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Feminist Noir or Chick Noir? – Protagonist, Voice, Tone and Sexuality in Female-Led Contemporary Noir Fiction

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**Feminist Noir or Chick Noir? – Protagonist, Voice, Tone  
and Sexuality in Female-Led Contemporary Noir Fiction**

Exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
award of PhD. by Publication, University of Huddersfield,  
accompanied by hard copies of *Our Father, Who Art Out  
There...Somewhere* (2011)

I am the sole author of the above work.

Alison Taft, August 2018

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## Abstract

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This exegesis is a critical and reflexive commentary on my first novel (Taft, A.J. (2011) *Our Father, Who Art Out There...Somewhere*, Caffeine Nights: Kent) and my struggle to fit my writing to pre-existing or newly-emerging genres.

At the time *Our Father* was published (September 2011) a new publishing category was seeking to establish itself in the marketplace. Chick Noir first emerged as a feminist reinvention of the traditionally male noir genre with stories centred around a criminal story question. However, following the phenomenal commercial success of chick noir books like *Before I Sleep* (Watson, S.J. 2011), *Gone Girl* (Flynn, Gillian, 2012), and *Girl On The Train* (Hawkins, Paula, 2015) our understanding of what constitutes a chick noir text has changed.

This exegesis examines my attempts to contextualise *Our Father* within the framework of Chick Noir, both as it existed in 2011 and as it has developed since. It has led to me looking at other possible categories for my writing including Feminist Crime Fiction and Feminist Noir.

## Introduction

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*Our Father, Who Art Out There...Somewhere* is the story of Lily Appleyard, a working-class woman from Lancashire who attempts to find her birth father, a man she has never met. When she gets a third party agency to track him down, he refuses contact. Encouraged by her best friend, Jo, Lily first stalks her father, then kidnaps his teenage daughter, Fiona. After a difficult start, the half-sisters join forces to teach their father a lesson about what it means to be a family.

*Our Father* is a feminist subversion of the sexual stereotypes of traditional Noir. The central (male) investigator role – the revenge seeker of Noir – is now female and played by Lily (aided and abetted by her best friend, Jo, a radical socialist feminist.) The femme fatale appears but in male form - men are the sexual beings who are not to be trusted. (Lily's father left Lily's mother because he was having an affair with another woman. Stuart, Fiona's boyfriend, falls in love with Lily and kisses her, which ultimately leads to the destruction of Lily's dream of a united family.) Jo often references men by their sex organs (using terms such as 'prick', 'dick', 'cock'.) Perhaps I am unconsciously trying to limit the role of men to the sexual sphere, in the same way as Noir restricts the role of its women. I want the women to be the initiators of the action – to create, rather than react to, the events of the story.

Despite never having embraced the noir genre as a reader, it is easy for me to see how *Our Father* borrows its traditions, albeit while subverting the sexual stereotypes. It is in fact easier to place *Our Father* alongside traditional noir stories than it is to contextualise it as either Chick Lit or Chick Noir. *Our Father* differs from both 'chick' genres in one key area, which effectively bars its entry to either: *Our Father's* main narrative drive is not focussed on the sexual relationship between men and women. Instead, like Noir, its focus is on a criminal story question.

When Chick Noir first emerged it appeared that this absence of focus on the primary relationship between men and women was going to be one of the hallmarks that set the genre apart from Chick Lit. In the early days, reviewers and book bloggers sought to define the rising trend in these darker stories aimed at the contemporary woman:

There is a new modern fiction category on the block; chick noir which is post-modern chick lit with an edge. This differs from chick lit which is all about getting the guy and living happy ever after while chick noir is much more dark and features single women who grow to be happy in their own skin and [are] not obsessive about being married.<sup>1</sup>

Authors of the early chick noir texts, like Carrie Adams and Jane Fallon, appeared to be pushing the boundaries when it came to the traditional subject matter of chick lit narratives. Their focus was on other aspects of women's lives, outside of their heterosexual, romantic relationships – with the stories having more focus on themes such as career concerns, friendships, material success, personal fulfilment and revenge.

However, following the huge success of books like *Gone Girl*, *The Girl on The Train* and *Before I go to Sleep*, it appears our cultural understanding of the type of stories that constitute Chick Noir has narrowed and now (albeit toxic) sexual relationships are at the heart of chick noir narratives, in the same way that they are at the heart of chick lit stories. Put simply, Chick Lit is about meeting Mr Right, while Chick Noir is about meeting Mr Wrong. Kennedy also notes the difference in tone: “Chick lit and chick noir are two narrative forms addressing many of the same concerns relating to the modern woman, offering two different responses: humour and horror.” (Kennedy, 2017: p. 35)

Noir is viewed as a (predominantly male) response to the anxiety arising from two World Wars and women's liberation from the home. Chick Noir has likewise been seen as a response to the anxiety arising from the economic recession

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/in-her-own-write-29983440.html>

beginning in 2008. This economic recession has perhaps impacted women more than previous recessions, insofar as women now form a larger part of the workforce. As Kennedy notes: “The way marriage and relationships affect a woman’s economic status is a central concern in chick noir, with shifts in wealth directly precipitating or following the crimes in each novel.” (Kennedy, 2017: p. 28)

This downturn in economic fortune was certainly true of my own situation when writing *Our Father*. I wrote the first draft in 2007, immediately prior to the recession of 2008. I had been sacked, whilst pregnant, from my well-paid, managerial post and had been a stay-at-home (how I hate that term) mother for the previous three years. Whilst I was unaware of this as a driving factor in my writing, with hindsight its significance cannot be overlooked. Prior to having children, I never felt constrained by my gender. It was easy, in my twenties, to believe that the feminist battle had been won. I was educated, financially independent and sexually liberated. Becoming a mother was, for me, a stark reminder that the playing field wasn’t as level as I’d previously believed. My first child required life-saving surgery on the day he was born, which forcefully brought home the responsibilities involved in my new role as mother. Having grown up with a mother who found it difficult to prioritise the needs of her child, I found myself struggling to adapt to this new world order. I didn’t have a role model for motherhood. It was during this period of massive personal, cultural adjustment that I wrote *Our Father*. As Kennedy notes:

Chick noir takes the conflict between daughters and their mothers and reflects on the way contemporary women, though they may try to distance themselves from their mothers and from previous generations of women, discover to their horror that they are not so far removed from the struggles faced by women in previous decades. (Kennedy, 2017: p. 35)

However, whilst I’m an avid reader of Chick Noir, and it’s clear I share a lot of the frustrations of the chick noir writer, unless I start to write about toxic sexual relationships it seems evident that my novels don’t fit the genre. With its subversion of the gender stereotypes of Noir, perhaps Feminist Noir would be a more accurate way to describe *Our Father*.



## Understanding Genre - Chick Noir, Chick Lit and Noir

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In *Genre* (Frow, John, 2015), Frow attempts to define genre as, 'a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning' (Frow, 2015. p 27). Thus the author and the reader both have a role to play in the construction of genre – the author produces and the reader interprets. Once we know the genre to which a novel belongs, we will form an expectation as to the story, style and content therein. Frow argues that genre is central to human meaning-making.

It is, of course, impossible to produce a definitive list of genres. New genres emerge all the time and older ones may fall away. Some novels exhibit characteristics of more than one genre and some novels may not fit neatly into any genre. However, it is clear that consigning a novel to a genre helps not only the marketing department of a publishing house – it also provides a framework for discourse around a piece of writing. It sets the expectations of the reader. My first literary agent, the well-known Darley Anderson, once likened genre to baked beans. People buy Heinz because they want to know what they are getting in the tin.

