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## The Cooking of Friendships: Nora Ephron and the Life-Work of "Mediated Intimacy"<sup>1</sup>

Nora Ephron - journalist, essayist, screenwriter, film director, and film producer - who is best-known for the revival of pithy romantic comedies *via* films including *When Harry Met Sally* (1989 dir. Reiner), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993 dir. Ephron), and *You've Got Mail* (1998 dir. Ephron), died on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2012, aged seventy-one - hardly "old age" in these times of extended life expectancy. However, for Ephron and her generation, earlier definitions of female "old age" prevailed: definitions in which the cessation of ovulation produced a cultural invisibility that Germaine Greer has called a "premature death."<sup>2</sup> It is notable then that Ephron's creativity, which initially manifested itself in politically-acute, satirical journalism in imprints such as *New York Post*, *Esquire*, and *New York Magazine*, flourished most fully as she reached this ostensible dead-end of *valued* feminine creativity. From this perspective, most of Ephron's creativity, indeed, her life's work, is the product of an "older" woman.

Similarly, Ephron's penultimate collection of essays, *I Feel Bad About My Neck AND OTHER THOUGHTS ON BEING A WOMAN* (2007),<sup>3</sup> reveal that, once she had reached her early sixties, she identified herself as "older." With characteristic humour, and her particular take on feminism, these essays rail against the physical changes that she associated with aging,

"[...] my ability to pick up something and read it - which has gone unchecked all my life up until now - is entirely dependent on the whereabouts of my reading glasses... Why aren't they in this room? I bought six pairs last week and sprinkled them about the house. Why aren't they visible?" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 84).

Yet, crucially, her essays also refute the temporary compensations promised by increasingly-normalised rejuvenation therapies, especially the "face-lift." In this respect, she warns,

"[if] I had a face-lift, my neck would be improved, no question, but my face would end up pulled and tight. I would rather squint at this sorry face and neck of mine in the mirror than confront a stranger who looks suspiciously like a drum pad." (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 18)

Four years later, in *I Remember Nothing AND OTHER REFLECTIONS* (2011),<sup>4</sup> she unequivocally declares: "Now the most important thing about me is that I'm old" (*I Remember Nothing...* 2011: 205). Ephron was terminally ill when she wrote these essays, painfully aware that her life-work was ending. With the wisdom of hindsight, it is now unsurprising that, despite the latent humour in her self-expression, she associates "old" with physical decline, bereavement, and mortality. In *I Remember Nothing...*, she writes from personal experience: "Once a week there's some sort of bad news. Once a month there's a funeral" (*I Remember Nothing...* 2011: 210). Here, Ephron's position usefully foregrounds the extent to which 'old' and 'older' are not neutrally-objective terms, but rather, to borrow from Donna Haraway (1988),<sup>5</sup> they are forms of "situated knowledges," that is, items of knowledge produced through highly-

1. The research carried out for the writing of this article has received support from the ACT (Aging+Communication +Technology) research project which is funded by the Canadian SSHRC.

2. Germaine Greer. *The Change: Women, Ageing, and the Menopause*. (London: Hamish Hamilton: 1991): 1.

3. Here, formatting conforms to the book's front matter, rather than its un-capitalised dust-jacket. Hereinafter, this title will be abbreviated to *I Feel Bad About My Neck...*

4. Here, formatting conforms to the book's front matter, rather than its un-capitalised dust-jacket. Hereinafter, this title will be abbreviated to *I Remember Nothing...*

5. Donna Haraway. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." (*Feminist Studies*. 14. 3, 1988): 575-599.

specific social locations and social interactions.

Ephron's situated knowledge of 'older' is a highly-complex intersection between economically-secure, White, heterosexual privilege, western stereotypes of age as decline, debilitating treatments for a rare form of incurable leukaemia, and, amazingly, a creative energy that, in total contradiction to the narrative of self-decline dominating her later essays, remained resolutely undiminished. From the age of fifty-seven in 1998 until her death at the age of seventy-one in 2012, in addition to the aforementioned essay collections, she wrote the screenplay for, directed, and produced *You've Got Mail* (1998), *Lucky Numbers* (2000), with co-writer Delia Ephron, *Bewitched* (2005), and *Julie and Julia* (2009).

At this point, it is useful to invoke Vincent Porter's (1983) scholarship on the role of the film producer.<sup>6</sup> Porter's work revises totally the dominant stereotype of the film producer as a money-grubbing barbarian devoid of artistic integrity. Instead, Porter foregrounds the creativity of the producer's role as it demands a sophisticated understanding of four interlocking skills: recognition of audience taste and box office trends at a given historical moment; the ability to persuade investors of the artistic and economic merits of a film; the vision to establish a creative team composed of the best possible artists in key roles; and, finally, the skills to manage the budget and the crew whilst holding fast to the overall artistic integrity of a film (Porter 1983: 179-180). Following Porter,<sup>7</sup> it is evident that, as the producer of ten films in total, Ephron's creativity in this area needs to be firmly recognised, especially since restrictions of space and archival access prevent any detailed analysis on this occasion. It is imperative to emphasise that film production is not subsidiary to Ephron's life-work: her writing and film direction. Film production is an aspect of her artistic scope that constitutes a fundamental element of her creative spirit. As Andrew Spicer suggests in respect of film producers *per se*, they possess "[a]n artistry all the more elusive because it is, for the most part, invisible."<sup>8</sup>

