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Conference Review:

The F-Word in Contemporary Women's Writing

Rebecca Wray

Queen's University, 4th-5th April 2013

The F-Word in Contemporary Women's Writing is the fourth biennial conference organised by the Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network [PGCWWN]. The PGCWWN is a student-led research community for postgraduate students whose research is focused on the work of contemporary women writers. With snow threatening the whole of the United Kingdom in early April, the conference took place in Queen's University in Belfast and was surprisingly, though pleasantly sunny. Delegates came from a number of disciplines such as English Literature, film studies, psychology and sociology; as well as from a variety of locations across the globe.

As a psychologist I was interested in attending this conference because the first part of my PhD research is focused on identifying discourses in women's magazines and feminist blogs and in particular how feminist and post-feminist discourses are engaged with. The theme of the 'F-Word' conference was to examine the diverse and varied ways in which contemporary women's writing (post-1970s) has engaged with, approached and contributed to contemporary feminist discourse.

There were parallel presentation panels running throughout both days of the conference which produced lively discussions of women's writing across a range of media platforms including: fiction of various genres (including crime and detective novels, historical fiction, fairytales, chick lit, and young adult fiction), biographies, poetry, erotica, manga, magazines, independently-produced zines, television shows, music videos, online blogs and digital campaigns. With such a wide range of presentations showcasing the research of postgraduates from varying disciplines, I felt spoiled for choice and only wish I could have also seen the panels that were running parallel to the ones I attended.

I presented in one of the first panel sessions on the first day. I was nervous as I was discussing the preliminary findings from my first research study but found the audience supportive and encouraging, an atmosphere I found which filtered through the entire conference. I particularly liked the way the panels were organised so that presenters all take turns delivering their papers, followed by a joint questions and answers session. I like this set-up for two main reasons. The first is that it feels more supportive when you're answering questions alongside your fellow presenters then answering when in isolation from the others. The second reason is that it means the audience can direct a question to some or all of the presenters at once if it is applicable to all the papers.

Diane Negra's key note address was held at the end of the first day. Her paper 'Claiming Feminism: Commentary, Autobiography and Advice Literature for Women in the Recession' was focused on how the current recession has led to cultural shifts such as public opinion on women's 'seeming choice' to not occupy high-status and highly paid occupations. Diane Negra discussed how post-feminist rhetoric casts feminism as being primarily about choice and how this then leads onto women's capacity to self-improve and for entrepreneurship. She

highlights how this shift is marked by the rise in business self-help books written by high-profile women such as Bethany Frankel, Sheryl Sandberg, Hanna Rosin from the US and Caitlin Moran from the UK. These books focus on the individual honing their careers and achievement through self-belief and perseverance.

Diane Negra discusses how these authors advocate individual choice and personal modification through the use of self-help and life coaches, rather than challenging barriers and changing structures within society. One of the interesting things Negra highlights in her talk is how these authors create and cultivate personas which emphasise positive thinking, self-promotion and an emphasis placed on the importance of displaying motherhood and appearing non-threatening in their approach to work. She was critical of how these authors ignore their position of privilege and how the narrative of female 'choice' leaves little room for acknowledging the way choices are constrained by life circumstances and barriers.

A key concern raised by Diane Negra, which the audience joined in discussing towards the end of the talk, was how these books are easily accessible in public spaces, in comparison to the academic feminist books which tend to be costly and printed on limited runs. Negra proposed that feminist books need to be produced so they are easier to digest and access by a general audience.

The conference, like the PGCWWN itself provides a supportive and encouraging atmosphere for postgraduates and early career researchers, through the provision of workshops and spaces for discussion. In the middle of the second day, Helen Davies shared her knowledge and experience on getting published in a workshop on publishing for postgraduates and early career researchers. I found her workshop to be very informative and useful for any postgraduate researcher looking to get published regardless of subject discipline. As well as practical advice on choosing and approaching the right publishers, Helen advised us on which stages of our postgraduate studies and careers is best to work on different types of publications such as book reviews, journal articles, book chapters and monographs. What I found particularly useful in this workshop was how Helen explained the Research Excellence Framework and what it will mean to us in relation to our careers. This gave the audience much food for thought and plenty of opportunities were provided for us to ask questions.

The F-Word in Contemporary Women's Writing conference, also marked the departure of Claire O'Callaghan, Catherine McGurran and Amy Rushton from the PGCWWN Steering Group, who worked hard in setting up a well-organised, supportive and stimulating conference. Beginning their new roles in April 2013, James Bailey, Adèle Cook, Claire Cowling and Michelle Green were announced over cake and coffee as the new members of the Steering Group. The next PGCWWN conference will be held in 2015 and I look forward to seeing what the new Steering Group will have planned for this and other future events.

This was the first PGCWWN conference I have had the privilege of attending and presenting at and I can recommend it to students of any discipline who have an interest in gender and how feminist and/or post-feminist ideas are engaged with in women's writing. The conference organisers provided a warm welcome and ensured delegates felt at ease throughout the event. I found the conference to be a very friendly and supportive space, allowing for stimulating discussion of the issues raised by the panels, which continued long into the evening at the conference dinner at the end of the first day's events. I look forward to meeting everyone again at future events and continuing these conversations.

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