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Marian Keyes' *This Charming Man*: An Alcoholic Love Story

Maria Butler

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Abstract: Marian Keyes' This Charming Man (2008), marketed as a "chick lit" novel, is a multi-person narrative told from the perspectives of four women: Lola, Alicia, and twins Grace and Marnie. Despite its colourful packaging and nod to chick lit tropes, its primary themes concern addiction, domestic violence, and violence against women. This paper analyses how Keyes' depiction of alcoholic Marnie's descent into active addiction and her early steps towards recovery can be read as an unconventional love triangle between an alcoholic, alcohol, and AA. I argue this by demonstrating how Keyes subverts romance tropes to reframe Marnie's alcoholism as an abusive relationship between herself and alcohol and suggesting that Keyes' casts AA as Marnie's romantic endgame. In doing so, I propose that the promise of a Happily-Ever-After indicated by Keyes' integration of romance tropes and her chick lit genre positioning creates a fantasy space whereby Marnie's alcoholism will be cured by the end of the novel. This, in turn, enables a form of reparative reading which helps readers to reconcile the negative affects of fear, disgust, and shame elicited by addiction, thereby facilitating a compassion-based approach towards those caught in its crosshairs.

About the Author: Maria Butler is a postdoctoral researcher on the Research Ireland Insight Centre for Data Analytics project, Gender, Culture, and Data at University College Dublin, Ireland. She is due to start her next project *The Irish for Bestseller: the socio-historical impact of Poolbeg's female authors 1990-1999* in Maynooth University in September 2026. Her first monograph *Marian Keyes and the Politics of Commercial Fiction* will be release by UCD Press in the same month.

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Marian Keyes' ninth novel, *This Charming Man* (2008) is a multi-person narrative told from the perspectives of four women, Lola, Alicia, and twins Grace and Marnie, who have

intimate relationships with politician and domestic abuser Paddy de Courcy. Set in Ireland on the cusp of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, the novel accompanies these women in the months following Paddy's engagement to Alicia. Although its primary themes centre domestic violence and violence against women, *This Charming Man* also features Keyes' bleakest overall representation of addiction via Marnie's descent into active alcoholism and tentative steps towards recovery.

Following on from *Lucy Sullivan Is Getting Married* (1996), and *Rachel's Holiday* (1997), *This Charming Man* is Keyes' third novel with a prominent addiction storyline. Whilst reinforcing the previous texts' messages that addicts come in many shapes, sizes, and genders, and that recovery is only possible once you accept that you have a problem, its depiction of active addiction is more immediate and visceral than those found in Keyes' earlier work. Moreover, juxtaposing Marnie's alcoholism within a wider narrative of violence against women, which encompasses domestic violence, human trafficking, and failing health systems, parallels the violence inflicted by Marnie's addiction. This article is most interested in Marnie's alcoholism, although I do touch briefly upon some of the violence endured by the women of *This Charming Man*. I propose that Marnie's storyline depicting her alcoholism and early steps towards recovery is socially activist. This is because its position within a chick lit novel allows readers to reconcile their negative emotions towards addicts and addiction in a safe fictional environment wherein strong negative affects can be tempered by the genre requirements for humour and a happy ending. Furthermore, Keyes' use of romance conventions to convey Marnie's addiction and recovery invites readers to move away from public narratives emphasising AA's sexist history (McClellan 80), adherence to religious dogma (McClellan 90), and "cult" status (Graham 75) to view the organisation in a more positive light.

Alcohol, Ireland, postfeminism and chick lit

Keyes' Irishness, gender, and own alcoholism inform her depiction of addiction in *This Charming Man*. On a societal level, alcohol consumption has long been widely understood as a cornerstone of the Irish love of the "craic."[1] However, the Irish relationship with alcohol is a complex one. Ireland is an island of extremes in terms of alcohol consumption. The 2021 report *Alcohol Consumption, Alcohol-related Harm and Alcohol Policy in Ireland* found that one in four Irish adults abstains from alcohol consumption, but more than half of Irish drinkers are categorised as "hazardous drinkers" according to the World Health Organisation's criteria (O'Dwyer et al. 2-3). This duality predates Ireland's independence and continued throughout the twentieth century, when Ireland had a high population of Pioneers (Ferriter 360).[2] Despite the significant number of teetotallers in Ireland lowering the median volume of alcohol consumption per person, the disproven theory that the Irish are more susceptible to alcoholism than other populations gained traction throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Ferriter 352; Mauger 71). Not only did alcohol help shape Irish identity, but a propensity for alcohol consumption was touted as a national trait (Mauger 71).

Alcohol consumption increased drastically in the early years of the Celtic Tiger (Ferriter 366). One of the many reasons attributed to this rise was increased levels of alcohol consumption amongst (often young) women, who adopted "a form of drinking involving very large quantities of alcohol and getting excessively drunk, which is associated with male

values and identities (and Irishness)" (Connolly 1256–7). This was in marked contrast to female drinking patterns throughout most of twentieth-century Ireland. Early moral and political leaders of the Irish Free State regarded women as "both more vulnerable to excess and their abuse of alcohol more transgressive than that of their male counterparts" (Ferriter 356). This attitude placed the expectation on women to remain sober, morally and sexually pure, and, most importantly, in the home. Social norms also precluded most women from frequenting pubs during the early decades of Irish independence, and for that reason it is rare to find women depicted in pubs in the literature and film from that period.

Even though the presence of women in pubs in Ireland became more accepted by the 1960s, they were often confined to the female-only snugs (sectioned-off areas with separate access to the bar and a door or curtain distancing them from the rest of the establishment). This physical boundary between men and women continued to shroud female alcohol consumption throughout the mid-twentieth century. By the time that women were freely allowed on licenced premises, the legacy of the pub as a male space and the cultural focus of male drinking throughout the identity-forming decades of Irish culture was imprinted on the national consciousness. This legacy divided cultural attitudes towards drinking along gender lines—alcohol consumption was a legitimate pursuit for men but a shameful pastime for many women.

