

The Activist Potential of Marian Keyes' Irish Chick Lit

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Published online: February 2025

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

<https://doi.org/10.70138/XFEM8295>

Like so many readers of romance and chick lit, we—Maria Butler, a PhD student at University College Cork, and Rosalind Haslett, a Senior Lecturer in theatre and performance at Newcastle University—both stumbled across Marian Keyes' novels by accident. Rosalind was a student in Dublin when she spotted *Sushi For Beginners* and *Last Chance Saloon* while browsing the small bookshelf in her shared accommodation. It was 2001 and her housemates, two sisters from Galway, were shocked to discover she'd never read any Marian Keyes before.

'You *have* to borrow them', they insisted.

So, Rosalind took the books to her room and read them both cover to cover immediately: she has been reading and re-reading them ever since. Maria, who is about ten years younger, was a teenager when she first picked up the yellow Poolbeg trade paperback of *Last Chance Saloon* that she found in her family home. She read it when she felt down or homesick. It accompanied her to college and again on her Erasmus year abroad. It quickly became her comfort book.

For both of us, these first experiences of reading Keyes' novels were formative because the books had been passed on to us by other women in our lives. These books were our initiation into a tacit community of women who offered practical support to one another in the absence of compassionate or affirming systems, structures and laws. We got hold of the books by the same means that—had we needed to—we would have discovered how to go on the pill, or seek help for an addiction, or get an abortion, or leave an abusive partner. Keyes' novels stepped in to occupy a space that had otherwise only been filled with shame and silence. They helped us to understand that our personal problems were part of a collective experience. These books allowed us to participate in the telling of stories about characters we recognised and struggles that mirrored our own. By following these narratives to their inevitable happy ending, we were able to rehearse the different ways that we might overcome our own difficulties too.

Not only did we discover the pleasures of Keyes' novels in similar ways, we also have overlapping reasons for returning to these books as the subject of our respective research

projects. In 2018, the Irish abortion referendum passed by a majority of 66.4% and—at the same time but in different places—we both began to think about Keyes’ art and activism in a new light. The referendum was preceded by a hard-fought national debate about the rights of women in Ireland, during which the personal testimonies of women who had been compelled to travel for abortions became a key part of the political discourse. Rosalind, by then living in England, remembers reading these personal testimonies in the newspapers and online and listening to them on *The Irish Times Women’s Podcast*. She found herself thinking about the way they seemed to relate to the form of the dramatic monologue; a convention of style that is very closely associated with twentieth-century Irish theatre. And then she kept coming back to the idea that maybe it was Marian Keyes’ popular chick-lit novels, with their confessional, first-person narratives, that had taught Irish women how to tell their own stories in their own words. Although her background is in theatre and performance scholarship, Rosalind found herself irresistibly drawn to a new project about Keyes’ fiction as a form of closet drama (plays intended to be read privately rather than staged publicly). The novels are not written to be performed, but they do use dramatic techniques. They structure an open and discursive relationship with the reader that often feels as live and immediate as the experience of being part of a theatre audience. And they also transmit inherited knowledge through the telling of anecdotes and jokes—a phenomenon that Rosalind has previously observed in the backstage cultures of community theatre (Haslett, 2020; 2021).

At the same moment, but on the west coast of Ireland, Maria also found herself at a personal and professional crossroads. She had always wanted to do a PhD and so, in 2020, she proposed a project on the activist potential of Keyes’s novels. Maria argues that Keyes’ celebrity and branding interact with Keyes’ fiction and non-fiction writings to destabilise three of the Irish loci of shame: addiction, depression, and abortion. Although Maria was nervous to propose a postgraduate research project on Keyes for fear of outdated and misogynistic responses, her research has proved timely and is supported by funding from the Irish Research Council (Butler, 2023). She is also drawing upon her background in library studies and is working closely with the National Library of Ireland on the ingestion of their forthcoming born-digital archive of Keyes’ novel *The Mystery of Mercy Close* (2012). Maria is interested in how Keyes’ writings impart practical information to readers, such as the way *The Break* (2017) details the steps involved in circumnavigating the legislation to procure an abortion, and *Last Chance Saloon* (1999) reframes public narratives about the AIDS crisis.

There are significant differences in our academic approaches to Keyes and her novels, but we have both been inspired by the upsurge in feminist activism that has forced significant political change in contemporary Ireland. Since the publication of Keyes’ debut novel *Watermelon* (1995), Ireland has undergone what the country’s former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has described as a ‘quiet revolution’ on issues of gender and sexuality (McDonald, et al., 2018), including landmark rulings like the legalisation of divorce (1995), the introduction of equal marriage (2015), and the legalisation of abortion (2018). It was our private and personal reading practices that brought us to Keyes, but it is this ongoing public debate that has instigated our desire to engage with her work academically. We are both energised by the socio-political aspects of the seventeen (and counting) novels that constitute Keyes’ oeuvre, and which not only document but which, we argue, have also contributed to this sea change in attitudes towards issues of gender and sexuality in Irish law and governance. Against this backdrop, it felt—for both of us—like the right time to open

out from the private networks and informal systems of ‘passing on’ through which we first discovered Keyes’ work and to step into the public forum.

We are not the first scholars to have written on Keyes’ work: there exists a small but pioneering body of literature in this area. However, given Keyes’ rate of publication and her intensity of focus on the contemporary moment (most of her novels are set in the year of publication), as well as the recent pace of socio-political change in Ireland, much of this has already been rendered out of date in a very fast-moving field. It is common to see Keyes’ work treated within broader studies on chick lit since her first novel *Watermelon* (1995). Alongside titles such as Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1996), it is considered to have been part of a vanguard of chick lit at the turn of the millennium. Chick lit has roots in the personal column and the magazine editorial (both *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City* were first serialised as weekly columns in the national press). So, considering Keyes’ work within this frame provides useful context for our observations about the activist potential of Keyes’ work, which relies upon its contemporary relevance and its immediate engagement with the social realities of its implied readership. However, scholarly characterisations of 1990s and early 2000s chick lit often position it as a postfeminist, late-capitalist, mid-Atlantic phenomenon. We argue that there is much to be gained from a highly contextualised reading of Keyes’s work that locates it within the geographically and socio-politically distinct context of Ireland in the decades before and after the millennium. Consequently, our work is more clearly aligned with recent scholarship on chick lit that focuses on the subversive potential of the genre, as it emerges within culturally and politically conservative contexts (Rudin, 2023; Abu Udum, 2022; Spencer, 2018).

There are some remarkable parallels in the genesis of our projects. And yet they are both pieces of lone-scholar research. This signals the emergence of a landscape for studies of Keyes’ work, which is both collectivist and diverse, and which is expansive enough to allow for polyvocality. It seems fitting that our professional ‘meet cute’ happened because we were both scheduled to speak alongside on the same panel at IASPR 2023 in Birmingham. That conference instigated a conversation, which has opened up into an ongoing and productive dialogue that is of benefit to both of us—both individually and also as part of a broader field.

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