During the period 1998-2011, Ephron also wrote and produced *Hanging Up* (2000 dir. Diane Keaton), and produced *All I Wanna Do* (1998 dir. Sarah Kernochan), whilst continuing her journalistic commentary as a blogger on *The Huffington Post* and as a regular contributor to publications such as *Vogue* magazine, and *The New York Times*. At the time of her death, she had just completed a play about *New York Daily News* human rights journalist Mike McAlary; was working on a screenplay for a Peggy Lee biopic;<sup>9</sup> and, as James Atlas (2012) reports in a lengthy obituary for *Newsweek*, "[t]wo weeks before her death Ephron put in a long session from her hospital bed with producer Scott Rudin on a show about bankers for HBO."<sup>10</sup> This, to my mind, is a formidable achievement and goes some way towards explaining my partiality for Ephron. When her death was announced, I felt, in common with many of her obituary writers, as if an intimate friend had died, and I experienced a sense of grief that far exceeded simple regret that there would be no more essays or films from her. As an academic well-versed in cultural theory, my personal response, visceral as it might seem, has given rise to a curiosity within me to seek alternative, cultural explanations, that is, to situate this personal, emotional response within broader cultural locations.

Basic understandings of trauma offer one possible explanation due to a highly-charged, personal encounter with Ephron's work. To recall, a close friend of mine was terminally ill with breast cancer. Aged only forty-two, she was preparing to leave behind a much-loved husband and two small children. She asked me to go with her to watch *Sleepless in Seattle*, which was written and directed by Ephron, in

6. Vincent Porter. "The Context of Creativity: Ealing Studios and Hammer Films." James Curran, and Vincent Porter. Eds. *British Cinema History*. (London: Weidenteld and Nicholson, 1983).
7. See also Andrew Spicer. "The Production Line: Reflections on the Role of the Film Producer in British Cinema." (*Journal of British Cinema and Television*. 1. 1, 2004): 33-50.
8. Andrew Spicer. "The Precariousness of Production: Michael Klinger and the Role of the Film Producer in the British Film Industry during the 1970s." (University of the West of England Repository. Open-access.pdf, undated): 1.
9. *The Hollywood Reporter* (09 /11 /2014) reports that, following a screenplay re- write by Doug Wright, the film is proceeding with Reese Witherspoon playing the role of Peggy Lee, Todd Haynes directing, and Marc Platt producing.
10. James Atlas. "I'll Have What She Had." (*Newsweek*. 160. 3, July 16<sup>th</sup> 2012): 42--48.

the hope that a romantic comedy about a widowed father, Sam Baldwin,<sup>11</sup> who finds love through a radio phone-in show, might reassure her that her husband and children would be "alright" without her. It worked. My friend said afterwards that the film had helped her imagine a positive future for her family in which she was an absent-presence, rather than wholly absent. Her anger remained, but some of her despair was alleviated. Later, my friend's widower did remarry, and the optimism engendered by Ephron's work seemed to be validated. For me, one legacy of this experience is that now I can only watch that film from the point-of-view of Maggie Baldwin, the deceased wife.<sup>12</sup> Yet, thanks to the emotional intelligence of my late friend, and to Ephron's creative talent, this re- action is one of acceptance and relief, rather than anger and jealousy. In consequence, the emotional "tug on the heart strings," activated by the melodramatic excess of the film's happy ending, has especially rich resonances for me.

Here, there is no requirement for a trained psychotherapist to identify my sadness at Ephron's death as a traumatic return to the emotional register of both that night at the cinema and my subsequent grief at the loss of my very close friend. But such a deeply-individual explanation, convincing as it might be, does little to explain the broader appeal of Ephron's work and its powerful emotional charge that so readily positions the writer and director as a personal "friend." For the literary and film critic alike, the underlying conundrum is: how does Ephron's work create such an effect of intimacy? As this essay will elaborate, regardless of medium or mode of writing, and extending to include her work as a director and producer, the formal properties of Ephron's creative output combine to produce a complex mesh of "mediated intimacy."

## Mediated Intimacy

On the concept of "mediated intimacy," reference is acknowledged to Rory Moore's (2013) work on the nineteenth-century writer Dinah Mulock Craik.<sup>13</sup> Moore labels Craik "a proto-celebrity" owing to the ways by which she managed her literary persona through a "mediated intimacy" with her admirers,<sup>14</sup> that is, an intimacy mediated through *both* the narratives of her novels and the management of the publicity surrounding her publications. Indeed, as Moore observes, Dinah Mulock Craik's novel *The Ogilvies* (1849)<sup>15</sup> marks the first use of the term "celebrity" in its current understanding; and it also reflects on the requirement for literary stars to market *themselves* as much as their work. Concluding that "[a] study of Craik also reveals a keen attentiveness on her part to the demands of the public for a relationship with the author..., suggesting an active engagement with celebrity image management" (Moore 2013: 390), Moore draws a correlation between the demands and processes of celebrity culture and the production of a "mediated intimacy."

