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# Lad lit as mediated intimacy: A postfeminist tale of female power, male vulnerability and toast

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**Lad lit as mediated intimacy: A postfeminist tale of female power,  
male vulnerability and toast.**

**Rosalind Gill**

**The Open University**

*I may be 30, but I act 15. I am adrift in New York. I'm too clever by half for my own good. I live on puns and snide, sarcastic asides. I don't look too deeply into myself or anyone else—everyone else is boring or a phony anyway. I may be a New Yorker, but I am not in therapy. I have a boring job, for which I am overeducated and underqualified, but I lack the ambition to commit to a serious career. (Usually I have family money.) I hang out with my equally disconnected friends in many of the city's bars. I drink a lot, take recreational drugs, don't care about much except being clever. I recently broke up with my girlfriend, and while I am eager to have sex, which I do often given the zillions of available women in New York, the sex is not especially fulfilling, and emotions rarely enter the picture. I am deeply shallow. And I know it. Oh, and then something happens. I go on a journey, get inside the media machinery, sort-of fall for a new girl. Or 9/11 happens, but that doesn't really affect me much either. And though I might now mouth some bland platitudes about change, anyone can see that I'm still the same guy I was before. Only different. But not really.*  
Michael Kimmel, 2006

**Introduction**

This, according to the sociologist Michael Kimmel, is the basic summary of 'guy-lit novels', the North American version of what is known in the UK as contemporary 'lad lit'. Various characterised as an offshoot of chick lit, or a riposte to it, lad lit has been growing rapidly as a publishing phenomenon since the late 1990s. Its early and most celebrated exponents were Nick Hornby and Tony Parsons, but it now includes a long list of authors, distinctive US and UK versions, and even subgenres such as 'dad lit'. Searches on Amazon.co.uk will produce hundreds of results, which, like chick lit novels, are easily recognizable by their brightly coloured covers, with cartoon-style illustrations and marketing quotes stressing their humour, observational acuity and insight into the 'tortured male psyche'. Indeed, the sheer volume of endorsements which portray the genre as a mirror of contemporary masculinity ('A well observed insight into a man's brain', 'A perfect portrait of the love-lorn male') would suggest that this is an important site for the study of gender.

Yet there appear to be no analyses of lad lit. Michael Kimmel's discussion stands out both because it is a witty and incisive critique of the genre—albeit an extremely brief one—but also because it is, as yet, the only scholarly discussion of lad lit I have seen. Despite the growing significance of the genre, it has so far received no sustained academic attention. This is all the more surprising in the context of a flourishing literature concerned with masculinities, which features a wealth of research and discussion about the 'new lad' (Benwell, 2003b, Crewe, 2003a, Stevenson, 2003, Beynon, 2002, Jackson et al., 2001, Nixon, 2001, Edwards, 2006), as well as the recent surge of interest in 'chick lit' (Gill, 2006, Ferriss and Young, 2006, Whelehan, 2002, Whelehan, 2005, Yardley, 2006). Lad lit might be thought of as significant to writers in each of these fields, yet has been overlooked by both.

Here, then, I want to begin the task of examining this genre. I approach it not as a literary theorist, but as a social scientist interested in popular culture. This paper is part of a wider project concerned with mediated intimacy—that is, the ways in which our understandings and experiences of a whole range of intimate relationships are increasingly mediated by constructions from film, television, magazines, the Internet and popular fiction. Elsewhere I consider a range of 'mediated intimacies' such as magazine sex and relationship advice, TV parenting programmes, and constructions of migrants, asylum seekers and intimate 'Others' in the British press (see (Gill, 2009) for detailed discussion of how I am thinking about intimacy and its mediation). Here, though, my interest is in how lad lit constructs intimate relationships, making them knowable/understandable/livable in specific ways. My questions, therefore, do not centre on lad lit's literary merits or qualities, but rather on the kinds of constructions of masculinity and gender relations it offers. How are men represented or constructed in lad lit novels? To what extent do these novels break with or reinforce conventional depictions of hegemonic masculinity? How are women figured in these novels? What kind of constructions of gender relations are to be found in lad lit, and, above all, how are intimate heterosexual relationships depicted?

In the first part of this paper, I will situate lad lit within the growth of other 'lad productions' such as magazines and TV shows, and will discuss some of the characteristics that are said to constitute 'new laddism'. Then in the remainder of this article I will turn to the novels themselves to focus upon two themes: the distinctly 'unheroic' masculinity it constructs as well as its postfeminist-style depiction of women as sexual objects. I will argue that these themes are intimately related and seem to work together to bolster male power, while simultaneously effacing this and claiming that men are the disadvantaged losers in the 'new' gender order.