### Chick Noir

*Our Father* was first described as Chick Noir (a term I hadn't heard before) by a colleague who read the completed manuscript in 2009. A subsequent Google search for 'Publishers of Chick Noir' revealed only one – a newly established, independent press - Caffeine Nights Publishing, based in Kent. Their website showed they had published one novel in the chick noir genre:

*Tripping* [by Darren E Laws] is the first book to be published by Caffeine Nights Publishing. *Tripping* is a modern day fable which Darren's publishers call 'Chick lit with a dark side' and they have now coined a new phrase to describe the book; Chick Noir.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.prleap.com/pr/70487/caffeine-nights-publishing-introduces-a-new>

I hadn't really considered genre when writing *Our Father*, but Caffeine Night's definition of Chick Noir as 'Chick Lit with a dark side,' seemed to fit with what I had written. In *Our Father*, Lily was raised by her mother, a modern-day, working-class Miss Havisham, who, having been jilted, not at her wedding, but at the birth of her first child, turned to food for comfort. The novel opens with the death of Lily's mother, who has rotted into the fabric of the sofa, having spent the last years of her life morbidly obese and severely agoraphobic. These darker elements were unlike anything I had ever read in Chick Lit and were of fundamental importance to me. The inspiration for *Our Father* came from my own experience of searching for a reluctant birth father. Having spent my childhood and adolescence in a small, northern industrial town, growing up in a predominantly working-class community, I wanted to honour the truth of the story by keeping it close to my own experiences (whilst at the same time creating a work of fiction).

However, at the same time, I could see that the tone of my writing fit with the tone of Chick Lit. Sub-consciously, for some reason, I introduced humour into the story, perhaps as a way of making the experience more palatable for the reader. This has led me to question whether tone is, to a greater or lesser degree, determined by gender. As a woman, am I bound to make light of a given situation, no matter how dark that situation may appear? *Our Father* is based on a situation that, at the time of writing, I wasn't experiencing as in any way 'light' and yet I introduced a comic undertone. This need to lighten the mood does not appear to be part of the make up of the male writer of Noir. It is both interesting and, to my mind, liberating that neither does it appear to be part of the make up of the more contemporary chick noir writer.

I also understood that as a woman writing non-literary (i.e. plot-based rather than character-based), contemporary fiction about women and for women, it is difficult to escape the 'chick' label, despite feminist criticism of the term. I sympathise with Smallwood, who writes: "The term, Chick lit begun in the 1990's is one I'd wish didn't exist but since it does, I wanted to examine why it irritates me..." (Smallwood, 2016: p. 212)

In November 2009 I submitted my manuscript to Caffeine Nights and in January 2010 signed a contract with them. My internet searches during that period turned up only four other published novels that had been given the 'chick noir' label, which, in addition to the other Caffeine Nights' novel already mentioned (Laws, Darren E. *Tripping* (2007) brought the total to five. These five novels (listed in Appendix One) were all published in the mid to late noughties and can be used to form an impression of what I've termed Emerging Chick Noir. These early books predate any real definition or general understanding in our collective consciousness of what Chick Noir as a genre might entail and they exist now as a testament to how much the genre has developed.

Of the five chick noir books I identified that were published before *Our Father*, only three were published by mainstream presses. The first of these, Carrie Adams' *The Godmother*, was published in 2006 (Adams, Carrie, *The Godmother*, 2006). The blurb on the back cover states, 'The Godmother is the antidote to chick lit we've all been waiting for.' Some took the emergence of this new, darker form of women's writing as a direct challenge to Chick Lit: 'Move aside chick-lit, this is chick noir...an intelligent breath of fresh air for a tired genre'<sup>3</sup> Nina Siegal's *A Little Trouble With The Facts*, (Siegal, Nina, 2008) was published by Harper Paperback and the blurb on the back makes it clear that this is Noir in the classic tradition, whilst at the same time highlighting the protagonist's gender: 'But can Valerie trade her stilettos for gumshoes?' Lynn Reynold's *Thirty Nine Again* (Reynold, Lynn, 2009) was published by The Wild Rose Press, a small, independent publisher. The blurb describes the novel as, 'like Chick Lit, but with guns and dead bodies instead of shoes.' *Tripping* is the only chick noir book I found during my research in 2010 that was written by a man.

Although it is only ten years since Chick Noir first emerged as a recognisable publishing category, it has become both well-established and commercially

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<sup>3</sup> Eve Magazine – quoted at <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Godmother-Carrie-Adams/dp/0755329546>

successful, spawning some of the biggest selling books of recent years. (Appendix Five contains a list of novels that have been classified as Chick Noir.) Since *Our Father* was published, the genre has evolved from its initial origins and, in doing so, has moved away from some of its original characteristics. This has perhaps been down to the success of some of the biggest-selling chick noir novels, novels that all could be considered 'game-changers': *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (Flynn, Gillian, 2012) appeared in the best selling charts in 2012 and 2013 and came top of the best-selling adult-fiction print book for 2014 and *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins (Hawkins, Paula 2015) was the best-selling adult-fiction book for 2016 (it came third on the list in 2015). Other successful chick noir books include *Before I Go To Sleep* by S.J. Watson (Watson, S.J. 2011), *Behind Closed Doors* by B.A. Paris (Paris, B.A. 2016) and *Into The Darkest Corner* by Elizabeth Haynes (Haynes, Elizabeth, 2013). The success of these books, and others like them, has shaped our collective understanding of the chick noir genre.

### **Chick Lit**

At the time I wrote *Our Father*, I'd certainly read more Chick Lit than I had Noir or Chick Noir. Chick Lit emerged around the same time I emerged into adulthood – the mid-nineteen-nineties - a decade or more before Chick Noir came on the scene. Among the bigger names in the chick lit field are authors such as Marian Keyes, Helen Fielding and Jill Mansell, all of whom are regarded as pioneers of the genre. (Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, (Fielding, Helen, 1996) is often viewed as the genre-defining novel.) Chick Lit became very popular, particularly, perhaps exclusively, among female readers. (*Bridget Jones' Diary* was the second biggest selling book of the 1990s.)<sup>4</sup> Chick Lit appears to be a genre written almost exclusively by women, about women, for women. (The top one hundred chick lit authors as published by Chick Lit Club are all female.<sup>5</sup> )

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/the-50-best-selling-books-of-the-1990s-1200522.html>

<sup>5</sup> (<http://www.chicklitclub.com/ultimate100authors.html>)

For the purposes of this reflection I have focused on five best-selling novels of the genre to help try to define what it is about the style and content of the story that shapes our understanding of Chick Lit. These novels are listed in Appendix Three. Chick Lit puts the young, aspirational female protagonist at the centre of the action (albeit romantic action) and, almost without exception, ensures that she gets what she wants (the story goal) by the end of the narrative. The genre relies on establishing a close relationship between reader and protagonist and employs a light-hearted, comic tone.

### **Noir**

Noir pre-dates Chick Lit and can be traced back to the early twentieth century. It never featured in my reading prior to my writing *Our Father*, despite my love of crime and detective novels. The fact that the main narrative strand of noir stories usually concerns the difficulties encountered by a flawed, self-destructive protagonist in search of the answer to a criminal question should have ensured that I was an avid reader of the genre. This is, after all, the main narrative strand of *Our Father*. In addition I am a keen reader of Janet Evanovich's series featuring Stephanie Plum, a bounty hunter based in New Jersey, and police procedurals such as Michael Connelley's Harry Bosch series. I've also enjoyed Lee Child's lone avenger, Jack Reacher. Many of these crime novels feature male protagonists, which didn't spoil my enjoyment of the story. It is interesting to note that the study by M. Bortolussi et al (Bortolussi et al (2010) p 316) found that women readers did not "show a preference for texts that feature female protagonists, and they did not show a tendency to identify more with the female protagonists."

However, in stark contrast to Chick Lit, Noir appears to be a genre written almost exclusively by men, about men, for men (the top ten noir novels in Publishers' Weekly are all credited to male authors).<sup>6</sup> It is the disparity in roles between male and female characters that meant I hadn't previously embraced the genre

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/67271-10-best-noir-novels.html>

as a reader.

