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“Chick Noir”: *Shopaholic* Meets *Double Indemnity*

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Abstract

In early 2014, several articles appeared proclaiming the rise to prominence of a new subgenre of the crime novel: “chick noir,” which included popular books like *Gone Girl*, *The Silent Wife*, and *Before We Met*. However, there was also resistance to the new genre label from critics who viewed it as belittling to women’s writing and to female-focused narratives. Indeed, the separation of female-centred books – whether “chick lit” or “chick noir” – from mainstream fiction remains highly problematic and reflects the persistence of a gendered literary hierarchy. However, as this paper suggests, the label “chick noir” also reflects the fact that in these novels the crime thriller has been revitalized through cross-pollination with the so-called chick lit novel. I contend that 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. Comparing the features of chick noir to those of chick lit and noir crime fiction, I suggest that chick noir may be read as a manifestation of feminist anger and anxiety – responses to the contemporary pressure to be “wonder women.”

Keywords: chick lit, chick noir, contemporary women’s writing, contemporary crime fiction, domestic noir, feminism and fiction, feminist fiction, *femme fatale* in literature, genre blending, wonder women

In 2014, a series of articles emerged and introduced – or at least perpetuated – a new genre label: chick noir. On January 2nd 2014, an article appeared in the *London Evening Standard* proclaiming in its title: “Move over Fifty Shades, there’s a brand new genre whipping the publishing world into a murderous frenzy” (Urwin). About two weeks later, Jon Stock of *The Telegraph* wrote an article entitled “Our Growing Appetite for ‘Chick Noir.’” A week after that, Charlotte Jones’s article,

“Chick Noir: A Thoroughly Modern Victorian Marriage Thriller” appeared in *The Guardian*. The discussion of this genre continued. In July, the Bloomsbury Institute held a salon on “The Rise of the Marriage Thriller.” In anticipation of this event, an article appeared in *The Independent* asking, “What’s the meaning of ‘chick noir’?” (Akbar). Yet, despite the media attention given to the term, the definition and parameters of chick noir were, and remain, somewhat blurry. The poster child for the genre seems to be Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012), which is mentioned prominently in most articles on the subject. In his *Telegraph* article elaborating upon the term, Jon Stock identifies five novels he says are examples of contemporary “chick noir”: *Gone Girl* is number one, followed by A.S.A. Harrison’s *The Silent Wife* (2013), Natalie Young’s *Season to Taste* (2014), Lucie Whitehouse’s *Before We Met* (2014), and Jean Hanff Korelitz’s *You Should Have Known* (2014). All of Stock’s examples were published between 2012 and 2014, and all are by female British or American authors. As noted by the journalists who have discussed the genre, chick noir novels are crime thrillers that usually focus on women and feature plots that revolve around relationships gone sour.

However, not everyone is comfortable with the label or with the media fervor surrounding this subgenre of crime fiction. A *Cosmopolitan* UK article from January 2014 complains: “When a black-jacketed thriller is given a ‘chick’ appendage simply because it features a female protagonist and was written by a woman, it’s unhelpful at best and sets feminism back a century or two at worst” (Mullender). Moreover, Paula Rabinowitz complains that “these novels offer little pleasure, not even of the engrossing page-turner variety claimed by their cover blurbs. With dragging plot lines and dull prose, each book melts into the next, and one vapid couple morphs into another” (B14). Yet there is still a visibly thriving market of crime, thriller, and detective novels that deal with broken relationships, suburbia, and focalize around modern-day female characters. Recent additions include Paula Hawkins’ *The Girl on the Train* (2015) and Liane Moriarty’s *Truly Madly Guilty* (2016). At the time of this writing, in late 2016, the term chick noir seems to have fallen by the wayside, replaced by “domestic noir,” a term coined by novelist Julia Crouch in collaboration with her publicist. As she describes:

Domestic Noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants. (Crouch)

However, although the term by which this subgenre of crime fiction is known may have changed, the central elements of female protagonists, domestic settings, and plots focused on relationships remain.

