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The fictional sob sisters: narrative construction of women journalists in popular literature

Kelsey Batschelet
Iowa State University

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The fictional sob sisters:
Narrative construction of women journalists in popular literature

by

Kelsey Batschelet

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Tracy Lucht, Major Professor
Daniela V. Dimitrova
Michele Schaal

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my brother, Adam Batschelet, whose persistent support and guidance inspired me to apply to graduate school. I owe all of my success in graduate school, including this thesis, to him. I'd also like to dedicate this to my parents, Allen and Terri Batschelet, whose endless encouragement, advice and support motivated my success.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction of women journalist protagonists in six novels published since 2000 by analyzing the themes and concepts authors use to create the characters, including the cultures of the fictional newsroom, character identities and professional success. The findings indicate that fictional women journalists are held to the same standards as their non-fictional counterparts, and authors construct positive, relatable characters. The resulting characters work in newsrooms that reflect non-fictional realities, including a lack of gender diversity in authority positions and male-dominated spaces. The findings show that while most of the portraits of women journalists in fiction are positive, they are often marginalized and confined to reporting on women's issues.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Write about something else. Something funny, something cute. You know how to do that" – excerpt from *Sarah's Key* by Tatiana de Rosnay P. 51

Literature continuously evolves to reflect and interpret our society's current interests. A quick review of well-received novels of late will acquaint the reader with characters who grapple with problems abutting their own, who engage in popular and familiar behaviors – such as communicating through new media – and who hold similar belief and value structures. However, stereotypes and frames – which should be considered as two separate but nested narrative structures (Zaller, 1992) – that surround gender and traditional occupational roles can be slow to see revision within narratives (Paterson & Lach, 1990). These fictional narratives can be particularly helpful in understanding the representation of gender in society. As we consider the place of gender in fictional and reality-based narratives, we might explore the image of the newspaperwoman. The characters of women journalists in fiction offer insight into the stories told about women as professionals, and can be used to shed light on how the image of the female reporter has evolved – or stagnated – in literature.

Women did not easily acquire the title of "journalist," and the role of the newspaperwoman was slow to gain wide acceptance in the United States when the job emerged in the late 1800s (Lutes, 2006). Women were offered positions as journalists in order to satisfy an ever-growing audience of women newspaper readers since "women reporters could draw women readers" (Whitt, 2008, p. 5). Rising audiences of women readers created a demand for articles and essays on "women's issues" that editors believed men could not – or would not – be willing to report on (Whitt 2008, p. 5). The bylines of women journalists – which grew in

number from 288 in the 1880s to 2,193 by 1900 – were increasingly more common by the turn of the 20th century (Whitt, 2008, p. 5). Despite the 115 years that have passed since 1900 and the rise of women in the field, journalism continues to see a gender gap, with the Women's Media Center reporting that in 2013 "63.4 percent of those [journalists] with bylines, on-camera appearances and producer credits were men, while women constituted 36.1 percent of contributors. (Gender was not apparent in the remaining 0.5 percent)." (2015). The same statistics showed that in 2014, "62.1 percent of news was generated by men – a difference of 1.3 percent" (Women's Media Center, 2015).

Popular fiction continues to offer scholars a window through which to view and interpret social and cultural values. The concept of literature as a means to understand society is based in the narratology tradition, a semiological approach. We can draw a line of thought between Claude Lévi-Strauss' work on myth to the role of fiction in society. As Larsen (1991) wrote:

> According to Lévi-Strauss (1967), the myths circulating in 'primitive' societies
> may be regarded as conceptual tools by which people classify and interpret their
> everyday experiences. … Thus, myth is not a direct statement or 'expression' of
> the ideologies or worldviews that are dominant in a given society, but the means
> or medium of a specific ritual and symbolic interaction between individuals and
> society. A similar role is played by media in modern, industrialized societies (p.
> 128).

Literature, as a form of media, also attends to that role of "myth" interpreter.

After women found their way into the reporting field, they carved out a space in journalism that garnered them attention – though not always positive or respectful – and a semblance of prominence as women writers. Being a newspaperwoman was one of the most

accessible means of writing as an occupation for women in the 20th century. However, with the introduction of women into the field there arose concern surrounding who the woman journalist was – was she brash? Sensational? Emotional? Could she be a hard-hitting reporter, or was she better suited for writing and reporting on "women's issues"? The character that was eventually put forth was created based on conventions, stereotypes and attributes that conflated typical – read "masculine" – journalistic traits with traditional gender expectations of the time (Lutes, 2006).

While women are entering the field at staggering rates and "have outnumbered men in college and university journalism courses in the United States" since 1977, we must wonder why they still represent a minority in the newsroom (Gallagher, 2001 p. 63). What is hindering the professional achievement of women journalists in the newsroom? Why are they still being seen as 'other' in comparison to their male counterparts (Steiner, Chambers & Fleming, 2004)? The woman journalist's journey into the newsroom is one of facing gendered journalistic values and an institution that is often unwilling to let them lead. Though their presence in the newsroom and roles as news-writers and presenters are accepted, they are constantly othered in direct opposition to their male counterparts who came before them (Steiner, Chambers & Fleming, 2004).

In keeping with the argument that literature reproduces and interprets social and cultural attitudes, novels duplicated the image of the woman journalist as she took on an increasingly prominent role in the media. As the roles of women in journalism continue to grow and expand – they are television news directors, editors-in-chief, anchors and front-page bylines – they endure as literary characters in popular fiction. If we position literature as a translator of society, then research into the construction and portrayal of women journalists in current fiction can offer insight into how gender roles and expectations in media have changed, stagnated or evolved in

the medium's interpretation since the introduction of the newspaperwoman. This issue has been explored in regards to the place of women journalists during the 20th century (Mangun, 2011), but the body of work concerning the modern woman journalist's presence in the fictional genres of literature is limited.

Unpacking the ways in which women employed by the media are portrayed and constructed through the narrative structures of popular fiction provides valuable knowledge of the Western cultural perception of women as professionals, as well as the way that newspaperwomen are constructed in current literature and thought. This research will use framing theory to explore the construction and portrayal of the newspaperwoman as a literary character, identifying common conventions while documenting the expression of gender roles in fiction.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women Journalists in Fiction

Women in literature, including women journalists, are often framed through the illustration of professional and personal traits, and by "the turn of the century, women reporters were already a visible subset of the nation's newspaper journalists" (Lutes, 2006, p. 1). Companionably, an imitative version of the woman journalist was written into the literature of the time – such as Ella Hepworth's character Mary Erle in *The Story of a Modern Woman*, published in 1894, and Henry James' Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of a Lady* in 1881. These women characters act as an invader of a boys' club and as a measure of comic relief, respectively. Neither role is particularly serious and paints the woman reporter as a folly of the story: "Henrietta appears especially brash among the contemplative parlor dwellers of James's novel" (Lutes, 2006, p. 94).

These characters were some of the first to represent women journalists in popular fiction, and their roles aptly reflected the ones they held in reality, as Jim Fisher noted in a book review: "[T]he public turned to fiction for its image of what reporters were like, and what it saw formed attitudes of the press that we may not be free from today" (1987, p. 44). The woman journalist's fictional and real presence in the harsh – read "unladylike" – environment of the newsroom, however, created a stir. Lutes notes that "by the early 1900s, fictional newspaperwomen were common enough to inspire a backlash from media critics, who grumbled that the portrayals glamorized a brutal profession and gave young women unrealistic, even dangerous ambitions" (2006 p. 102). Most young women in the early 20th century held jobs that adhered to fixed gender expectations, and the confrontational and outspoken atmosphere of newsgathering and

reporting did not fit the conventional traits of a woman's job. Their positions as characters in novels were as unconventional and heretical women: "[By] choosing journalism, they were diverging both from the accepted role of the middle-class woman as home maker, and were also diverging from acceptable female professions of nursing and teaching" (Lonsdale, 2013, p. 464).

