

WOMEN-CENTRED PROSE BEYOND GENRE LABELS: FROM CHICK-LIT TO EMOTIONAL ETHICS

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Summary

The article proposes a reconceptualisation of women-centred popular prose beyond established genre labels such as chick lit or women's fiction. Genre-based approaches have been productive in mapping the emergence and commercial success of female-authored popular narratives since the late 1990s. Contemporary popular fiction increasingly focuses on emotional experience, care, and everyday ethical concerns.

This article examines a selection of English- and French-language popular novels published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and proposes a different approach to such texts. Instead of relying on established genre labels, it focuses on how these narratives are organised around a female point of view, everyday emotional experience, and changing value priorities. Special attention is given to the gradual shift away from postfeminist irony towards more open, emotionally attentive forms of narration, in which relationships, vulnerability, and responsibility play a central role. Taken together, these features allow women-centred prose to be discussed as a meaningful analytical category rather than as a fixed genre.

Key words: women-centred prose, female narrative perspective, popular women's fiction, postfeminist discourse, ethics of care, emotional labour, narrative focalisation.

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1. Introduction

The category of chick lit has played a central role in how women-authored popular fiction has been discussed. It was commonly used to describe novels about young urban women, characterised by ironic tone, romantic plots, and self-awareness. Scholars initially approached these texts as expressions of postfeminist culture, exploring how they dealt with independence, consumption, and intimate relationships (*Ferriss & Young, 2006; Whelehan, 2005*). Over the past two decades, however, the thematic range and narrative focus of women-authored popular prose have broadened in noticeable ways. In many recent novels, the focus has changed. Romantic comedy and lifestyle satire play a smaller role, while attention is given to emotional vulnerability, care, illness, friendship, ageing, and grief as they appear in everyday life. As a result, these texts do not sit comfortably within established genre labels. In response to this development, the article proposes women-centred prose as an analytical category that allows these narratives to be discussed in terms of perspective, thematic focus, and value orientation, rather than through fixed genre boundaries. Building on these observations, the aim of the article is to examine contemporary women-authored popular fiction through the lens of women-centred prose and to show how this approach offers a more flexible and accurate framework than established genre labels. The study seeks to identify the narrative and thematic features that characterise this body of texts, with particular attention to narrative perspective, everyday emotional experience, and changing value orientations.

The research is based on a qualitative analysis of selected English- and French-language popular novels published from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century. The article examines contemporary women-authored popular fiction through detailed textual analysis, focusing on narrative perspective, emotional emphasis, and representations of care and responsibility.

2. Limits of Genre-Based Approaches to Women's Popular Fiction

Genre labels such as chick lit or women's fiction have been important in bringing popular prose into academic discussion. They helped scholars recognise recurring themes, shared narrative patterns, and the cultural role of women-authored texts, especially within debates on postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007). At the same time, these labels grew out of publishing and marketing practices, which tend to favour familiar formulas and easily recognisable storylines.

This becomes a problem when we look at more recent novels that are still marketed as chick lit (*Albenga, 2015*) or feel-good fiction but no longer follow the conventions usually associated with these categories. In English-language popular fiction (Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017) and Dolly Alderton's *Ghosts* (2020)), authors depict protagonists whose everyday life is portrayed in dark tones: loneliness, mental health concerns, ongoing attempts to establish some personal relationship. Although these novels remain accessible and grounded in everyday experience, their stories are driven less by genre expectations than by vulnerability, care, and ethical self-reflection.

A comparable shift can be seen in contemporary French-language prose. Novels often grouped under popular women's fiction increasingly centre on emotional and ethical concerns rather than on genre conventions. In French-language fiction (Delphine de Vigan's *Les Grâtes* (2019) and Mélissa Da Costa's *Tout le bleu du ciel* (2019)) protagonists are shown through calm, introspective narration facing ageing, illness, and interdependence in care relationships. These texts are not marked by romanticism, comedy or overt irony, one can find meaning in ordinary acts of attention, listening, and emotional responsibility. As a result, they sit uneasily within fixed genre categories.

As a number of scholars have pointed out, continuing to apply the chick lit label to texts that no longer follow its original model can limit how these works are read and interpreted (*Harzewski, 2011; Hache-Bissette, 2012; Tsapro, 2025*). In both English- and French-language contexts, many recent novels written by women move away from humour-based irony towards quieter, more reflective narrative voices. They are often not easy to be classified.

So, it becomes necessary to look for an analytical approach that does not rely primarily on genre labels but instead pays attention to narrative perspective, thematic focus, and the values shaping these texts.