While it might be tempting to write off "chick noir" as a marketing scheme to sell the crime thriller, a traditionally male-occupied genre, to women readers, I argue that this explanation is too simplistic. For, even after the label and the media flurry surrounding chick noir died down, novels written in this mode blending noir detective and crime narratives with chick lit narratives have continued to be immensely popular. *The Girl on the Train*, for instance, spent more than 80 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list (Rochlin). I contend that the term "chick noir" accurately points to the way these books blend crime fiction with what has, for at least a decade, been called "chick lit." This article, therefore, conducts a case study of the five novels labelled "chick noir" by *The Telegraph* in 2014 in order to examine the narrative formulae and patterns at play in this blended genre. This paper contextualizes the recent discussions of "chick noir" in light of the features of both crime fiction and chick lit, and considers the impetus and implications of the blurring of these two seemingly disparate genre formulas. I argue that in blending crime fiction and chick lit, these novels effectively interrogate many of the positions and perils of women in modern literature – both "chick" and "noir" – as well as in contemporary society.

Introducing the Case Studies: Five Chick Noir Novels

Bill Ott's May 2013 review of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* for the "Year's Best Crime Novels" article in *Booklist* calls the text a "crossover crime novel" and foregrounds the way the novel combines the dark and the humorous into "a compelling thriller and a searing portrait of a marriage."

Gone Girl features dual perspective narration, with chapters alternating between Nick and Amy as they, writing at different points in time, recount the rise and fall of their relationship. Part One sees Nick discover an apparent crime scene in his home and follows his attempt to uncover what has happened to his wife while he fends off police suspicions. Simultaneously, Amy's chapters in Part One give the reader the story of how Nick and Amy met as writers in New York, fell in love, married, but then lost much of their money and moved from Manhattan to North Carthage, Missouri in order to care for Nick's mother. At the start of Part Two of the narrative, the reader learns that Amy is still alive, and that she has orchestrated her own disappearance in order to frame Nick. She acts in revenge for his flaws as a husband – especially for his affair with a twenty-three year old student. In the mid-section of the novel, Amy's plans unravel and she is forced to call upon an old boyfriend, Desi, to provide for her while she waits out Nick's conviction. However, this partnership backfires when she finds herself in real danger; Desi is frighteningly obsessed with her and she is now dependent on him for everything. By Part Three, Amy has killed Desi and returns to Missouri, conveniently casting Desi as her abductor and performing the role of the traumatized, innocent, devoted housewife. Nick is cleared of all charges, but is now trapped in a marriage with a woman whom he knows is capable of ruining him – even murdering him – if he does not play the role of husband the way she has wanted all along. As Amy explains in the final chapter: "We are on the eve of becoming the world's best, brightest nuclear family. We just need to sustain it. Nick doesn't have it down perfect" (415).

Like *Gone Girl*, part one of A.S.A. Harrison's *The Silent Wife* features the alternating narrative perspectives of Jodi Brett and Todd Gilbert, a couple who, though never married, have been living together for twenty years. As the narrative progresses, the reader gains insight into Jodi's financial dependence on Todd (she is a part-time psychologist and homemaker) and Todd's serial infidelity. The narrative unfolds around Todd's discovery that his latest mistress, the daughter of an old friend, is pregnant. As Todd prepares to leave Jodi, Jodi realizes that she will be left financially destitute, not entitled to any part of the home or possessions

she and Todd have accumulated during their two decades together. At the end of Part One, Jodi makes the decision to hire a team of hit men to kill Todd before he can marry his mistress, thereby securing herself as the beneficiary of his estate. In her review of *The Silent Wife* for *Reviewer's Bookwatch*, Gloria Feit says, "I find my comfort zone in tales of crime, mystery, and suspense, but those things don't seem to be present in this book, that is, until very near its conclusion, and then all those are there, in spades." Feit's review points to the way *The Silent Wife* presents murder as an abrupt and intrusive presence within the domestic sphere, since it focuses the majority of its narrative on the minutiae of everyday domestic life. It is precisely this disjunction between everyday domestic life and the elements of "crime, mystery, and suspense" that makes the narrative so chilling. Its focus on the domestic sphere makes *The Silent Wife* a psychological study of the way lies and abuses within the domestic sphere lead to Jodie's decision to orchestrate Todd's murder.

