating to consider the representation of suburban life central to *The Honey Queen*. This work is set in Redstone, an imaginary suburb of Cork. The village is described in idyllic terms: an Art Deco façade; boutique stores and cafes; mature trees; wrought-iron streetlights; a converted grain storage building retaining the original façade. Suburbia in this example is enveloped in nostalgia. This suburban ideal is built on a neoliberal logic of desire, a lifestyle reminiscent of the boom years exists alongside a thrifty resourcefulness that will allow for the realization of this dream in recession culture. These fantasies typically illustrate white, middle class communities. The consequences of mass suburbanization are downplayed; we do not see estates built on floodplains, houses containing pyrite, or severe poverty. Instead, careful household economics mean that people can afford to buy local organic and homemade produce. The idea of individual choice is lauded over public infrastructure or social welfare, and redundancy is represented as an opportunity to find one’s place in the community.

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<sup>40</sup> Negra and Tasker, 2014, p. 13.  
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Neoliberal feminist discourse of equality and empowerment makes it acceptable to suggest that the individual woman should adapt to changing social circumstances, and not structural systems of gender, class and racial inequality. On this point, we can recall Christine's commitment to self-help books throughout Ahern's *How to Fall in Love*. Ging argues that self-help therapy, rather than questioning the structural causes of inequality, asserts individual transformation: 'While most self-help therapies that address problems of gender relations give the impression of taking radical individual action to change things, they ultimately serve to preserve the status quo'.<sup>41</sup> These books take for granted pre-ordained biological differences between men and women that can be addressed through private solutions and 'expertise'. The extent to which *How to Fall in Love* centralises this economy is striking. Each chapter begins with a 'How to' title, from '1. How to Talk a Man Down', through to '26. How to Find a Positive in a Catch-22'. Through her commitment to self-help literature such as *How to Enjoy Your Life in Thirty Simple Ways*, Christine succeeds in convincing a man to not commit suicide. Instead, he realises that he desires to take his rightful place as heir and CEO of his father's chocolate factory, a wealthy, internationally successful company, and successfully ousts his conniving cousin and morally and financially bankrupt sister - she was running a fake investment scheme - in the process. Initially, she talks him out of jumping off the Ha'penny Bridge by remembering the lines in one of her suicide books: 'Since Simon Conway I had read a few books, trying to figure out what I'd done wrong, how I could have talked him round. [...] I could do this, I told myself, feeling confident and in control.'<sup>42</sup> At the outset of the novel, thirty-six-year-old Simon shot himself in the head in a building on a ghost estate he and his family had been evacuated from for

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<sup>41</sup> Ging, 2009, p. 65.

<sup>42</sup> Ahern, p. 26.

safety reasons. As Christine describes to the detective: ‘Simon had talked mostly about money, about the pressure of having to pay the mortgage on the apartment he wasn’t allowed to live in, and the council, which had a case pending to stop paying for his replacement accommodation, and the fact that he had just lost his job.’<sup>43</sup> It is eventually more about Christine than about Simon; she said something that triggered Simon to pull the trigger and ‘the Simon Conway *experience*’,<sup>44</sup> as she calls it, set her on her current path, which, ultimately, is about her need for forgiveness. While appearing to address structural problems, the text redirects blame away from the politicians, developers and bankers responsible for the crises and towards the necessity for individualised and corporate solutions. Most disturbingly, it neutralises the social factors implicated in male suicide. Ultimately, *How to Fall in Love* is a fundamentally neoliberal text, as it centralizes self-responsibility, promotes market-capitalism, and naturalizes gender polarization of the recession in terms of masculinity in crises versus resourceful femininity.

The texts examined here demonstrate commonality in the ways that they portray gender and maintain the principals of neoliberal governmentality. They also share a preoccupation with the themes of a search for belonging and return to the family home. Considering the historical progression of Irish ‘Chick Lit’, which, as Cremin notes, in its early manifestations represented a shift away from home, this is a notable return. Without underestimating the importance of the representation of mother daughter relationships – as this recalls an earlier phase of Irish ‘Chick Lit’ and represents a liberal feminist principal that precedes neoliberal feminism – it might be argued that these tropes serve to reinstate a bio-determinist view of femininity. Connectedly, these texts also share a theme of

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<sup>43</sup> Ahern, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ahern, p. 4. Italics Ahern’s own.  
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adoption. In particular, both Kelly's and O'Flanagan's texts refer to Ireland's history of Magdalene homes. In *The Honey Queen*, Lillie was given up for adoption in a Dublin convent and 'She'd been told how in 1940s Ireland illegitimate children and their mothers were so badly treated that most women were forced to give their babies away in tragic circumstances'.<sup>45</sup> She was raised in Australia by adoptive parents. A short time after the death of her husband, Lillie receives a letter from a brother she never knew. The letter brings Lillie to Ireland and a period of personal healing, wherein she also helps her brother Seth and his wife Frankie.