### **The new lad as new subject**

The figure of the new lad has been a significant feature of popular culture since the early 1990s. He materialised as a new masculine figure, a distinct articulation of masculinity, across a variety of cultural sites, most notably zoo radio formats, popular TV quizzes and sitcoms, and men's magazines. By the mid-1990s he was easily

recognizable as a 'new' icon of masculinity. But he also appeared reflexively as an object of discussion across academic, marketing and media texts, which saw a massive proliferation of debates about change and crisis in men's lives. As I have argued elsewhere (Gill, 2003), the sudden visibility of the 'new lad' both as an emblem of a new type of masculinity and as the focus of journalistic quasi-sociological discussions, is an outcome of a number of shifts which meant that producing knowledge about gender had become 'big business'. In the past, forms of masculinity were studied only if they were regarded as a problem, with predictable classed and racialised pictures emerging and frequent moral panics about male youth and the 'dangerous classes'. Since the mid-1980s, however, masculinity in its own right has become a key focus of interest and interrogation as analysts explore and document shifts in men's values, tastes, aspirations, feelings, beliefs and behaviour. A whole army of cultural commentators (including journalists, academics and futurologists) now devotes its time and resources to identifying or picking over 'emerging trends' and to analysing, classifying, measuring and monitoring contemporary masculinities. The new lad may be thought of as part of this power/knowledge nexus in which these 'new cultural intermediaries' (Featherstone, 1991) interpret and mediate cultural and psychological questions about who we are, how we live and what we want—a process which, as Foucault might remind us, is never innocent description, but also produces or constitutes the world (in this case new masculinities).

Although the 'new lad' appeared in a range of sites including TV and pop radio, the so-called 'lad mags', such as *Arena*, *Maxim* and *FHM* (and more recently *Zoo* and *Nuts*) have been particularly important iterations of this form of masculinity, and have received considerable academic discussion (Benwell, 2003b, Edwards, 2003, Crewe, 2003b, Jackson et al., 2001). The early 1990s saw men's magazines move away from depictions of the egalitarian 'new man' to a more 'assertive articulation of the post-permissive masculine heterosexual script' (Nixon, 2001) deploying growing numbers of sexualised images, and subjecting women to increasing sexual scrutiny. But it was with the launch of *Loaded* and the relaunch of *FHM* in 1994 that laddism found its most distinctive voices. Taking its inspiration from the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun* and from the music press, *Loaded* was a young, loud, hedonistic celebration of masculinity. It spoke to men in a popular demotic, addressing them in terms of their assumed interests in beer, football, women and 'shagging'. James Brown, the joint founder of the magazine, asserts that *Loaded* expressed what would have come out 'if you picked me up and shaken everything out of my head' (quoted in Crewe 2003:100). As Ben Crewe (2003a) has argued, the sexual politics of the magazine were in place from the first issue, which featured photographs of Liz Hurley, a homage to hotel sex, porn channels, etc, a 'travel' feature recounting 'cheap cocaine and cheap women', and the Miss Guyana bikini contest. The attitude towards women was enthusiastically predatory, unabashed by 'new mannish' concerns. The lads addressed were cheerfully unreconstructed: they were familiar with the terms of feminist critique but unapologetic about their consumption of soft

porn and their desire to 'shag' women. This was eloquently captured by the strapline of the magazine: 'for men who should know better'.

The last decade has seen a number of attempts to theorise the emergence of the 'new lad'. His cultural ascendance has been understood by some as a reaction against feminism. From this perspective, the figure of the new lad, constructed around knowingly misogynist attitudes to women, represents a refusal to acknowledge the changes in gender relations produced by feminism, and an attack upon it. Imelda Whelehan (2000) argued that the new lad is 'a nostalgic revival of old patriarchy; a direct challenge to feminism's call for social transformation, by reaffirming—albeit ironically—the unchanging nature of gender relations and sexual roles' (2000:5). Suzanne Franks (1999) claimed that as women's roles and identities changed and expanded into domains previously thought of as male, the new lad represents a response which moves men further into the heartlands of masculinity—rather than blurring gender identities. He represents, from this perspective, a defensive assertion of masculinity, male power and men's rights against feminist challenges. In this sense, new lad is understood as part of the backlash against feminism across multiple sites and domains (Faludi, 1992).

Another way of understanding this apparently novel form of masculinity is to think about it as a reaction against the 'new man' who assumed a certain media prominence during the 1980s. Ben Crewe claims that lad culture was built on contempt for the 'miserable liberal guilt' of new man and his 'hesitant and questioning stands on sexual relations' (2003: 100). The new man was also derided for his narcissism. Above all, he was condemned as inauthentic. He was presented alternately as a media fabrication or a calculating pose by ordinary men to get women to sleep with them. An early attempt to make sense of how masculinity was changing was published in *Arena* magazine (a good example too of this reflexive moment) (O'Hagan, 1991). Part sociological analysis, part 'ladifesto', this article sought to expose the 'myth' of the sensitive, caring and nonsexist new man, and to celebrate the arrival of his hedonistic, libidinous, postfeminist alter ego (or younger brother). O'Hagan argued that new lads were new men who can't quite shake off their laddishness. Quite different from their 'boorish/tribal/drunken' 'prehistoric predecessors' new lads were intelligent enough to 'tell you how misogynist the new David Lynch film is' but might do so primarily as a seduction strategy. Smart and knowing, the new lad 'aspires to new man status when he is out with women, but reverts to old lad type when he's out with the boys. Clever, eh?' Against the duplicity and hypocrisy of the new man, new lad was depicted as honest, open and authentic.