Although not made explicit, it is implicit to Moore's argument that Dinah Mulock Craik is not a fixed and knowable subject. Rather, Craik can be seen to slide between two positions, the writer in charge of her image and the image itself. There is something of the Barthesian posing body in all of this. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography* (1980), Roland Barthes contends that posing for a photograph produces a subjectivity split between the moment the shutter clicks and the resulting image: "Now once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image" (Barthes 1980: 10). Following Moore, it is clear that a camera is not a requirement for the subjective production of image, and that images are not wholly reliant on the visual. Rather, images can be just as reliant on discourse as on the camera, provided they stem from a subject's sense of being scrutinised by an external gaze of some kind.

It is not intended here to tease out the nuances of Barthes's theory. Nevertheless, his remarks on photography and image creation underline the fact that references here to Ephron do not presuppose a fixed and knowable historical subject, but rather, an *image* of the writer and director/producer made publicly available. It also underscores the fact that the production of that *image* is as dependent on discourse as it is

11. The character of Sam Baldwin in *Sleepless in Seattle* is played by Tom Hanks.

12. The character of Maggie Baldwin in *Sleepless in Seattle* is played by Carey Lowell.

13. Rory Moore. "A Mediated Intimacy: Dinah Mulock Craik and Celebrity Culture." (*Womens Writing*, 2013): 387--401.

14. Rosalind Gil uses the same term in her discourse analysis of sex and relationship advice in women's magazines. See "Mediated Intimacy and post-feminism: a discourse analytic examination of sex and relationships advice in a woman's magazine." (*Discourse and Communication*. 3. 4, 2009): 345- 369.

15. Dinah Mulock Craik. *The Ogilvies*. (London: Richard Ewing King, 1849).

on semiotics. This distinction between historical subject and image is vital in the case of Ephron for whom much of her cinematic creativity is collaborative. For instance, the screenplay for *Sleepless in Seattle* is credited to Nora Ephron, David S. Ward and Jeff Arch, yet direction of the film is credited to Ephron alone. For her final film, *Julie and Julia*, whilst the screenplay and direction are credited to Ephron alone, production is attributed to collaboration between Nora Ephron, Laurence Mark, Eric Steel, and Amy Robinson.<sup>16</sup> Thus, even though Ephron's public image is one of a singular creative force, it can be seen that multiple historical subjects underpin the individual identity of that image.

With that said, and returning to Moore's work on Craik, his account of "mediated intimacy" usefully illuminates the extent to which cultural norms, especially gender, help shape the constructed image of the celebrity writer. In the gender politics of Victorian separate-spheres ideologies, it was incumbent on literary women to be self-effacing, sometimes literally through anonymous publication or the use of pseudonyms, and always ideologically, through the exercise of feminine ideals of domestic confinement. One example, given by Moore, concerns an interview with Craik as a professional writer during which she expresses satisfaction at her husband's choice of sitting-room carpet. At a stroke, through the disclosure of an intimate domestic detail, she deftly defers to her husband and is, thereby, displaced from the public, masculine world of writing achievement and re-located within the patriarchal norms of feminine domesticity. Through such strategies, the celebrity *personae* of Victorian women writers were frequently those of 'Angels of the House,' whose intimacy with the public world of 'masculine' literature was represented as being respectably mediated through a 'feminine,' domestic filter.

This gendered binary successfully concretised to the extent that, women's suffrage and second-wave feminism notwithstanding, and in the context of an exponential proliferation of media networks, residues of these domestic antidotes to the Victorian woman writer's engagement with a masculine public world trace through the contemporary literary sphere. Consider, for instance, how much publicity has been given to the status of J.K. Rowling as a single mother, or the emphasis placed on the additional burdens of motherhood experienced by P.D. James who is reputed to start her day at 5 a.m. in order to manage the demands of contemporary domestic, multi-tasking. In this residual form, for these particular writers, "mediated intimacy" is produced through publicity material alone, rather than at the intersection of publicity and narrative content as in the case of Craik.

Notably, however, with Ephron, as exemplified by the novel *Heartburn* (1983),<sup>17</sup> an intersection of publicity and narrative content similar to that of Craik underpins the creation of "mediated intimacy." Initially, the novel's title offers a playful take on the meanings of heartburn - heartache and indigestion - whilst foregrounding the trope of inserting descriptions of favourite recipes into a first-person, confessional narrative of her ex-husband's infidelity and a resulting divorce. Subsequently, this novel was rapidly claimed by Ephron as a lightly-disguised autobiography. In *I Feel Bad About My Neck...*, two sentences sum up the thin disguise: "So I write a novel. I change my first husband's cats into hamsters, and I change the British Ambassador into an undersecretary of state, and I give my second husband a beard" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 162). As this condensation suggests, *Heartburn* is an account of Ephron's divorce from her second husband, investigative journalist Carl Bernstein, who, with Bob Woodward, exposed Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal. In the year they married, Ephron and Bernstein co-wrote a screenplay for *All the President's Men* (1976),<sup>18</sup> the film of those events, but this was rejected in favour of that by William Goldman. Just four years later, when she was seven months pregnant with their second child, Ephron discovered that Bernstein was having an affair with Margaret Jay, wife of the British Ambassador, and that he intended to leave her.