Often women journalists were understood as strangers or even intruders into the male-dominated newsroom; they were outsiders to the culture and there was certainly no welcome-mat rolled out for their entry (Lonsdale, 2013). Since journalism is governed by objectivity, the conventional sign of a truly journalistic piece is found in writing that is factual, hard and uninfluenced – particularly by any hint of personal opinions or emotions. Scholars have argued that objectivity, the key to the style of journalism preferred in the United States, "is not gender neutral, but essentially masculinizes journalism" (Hardin & Shain, 2006 p. 324). The sense that women were interrupting the dynamics of the newsroom did not dissipate with time and was continually reflected in fictional narratives. Lonsdale makes a point to mention Monica Dickens' character Poppy, a female reporter in *My Turn to Make Tea* (1951), who is repeatedly assigned to trivial news stories: "Poppy, although a better reporter than her colleagues, is never given serious assignments." Poppy resigns, meeting the editor halfway up the stairs as he is coming down to sack her: "It made quite a friendly transaction, and we agreed that women were a nuisance in an office, anyway . . ." (Lonsdale, 2013, p. 463, quoting from Dickens [1951; 1962, p. 222]). Lonsdale's plucking of this scene from the novel poignantly emphasizes not only the man's perspective on women's place in the newsroom but the woman journalist's understanding of herself in that space.

The two characters' agreement on the purpose, or lack thereof, of women in journalism is telling of what was happening within the industry and within society at the time the novel was

written in 1951. The newsroom continues to be a hierarchy in the 21ˢᵗ century, in which men's

beliefs are valued more highly than women's. The news selection criteria tend to be largely

defined by men, thus marginalizing the issues that are of importance to women and decrying

them as "soft" news topics in contradiction to the "hard" topics valued by men, "thereby

suggesting that what is of interest to women is less important than that which interests men"

(Ross & Carter, 2011 p. 1150). The work of their male colleagues sets the professional standard

for women's journalism, while women's work remains a gendered space where their femininity

defines their reporting (Steiner, Chambers & Fleming, 2004).

The interaction between Poppy and her editor, and Poppy's inability to land a serious

assignment, further elucidates the lesser value of the woman journalist. As Lutes notes,

"newspaperwomen in fiction … have rarely been taken seriously, whether imagined by male or

by female writers" (2006, p. 95). In examining this argument, we must consider the concern that

the presence of the women journalists working in non-fictional offices elicited. "Critics

associated the arrival of women with the disintegration of values in the press" (Lonsdale, 2013,

p. 465). Those critiques assumed that women would only be able to create content that pertained

to "women's issues" – the soft counterpart to serious, hard news. As Lonsdale notes, "women

journalists of the day [were] trapped in the features departments and women's pages, pigeon-

holed into writing about 'What Women Want'" (2013, p. 466). The white, well-educated women

who made up the first group of women journalists were "confined to writing about topics and in

a style that contrasted sharply with the straight factual reporting of their male colleagues"

(Steiner, Chambers & Fleming, 2004, p. 16). They were relegated to writing feature stories and

human interest pieces that relied on the flaunting of emotions for newsworthiness.

Women's journalism was primarily considered "light," covering topics "such as fashion, the arts, domestic issues and society gossip" (Steiner, Chambers & Fleming, 2004, p. 16). The objective newsroom is meant to act as a form of equalizer, though it often "equalizes" in favor of the men. Since male journalists formed the institution of journalism, their perspectives have been favored over those of women journalists, who entered the field much later. Women journalists must reconcile their identities as journalists with their gender "to succeed in male-dominated work places" (Hardin & Shain, 2006, p. 322).

This carries over into literary newspaperwomen, who, if they were to be interesting characters, had to either embrace their women-centric assignments or adopt behaviors that evoked brash, typically masculine traits in order to write hard news. Lonsdale writes of a newspaperwoman who is a character in *Stamboul Train*, who has done just that, saying "despite her tough exterior, [she is] also trapped by her gender" (p. 466). This adoption of less conventionally feminine traits further distanced the fictional newspaperwomen from traditional gender roles and instead created a role that was misunderstood and often unappealing and inaccessible for many readers. Because of this, early women journalists acquired the emotionally charged and belittling nickname of the "sob sisters."

The nickname was conceived of by the journalist Irvin S. Cobb during the sensational 1907 murder trial of Harry Kendall Thaw, which welcomed the rare sight of four women reporters in the audience (Lutes, 2003, p. 504). While their presence was a sensation, it was also an achievement, quickly condemned by Cobb, who, "looking a little wearily at the four fine-looking girls who spread their sympathy like jam, injected a scornful line into his copy about the 'sob sisters,'" (Ross, 1936, p. 65). Ross's explanation of Cobb's conception of the term illustrates the idea of the woman reporter as a conventional female, laden with emotion.

Her description brings to mind a domestic woman, capable only of writing syrupy, sentimental and sweetly sensationalized copy deserving of a shot of Cobb's reality in the form of the denigrating "sob sisters" title. The moniker stuck (like figuratively sympathetic jam) and was in wide circulation by 1910, mostly due to the extensive coverage of the highly sensational Thaw trial (Lutes, 2003, p. 504). The nickname aided in creating and supporting the stereotype of the "soft news" female reporter, whose stories were more likely to deal with lesser-valued human interest issues than hard politics. The "sob sister" epithet shadowed the bylines of many women journalists for decades after its coinage (Lutes, 2003, p. 504).

No debasing nicknames dogged male journalists' bylines. Men were viewed as the reporters capable of covering factual stories and more serious and "higher-status news of political and economic issues" (Steiner, Chambers & Fleming, 2004, p. 16). The kind of stories that male journalists wrote, assuming the role of the veritable founding fathers of journalism, were deemed "hard news" in comparison to the more feminine "soft news" assignments of women, who "manufactured tears for profit" (Lutes, 2003, p. 505).

Women's early role in the newsroom was hampered by outright gender discrimination largely influenced by the lack of assignment parity. They often wrote for the "yellow press," which references a type of newspaper characterized by its misconduct and shady newsgathering habits (Campbell, 2001, p. 25). Women's presence in the yellow press was generally not a matter of preference; they simply were not being offered entrance into the elite newspapers or journals (Lutes, 2003, p. 506). Men whose publications did not shy away from yellow press tactics, like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, hired them, offering the women jobs writing human interest pieces and engaging in publicity stunts – tactics they hoped would increase their readership (Whitt, 2008, p. 5). In contrast, Adolph Ochs at the *New York Times* "did not believe

that women belonged on newspaper staffs" (Whitt, 2008, p. 5). That mindset may have stuck: the Women's Media Center reported in 2014 that the *New York Times* had the most significant gender gap among newspapers, with male reporters representing 69 percent of bylines in that newspaper.

Narrative Theory and Qualitative Research

Novels do not have a history of finding favor with qualitative social scientists for research purposes, but the argument for the medium's ability to offer a wealth of insight into social issues and concerns is growing. Hayden White (1978) argues for the validity of novels as a representation of society, saying that "the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of 'reality'" (p. 122). The novel approaches this act from an artistic standpoint, and it reproduces a version of reality that is as real as its wholly fact-based counterpart, a point made by Nathan (2013):

The novel, which is not obliged to respect the constraints of an allegedly scrupulous reflection of reality – and they can only be described as constraints in the sense that they restrict the writer's representational options – is by this liberty better equipped to construct an "image of reality which . . . is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less 'real' than that referred to by the historian or other qualitative researchers" (White,p. 77).

The human experience written in novels speaks to readers in the form of a relatable or recognizable event – either personally or socially. These types of literary narratives offer incredible perspectives on social nature and knowledge. Researching literature, particularly recent literature, is important to understanding the ways that modern writers are interpreting and

presenting the current human experience. Returning to Nathan (2013): "[L]iterature has its own truths and can contribute to the social sciences in areas where empirical verification isn't needed, in terms of intellectual history and studies of culture in particular, and in terms of the immeasurable aspects of society in general" (p. 78). Those "immeasurable aspects" encompass the nuanced attitudes and belief structures ensconced in a society.