Other writers have argued that the new lad may be a more ambiguous figure than straightforward backlash accounts suggest. In their more upbeat account of the popularity of lad mags, Nick Stephenson, Peter Jackson and Kate Brooks contend that the magazines are 'caught between' 'an attempt to construct masculinity as a form of fundamentalist certitude, while simultaneously responding to a world where gender relations are rapidly changing... an awareness that old-style patriarchal relations are

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crumbling and a desire to reinscribe power relations between the different genders and sexualities' (2003:122). Much of this ambivalence is handled through the abundant use of irony in the magazines. Where new lad differs from older established misogynist scripts is precisely in the knowingness of his sexism. As Bethan Benwell (2003a) has argued, the 'one great trump card' played by the new lad magazines 'anxious to proclaim the power of masculinity but simultaneously to preserve an intelligent post feminist political identity' was the use of ironic distancing. But while irony in relation to the new man was designed to provide a safe distance between the reader and less traditional sexual scripts, with laddism irony functions primarily as a means of subverting potential critique—allowing expression of an unpalatable truth in a disguised form, while claiming it is not what you actually meant (Stephenson, Jackson & Brooks 2000).

Research on magazines indicates that the key terms for analysing what is distinctive about this form of masculinity include irony, knowingness, and distancing, and these offer valuable insights for lad lit too. The affective tone is one of emotional detachment and being 'deeply shallow', as Michael Kimmel (2006) put it, but, I would suggest, also shallowly deep, in a witty, clever, knowing way—especially if this will aid one in getting a woman into bed. The magazines are characterised by humour and an ethos of 'not taking things too seriously'—except for beer, football and 'shagging', as *Loaded's* first editorial made explicit:

Loaded is a new magazine dedicated to life and liberty and the pursuit of sex, drink, football and less serious matters. Loaded is music, film, relationships, humour, travel, sport, hard news and popular culture. Loaded is clubbing, drinking, eating, playing and living. Loaded is for the man who believes he can do anything if only he wasn't hungover. (Loaded, April 1994: 3)

The lad magazines are also notable as a distinctively classed and racialised phenomenon. The whiteness of constructions of the new lad is striking. Carrington (1999) has argued that the rise of new laddism can be interpreted as part of the reassertion of a white English male identity in which football and Britpop played a central role. In 'softer' versions this became the 'cool Britannia' discourse of the late 1990s (itself, I would contend, problematically racialised). But more chillingly he suggests that new laddism became intertwined with the rise of an 'aggressive, macho, xenophobic form of English nationalism' which then clothed itself in the language of 'heroic working class resistance' to rebut criticisms of its racism and homophobia (Carrington, 1999: 83). This offers an interesting take on the classed nature of lad productions which are constructed around an assumed white, working-class aesthetic and sensibility and are explicitly hostile to middle-class articulations of masculinity—regarded as insipid, inauthentic and—crucially—unmasculine.

However, this stance hides a deep ambivalence to class within the lad magazines. Ben Crewe (2003b) discusses how on the one hand the editors of *Loaded* sought to

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celebrate their 'working class credentials' and would frequently deny or disavow their impressive higher education qualifications, yet on the other they were quick to fall back on middle-class defences of themselves as intelligent, skilled professionals whenever the magazine was accused of sexism or 'yobbishness' in any form (and this would include accusations of racism and homophobia). Beynon (2002) argues that the success of the lad mags and other lad productions was in fact achieved through the cynical *exploitation* of a version of white working-class machismo, by an industry dominated by ambitious, University-educated middle-class men. What emerged was a 'yobocracy' of writers, comedians, football stars and media people (e.g. Paul Gascoigne, Chris Evans and David Baddiel) who *performed* the new lad lifestyle, but without any of the costs or consequences it would have for ordinary working class men. This performative point is central to understanding 'new lad'—allowing us to move beyond claims about authenticity and inauthenticity, but rather to see those as discursive resources that are strategically mobilised in discussions about masculinity.

### **A laddish sensibility**

The analysis presented here is based on a critical reading of 20 lad lit novels published over the last decade. They were obtained using searches on Amazon and in particular through snowballing using the online functions that allow one to select 'more like this', or which 'recommend' books based on previous purchases. The resulting sample seems to capture a typical range of this type of contemporary lad lit fiction. It includes several authors widely championed as key exemplars of the genre (e.g. David Baddiel, Mike Gayle and Mark Barrowcliffe) and many authors featuring in popular lad lit lists or digests. No author was included more than once, and care was taken to include books from across the whole decade—therefore getting earlier and later examples of this type of fiction. There are clearly different variants of lad lit that I am risking collapsing here. However as this is—to my knowledge—the first detailed analysis of lad lit, I intend to treat it as a whole and try to say something about the contours of the genre.