While the hardboiled mode of detective narrative is unabashedly masculine, with tough guy investigators like Philip Marlow and Mike Hammer at the forefront, women's roles are also significant. Referred to as the femme fatale, the dangerous woman of the hardboiled tradition is manipulative, deceitful, murderous, and sometimes even psychotic. (Kennedy, 2017: p. 30)

This 'unabashedly' masculine tone is easily identified in the five noir novels (listed in Appendix Four) that I read in preparation for this exegesis. The women in the stories are often confined to a sexual role. It has been interesting to see which elements *Our Father* borrows from Chick Lit and which come from the noir tradition, despite my lack of familiarity with the latter. Indeed it's only through the feminisation of noir (putting the 'chick' into Chick Noir), that the genre begins to hold any appeal for me as either a writer or as a reader. I don't identify or engage with the female characters and their roles within the traditional noir narrative and their story outcomes are not ones that I would aspire to. As Kennedy states: "The femme fatale is ultimately villainized, and she usually does not get what she wants." (Kennedy, 2017: p. 31) The reason for my writing *Our Father* was because I had already faced a situation where I hadn't got what I wanted – I hadn't established contact with my birth father or his side of the family. My hope in writing the book was to create an outcome that was different, and to my mind, better than the real life one I'd encountered. I certainly didn't want to write a story where the female protagonist was punished for her desires, even if her desires were based on revenge. Chick Noir, for me, was about allowing women to be 'bad' – to act on their darker desires without being punished for them. As Kennedy notes, "The homicidal women of chick noir, however, fare much better." (Kennedy, 2017: p. 31) I wanted to create a dangerous woman who fared better than the femme fatale of noir.

## Protagonist – Age, Gender and Social Class

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Constructing such a character came easily to me. Lily Appleyard, the protagonist in *Our Father*, is a nineteen-year old, white, single woman who was born and raised in Accrington, Lancashire. She is the granddaughter of a lower middle-class man, but was raised by her single-parent mother, a severely depressed, clinically-obese woman, estranged from the rest of her family. Lily is more than quirky; she is deeply flawed. She is unfeminine, disconnected from society and exhibits self-destructive tendencies. She self-harms, smokes dope and binge-drinks.

The most obvious difference between Chick Lit and Noir is that the former features female protagonists and the latter male. But while Lily matches chick lit protagonists in the fact that she is female, it is there that resemblance ends. While the chick lit heroine may have a developed internal need (that is, she has a character flaw to overcome), she remains at all times an attractive and aspirational character. In *Watermelon* (Keyes, Marian, 1996), Marian Keyes' first novel, the protagonist is Clare Webster. She is twenty-nine years old, white, works for a charity and lives in London. She is newly single and the story's inciting incident is the announcement her husband is leaving her on the day she's given birth to their first child (coincidentally the same set of circumstances that befell my own mother.)

Bridget Jones, the protagonist of Helen Fielding's genre-defining novel, *Bridget Jones' Diary*, is single, white, thirty-two years old and works in television in London. Ellie Kendall (Mansell, Jill, 2011) is in her late twenties and newly widowed. She also lives in London. Tessa Hamilton (Alliot, Catherine (2007) *The Real Thing*) is thirty years old and the mother of two young children. She is the only protagonist of the five chick lit novels who remains married throughout the story. Her husband is a barrister and she is a full-time mother. In *Straight Talking* (Green, Jane, 1993) Tasha is single, thirty years old and works as a television producer (again in London). The protagonists of all five novels would all be able to identify with Tasha's statement at the opening of the novel: "I'm

successful, in a fashion. I earn enough money to go on shopping binges at Joseph every three months or so, and I own my own flat.” (Green, 1998: p. 3) Lily would not.

Lily is not an aspirational character. I wasn't expecting the reader, such as I thought about a reader, to identify with her. Rather I wanted to create a character that would be seen as the worst person, the least-equipped person, to deal with the conflict within the story. This, with hindsight, was because when my birth father refused my request for contact, I had some difficulty feeling sympathy for myself. I was a fully-grown woman, trying to adapt to becoming a mother for the first time. My new role was all about thinking of others, rather than about myself. I had been raised in a nuclear family with a perfectly adequate stepfather. The failure of my birth father to provide some answers to my curiosity about my genetic history didn't seem, at the time, to provide enough dramatic tension to power a whole novel. Birth father refuses to meet middle-class, educated, privileged mother of two doesn't pack much emotional punch. However, I remember being struck by the fact that my birth father hadn't sought to discover my reason for contacting him before rejecting the advance. I was conscious that he knew nothing about me. I found myself thinking that I might have been in a life-threatening situation. Perhaps I needed a kidney or a bone marrow transplant. The fact that he hadn't made any attempt to ensure I was in a good place, capable of withstanding his rejection, before issuing it, really jarred with me. As I played with all the worst-case scenarios, the character of Lily appeared. Lily is young, alone, without any real privilege. Her mother is dead, she has no real family and she has no money (at least none that she is aware of). Lily is the most alone person I could imagine, and perhaps served to reflect the loneliness I felt but couldn't articulate at that time.

Lily has also grown up with a mother who was unable to parent her child. Lily's mother's depression rendered her incapable of meeting the needs of her child. Her alcoholism, food addiction and agoraphobia meant she never played an active role within Lily's childhood. This dysfunctional relationship between mother and child in some ways mirrored my own experiences, and is in common



with other chick noir narratives. As Kennedy notes: “The women of chick noir usually have a tense relationship with their own mothers, and may not even wish to become mothers themselves.” (Kennedy, 2017: p. 22)

The dysfunctional parental relationship is certainly referenced in *Gone Girl*. Amy Dunne’s parents are child psychologists. They suffered several miscarriages and stillbirths before Amy was born (naming each lost baby ‘Hope’). They are the authors of a series of best-selling books about ‘Amazing Amy’ but sales decline as Amy grows up (to the point where Amy’s parents have had to borrow the money from her trust fund). Amy lives in the shadow of the fictional ‘Amazing Amy.’ When Amy goes missing (and is presumed by many to have been murdered) her parents appear more eager to use the opportunity to help increase sales of their books than they are committed to finding their missing daughter.

In *Behind Closed Doors*, Grace Angel’s parents have moved to New Zealand, leaving Grace with the responsibility of caring for her younger sister, Millie, who has Down’s Syndrome. Millie is eighteen years younger than Grace. “My parents hadn’t wanted another child and, when Millie arrived, they definitely hadn’t wanted her.” (Paris, 2016: p. 35) Grace’s mother became severely depressed and tried to put Millie up for adoption. Grace intervened and effectively became Millie’s principle carer. “They were the sort of people who weren’t suited to having children at all.” (Paris, 2016: p. 37)

In *Girl on The Train*, Rachel Watson is an alcoholic, struggling to come to terms with her recent divorce and her inability to have children. She has lost her job but lies to her mother about her problems. Rachel’s dysfunctional relationship with her mother is raised early on in the novel: “My mother used to tell me that I had an overactive imagination; Tom [her ex-husband] said that too.” This aligns her mother and ex-husband against her. When Rachel raises the possibility of returning to family home, her mother responds: “‘Darling, it’s not a good time for you to come and stay now. There’s... well, I’ve got a new friend, and you know how it is in the early stages.’ She titters.” (Hawkins, 2015: p. 172-173)

Both Catherine's parents in the novel *Into The Darkest Corner* died in a car accident while she was at university. She knows that had her mother lived, her life would be different: "Maybe if my mum and dad were still alive, maybe they would have been able to counsel me always from him. They would have recognised him as dangerous... If Mum had lived, maybe I would have married someone by now, someone kind, stable, honest; maybe I'd have a child, maybe two, maybe three." (Haynes, 2013: p. 238)

All these women, like Lily, have lost (or never had) maternal protection. They have mothers who (for whatever reason) are unable to put the needs of their children before themselves. I deliberately killed Lily's mother off at the start of the novel because I didn't want any comparisons to be drawn with my own mother. I didn't want to write about my own relationship with my mother. My anger was at my father because, for whatever her faults, at least my mother was present for my childhood. I didn't want to fall into what I saw as the misogynistic trap of blaming the mother whilst the father gets a free ride. I blamed my father for disabling my mother – for plunging her into emotional crisis at what should have been one of the happiest times of her life (the birth of her first child). Lily, however, has an idealistic idea of her father might be like. She has used the fantasy of him to sustain her through her childhood. One of the key differences between Lily and myself is that I had a step-father and a brother, which gave me some idea as to what men are like. Lily grew up with only a mother.