Drawing upon Roland Barthes' argument on the role of myths in literature, we can understand the significance of signifiers and the signified in novels. Barthes used myth to refer to fictional stories that have a timeless meaning, but are "in fact, an expression of a historically specific ideological vision of the world," (Allen, 2003, p. 34). Barthes expounded on Saussure's idea of language as a first-order system, saying instead that language has both a first- and second-order. The myth takes the first-order sign, and makes it the signifier for the signified (Allen, 2003, p. 43). So, the images evoked by words in literature serve to convey a first-order sign, which actually leans on a second-order meaning (Allen, 2003, p. 43).

In the literary community, fiction is approached from a variety of theoretical standpoints. The nature of fiction can be understood through different interpretations, but the general consensus is that meaning is derived from text through its quality of openness or accessibility (Nielsen, 1997). Novels are a form of escape; they offer an accessible text that acts as a vehicle for translating the human experience through an array of settings and realities. Fiction works within the form of the transportation imagery model, transporting readers fully while subtly challenging and revising their perspectives on reality. The fictional worlds created in literature are able to momentarily restructure a reader's emotional reaction to and understanding of the constructs of life (Nielsen, 1997). The significance of fiction, then, lies in its enabling of the reader to interpret her or his experiences through the fictional lives of others. "It is this entirely

imagined experience that fiction offers us: access to the unknowable reality of other people's inner lives" (Ashe, 2015, p. 43).

Taken further, Ashe's claim that fiction gives the reader a glimpse of another's existence through character storylines speaks to the ability of fiction to lay the groundwork for the interpretation of reality. This is a broad adaptation of Lévi-Strauss' theory that narratives, like myths, work to filter and reproduce a society's values. Being privy to a character's world is just that: a chance to step into a fictional world presented as a version of a recognizable reality. The character's existence, then, encourages the reader to relate, recognize and adopt the parameters of that reality. This practice argues for the validity of these fictional existences, and their ability to speak to and mimic our social realities.

Saliba and Geltner (2012) propose the idea of a master narrative in literature composed of dominant frames (p. 4). The habit of frequently referring to a common dominant frame in order to construct a master narrative is used in fiction to influence the reader's interpretation. A character or plot concept is presented from multiple angles, all of which are contained by the characteristics of the author's intended dominant frame, creating a basis for the revelation of the master narrative at the novel's conclusion.

This study is informed by Nathan's (2013) argument that "the value of literature for the social sciences is in the fact that it is a sort of mirror of society which produces a picture of that society in the same way that an ethnography does, and that therefore literature is useful to social scientists insofar as it provides a representation of that society which, though fictionalized, corresponds to that society or that culture in its contours" (p. 80). Arguing that fiction works *like* but not *as* ethnography implies its use as a tool for observing the society from which it originates without assuming it is a direct reflection of that society's beliefs and values; rather, it works as

an imitation. Literature is a mirror, but readers must bear in mind that reflections can be distorted.

Framing Theory

Framing theory informs the analysis of the fiction selected for this study. The theory asserts that the "mass media actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 105). Gamson and Modigliani (1987) define the frame as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them" (p. 376). The use of frames in literature relies upon several specific techniques and aspects of writing to usher the reader toward a particular and calculated understanding of the text. Entman (1993) said that frame construction lies in the keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols and visuals of a narrative. Literature behaves as a focal point within cultural interactions and thoughts, and, as Goffman (1981) writes, "Frames are a central part of a culture and are institutionalized in various ways" (p. 63). Authors who are able to capitalize on the framing-based writing techniques of metaphors, concepts and symbols that Entman asserted are able to construct a series of cultural frames in which to capsulate and present a character throughout the narrative.

Framing theory is most often applied to mass media coverage of news events, though its properties have also been used in limited instances to analyze other types of narratives, such as literature and literary journalism. In considering the position of frames within a narrative, Saliba and Geltner (2012) propose that a dominant frame may arise within the text. This frame competes with other frames within the narrative, eventually overpowering them through frequency and strength. These dominant frames are "plausibly capable of influencing readers' interpretation of specific elements within an event or issue" (Saliba and Geltner, 2012, p. 4). The

prevalence of these powerful frames creates a master narrative, which can act as contextual suggestions that prod the reader toward the meaning they should extract from the narrative (Salibe and Geltner, 2012).

"Frames have several locations, including the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture," according to de Vreese (2005, p. 51), summarizing Entman (1993). Readers encounter the dominant frames in literature through these receptors, which can be modified to function as the author, the text, the reader and the culture. All of these elements contribute to the framing process, which involves frame-building, frame-setting and consequences that occur on the societal and personal level (de Vreese, 2005). The fiction writer acts as builder and setter of these frames in accordance with the cultural and societal frames in which they operate, presenting the text to the reader, who then interprets these frames through her or his own individual and cultural frames. Authors and readers who function within the same culture or society will often have similar base-level frame interpretations stemming from cultural influences and common myth interpretations.

The history of women in the newsroom provides a context for women journalists' position in the novels that portray them. There has been a space for women journalists in literature since their arrival in the newsroom, yet the discourse surrounding their literary presence is limited and often focused on the early to mid- 20th century. More research is needed concerning the existence and significance of newspaperwomen in recent and popular fiction. In addition, there is little research comparing the fictional image of women reporters to the status of non-fictional women in the industry. This knowledge can give us critical insight into the portrayals of fictional women journalists and their link to reality. This study poses a research question that proposes to close the gap in the literature surrounding the frames utilized in the

creation of women journalists in fiction.

- *Research Question*: How are the characters of women journalists constructed and

  portrayed in a selection of popular fiction since 2000?

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Study Parameters

This study evaluated literature from 2000 to 2015, as few research studies interested in analyzing women journalists in narratives have focused on this modern period. It was hoped that targeting this span of time would produce findings that spoke to the types of frames currently present in the creation of the characters of newspaperwomen in popular fiction. This insight would allow for further unpacking of the origins of those frames by comparing the results to previous analyses of women journalists in literature, including those highlighted in the preceding review, as well as with the current status of non-fictional women journalists. This study also took into account the ability of literature to translate commonly held social beliefs into frames within narrative structures.

The study drew on framing theory in conjunction with an inductive, qualitative method as a structure for narratology-based research. Framing theory lent itself to this study as it can be used to decipher how characters are presented and constructed within the structures of literature. The theory provided the opportunity to examine the composition of the frame – and its use as a tool – as well as how a character functions within a given text. Inferences could be drawn from the initial framing of the subject through prevalent, dominant frames to the reader's interpretation of that frame as a master narrative. This type of approach allowed for a thorough exploration of the content involved, as it "requires that the text be read carefully and examined holistically to first discover the frames and master narrative present and then determine the ways they create meaning for readers" (Saliba & Geltner, 2012, p. 9).

Novel Selection

Because there have been many novels written since 2000 that include women journalists as characters, the selection of literature for this study was winnowed down in terms of genre and novel recognition. Fiction, as the chosen genre, will be understood as "a mode of writing in which both author and reader are aware – and knows that the other is aware – that the events transcribed cannot be known to have happened. … Fiction gives an account of something unverifiable, which does not ask to be believed, only to be thought about" (Ashe, 2015, p. 41). All six selected books qualified as fiction, according to their publishers. A criterion sample was used to identify the novels, based on "criterion derived from commonly understood definitions of the case," (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 112). The criterion in this case was identified as a popular work of fiction featuring a female journalist as protagonist. The culled novels were chosen for their popularity, which was determined through awards won by the novels; recognition of the novels on a bestseller list; and prominence of the authors. Preference was given to books that received notable awards – marking them as among the most popular – as well as books that appeared on the New York Times Bestseller list, considered the dominant indicator of what books Americans are reading (Miller, 2000). Books that may not have made the New York Times Bestseller list or received awards were chosen on the qualification of the author as a bestselling author; Jennifer Weiner, a New York Times Bestselling author, serves as an example.

The chosen books did not have to be written by American authors, so long as they depicted a Western character. The books were, incidentally, all written by women authors, which was not a criterion for selection. However, the fact that the books found to be among the most prominent examples of women journalists in recent fiction were all written by women is significant. Although the researcher did not pick the books on the basis of their subgenre, they all

fell into what would generally be considered "Chick Lit." For this study, the definition of Chick Lit comes from Ferriss and Young: "Chick lit features single women in their twenties and thirties 'navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships'" (2013, p. 3, quoting Cabot). The books selected for study adhere to this design, though the characters' ages range outside of 20–30 years old.