The approach taken here is a feminist poststructuralist one, informed by discursive analysis, which views lad lit as an interesting site for constructions of gender and intimate relationships. The analytic process involved a close reading of the texts, aided by detailed note taking. As I indicated above I am less interested in literary or textual features than in broad discursive constructions. In this article I will focus on characterisation to a greater extent than plot narratives. My aim in what follows is to say something about the *sensibility* of lad lit. I use this term to distance myself from much work in the field which tends to regard the 'new lad' in terms of a temporal logic in which new forms of masculinity are understood as (chronologically) displacing earlier ones (cfNixon, 2001). This is, to my mind, too neat and linear a characterisation, which excludes fragmentation and division within the categories (most notably around class and race). Moreover the notion of displacement occludes the way in which traces of various ideologies become sedimented in common sense (Hall, 1988). Thus it is possible to see elements of different versions of masculinity

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appearing *simultaneously* in popular cultural texts—for example new man, new lad, metrosexual. To think of new laddism as a sensibility avoids these problems and allows for different formulations of masculinity to co-exist, and to see them as being reworked, recycled and used to ‘kick off’ (Williamson 1978) against each other. It takes seriously Beynon’s point that ‘perhaps what we are currently witnessing at the start of the 21st century is nothing less than the emergence of a more fluid, bricolage masculinity, the result of “channel hopping” across versions of the “masculine”’ (2002:6). Importantly, the notion of a sensibility, also allows attention to the affective, emotional or tonal qualities of lad productions, as well as their content.

Besides my conception of sensibility, the other key analytic term here is that of *figuration*. I regard the ‘new lad’ as a cultural construction, discourse or figure, who is mobilised repeatedly in different ways, in different forums, for different occasioned practices. Following Tyler’s insightful work on the figures of the ‘chav’ and the ‘asylum seeker’ (Tyler, 2008, Tyler, 2006), I use the term ‘figure’ ‘to describe the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments, specific bodies become overdetermined and publicly imagined and represented (figured) in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways that are expressive of an underlying crisis or anxiety’ (Tyler, 2008ms:4). The sheer number of newspaper articles about the rise of the new lad and his connection to an assumed crisis in masculinity indicates that new lad constitutes just such a figure. This approach is a material-discursive one which understands representations as not merely representing the world but as constitutive and generative. Most contemporary empirical research on or with young men points to an extremely complicated relationship between self descriptions made by real young men and the templates of masculinity on offer in magazines and other cultural forms. A figurative approach allows us to examine this new construction of masculinity without assuming that any individual man will straightforwardly inhabit a new lad identity.

### **Figuring masculinity in lad lit: unheroic heroes**

How, then, is masculinity figured in lad lit? Perhaps the most striking feature of lad lit is the difference between the characterisation of masculinity here and in other fictional genres. In traditional romances the heroes are invariably strong, powerful and successful; in spy fiction and military genres they are presented as intelligent, valiant, purposeful; in lad lit, by contrast, readers are offered a distinctly unheroic masculinity—one that is fallible, self-deprecating and liable to fail at any moment. In relation to work, for example, lad lit heroes are portrayed as unsuccessful, struggling, or as clinging on by a thread to their tenuous ‘careers’. They are usually doing something boring for which they are overqualified, or working in one of the ‘glamorous’ cultural industries (whose dark—or banal—underbelly will be exposed—eg advertising in *E* by Matt Beaumont, record company PR in Daniel Price’s *Slick* (Beaumont, 2000, Price, 2004))<sup>2</sup>. Duffy in *Mr Commitment* (Gayle, 1999) is a struggling stand-up comedian who is always waiting for his big break, which palpably fails to materialize, whilst Rob in Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity* (1995) tells us: ‘Here’s

how not to plan a career: a) split up with girlfriend; b) junk college; c) go to work in a record shop; d) stay in record shop for rest of life'. Meanwhile Charles in *Don't Try This at Home* (Reizin, 2003) is a producer of 'deception comedy' TV programmes who lives on his wit(s), lies his way out of every difficult situation, yet always manages to say the wrong thing to his (female<sup>3</sup>) boss. He lives in fear of his contract not being renewed, and is obsessively preoccupied with the idea that one of his junior colleagues 'could be my boss in five years time'. Moreover, his cynicism about the TV business makes him wonder whether he even wants to succeed:

Will I ascend to the top of my profession—*don't make me laugh*—ok, through a tremendous effort of will I could just about manage to creep, crawl, backstab, bully, cheat, manoeuvre...generally forge my way to some sort of secure standing in what is simultaneously a deeply insecure and worthless business... Or should I go back to my first love?  
Unemployment (Reizin, 2003:35)

The tone of this extract exemplifies many of the features of lad lit. Simultaneously detached, bitter, and self-deprecating, Charles despises what he does, but not enough to actually try to change anything. The entire book might be seen as a searing critique of contemporary reality TV, with its deception, cruelty and on-camera ambushes, yet the hero's response to feeling morally compromised is apathy; he humourously and intelligently dissects the world of which he is a part, but carries on just the same. This is one example of what has been discussed in relation to men's magazines as the knowingness of lad productions. It is premised on a familiarity with the terms of ethical and political critique, but detached from any engagement. In a sense, it might be said to constitute a 'post-political' universe in which there are no meaningful moral or ethical frameworks. In this dystopian world the characters wallow in the a-moral mud, but can call upon no alternate vision of how things might be, and, indeed, even seemingly ethical stances by other characters are revealed to be phony or calculating. No one comes out well: principled takes on advertising emerge as even more cynical, apparent critics of celebrity culture turn out to be just as vain and self aggrandising, and so on.