Similar patterns can be observed internationally. At the beginning of the twentieth century, public drinking establishments were the domain of men, whereas women drank at home (Day et al. 167). Indeed, women were often unwelcome in pubs "well into the 1980s" (Gutzke 92). The increased visibility of women's drinking throughout the twentieth century prompted reoccurring moral panics, "clearly establishing for the first time that new women's behaviour aroused recurring anxieties and fears that fostered powerful societal pressures to reassert male control" (10). On a cultural level, women's excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs was often interpreted as "embodied protests against the patriarchal structures that deny, suppress and shame female desire" (Mitchell 260). Writing in the 1990s, social scientists Laura Schmidt and Constance Weisner categorise this association between alcohol, drug use, pleasure, and female emancipation as "wet feminism" (McClellan 22). Wet feminism's rebellion was central to the representations of women drinking that became associated with chick lit, which was the dominant form of women's popular fiction at the turn of the millennium.

The late 1990s saw a large increase in wine and alcopop consumption across the UK and America (Gately, ch. 36). The predominantly female consumers of these products were identified as "[p]rioritising careers and boyfriends over marriage, motherhood and domesticity" (Jackson and Tinkler 257). These young female alcohol consumers were the same demographic as those identifying with the young urban singletons in commercial women's fiction—particularly those found in chick lit. Indeed, the two occasionally converged in public discourse, as when author Beryl Bainbridge referred to chick lit as "a froth sort of a thing about girls falling over drunk" (qtd. in Colgan). However, as evidenced by Jenny Colgan's 2004 definition of chick lit as "a description of any book written by a woman under fifty that is unreadable by a male," the generic label is broad, encompassing a range of literary output of varying quality. Similarly, the increase in women's alcohol consumption covered a wide spectrum of women who all followed different drinking patterns.

Written during the final years of the Irish Celtic Tiger, Marnie's storyline in *This Charming Man* acts as an antidote to the prominent cultural discourses linking alcohol consumption with postfeminist freedoms, which Angela McRobbie defines as the veneer of freedom and choice presented to women (often through the medium of popular culture) which undermines the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s (11). According to McRobbie, postfeminism "seems to mean gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements, in this case sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent" (12). The inclusion of drinking in McRobbie's description of postfeminism shows how alcohol consumption became central to popular culture's formulation of independent womanhood at the turn of the millennium. In the Irish context, female hedonism became a way for some women to defy the domestically constructed role of women that prevailed throughout the twentieth century.

Keyes' alcoholism and recovery

Marian Keyes is a high-profile, personality-driven author whose digital fan interactions have supplemented her frequent print and television interviews (most notably in Ireland and the UK) since the introduction of her digital fan newsletter in the mid-2000s. Writing at a time when women were both told they could have it all and judged for failing to meet the culturally prescribed expectations of womanhood, Keyes' branding is characterised by her openness about her personal struggles, including her disclosure of her status as an addict. For example, early newspaper interviews ran with the headlines "Writing Herself Out of Alcoholism" and "I was a hopeless alcoholic but this loving, caring friend saved me from a life of hell and simply swept me off my feet" (Dening; Beattie). This openness is significant when viewed in the broader postfeminist cultural context. Consider that *This Charming Man* was published after years of sensationalised media reports about the dangers of women drinking alcohol to excess, a narrative that contrasted with the idealised versions of urban womanhood proffered by *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City*, wherein alcohol facilitates romance, friendship, and a sense of adventure. This polarisation, found in many of the places where second-wave feminism had gained ground, effaced female alcoholics from wider cultural discourse by categorising all women as either problem drinkers or (post)feminists. This dichotomy could be due to the postfeminist prioritisation of "female individualisation" whereby young women "dis-embedded from communities where gender roles were fixed" and were "increasingly called upon to invent their own structures" (McRobbie 19). Dis-embedding from these communities afforded women the freedom to choose to "drink like men" (Gately, ch. 37). Nevertheless, the apparatus and communities which subjugated women remained, therefore, women continued to be held to many of the moral standards which had governed previous generations—including those relating to alcohol consumption.

Keyes' early media appearances spotlight her experience in overcoming addiction. This positioning helped Keyes to educate readers about substance addiction without moralising about women's embrace of illicit substances to assert gender equality. By grounding her addiction narratives in her own history of alcoholism, Keyes was able to remove herself from the conflict between feminism, postfeminism, and traditional female roles which dominated turn-of-the-millennium popular culture. This placed Keyes in a unique position to write characters who, like her, negotiated addiction against a backdrop of rapidly changing, and widely contested, gender roles. Consequently, she was potentially able

to reach a section of society that did not want to be patronised about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. Once reached, Keyes could invite her readers to reappraise their understanding of addiction and addicts rather than reinforcing the culturally dominant, negative addiction narratives.

Twelve-step programs are one of the trappings of addiction which Keyes invites her readers to reconsider. Many of her readers would recognize the name, if not the detailed internal operations, of twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), in part from their fictionalized representations in film and television. The dramatic nature of these representations, as the anthropologist Laura Mary Graham argues, has associated twelve-step programs with misery and confrontation (77). Thus, AA is "frequently misunderstood" thanks to "opinions [that] are not necessarily well informed" (Graham 77). As an organisation, Alcoholics Anonymous is a nonprofit voluntary fellowship founded in America in the 1930s. As of 2021, it has an estimated global membership of nearly two million (Alcoholics Anonymous). All members follow the same core tenets: Membership is open to anyone who wants to stop being controlled by alcohol, and members are strongly encouraged to adhere to the Twelve Steps, which include admitting their powerlessness over alcohol, giving themselves over to a higher power, and making amends for their misdeeds. However, the specifics of AA meetings vary across different geographic regions (Makela 3). These variances can include different policies about court-mandated AA, at what point in recovery members should start doing their "steps," and the distribution of sober "chips" which mark how long an individual has been sober. Many cultural representations of AA originate in the US, meaning they are often based on the American style of meetings. The program's opponents criticise the Twelve Steps' reliance on a higher power (God) and the inherent misogyny present in its foundational publications, *Alcoholics Anonymous (The Big Book)* (1939) and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (1952). For example, in *The Big Book*, out of the twenty-nine testimonials published in the first edition, there are only two told from a woman's perspective—one from a female alcoholic and one from the wife of an alcoholic. This misogyny is reflected in AA's other early publications, such as a 1946 magazine article which outlined women as demanding attention, too talkative, too controlling, and warned that their feelings are too easily hurt (White 159). Likewise, the centrality of a higher power to twelve-step teachings has always been controversial. Indeed, the "We Agnostics" chapter in *The Big Book* seeks to mitigate the fears of non-religious individuals by explaining, "[w]hen, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God" (W. 49). Yet, many people still recognise the terms *God* and *higher power* to signify organised religion. Thus, AA can be associated with misery, confrontation, misogyny, and regressive religious beliefs—all of which form barriers to entry for those who might benefit from participating in the program.