3. Women-Centred Prose as an Analytical Category

The term women-centred prose is used to describe narratives in which female experience shapes the text from within. This term does not refer to a fixed genre, it does not imply a specific type of plot, style, or readership. Instead, it offers a way of talking about texts that organise meaning around how women perceive, interpret, and live through everyday situations. In this sense, women-centred prose is approached as an analytical category rather than a genre label.

One of its key features is narrative perspective. Such texts are typically told from a female point of view, either through first-person narration or through a closely aligned internal perspective. This point of view influences not only how characters are portrayed, but also which events are considered important and how they are understood. Attention is often directed towards inner experience, emotional response, and reflection, rather than towards fast-moving, action-driven plots.

Another defining aspect lies in thematic focus. Women-centred prose tends to bring to the foreground experiences that have often been treated as secondary or marginal in genre-based fiction. These include emotional labour, care for others, everyday routines, moments of uncertainty, and small ethical choices made in ordinary contexts. Rather than serving as background to romance or professional success, such experiences form the core of the narrative.

These texts are marked by a particular ethical sensibility. They draw attention to responsibility, interdependence, and emotional attentiveness instead of emphasising self-fulfilment through consumption, achievement, or romantic closure. Meaning is created through relationships and forms of care, while resolution or triumph are not in the center any more. This orientation signals a broader shift away from postfeminist irony towards a mode of storytelling grounded in what can be described as emotional ethics.

4. From Postfeminist Irony to Emotional Ethics

Early chick lit narratives often relied on irony as a key narrative strategy. Through humour and self-distance, protagonists were able to navigate conflicting cultural expectations while keeping a critical stance towards them. Irony made it possible to express dissatisfaction with social norms without openly rejecting postfeminist ideas of choice, independence, and self-management. In this sense, ironic narration functioned as a form of empowerment that balanced critique with cultural belonging.

In more recent women-centred prose, this ironic mode becomes noticeably less central. Many contemporary narratives turn instead towards emotional openness and sincerity. Rather than building stories around witty self-observation or romantic fulfilment, these texts dwell on care for others, intergenerational ties, illness, loss, and processes of psychological recovery. Emotional vulnerability comes to the foreground, while ironic distance becomes less important. Fragility is not presented as something to overcome but as part of the story itself. This shift is especially clear in novels where humour and self-distance fade into the background and quieter forms of storytelling take over. In Emily Henry's *People We Meet on Vacation* (2021), the romantic plot is still there, but it no longer holds the text together. The narrative is more often about friendship, emotional tiredness, and the ongoing effort of staying close to another person. A similar narrative logic can be found in Sophie Tal Men's novels, including *De battre la chamade* (2023) and *La tendresse des autres* (2025), where work, illness, and caring for others shape the characters' choices and relationships. Across these texts, irony gives way to a more direct and emotionally open mode of narration.

This transformation can be linked to wider cultural changes. As ironic discourse has become increasingly familiar and widespread, its critical force has weakened. At the same time, forms of affective and emotional labour have gained greater visibility in social life. Women-centred prose turns attention to ethical questions as they appear in everyday life: in small decisions, ongoing relationships, and ordinary forms of care.

Table 1 sets out the main differences between genre-based popular fiction and women-centred prose, comparing how these texts organise narrative focus, themes, plot development,

and ethical concerns. While genre-driven texts tend to emphasise formulaic structures and individual fulfilment, women-centred prose is shaped by lived experience, relational responsibility, and an ethics of care.

Table 1

Genre-based popular fiction and women-centred prose: analytical comparison

Aspect	Chick lit / genre-based fiction (representative texts)	Women-centred prose (representative texts)
Organising principle	Genre conventions and market logic (e.g. Helen Fielding, <i>Bridget Jones's Diary</i> ; Sophie Kinsella, <i>Confessions of a Shopaholic</i>)	Female experience as the structuring principle (e.g. Gail Honeyman, <i>Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine</i> ; Delphine de Vigan, <i>Les Gratitude</i>)
Narrative mode	Irony and humour as dominant modes (e.g. Marian Keyes, <i>Watermelon</i> ; Meg Cabot, <i>Queen of Babble</i>)	Emotional sincerity and restrained introspection (e.g. Dolly Alderton, <i>Ghosts</i> ; Mélissa Da Costa, <i>Tout le bleu du ciel</i>)
Central themes	Romance, consumption, lifestyle, self-fashioning (e.g. Emily Henry, <i>Beach Read</i> ; Jenny Colgan, <i>Meet Me at the Cupcake Café</i>)	Care, vulnerability, illness, emotional labour (e.g. Sophie Tal Men, <i>La tendresse des autres</i> ; Claire Lombardo, <i>The Most Fun We Ever Had</i>)
Plot dynamics	Resolution-oriented plots (romantic or professional closure) (e.g. Beth O'Leary, <i>The Flatshare</i> ; Lindsey Kelk, <i>I Heart New York</i>)	Process-oriented narration focused on emotional development (e.g. Marian Keyes, <i>Grown Ups</i> ; Virginie Grimaldi, <i>Les possibles</i>)
Ethical focus	Individual fulfilment and self-optimisation (e.g. Sophie Kinsella, <i>Can You Keep a Secret?</i>)	Relational responsibility and ethics of care (e.g. Agnès Martin-Lugand, <i>Les gens heureux lisent et boivent du café</i> ; Delphine de Vigan, <i>No et moi</i>)