Interestingly, the male hero's lack of career success stands in stark contrast to that of the women in lad lit novels, who are typically portrayed as intelligent, confident and successful. Duffy's partner in *Mr Commitment* 'has managed to smash through every glass ceiling' there is to become a top advertising executive, while Kate (the hapless Charles's would-be partner) is a forensic scientist who is depicted as superior in every way to Charles, even effortlessly beating him at chess. This is a fascinating reversal of the pattern in chick lit in which women are invariably portrayed as struggling in low paid, unsatisfying jobs which are far removed from their aspirations. Bridget Jones is a good example of this, as is Jemima in *Jemima J.*, whose aspiration to become a journalist has morphed into a job compiling the 'top tips' column at a local newspaper. In chick lit career success for women is occasioned by heterosexual union, after which the heroines tend to suddenly find the confidence to pursue their

goals and/or get promoted. As I have argued elsewhere, this is a postfeminist updating of the traditional fairy tale in which the hero is necessary to save the heroine from her dead-end job and to propel her into a 'happy ever after' that is now framed less in terms of domestic contentment than a dazzling career (See Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006).

The motif of un- or anti-heroism extends more broadly throughout the characterisation of leading male characters in lad lit. As Hornby's Rob puts it: 'I'm here in this stupid little flat, on my own, I'm 35 years old, I own a tiny failing business and my friends don't seem to be friends but people whose phone numbers I haven't lost'. Men are frequently portrayed as domestically inept, unable to cook, and left surviving on a diet of toast and pot noodle. Indeed, the toast diet is so central to constructions of laddish masculinity in these books that it might be said to stand metonymically for new lad's entire lifestyle<sup>4</sup>. Toast represents many things in these novels: a certain infantilism and refusal or inability to grow up and cook 'proper' food; a nostalgic harking back to adolescence or college days; a source of deep comfort, when life proves too difficult. Here's Duffy, so confused about his relationship that he finds himself unable to make the most straightforward decision—in this case which chocolate bar to buy from the sweet shop:

"Oi mate" [the sweetshop man] called after me. "You've left your chocolate!"

"I know," I sighed. "You can keep them. I can't make my mind up, mate. So you know what? I think I'm just going to go home and have some toast instead" (Gayle, 1999:14)

Mike Gayle's book *Turning Thirty* (not included in my sample) even has a large cover illustration of a toaster!

Perhaps this characterisation is not surprising given long-standing assumptions of the domestic realm as feminine, but lad lit heroes also fall short of power and prowess in other domains too. They tend to be portrayed as cowardly, hypochondriacal losers who are not in control of their own destinies and hark back longingly to simpler times (usually their adolescence). The extent to which hypochondria afflicts lad lit heroes is little short of remarkable: the men seem uniformly to suffer from some sort of suitably diffuse, painful but not debilitating illness—slow-growing brain tumours are a particular favourite (but the possibilities are endless). Kit, hero and narrator of *The International Gooseberry* (Hatch, 2001) worries perpetually about contracting West Nile encephalitis (travelling in the US!) and keeps up a running commentary about his other bodily 'symptoms', none of which is seemingly too trivial to warrant anxious attention:

I can't sleep because my verruca's itching, my trapped wind from the flight is still slowly releasing (I farted 36 times today), my balls are

aching because all my tight pairs of pants have mysteriously vanished, and I've got six mosquito bites that are already going red and blotchy like squashed tomatoes. (Hatch, 2001: 24)

Meanwhile Reizin's Charles is similarly afflicted:

The first symptom of the day steps into the spotlight and takes a bow, a stabbing pain over my left eye. Not severe, but not so mild that you'd miss it either. Right about where the eyebrow is. Signifying what? Brain tumour or stroke, could be either. I lie here, scanning my body for other faint signals from inner space. But this, make no mistake, is how it will start: the dull little ache you wake up with one morning that wasn't there the night before. And six months later, time enough to say your goodbyes and arrange your affairs, as they put it, you're toast. (Reizin, 2003:35)

The sheer volume of these kinds of anxious reflections across the entire corpus of lad lit must raise questions about what is going on here. Why is the body such a site of anxiety for male narrators? It is notable that the anxiety relates neither to appearance (as in chick lit) nor to performance (in more hegemonically masculine terms). Rather it seems to index a more profound existential dis-ease with the self in late capitalist society, perhaps even melancholia. Psychoanalytic writing directs us to ask what is expressed, somatised by bodily symptoms—here the question must be reformulated at a *metalevel*: what is this patterned and repeated construction of a hurting, vulnerable and anxious male body doing in such volumes in a popular cultural form? What anxieties does it speak to? What ideological work does it effect?

