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Writing domestic violence in Marian Keyes' *This Charming Man* (2008)

Abstract:

Popular fiction for women has been variously criticised and derided for a focus on romance plots and superficial themes. Marian Keyes, a prolific author of contemporary women's popular fiction, however, utilises romance to explore serious contemporary issues. This paper examines the representation of one of these serious issues, domestic violence, in Keyes' novel *This Charming Man* (2008). The novel's multi-story plot gradually weaves together the histories and experiences of four female protagonists from their individual points of view. Each protagonist has had a romantic involvement with one 'charming man', the rich and powerful Irish politician Paddy de Courcy. Chapters devoted to each woman are interspersed with short vignettes that recount moments of Paddy's violent behaviour. The narrative organisation of *This Charming Man* represents domestic violence in a way that prioritises healing, physically, mentally and emotionally, for the protagonists through telling their stories and sharing those stories with other characters and readers. This form of creative writing prompts reader engagement and reflection. Such readerly engagement may increase awareness of this issue and potentially lead readers to actively seek change in their own lives.

Biographical notes:

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You've got to go, 'Shoes, shoes, shoes! Handbags, chocolate!' she says, shouting, and then whispers: 'Women's rights' (Marian Keyes in an interview with Brian Lavery 2006).

Introduction

Domestic and intimate partner violence is a serious contemporary issue. In developed countries, there is public acknowledgement that women have the right to live free from domestic violence – physical, emotional, sexual, and financial – and governments increasingly legislate to achieve this. However, people, particularly women, continue to experience violence in their personal lives so that their own, family and community health and wellbeing is undermined. Socio-political analysis including from feminist theoretical perspectives has sought to address this violence. Creativity – art therapy, writing, and performance – is important to consider in this regard. It is beneficial for exploring ideas and providing a range of insights (Ali et al. 2002: 15, in Flew 2004: 1) for engaging with domestic and intimate partner violence in relative safety. Increasingly, novelists particularly women, are writing narratives that encourage readers to consider domestic violence and the mental health issues associated with it, which are on-going, contemporary, social justice issues that are still often taboo. Novelists are addressing this issue by writing characters and fictional scenarios that open up ways for readers to reflect, gain knowledge, rehearse strategies for dealing with violence, develop empathy for those, including themselves, who experience intimate partner violence and possibly take action. In this discussion, we explore the synergy between social behaviour – domestic and intimate partner violence – and creative arts, through the analysis of a popular novel, in contributing strategies for addressing the issue.

Kaukinen et al. argue that while changes – in western countries – have empowered women socio-economically, this comes with an increased 'risk of male-perpetrated violence as an alternative means of men maintaining power and control over women' (2013: 578). They emphasise that these women have 'increased economic power and associated status' (Kaukinen 2013: 578), which should increase their options for dealing with violent situations. However, this is not necessarily so. Admitting to and speaking about the experience of intimate partner violence is still difficult or taboo for many. Stöckl et al. in their multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women revealed that adolescents and young women in western and non-western countries are experiencing high levels of intimate partner violence. They cite a number of contributing factors including a history of family violence, education, societal attitudes and high levels of alcohol consumption (2014: 1). They conclude that intimate partner violence has ongoing effects on women's mental and physical health, reproduction, and social status. Marian Keyes makes this same point in her novel *This Charming Man*, which we discuss here to argue for the importance of fiction and creative works in highlighting and addressing domestic violence.

This paper considers how popular literature can create talking points and reflective spaces in relation to this important issue. We discuss ways narrative strategies in contemporary popular women's fiction inform consciousness-raising about domestic

violence. We see this literature as providing a catalyst for readers to 'intervene upon oneself' (Rose 1990: 90) by using the narrative content to admit the abuse to themselves and possibly others as a step to seeking help and healing. To do this, we focus specifically on *This Charming Man* (2008), a novel by prolific Irish writer Marian Keyes. *This Charming Man* provides a 'safe environment' for readers to confront intimate partner violence, albeit that the novel exposes the reader to all aspects of intimate partner violence as identified by the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO markers of intimate partner violence are: behaviours that cause physical harm – slapping, hitting and burning – or sexual harm, including forced sexual intercourse and sexual coercion; psychological abuse such as belittling, humiliating, intimidating; controlling behaviours, including isolating a person from family and friends; monitoring their movements; restricting access to shared or individual finances, employment, education or medical care (WHO 2016). Through her novel, Keyes explores domestic violence across all these behaviours.