16. It should be noted that, although Nora Ephron is frequently individuated, this is a crediting convention of the film industry in which collaborative working practices are the norm.

17. Nora Ephron. *Heartburn*. (London: Virago, 1983).

18. The film *All the President's Men*, with screenplay by William Goldman, is directed by Alan J. Pakula, and stars Dustin Hoffman, Robert Redford, and Jack Warden



Characteristically for Ephron, a recipe for a favourite dish - mashed potato in this instance - connotes the emotional register of this "heartburn" scenario. She instructs, "Put through a potato ricer and immediately add 1 tablespoon of cream and as much melted butter and salt and pepper as you feel like. Serves one" (My emphasis. *Heartburn* 1983: 128). Here Ephron's seemingly simple writing is as deceptively rich as the dish described, since the everyday connotations of mashed potato signal the non-exceptionality of divorce per se, whilst its heart-breaking, singular emotional impact is registered in the solitary portion-size. No doubt, the fictionalisation of this turbulent story served to protect Ephron from all manner of litigation, whilst doing little to prevent a seamless alignment between the writer and the novel's narrator/protagonist, Rachel Samstat. This alignment is attenuated by seemingly throw-away lines such as, "I see I haven't managed to work in any recipes for a while. It's hard to work in recipes when you're moving the plot forward" (*Heartburn* 1983: 100). In this instance, the narrator/protagonist claims to be the writer. Through this conflation of first-person narrator and writer, the promise of intimate insights into Ephron's private life is held out. By extension, these promises privilege the personal and the domestic over the public, and they serve to secure the grounds for "mediated intimacy." Here, Ephron actively attends to the demands for the public's relationship with the writer through celebrity image management via the domestic, and, due to the recurring trope of recipes and food, the "mediated intimacy" thus produced "cooks up" the feeling of friendship held by many of her admirers. In this "cooking" of friendships, Ephron exemplifies what Chris Rojek (2001)<sup>19</sup> suggests of "celebrity" more broadly, that is, that "[i]t crosses the boundary between public and private worlds, preferring the personal, the private, the 'veridical' self" (Rojek 2001: 11).

The propensity to use cooking and food as a metaphor for emotional and domestic intimacies does not diminish as she "gets old." *I Feel Bad About My Neck...* contains an essay "Serial Monogamy: A Memoir" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 33- 51) which offers an extended auto/biographical riff on her relationship with cookery books and cooking. Typically for Ephron, the essay interleaves the emotional roller-coaster of falling-in-love through to eventual break-up of two forms of intense, serially-monogamous relationships - her marriages and her favourite cookery books. For Ephron, the cookery books she owns, and uses, are the barometer of her place in the world: "Owning *The Gourmet Cookbook* made me feel tremendously sophisticated" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 36); and, at the same time, food illuminates the kind of world she inhabits - "This is what it came down to in New York, you had to have pull to order fish" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 44). Yet, by the end of her reflections, she writes that it is "about finding a way that food fits into your life" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 50). If, as suggested, food functions as a metaphor for the intimacies of the domestic, then here, Ephron is relegating it to a minimal position - something of minor significance in the overall scheme of her life. This relegation marks a notable shift when compared to Moore's account of Craik. In Craik's Victorian milieu, it was necessary for women to subsume their writing into the domestic, to make it seem as if writing was a mere accessory to a life defined by the domestic. In Ephron's post-second-wave feminist milieu, the reverse is the case; it is the domestic that is subsumed as if no more than an accessory and it is the woman writer's place in the public world that is taken for granted. Thus, through Ephron's creativity, we can begin to recognise how Moore's account of "mediated intimacy" is historically-specific in its formations and is constituted and reconstituted in line with shifting expectations of gender.

### Auto/biographic Intimacy

In Ephron's case, the "mediated intimacy" of image production cannot be separated from the highly-personal address of her writing. Re- viewing *I Feel Bad About My Neck...*, Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* says, "She has an uncanny ability to sound like your best friend, whoever you are."<sup>20</sup> To a large

19 Chris Rojek. *Celebrity*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

20 Janet Maslin. "Oh, the Indignity: Nora Ephron Confronts Aging and Other New York Battles." (*The New York Times*. July 27<sup>th</sup> 2006).

extent, this intimate and familiar address stems from the formal properties of the writing - a combination of first-person narration constituted through informal, conversational prose and auto/biographical content. As already suggested, the narrative "I" of Ephron's writing functions to suggest an unmediated link between the thoughts of the writer and the novel's narration; it is as if the words on the page are her unfettered thoughts about deep, emotional experiences and memories. For instance, on her parents she writes: "Alcoholic parents are so confusing. They're your parents, so you love them. But they're drunks, so you hate them. But you love them. But you hate them" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 64). There is a sense here that she is confiding her deepest, repressed traumas as they rupture into her conscious line-of-thought. In the course of her essays, Ephron talks about her early ambitions, her current ambitions, marriage, divorce, parenting, cooking, home-decoration, house-removals, friendship, love, work, her body, and mortality. It is as if no part of her life is sacrosanct. Seemingly every intimate secret is laid out in a transparent gesture of honesty, as if she were talking to a trusted therapist or friend. But crucially, her pithy humour - "When your children are teenagers it's important to have a dog so that someone in the house is happy to see you"<sup>21</sup> - prevents this from becoming mawkish, and indeed, secures it in the realm of self-revelatory, intimate gossip.

