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Authorial Agenda and Political Responsibility: Examining representations of the controversial concept of ‘rape culture’ in the Young Adult Literature of Irish author Louise O’Neill

Within the context of young adult literature, this paper examines the reception and social impact of Irish author Louise O’Neill’s controversial works in relation to a growing body of international and Irish 21st century YA fiction that demonstrate a shift away from the personal towards the political. Informed by an analysis of ‘rape culture’ and ‘positive consent’ in American society, this paper will address how these concepts have become relevant to Irish society, particularly in the years following the publication of O’Neill’s novel, *Asking For It* (2015). Written with the intent of provoking controversy in the form of public discussion and debate, *Asking For It* (published in both YA and adult formats) raised important questions about attitudes to sexual violence, consent, and the role of media and pornography in normalising sexual violence. *Asking For It*, despite its many achievements – most notably its success in emphasising the need for social and political change in Ireland in relation to rape and sexual assault – does not consider the challenges involved in navigating ‘rape culture’ for all young people; nor the possible negative effects of actions such as ‘positive consent’ classes and legislation on sexual culture and freedom. Depictions of sexuality in the text align more with aspects of Kate Harding’s sensationalist, radical feminist criticism, than with the more nuanced critical approach of Peggy Orenstein or Laura Kipnis who recognises the lurking potential for extremism within the concept of ‘rape culture’. Consequently, the text is in danger of presenting extremism, in terms of male sexual violence, as normalcy and of endorsing a puritan appraisal of sexual relations which undermines, rather than promotes, equality. More broadly, this paper is concerned with examining how texts, like O’Neill’s, that contain overtly feminist political ideology rethink freedom and empowerment for women and girls – do they really propose new ways of thinking about power and gender or do they get lost in, or weighed down by, authorial agenda and controversy?

Key words: sexuality, consent, ‘rape culture’, gender, Irish YA

Jennifer Mooney is reading for a PhD in Children's Literature at Dublin City University and is in receipt of the School of English Doctoral Scholarship. Her dissertation focuses on the relationship between feminist theories of power and empowerment and the creative work of Irish author Louise O'Neill in the context of contemporary young adult literature. Her MA thesis was shortlisted for the ISSCL's Biennial Award for an Outstanding Thesis in Children's Literature 2015-2017. She was awarded the John Killeen medal in 2010. As an experienced primary school, drama, and TEFL teacher, Jennifer has taught literacy across primary, secondary and adult settings