Novels by Marian Keyes can be described as feminist genre fiction, which Anne Cranny-Francis describes as works that are written from a 'self-consciously feminist perspective' (1990: 1) while capitalising on 'large' and 'diverse' readerships (3) typified by bestselling genre fiction. Since Keyes started writing she has cultivated a large readership in the United Kingdom, Ireland and beyond. In 1995, Marian Keyes published her first novel *Watermelon* with the Irish publisher Poolbeg. *Watermelon* went into publication in the United Kingdom in the same year and Keyes signed a three-book contract. British publishers were 'excited' by the sales of Keyes's first two novels in Ireland, which later led to publishing deals reportedly worth more than 600,000 Euros. According to Jan Battles' article in the UK's *Sunday Times* in 1996: '*Watermelon*, for which Keyes received no advance, came out in August 1995 and sold 35,000 copies in Ireland. It was one of six books selected by WH Smith as part of its 1996 Fresh Talent promotion and sold 65,000 copies in Britain'. As of 2016, Keyes has written twelve best-selling novels plus two article collections and a cookbook, *Saved by Cake* (2012). Keyes has undertaken multiple sell-out book tours and events in Australia, and her novels are held in most urban, suburban and regional libraries.

Keyes' *This Charming Man* addresses the difficult and sensitive subject of intimate partner violence by combining an engaging and at times, entertaining narrative set in Dublin, Ireland, with what are deeply disturbing acts of violence and societal complicity. Fiction set in an Irish context is possibly useful for Australian readers because it increases the distance between them and the violence that is represented still further than an Australian novel might do. For instance, a woman in rural Australia faced with domestic violence might find it less confronting to read of similar experiences in situations removed from her own experience. Similarly, an Irish reader might find reading from an Australian or another perspective less confronting. Readers' ability to deal with representations of situations happening in their lives will vary as their experiences do and hence the cultural and physical distance acts as a scrim in a theatrical performance that hangs between the actors and the audience shielding the audience from the direct violence.

Contextualising domestic violence

As Australian academics, we are primarily concerned with the role of popular fiction writing as a mechanism for highlighting and addressing domestic and intimate partner violence across Australian society where 'one in four women has experienced violence from an intimate partner, according to a disturbing new report that also finds at least 500,000 children have witnessed violence' (Ross 2015). Children witnessing violence is significant because of the high correlation between witnessing violence, particularly over sustained periods, and accepting it in one's own life. According to Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, domestic violence is a 'tragic and deadly epidemic', which resulted in 63 Australian women dying in 2015. This is an increase from the 2008-10 figures (Ross 2015). There were also approximately 60,000 reports to police of domestic violence related assault in 2015, excluding Victoria and Queensland, which were not included in the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures (Colgan 2015). It is important to note that men also experience domestic violence; however, the perpetrators are often other male family members, the rate of incidence is not as high or of the same magnitude and there is less fear of continued violence once people are not in the same dwelling (Cussen 2015). How one person experiences violence as opposed to another, however, cannot be measured and it is not useful or respectful of peoples' experiences to speculate on this.

As Rosemary Hunter explains in 'Narratives of Domestic Violence', historically in Australia, domestic violence was concealed 'in the suburban shadows' (2006: 733). This was reflected in 'everyday common sense ideas' that whatever happened in the home was between 'husband and wife' and certainly not a police matter. Legislation including the *Domestic Violence Act 1986* (ACT), the *Domestic Violence Act 1992* (NT), and the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) reflect a shift in official Australian attitudes. However, legislation alone is not able to eradicate domestic violence. Socio-cultural factors including attitudes to women, to sexuality, women's employment opportunities, and equity in access to finance all need to be addressed.

The National Australia Day Council chose Rosie Batty as the 2015 Australian of the year for her work in opposing domestic violence after the death of her son. This award was an important public acknowledgement of the magnitude of the problem, further reinforced by the Prime Minister's pledge of \$100 million to stop the 'national disgrace' of domestic violence (Ireland 2015). While government services, including health, refuges, policing for dealing with domestic and intimate partner violence are crucial to addressing the problem, many people experiencing such violence are not physically or psychologically ready to access support at official levels or to admit what is happening. Shame, lack of self-worth and believing that it does not happen to some women, such as professional or upper-class women, can make those who it is happening to internalise blame. These are all factors that deter women from admitting to and talking about their situation, and seeking help. This is particularly so when people are isolated from family and friends by physical distance or social taboos and therefore isolated from community narratives including accounts of peoples' lives that might assist them.