When writing *Our Father*, I wanted the focus to be on inadequate fathers and I was deflated at a reading group, shortly after the novel's publication, when a woman pointed out to me that I'd made Lily's father the best 'mother' of all the characters. (Fiona's mother is career-focussed, Lily's mother is too depressed to parent effectively. Lily's paternal grandmother overrides the needs of her son. Only David, Lily's father, provides any kind of hands-on nurturing in a parental role – to his second daughter, Fiona). This caused me to realise that it's not only Lily who has built fantasies around absent father figures.

I did, of course, want to create a dysfunctional family background for Lily, and I did want to remove the protection of the family so that she is alone in the world. I just didn't want to focus on, or perhaps even think about, the relationship between mother and child. Society's higher expectations of mothers, and perhaps, in the face of that, my own deep-seated disappointment with my own, were not something I wished to confront at the time.

I did therefore consciously create a protagonist who lacked maternal protection, whilst at the same time focussing on a theme of inadequate fathers. It is, however, the qualities I unintentionally gave Lily that mark her out as being so different from the traditional chick lit protagonist. The most striking of these, to my mind, is that Lily is working-class. In fact it's probably fair to say that she has been raised among the underclass. Her mother didn't ever go out to work and the family depended on state benefits throughout Lily's childhood. To my mind, it is this difference in class (chick lit protagonists are all middle class – educated, solvent and with aspirations as to career and marriage) that effectively bars my protagonist from entry into a chick lit narrative. Lily therefore has much more in common with the noir protagonist, despite the obvious difference in gender. Noir protagonists are investigators. "It is the tough, independent investigator, though, who is most strongly associated with the hard-boiled tradition." (Horsley, 2001: p. 24) Of the noir novels listed in Appendix Four, Sam Spade (Hammett, Dashiell (2011) *The Maltese Falcon*) and Philip Marlow (Chandler, Raymond (1939) *The Big Sleep*) are both private detectives. In *LA Confidential* (Ellroy, James (2012)) three LAPD detectives serve as the story's protagonists - Exley, Bud and Jack (all flawed to one degree or another - Exley is cold and unfriendly, yet moral; Bud is a violent enforcer who has a romantic relationship with a prostitute; Jack is vain and self-serving, more interested in celebrity than police work - he consults on a TV show). In *Get Carter*, (Lewis, Ted (2013)) Jack Carter is a Newcastle-born gangster, now living in London and working for organised crime bosses. Jack is about to escape (with the wife of his boss) to South America but first he attends the funeral of his brother, Frank, who has supposedly died in a drunk driving accident. Jack doesn't believe this official explanation of his brother's death and so investigates. He isn't therefore an

official investigator, but he assumes the role of one within the story. This is the same role Lily and Jo assume as they stalk Lily's father looking for clues to his rejection of her.

These 'investigators' (whether officially authorised or not) are immersed in the narrative. They act as mediator between the criminal underworld and respectable society, allowing the protagonist to move between both worlds without being part of either. This is in marked contrast to the heroes of traditional crime fiction, such as Hercule Poirot or Sherlock Holmes. Noir was a reaction to these perceived 'effeminate' detectives of classical crime – with their high-minded artistic leanings – and is credited as the introduction of 'real men'. "Protagonists tend to be isolated and estranged, existing on the margins of society and, as outsiders, capable of seeing with a satirist's eye." (Horsley, 2001 p. 23) With hindsight, perhaps Lily was my attempt to find a 'real woman' – one not constrained by narrow gender stereotypes. I wanted a woman who wasn't afraid to act. This of course was a response to my own impotence in the face of rejection. Before writing *Our Father* I did research the possibility of suing my birth father for some kind of breach of contract. Could I prove that in the act of conception, there was an implied contract between father and offspring? And if so, what would this contract involve? What is the bare minimum a daughter could expect from her father? The law demands that in order to show a breach of contract, a financial loss must be evidenced. Could I claim the cost of a birthday card, once a year for eighteen years? These were the kind of questions I honestly considered. I did nothing, stalled by what was legally possible and also by others' expectations of what constituted an 'acceptable' way to deal with the situation. I remember at the time, a friend saying, 'You have to grieve the loss'. I was bemused as that was the last thing I felt like doing. I was angry, not sad. I wanted revenge, not inner peace. Lily came into being to deliver the justice I sought.

Krutnik describes Noir as having, "An obsession with male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or ideal) parameters of masculine identity, desire and achievement." (Krutnik, 1991: p xiii) It's not difficult to see myself has having an obsession with **female** figures

who are both internally divided and alienated. It is no coincidence that I wrote this novel at a time when I was adapting to my new role as a stay-at-home mother. Prior to this I had studied at university, worked in film production and run my own business. I had never married, had lived alone or shared houses with friends. I had had sexual relationships with women as well as men. Becoming a mother, and effectively a 'housewife', was an enormous challenge to my own self-perception as well as to that of my peers and fellow feminists. It is easy to now recognise that I was feeling alienated from (to misquote Krutnik) the culturally permissible parameters of **feminine** identity, desire and achievement.

If Noir is a masculine genre characterised by its obsession with the challenges of and problems with male identity and cultural authority (Krutnik excludes both *Rebecca* (1940) and *Gaslight* (1944) from the noir genre precisely because they are concerned with female desire and subjectivity) then Chick Noir turns our understanding of Noir on its head. If Noir is male, what happens if we make it female? Some characteristics of the noir protagonist are recognisable as female traits. Krutnik states that noir "tends to be concerned with the lone male hero, characterised more by intuitive action" (Krutnik, 1991: p. 32), yet intuitive action is often seen as the preserve of female characters and means women have the potential to make excellent noir protagonists.

The protagonist of Noir is often a revenge seeker, meaning that often they have first been the victim. Lee Horsley describes noir protagonists as, "Victims seeking to become active agents and taking on the qualities of the punitive investigator, the gangster or the murderer." (Horsley, 2001: p. 103) This is of course true for Lily. She is the victim of her father's rejection. Reeling from the blow of his refusal to meet her (a dream she has harboured since early childhood), she first becomes his stalker, before planning and executing a kidnap attempt on his fifteen-year old daughter. Once kidnapped, Fiona joins forces with Lily and Jo and together they demand justice, and with it, recognition, in the form of a ransom. I love the idea of the revenge seeker, and the investigator who is immersed in the crime, so that while she acts as an intermediary between the two worlds, she is also tainted by both.

In contrast to Lily in *Our Father*, the early chick noir narratives, particularly those published by the mainstream presses, featured protagonists that were more recognisable from the pages of Chick Lit rather than Noir. In *The Godmother*, Tessa King is in her thirties, white, middle-class, educated and financially independent (she is a barrister), although she has to leave her workplace after being stalked by her ex-head of chambers. In *Getting Rid of Matthew* (Fallon, Jane, 2007), Helen has been Matthew's mistress for the past four years. She is in her late-thirties, white, middle-class, and currently working (in a job that is below expectations) as a personal assistant. She wants three things in life, "a highly paid job in public relations, a flat of her own and a man, also belonging to her exclusively" (Fallon, 2007: p 3). Helen becomes a successful public relations accounts manager by the end of the story. *Tripping*, the only novel to feature an ensemble cast, is based around the friendships between four women, Becky, Samantha, Alice and Harry (Zoe Harrington), all of whom are white, university-educated and in their early thirties. The protagonists of all these three early chick noir novels could be transcribed into the pages of a chick lit narrative.

However, the early chick noir novels published by the independent presses both feature protagonists with more than a passing resemblance to the noir tradition. Valerie Vane (*A Little Trouble With The Facts*) is a reporter on a New York daily newspaper. Vane at first glance appears as a Chick Lit protagonist – she is white, mid-thirties and educated. However, very soon into the narrative her troubled upbringing is introduced and we learn that she was born in a squat, the child of hippy parents and was originally named Sunburst Rhapsody Miller. Her father died in a motorbike accident when she was ten years old and the family were impoverished. She is not viewed as an aspirational character. Likewise, Sabrina (*Thirty-Nine Again*) is not someone the reader is necessarily expected to identify with. Sabrina is white, forty-years old and has recently had treatment for breast cancer. She considers herself engaged to Scott, who is an immigration lawyer, but in the opening pages, begins a relationship with Evan, her personal trainer. Her life is chaotic and with her health status unresolved, she is not someone a reader

would aspire to be. It is interesting that both these books are set in America and feature American protagonists (as opposed to the very British tradition of Chick Lit.) The protagonists of both these novels are the flawed investigators, the revenge-seekers from noir.