An apparent trend in fiction written for a Chick Lit audience is to employ the female protagonist in some kind of media-related job. Lizzie Skurnick poked fun at this in a sarcastic quiz printed in the *Baltimore City Paper* to help readers identify whether they had purchased a Chick Lit book. One of Skurnick's questions asks whether the protagonist works at "a) a woman's magazine, b) a newspaper, c) a TV station, d) any other organization that can be linked, however tenuously, to 'the media'?" (Ferriss & Young, 2013, p. 1). This quip is evidence that literature written by women for women as Chick Lit often features a media-affiliated protagonist. All of the selected books follow this trend by featuring a woman journalist as the protagonist.

The sample was limited to six works of fiction, allowing for a manageable number of books published over the last 15 years to be studied. In order to execute a close, qualitative analysis of each of the novels, six novels provided an adequate and reasonable sample for this study, which ensured reasonable access to the novels and minimized expenses and time expenditures (Pascoe, 2013, p. 9). The novels were found through an online search utilizing "woman journalist" and "fiction" as variables on WorldCat, a conglomerate catalog created from thousands of library book catalogs. All books are qualified as fiction, and no sub-genre was favored. The novels selected for the study are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1.
Novels

Book Title	Author	Genre	Publication Date	Awards or Notability of Author
One Fifth Avenue	Candace Bushnell	Fiction: Chick-Lit	2008	Bestselling author; author awarded 2006 Matrix Award for books
Sharp Objects	Gillian Flynn	Fiction: Mystery Chick Lit	2006	NYT Bestseller
Good in Bed	Jennifer Weiner	Fiction: Chick-Lit	2001	NYT Bestselling Author
Sarah's Key	Tatiana de Rosnay	Fiction: Chick Lit	2007	Bestselling novel
The Last Letter from your Lover	Jojo Moyes	Fiction: Chick Lit	2010	NYT Bestselling Author
The Shining Girls	Lauren Beukes	Fiction: Mystery Chick Lit	2013	August Derleth prize; Strand Critics Choice Award for Best Mystery and for Best Horror; University of Johannesburg Prize

Narrative Analysis

Researchers who analyze text must choose between doing so at a narrative level or a language level. For this study, the selected text was examined based on a long tradition of understanding content through narrative analysis, as "narrative methodologies have become a significant part of the repertoire of the social sciences" (Lieblich, 1998, p. 1). The study of narratives reveals basic opinions within cultures regarding society and human beings which are fictionalized in books (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005). Frames as translators of cultural myths and interpretations must, then, be understood and unpacked at the narrative level, for narratives – as

new literary theory suggests – must be considered within context (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005).

Excluding the narrative from the analysis and focusing solely on the language involved in

composing frames would separate the frames from the narrative context and force them back into

a closed system.

     As Lieblich (1998) notes, "The narrative approach advocates pluralism, relativism, and

subjectivity" (p. 2). These methods will be employed in the analysis of the text included in this

study, couched in the understanding that narrative analyses assume that "there is neither a single,

absolute truth in human reality nor one correct reading or interpretation of a text" (Lieblich,

1998, p. 2). As that is the case, the researcher must remain aware of her own perspective and

biases when conducting narrative analysis and the way those might influence her interpretations,

while relying on a rational and systematic system for interpreting and presenting her findings.

Those biases include the fact that the researcher is a well-educated, white, middle-class, feminist

woman in her twenties, which makes her the target audience of the selected novels.

     In this study, the researcher identified and analyzed the frames evident in each of the

selected novels, engaging in a form of media research that looks for "traces of a socially

constructed reality, which may be understood by considering the words, concepts, ideas, themes

and issues that reside in texts as they are considered within a particular cultural context"

(Brennen, 2013, p. 193). This type of analysis seeks to find meaning and reason behind the ways

that written language aids us in creating our "social realities" (Brennen, 2013). As a researcher,

one must attend to the context in which the text is situated in order to "seek out insights

regarding the historical, cultural and economic relationships that exist between a text and a

specific society at a particular place in time" (Brennen, 2013). In this study, the historical

background will be the initial presence of newspaperwomen in fiction in the 20th century, as the

previous literature review examined; the cultural context will be Western society between 2000 and 2015; and the economic context will be the current climate for professional women, with an emphasis on journalists.

A thorough analysis also calls for an understanding of how the text moves from an author's creation to a reader's consumption, and the effect that has on meaning and understanding. Brennen (2013) notes that there is a dominant meaning in every text, placed there by the author to be discovered by the reader. As Larsen (1991) wrote, text "should not be regarded as a closed, segmented object with determinate, composite meanings, but rather as an indeterminate field of meaning in which intentions and possible effects intersect" (p. 122). The open text, then, cannot be tied to a single, concrete interpretation, but it can be effectively translated into frames according to specific parameters.

The assembled books were read thoroughly, and the content was analyzed for specific sensitizing concepts used in the construction of frames. Referring back to Entman (1991), who stated that "frames are constructed from and embodied in the keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images" of a text, concepts that touch on each of these aspects were analyzed. Examples of these concepts include keywords, images and experiences that connote ambition, confidence, journalistic skill, motivation, professional success and respect relevant to the characters of newspaperwomen, as well as symbols of femininity either supported or subverted through their journalistic careers. Collective concepts such as the "pushy," "abrasive" or "masculine" woman journalist were considered and juxtaposed against those of the "quiet, traditional" woman journalist whose work is reminiscent of the sob sisters. Sensitizing concepts included everything from the character's professional experiences to her romantic relationships

and how she dealt with or was affected by them. The study sought to determine whether the sob sister's legacy lives on in fictional text – or whether it has been relinquished to history.

Comparative and Categorical Analysis

The selected texts were read and their content was categorized by theme. Categories referred to "general phenomena: concepts, constructs, themes," and other groups of similar content (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). As an inductive project, the categories used for the study arose through data analysis, with preliminary research suggesting that they would include such concepts as: appearance, gender traditions, respect in industry, and story assignment. Since the novels covered compiled several hundreds of pages of text, the analysis included the strategic use of data reduction to maintain integrity of the findings. Significant categorized themes were explored and coded, but the research did not require scenes and plotlines irrelevant to the construction of the frames surrounding the woman journalist protagonist to be fully explored. They were referenced for context, but their inclusion in the novel was understood as a propellant of the plot and a way of fleshing out the storyline without having a direct effect on the construction of the protagonist. The content was summarily combed for frame constructions, and dominant frames in each selected text were identified through categorization and coding.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The initial open coding of the six selected texts produced more than 100 themes. These

themes were then organized into categories to produce four overarching themes: *journalistic*

ambitions, newsroom culture and realities, personal traits, and romantic and sexual

relationships. A brief outline of these overarching themes and their subcategories is provided in

Table 2, and each is explained in more detail below.

TABLE 2.
Categories

Core category	Sub-category	Definition
Journalistic ambitions	Writing (working) as escape Success at work Early desire to be a journalist Ladder-climbing Wistful professional dreams	Concepts of professional ambition, success, enthusiasm, goals and hope for advancement in journalism.
Newsroom culture and realities	Justification of occupation Gender of boss Female competition in the newsroom Discussion and use of new media Sob Sister legacy Instances of sexism	Concepts pertaining to the culture of the newsroom, including assignments, competition and presence of sexism or discrimination.
Personal traits	Self-doubt and low self-worth Feminist Confident, aggressive and independent nature Damaged Conventionally attractive	Concepts of personality and physical traits, as well as individual belief systems.
Romantic and sexual relationships	Motherhood Infidelity Strained romantic relationships Discussion of sex	Concepts pertaining to romantic partners and sexual relationships and experiences.

The ages of the women journalists who served as protagonists in the six novels selected for study

covered a wide range, from twentysomethings to octogenarians. They were all actively employed

in the journalism industry throughout the novel and primarily occupied roles as "soft" news reporters. The characters' ages and professional characteristics are outlined in Table 3.