Literature, film and drama can play a significant role in opening up awareness of the extent of domestic and intimate partner violence and encourage disclosure and awareness that the person experiencing the violence is not the cause, as we explain here. Literature, film and drama can play a significant role in intervening in domestic violence, for example as explored in the interdisciplinary research conducted by the Law, Literature and Humanities Association. Patrick Morris illustrates the use of English literature in clinical and forensic psychiatry to assess and treat people involved in trauma including domestic violence (Morris 2013). Such research makes the point that narrative is fundamental to society and everyday life. As Horst Ruthrof has noted:

[It] extends considerably beyond the scope of literature; it is one of the essential constituents of our understanding of reality. From the time we begin to understand language until our death, we are perpetually surrounded by narratives, first of all in our family, then at school, then through an encounter with people and reading (1997: 34).

We are born into an historical process in which official, personal and cultural narratives compete and inter-relate in the production of who we are and how we live our lives. Traditionally, there have been demarcations between the private and public domains, so that what happens at home remains at home.

Societal conditioning positions many people to adhere to these unwritten rules, apparent in books such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007). These books expose alcoholism, family violence, poverty and sexism in working and lower middle-class Irish families. Readers confronted with the socio-economic, often religious and psychological contexts in which the families live may 'understand' why beaten women stay with their husbands. The novels evoke empathy for the women and children who live with the violence while opening these issues up for public discussion. Marian Keyes is thus one of an increasing number of popular fiction novelists who are using their writing as a conduit for engaging large audiences on the issue of domestic and intimate partner violence. Jodi Picoult's *Picture Perfect* (1995), tells the story of Cassie Barrett, a well-reputed anthropologist, married to Alex Rivers, a popular Hollywood actor. Publically, Cassie lives a glamorous life but in private exists with abuse and fear. In *Safe Haven* (2010) Nicholas Sparks, novelist and screenwriter, has protagonist Katie running for her life from an abusive husband. Sparks who has adapted several of his novels for film, encourages readers and viewers to confront and respond to domestic and intimate partner violence. Anna George in *What Came Before* (2014) has readers confront why and how a well-educated, successful lawyer comes to be dissatisfied with life and funnels that into intimate partner violence. Similarly, in the Australian rural romance genre, Rachael Treasure's *The Farmer's Wife* (2013) and Karly Lane's *North Star* (2011) comment on patriarchy in rural Australia and its often silent acceptance of domestic violence, sexism and alcoholism. *The Farmer's Wife* sees the heroine Rebecca Saunders experience physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband while *North Star* recounts the heroine's escape from a marriage undone by financial abuse. Each of these writers embeds the accounts of violence in everyday life events, where they

exist in people's lives. The ways writers do this are crucial for opening up discussions of what is most often a taboo subject, yet within the safe zone of fiction.

Katherine X and Sue Smethurst's *Behind Closed Doors* (2015) and Rosie Batty and Bryce Corbett's *A Mother's Story* (2015) are works of non-fiction that address increasing intimate partner and domestic violence in Australia. As non-fiction, readers may well find these types of text more confronting than fiction. High levels of confrontation mean there is no relief from the violence and psychological torment, often communicated through narrative strategies including characterisation and humour. Further, these non-fiction texts do not have the broad or young readership of prolific Irish popular fiction author Marian Keyes or Australia's Rachel Treasure.

Keyes' *This Charming Man* employs numerous narrative strategies to represent the palpable images of violence to engage the reader and invite reflection. Such strategies are framed within simple direct language to explore human behaviour from the point of view of the women experiencing the violence. The novel makes the point that positive change and healing requires action from the women because the perpetrator, in this instance, does not come to a realisation about the harm he is causing nor does he demonstrate any desire to reform his behaviour. Keyes utilises distinct narrative strategies to expose domestic violence and the characters' responses to it. The novel has a single plot that the author weaves together via alternating chapters devoted to each of the primary female protagonists. As the women start to tell their stories to the reader and speak about their experiences with each other, they move ever closer to action and ultimately healing. The intertwining of their stories makes the point that acts of domestic violence are rarely isolated to a single incident. The novel modulates its dominant narrative tone between solemnness, humour, violence and hope in the past and present. Brief flashback vignettes show unnamed women experiencing the 'charming man' Paddy at his worst. Though shocking, the vignettes are fleeting and are often juxtaposed with uplifting or comedic moments. Keyes uses movements in time to reveal the synergy between the escalating violence and the women's diminishing self-confidence. Such narrative fluctuations in tone encourage the reader to stay engaged until the end. *This Charming Man* presents the characters' relationships, desires, and behaviours so the reader can judge their reliability as witnesses to Paddy's character and behaviour. The cross-referencing of the four women's narratives creates a compelling multi-perspective testimony of Paddy's behaviour; the plot increasingly becomes driven by a need for a resolution for the women and the reader.