Natalie Young's *Season to Taste* received a good amount of media coverage when it was published, primarily due to its controversial content. The novel follows, in excruciating detail, the story of a rural housewife who has murdered her husband and, not wanting to get caught, decides to eat his body in order to dispose of it. The narrative features descriptions of the recipes Lizzie invents, and the meditations and reflections she goes through to enable herself to continue with her gruesome task. Along the way, the reader gains brief insights into the troubled marriage that was brought to an end through the murder. While never quite becoming a detective novel, the threat of detection is omnipresent, driving the central act of cannibalism around which the novel revolves. As one reviewer notes, readers "somehow begin to root for her, becoming almost her accomplices, as she polishes off another bit of Jacob" (Pitt). Like Amy Elliott Dunne and Jodi Brett, Lizzie feels gradually less remorseful as time dulls her crime, and she manages to settle back into the normalcy of everyday life.

At the start of Lucie Whitehouse's *Before We Met*, Hannah Reilly goes to meet her husband, Mark, at the airport, but he never appears. As she waits for him, Hannah recalls how she met Mark in America and eventually left her New York job to marry him and move into his lavish

London home. Now unemployed, her primary role is as Mark's wife. As Mark is absent and out of contact longer and longer, Hannah begins to delve into the darker secrets of Mark's premarital life, including the story of his brother who is in prison for murdering his girlfriend. As a *Publishers Weekly* review describes, the novel "takes a familiar premise – a woman with doubts about her new husband – and spins it into an intriguing thriller" ("Before We Met"). Acting as an amateur detective, Hannah uncovers troubling questions about Mark's business and his relationship to his brother. Then suddenly Mark reappears and explains everything. He owes his brother money, and his brother is being released on parole, and he is concerned for Hannah's safety if he can't satisfy his brother's financial claim. Then, one of Mark's ex-girlfriends is found murdered. Yet, just when the victims and villains seem so clearly defined, Hannah discovers another of Mark's secrets: the parents he told her were long dead are, in fact, still alive. After visiting them in secret, Hannah begins to think about divorcing Mark for all the lies he has told. However, before she can confront him, she is abducted by her brother-in-law, who wants not to hurt her, but to have his side of the story told. It turns out that the murderer all along has been Mark. When he finds them, Mark murders his brother and attempts to convince Hannah to stay with him. When she runs, he tries to kill her, too. She only escapes by smashing his head with a rock.

You Should Have Known is both the title of Jean Hanff Korelitz's chick noir novel, and the title of its protagonist and psychologist Grace Reinhart Sach's debut book. Grace's book is a psychological study about women who ignore negative information about men before entering relationships. Dramatic irony ensues, however, when, at the same time her book is launching, Grace becomes entangled in a murder investigation that involves her husband. A mother at her son's expensive private school has been found murdered, and police immediately come looking for Grace's husband, Jonathan. As the investigation carries on, Grace learns not only that Jonathan killed this woman, but also that she was his mistress and was pregnant with his child. Grace and her son leave behind their Upper East Side life and the media frenzy, relocating to an old family lake house in Connecticut. The novel is likened to both *Gone Girl*

and *The Silent Wife* by reviewer Robin Nesbitt (66), though arguably it shares more in common with *Before We Met* as the story of a wife who discovers that she doesn't really know her husband.

Chick

The first part of the label "chick noir" is "chick," a clear reference to the recently minted and polarizing term "chick lit." The ur-text for chick lit is generally considered to be Helen Fielding's 1996 bestseller *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Ferriss 4). Although several critics have pointed out that many domestic women's novels, including Jane Austen's 1813 *Pride and Prejudice*,¹ feature similar narratives, the term "chick lit" refers to something much more specific than "domestic women's fiction." A useful model for understanding the iconic features of the genre is a chart that appeared in *Book* magazine in the summer of 2003, which outlines the formula for a chick lit novel as follows: A young urban female employed in some kind of arts or media job experiences anxiety about one or more of the following: her body, her sex life, her biological clock, her annoying mother, being alone, shopping, smoking and the difficulty of quitting, money, alcohol and its problematic after-effects, men, and finding love. She is usually based in New York – especially Manhattan – or London (Harzewski 34). This formula outlines the basic features of the chick lit protagonist, as well as the central and peripheral conflicts she encounters in the course of the narrative.