Keyes is a member of AA (Ryan), but she rarely mentions or discusses her involvement with the program in public forums—likely owing to the requirement for "personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and film" set forth in AA's guiding principles (Alcoholics Anonymous Ireland). For this reason, AA does not feature prominently in Keyes' public persona. However, twelve-step meetings and teachings appear frequently in her fictional addiction narratives; therefore, they form a component of her authorial mandate (which, according to Loren Glass, is the melding of author, narrator, and protagonist) by permitting Keyes' fans to conflate her experiences with those of her characters (Glass 42). Since becoming sober, Keyes has lived in both Ireland and England, meaning that her

depictions of the program likely promote a combination of Irish and English practices, which can differ from the popular culture representations of American groups. Although Keyes does not publicise her AA membership, nor does she hide it. Thus, she has posted about chairing meetings on her now-defunct Twitter account, but she does not mention the organisation in published or recorded interviews. Keyes' previous addiction narratives, *Lucy Sullivan Is Getting Married* and *Rachel's Holiday*, propose that twelve-step programs offer the best defence against addiction: "The only thing that sometimes seems to work is AA" (*Lucy Sullivan* 538). These novels adhere to the traditional cultural portrayal of twelve-step meetings whereby the protagonists engage with twelve-step teachings to gradually accept the role that addiction plays in their lives. These previous works function as activism through education thanks to Keyes' didactic treatment of AA and its related organisations, whereby she promotes twelve-step programs as an effective path to recovery provided one adheres to the program.

That both Marnie and *Rachel's Holiday*'s Rachel share character traits and histories belonging to Keyes as per her non-fiction account of her alcoholism, "The Pissed is Is a Foreign Country, They Do Things Differently There," facilitates Keyes merging with her characters. For example, like Marnie, Keyes isolated herself from everything and everyone except alcohol: "So long as I had my best friend, my lover, alcohol, I didn't need anyone or anything else" ("The Pissed" 164), and like Rachel, she attended rehab following a drunken suicide attempt. As such, the boundaries between Keyes and her characters are blurred so that when her characters recommend twelve-step programs as a form of recovery to each other, it can appear as if Keyes is offering the same advice to her readers.

Alcoholism and recovery in *This Charming Man*

In *This Charming Man*, Keyes takes an experimental approach towards the depiction of twelve-step programs. Rather than teaching the reader about the program, the novel furnishes AA with a voice comprised of its members' shares (the thoughts, stories, and experiences AA members share with the rest of the group to maintain their sobriety). This voice and the support group's role within the text effectively grant AA the status of a character. Indeed, AA eventually functions as alcoholic Marnie's romantic lead, which facilitates readers to reappraise the organisation in a positive light.

Marnie's relationship with AA is juxtaposed with her failed romantic history. She opens the novel married to Nick, with whom she has two children and a house in London. Nick is a successful "rough diamond" with "an optimism that [is] contagious" (215). He is highly sentimental, loves Marnie, children, and animals, and is not scared by her "horror of the world and of the human condition" (214). Moreover, he makes his wife's happiness "his project," which moves her towards her teenage ambition of becoming a "trophy wife" (215, 212). We learn through flashback that Marnie has always had depressive tendencies and a flair for the dramatics which impeded her ability to form lasting romantic relationships before Nick. This melancholy facilitated her relationship with Paddy, the eponymous charming man, when they were both teenagers in Ireland. Instantly caught up in a jealous and tumultuous emotional storm, friends and family members liken their relationship to *Wuthering Heights*' Cathy and Heathcliff. Despite Paddy kicking and punching Marnie to the point of hospitalisation and fleeing to the UK, leaving her injured and heartbroken, she continues to idealise their connection. Nevertheless, Marnie's partiality towards alcohol

predates her relationship with Paddy. Her relationships with both alcohol and Paddy demonstrate her propensity to escape her mental turmoil into dangerous and unhealthy fantasies.

The depression and sense of alienation which draws Marnie to Paddy also fuels her alcoholism. Both Paddy and alcohol offer Marnie a respite from her melancholy, but this escape comes at a price. As such, *This Charming Man* provides mainstream audiences with a bleak antidote to the association between alcohol and postfeminist freedom which provides a backdrop for its publication. Very little of Marnie's drinking in *This Charming Man* is revealed through flashbacks, meaning that the audience is not afforded a temporal buffer from the squalor of addiction. Instead, the narrative action unfolds while Marnie is in active addiction and renders her journey towards multiple "rock bottoms." These "bottoms" include severe injuries from running into traffic while drunk, drink driving, sexual assault, and the loss of her job, husband, and children.

It is significant that Keyes juxtaposes Marnie's alcoholism with multiple accounts of domestic abuse, including emotional manipulation, physical violence, and rape, because despite their apparent differences, both storylines mirror one another by highlighting the physical and emotional consequences of remaining in dangerous relationships with abusive men and/or addictive substances. According to J. Hillis Miller, "Romances generally, though by no means always, are stories of an innocent girl growing up and marrying her Prince Charming" (91). However, as Keyes demonstrates in *This Charming Man*, appearances can be deceiving. Paddy, the charming man of the title, is violent and abusive towards all four female protagonists. Similarly, instead of offering Marnie the freedoms promised by postfeminist narratives, alcohol actively harms her. It is only when the protagonists begin to interrogate their conception of "charming" that they can move beyond societal expectations to achieve happiness. Thus, once she accepts and processes his physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, Paddy's most recent ex-girlfriend, Lola, finds love with her cross-dressing neighbour, Rossa Considine, a man whose proximity to femininity belies Celtic Tiger formulations of the ideal romantic partner. Likewise, Keyes positions Marnie's alcoholism within the familiar elements of popular romance, crafting a love triangle not among individuals vying for their Happily-Ever-After (HEA) but instead among alcohol, the alcoholic, and the support group Alcoholics Anonymous. In this way, Keyes unsticks twelve-step programs from the negative connotations with which they are associated by addicts and non-addicts alike.