'I thought I was the only one'

This Charming Man uses a single plot with multiple narratives to tell the story of politician Paddy de Courcy's relationships with four middle and upper middle-class professional women, Grace, Lola, Marnie, and Alicia. The multi-story narrative shifts mainly between three of the four women to offer readers insights into their lives, thoughts and feelings. Narrative shifts facilitate the reader's emotional connection with each woman and keep them reading, even through harrowing examples of domestic violence. The early chapters shift mainly between Lola, Marnie and Grace,

with Alicia (Paddy's new fiancée) mentioned in passing. Only later does the narrative reveal the nature of the relationships between each woman and Paddy. This multi-narrative strategy echoes that used by Jane Austen in *The Three Sisters* (1792), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Sandition* (1817) and other novels in which she wrote to expose the societal conventions that disempowered women.

As the stories draw together, so too do the women; a necessity for dealing with intimate partner violence according to authors such as McCourt, Doyle, Enright, Treasure and Batty. Thus the first short chapter of *This Charming Man* introduces the four women and their responses to learning of Paddy's engagement. Grace, a journalist, is writing a story about Paddy's engagement. Her response to the news he is getting married is professional, focussed upon her need to write the story. Lola, Paddy's current girlfriend, is shocked at this surprise news and thinks she is having a 'heart attack'. Marnie, Paddy's childhood sweetheart, has a telling, emotional response: 'don't you dare be happy, you bastard. That's what I thought when I heard' (Keyes 2008: 4). And finally, Alicia, the bride-to-be who has received no formal proposal from Paddy and learns of the engagement through the media announcement says: 'It would have been nice if you had asked me first' (3). Alicia's surprised reaction hints at Paddy's motive, later revealed to be his desire for the political advantage of marriage as a new election campaign begins. Keyes thus situates the reader in the world of Irish politics and high society then abruptly renders thin the veneer of social nicety with disturbing images of physical and emotional abuse throughout each of the narrative threads.

Readers are positioned by the narrative to consider how intimate partner violence occurs across society including how subtle and hidden it can be. For instance, through Lola's narrative, the reader learns that she is a personal stylist for professionals and socialites. One of her clients is Rosalyn Croft, the wife of a wealthy and powerful man who is hosting a gala dinner for dignitaries and politicians. Still traumatised from her relationship break-up, Lola accidentally takes the wrong set of designer clothes to Mrs Croft's on the night of the dinner. The result will be that Mrs Croft has nothing appropriate to wear. Upon discovering the mistake, Mrs Croft exclaims 'oh God, oh my God, oh God, Maxwell with kill me!' (101). When her husband discovers the mistake, he confronts Mrs Croft with 'Why can't you use a reliable stylist? You fucking useless –' (102). Lola and Mrs Croft's staff scurry away from the scene, however, Lola catches a glimpse of Mr and Mrs Croft in what she describes, as an 'odd embrace' (102). Lola narrates what she sees in her characteristic *slanguage*: 'Mr Croft holding Mrs Croft's wrist between both hands and giving her Chinese burn! ... long mew of pain from her. Then Mr Croft let go, gave her rough push and barrelled from room' (102-3). Lola and the household staff then remain silent and thus complicit. Lola is confronted, shocked, speechless and apparently powerless. She is the 'servant' who supposedly does not see or hear anything amiss and does not speak out of turn because she knows her place. This narrative thread is used to show how in this particular society, privilege and social status come at a cost, which many women pay. Keyes thus exposes the ways that informal rules work to socialise people, in this case women, to live with violence to maintain their social status, job or relationship.

Similar manifestations of violence occur in the narrative threads of each female protagonist.

The weaving together of the narratives in *This Charming Man* reveals the potential of women to address domestic violence if they unite. The novel further raises the question of whether revenge or justice is a more important outcome of addressing domestic violence, at least for Keyes's characters. Keyes uses the desire for revenge or justice against Paddy as a primary narrative driver. This strategy is evident in Lola's story in particular because she has been publicly jilted by Paddy. At one point, Lola decides to rent a DVD in the absence of much else to do in the small town she has retreated to in the aftermath of the breakup. The video shop attendants, Brandon and Kelly, ask Lola what she 'is in the mood for' and Lola briefly describing her reasons for wanting to watch a DVD. While Kelly suggests tearful Hollywood romantic films such as *Sleepless in Seattle* and *One Fine Day*, Brandon is adamant that Lola needs a 'revenge film', specifically *Kill Bill* or *Dirty Harry* (51). After watching *Dirty Harry*, Lola exclaims that it is a 'marvellous film' and 'exactly what I'd wanted' (51). Thereafter Lola delights in watching several other revenge films during her stay at the cabin. While she appears to seek catharsis through the films she watches, the reader is positioned to speculate if the novel and its wider story has a revenge component.