Chick noir protagonists are remarkably similar to chick lit protagonists, exhibiting several of the traits outlined in the aforementioned formula. The settings and protagonists are predominantly metropolitan. Of the five chick noir novels I am using as case studies, three have protagonists based in either New York or London, while *The Silent Wife* takes place in downtown Chicago and *Season to Taste* is set in rural England. Apart from *Season to Taste*'s Lizzie, all of the female protagonists are urban socialites. Moreover, like their chick lit counterparts, the women of chick noir are associated with arts and media: *Gone Girl*'s Amy worked as a journalist at a women's magazine; *Before*

We Met's Hannah worked in advertising; *Season to Taste*'s Lizzie was an art student when she got married; *The Silent Wife*'s Jodi is an avid art collector; and *You Should Have Known*'s Grace has just written her first book. What stands out about chick noir protagonists is the fact that they are all talented, intelligent, and caring women who are nevertheless mistreated in various ways by their romantic partners. In *The Silent Wife*, for instance, Todd reflects that Jodi "was everything a man could want and so much more" (133), and yet he continually cheats on her. These novels thus address what we might call the modern feminist dilemma: when being everything isn't enough. 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. Yet, chaos and crime soon overtake their lives. In this way, chick noir picks up at the end of the chick lit narrative and becomes a dark sequel that calls into question the stability chick lit associates with relationships, a successful career, and belonging to a privileged social class.

Moreover, concerns with motherhood permeate chick noir narratives, just as they do chick lit. In each novel, it is explicitly stated that the protagonist is conflicted about her relationship with her mother (or mother-in-law, in the case of *Gone Girl*). While tensions between chick lit heroines and their mothers are played out to comedic effect, as when Rebecca Bloomwood notes that she has a special system for telling her mother how much things cost: "mum prices" (Kinsella 48), the protagonists of chick noir fear becoming their mothers, a fear that symbolizes the loss of female agency, power, and autonomy. Chick noir deploys the spectre of the mother to haunt the notion of feminist progress. Midway through *The Silent Wife*, for instance, Jodi is dismayed to realize that:

What she had become was a version of her mother. In spite of making different choices, in spite of living in different times, in spite of being forewarned by her education in psychology [...] the predicament she landed in was the very one she had set out to avoid. (150)

In chick noir, there is an element of Gothic horror in this realization, this

sense of the inescapability of the past and of women's entrapment within social systems that continue to replicate the problems faced by previous generations of women. Furthermore, each chick noir novel also contains several references to the protagonist worrying about her biological clock, having reproductive difficulties, or having anxiety about not wanting children. *You Should Have Known*, for instance, is littered with references to Grace's inability to have more children and the "sharp punch of sadness" that she experiences from this knowledge (136). In *Gone Girl*, when Nick and Amy move into the suburbs, they are judged by neighbours for being "the only ones without children" (22). This anxiety about infertility or childlessness is a dark reversal of the representation of pregnancy in chick lit, which is done to comic or romantic effect, as when Bridget Jones misreads a pregnancy test and panics until a friend explains, "one line means you're *not* pregnant – you ninny" (Fielding 120). The anxieties that chick noir protagonists experience with regard to the question of becoming mothers suggest the extent to which biological motherhood remains a central social signifier of a woman's worth and status in patriarchal society. Although the women of chick noir usually have tense relationships with their own mothers, and may not even wish to become mothers themselves, their narratives illustrate the pressure and guilt they nevertheless feel over issues like infertility and childlessness.

Even a cursory glance across the covers and titles of chick lit novels demonstrates the genre's entanglement with material culture. Novels like *In Her Shoes* (Weiner 2002), *The Devil Wears Prada* (Weisberger 2003), and *Confessions of a Shopaholic*² (Kinsella 2000) all explicitly point to the way modern middle-class women's lives are shaped by "stuff": shoes, clothes, labels, money, and debt. As much as material culture is a key component of chick lit novels, from Miranda Priestly's Prada to Becky Bloomwood's Denny and George scarf, it is also a significant narrative device in chick noir. In each of these novels, one of the key conflicts for the female protagonist is a change in financial status. If her economic status moves up, she is at risk of being dependent on the man who has brought her into this world of wealth and comfort; if her status moves down, she is at risk of resenting her partner for the collapse of her career and financial security. In *Gone Girl*, negative changes in her economic