Reparative reading and *This Charming Man*

Despite the violence running through it, reading *This Charming Man* reparatively is possible. And in fact by engaging with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "reparative motive of seeking pleasure" whilst reading (Sedgwick 138), readers of this novel can heal the psychological disconnect between two wildly oppositional cultural messages: One, the promotion of substance use as a symbol of postfeminist freedom, and two, the tangible dangers of female inebriation, addiction, and substance abuse in a society which fails to protect women and addicts. Sedgwick proposes reparative reading as an alternative to the "hermeneutics of suspicion," which she identified as the de facto basis of late-twentieth-century critical analysis (124). Sedgwick argues that paranoid inquiry (which uncovers structures of oppression and the violence associated with them) should be viewed as one element of affective literary practices rather than the foundation of all critical inquiry. She

contends that paranoia does not grant the affected person extra awareness of the reality of their circumstances in comparison to non-paranoid persons (128). Subsequently, Sedgwick views paranoid reading practices as a limited avenue of critical enquiry. She proves this perspective by showing that paranoia is "anticipatory" ("paranoia requires that bad news be always already known") and "reflexive and mimetic," which impedes alternative interpretations of the paranoia-inducing object (130; 131).

Reading reparatively does not mean ignoring the violence inherent in a text. Sedgwick's reparative reading originates from Melanie Klein's theory of the depressive position, which is the state of mind whereby an infant learns that the same object can elicit feelings of love and hate. Processing this mental state can lead to a deepening of love, which in turn can engender the urge to repair what "has been lost or damaged by hate" (Bott Spillius et al. 84). Sedgwick contends that the "world [is] full of loss, pain, and oppression" (138). Thus, reparative reading is rooted in anxiety, poignant sadness, and remorseful guilt via Klein's depressive position, which one must travel through to arrive at "the reparative motive of seeking pleasure" (138). Reparative reading engages with the negative affects elicited by the text, but, significantly, these emotions must be reconciled and discarded. This means that readers must allow themselves to feel their negative affects instead of ignoring and burying them. This process helps readers to negotiate and heal their internal selves. This internal healing can then be carried back to the external world, where it can help inform readers' worldviews.

Keyes' incorporation of the genre formulas of romance fiction to depict the cost of addiction encourages this type of reading. In her analysis of the relationship between happy endings and reparative reading practices in the romance genre, Catherine Roach builds upon Sedgwick's work to propose that the romance novel's HEA affords readers a safe space "to try to make up for the costs to a woman's psyche of living in a culture that is still a man's world" (12). Roach reads the male romantic lead in heterosexual romance novels as a substitution for the patriarchy and proposes that his declaration of love creates equality between the lovers, in turn providing a fantasy "wherein gender unfairness is repaired and all works out" (167). In a subsequent book chapter co-authored with Hannah McCann, Roach and McCann specify the fantasy aspect of romance fiction arising from the HEA as the crucial factor in the reparative reading of romance novels. They propose that the fantasy creates a safe space wherein the "[r]eaders can project themselves into the characters' desires, to inhabit the fantasy space of the story and experience the events (sexual or otherwise) narrated therein" (416).

In fact, this "safe space for the exploration of trauma and recovery" allows readers to negotiate and process the pain and trauma caused by socially unjust contemporary cultural narratives, provided they are sufficiently literate in genre indicators to predict when a text will resolve with a happy ending (Šmídová 2). *This Charming Man* facilitates an encounter with addiction and recovery that allows readers to navigate their affective responses to both, the dangers of alcohol, and their encounters with those suffering from active addiction. Roach contends that the journey towards a HEA allows the protagonist (and the reader) to reconcile the various obstacles which constitute their hero's journey: "A romance is a story about how to get to a particular type of end, an eschaton of love, healing, commitment, completion, happiness, generational continuity, maturity, and hope. What is most important about the romance story is this ending toward which it moves" (173). Accordingly, readers are safe to explore depictions of social issues because they know that these issues will be

resolved by the end of the narrative. Furthermore, readers can learn the same lessons as the characters without undergoing the same trauma. This is because, although they can sample the emotions of fear, sadness, etc. and feel their affect, the reader is always aware that the story will resolve positively. Moreover, as Katie Deane identifies in her analysis of the dark romance genre, "audiences have the ability to pause or stop, and therefore control events that may exceed the bounds of their consent as a lived experience" (Deane 15). This means that readers can choose how and when to engage with traumatic narratives, thereby mitigating against some of the horror held within. Therefore, reparative reading offers the individual a chance to be impressed upon by alternative affects whilst being shielded from paranoid projections by the implicit HEA contract inferred by a text's branding, as well as their capacity to walk away if the novel becomes too dark. This, in turn, facilitates readers in drawing upon these impressions when they encounter similar narratives in reality.

Sedgwick proposes reparative reading as an alternative to paranoid literary enquiry, which seeks to uncover hidden violence within a text. Applying Sedgwick's argument, a paranoid-based analysis of alcoholism in *This Charming Man* would prioritise the violence incurred by Marnie's alcoholism (including her "three broken ribs. Concussion. Internal bleeding" which occurred just six weeks after the injuries detailed later in this article) but would stop short of offering any solutions (362). In her outline of the hermeneutics of suspicion, Sedgwick argues that the failure of paranoid literary enquiry to resolve the violence it identifies arises from various factors relating to paranoia's relationship with fear. She demonstrates how fear can overpower other emotions like hope, thereby preventing readers from engaging in the "reparative mode of seeking pleasure" (Sedgwick 130–40; 138).

However, the extra-textual cues afforded by Keyes' genre positioning, branding, and persona open the possibility of a reparative reading of *This Charming Man*. This is because Keyes established a tradition of writing novels with happy endings in the eight books that preceded its publication. Therefore, she had implicitly entered the contract Catherine Roach identifies in *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* to provide readers with a happy ending long before *This Charming Man*'s publication (166). *This Charming Man*'s original UK cover is bright purple and features illustrations of gold, silver, pink, and blue fireworks (Tjader), a design consistent with the brightly coloured book covers associated with chick lit (a genre adjacent to romance which, although characterised by differing conventions, also contains a prominent romance plot and happy ending—if not a HEA). This paratextual design convention signposts to readers that the text will resolve positively for the story protagonists. Subsequently, readers can be confronted with the squalor of active addiction, safe in the knowledge that Marnie will be saved from herself before the novel ends. Moreover, from the point of first engagement with the text, despite its dark and violent subject matter, readers can see the similarities between *This Charming Man* and the chick lit urtext and postfeminist bible, *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Like Bridget, POV character Lola's narration, which opens the novel, is stylised in the form of a diary. And like Bridget, Lola's diary is written colloquially and time-stamped to provide relevant updates throughout the day. The inference of this intertextuality is that Lola, and by extension *This Charming Man*'s other POV characters, will follow a similar trajectory to Bridget, meaning that their storylines will culminate in a HEA.