As Chick Noir has developed over the last decade, this idea of the flawed revenge-seeker has overtaken the aspirational, girl-next-door protagonist from chick lit narratives, although many similarities remain.

Chick noir protagonists are remarkably similar to chick lit protagonists... predominantly metropolitan...urban socialites. Moreover, like their chick lit counterparts, the women of chick noir are associated with arts and media. (Kennedy, 2017: p 25-26)

However, while chick noir protagonists may be similar to chick lit protagonists in terms of social background and identity, Chick Noir offers a broader role in terms of behaviour. Chick noir women are allowed to behave in ways that challenge the previously accepted stereotypes of female identity, desire and achievement. Both *Girl On The Train's* Rachel Watson and *Gone Girl's* Amy Dunne are flawed, unreliable and also unlikeable narrators. It is this introduction of 'unlikeable' as a characteristic of a female protagonist that is one of the most striking features of the genre. Prior to the huge commercial successes of Chick Noir, unlikeable women characters were resigned to the femme fatale role of Noir and were punished for their behaviour.

... As our appetite for chick lit fades away, we have developed an appetite for the psychological thriller, often featuring a not-so-nice solo heroine: in Natalie Young's *Season to Taste* – an extreme example, admittedly – the narrator cannibalises her husband; in Louise Doughty's *Apple Tree Yard*, the narrator is only nominally married – before her unravelling she is a spinster of the mind, of a certain age, brisk, a *femme serieuse* <sup>7</sup>

It's interesting to note here that these chick noir protagonists tend to be older than their chick lit counterparts. In *Before I Go to Sleep* Christine is forty-seven

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/24/chick-lit-is-in-its-death-throes-india-knight>

years old. Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* is thirty-eight. Kennedy references this increase in age:

While most protagonists of chick lit are struggling to climb to the top, both professionally and personally, most of the protagonists of chick noir are already there; at the start of their narratives they are married and have (or used to have) fulfilling careers. (Kennedy, 2017: p. 26)

This increase in age and experience of the chick noir protagonist is in marked contrast to Lily who is only nineteen years old. I am still unsure why I chose a character who was nineteen, given the situation that befalls Lily happened to me when I was in my mid-thirties. Perhaps I felt constrained by the idea of what was acceptable behaviour for a mother of two in her late thirties. I had to give the anger to someone who was 'allowed' to carry it. In my case I chose a nineteen year old – someone barely responsible for their actions.



## Voice – Point of View, Style and Tone

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### Point of View

The relationship between reader and protagonist is of crucial importance in chick lit and chick noir narratives. The reader's relationship with the protagonist can, of course, be influenced by the viewpoint the author chooses to use. Chick Lit, for example, depends on establishing a firm bond between protagonist and reader based on identification and aspiration.

The great success of chick lit can be credited to the fact that the stories reproduce the situation of contemporary young women... The genre typically revolves around a specific type of fictional character: a thirty-year-old, white, middle-class, educated, single woman, with whom some readers can feel straightforwardly identified given their shared profile.<sup>8</sup>

In order to facilitate this bond, the first-person viewpoint is often employed as a means of introducing both voice and an intimate, confessional tone. Indeed, Kathy Lette claims to have invented the chick lit genre by penning, "first person, funny, feminist fiction".<sup>9</sup> The first-person point of view, where the camera lens (if we can think of it in this way within a novel) looks through the eyes of a single character, is an intense and dramatic focus. "It lends itself well to a very intimate treatment, which is useful if the subject is a personal, internal process." (Watts, 1996: p 77) Of the five chick lit narratives, *Watermelon*, *Bridget Jones' Diary*, *Straight Talking* and *The Real Thing* are all written in the first-person, with the protagonist narrating the story. *To The Moon and Back* is the only exception – which is written in the third-person close up, from the protagonist's (Ellie's) perspective. Mansell maintains a very close viewpoint – so close Ellie's voice is allowed to blend into the narrative.

Fresh from the shower, Ellie took in the alluring view from the bedroom doorway. Seriously, could anything beat the sight of a drop-dead gorgeous

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<sup>8</sup> <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklitter/perezserrano.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/have-we-fallen-out-of-love-with-chick-lit-2361445.html>

28-year-old male wearing nothing but white boxers whilst clutching a steam iron in one hand and a black skirt in the other?  
*And to think he's mine, all mine.* She had the marriage certificate to prove it. (Mansell, 2011: p 1)

The third-person viewpoint is so close here, Mansell can transition between the narrator's voice and the third-person prose without difficulty. Whether first, or third-person, the chick lit viewpoint is always close up, so that the narratives create an intimate, confessional tone. The reader is thus encouraged to identify with, and trust, the narrator.

Noir on the other hand, often uses more neutral viewpoints, such as the more distant, omniscient lens. This means that the reader is encouraged to watch the action with the detachment of an observer – the 'god-like' eye at the back of the room that sees everything, but doesn't give us the internal thought processes of the characters. We can imagine it as the unbiased camera just left to record at the scene. As Krutnik states: "It doesn't record anything but what we might have seen or heard ourselves if we had been present" (Krutnik, 1991: p. 40). *The Maltese Falcon* and *LA Confidential* are both written in the third-person, using an omniscient viewpoint. Leech and Short (2013) reference the term, 'mind style' – the mind through which the fictional world is reflected. It might be difficult in these third-person narrations to separate the mind style of the character from the mind style of the author, but the maleness of the gaze (what is noticed) and the language (how it is described), cannot be overlooked.

She was tall and pliantly slender, without angularity anywhere. Her body was erect and high-breasted, her legs long, her hands and feet narrow. She wore two shades of blue that had been selected because of her eyes. The hair curling from under her blue hat was darkly red, her full lips more brightly red. White teeth glistened in the crescent her timid smile made. (Hammett, 2010: p 2)

In the above extract, it could be argued that Hammett used the word 'pliantly' before 'slender' to reference the sexual arena. This is his second observation of a female character (Miss Wonderly) who has just arrived into the narrative, after noting her height. 'White teeth glistened in the crescent' may also have been

employed to foreshadow the apparent danger within the feminine – the word ‘crescent’ reminds us of the moon (which along with ‘teeth’ evokes danger – the dark and perhaps vampires and/or werewolves). The fact that he has made the teeth the actor of the sentence gives the threat urgency.

Even where first-person viewpoints are used (Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* is written in the first-person, from the viewpoint of his Los Angeles’ based PI, Philip Marlowe), the narrator maintains a distance between the reader and himself.

I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn’t care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars. (Chandler, 1939: p 3)

This is not a confessional, intimate narrative – the character is holding the reader at bay with short, clipped sentences that are designed to give very little away.

The syntax gives insight into the character.

*Our Father* is written from a third-person, omniscient viewpoint. This was an instinctive choice, as I knew very little about point of view at the time of writing. It references the noir tradition of maintaining distance between character and reader.

The disadvantage of a god’s eye view is significant: the reader, like the narrator, can float above the scene, passing through walls like a ghost, never really getting involved. If your intention is to produce a cool, perhaps ironic tone, this distance may be in your favour. If you have an emotional tale to tell you may find the effect is the opposite of intense. (Watts, 1996: p 82)

I didn’t want to create a confessional, intimate tone. In fact I shied away from getting too closely involved in Lily’s thought processes. I wasn’t trying to get the reader on Lily’s side and perhaps I was searching for that ‘cool, ironic’ tone. I have come to believe that choice of viewpoint is linked to author personality – I always feel more comfortable writing third-person narratives whereas some writers are much happier in the first. Of the six novels I have written since *Our*

*Father*, only the most recent has been written in the first. I like distance. Perhaps what I wanted to avoid most of all was self-pity.