In *I Feel Bad About My Neck...*, Ephron attributes this propensity to "tell all" to the influence of her mother, screenwriter Phoebe Ephron (nee Wolkind), who gave the piece of advice, "Everything is copy, take notes" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 157). Phoebe Ephron evidently followed her own advice when, in 1961, she collaborated with Nora Ephron's father, Henry Ephron, on a successful Broadway play, *Take Her. She's Mine* (1963).<sup>22</sup> In *I Remember Nothing...*, Ephron reiterates this story about the adaptation of her own life into, first, a Broadway play, and then later, into the screenplay for the film (*I Remember Nothing...* 2011: 64). This chain of reiteration secures the domestic/public dynamic of "mediated intimacy," whilst also highlighting the irony in the book's title in that Ephron categorically remembers "some thing(s)," but also safeguards against forgetting "any thing(s)" through the prompts of her confessional creative output. Meanwhile, a forthcoming HBO TV documentary film about Ephron's life and work, *Everything is Copy* (2015 dir. Bernstein),<sup>23</sup> takes Phoebe Ephron's mantra as its title. This documentary throws a spotlight on both the persistence and mobility of the memories deployed by Ephron in the formulation of her "mediated intimacy," whilst at the same time it serves as a useful reminder that the death of the historical subject does not diminish celebrity image, and indeed, can enhance it. And crucially, foregrounded by this film is a flow between first- and second-person life-stories that shows the extent to which biographic and autobiographic genres are intimately linked.

Exploring the flows between first- and second-person life narratives, Liz Stanley (1995) was amongst the first to collapse the categories "autobiography" and "biography" into the articulated term "auto/biography."<sup>24</sup> Concerned with the "truth claims" made by life-writing, that is, edited diaries and published letters, in the context of the exponential growth in the popularity of these forms, Stanley's basic premise is that there is no inherent or generic difference between autobiography and biography because each raises the same ontological and epistemological issues about partiality, omissions, and fabrications in the narrativised representation of a life. Extending the point even further, Laura Marcus (1994)<sup>25</sup> suggests that auto/biography is "[d]ifficult to define as a distinct genre, because it hovers ... on the borderline

21 Nora Ephron. *Heartburn*. (London: Virago, 1983): 183.

22 *Take Her. She's Mine* is based on Phoebe Ephron's daughter's move from California to Wellesley College on the eastern seaboard. The play was adapted for the screen by Nunally Johnson in 1963.

23 *Everything is Copy* is directed by Jacob Bernstein, Nora Ephron's son.

24 See Liz Stanley. *The Auto/biographical T: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Autobiography*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

25 See Laura Marcus. *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic,<sup>26</sup> the everyday and the literary" (Marcus 1994: 16). It is precisely this complex auto/biographical mesh, with its multiple interpellatory hooks, that facilitates the "mediated intimacy" of Ephron's celebrity and its offer of personal friendship to "whoever you are."

The intimacy engendered within this auto/biographical web is attenuated by Ephron's hallmark - her self-deprecating, confessional "voice." For instance, in *I Feel Bad About My Neck...*, she comments on her own embodiment of the signs of aging: "If I pass a mirror I avert my eyes. If I must look into it, I begin by squinting, so that if anything really bad is looking back at me I am already half way to closing my eyes to ward off the sight" (*I Feel Bad About My Neck...* 2007: 17), and in *I Remember Nothing...*, the aging Ephron reflects on her creative failures: "I have had a lot of flops...a couple of my flops eventually became cult movie hits, which is your last and final hope for a flop, but most of my flops remained flops" (*I Remember Nothing...* 2011: 175). Such self-deprecating reflection exemplifies how Ephron's style can be seen to bridge the cutting, political, observational wit of mid-twentieth century Dorothy Parker,<sup>27</sup> and the consumerist self-obsessions of postfeminist, chick-lit exemplified by Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* novels (1997-2011),<sup>28</sup> and their TV adaptations (HBO 1998-2004). It is noteworthy that some internet blog-sites claim that Carrie Bradshaw, the protagonist of New York-set *Sex and the City*, is loosely based on Ephron.<sup>29</sup> The veracity of these claims notwithstanding, they are now embedded in Ephron's celebrity image; regardless of her chronological age and her self-identification with "getting old," she is effectively aligned with the aged thirty-something protagonists of these post-feminist texts. Thus, it can be seen that the self-deprecations of Ephron's "mediated intimacy" close over the ostensible generational schisms associated with chronological age. Equally, these slides across chronological categories offer the potential for an elision between Ephron and the feisty, female protagonists of her most successful film narratives, Sally Albright in *When Harry Met Sally*, Annie Reed in *Sleepless in Seattle*, and Kathleen Kelly in *You've Got Mail*,<sup>30</sup> in ways that echo the writer/protagonist connotations of her essays.