and social status are the direct precedents to Amy's crimes. When Nick decides to relocate to his hometown, Amy finds herself living as a housewife in a house she despises while her husband makes a feeble attempt to run a local business. No longer a journalist with a trust fund in Manhattan, Amy now finds herself dependent on Nick, whose stability in the relationship becomes increasingly questionable. Financial loss is also the motivation for Jodi in *The Silent Wife*. Jodi's foray into the criminal and homicidal arises from a desire to exact revenge on a philandering partner whose exit from the relationship will leave her financially ruined. In *You Should Have Known*, Grace is faced suddenly with the collapse of her wealthy Upper East Side life when her husband of twenty years commits a murder. In this novel, iconic material objects like Grace's Birkin bag are used as symbols of the stability and wealth that Upper East Side husbands are supposed to provide for their wives and families. At the end of *You Should Have Known*, Grace discovers that the Birkin bag Jonathan gave her was a fake all along, and she throws it in a garbage can, signifying the end of her former life. In *Season to Taste*, Lizzie's plan to eat the husband she has murdered is connected to her lack of funds, which affects her ability to buy groceries. In this novel, Lizzie's cannibalism is a dark metaphor for the way she has depended on Jacob, and has been left hungry, both figuratively and literally, since the start of their relationship. In *Before We Met*, Hannah has experienced a significant rise in class and economic status after marrying Mark, but she struggles to acclimate to her new life of dependency, living in his multi-million dollar house whilst being unemployed. 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. Whereas chick lit protagonists struggle to "have it all," chick noir protagonists struggle to keep it all, but frequently learn that having material comforts is not equivalent to having happiness or security. While chick lit heroines like Bridget Jones and Becky Bloomwood are drawn to men who are wealthy providers, many of the women of chick noir demonstrate that wives of wealthy men, even when they have their own careers, can still experience the stress of precarious financial autonomy.

While many chick lit novels do problematize capitalism and the

drive to acquire material possessions to some extent, chick noir does so with decidedly higher stakes. As Paula Rabinowitz notes, "these books revel in the emptiness of trying to have it all" (B14). Rabinowitz ties the shift from "chick lit" to "chick noir" to the economic recession of 2008, noting that for readers in a post-recession world, the tone of novels like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City* is too "smiley" (B15). While chick lit social climbers like Nanny in *The Nanny Diaries* or Andi in *The Devil Wears Prada* venture into the world of the upper class, discover its flaws in humorous fashion, and escape relatively unscathed, chick noir protagonists who dwell within the upper echelons live in a world of insidious lies, secrets, violence, and murder. In *Before We Met*, for instance, hunky millionaire entrepreneur Mark is actually a murderer who evaded detection prior to the narrative. But when threatened with the emergence of the truth about his past, he commits murder again, twice, in his desperation to retain his wealth and status – and the blind devotion of his unsuspecting wife. Even after she learns the truth about his past, Mark begs Hannah to stay with him. Her refusal to continue living in his fantasy world, no matter how luxurious, leads him to attempt to kill her, a situation that she escapes only by killing him. In another version of the loss-of-wealth plot, *The Silent Wife* documents how a once-content upper-class woman ends up hiring a team of hit men to murder the man who is in the process of turning her out of the home and lifestyle they have built over their twenty years together. In chick noir, the idea that stability and pleasure are to be found in the upper classes and/or in the safety of marriage is not just satirized or humorously sent up, it is utterly decimated in bloody horror. The upper class world is depicted as a space where violence and even murder often go undetected and unpunished, and upper class marriage is shown to be a potential cesspool of secrets and abuses.

Noir

The *roman noir* is a subgenre of crime fiction, popularized in the early twentieth century. Closely related to the American hardboiled mode of detective fiction, noir narratives depict criminality as something "just