Indeed, *This Charming Man*'s genre positioning is particularly significant in light of Madeleine Span's finding that reading chick lit "may contribute to how individuals and social

communities form their impressions of social reality" (3). Span's project was limited to a small sample size of reader interviews, however, if her finding, that readers "establish relations between the texts and their own lives," is accurate for a wider demographic, then it indicates that those readers who access *This Charming Man* reparatively could integrate those repairs into their wider worldview (13).

Consequently, Marnie's addiction can trigger some of the manifestations of disgust associated with dominant representations of addiction within the reader in a contained environment. Notably, the genre markers and Keyes' branding work together to counteract the reader's disgust by eliminating the fear of contagion identified by Sara Ahmed in her analysis of the politics tied to emotions (86). This is because the genre convention of happy endings combined with the incorporation of Keyes' recovery into her authorial mandate operates as an antidote to the affects Ahmed associates with disgust. For one, Marnie and Keyes' recoveries demonstrates that addicts are not inherently bad because they can redeem themselves by moving beyond active addiction to reintegrate into society; in Keyes' case by becoming a prolific author and in Marnie's case by reuniting with her family to become a happy wife and mother. Moreover, removing the fear of contagion by "curing" the object of disgust minimises the anger Ahmed describes arising from the potential to "sicken, and to be taken over or taken in" by being in proximity to the addict (86). This minimisation of the strong negative affects of fear and anger affords readers the emotional space to reconcile the potential disgust they might feel towards addicts with compassion, thereby reducing psychological instances of othering.

Thus, reparative reading allows the reader to reconcile the spectrum of emotions they feel towards Marnie (e.g., empathy, frustration, compassion, disgust, anger, and shame) with real-world addicts (both known and unknown), safe in the knowledge that she will emerge intact from this spiral. This, in turn, means that the reader can process negative emotions towards Marnie without causing themselves any psychological harm or guilt because she will not die before they have the chance to process and discard them. The promise of a happy ending assured by the genre provides a safe space where readers can allow themselves to feel anger and disgust towards Marnie, but, crucially, also move beyond them to more socially productive emotions like empathy, sympathy, and compassion.

Reversing romantic tropes in *This Charming Man*

In her analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès identifies how "[t]he narrative of romance enables Rushdie to rewrite trauma into a coherent and recognisable, albeit slightly displaced, whole" (210). Similarly, I wish to show how Keyes draws upon romance tropes to narrativize and make sense of active addiction for her readership. Positioning Marnie's experience of addiction alongside a multi-strand narrative focusing on violence towards women implies that she is in an abusive relationship with alcohol, thus turning her narrative into an unconventional love story. Like the women who date Paddy, Marnie loves her tormentor (alcohol) even though consuming it causes her physical and emotional harm. She is unable to admit that she has a problem which carries a societal stigma, and despite the increasing danger caused by her relationship with alcohol, she remains unable to stop. Nevertheless, despite her avowed love of alcohol, Marnie passively engages with AA at the behest of those around her. Subsequently, the continued presence of the fellowship throughout the text and Marnie's eventual acceptance of the

Twelve Steps means that *This Charming Man* can be read as an unconventional love triangle between an alcoholic, alcohol, and AA.

This Charming Man casts alcohol as Marnie's apparent Prince Charming by incorporating many of the romance narrative elements into her storyline before pivoting to reveal AA as the ultimate romantic hero. Romance scholar Pamela Regis identifies the eight narrative elements of a romance novel as:

> *[A] definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the *meeting* between the heroine and hero; an account of their *attraction* for each other; the *barrier* between them; *the point of ritual death*; the *recognition* that fells the barrier; the *declaration* of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their *betrothal*. (14)

In accordance with these standards, Marnie's first narrative section defines the society she inhabits. According to Regis, "[t]his society is in some way flawed; it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt. It always oppresses the heroine and hero" (31). This is consistent with Marnie's reality. Having moved from her childhood home in Dublin to London, she is a "yummy mummy,"[3] married to a wealthy husband, works in real estate, and has two children. Yet the reader's first glimpse of her interior monologue is twenty-nine repetitions of "I'm dying" (183). As the passage progresses, we learn that Marnie is attending a meditation circle in an attempt to combat her "[b]lack, reeking, rotting" soul (184). This introduction makes it clear from the outset that her successful façade hides a darker truth.

Each of the novel's character instalments is bookended by an anonymous first-person account of domestic violence. If we contextualise the opening of Marnie's narrative section with the violent vignettes which bookend each of these character segments in *This Charming Man*, the inference is that she is a victim of the domestic violence detailed on the previous page of the novel. This inference is strengthened by her visible discomfort and anxiety throughout the chapter, combined with her husband Nick's apparently controlling behaviours, which include questioning Marnie on her whereabouts after work and his threatening invasion of her personal space: "his body had blocked her into the corner between the freezer and wall, close enough so she could smell his breath […]. He studied her face, seeming to catalogue all that he saw. She couldn't read his expression, but it made her nervous. The moment went on for a very long time, then he moved aside to let her pass" (187). Nick's behaviour echoes the violent vignette immediately preceding Marnie's section, which shows an unnamed woman being raped against a sink by a man who clearly knows her. Nick trapping Marnie between the freezer and the wall mirrors the unnamed man trapping his victim against a sink. When read back to back, these two scenes hint that Marnie is not safe in her relationship by encouraging the reader to project the couple into the previous scene.