It is striking how this characterisation of the male body contrasts with that of the female body in chick lit. In chick lit the body is also the site of extraordinary—indeed obsessional—preoccupation but of a quite different nature. Chick lit heroines' bodies emerge as the locus of femininity, women's key source of identity. But this is a body that is always-already unruly and which requires constant monitoring, surveillance and discipline in order to make it conform to the ever more stringent judgments of normative feminine appearance. An entry in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1996) vividly expresses the fears about what might happen if this disciplinary activity were not to be undertaken:

Being a woman is worse than being a farmer—there is so much harvesting and crop spraying to be done: legs to be waxed, underarms shaved, eyebrows plucked, feet pumiced, skin exfoliated and moisturised, spots cleansed, roots dyed, eyelashes tinted, nails filed, cellulite massaged, stomach muscles exercised. The whole performance is so highly tuned you need only to neglect it for a few days for the whole thing to go to seed. Sometimes I wonder what I would be like if left to revert to nature—with a full beard and handlebar moustache on

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each shin. (Fielding, 1996:30)

There is no parallel in lad lit to the kind of bodily discipline captured so vividly here. Concerns about the 'male beauty myth' notwithstanding—i.e. the impact on men of increasingly prevalent idealised representations of the male body—lad lit heroes appear free from the need to police their calorific intake, units of alcohol or daily weight and nor are they expected to engage in anything but the most basic hygiene routine (if that). It appears that the neo-liberal injunction to self-survey and self-discipline is unevenly gendered, with women rather than men constructed as the ideal subjects of neo-liberalism. (Tincknell et al., 2003, Gill, 2007b)

But the body is also represented as a window to female characters' interior lives and it is perhaps here where we can see the similarities with men in lad lit, as well as in the constant compulsion to confess, and to narrate failures and weaknesses. When Bridget Jones smokes 40 cigarettes or records that she has consumed excessive calories we are invited to read this in psychological terms as indicative of emotional breakdown (usually precipitated by a man). Are the hypochondriacal concerns of lad lit heroes a comparable index of psychological 'trouble' or emotional breakdown? Do the mysterious pains, the inchoate fears, the banal preoccupation with seemingly minor afflictions (a mosquito bite here, a verruca there) convey some sense of crisis, and, if so, what function(s) does this perform as motif throughout the genre? More broadly, how are we to read and interpret lad lit's insistence on masculinity as unheroic, flawed and feeble?

It is worth pointing out that not all men are depicted in this way in lad lit. Indeed the lack of heroism on the hero's part is often signalled through a series of contrasts with other, apparently superior, masculinities. In Tony Parsons's fiction his main character's confusion and relationship breakdown is set against his father's strong, stoical, 'breadwinner masculinity', and found badly wanting (e.g. Parsons, 2000). In other examples of the genre older brothers, work colleagues or even strangers can play this role, pointing up the hero's failures in a way that may seem perverse. A typical example is to be found in a restaurant scene from *Don't Try This At Home* in which Charles and another man vie for the attention of Charles's ex-girlfriend Cheryl. The other man is revealed to be charming and successful and his place in Cheryl's heart/bed is assured when he is able to order from the menu in fluent French! Charles is left looking on uncomfortably as the 'gooseberry', and is then forced to endure the sound of their ecstatic love-making from the next room all night—moans of pleasure Cheryl had never made when she was with him:

In counterpoint to the percussion of thumping and the woodwind of creaking, a string section has joined the concerto: Cheryl's sawing little cries, quiet at first, but growing steadily louder, and then deeper, until horrifyingly, they become full throated roars of an almost bloodcurdling intensity. (Reizin, 2003: 179)

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Lad lit narrators' flawed and self-deprecating self-presentations resonate strongly with Bethan Benwell's (2003) analysis of articles in FHM magazine. In one, the writer is sent to audition to be a porn star, but presents himself (like Charles) as 'distinctly short of phallic omnipotence' (Benwell, 2003a)! He attempts James Bond suaveness, 'raises an appreciative eyebrow at his sexy co-stars', but 'can think of precisely nothing to say'. Unable to sustain an erection he is humiliated by being called 'Drooperdick' instead of 'Super Dick' (quoted in Benwell, 2003). This type of writing in both magazines and lad lit seems to suggest that the power and privilege associated with traditional masculinity is unreachable, or at least a struggle to attain (though other men achieve it effortlessly, of course). It appears to mock conventional constructions of potent masculinity and draws attention to it as an ongoing masquerade (to use the term from feminist psychoanalytic film theory) (Doane, 1992, Stacey, 1993, Tseelon, 1995, Mulvey, 1975), always liable to failure or exposure. The question is: what does this do/perform/make possible? Does the anti-heroic 'unmasking' of masculinity work to subvert or destabilise male power? Or do these constructions of men as hapless, inept fools repudiate this power in order to reinforce it? These questions will be central to the next section in which I examine constructions of women, gender relations and heterosexual intimacy in lad lit.