beneath the innocent surface of everyday American life” (Rzepka 230). While similar, “noir” tends to be used as a cinematic term and “hardboiled” as a literary term. While the hardboiled mode of detective narrative is unabashedly masculine, with tough guy investigators like Philip Marlowe 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. Whereas analytic detective fiction eschews romance in favour of celibate, cerebral detectives like Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot (Roth 113), hardboiled novels and film noir foreground relationships and sexuality. Sometimes it is the detective or investigator who is attracted to a woman involved in crime, and sometimes the *femme fatale* has murdered her lover or husband. Referring to the iconic noir novels of James M. Cain, John Scaggs notes that “the rapid decay of human relationships due to suspicion and mistrust in the wake of the crime of murder is central” (110). As in hardboiled crime fiction, in chick noir the act of investigating a homicide runs parallel to the act of investigating the disintegration of the central romantic relationship. Since the homicide is inextricably connected to the romantic relationship, the novels share a great deal in common with the *roman noir*. In the chick noir novels under discussion, three place the woman in the role of *femme fatale* who is evading the detection of law enforcement, and two place the woman in the role of an amateur detective who is uncovering the crimes of her husband. All of the homicidal women are motivated, at least in part, by their discovery of their husbands’ infidelity. Both of the husbands who are discovered to be murderers murder women, and only women with whom they have previously been romantically involved. Love and murder, in short, are at the heart of chick noir, just as they are with hardboiled detective fiction.

The homicidal woman of the hardboiled detective novel and film noir is known as a *femme fatale*, an independent woman who attracts men with her sex appeal but brings them to downfall and death. As many critics have noted, the *femme fatale* arose from twentieth-century anxieties about women’s liberation and the New Woman during the post-war period (Rzepka 185). Sexually aware and active, the *femme fatale* knows how to

use her body and her behaviour to win the allegiance and trust of men. Not the maternal or domestic type, the *femme fatale* is instead interested in money and power, which she attempts to acquire by manipulating men sexually. In Raymond Chandler's iconic novel *The Big Sleep*, the first woman Philip Marlowe meets (who also happens to be a murderer) literally throws herself into his arms. As Marlowe describes, "she lowered her lashes until they almost cuddled her cheeks and slowly raised them again, like a theater curtain. I was to get to know that trick. That was supposed to make me roll over on my back with all four paws in the air" (5). In the novel's penultimate chapter, after Marlowe figures out that Carmen is a murderer, he tells her "my, but you're cute" (220). Beauty, seduction, and death intertwine for the *femme fatale*. In James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*, would-be murderess Phyllis Nerdlinger tells her would-be lover and accomplice, Walter, "I think of myself as Death, sometimes. In a scarlet shroud, floating through the night. I'm so beautiful, then" (18). When planning the murder of her husband in order to collect on his insurance policy, Walter is consumed with fantasies about Phyllis. Of course, Walter doesn't think her so beautiful later, when she sets her sights on murdering *him*, and he quickly shifts his attraction to her innocent stepdaughter. The downfall of the *femme fatale* in these iconic hardboiled novels – both of which were made into successful noir films – is that while her sexuality might lure men in initially, modesty and innocence are still the most prized female qualities. The *femme fatale* is ultimately villainized, and she usually does not get what she wants.

The homicidal women of chick noir, however, fare much better. In stark contrast to the usual outcome for the *femme fatale* of the hardboiled detective novel, *Gone Girl*'s Amy is able to murder her would-be lover and accomplice, Desi, without ever compromising her media image as "Amazing Amy," the ideal daughter and wife. In fact, at the end of her interview with Detective Boney, wherein she spins her fabricated tale about being abducted and killing in self-defense, Amy is told: "You are a hero. You are an absolute hero" (380). Much like Amy, *The Silent Wife*'s Jodi simply settles back into normalcy after contracting the murder of her long-term partner, Todd. The detectives, only briefly interested in Jodi as a suspect, have convicted someone else for the murder, telling her

triumphantly: “We have our case, and it’s a pretty solid one” (309). Likewise, *Season to Taste*’s Lizzie feels very little remorse for murdering her husband, Jacob, and then eating him to discard of the corpse. After taking extra helpings of one cannibalistic dinner, she justifies herself with the thought that “he’d not been a good husband” (62). Both the *femme fatale* of classic hardboiled crime fiction and the woman of the chick noir novel manipulate and murder in order to satisfy their own desires. Yet 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. In many cases, the narrative encourages readers to root for them. In both *The Big Sleep* and *Double Indemnity*, the *femme fatale*’s motivations for her crime are kept murky, and she is eventually revealed to be psychologically unstable. Yet chick noir novels make great effort to show that the homicidal protagonist is an average woman whose believes that her crime is just and fair, and will free her from a destructive relationship. The fact that the most popular hardboiled detective novels featuring *femmes fatales* were written by male authors while most of the popular chick noir *femmes fatales* are written by female authors suggests that the reframing of this literary archetype within chick noir is a gendered issue. The successes of *femmes fatales* in chick noir may be read as feminist wish fulfillment – representations of women who are able to hit back at the men and the systems that keep them economically dependent and socially degraded. In chick noir, female authors appear to be re-claiming the *femme fatale* and deploying her as a critique of contemporary women’s position between the aspirations of feminist ideology and the realities of living within patriarchal society.