The evident discontent between Nick and Marnie indicates that Nick is not her romantic hero. This inference is strengthened when, at the end of her first narrative section, Marnie's increasing discomfort in Nick's company culminates with her waking up in bed following what appears to be a severe beating:

> Teeth ached, jaw ached, eye sockets throbbed. Nausea lay in wait […]. Pain. Shock. Vomit in her throat. […]. Bones in face bad but lip not split […]. Checking

> further down. Ribs bad. Pelvis bad. Vertebrae okay. All frontal damage this time. She tested her legs, using the sole of her foot to feel the opposite leg. Along their length, on both legs, were painful points that would bloom into round black blossoms. […]. Even her feet were bruised. From my head to my toes … Another wave would come. (225)

Marnie's first narrative segment ends with this catalogue of injuries. We do not encounter her again for another 140 pages, thereby allowing the reader plenty of opportunity to believe that Nick is responsible. This inference is strengthened multiple times—these injuries take place in a book about gender-based violence. Moreover, upon waking and discovering her injuries, Marnie describes Nick as "the last person she wanted, but there was no choice," which can be read as Nick forcing himself into her company (225). Finally, at this point of the narrative, the tension between the pair is the only obvious source of discontent in Marnie's seemingly perfect life.

However, her second narrative episode begins with the revelation that the injuries were self-inflicted during a blackout drinking binge. As *This Charming Man* unfolds, we learn that the anonymous vignette has nothing to do with Nick and Marnie and instead shows Paddy raping one of his ex-girlfriends. Moreover, Nick's apparently controlling behaviours are recontextualized by the knowledge that not only had Marnie's drinking already led to her demotion in work but, despite numerous conversations promising her husband that she would moderate her drinking, she had been hospitalised multiple times from drinking prior to this incident, cheated on Nick with her colleague, driven her children in the car while drunk, and failed to come home from a drinking binge more than once. Thus, Nick's movements can be seen as the desperate actions of a husband trying to control his wife's spiralling alcoholism.

This reading is strengthened by Nick's myriad actions to save his wife and family, including searching for Marnie when she drunkenly disappears, liaising with alcohol counsellors, seeking help from her twin, Grace, finding rehabs for Marnie, and shielding their daughters from her alcoholism. Possible interpretations of Nick and Marnie's relationship which might categorise Nick's behaviour as coercive are complicated further via its focalisation through Marnie, an unreliable alcoholic narrator who is looking to blame anyone but herself.

The inaccuracy of Marnie's initial narration is underscored several times as the novel progresses. For example, it emerges that Nick's loss of financial bonuses as work is not because he lost his "Midas touch," as per Marnie's narrative (211), but is instead a consequence of his missing work because of her addiction. Nevertheless, Keyes' initial misdirect successfully removes Nick as Marnie's primary romantic interest for the duration of the novel because by the time we discover his innocence, he is already categorised as a villain. This, in turn, provides an opening for an alternative romance—alcohol.[4]

Although we do not learn about Marnie's first time drinking alcohol, we know that it has always played a role in her life: "She had always liked a drink—she never made any bones about that" (383). Marnie's first time drinking in the morning marks the moment when her relationship with alcohol changes from casual to all-encompassing. As such, this encounter can be seen to fulfil the narrative criteria of "the meeting," whereby "the heroine and hero meet for the first time" (Regis 31). Marnie describes the intense and positive emotion elicited by this "meeting": "she felt giddy with freedom; astonished that she'd spent so many years

hidebound by artificial barricades" (*Charming Man* 384). Her reference to "artificial barricades" conjures images of war, which in turn fulfils Regis' assertion that "some hint of the conflict to come is often introduced" alongside the meeting (and, in turn, points to Marnie's future "battle" to become sober) (31). Because we first encounter Marnie while she is in active addiction, this meeting is recounted through flashback at a later point in the narrative, underlining the depth and duration of her love affair with alcohol. This narrative order remains consistent with Regis' criteria because she argues that the narrative elements can occur at any point within the text (30).

Keyes' depiction of "the attraction" between Marnie and alcohol invites readers to understand why she is so attached to the substance. Regis defines "the attraction" as "[a] scene or series of scenes scattered throughout the novel establish[ing] for the reader the reason that this couple must marry" (33). Many of Marnie's descriptions of drinking alcohol have a magical quality to them. Thus, we can see how her attraction to alcohol is rooted in the escapism it affords her from a society where she "feel[s] too much, all the time, and [she] hate[s] it" (*Charming Man* 354). Marnie's descriptions of alcohol remain fantastical even as her life crumbles around her and her alcoholism causes her to lose her job, husband, and children. Therefore, she swallows "liquid magic" and "molten stars" in her car outside the off-licence where she buys vodka to numb the pain of missing her daughters (478). This scene, once again, highlights the difference between perception and reality that underpins the representations of domestic violence, addiction, and recovery which run through the novel.

The fanciful language Marnie uses is significant because it invites a comparison between her alcoholism and Paddy's violent behaviour. The title of the novel, *This Charming Man*, refers to Paddy de Courcy, who we know is violent towards women. The title also links Paddy to the fairy-tale Prince Charming, who traditionally rescues the heroine from her problems and provides her with a HEA. Although the reader can see that Paddy is abusive, he is portrayed as "a tall, dark, handsome man," successful, gregarious, and apparently emotionally vulnerable (12). The reader could understand how women are fooled by his prince-like demeanour because success, wealth, good looks, and emotional intelligence are traits women are encouraged to pursue for their own HEA.

By the time the women of *This Charming Man* realise that he is abusive, each has fallen for the Prince Charming act and have come to believe that their life will be worse without him in it: "He always talked me out of it, swore to me on his mother's memory that he'd never touch me again, blamed it on his job being stressful. The *usual*. And thicko here bought it every time. Kept thinking things would be different. Hope sprang eternal" (597). This false belief in positive change, which mimics the trajectory of canonical addiction narratives like Charles R. Jackson's *The Lost Weekend* (1944) and Malcom Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), traps Paddy's victims in a violent and dangerous relationship that isolates them from their loved ones and endangers their lives.