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Stories in women-centred prose keep the focus on how people relate to one another in daily life and give ethical questions a quiet but persistent presence in the text. This way of telling the story also changes what holds the reader's attention. Rather than building towards a clear payoff, women-centred prose follows time, emotional build-up, and moments that remain unresolved. Interest comes from staying with the process, which invites a slower and more attentive kind of reading.

In *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017), the first-person narrative keeps the focus on Eleanor's inner life. Events are filtered through her limited understanding of social interaction, leading her to prioritize emotional experience over external action. Much of the narrative unfolds through small observations, habitual thoughts, and repeated situations rather than through dramatic plot developments.

This restricted perspective creates a narrative rhythm centred on emotional accumulation. Ordinary moments – conversations at work, phone calls, weekly routines – gain significance because they reveal gradual changes in Eleanor's relation to herself and others. Emotional focus is maintained not through explicit commentary but through repetition and delay. What matters is not what happens, but how Eleanor registers it and how her responses slowly change over time.

A similar narrative approach appears in Dolly Alderton's *Ghosts* (2020). Although the novel is set in a familiar world of dating apps and online communication, it is not driven by romantic progress or resolution. Much of the story is shaped by waiting, uncertainty, and the emotional traces left by relationships that fade or never fully begin. Attention stays with how the protagonist experiences absence, silence, and delayed responses rather than with decisive events.

As in Eleanor Oliphant *Is Completely Fine*, narrative perspective keeps the focus on everyday emotional experience. Meaning develops slowly, through reflection and repetition, not through clear turning points. Relationships remain important even when they fail to take a conventional shape, reinforcing the idea that women-centred prose values emotional process over narrative payoff and stays close to ordinary life rather than genre expectations.

A similar narrative logic can be observed in *Ghosts* (2020) by Dolly Alderton, although the tone and social setting differ. The novel is also organised around a closely aligned narrative perspective that prioritises emotional reflection over plot-driven progression. Here, attention is directed towards uncertainty, waiting, and the emotional aftermath of relationships rather than towards decisive events. In both texts, narrative perspective functions as a structuring device that keeps the story grounded in lived emotional experience, reinforcing the centrality of subjectivity within women-centred prose.

Within this framework, emotional labour becomes a key organising principle of the narrative. Acts of listening, caring, waiting, and managing emotional responses shape both character development and the progression of relationships. These practices are not presented as extraordinary or dramatic. They appear in recognisable contexts such as family life, friendships, professional settings, or situations involving care for others. By sustaining attention on such everyday forms of work, women-centred prose brings into view aspects of experience that are often marginalised or overlooked in genre-based fiction.

Many of these narratives do not move towards a neat ending but remain open and slow to develop. Relationships are presented as ongoing and in need of care. Responsibility emerges gradually, shaped by time, experience, and everyday choices.

This openness is closely linked to a broader change in narrative tone. In much contemporary women-authored fiction, irony quietly recedes. What takes its place is not sentimentality, but a calmer, more attentive way of telling the story. Emotions appear, but they are not overstated. Vulnerability meets care; it is not a climax in the text. Such storytelling responds to a cultural moment in which ironic distance has lost much of its critical force, offering alternative ways of engaging with emotional experience.

The in-between position of women-centered prose is defined by changing reading practices and expectations in contemporary popular culture.

5. Conclusions

The analysis suggests that many contemporary women-authored popular novels are no longer well described by established genre labels such as chick lit. While these labels were useful for understanding earlier stages of women's popular fiction, they struggle to account for texts that place emotional experience, care, and everyday ethical concerns at the centre of the narrative. The concept of women-centred prose offers a more flexible way of talking about such works, as it draws attention to narrative perspective, thematic focus, and value orientation rather than to formal genre features. Seen in this light, women-centred prose captures ongoing changes in how popular fiction written by women organises meaning and addresses the reader.

The novels discussed here are organised around everyday situations and relationships that change slowly over time. Approaching such texts through the lens of women-centred prose makes it possible to recognise their shared narrative logic while avoiding restrictive genre classifications, and it opens up further possibilities for comparative research into contemporary popular fiction.

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