Chick noir novels always feature the crime of murder, but they vary in how the murder is positioned within the narrative. The novels follow one of two patterns: that of the detective novel, which investigates a murder (or suspected murder) that has occurred before the novel begins or in its early pages, or that of the thriller, which charts the lead-up to a murderous climax. As a type of crime novel, chick noir almost always features a detective – a professional police detective or a civilian acting as a detective, or, sometimes, both. Of our five case studies, only *Season to*

Taste does not feature a professional detective at all. Chick noir novels are not traditional detective novels, which are defined by "the absence of the criminal as criminal until the end of the work" (Roth 162). Instead, the identity of the murderer is often presented upfront, as in *Season to Taste* and *The Silent Wife*, or mid-way through the text, as in *Gone Girl* and *You Should Have Known*. Only *Before We Met* reserves the climactic reveal to the end of the book. In chick noir, the emphasis is shifted from the investigation of the facts of the murder to the development of the motives and events that surround the murder. Moreover, it is the reader, not the fictional detective, whose understanding of the murder is privileged by the narrative. Indeed, one recurring feature of chick noir novels is that the professional detectives usually get it wrong. Of the three wives who kill their husbands in the novels I have been discussing, not one is identified and charged. Even in *Before We Met*, the actual murderer is not suspected until he attempts and fails to kill his wife in the novel's penultimate chapter. In most of these novels, it is not a detective character but the reader who has the fullest and most accurate picture of the crime that has occurred, revealing that exploring motive and the psychology of domestic crime is the main focus of these texts.

The detective novel is often considered a conservative narrative form wherein order is imposed upon chaos by an agent of the law who discerns the truth of the events. Charles Rzepka goes so far as to assert that "as a part of modern mass entertainment, detective fiction helps interpellate its readers into conformity with the hegemony of white, male, middle-class values in Western capitalist-industrial societies" (21). Chick noir, though it features the elements of crime and investigation, is, in contrast, a pessimistic form wherein reason and law are inadequate to interpret or impose order on the chaos of human emotions. John Scaggs has argued that the revenge tragedy can be considered a predecessor of the modern crime thriller (106), and this is also a useful genealogy when thinking about chick noir. Revenge is at the heart of many of the murders committed in chick noir, and it is the drive to avenge, to punish, and to conceal that is at the heart of the investigations carried out in these novels. The solution of the crime is not the main point. Rather, the main feature of chick noir is the psychological picture of modern-day women who

experience instability in the areas that they have been taught to expect security: monogamous romantic relationships, work, motherhood, wealth and class status. Far from being a conservative narrative that re-establishes order through the investigation of a crime, chick noir novels are cynical narratives that offer only gruesome solutions to the social, economic, and romantic unhappiness they illuminate.

Chick Noir

Chick noir novels position themselves between the genres of chick lit and noir crime fiction. As has been discussed, chick noir mirrors structural elements and themes from both chick lit and noir. More than that, chick noir novels are self-reflexive about their literary inheritance. One way this metafictional positioning is evident is through naming. The female protagonist of *You Should Have Known* is named Grace Reinhart Sachs. “Reinhart” is a clear evocation of the American crime writer Mary Roberts Rinehart, while “Sachs” is easily read as a reference to the surname of *The Devil Wears Prada* protagonist Andrea Sachs. Similarly, a murder victim in *Before We Met*, Hermione Alleyn, with the fact of its unusual spelling foregrounded in the narrative, is almost certainly a reference to Ngaio Marsh’s fictional detective Roderick Alleyn. Less obvious is *The Silent Wife*’s Jodi Brett – possibly a reference to British detective writer Simon Brett. In addition to referential names, the names of the couples in chick noir novels conform to the typical white, Western names found in chick lit and chick flicks. Indeed, it is immediately striking how whitewashed these novels are through the names of their central characters. This is a feature the genre shares with most chick lit. And yet, by using setting and characters to create an image of white, Western, middle- or upper-class life in either America or Britain, chick noir is better able to upset the idealised image of the white, upper-class domestic bliss chick lit protagonists strive toward.