TABLE 3.
Character characteristics

Book	Character	Approximate Age	Position
Good in Bed	Candace Shapiro	28	Gossip Columnist
One Fifth Avenue	Enid Merle	80s	Gossip Columnist
One Fifth Avenue	Mindy Gooch	40s	Culture Writer
Sarah's Key	Julia Jarmond	40s	Features Writer
Sharp Objects	Camille Preaker	30s	General Assignment Reporter
Shining Girls	Kirby Mizrachi	Early 20s	Intern, sports beat
The Last Letter from Your Lover	Ellie Haworth	32	Features Writer

Journalistic Ambitions

The professional ambitions and goals of the seven fictional women journalists appeared as one of the most commonly shared themes among the novels. This theme was identified through instances in which the characters described their professional goals in the journalism industry or appeared in scenes in which their journalistic work absorbed their attention. Consistently, the characters spoke or dreamed about having prestige or success in their field.

Within this overarching theme, five categories were identified: writing (working) as escape, success at work, early desire to be a journalist, ladder-climbing, and wistful professional dreams.

Writing (working) as escape. The concept of being engrossed and absorbed in reporting a story appeared prominently for three characters: Candace Shapiro, Ellie Haworth and Julia Jarmond. The narratives of these characters were strikingly comparable, as all three experienced a transition from discontent or disinterest to satisfaction and enthusiasm with their jobs over the course of the novel. In all three characters, this evolution was spurred by a story that spoke to them, or piqued their interest. Once they discovered the story and began reporting on it, it consumed them and became a form of escape from the rest of their lives. This enthusiasm for journalism was rediscovered after they exited difficult or strained romantic relationships, suggesting that they used their work to escape from their strained romantic lives. Haworth exemplifies this concept of being grounded by a story: "She types swiftly, the words spilling easily from her fingers. For once, she knows exactly what she has to say" (Moyes, 2010, p. 370). Shapiro, too, becomes engrossed by a story: "Writing let me escape" (Weiner, 2002, p. 109).

Success at work. Professional success was addressed by several of the characters, who either were recognized by organizations or institutions as being successful. Mindy Gooch was upheld as an example of professional achievement – "She was honored by women's media organizations" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 29)— while other characters determined themselves to be successful by way of self-evaluation, such as Candace Shapiro—"But I'm good at my job. People respect me. Some of them even fear me" (Weiner, 2002, p. 41)—and Camille Preaker: "Well, I've been doing some more high-profile stories, I've covered three murders just since the beginning of the year" (Flynn, 2006, p. 66). They also found respected journalistic positions and wealth as a form of success, such as Enid Merle: "In the early eighties the column had been

syndicated and Enid had become a wealthy woman" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 19). Versions of

journalistic success ranged throughout the novels but appeared in all seven of the character

narratives, demonstrating that women journalists find success in their field while showing the

different ways that success can be defined.

 Early desire to be a journalist. Harboring journalistic aspirations from a young age also

appeared as a theme throughout the novels. Early traits of journalistic promise, talent and passion

were found in several of the characters' stories. An example comes from Camille Preaker,

complete with budding journalistic skills: "By eleven, I was compulsively writing down

everything anyone said to me in a tiny blue notepad, a mini reporter already" (Flynn, 2008, p.

61). For several of the characters, like Preaker, journalism was always in their future and was not

something they simply happened into. The authors, noting the importance of early tendencies

toward writing, showed that a career in journalism, much like other professions, was something

to strive for. Just like many children dream of growing up to be doctors and lawyers, the young

versions of these characters dreamed of growing up to be reporters, marking the profession as an

admirable career trajectory.

 Ladder-climbing. Overwhelmingly, the seven characters exhibited a desire to climb the

professional ladder. They do so in various ways, from Ellie Haworth's diligent hard work and

determination—"She's at her desk by nine, works till late in the evening" (Moyes, 2010, p.

381)—to Kirby Mizrachi's nefarious tactics: "The axles of corruption are greased with donut

glaze. Or that's what it costs Kirby to get access to files she really doesn't have any good excuse

to be looking at" (Beukes, 2013, p. 81). Ladder-climbing also appears in the form of industry

pioneering, as with Enid Merle:

Enid, who had never married and had a degree in psychology from Columbia

University (making her one of the college's first women to earn one) had taken a

job as a secretary at the New York Star in 1948, and given her fascination with

the antics of humanity, and possessing a sympathetic ear, had worked her way

into the gossip department, eventually securing her own column (Bushnell, 2008,

p. 19).

Enid's independent and career-minded trajectory were instrumental to her success in the

profession. She seemed to climb the most "rungs" of the professional ladder in her career, but

was also the oldest and most established character among the novels. Enid's career, as well as

those of the younger characters, show the women's desire to improve their professional work as

a means to rise through the ranks of their field.

Wistful professional dreams. In the same vein as ladder-climbing, several of the

characters fantasized about prestigious positions at large, respected newspapers and jobs that

took them out of their small newspaper offices and onto airplanes and front pages. Highlighting

this aspiration for respect and prominence is Camille Preaker: "I craved big oak panels, a

window pane in the door – marked chief – so the cub reporters could watch us rage over first

amendment rights. Curry's office is bland and institutional, like the rest of the building. You

could debate journalism or get a pap smear. No one cared" (Flynn, 2008, p. 3). Her frustrated

dismissal of her newspaper office as a place where women could have routine health

appointments or argue over First Amendment rights clearly shows her disappointment in the lack

of prestige in her newsroom. This is at once a take on the reality of most newsrooms and a

remark on her status in the industry.

Newsroom Culture and Realities

The culture of the newsrooms in which each woman reporter operated was predominantly conventional, and all of the women worked at print newspapers. The realities of those newsrooms were categorized into themes, which spoke to the ways the women journalists were treated and interacted with their coworkers, and how they felt toward their editors. Within this overarching theme, six subcategories emerged: justification of occupation, gender of boss, female competition in the newsroom, discussion and use of new media, sob sister legacy, and instances of sexism.

Justification of occupation. A need or impulse to explain or justify their role as a journalist was evident in several of the characters. This indicated that they did not perceive their job as respected and needed to explain themselves and their work. This is shown when Julia Jarmond defensively tells the reader, "It was actually hard work," when describing her position as a reporter at a Paris-based American magazine (Rosnay, 2007, p. 26). The reader cannot challenge Jarmond's position, so for the author to include this justification from the character shows not only a defensive stance toward journalism, but also a latent understanding on the author's part that journalism is undervalued. Also of note is Candace Shapiro's sarcastic, but still genuine, defense of her role as a celebrity gossip columnist: "I cover Hollywood for the *Philadelphia Examiner*. This is not as easy as you'd think, because Hollywood is in California and I, alas, am not. Still, I persist" (Weiner, 2001, p. 51). The need to explain and argue for their significance in the newsroom is indicative of the lower newsroom status of women reporters who write "soft" pieces in the features and gossip departments.

Gender of boss. Largely, the characters' bosses are male, with only two characters working for female editors. This is in line with power structures in non-fictional newsrooms. The

male and female bosses alike are described as weary, tyrannical, stressed and even "horrible." Julia Jarmond's description of her boss serves as an example of the general consensus of a difficult-to-work-for editor, with a hint of sexist conventions: "Joshua was a tyrant. I liked him, but he was a tyrant. He was the kind of boss that had little respect for private lives, marriages and children" (Rosnay, 2007, p. 26). This kind of attitude from their editors was accepted and tolerated by the characters, but instilled in them a sense of frustration. All but one of the characters (Mindy Gooch) respected their bosses, even if they begrudged them their faults.

Female competition in newsroom. Competition between female journalists was a prevalent theme, appearing in four of the storylines. Strikingly, competition was the only type of relationship developed between women reporters in the newsroom. Candace Shapiro experienced the most obvious competition from an aging gossip columnist who feared being usurped and consistently undermined Shapiro: "Gabby grumbled about one-hit wonders and flashes in the pan" (Weiner, 2001, p. 127). Fear of being edged out by younger journalists also played into Julia Jarmond's competitive feelings toward a female reporter in her newsroom: "I could never quite make up my mind whether I liked her or not. She was half my age and already getting paid as much as I was, even if my name was above hers on the masthead" (Rosnay, 2007, p. 27). This kind of side-eyed leeriness and outright aggression between the characters and their female co-workers largely characterized their only newsroom relationships aside from their relationships with their bosses.