Feminist theorists including Tania Modleski (1980) and Kay Seidel (1992) have discussed the importance of revenge fantasies for readers. Modleski argues for the cathartic effect of heroines who exert power in 'bringing the man to his knees' (1980: 53). Kay Seidel discusses the difference between 'fantasies' and 'goals' in romance novels, suggesting that romance plots often 'set up fantasies about how the world ought to work.' (1992: 160) These theorists are not naïve. They do not advocate retaliatory violence; rather, they argue for the power of narrative to posit strategies and energies for change. Readers can use the ideas from narratives (such as film and literature) to imagine future scenarios including life choices. In this way according to Feldman, we are 'always the artefact of prior received and newly constructed narratives' (1991:13). We are always using narratives to make sense of life. In the case of *This Charming Man*, the reader is positioned to judge motivations, actions, characters and outcomes to work through the accounts and affects of abuse.

Themes of revenge and natural justice are tropes that weave the four women's narratives together in *This Charming Man*. None of the women wants to formally pursue Paddy through legal channels given his political power and social influence. However, Grace convinces Lola and Marnie to confront Paddy about his behaviour. At first, when they face Paddy and threaten to publish a news story about his violence, he stares them down and laughs them off. He attempts to pit the women against each other and even tries to blame them for the violence he inflicted upon them. For example, in Marnie's case, he asks her if she is 'still crazy after all years?' (Keyes 2008: 738). Then when accused of having hit Marnie many years prior, he replies, 'Anyone would hit Marnie' (738). Paddy's spiteful tactics aim to discredit and humiliate the women; they may even go so far as to convince the women, especially the highly vulnerable character Marnie, that the violence was deserved. Grace, however, is unfazed by Paddy's approach. Desperately, she checks the hands and

arms of Paddy's fiancée, Alicia, for a cigarette burn or signs of bruises. Grace's hope is that Alicia has also experienced this particular violence; however, Grace finds nothing. The women retreat, regroup and try again.

The second confrontation with Paddy sees them come armed with copies of signed affidavits, demonstrating a more formal approach to dealing with an alleged perpetrator of domestic violence. They ask him to stop sabotaging the political career of his female party leader; it is clear that Paddy hopes that with her out of the way he would become the new leader. The women are successful in having Paddy meet their demands this time. However, this climax yields neither revenge nor justice: Paddy still has his fiancée and his career. The final denouement, however, produces a twist where following the political election: Paddy's female boss and party leader publicly sack him by announcing, 'Paddy ... has decided to take time out from political life' (866). Alicia narrates this scene as an observer on the sidelines, 'Dee Rossini was sacking him. Publicly. In front of the world's media. And he hadn't a clue. Paddy, who always knew everything' (867). Alicia confides to the reader her fearful thought that Paddy might somehow 'blame her for this' (870). Moreover, the reader learns Alicia's hand now bears the mark of a cigarette burn, a form of violence he has inflicted on the other female protagonists previously. This final chapter from Alicia's perspective unsettles the reader; Marnie, Grace and Lola have sought some resolution and have begun to heal, however, the reader is positioned to think that Alicia's pain and the reality of her difficult situation are just beginning.

Through accounts of their private lives, Keyes' female protagonists confront readers with the limited gains made by women through feminism and liberal politics. These limited gains include the terrifying reality that domestic violence numbers continue to increase in many Western countries. Keyes exposes the interrelationship between private and public or cultural narratives and the cultural contract they form between individuals, groups and our social universe' (McLaren 1995: 89). As McLaren suggests '[i]f narratives give our lives meaning we need to understand what those narratives are and how they come to exert such an influence on us' (1995: 89). When Keyes' protagonists understand the cultural narratives that enabled their acceptance of Paddy's and other influential men's treatment of them, they better understand their social conditioning and can expose it before moving beyond it.

As the story unfolds, the reader encounters several short vignettes that detail domestic violence inflicted by Paddy on each of the female protagonists. These vignettes briefly show how the women react, thereby providing insight into their social conditioning towards this issue. The first vignette begins with Paddy remorseful and apologetic. The fragmented imagery of his words and body emphasises a sense of shock at his behaviour, 'oh God, oh God' 'his face wet with tears' before 'he broke down into proper shoulder-jerking crying' (Keyes 2008: 129). His behaviour elicits remorse and sympathy from the anonymous woman whose point of view the vignette is told as she exclaims, 'She couldn't bear to see him so prostrate' (129). The vignette concludes: 'He grasped her to him and kissed her hard, and although her split lip was raw to the touch, she let him' (129). Such a statement is tinged with irony and shock that the woman is sympathetic to him when it is she who is physically hurt.