Similarly, alcohol functions as Marnie's Prince Charming, which is evident in the magical language she associates with drink. If Prince Charming rescues the fair maid, vodka offers Marnie an escape from her reality as a depressed housewife. The attraction towards alcohol arises from its role as Prince Charming. However, the HEA offered by alcohol is a mirage which masks inevitable isolation and death if their relationship continues. Like Paddy's victims, by the time Marnie realises how much damage the alcohol is causing her, she is too enraptured by the fantasy of escape and salvation afforded by drinking to be able

to stop without extreme difficulty. Moreover, Marnie bolsters her fairy-tale fantasy by casting herself as a damsel in distress. She recounts how alcohol saves her from the drudgery of domestic chores whilst paying specific attention to the image of a moving clock face, which, in turn, evokes Cinderella: "The rule was, no alcohol until 6 p.m. She'd spend the day taking care of the two babies, but once the hands of the kitchen clock aligned themselves into a straight black line, she poured herself a vodka and tonic. She looked forward to it, she wasn't going to deny it, but since when was that a crime?" (383-4). Marnie's false belief that alcohol can free her from the traditional trappings of marriage and motherhood fortifies the postfeminist turn away from feminism, because rather than seeking equality with Nick, she chooses a second, riskier option, one which relies on her individual choices rather than on collective, feminist action.

She does not need feminism because alcohol rescues her from her sadness and melancholy: "She swallowed another mouthful of liquid glitter and cushioned herself further into the glow" (406). Marnie's language describing her mental illness also signifies her identification with a damsel in distress. Despite numerous references to her "sadness," she only refers to it as depression once during an attempt to remain sober: "She could manage perhaps a week without a drink, but the depression during that time was like walking on knives" (395). Therefore, we can see that Marnie's use of words like "sadness" and "melancholy" fortify her fairy-tale construction of her relationship with alcohol by echoing the lexicon found in fairy tales. In contrast, the word *depression*, with its realist connotations, distances her from her escapist fantasy.

Marnie's refusal to engage with reality can be frustrating, yet in showing us that alcohol functions as her Prince Charming, Keyes helps us to understand Marnie's belief that her life will be worse without alcohol. Indeed, she cannot stop drinking because she loves it:

> She loved alcohol, a love that was fierce and hungry. Alcohol—vodka—was all she craved and there was nothing to compare to that first swallow. The taste so clean; icy cold and fiery warm, coursing down her throat, spreading heat through her chest, burning off all fear and anxiety in her stomach. It was as if stardust had been sprinkled from her head to her toes, and she was suddenly alert, yet calm, hopeful but accepting. Then giddy, giddy and free, soaring with relief. (395–6)

This statement fulfils Regis' need for a "declaration" wherein "the hero declares his love for the heroine, and the heroine her love for the hero" (34). Although alcohol is inanimate and unable to make a declaration of love, its effect on Marnie can be read as a declaration—at least in Marnie's eyes—by reinforcing the magical associations that she holds towards it. The image of alcohol sprinkling her in stardust is reminiscent of the pixie dust Peter Pan and the Lost Boys use to fly to Neverland. Similarly, Marnie believes that alcohol can release her from her reality. This inclusion of fairy-tale language subverts the romance fantasy which Roach and McCann identify as facilitating the reparative reading of romance novels by showing us how the perceived fantasy can mask a grim reality (416).

The same language also infers that Marnie will have a HEA, like in the fairy tales *This Charming Man* references. This inference facilitates the readers' exploration of active addiction in a safe "reparative" space wherein they can reconcile the alcoholic "other" with Marnie's character, safe in the knowledge that she will be healthy and happy by the novel's

end. This may prevent the reader from anticipating the future pain occasioned by Marnie's demise, which may then encourage the reader to connect with her on a deeper emotional level because their body—while reading—is not reacting to the text in a strictly paranoid manner. Moreover, this emotional engagement with the text aids the retention of Marnie's experiences as non-propositional knowledge, thereby drawing together its reparative and schema-altering properties (Bracher 11).

The "barrier" which "establishes for the reader the reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry" is comprised of objections from Marnie's husband, Nick, her boss, and her twin, Grace (Regis 32). Nick threatens to end their marriage and take custody of their daughters. Likewise, Marnie's boss threatens to fire her unless she stops drinking. Both eventualities come to pass. Unlike the men in Marnie's life, Grace remains in contact with her twin but eventually accepts that she has no control over her sister's choices. Conversely, rather than functioning as "the point of ritual death," which "marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible," the collapse of Marnie's life facilitates a temporary betrothal to alcohol by providing her with unimpeded access to the substance going forward (Regis 35).

Marnie's introduction to AA, the real romantic hero of the text, co-occurs with her descent into the final phase of her addiction when Marnie's boss and her twin, Grace, both separately pressure her into attending AA meetings. In the subsequent chapters, Marnie's relationship with AA evokes a popular romance trope—enemies to lovers. She does not want to attend AA, arguing that it is "[*i*]*nappropriate*, me being there. They're alcoholics. It was wrong that I was there spying on them" (*Charming Man* 392). Nevertheless, we see how AA woos her. The members accept her unconditionally despite her litany of injuries: "they kept giving her warm, welcoming smiles. *Dying* for her to be in the gang with them" (379). Existing member Jules encourages Marnie to swap numbers with her. On a separate occasion, she even takes Marnie out for coffee and tries to simultaneously "set her up" with AA by describing the positive impacts it had on her own life and playing "hard to get" by telling Marnie "I'll miss you" when the latter decides to stop attending meetings (483).

But the choice is not up to Marnie, because her sister Grace continues to bring her to meetings, which forces Marnie to participate in a series of dates with the organisation. During these dates, AA takes on an amorphous character identity whereby the various speakers' voices combine to make it appear as if AA itself is speaking directly to Marnie:

> "… I tried to stop drinking on my own, but I couldn't. The only thing that did it was coming to these meetings …"
> "… I couldn't bear my feelings. I was always angry or jealous or depressed or afraid, so I drank …"
> "… I had a beautiful girlfriend. I loved her. She begged me to stop. I tried for her but I couldn't. She left me and the grief nearly killed me, but it wasn't enough to stop me drinking. The truth was I loved alcohol more than I loved her …"
> "… I blamed everyone else for my drinking: my wife for nagging me, my boss for working me too hard, my parents for not loving me enough. But the only reason I drank was because I was an alcoholic, which was my responsibility …"

> "… I was always different, even as a teenager, even as a child, in fact …" (401–2)

Even though Marnie is not yet willing to listen to AA, the voice assures her that she is not alone by reflecting her experiences back at her. Like Marnie, AA knows depression, loss, and addiction. The voice of AA greets her at each meeting she attends and gradually convinces her that it understands her. This understanding allows Marnie and AA, like a heroine and her beloved, to "go from conflict to harmony and from disequilibrium of power to equality" (Roach 26). Thus, when Marnie eventually realises that her love for alcohol is so damaging that even her sister has given up on her, she decides to phone AA's Jules to ask for help instead of consuming alcohol. This act demonstrates how Marnie chooses AA over her addiction. In doing so, it fulfils AA's narrative role as the romantic interest who is under the heroine's nose all along.