Discussion and use of new media. Though all of the characters in the novels work in traditional print newspaper settings, new media was a recurring theme throughout the storylines. The cultures of their newsrooms were largely conventional, and new media served as a dream for some characters and an emerging reality for others. The younger journalists at print papers

lamented the way their newsrooms clung to traditional media, evidenced by Candace Shapiro: "While my peers were writing hip, sarcastic first-person columns for nascent online magazines about being single in the nation's big cities, I was toiling at a little local newspaper – a dinosaur, quivering on the tar pit of extinction in the evolutionary scale of the media" (Weiner, 2001, p. 59). New media also cropped up as a way for the middle-age journalist, Mindy Gooch, to regain relevancy in a changing media landscape: "Mindy's blog had become more and more popular – so popular in fact that she'd even had a meeting with a producer from The View" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 320). The presence of new media in the narratives reflects the current reality of the shifting state of media.

  Sob sister legacy. The legacy of the sentimental "sob sister" style of reporting appeared in four of the seven storylines. The women reporters were accused of being too meek, as in the case of Camille Preaker, who even wonders aloud whether her gender is the root of the issue: "Frank Curry thinks I'm a soft touch. Might be because I'm a woman. Might be because I'm a soft touch" (Flynn, 2008, p. 2). They were also at times pushed toward writing sob sister-style stories, such as when Julia Jarmond tells her husband of the story she was writing, which involved a difficult subject matter, and he replies: "Write about something else. Something funny, something cute. You know how to do that" (Rosany, 2007, p. 51). This type of dismissal toward women tackling more newsworthy pieces appeared throughout the novels. In other instances, it was simply assumed that women would want to write more human-interest and "soft" stories, such as when Kirby Mizrachi's editor tells her: "There's a chance I could get you a real job with the paper. . . . Maybe even in lifestyle, if that's where you wanted to be" (Beukes, 2013, p. 225). This offer comes after Kirby spent months working as a sports intern while conducting her own criminal reporting on the side. Not once in the novel did she hint at or imply

an interest in writing for the lifestyle beat, yet her editor simply assumes that is where she would want to work if given the option. These instances of being pushed toward "soft" and emotional stories contribute to the legacy of the sob sisters, in which women reporters are expected to write with a certain sentimentality.

Instances of sexism. Sexism in the newsroom appeared in several of the novels, from blatant harassment to professional discrimination. Candace Shapiro recounts being harassed by a male coworker during one of her internships, "… All the while trying to avoid the gin breath and wandering hands of the nation's preeminent gun rights activist, whose office was right next to the shelves, and whose favorite summer hobby seemed to be accidentally on purpose brushing against the sides of my breasts when my arms were loaded down with binders" (Weiner, 2001, p. 172). This story was recounted as if it was to be expected, though she expressed annoyance at the encounter. Then there was Julia Jarmond's sexist boss, who disregarded the realities of working and having a family: "If somebody got pregnant, she was a nonentity. If somebody had a sick child, she was glared at" (Rosnay, 2007, p. 26). These experiences highlight issues of sexism in the newsroom, which interferes with the professional culture.

Personal Traits

Across the six novels, there were several shared traits found in the composition of the characters' identities and behavior. Strikingly, the characters shared a feminist perspective, but also were often described as having a low sense of self-worth. These themes were derived from scenes in which the characters described themselves or their feelings, as well as in moments in which they reacted to others. Their physical descriptions were also included. In this overarching theme, five subcategories emerged: self-doubt/low self-worth; feminism; a confident, aggressive and independent nature; damaged; and conventionally attractive.

Self-doubt/low self-worth. The majority of the characters appeared to harbor a low sense of self-worth and often doubted their abilities. Julia Jarmond constantly degraded herself and her French language skills, always considering herself an outsider: "I felt like my French still wasn't any good after living here all these years" (Rosnay, 2007, p. 5). Julia was married to a French man, had a child whom she raised in France and spoke in French throughout most of her day – yet she still doubted her abilities. Camille Preaker put little value in her own opinions—"I was never really on my side in any argument" (Flynn, 2006, p. 173)—and Kirby Mizrachi felt she was always out of control, describing herself as "a train-wreck" (Beukes, 2013, p. 285). Camille and Kirby were praised for their work, yet they never felt as if they were doing it correctly or succeeding at their job. While these characters' self-doubt was linked to their capabilities and skills, Candace Shapiro's low self-worth came from her self-consciousness about her appearance: "Drunk. Fat. Alone. Unloved. And, worst of all, a cliché. Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones put together, which was probably about how much I weighed" (Weiner, 2001, p. 19). Candace's body issues appear consistently throughout the novel. She refers most situations back to them, couching her experiences in how she looks. These descriptions of low self-worth lent themselves to character identities riddled with self-consciousness.

Feminism. In this context, feminist values are defined as a recognition of the shared interests of women, acknowledgment of women's lack of power, and a perception that gender differences are illegitimate (Aronson, p. 904). The majority of the characters studied expressed feminist ideals and beliefs through their actions and internal dialogues or were classified as feminist by strangers, such as Camille Preaker: "Don't let feminists – here she looked at me – make you feel guilty for having what they can't have" (Flynn, 2006, p. 131). Julia Jarmond upset her conventional French in-laws when she kept her last name after marrying: "When I had made

it clear that despite being Bertrand's wife, I was still to be called Julia Jarmond, I was greeted with surprised silence" (Rosnay, 2007, p. 94). Then, there were characters who used their position as journalists as a platform from which to address feminist issues and ideas, such as Mindy Gooch: "She'd received 872 emails congratulating her on her courage in addressing topics that were off-limits. Such as whether a woman really needed her husband after he had given her children" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 222). In these ways, the women reporters in the novels exhibited alliance with an overall belief system that was decidedly feminist.

Confident, aggressive and independent nature. The personalities of the seven fictional women journalists studied were overwhelmingly confident, aggressive and independent, despite their issues with low self-esteem. The characters exhibited these traits primarily while on assignment and occasionally in their personal relationships. Ellie Haworth prioritized her career over marriage and children, living an independent, single lifestyle: "Unlike her two best friends, Ellie has never lived with a man. Until she was thirty she had assigned marriageandchildren – it was always one word – to the folder of things she would do later in life, long after she had established her career, along with drinking sensibly and taking out a pension" (Moyes, 2010, p. 283). Their career-first mindset occasionally affects their romantic relationships, as shown by Ellie Haworth as well as Mindy Gooch: "I was working, James. Making money. It was my job" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 115). This statement comes after Mindy's husband complains about their lack of intimacy across the timeline of their marriage. Accompanying this independence was confident and aggressive behavior, particularly when it came to work. Camille Preaker exemplified this when she retorted to a policeman, "Reporters have to be more aggressive when the police completely shut them out of an investigation" (Flynn, 2007, p. 53). Camille balanced the most damaged persona in the novels with one of the most confident and abrasive reporting

styles. The independent and confident traits demonstrated by the characters align neatly with the feminist values espoused by the majority of the characters.

Damaged. Several of the character's storylines centered on them being "damaged." This came in forms of depression, self-destructive behaviors, alcoholism, miscarriages, and, in one instance, a brush with death. Camille Preaker's character laid the damage on thick, as she was both an alcoholic and a cutter: "Most of the time I'm awake, I want to cut;" "I drank more vodka. There was nothing I wanted to do more than be unconscious again" (Flynn, 2007, p. 63 & 41). Her storyline is centered on her self-destructive behaviors, which consistently shape her actions. Nearly being murdered defined the storyline of Kirby Mizrachi, who was constantly treated with care and awe over her violent history. Once, she was even fetishized because of the experience: "She's unwinding her scarf to reveal the raw ridge across her throat where the maniac cut her, nicking the carotid, but not severing it;" "He traces [her scars] with his fingers. 'It's beautiful. You're beautiful, I mean'" (Beukes, 2013, p. 70 & 173). This moment exemplified the allure of being a "damaged" woman, which appeared in less obviously fetishized forms across all the novels. These storylines obscured the characters' confidence and served as a way of letting the reader into a more personal, vulnerable space of the characters.