*The Things We Never Say* also addresses the subject of the Magdalene homes. In the beginning, it describes a scene from the past in which Abbey's grandmother Dilly attempts to leave the home. Dilly is caught and beaten by a nun, in a scene that graphically illustrates the nun's white cheeks, now flushed pink with anticipation, and the thick leather belt as the first blow hits Dilly across the shoulders, causing her to fall to the ground.<sup>46</sup> We later learn that Dilly was beaten to death, giving birth to her daughter before she died. In the present, her then boyfriend Frank, now an old man seeking to atone, writes his American daughter and granddaughter, Abbey, into his inheritance. Through their engagement with the internment of women and children and the hands of Church and State, importantly, Kelly and O'Flanagan speak to the widespread reality of these abuses and their reverberations for a current generation. Lillie considers how '[sixty-four] years ago, when religious men held the moral compass in their hands, when pregnancy out of wedlock was considered a heinous sin (Dilly) had given birth to a baby girl and placed her in the hands of the Church'<sup>47</sup> and Fred comments on a culture of ongoing violence and lack of State support: 'there's still

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<sup>45</sup> Kelly, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> O'Flanagan, p.6.

<sup>47</sup> Kelly, p. 125-6.

stuff going on. Abuse of kiddies, for example. Violence in the family. Women having to run away and not having anywhere to run to. And this government doesn't give them enough help, continued Fred. They've cut funding to lots of very worthwhile projects'.<sup>48</sup> However, there is a sense in both works that the past is in the past: 'The past was a different country, he knew that'<sup>49</sup>; 'A stór, you might be thinking it was cruel because of the way it happens today, but then, sure, she'd have been ostracized. Mother Vincent in the town was a good woman, she said she'd help, seeing as how Michael had been killed and that. She came up with the plan and that was that'.<sup>50</sup> This functions to maintain neoliberal values by suggesting that the present transformation in Irish society was acquired not only by moving away from the controlled markets of the past but also by a shift in cultural values towards tolerance and openness.

If, as Armstrong argues, fiction has significant implications for our societies understanding of identity, this underlies the importance of considering fantasies of women's lives in Irish 'Chick Lit', as they provide insight into neoliberal gender in the popular culture of the recession. As the representations of 'Recession Lit', inflected in particular ways in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, demonstrate, it is important for us as a critical community to engage productively with the works of these writers, as relevant not only to women, but to the cultural community as a whole. In neoliberal Ireland, the current economic crises arose out of a culture of crony-capitalism involving politicians, developers and bankers. Tax breaks, high rents, cutbacks in social housing and banks pushing loans caused a housing bubble in the latter years of the Celtic Tiger. When the bubble burst, the State borrowed heavily to bail out the banks, resulting in a steep reduction of public

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<sup>48</sup> O'Flanagan, p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> O'Flanagan, p. 73.

<sup>50</sup> Kelly, p. 328. 'A stór' is an Irish term of endearment that can be used to mean 'darling'.  
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expenditure, at significant social cost. In a time of mass unemployment and with little state support and few reproductive rights, a legacy of Catholic ideology in State politics, women have been hardest hit in this climate. However, in the texts under consideration in this essay, the rhetoric is one of individual responsibility, seen in the figure of the new neoliberal feminist subject who is white, heterosexual and middle class. While they gesture to past oppressions, and comment on present difficulties, this is largely reconciled through the trope of return and reconciliation. Furthermore, there is a sense of divide between the worlds of a Catholic past and a liberal present. It is notable that Kelly and O'Flanagan both retain the importance of mother-daughter relationships and the bonds between women, suggestive of the values of liberal feminism that inspired an earlier phase of Irish 'Chick Lit'. However, though it maintains some of the characteristics of its earlier manifestations, Irish 'Recession Lit' has responded to the post-Celtic Tiger period by adapting the consumerist values of the boom in ways that accommodate neoliberal capitalism.

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