### **Sexual objectification postfeminist style**

Women in lad lit figure as objects of admiration and awe, resentment, and lust. Here I am going to focus on the latter. Sexual scrutiny of women is central to most lad lit novels—even at the level of basic descriptions of female characters—but lad lit offers, I want to suggest, a distinctly *postfeminist* form of sexual objectification. The term postfeminism is contested and has been defined in many contradictory ways e.g. as a historical shift, and epistemological break or a backlash. Here I use the term to denote a particular sensibility characterised by (amongst other things) a knowingness and its apparent ease and comfortableness with the terms of feminist critique, combined with a disavowal or repudiation of feminist ideas. Reizin's Charles, for example, mentally undress his and 'fucks' every woman he sees: he fantasises about the woman sitting opposite him on the tube, the junior researcher in his office and even (perhaps especially) his two closest friends, Rose and Geraldine, whom he imagines in a threesome with him enjoying their contrasting kinds of sexiness. However, what makes this different from other modes of objectification is that all this information is presented to readers in a first person narrative with apparent apology. Thus, Charles (as narrator) says of Rose: 'I imagine that she would writhe a lot. (Forgive me). Geraldine would be more...sensuously serene (Look I'm sorry. It's just that I have thought about these things)' (Reizin, 2003: 53).

Here, then, we see the irony discussed by Benwell and others deployed to forestall criticism from any (feminist) readers troubled by this. Its implicit acknowledgement that it is 'wrong'—definitely not 'politically correct'—helps to disarm objections. Sometimes this is explicitly couched as 'taking feminism into account'. Stewart, the

narrator in *Infidelity for First-time Fathers* (Barrowcliffe, 2001), torn between his fiancée and his lover, both of whom are pregnant, tells readers:

So with sex, it is the whole woman that the mature and rounded man makes love to. Her personality and her body are one, you cannot separate them. This said, I really can't go any further without mentioning's Cat's tits, which are spectacular. Also—in a non-sexist way—I'd like to compare them to Andrea's as a way of showing how I relate to each of the women. Feminists will be glad I have resisted the overwhelming impulse to give them marks out of 10 or English tourist board style crowns (2001: 44).

This is an example of what several writers (Gill, 2007b, McRobbie, 2004, Whelehan, 2000) have understood as the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas. Feminism is acknowledged, its terms adopted, but only to be pressed into service in the continued objectification and most demeaning sexual scrutiny of women. Here, then, feminism is indexed with the paradoxical purpose of repudiating it. Going back to the questions asked above, it is difficult to see this as in any way subversive of traditional gender relations; rather it uses feminist ideas precisely to re-inscribe the status quo.

As well as rebutting potential critique and indexing their 'anti-sexist' credentials, Charles, Stewart and other lad lit heroes regain the moral high ground by highlighting their own honesty and straightforwardness against the implied duplicity 'new men' who might try to claim that they do not constantly think about women in this way (but, we are told, do really). For in these assertions all (heterosexual) men are included, not simply particular individuals. Thus, after fantasy sex with the woman seated opposite him, narrator Charles says 'Sorry but chaps do have these thoughts on the tube' (Reizin, 2001: 39) while Stewart, says of sex with his much younger girlfriend: 'I know it's disgusting to hear an old bloke perving over a young woman like this but that is what a lot of blokes do' (Barrowcliffe, 2001). Such behaviour is first asserted, next apologised for, and then normalised as what all men do (if they are honest).

It is interesting also how this kind of statement seems to suggest a form of translation: almost as if authors are explaining the customs and behaviours of an unfamiliar 'tribe' or species to their readers: you may find them strange, even somewhat abhorrent at times, but having lived among them we have discovered that the human male genuinely does think like this! This notion ties into another postfeminist theme, notably the reassertion of notions of natural sexual difference which has become such a dominant idea in recent years—building on the popularity of evolutionary psychology and John Gray's best-selling self-help manuals which present women and men as belonging two different, but (crucially) complementary, planetary species (Potts, 1998, Gill, 2007a). Such ideas are repeatedly drawn upon in lad lit—sometimes in the most odious ways. Here, for example, is Dan explaining to

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Edward, main protagonist of Matt Dunn's (2006) *The Ex-Boyfriend's Handbook*, why women saying no don't always mean no:

"Edward, you have so much to learn. If I walked away every time a girl said 'no' to me when I asked her out..."  
"That happens, does it?"  
Dan thinks about this. "Well, rarely. But the point is, where a woman is concerned 'no' doesn't always mean 'no'. In fact, sometimes it's actually a 'yes' in disguise." (2006: 26)

It hardly needs stating how pernicious such a claim is in the context of its use in the courtroom and media discourse about rape.

Women as objects of desire are frequently presented as 'prey' in lad lit novels—indeed, I don't think I have ever come across so many predatory metaphors, outside of the domain of wildlife documentaries! Part of the 'honesty' of the confessional lad lit credo involves recounting openly the attempts to seduce women, the carefully devised plans to 'score' even when this involves telling lies or cynically manipulating a situation to turn it to one's sexual advantage. David Baddiel's laddish hero, Vic, 'fucked her the day Princess Diana died' because he was able to persuade the woman in question that his red eyes (sore from hayfever) were the result of tears of grief; she fell for his new mannish sensitivity. Charles's favourite chat up line—in true shallow-deep form—centres on the pulling power of reflections on mortality:

"Horrible thought, that you can be...", pause for dramatic effect,  
"snuffed out like a light" [...]  
Actually, Cheryl was my most famous victory with the death conversation turning sexual... (Reizin, 2003: 98–9)

What is interesting, then, is that while lad lit characters are presented as acting duplicitously, it is their very duplicity that is offered up for confession as honesty. That is, while the *characters* act in dishonest and manipulative ways, the *narrators* own up to this—indeed lay it bare for us as readers. The specificities of the confessions, and particularly their focus upon what all men are like, raises questions about the assumed readership of lad lit: is it really designed for women and not men at all? What pleasures and points of identification might it offer to male or female readers?