Conventionally attractive. The physical appearance of the characters was described as attractive in typical terms across the novels. None of the characters was described as incredibly attractive or unattractive, but all registered as obviously good looking. Ellie Haworth was described as having "obedient hair, a body that is basically plump and slender in the right places, and is pretty enough to attract attention that she still pretends to offend her" (Moyes, 2010, p. 252), while Camille Preaker "became, quite suddenly, unmistakably beautiful," as a teenager (Flynn, 2006, p. 122). The middle-aged characters Julia Jarmond and Mindy Gooch are

described as still attractive for their age: "I glanced in the mirror on my left. My eyes seemed wider and bluer than usual, my skin glowed. Pretty damn good for a middle-aged pregnant female" (Rosnay, 2007, p. 103); "With her sleek, highlighted bob and her plain but attractive face, Mindy was trotted out at corporate events" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 29). Their physical appearance played a small role in their journalistic careers. Gooch was the only character whose appearance was expressly "used" by her newspaper.

Romantic and Sexual Relationships

An important aspect of the character construction throughout the six novels was the women's romantic and sexual relationships. All but one of the characters experienced strained romantic relationships, which often involved infidelity, and sexual experiences were discussed in all of the novels. These relationships often molded character development, such as when characters rediscovered their worth after exiting a difficult relationship. Within this overarching theme, four subcategories emerged: motherhood, infidelity, strained romantic relationships, and discussions of sex.

Motherhood. Three of the seven characters were mothers or became mothers by the end of the novels. The other four characters expressed either no interest in motherhood or a distinct distaste for the idea of motherhood, such as Kirby Mizrachi, who responds to the idea of having kids as "not very likely" (Beukes, 2013, p. 301). Enid Merle also eschewed the role of mother, putting her career first, for which she is criticized and praised for in the same breath: "You never married, never had children. Most women would have killed themselves. But not you. You go on and on" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 96). The contrast of Enid's choices being admirable and a downfall exemplifies the idea that these women reporters should be striving to "have it all" – both motherhood and a career. Enid chose simply to have a career, and therefore does not "have it all"

in the commenters' view. Julia Jarmond, on the other hand, leaves her husband to carry out a pregnancy that he was against, a move which defines her storyline. Candace Shapiro becomes unexpectedly pregnant by her ex-boyfriend, whose column about their sex life propels her storyline, and, in a twist that defines the rest of her character arc, keeps the baby.

Strained romantic relationships. Six of the seven women experience strained romantic relationships, which serve to define their characters' journeys. From Ellie Haworth's long-term, dead-end affair, to Kirby Mizrachi's difficulty in forming relationships—"She should know better by now than to try and connect with people" (Beukes, 2013, p. 119)—the characters experience a range of heartbreak and longing. Growing apart from husbands and lovers also contributes to the strained relationships, as with Julia Jarmond: "I wondered if I still cared about what Bertrand thought, about what Bertrand felt?" (Rosnay, 2007, p. 186). This reliance on relationships with men as a plotline extended the stereotype that women must be romantically involved to be interesting in a novel, and that their relationships could define their stories.

Discussions of sex. Every novel included some form and discussion of sex, both in relation to the character's romantic relationships and outside of it. Sex often served as an equalizer, as with Julia Jarmond: "In bed was probably the only place Bertrand and I truly communicated, the only place where nobody dominated the other" (Rosnay, 2007, p. 42). It also served as a salve for Camille Preaker and as a form of manipulation for Kirby Mizrachi. Lack of intimacy also appeared in several of the strained relationships, including Mindy Gooch's: "She and James didn't do it enough. In fact, they didn't do it at all" (Bushnell, 2008, p. 108). The presence of sex throughout the novels worked to support or degrade the characters' relationships, as well as to propel their personal narratives.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

The four overarching themes, which emerged during data analysis, come together to create the master narratives of the six novels. In response to the research question – How are the characters of women journalists constructed and portrayed in a selection of popular fiction since 2000? – the researcher argues that the four overarching themes unite to create a framework composed of: 1) a positive professional portrait of the woman journalist, 2) a realistic newsroom, and 3) a relatable and endearing character. The texts, despite featuring different plotlines, all adhere to this similar framework in which the journalistic ambitions of an often damaged, but lovely, journalist are played out in a masculine newsroom culture rife with female competition – all while the journalist negotiates her unfulfilling romantic relationships. The ways these three concepts come together to build this frame are discussed individually below.

A positive professional portrait of the woman journalist. A successful professional career in journalism is, at some point, the main ambition of every woman reporter in the six novels studied. In the theme of *journalistic ambition*, several subcategories contributed to the frame of a positively perceived woman journalist, determined through her own self-perceptions and those of her editor and peers. The women journalists all harbor dreams of "making it big" in journalism, and often daydream about prestigious futures in the profession, shown in the subcategory of *wistful professional dreams*. Notably, the majority of the characters who harbor this wistfulness are young, while the two older characters, Mindy Gooch and Enid Merle, have already established their careers and achieved moderate success – Enid has a syndicated column and Mindy finds a way to remain relevant through publishing a popular blog. The fact that four of the six characters have not yet achieved similar success and instead dream wistfully of achieving

respect in their field can be interpreted as a factor of their collectively younger age – and not bias due to their gender.

All of the women achieved some sort of professional success, whether it was moving from small-town dailies to large city papers, such as Candace Shapiro's character, or from newsroom secretary to syndicated columnist, like Enid Merle. Often, the characters used their jobs as a way to escape from their complicated personal lives, throwing themselves into the stories and finding things out about themselves through their work, as noted in the subcategory *writing (working) as escape*. In this way, journalism was not only a profession, but a calling, particularly for those characters who always knew they wanted to grow up and become journalists, such as Camille Preaker, noted in textual excerpts as the *early desire to be a journalist* subcategory. Journalism served as an outlet for many of the characters and was used by the authors to explore the women's personalities, including their insecurities and flaws. Ellie Haworth, for example, found herself failing at her job until she unearthed a story that "spoke" to her, reigniting her interest in her career as well as teaching her to respect and value her own strengths (something she is failing to do when the reader first meets her). The use of journalism as a profession and as a way to dive into the emotions of the character appeared to be a tool for the authors, who often overlapped the character's personal issues with their professional work.

Together, personal fulfillment and industry success contribute to a positive image of women in journalism across the six books. The stories use the same master narratives to construct a frame through which the text portrays the seven women reporters in a positive light when it comes to their journalism. This includes similar concepts of the importance of writing/working in the protagonists' lives, and the significance of a single story to the journalists.

The journalistic drive and ambition of these characters is a shining thread throughout the knitted plotlines of their stories.

   A realistic newsroom. The newsrooms described in the novels were largely reflective of the realities of non-fictional newsrooms. Five of the seven characters wrote on traditional "women's topics" such as gossip and lifestyle, while Camille Preaker and Kirby Mizrachi were described as general assignment reporters, who mostly covered crime, and a sports intern, respectively. The heavy alignment with "women's issues" is in line with what actual women journalists report on. The Women's Media Center reported that in 2014, women produced 45 percent of lifestyle news and 42 percent of culture news, while they only produced 32 percent of criminal justice news (2015, p. 12). This also encourages the legacy of the sob sisters, suggesting that women should be writing "softer" news pieces, which were the historical forte of the emotional sob sisters. There are specific instances in the novels when the women reporters are encouraged by editors, husbands and friends to write softer, more feminine stories, effectively telling the women to carry on the sob sister tradition.

   All but two characters worked for male bosses, which is in accordance with the current statistics on who holds the power in newsrooms. Studies have shown that women's presence in media is still much smaller than that of men, and that men traditionally hold authoritative roles in the newsroom (2014, de Bruin, p. 51). That the characters overwhelmingly work for male editors is typical of a non-fictional newsroom. Since men constitute the majority of the senior editorial positions in non-fictional newsrooms, Gallagher proposed that male attitudes are an obstacle to the career development of women journalists (2001, p. 63).