### Intergenerational Intimacies

This, of course, is only a potential elision. But this possibility is given further purchase because Ephron inserts a female point-of-view into the classic tropes of the romantic comedy genre that, despite its categorization as feminine, typically has narratives organised around an active male hero and his desires, that is, "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl." In marked distinction, Ephron's films place heterosexual, female desires at their centre and show a concern for the ways in which romance and the pursuit of a for-life partner fits in with women's professional lives. Thus, Sally in *When Harry Met Sally* is a journalist, so too is Annie in *Sleepless in Seattle*, and in *You've Got Mail*, Kathleen is a bookstore owner. Here Ephron's characters chime with those post-feminist expectations for women to "have it all," including the pursuit of a for-life, romantic partner. But, in line with what Steve Neale (1981)<sup>31</sup> terms "generic verisimilitude," that is, faithfulness to genre, that quest for a for-life partner is formulated as a series of obstacles to be overcome. Notably, the biggest obstacle is the protagonist's rational voice which constantly disrupts her ability to trust her own feelings. In *When Harry Met Sally*, Sally is unsure that her

26 As illustrated by the introduction to this essay.

27 See Dorothy Parker. *The Collected Dorothy Parker*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).

28 Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City*. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1997); Candace Bushnell. *Four Blondes*. (New York: Grove Press, 2001); Candace Bushnell. *Trading Up*. (New York: Hyperion, 2003); Candace Bushnell. *Lipstick Jungle*. (New York: Hyperion, 2005); Candace Bushnell. *One Fifth Avenue*. (New York: Hachette Books, 2008); Candace Bushnell. *The Carrie Diaries*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010); Candace Bushnell. *Summer and the City*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011).

29 See, for example, Anon. <[www.thehipsterette.com.au/wordpress/?tag=nora-ephron](http://www.thehipsterette.com.au/wordpress/?tag=nora-ephron)>

30 The characters Sally Albright in *When Harry Met Sally*, Annie Reed in *Sleepless in Seattle*, and Kathleen Kelly in *You've Got Mail* are all played by Meg Ryan.

31 Steve Neale. "Questions of Genre." (*Screen*. 13. 1, 1981): 45-66.



best friend might also be her life-partner; in *Sleepless in Seattle*, Annie is not convinced she can fall in love over the air waves; in *You've Got Mail*, Kathleen is doubtful whether the corporate man can be sensitive and compassionate. In this way, the narratives hold out the unsettling potential for the intimacies of romance and sexual union to be bypassed, for the happy-ending to be deferred. The DVD cover tag-line for *Sleepless in Seattle* - "What if someone you never met, someone you never saw, someone you never knew was the only someone for you?" - succinctly registers a narrative tension between rationality and emotion, its direct address engaging audiences into these particular intimacies of "generic verisimilitude."

Ironically, despite the substitution of female for male desire in the genre, Ephron's films have become the target of feminist critique. Prior to *When Harry Met Sally*, Ephron's screenplay writing was broadly realist and auto/biographic. For instance, the film *Silkwood* (1983 dir. Nichols) tells the "true story" of nuclear whistle-blower Karen Silkwood,<sup>32</sup> whilst the novel *Heartburn* offers an insider's interrogation of the gender politics of marriage. Though not overtly feminist in the manner of films such as *The Piano* (1993 dir. Campion) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991 dir. Scott), their feisty female protagonists and storylines of working women leave little doubt that Ephron's films are shaped by a feminist sensibility about patriarchal culture, both industrial and domestic. However, this sensibility is rapidly subsumed by the patriarchal conventions of the genre, and some critics now locate her films within a post-feminist discourse.

For instance, analysis of the recent Ephron-produced remakes, *The Stepford Wives* (2004 dir. Oz) and *Bewitched* (2005 dir. Ephron), leads Sherryl Vint (2007)<sup>33</sup> to argue that comedy has been added to the panoply of strategies holding up the virulent, anti-feminist backlash first identified by Susan Faludi (1991).<sup>34</sup> Coining the term "New Backlash," Vint suggests that these films feature, indeed celebrate, female protagonists who reap the benefits of feminist achievement in terms of normalised career opportunities, economic and social independence, and guilt-free sexual activity. At the same time, the narratives disavow the political activism behind those achievements. Vint adds that, whereas earlier post-feminist films tended to vilify feminism, in these films, feminism is the comedic butt and is, thus, rendered trivial, pointless, and irrelevant. Bizarrely, due to this connection between Ephron and post-feminism, the interleaving of Ephron with Carrie Bradshaw, the ultimate post-feminist heroine, is strengthened.