A further postfeminist feature of the sexual objectification of women in lad lit novels centres around the construction of male characters as, at best, confused by contemporary sexual mores, and, at worst, the victims of a feminist conspiracy of 'political correctness'. A sense of a new gender or sexual order prevails, with male characters asking things like 'At what point are you meant, in the politically correct world, to look at a girl's tits?' (Barrowcliffe, 2001:97). Here, again, it is possible to see how the anti-heroic construction of masculinity, combined with the depiction of

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women as successful, superior and basically running the world, works to authorise a buffoonish sexism from men who either don't 'know better' or can be presented as reverting to 'natural' male behaviours for which they cannot be called to account. Far from mocking or unmasking male power the presentation of ineptitude and confusion seems strategically designed to maintain it, while simultaneously effacing it and claiming that men are the disadvantaged losers in the 'new' gender stakes.

## Conclusion

In this article I have looked at constructions of men and women in lad lit. This fiction offers a bricolage of different constructions of masculinity: the sex-predator/playboy, the employment/financial/sexual failure; the perpetual adolescent; the melancholic man yearning for freedom from responsibility or looking back nostalgically to simpler times. Unlike other genres (including chick lit) lad lit predominantly presents its main male protagonists as flawed, fallible and self-deprecating. In pointing to the prevalence of this distinctive 'unheroic masculinity' I have sought to explore the contours and meanings of this and to ask what it does or performs in lad lit, particularly in combination with a contrasting depiction of female characters as cool, assured and powerful.

I have suggested that this patterned construction of men and women is a distinctively postfeminist one, which presents women as beneficiaries of a 'genderquake' in which men have been left behind and disadvantaged. The features that mark lad lit out as postfeminist include: the notion that equality has been achieved; the depiction of women as having smashed through every glass ceiling there is to achieve superior status; the repeated referencing—and then repudiation or undermining—of feminism and feminists; and the reassertion of natural sexual difference, based on heteronormative ideas of gender complementarity. Deployed together I have argued that these themes occlude continued gender inequalities, authorise sexism and work to rebut or head off potential critique through a variety of strategies including indexing feminist credentials or making clear the knowingness of the transgression. I looked in detail at one feature of the representation of women in lad lit and sought to demonstrate how this postfeminist dynamic operates effectively to facilitate crude and sexist sexual objectification of women by variously apologising, nodding to feminism, constructing men as 'naturally' predatory or presenting them as confused victims of 'political correctness gone mad'.

There are several other features of the presentation of women that I was unable—because of space constraints—to explore here, and which would merit further research. Central amongst these were constructions of women as objects of anger and resentment centring on themes of commitment (women unreasonably wanting it), women's neediness/demandingness (including sexually) and the double standards which lad lit heroes feel privilege women and disadvantage them. These themes will be discussed elsewhere as I develop the analysis presented here.

The particular classed and racialised constructions in lad lit struck me forcibly while doing the reading on which this analysis is based and would also repay further study. It seems to me that complex constructions of a white Englishness are central to the forms of masculinity depicted here, organised through a nostalgic discourse of consumption that centres on toys, TV programmes and food (notably food eaten as a child). Class itself is complexly signalled through these symbolic resources, as if it were reducible to consumption.

Finally, a more complete analysis needs to pay attention to narrative. One way of reading lad lit is as a 'coming-of-age' genre in which men come to realise that most of their problems are their own fault (this is, after all, a resolutely individualist discourse) and that 'the best a man can get' to paraphrase both the long-running Gillette razor advertisement and the intertextual title of John O'Farrell's dad lit novel is to get married and have children. As Tim Lott's hero in *White City Blue* puts it after his wedding:

Is my freedom gone? What the fuck is that? A little drop of life between childhood and marriage. It is not all that it is cracked up to be. Marriage is what happens when you learn that life is bigger than you (Lott, 2000)

What is fascinating about such resolutions is both their apparent vindication of female characters' drive to secure men's emotional commitment, and, simultaneously, their utterly heteronormative framing such that adulthood and, indeed, citizenship become predicated upon marriage. Like so many other issues raised tantalisingly here, this would repay deeper analysis. What I hope to have begun here is the critical reading of lad lit as a key site of mediated intimacy.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>A term of class hatred, used in the UK as a form of attack on working class people.

<sup>2</sup>As accounts of work in the precarious and insecure cultural industries lad lit makes fascinating reading. This ties into a longstanding interest of mine in precarious work, so will be analysed in detail elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup>Her gender is not incidental.

<sup>4</sup>The many meanings of toast are indexed—including that of ‘being toast’ (failing).

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