The vignettes build momentum through the novel, escalating the violence as the reader becomes more aligned with the female characters. The third vignette, only two sentences long, is menacing. Rather than narrating Paddy's violence, this vignette captures the immediate aftermath:

'If you ever tell anyone,' he said, I'll kill you. Okay? Okay?' he said, louder this time. She was mopping the blood off her face, astonished at its quantity and redness. 'Okay' (299).

Only later does the reader learn that the unknown woman in the vignette is Grace, the journalist. The vignettes serve as a brief prelude of violent encounters between Paddy and each woman, and then later the novel expresses the actual, contextualised and detailed memory narrated by each woman. When Grace gives her full story, readers learn that Paddy's violence was the result of her refusing his sexual advances. Readers are positioned to be startled by the quick change in Paddy's temperament and his violence against a character the reader has been positioned to identify with and like. Disturbingly for readers, is Grace's acquiescence to Paddy's threat to be silent about their encounter. The reader is prompted to question why Grace has feebly responded with 'okay' when Paddy has hit and threatened her (129). Much later, when Grace's full story is revealed, the reader better understands her reaction, especially her fear that Paddy would try to destroy her marriage if she said anything. Together, the vignettes expose the pattern of Paddy's violence; he strikes when women are vulnerable either emotionally or physically and turns sweet as pie or into a menacing threat-maker immediately after. He relies on their shame and fear to keep them silent.

The sixth vignette is the key to piecing together the relationships and shared experiences of the women so they can together confront Paddy and move towards healing. In this vignette, Paddy extinguishes a lit cigarette into the hand of an unknown woman. She asks, 'Why ... did you do that?' (543), to which he replies, 'It was an accident ... I thought it was an ashtray' (543). He then helps her get cold water on the burn and readers are told, 'He dressed her wound, he gave her codeine, he brought her dinner in bed and fed it to her bite by bite. He'd never been so tender' (543). The cigarette burn is later a catalyst for bonding the four women together and deciding to confront him about his violence. Marnie, Lola and Grace discover that they have all been 'burned' by Paddy, literally and figuratively. However, readers discover in one of the last chapters that his fiancée Alicia has by then also been burned. However, she has missed an opportunity to unite with the other women. When Alicia refers to her burned hand that was 'almost better now' and 'barely hurt at all' (870), the reader feels the pain in all its complexity. The physical violence of the burn juxtaposed with the wealthy, upwardly mobile political and social life incite the reader's revulsion and empathy. Alicia's reference to her injured hand leads the reader to be also affected, connecting with her beyond the physical sensation and detecting her palpable sense of entrapment. Keyes positions the reader to want Alicia to fight back and expose Paddy. When she remains silent through to the novel's conclusion, injustice, betrayal, empathy, anger, and sadness are evoked for the reader and then directed to Alicia, Paddy, society and within. The vignettes, used in the first two-thirds of the novel, are a powerful narrative strategy, introducing memories of violent encounters with Paddy. Such scenes provide powerful, confronting, yet therapeutic

opportunities for readers who share similar experiences, have witnessed violence with others, have been complicit in silence, or who want to speak out but do not know how. They are powerful reminders that what we read affects us.

The narrative structure of the novel moves the reader between past and present, showing the power of memory in addressing issues of violence in the present. The violent vignettes are told in past tense and the individual chapters devoted to each woman move forward and back in time. Temporal manipulation through the narrative structure works to expose dimensions of violence often trapped in memory. Marnie's chapters move forward and back between her present as she struggles to keep her job and be a capable mother and wife and the way past moments have led her to struggle in the now. Gradually readers are introduced to Marnie's situation, the financial trouble she and her husband are experiencing and her efforts to fulfil basic tasks at work. After a stressful work situation, Marnie decides to have an innocent 'drink with a colleague' (295). Marnie later wakes up bruised and battered in the hospital. Readers quickly discover that Marnie has alcoholism; she drinks to the point of oblivion then wakes up hours later, often injured and suffering short-term amnesia.

At first, readers are positioned to think that Marnie's troubles relate to her current situation of reconciling the demands of motherhood, marriage and work. However, only gradually it is revealed that Marnie suffers deep trauma from her teenage relationship with Paddy. When Marnie agrees to be united with Lola and Grace to confront Paddy in the present, Marnie is immediately awash with thoughts of their past, as she admits, with 'no defence against unwanted memories' (691). Marnie recounts the trajectory of their relationship from innocent beginnings akin to star-crossed love to the exact moment when Paddy changed after the death of his mother (693). At first, he became possessive of her, jealous of any interaction with another man, then as Marnie confides, 'the emotional game-playing spilled over into the physical: a shove here, a slap there, one over-ought night, a punch in the face' (694). One day the narrator reveals, 'he outgrew her' (694). Soon after he beats Marnie to the point of hospitalisation then disappears leaving her heartbroken and shattered. Through the information about her past, the reader understands Marnie's narrative present and gleans insight into Paddy's history. This includes what has partially driven his violent demeanour. Marnie's narrative is positioned as an opportunity for her catharsis and a transitional moment towards facing the past so she might cope better in the present.