If you have a sad story to tell and you related it from the viewpoint of the person it happened to, an unsympathetic reader could hear it as the whining of a victim: Tell the same story in the third-person and the effect may be one of pathos. (Watts, 1996: p 78)

My natural inclination is for the third-person and I struggled to use the first. I felt voyeuristic, un-inclined to step into someone else's skin. With my most recent novel, however, I forced myself to confront a first-person narrative as part of a conscious attempt to become more commercial. (And it is this novel that has been the most successful – in that it landed me a much bigger publisher). I believe adopting a more intimate first-person viewpoint was the turning point for me as a writer after years of writing in the third. It certainly brought me more into line with other chick noir narratives, which didn't share my enthusiasm for the noir tradition of a more distant viewpoint. Of the chick noir novels published before mine, *Thirty Nine Again*, *The Godmother* and *A Little Trouble with the Facts* all use a first-person narration. Only Jane Fallon and Darren Laws chose third-person narrations. *Getting Rid of Matthew* uses a dual third-person close-up viewpoint that shifts between Helen and Matthew's wife, Sophie. *Tripping* uses a multiple third-person viewpoint, which moves between all four female lead characters. "The advantage of a shifting viewpoint is an expanded panoramic vision," (Watts, 1996: p 81) but the downside is that the reader can become conflicted as to whose story they are reading. The more point of view characters in a novel, the less close a reader will feel to each. In genres that depend on reader identification with the protagonist, neither omniscient nor third-person multiple is the obvious choice of viewpoint.

As the chick noir genre has developed, the first-person viewpoint has become more and more of a recognisable characteristic. In fact, according to one avid reader and book blogger, it is the defining feature:

First and foremost is the fact that these novels are almost always told in the first person, and moreover, in the first person inside the head of someone riveting, fascinating, and – and this is crucial – honest.<sup>10</sup>

All five of the contemporary chick noir novels listed in Appendix Two use first-person narrations. In each the novel is narrated by the female protagonist. Even *Gone Girl*, where the female protagonist, Amy Dunne, is missing at the start of the story, manages to introduce her first-person viewpoint through her backdated diary entries. Amy shares the narration with her husband, Nick, and his story is also given in the first-person. The vast majority of *Into The Darkest Corner* is written in the first-person, from the viewpoint of Cathy, the novel's protagonist who has developed an obsessive-compulsive disorder following a toxic relationship with Lee, a man who is in prison at the start of the novel. *Behind Closed Doors* is also narrated in the first-person, by Grace, the novel's protagonist. Grace is married to Jack, a psychopath who is intent on imprisoning Grace's sister, Millie, who has Down's Syndrome. What is striking about these first-person narrations is that they all also introduce the concept of the unreliable narrator to one degree or another. In SJ Watson's *Before I Go To Sleep*, the narrator is suffering from anterograde amnesia, (or rather a fictional account of anterograde amnesia). She can retain memory for one day but when she goes to sleep the slate is wiped clean and she wakes up not knowing who she is, where she lives or recognising her husband. The majority of *Girl On The Train* is narrated by Rachel, who keeps getting drunk and thus has gaps in her memory, which render her unable to provide credible testimony of pivotal story events.

Perhaps this emphasis on a first-person narration in Chick Noir and Chick Lit is symptomatic of our collective expectation that women are more emotionally literate than men. Or of our collective expectation that we need to get the (predominantly female) reader closer to the (predominantly female) characters because women expect and/or enjoy a more intimate relationship than their male counterparts. In the case of Chick Noir, where the female characters are

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<sup>10</sup> <http://bookriot.com/2016/01/08/chick-noir-awful-name-awesome-genre-2/>

flawed to a greater extent, the closer viewpoint is perhaps necessary for the reader to understand, and hence forgive, the protagonist's failings. Men are 'allowed' more freedom to be flawed, both in society and in fiction. Women writers might feel that they have to get the reader closer to their flawed protagonists in order to ensure that they aren't consigned to the femme fatale role of classic hardboiled crime fiction.

The chick noir protagonist is rendered more sympathetic, with more understandable motives; these women are tired of being cheated on, kept financially dependent, and having their desires and needs subordinated. (Kennedy, 2017: p 32)

It is these 'understandable motives' that Kennedy notes that are important in establishing a bond between reader and protagonist.

### **Style and Tone**

Chick lit narratives are known for their humour, even though they may tackle dark issues (such as miscarriages, drug addiction, mental health issues). The writer, DJ Connell, in an interview in *The Guardian* asked, "Why do I find the chick-lit label so offensive? Because it not only condemns a work of humour to the ghetto of the light and frivolous but it is also ridiculously out-dated."<sup>11</sup> The tone of Chick Lit contributes to its positioning within the 'ghetto of light and frivolous' even when its subject matter does not.

*Our Father* relies on a comic undertone, which borrows more from Chick Lit than it does from Noir. I consciously introduced humour into my novel, but I didn't consciously examine my reasons for doing so. I now wonder if that is something that women do. I made Lily hapless and at times invited the reader to laugh at her distress. Hardboiled crime fiction doesn't exhibit this tendency to use humour to lighten the more dramatic moments of the story. If anything, the reverse is true. The language used in Noir is tough, cynical and succinct and as such mirrors the hero's potency:

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/aug/04/chick-lit-debate-dj-connell>

Shrieks from the courtyard; running feet on gravel. Meeks dropped the shotgun, stumbled to the wall. Over to the men, tasking blood – point-blank head shots.

Thumps in the room; two rifles in grabbing range. Meeks yelled, ‘We got him!’, heard answering whoops, saw arms and legs coming out the window. He picked up the closest piece and let fly, full automatic: trapped targets, plaster chips exploding, dry wood igniting (Ellroy, 2012: p 4)

In the above excerpt from *LA Confidential*, language is wielded almost as a weapon. The characters verbally spar with each other and the author spars with the reader. This is typical of Noir, with the men often portrayed as the language users while women are assigned the role of erotic object. Whilst hard-boiled fiction and film noir can be seen as “reactions against the contemplative mode of the ‘literary’” (Krutnik, 1991: p 40), Noir doesn’t seem to attract the same level of criticism for its non-literary style as does Chick Lit. Raymond Chandler commented on Hammett’s “rather revolutionary debunking of both the language and material of fiction” (Chandler, 1950), whilst Ellroy, has become known (and celebrated) for his short, staccato sentences and limited use of vocabulary.

Some of the early chick noir narratives sought to imitate the style of Noir. *A Little Trouble with the Facts* opens with the line, “It was the high mercury end of July and no one was doing any dying.” (Siegal (2008) p 1) However, both Nina Siegal and Lynn Reynolds, who have been drawn to the main narrative drive of noir, have relied heavily both on the humour and self-deprecation associated with Chick Lit.

“Valerie Vane,” I said.

“Vane,” said Rood, still clutching my hand. “As in vain-glorious. Boastful, proud.” He was neither approving nor disapproving.

“Or idle, fruitless, futile,” I said, meeting his eyes and swallowing down a lump. (Siegal, 2008: p 9)

He fired the dark, shiny thing. At me. A bullet sailed right past my ear. I wet myself the teensiest bit.

(Reynolds, 2008: p 13)

With hindsight, I find myself annoyed at the fact I resorted to humour, possibly because I feel that was a decision I took subconsciously because I'm a woman. That I somehow sought to detract from what was a very traumatic event in order to make the experience 'safe' for the reader – not really the job of fiction. Is this part of my conditioning as a woman – are we taught to take ourselves less seriously, to lessen the impact of our emotional distress? Writing the book at the same time as adapting to my new role of mother, was I unaware of the way in which I had been socialised - to downplay my own emotional turmoil in order to put the needs of others above my own? Have I fallen into the same trap as Marian Keyes by virtue of my gender? "I'd rather never write again than not have a happy ending," Keyes says. "I might be bleak, but I'm hopeful."<sup>12</sup> This almost obsessive need to be optimistic (I'd rather never write again) is in marked contrast to the stories of contemporary Chick Noir.

While chick lit offers laughter as a remedy to these social problems... chick noir offers female readers solidarity in anger and anxiety about problems that are so long-standing and so socially entrenched, there sometimes seems to be no escape. (Kennedy, 2017: p 37)

Recognising that there might be no escape, no happy ending, is crucial to our understanding of Chick Noir.