The rise of chick noir suggests a heightening of social unease about women, their careers, their reproductive choices, their material wealth, and their relationships. Just as hardboiled fiction manifested anxieties

about agent women in a post-war American context, chick noir manifests anxieties about women and their place in the twenty-first century. I suggest that the anxieties being dealt with by chick noir mirror and amplify the anxieties that are visible in chick lit. 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. While chick lit depicts the modern woman's task of balancing work life and domestic life in comical fashion, chick noir considers the negative psychological ramifications of the isolation and competition fostered through the idea that modern women must be, as Debora Spar puts it, "wonder women." As Spar writes: "Women of my generation got the fast-paced job opportunities we craved [...]. The bad news is that we did not lose any [domestic] responsibilities in the process" (153). Chick noir takes anxieties about acquiring money and reflecting status through stuff and challenges the idea that material possessions and upper-class status provide women with actual security. Chick noir takes anxieties about being single and cautions that a romantic relationship – even one that seems wonderful at first – is no panacea for discontent, and, especially in the contemporary period, is not guaranteed to last. In short, I contend that 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.

The image of contemporary womanhood in chick noir novels is interesting for what it reveals about how women are typically represented and regarded in Western society. In blending genres, the novels that have been called "chick noir" effectively interrogate the persistence of superficial and archetypal media representations of women. For as much as a woman like *Gone Girl*'s Amy Elliott Dunne has in common with *Double Indemnity*'s Phyllis Nerdlinger, she also has much in common with the protagonists of *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. In a striking moment just after the narrative has revealed the truth of her disappearance, Amy turns on the television and astutely notes: "Tampon commercial, detergent

commercial, maxipad commercial, Windex commercial. You'd think all women do is clean and bleed" (245). While it is interesting to note that bleeding and cleaning are the key actions she takes in the set-up of her fake murder, Amy is proof positive that women – even homemakers – do and think about a great deal more than what advertisers and the mainstream media suggest. The Amy Elliott Dunne that bares her interiority to readers during the course of the novel is infinitely more complex than the Amazing Amy of her parents' children's books and the news media. The positioning of the homemaker as unintelligent or incompetent is also found in *The Silent Wife* where, despite her flimsy alibi and clear motive, detectives fail to recognize Jodi as the culprit behind Todd's murder. In *Season to Taste*, Natalie appears so naive and innocent to all those around her that no one doubts her word when she tells them Jacob has run away with another woman, and there is not even a police investigation into his sudden disappearance. Moreover, other chick noir protagonists like Grace in *You Should Have Known* and Hannah in *Before We Met* reveal that the "perfect" domestic wife can still find herself in peril and misery.

What these narratives reveal is that feminist discourse has not yet succeeded in freeing women from their reputation as frivolous, naive, and naturally submissive creatures who are happiest in domestic settings. Instead, modern-day women are expected to be domestic angels at the hearth, successful career women, well-liked socialites, sexy and glamorous wives, and doting mothers. These social expectations and pressures create women like the protagonists of chick noir: women who are unhappy feminists, trying to do and be everything, but finding that everything is still not enough. As Andi Zeisler, co-founder of *Bitch* magazine, has noted:

By the dawn of the new century, women were living in what could be called a deceptively postfeminist moment. That is to say, feminism was widely considered to be 'done'... 'What's the problem?' people wanted to know. Hadn't we gotten everything we asked for? Why were we still whining about sexism? (121)

It is this shock – even horror – at discovering how incomplete the feminist revolution is at present that drives the representation of women in chick

noir. These novels feature female protagonists who are angry and scared because the promises of finding empowerment and security by becoming "wonder women" prove false. Ultimately, then, what these novels suggest about contemporary gender politics is that many women are deeply unhappy with lingering social inequalities in the spheres of work, finance, and domestic responsibilities. While chick lit offers laughter as a remedy to these social problems, and traditional crime novels offer the logic and order of investigation to impose order on social chaos, 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.

Notes:

¹ Suzanne Ferriss notes that "Helen Fielding has freely admitted her debt to Austen" (71).

² Published in the UK as *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*

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