However, while aspects of Ephron's work do support Vint's argument, her narratives are not monolithic, and other, more positive approaches are available. For instance, Roberta Garrett (2012)<sup>35</sup> also argues that Ephron's films can be "[v]iewed as part of a general backlash against the permissiveness of the 1960s and 1970s mode" of romantic comedy because they reintroduce the marital denouement to the genre (Garrett 2012: 178). Garrett does not see this as a retrograde rejection of feminist critiques. Rather, she suggests that Ephron offers a nuanced reflection on the pleasures of the genre - pleasures split between cynicism and fantasy. Writing about the drafting of the screenplay of *Sleepless in Seattle*, Garrett notes that allusions to the film *An Affair to Remember* (1957 dir. Leo McCarey), in an earlier version of the screenplay by Jeff Arch,<sup>36</sup> "[r]einforce the idea of true love and predestination" (Garrett 2012: 185). However, in Ephron's subsequent draft, "[r]eferences to the prior romance serve to emphasize the fantasy elements of such cultural forms and, by implication, the idealistic views of romance that they carry" (Garrett 2012: 185). This is best demonstrated in dialogue in a scene where Annie and Becky,<sup>37</sup> Annie's long-married and

32 The character of Karen Silkwood in the film *Silkwood* is played by Merry! Streep.

33 Sherryl Vint. "The New Backlash: Popular Culture's 'Marriage' with Feminism, or Love Is All You Need." (*Journal of Popular Film and Television*. 34. 4, 2007).

34 Susan Faludi. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*. (New York: Anchor, 1992).

35 Roberta Garrett. "Female fantasy and post-feminist politics in Nora Ephron's screenplays." (*Journal of Screenwriting*. 3. 2, 2012).

36 See Nora Ephron, and Delia Ephron. *Sleepless in Seattle* by Jeff Arch. United States of America: Tristar Pictures, 1992. [Final draft]

37 The character of Becky in this version of *Sleepless in Seattle* is played by Rosie O'Donnell.

tougher working-class-friend, watch television as *An Affair to Remember* is screened. Annie is enraptured, claiming: "Now those were the days when people knew how to be in love," only to be met with Becky's riposte: "That's your problem. You don't want to be in love. You want to be in love in a movie" (*Sleepless in Seattle* 1993). It is implicit to Garrett's argument that the friendship between Annie and Becky is echoed by the intimate relationship between Ephron and her audiences, an intimacy grounded in the culturally-shared knowledge of the romantic comedy genre, and the attendant tension between the fantasy of romance and the rational cynicism of experience.

If, as is argued here, intimacy is the consistent thread of Ephron's work, both between characters within the narrative and between the writer and her readers/audience, this cannot be limited to the aged thirty-something peer group of her protagonists, since intergenerational relationships between women are one of the bedrocks of her work, and older women have significant, if not starring roles. The iconic fake orgasm scene in *When Harry Met Sally* gives the punch line - "I'll have what she's having" - to an older woman, whose drab appearance initially plays into the Hollywood stereotype of undesirable and undesiring aging femininity, only for this to be subverted by her vocal expression of ongoing sexual desire. Meanwhile, both *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail* feature protagonists who have deep and meaningful relationships with their mothers; in the former instance, even after death. This thread of inter-generational, female intimacy is best realised in, and by, Ephron's final film, *Julie and Julia*.

Moving between Europe in the nineteen-fifties and New York in the noughties, *Julie and Julia* intertwines the true stories of two women writers, the unknown Julie Powell,<sup>38</sup> and Julia Child,<sup>39</sup> the famed American cookery book writer and celebrity cook. The women never meet and are connected only by Julia Child's classic cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961, 1970),<sup>40</sup> when Powell, a struggling writer who earns a living at a call-centre giving advice to victims of the 9/11 attacks, sets herself the target of spending one year cooking all five hundred and twenty-four dishes in Child's book as the basis for a blog that eventually opens the way for professional success as a food-writer and journalist. The narrative employs intercutting techniques to draw parallels between Child and Powell, establishing that both are married; both childless with fertility problems; and both seeking fulfilment beyond a heterosexual union and a pay-check. Crucially, this intercutting establishes a complex mesh of "mediated intimacy," predicated on the domestic art of cooking as it plays between the public and private spheres: a "mediated intimacy" that unites Child and Powell in an inter-generational mentor/pupil dynamic; that links Child with her implied readers and television audience; that connects Powell to her implied blog followers; that forges a bond of friendship between each protagonist and the film's audience; and of course, re-inscribes the "mediated intimacy" already established between Ephron and her admirers. Clearly then, *Julie and Julia* both *exemplifies* and *performs* "mediated intimacy," and thus establishes a continuity between Craik's generation of public women and those of today; whilst also illuminating the discontinuities of changing communication technologies and formations of femininity that underpin that intimacy.

As with other Ephron-directed films, the soundtrack of *Julie and Julia* employs popular music hits to organise a nostalgic structure of feeling for this mesh of inter-generational "mediated intimacies." As Ian Garwood (2000)<sup>41</sup> argues in a detailed analysis of *Sleepless in Seattle*, the pop-music voiceover functions as a guide to both the emotions of character at a given moment, and what the viewer should be feeling at that moment. This chimes with the film's pictorial *mise-en-scene* - lighting, costume, decor, cookers, pans and dishes, and cupboards - which produces and authenticates period specificity and associated formations of femininity. In her nineteen-fifties milieu, Child is represented as a proto-feminist in a culture where "none of

38 The character of Julie Powell in *Julie and Julia* is played by Amy Adams.

39 The character of Julia Child in *Julie and Julia* is played by Merry! Streep.

40 Julia Child, Louisette Bertholle, and Simone Beck. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking: Volume One*. (Alfred Knopf: New York, 1961); Julia Child, and Simone Beck. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking: Volume Two*. (Alfred Knopf: New York, 1970).