Whatever the reasons for my decision to adopt humour within the story of *Our Father*, I'm refreshed by contemporary Chick Noir's refusal to lighten the tone for the reader and this is something I hope to explore in my own writing in the future.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/marian-keyes-interview-glamour-book-club>



## Gender and Heterosexuality

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Perhaps the most striking way in which *Our Father* doesn't fit with the traditional chick lit model is that its main narrative drive isn't focused on a romantic story question. Chick lit novels are essentially contemporary romance novels. Whilst they often tackle issues that affect contemporary women, (including 'darker' issues such as domestic abuse, miscarriages, mental health and drug addiction) the main narrative drive is always powered by the story question, 'Will the protagonist find (romantic) love?'

This focus on themes of love and marriage, and heterosexuality in particular, has led to Chick Lit often being dismissed as domestic and thus insignificant. Harzewski points out that although, "an underanalyzed body of postmodern fiction, chick lit serves as an accessible portal into contemporary gender politics and questions of cultural value." (Harzewski, 2011, p 21)

*Watermelon* is the story of Claire's struggle to adapt to motherhood after her husband leaves her for another woman, but the story essentially revolves around her finding love for the second time around, this time with a new, more reliable and suitable man. *Bridget Jones's Diary* references *Pride and Prejudice* and the central narrative drive comes from Bridget's search for Mr Right (in this case Mark Darcy). Bridget is a sexually active woman and has other sexual relationships in the course of the year. (She begins the novel in a relationship with the unsuitable Daniel Cleaver, her boss and serial womanizer.) "Bridget – a journalist, like her creator – has come to represent the paradigmatic chick lit protagonist, with *Bridget Jones's Diary* a source text for chick lit tropes." (Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 2011, p 59)

Finding love for the second time is also the theme in *To The Moon and Back*. In this novel Ellie, the protagonist, had been married to Mr Right but he is killed in an accident at the start of the story. Ellie has to grieve this loss (which happens off page) before marrying a second Mr Right at the end of the story. *Straight Talking* chronicles the romantic lives of Tasha, Andy (Andrea), Mel and Emma.

*The Real Thing* is the only one of the five novels that doesn't start with a single (or newly divorced or widowed) woman. However, the main narrative drive is still concerned with the romantic relationship between Tessa and her husband, David. Having 'lost the spark' due to the demands of two small children, Tessa bumps into a previous boyfriend - her first love. The story centres on the dilemma of passion versus commitment. The story question might be defined as 'Can Tessa rediscover true love within her marriage?'

The main narrative drive in *Our Father* isn't focussed on the search for romantic love. I didn't want any heterosexual relationships to enter the novel, although there is an undercurrent of sexual tension between Lily and her sister's boyfriend. This was primarily a device to act as a catalyst for the breakdown of the newly-discovered family. *Our Father* is again more in keeping with noir narratives, which often have a romantic subplot (or a subplot concerned with the sexual relationship between men and women), but where the main narrative drive always comes from a criminal story question. "In many of the tough-guy film noir thrillers....the generic story ( of the crime or investigation) and the love story are often (con) fused." (Krutnik, 1991: p 4) It is the criminal story question that provides the main narrative drive in Noir (and also in *Our Father*). The criminal question (Lily perceives her father's refusal to meet her as a crime) plays out within the sphere of intimate family relationships.

The other early chick noir narratives also sought to challenge the limitations set by the main narrative drive of Chick Lit. *The Godmother*, *Getting Rid of Matthew* and *Tripping* are not contemporary romance novels. Jane Fallon stated in an interview, shortly after her second novel, *Got You Back*, was published:

One reviewer dubbed my first book *Getting Rid of Matthew* 'chick noir' and another called it 'anti chick lit' both of which I loved. I write about messy relationships – between friends, rivals, married couples, siblings. I'm not really interested in boy/girl romances.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.femalefirst.co.uk/books/jane-fallon-skeletons-442867.html#ixzz4akM3iD7H>

Carrie Adams also appears to have intended to take issue with the central premise of Chick Lit: “Adams follows up 2006's *The Godmother* with a perceptive chick noir, once again debunking the notion that everything's smooth sailing once you've found the love of your life.”<sup>14</sup> However, despite challenging the central premise of Chick Lit, both *The Godmother* and *Getting Rid of Matthew* are focussed on the heterosexual relationships between the characters. In *The Godmother*, Tessa realises she has been in love with her best friend Ben for twenty years, but he is now married to someone else. She also has a sexual relationship with two other men during the course of the novel. *The Godmother* is more a story of a woman's drive to find herself than a woman's drive to find a man. At the end of the story she remains single. In *Getting Rid of Matthew*, when Matthew finally decides to leave his wife, Sophie (and their two daughters) and move into Helen's flat, Helen realises she doesn't want him any more. The story question that drives the main narrative is something along the lines of, ‘Can Helen find a way to get rid of Matthew?’ In order to rid herself of her new man, Helen befriends his ex-wife and tries to persuade Sophie to reunite with her husband. So while the story is formed by the heterosexual relationships it documents, it challenges the ‘happy ending’ of traditional chick lit novels in that it doesn't end with the successful resolution of the story question, ‘Will the protagonist find love?’ (Although both *Getting Rid of Matthew* and *The Godmother* foreshadow a possible resolution to this question by introducing potential love interests towards the end of the novel. These new men are introduced late into the story and it is left to the readers' imagination whether they will turn out to be ‘Mr Right.’)

Like Fallon stated, I wasn't interested in boy/girl romances. It is the absence of this interest that marks my writing out from a lot of other contemporary, genre-based women writers. The main narrative drive of *Our Father* therefore borrows more heavily from Noir than it does from Chick Lit. I have never written a novel that features the search for romantic love as its key narrative drive. I find myself

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-06-123265-7>

questioning why this is the case and whether it's coincidence that I remain unmarried.

However, while the central premise of Chick Lit was challenged by these early chick noir novels, the focus remained on heterosexual relationships. The only two books (besides my own) to centre on the noir tradition of a criminal story question are the two American novels - *A Little Trouble with the Facts* and *Thirty-Nine Again*, which both take the criminal story question from Noir as their main narrative drive. In the former, Valerie writes an obituary for a once-famous graffiti artist, then receives a call to tell her that the artist's death was in fact murder. She is driven to investigate. In the latter, Sabrina discovers a masked man ransacking her apartment and her personal trainer turns out to be an undercover investigator.

As Chick Noir has developed, the focus on the heterosexual relationship has become more pronounced – to the point where it once again can be used to define the genre. *Before I Go To Sleep* is the story of Christine and her husband's relationship, until it is discovered that he isn't her husband after all. In *Gone Girl*, Amy Dunne has faked her own disappearance to get back at her husband, Nick, for having an affair. She has planted evidence so that he will be accused of her murder. In *The Girl On The Train*, Rachel has split up from her ex husband and is grieving the loss of her marriage. She is unaware that her ex husband is a killer until late into the novel. *Behind Closed Doors* is the story of an abusive marriage and *Into the Darkest Corner* is focussed on a toxic sexual relationship. Of course they introduce the criminal element – what happens within these heterosexual relationships is criminal and often the story drive is provided by the women finding ways to bring these men to justice (In *Behind Closed Doors*, Grace murders Jack but manages to disguise his murder as suicide.)