   A common theme among the novels was also competition between the women journalists. In fact, these were the only newsroom relationships described aside from a

character's relationship with her editor. It stands to reason that the women journalists see each other as competition because there is only perceived space for a certain number of women in the newsroom. As Gallagher says, "It is as if one woman at the top is as much as the system can absorb without being thrown into a paroxysm of professional anguish about the potential effects—on status, salaries, self-esteem—of 'feminization,'" (2001, p. 63). It is reported, however, that "adding and promoting more women fails to change the dominant masculine culture" (Elmore, 2009, p. 233). This is because of the male construction of newsroom values and standards, which inherently exclude women (Elmore, 2009, p. 233).

Women journalists assess their performance in the newsroom and "see their ability to meet male standards, disguised as journalistic values, as the primary gauge for their job" (Hardin & Shain, 2006, p. 335). The women characters, it can be concluded, are in competition because they are trying to distance themselves from their peers' feminine traits. Also, since the women report on similar beats, it is understandable that there would be heightened competition among them. It is discouraging, however, to see that they did not consider the male journalists as competition, from which it can be inferred that they may not have considered the men fully their peers. Also discouraging was the presence of sexism in the newsroom, either from the characters' editors or other male colleagues. This, discouragingly, is a reflection of the actual experience of women journalists in the newsroom, as Carolyn Weaver found that between 40 and 60 percent of female journalists experienced sexual harassment at work (1992).

The presence and use of new media throughout the novels was indicative of the realities of the changing media landscape. All of the novels accurately portrayed the shift in journalism from traditional print to new-media ventures, either by allowing the characters to engage in new media practices, such as blogs, or by having the characters aspire to use new media methods.

This follows closely the current reality of the newsroom, which is slowly incorporating more and more online-only news and online subscription services. Overall, the climate of the newsrooms in the novels reflected the documented realities of the non-fictional newsroom, suggesting that the authors meant to portray a conceivable plot.

A relatable and endearing character. All of the characters in the novels were portrayed as approachable and charming to the reader. The characters were never put on a pedestal or treated as "perfect" representations of what it is to be women; rather they grappled with common issues. The majority of the women dealt with low self-doubt and self-worth, had difficult relationships and expressed modern feminist ideals while being described as conventionally attractive. Though the authors created characters that were at times a bit fantastical, they often used relatable traits to knock down their protagonists. For example, the beautiful journalist Julia Jarmond, who lives in a gorgeous Paris apartment with her French husband, struggles with issues surrounding motherhood and discovers her husband to be unfaithful. While most aspects of the character's life would be foreign to an American reader (the French apartment, the European lifestyle), her struggles with motherhood and infidelity make her an empathetic character.

The authors construct a blended character that embodies desirable traits, such as beauty and confidence, alongside sympathetic traits, such as self-consciousness and a sense of being damaged. None of the characters escape being represented as somehow damaged – they have had miscarriages, indulge in self-destructive behaviors like alcoholism and cutting or had a brush with death, and they all had failed relationships and issues with sex. This portrait of the damaged woman served as a way to make the character identifiable and aided in their plot arcs. Most of the women either overcame their damage or moved beyond it by the end of the novels. Their emotional baggage was used to provide conflict to their storylines while also constructing a more

complex character identity. It could be argued that the not-quite-perfect image of the women journalists served to further draw in the reader by allowing them to relate to the characters. It also operated to make the novels more pragmatic, which aids the researcher's argument that the books mean to portray a realistic woman journalist.

Conclusion

The results of this qualitative study are represented by the findings that women journalists are portrayed through the frames of a semi-positive professional portrait, a realistic newsroom and as relatable and endearing characters. The researcher contends that these three themes were used as frames for the narratives of the women journalists in an effort to reflect the realities of the modern newsroom. The authors used literature as a medium to tell the stories of women reporters who are sympathetic to their realistic counterparts in a multitude of ways. The characters are relatable and successful, yet the overall narratives suggest that the women will always be marginalized by the state of the newsroom, contributing to a semi-positive representation. While the stories are fictional, the frames through which they are constructed parallel the actual status of women in journalism, and are meant to be realistic to the readers.

The novels draw on current belief and value structures, most notably feminism, to create the characters. It could be argued, however, that the novels are both feminist and antifeminist. On the one hand, the women portrayed are strong, successful and openly align themselves with feminist notions, such as a career-first mindset. On the other hand, the characters are forced to uphold antifeminist stereotypes, such as the novels' lack of self-awareness of the effects of the characters' reliance on male relationships to define them. The novels, in an antifeminist vein, do not challenge patriarchal institutions, though they are acknowledged. The main human experience shown in the six novels relies on common antifeminist stereotypes found in Chick

Lit. These characters "face and cope with the impact of glossy magazines, consumerism, and the almost unavoidable obsession with body and body weight, which goes clearly against major feminist achievements of the 1970s" (Sellei, 2013, p. 178). This strange combination of modern feminist belief structures instilled in the characters, coupled with their inability to face or challenge patriarchal structures, contributes to a disparity between the characters' feminist behaviors and the authors' antifeminist storylines.

The books' publishers contribute to furthering antifeminist stereotypes about women through the books' marketing. Four of the books have pink on their covers. A fifth book features feminine themes, with a little girl in a frothy white dress walking away from the viewer in a European scene, while the sixth is decidedly androgynous, with a black background and a razor blade on the cover. The five books with "girly" covers adhere to the marketing tactics used by publishers for identifying Chick Lit books, which are "often brightly colored and feature such images of modern 'chick-ness' as lipstick, purses, cocktail glasses, and stiletto-heeled shoes" (Mabry, 2013, p. 194). These modern images of "chick-ness" appear on the covers of two of the books and are implied in the novels' titles – specifically, *Good in Bed* and *The Last Letter from Your Lover*. By choosing to decorate the books with feminine colors and images, the publishers are pushing the idea of the "hip, young protagonist within the covers with whom the reader is meant to identify" (Mabry, 2013, p. 194). Adorning the books with titles that allude to sexuality and romance only further the stereotyped marketing technique that pigeonholes the characters before the reader even cracks open the cover.

Notably, fans of Chick Lit fiction "claim that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women" (Ferriss & Young, 2013 p. 2), upholding the researcher's argument that literature can be considered a reflection of the current state of reality and

compounding the impact of the marketing techniques used by publishers. If authors wish to combat these marketing stereotypes, which have the power to negatively impact the ideas about women journalists that young women readers create, they should push to have their books represented in a less stereotypically feminine way. The overuse of pink and disembodied parts (the better for which the reader to project herself onto the character) on the cover of Chick Lit books only serve to undermine the messages of the novels. Authors may also take a stab at creating more self-awareness in the text of the institutions of patriarchy, which limit their characters in many ways.

This study offers two significant contributions to the limited existing literature on women journalists in fiction. First, with no known exceptions, this is the first qualitative study to examine women journalist protagonists in fiction published within the last 16 years. The themes and frames identified in this study are ideal for future studies to use as a model for comparing findings. This study also offers a design on which future qualitative studies on the construction of women journalists in fiction can be based.

Second, this study contributes knowledge of the situation of women journalists in fiction. Women characters identified as journalists and protagonists in the novels are, according to the findings, constructed to portray and adhere to the realities of women journalists in non-fictional settings. This is demonstrated by their exposure to sexism, the male-dominated composition of their newsrooms and their roles that follow the tradition of the "sob sisters" in the newsroom. The study provides an understanding of the character construction of the reporters and the framing techniques utilized by women authors when writing about women journalists. The findings suggest that the overall construction of women journalists in the studied fiction

contributes to a semi-successful image of newspaperwomen who continue to face marginalization in the newsroom.

The study was limited by the size of the sample, which could be expanded to discover whether these themes are apparent in other novels featuring women journalists. The study was also limited by the use of novels exclusively written by women. If books with women journalist protagonists written by male authors were to be included in a similar study, different findings may arise, prompting discussions and analysis of the way women and men authors portray women journalists in fiction. There are several opportunities for future studies to expand on these findings and further explore the representation of the human experience of women journalists in fiction.

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