Readers gain further insight into Paddy's violence through the latest memories of his recent girlfriend Lola. When she retreats to 'Uncle Tom's Cabin', a seaside retreat, her present and past collide through a gradual revealing of memories. Lola reflects on her relationship with Paddy including their meeting in a cemetery and courtship that included a trip to an upmarket shop for lingerie, intimate apparel and sex toys. The author frames these memories as anecdotes titled 'A Trip Down Memory Lane', which Lola shares with the reader as if she would to a female confidante. The seemingly innocuous or flippant title of these sections belies the sometimes powerful and disturbing interactions between Lola and Paddy that are revealed. The reader has many opportunities to decide upon and revise their understanding of characters' reliability as a witness to the male protagonist's domestic violence. In Lola's case, she

begins the novel desperately wanting to stay in a relationship with Paddy, despite his engagement to another woman. At first, Lola appears obsessed with Paddy and their relationship, repeatedly showing up at his apartment and phoning him. Lola confesses to the reader:

I can't stop ringing Paddy. It's like OCD. Like washing hands constantly. Or eating cashew nuts. Once I start, I can't stop.

He never answered and he never rang back. Was aware I was debasing myself but couldn't stop. I longed for him. Yearned for him (22).

Later Paddy calls Lola to tell her he misses her to which she is flooded with a fleeting hope that he might want to reconcile. The reader, however, is positioned to see Lola as a vulnerable and sometimes naïve woman who can easily be caught by Paddy's charm. In actuality, Paddy has no interest in reconciliation; rather his phone call is a thinly veiled attempt to find out if a journalist is pressuring Lola to tell her side of the story.

The narrator of *This Charming Man* positions the reader to be an objective observer of Paddy's relationships with the protagonists. From their vantage point, the reader is thus able to discern the 'shape and meaning of the story'. Alison Case has suggested that this positioning of the reader objectively is a feature of feminine narration that is useful for facilitating critical reading (2001). The reader is a better-knowing observer of Lola's situation from outside it than Lola is from within it. Yet, through dialogue with other characters, Lola soon starts to see the relationship for what it was. For instance, Lola recounts a conversation with her three close friends after the announcement of Paddy's engagement. Lola frames the conversation by telling the reader: 'Now he had publicly shamed me, they could speak freely' (Keyes 2008: 13). And speak freely they do; each remarking on a different aspect of Paddy as 'too charming', 'too good-looking', 'too obvious' and 'too perfect' (13). Their remarks puzzle Lola then leading her to respond that it is not possible to have 'too much' of such traits. Her friend Bridie, however, sums up the situation: 'The more you look at you, Lola, the more attractive you get. The more you look at Paddy de Courcy, the less attractive he gets.' (14) The narration positions the reader to share a similar level of objectivity towards Lola's situation as her friends. The dialogue between the protagonists and others is another way that realisation towards healing can happen.

Memories that act as a moment of self-reflection are further recounted through dialogue. For Lola, dialogue is the critical factor in her realising the truth of her relationship with Paddy. On one occasion, Lola confesses to her neighbour Chloe that during her relationship with Paddy he had coerced her into having sex with a Russian prostitute before he did the same, while she watched. When Chloe asks Lola whether she was 'okay about it' (580), Lola replies:

'No.' Voice choked and whole body trembling. 'All of sudden think it's appalling. Shameful. Humiliating. Can't believe I did it. Not pushing boundaries. Not being sexual adventurer. Simply let myself be humiliated' (580).

The reader is required to re-evaluate Lola's response to Paddy as she voices her humiliation and her knowledge of him as an unethical and uncaring person. Just as the

reader gradually learns the scale of his violence, Lola too starts to realise Paddy for what he is.