41 Ian Garwood. "Must You Remember This? Orchestrating the 'standard' pop song in *Sleepless in Seattle*." (*Screen*. 41. 3, Autumn 2000).

the wives here work." At the same time, her encounters at the Cordon Bleu cookery school establish the post-Second World War retrenchment of gendered spheres of work. Under Ephron's direction, Child, as superbly performed by Merry] Streep, is always clumsily out of place - too big and awkward for the spaces she inhabits. To some extent, this is part of the film's cultural verisimilitude, since Child was over six feet tall. But equally, Child's spatial awkwardness serves to register her displacement from the regulatory norms of nineteen-fifties femininity. Similarly, in the noughties sequences, Powell is juxtaposed with stereotypes of post-feminist success, that is, women with high-paying careers and consumer habits to match. These juxtapositions establish that she, like Child, fails to fulfil her generation's ideals of successful femininity. Indeed, this point is forced home when Powell is used by one of her peers on the cover of *New York Magazine* as a poster-girl for under-achievement.

More to the point, Powell adopts the kinds of identificatory practices associated with fandom, not only cooking Child's recipes, but also matching her kitchen equipment to that used by Child, and notably, wearing a string of pearls identical to her virtual mentor's. In an ethnographic study of Hollywood star fandom that challenges Laura Mulvey's (1975)<sup>42</sup> psychoanalytic account of the female spectator's passive desire, Jackie Stacey (1994)<sup>43</sup> argues that these kinds of active replications are "[l]oaded with emotional intensity," and that "[t]hese forms of feminine fantasy involve intense forms of intimacy between star and spectator, which may or may not involve consumption" (Stacey 1994: 211). Stacey's work is of significance here for several reasons. First, it extends Rory Moore's account of "mediated intimacy" beyond the writer's one-sided management of public image, to include the *active engagement* of fans.<sup>44</sup> Building on Stacey's work, it can be recognised that "mediated intimacy" is a mutually-supportive dynamic which benefits both celebrities and their admirers. Thus "mediated intimacy" is established as a two-way street of mutual need and support. Second, and most importantly, it suggests that heterosexual romance is not the only fantasy stimulated by Ephron's work; that romantic comedies should not be reduced to the pleasures of romance because other modes of desire and consumption are in play. Such pleasures undoubtedly include deep, emotional relations between women, both peer group and inter-generational. Just as important are modes of identification that recognise the struggles of daily survival in meeting the co-existing demands of the public world of work and the privacy of domesticity, the pain of childlessness, the joy of love, and the attendant grief of loves lost through break-ups and bereavement. Third, I would suggest that one of the pleasurable feminine fantasies at work here is an idealised retro-version of second-wave feminism that is chronologically located somewhere between Child's proto-feminism and Powell's post-feminism. Crucially, this fantasy retro-feminism is predicated on domesticity by choice - rather than by compulsion as in the nineteen-fifties or denial in the noughties. By the same token, it is not defined by adherence to post-feminist consumption and associated regulatory regimes of fashion, thinness, and ideals of beauty *à la Sex and the City*. And most importantly, it is a feminine fantasy in which the term consumption is focussed on the sensory and emotional pleasures of food, both in cooking and eating, instead of the prevailing culture of denial. Thus here, "mediated intimacy" not only secures Ephron's image within the domestic; it simultaneously mobilises a range of feminine desires that link Ephron to her fans - and possibly to her readers/audiences - and that "magically" resolve the tension between traditional formulations of femininity and those versions of post-feminism that seemingly reject such traditions.

\* \* \*

To conclude then, this essay suggests that "mediated intimacy" characterises Ephron's creative life-work and that it produces and reproduces the image of Ephron as an individuated, creative, culturally-produced, and self-defined older woman. For Ephron, the gendered negotiations between the private and the public spheres that attend "mediated intimacy" are underpinned by an attention to cooking and food in ways that highlight the cultural shifts in the formulation of femininity since the nineteenth century, whilst also remaining

42 Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." (*Screen*. 16. 3, 1975).

43 Jackie Stacey. *Stargazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

44 Whilst not all readers /audiences are fans, by definition, all fans are readers/audience.

relevant to the contemporary post-feminist moment. Yet despite the potential for Ephron's image to be elided with thirty-something post-feminism, its "older woman" framing secures an intergenerational appeal that refutes the arbitrary categories of chronological age and establishes a terrain of women's pleasure based upon multiple sites of desire. These include the pleasures offered by a shared knowledge of the romantic comedy genre that is split between the fantasy of romance and a knowing cynicism of the everyday realities of coupledness. Equally, Ephron's life-work mobilises the pleasure of inter-generational intimacy between women that places the joy of cooking and eating at its heart in ways that refute the self-denials of consumerist post-feminism, whilst weaving a fantasy retro-feminism that allows women to *really* "have it all" - career, romance - and those pleasures and comforts produced in the cooking of friendships, both embodied and virtual.

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