Chick Noir has now become defined through this focus on the toxic heterosexual relationship (and has also been called domestic noir or marriage thrillers). Lucie Whitehouse, interviewed by Jon Stock in *The Telegraph*, sought to define the genre:

"I'd define 'chick noir' as psychological thrillers that explore the fears and anxieties experienced by many women," Whitehouse says. "They deal in the dark side of relationships, intimate danger, the idea that you can never really know your husband or partner or that your home and relationship is threatened. In these books, danger sleeps next to you. Marriage is catnip for writers of psychological suspense because it's such a private, intimate relationship."<sup>15</sup>

So while the main narrative drive in contemporary Chick Noir involves a criminal question this criminal question is posed in the 'romantic' or the 'domestic' relationship. This is in contrast to other forms of crime and detective novels – featuring celibate, intellectual investigators (Poirot and Morse, for example). Chick Noir takes the romantic subplot of Noir and gives it predominance within the narrative. Whilst "Hardboiled novels and film noir foreground relationships and sexuality" (Kennedy, 2017: p 30), contemporary chick noir novels take place **solely** within the domestic realm. This means that Chick Noir is in danger of attracting the same criticism as Chick Lit - because the subject matter deals with women's lives, it is written off as 'domestic'. The marketing officer at Caffeine Nights alluded to this domestic realm: "Whether Chick lit with a dark side or Chick Noir, *Tripping* looks set to establish itself in a market that often deals with the lighter side of life."<sup>16</sup>

Many women take issue with the term 'chick' itself, which almost seems designed to ensure that the genres are seen as lacking weight. This contributes to a general issue of marketing, as Kathy Lette suggests: "Men who write first person, social satire, like Nick Hornby and David Nicholls and co, are compared to Chekov. While women authors get pink covers and condescension."<sup>17</sup> As Sarah Gormley notes, the word 'chick' has been seen over the years has being derogatory towards women themselves:

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/10574425/Our-growing-appetite-for-chick-noir.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.prleap.com/pr/70487/caffeine-nights-publishing-introduces-a-new>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/have-we-fallen-out-of-love-with-chick-lit-2361445.html>

Sarah Gormley (2005: 9) traces the historical usage of the term 'chick', which evidences that the term has several negative implications besides the "low' literary value" of the novels: namely, "that the women who write and read chick lit are infantile, unintellectual, and concerned with the trivial." <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklitz/perezserrano.html>

## Summary and Conclusion

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Genre may not be that important to the novice author writing their first novel, but it quickly becomes apparent that a marketing category is crucial when it comes to selling books.

As *Our Father* was published, it seemed that Chick Noir might be a label I could use in order to ensure that my novel got into the right readers' hands. The early chick noir novels were centred around other aspects of their protagonists lives rather than the heterosexual relationship.

However it is clear that as the genre flourished commercially, the perception of the kind of stories that constituted it narrowed, to those focused solely on the toxic sexual relationship and this meant that *Our Father* fell outside of its tightened definition and a new label was needed. Feminist Noir certainly seems to work better, particularly for my subsequent novels. After *Our Father*, I wrote *Shallow Be Thy Grave* (Taft, A.J. 2011) and *My Time Has Come* (Taft, A.J. 2013) both of which were published by Caffeine Nights. Both of these novels feature Lily Appleyard as she continues to try to reunite her broken family. Both of them centre on a criminal story question. (In *Shallow Be Thy Grave*, Lily's sister, Fiona is murdered and Lily wants to avenge her death. In *My Time Has Come*, Lily is asked by a friend of her mother's (Bert) if she'll help locate his missing wife).

Last year I moved publishers, and my most recent novel was published this year (under a new name) by HarperCollins (Harper, Ali, (2018) *The Disappeared*). I wrote this latest novel with a much more commercial awareness of genre and publishing categories. In it Lily Appleyard has changed her name to Lee Winters and opened a Missing Persons' Bureau. I deliberately gave her a more androgynous name in order to make her more gender-neutral (as well as to distance her from the previous novels). She is now an officially-endorsed private investigator. Her professional status perhaps matches my own attempts to make my writing more professional than personal.

Earlier this year I wrote the next novel in the series, provisionally entitled *The Invisible*. With funding from The Arts Council, I developed a series of author talks that compare the protagonists of Feminist Noir with those of Chick Noir.

The five novels I have written featuring Lily Appleyard/Lee Winters have all, for the most part, avoided the sexual world. Lily/Lee has not had any meaningful sexual relationship in any of the narratives. In *Our Father* she shares a kiss with Stuart, her sister's boyfriend and in *Shallow Be Thy Grave* she has a one-night stand with a man that she later discovers is criminally involved in her sister's disappearance.

In later books in the series, Lee has given up on sex and sees it as something that causes more problems than it's worth. Prior to the publication of *The Disappeared*, my editor at HarperCollins asked me to include more information about Lee's sexual history, because she thought the reader would want to know more about Lee's personal relationships. I have tried to avoid this, subconsciously I think, to avoid having my work relegated to the world of 'chick' stories – whether Noir or Lit. I am much more comfortable with the label of Feminist Noir.

However, as I am now looking for my next story, I find myself interested in whether I can introduce a more sexual element into my novels without then getting assigned to the 'chick' category of genre fiction and this is something I may explore in future narratives.

Ultimately, though, I don't feel like I've had that much say in how my stories have developed. I agree with idea that Stephen King developed in his memoir, *On Writing* (King, Stephen, 2001): The story already exists, and the writer is more like the archaeologist – she just carefully unearths it.





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## **Appendix One – Early Chick Noir Novels**

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*The Godmother* by Carrie Adams

*Tripping* by Darren E Laws

*Getting Rid of Matthew* by Jane Fallon

*A Little Trouble With The Facts* by Nina Siegal

*Thirty-Nine Again* by Lynn Reynolds

## **Appendix Two – Contemporary Chick Noir Novels**

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*Before I Go To Sleep* by SJ Watson

*Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn

*The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins

*Behind Closed Doors* by BA Paris

*Into The Darkest Corner* by Elizabeth Hayes.

## **Appendix Three – Chick Lit Novels**

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*Watermelon* by Marian Keyes

*Bridget Jones' Diary* by Helen Fielding

*To the Moon And Back* by Jill Mansell

*Straight Talking* by Jane Green

*The Real Thing* by Catherine Alliott.

## **Appendix Four – Noir Novels**

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*The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler

*The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett

*The Postman Always Rings Twice* James M Cain

*Jack's Return Home* by Ted Lewis (subsequently republished as *Get Carter*)

*LA Confidential* by James Ellroy.

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## Appendix Five - Chick Noir Time-Line

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### 2006

*The Godmother* - Carrie Adams

### 2007

*Tripping* - Darren E Laws

*Getting Rid of Matthew* - Jane Fallon

### 2008

*A Little Trouble With The Facts* - Nina Siegal (Harper Paperback, February 2008)

*Got You Back* - Jane Fallon (Penguin, August 2008)

### 2009

*Thirty-Nine Again* - Lynn Reynolds (Wild Rose Press, May 2009)

### 2010

*Foursome* - Jane Fallon (Penguin, February 2010)

### 2011

*Before I Go to Sleep* - S.J. Watson (Doubleday, April 2011)

*Our Father Who Art Out There, Somewhere* - A.J. Taft (Caffeine Nights, September 2011)

*The Ugly Sister* - Jane Fallon (Penguin, September 2011)

### 2012

*Gone Girl* - Gillian Flynn (Crown Publishing Group, June 2012)

*May We Be Forgiven* - A.M. Homes (Viking, September 2012)

### 2013

*Into the Darkest Corner* by Elizabeth Haynes (Harper, January 2013)

*How To Be a Good Wife* - Emma Chapman (St Martins Press, January 2013)

*Until You're Mine* by Samantha Hayes (Century, April 2013)

*Apple Tree Yard* by Louise Doughty (Faber & Faber, June 2013)

*The Silent Wife* - A.S.A. Harrison (Penguin, June 2013)

*Sandrine's Case* - Thomas H. Cook (Mysterious Press, August 2013)

## **2014**

*Before We Met* - Lucie Whitehouse (Bloomsbury, January 2014)

*Under Your Skin* by Sabine Durrant (Atria, February 2014)

*Skeletons* – Jane Fallon (Penguin, March 2014)

*You Should Have Known* by Jean Hanff Korelitz (Grand Central Publishing, March 2014)

*Season to Taste* - Natalie Young (Little, Brown and Company, July 2014)

## **2015**

*The Girl on the Train* - Paula Hawkins (Doubleday, January 2015)

*Dirt Nap Rhapsody* - Jules Cassard (Hopewell Manhattan Press, February 2015)

*The Husband's Secret* - Liane Moriarty (Berkley, July 2015)

## **2016**

*Strictly Between Us* – Jane Fallon (Penguin, January 2016)

*The Love Seat* - Sherise Seven (Juan Derful, Ink, January 2016)

*Behind Closed Doors* - B.A. Paris (HQ, February 2016)

## **2017**

*My Sweet Revenge* – Jane Fallon (Penguin, January 2017)

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