Often such moments and memories of violence and realisation are buffered by changes in narrative tone to comedy or humour, especially in Lola's chapters. Lola's narrative voice is punctuated by short sentences and much slang. 'Slang' or 'slangy language' describes writing or speech that can include jargon, cant or swearing (Berūkštienē 2012). For Berūkštienē, slang and slangy language can be 'social or antisocial' effecting the degree of formality in language and conversation. Specifically, slangy language can be used to express actions, people or difficult issues (2008: 65-66). In *This Charming Man*, Lola's narrative applies slangy language in two ways: to recount often difficult memories of her relationship with Paddy and to report situations that occur in her present at the cabin. Her report of incidents that happen in the present, frequently in comedic ways, offset the dark and disturbing flashbacks. These include moments in the developing relationship she has with her neighbour Rossa Considine. Through serendipitous meetings with locals, including Rossa, Lola ends up hosting nights when assorted cross-dressing men attend her house for drinks and food. The men have seemingly gravitated to Lola because she is able to acquire suitably sized women's clothing and accessories for them. At first, Lola narrates these evenings as if an outsider looking in on another world. For example, the first evening, Noel, Lola's dole officer, arrives and quickly seizes a pair of leopard-skin stilettos that Lola has ordered for him. As Lola recounts:

I watched anxiously. Had almost irresistible urge to cover eyes. Feared he was going to do some sex act ...

As if he read my mind, he said – angrily – 'Am not pervert. All I want to do is wear them' (Keyes 2008: 354).

Soon other local cross-dressing men start to meet at Lola's cabin for drinks and to collect clothing she has ordered for them. To Lola's shock one evening, a dazzling. Tall. Elegant' (404) unknown woman called Chloe arrives and is eventually revealed as her neighbour Rossa Considine. While Lola and Rossa seem to 'rub each other up the wrong way' when he is not cross-dressed (408) in Chloe, Lola finds a friend and confidante. Eventually, Lola's relationship with Chloe becomes romantic, firstly sharing a 'snog' (595). However, when Considine admits his love for Lola, she admits 'do love Chloe. But—and cannot understand this, Considine – love you more' (Keyes 2008: 882). These are some of many comedic moments interspersed with the recollections of domestic violence. Such moments change the pace of narration and provide hope that life and laughter can continue despite the experience of violence.

One of the primary ways that *This Charming Man*'s narrative engages readers is via the modulation of the tone, often between tragedy and comedy. The novel injects comedy through its formal qualities and incidents that happen to the protagonists. The comedy and humour in Grace's chapters are different to that found in Lola's. Grace's chapters are stylised with a tone that reflects her objectivity as a journalist. Her first person narration is circumspect and factual. Comedy in her chapters occurs incidentally, including her interactions with her elderly family members and the in-jokes she encounters at work. Comedy and tragedy are interwoven in Grace's life,

between the examples of domestic violence the narrative explores to the adventures of the family dog Bingo, owned by Grace's parents and addresses the illness of Grace's aunt Bid, who has lung cancer. At one point, Bingo escapes the family's Dublin bark yard and is later discovered in Wales. Grace's father phones Grace hoping she will collect the wayward Bingo. Their conversation ensues as follows:

I. Am. At. Work. You. Are. Retired. He. Is. Your. Dog.
You. Are. Our. Daughter. We. Are. Elderly. And. Poor.
I. Will. Pay. Your. Ferry. Fare. Good. Bye. (434)

When Grace agrees to pay for her parents and aunt Bid to travel together to collect the dog, Grace reports to the reader: 'High-pitched happy squeals from Ma and Bid reached me. Poor fuckers. How easy they were to please. Especially when Bid was so sick' (434-35). Such humorous moments and the way they are expressed to the reader provide narrative relief and hope. They remind the reader that tragedy and comedy are often not far from each other in our lives.

A narrative of hope

In conclusion, *This Charming Man*, a work of contemporary popular women's fiction, utilises a range of narrative strategies that position readers to engage with and reflect on domestic violence as a social justice issue. The novel has a complex narrative structure consisting of alternating chapters dedicated to the four protagonists. By moving between past and present, gradually readers learn about each of the women and how they have been treated violently by Paddy on various occasions. The individual narratives eventually converge to draw together three of the women (Lola, Grace, Marnie) through dialogue, action and ultimately healing. The novel also alternates between the tragic and the comic. Readers are exposed to difficult moments in the story inclusive of Paddy's violent behaviour towards each woman, as well as moments when the female protagonists appear psychologically or emotionally damaged. However these moments transition into uplifting and comical scenes, thereby changing the narrative tone. Together, these narrative strategies position readers to reflect on domestic violence as a shared issue that needs dialogue, action and ultimately healing. *This Charming Man* may assist readers to 'read critically because all cultural identities presuppose a certain narrative intentionally and are informed by particular stories' (McLaren 1995: 98). To do this we need to be aware of these narratives, in their range and their singularity, and recognise how they 'place us as subjects' (Pile and Thrift 1995: 19) and as readers, or in Marie Maclean's (1988) terms as performers, of the narratives including the auto-fictions of others. We need to engage with narratives, whether personal, official, oral, written, historical and contemporary and, determine why it is we 'sanction certain narratives and discount others' (McLaren 1995: 98).

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