This decision to accept AA's teachings and acquiesce to its first step functions as Marnie's HEA. She willingly attends a meeting, which tacitly operates as her "betrothal" to AA. There is a brief interlude just before Marnie stands up to share wherein she has a vision of her sober future self, with her loving husband and children, which she realises "was a memory, of course it was a memory. It had really happened. It just hadn't happened yet" (*Charming Man* 671). While alcohol felt like magic, embracing AA temporarily transports Marnie to the future, indicating that the real magic is in sobriety. However, it is notable that although the text hints that Marnie will reunite with Nick after she faces her addiction, her happy ending does not centre on a romantic relationship but on her acceptance of her alcoholism at an AA meeting:

> She opened her eyes. Every person in the room was still smiling at her.
> "My name is Marnie."
> Their smiles widened.
> "Hi, Marnie."
> "And I'm an alcoholic". (671)

The above statement, which represents Marnie's embrace of step one: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable," closes Marnie's final narrative section in the novel (W. 60). This trajectory is in keeping with that identified by Monika Šmídová whereby "the HEA […] does not have to mean a complete recovery on the part of the protagonist" but can "include acceptance of the protagonist's traumatic experience and of its persisting psychological and physical symptoms by their love interest(s) and/or by a wider social circle of friends and/or family" (9).

The 'real' hero(ine)?

The inference of Marnie's HEA is that she will start a new romance with AA by following the program and will eventually recover from active alcoholism. As in the tradition of much of commercial women's fiction (especially in chick lit), the true romantic endgame is hidden in plain sight for most of the narrative. AA fulfils this role. Casting AA as the romantic hero undermines the organisation's cultural ties to misery and confrontation. Through this process, Keyes invites readers to unbind their potentially negative perceptions

of twelve-step programs. Moreover, this depiction of AA as a romantic hero facilitates the act of reparative reading, which allows readers to negotiate alcohol consumption outside of the cultural binary depicting all women's drinking as either problematic or postfeminist.

However, unlike the fairy tales the text alludes to, Marnie does not achieve her HEA by passively waiting for her Prince Charming. According to Jayeeta Bagchi, the traditional romance culminates with "the moment where the man admits his love for the woman" via "[t]he three magical words 'I Love You'" (31). Viewed through this lens, the HEA becomes something that is done to the heroine. While most of Marnie's storyline depicts her passively submitting to the ravages of alcoholism, her ending hands back the autonomy she loses to her addiction. The declaration "I'm an alcoholic" replaces "I love you" as the magical words which end her narrative. Thus, Marnie becomes the one who initiates her implicit betrothal to AA. Contrary to Jennifer Crusie's assertion that the fairy-tale heroine "does not have to earn the reward; in fact, she can sit in the ashes and she'll still get her prince," Marnie earns her reward by admitting to her problem and acknowledging that she needs help. And although we can see how her support network encourages her towards AA, she is the one who takes the final leap. This proves her readiness to enter a relationship with the romantic hero, AA, where they will be able to take the necessary steps together to ensure "a life beyond [her] wildest dreams" (*Daily Reflections* 84).

Conclusion

With its bright-purple cover and the generic promise of a happy ending, *This Charming Man* challenges many of the gender- and alcohol-based cultural narratives prominent in the lead-up to the 2008 global recession. Marnie starts the novel as a wealthy, married mother of two who has overcome her previous abusive relationship to achieve her supposed fairy-tale ending with her successful husband, Nick. Despite achieving the societal goals of marriage, motherhood, and financial security, her existence is propped up by her addiction to alcohol, a substance which contemporary society equates to female emancipation. Thus, Marnie is caught at the centre of two opposing cultural narratives—that a woman's HEA centres marriage and a family, and that women should be free to emulate male behaviours (most notably, in this instance, through the hedonism associated with alcohol use). By drawing upon the tropes and structure of romance novels, Keyes characterises Marnie's descent into alcoholism as an abusive relationship. This characterisation challenges the dominant cultural representation of alcohol as a pathway to female autonomy, which coincided with postfeminism.

Whilst Keyes emphasises the significance of personal accountability via Marnie's three-word declaration at the end of the novel, it is notable that her betrothal to AA inducts her into a fellowship, thereby mitigating against the feelings of isolation which spark her two abusive relationships: alcohol and Paddy. That she is brought to the fellowship by her sister Grace and welcomed by fellow addict Jules moves her away from postfeminist individualism and towards a model of collective feminist action. Significantly, Keyes' own history of addiction prevents *This Charming Man* from becoming a moral tale of the dangers of female alcohol consumption. Instead, Keyes incorporates the romance tropes with which her readers are familiar to invite them to interrogate the postfeminist narratives that flatten female alcohol consumption as all good or all bad. Cognisant of the postfeminist context which links women's liberty with alcohol consumption, Keyes' novel affords readers a

reparative space through which they can reconcile the psychological fissures caused by living in a world wherein drug and alcohol use is normalised but addicts are demonised. In the process, not only does she recontextualise twelve-step programs as the romantic lead waiting for a heroine to come to her senses and make the first move, but she also engages in social activism by humanising addicts and promoting pathways out of addiction.

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[1] Irish slang which denotes having a good time. It is often associated with alcohol, music, and dancing, although it can encompass any form of fun activity. My definition.

[2] Although "Pioneer" was originally used to denote members of the Roman Catholic Pioneer Total Abstinence Association, by the end of the twentieth century, the term had become an informal catch-all for all those who chose lifelong abstinence from alcohol.

[3] A colloquial term to describe a young, attractive mother ("Yummy Mummy").

[4] Author Caroline Knapp popularised the notion of conducting a love affair with alcohol in the seminal *Drinking: A Love Story* (1996), a widely acclaimed best-selling addiction memoir.

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