

*ARE YOU SERIOUS?  
THE EMILIA REPORT  
INTO THE GENDER  
GAP FOR AUTHORS*



DANUTA KEAN

## Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	2
<i>Introduction: Why “Are You Serious”?</i> .....	3
<i>Part I: Comparison of broadsheet coverage of 10 male and female writers in the same market by Danuta Kean and Isabel de Vasconcellos</i> .....	4
General observations .....	4
Direct comparisons .....	5
Conclusion .....	9
<i>Part II: Are You Serious? A qualitative survey of the experiences of 27 women novelists.</i>	10
Domestic agenda .....	11
Serious work .....	11
A devil’s binding .....	13
The pram in the hallway .....	13
Will quality triumph? .....	14
<i>Key recommendations</i> .....	16
<i>The Emilia Report Methodology</i> .....	17
Part I Comparative study: .....	17
Part II Qualitative study: .....	17
<i>About the authors of the report</i> .....	17

## Introduction

In 2017 Michelle Terry, artistic director of The Globe, introduced me to Emilia Bassano. Until then, like many women, I had never heard of her. But Michelle told me that Emilia was possibly the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's Sonnets – a theory backed by “Emilia” being the most used woman's name in Shakespeare's plays.

I was intrigued: here was a woman who was at the heart of literary life in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century: a contemporary of Shakespeare and Marlowe and the first woman to publish a collection of poetry for money, yet, outside of academic circles, few knew of her.

Posterity may have ignored her, but Emilia was an outstanding woman: capable of publishing a book and getting patronage so that she could pursue her writing. She knew how to play the system: she knew how to get around strict censorship that limited women to write only religious texts. She knew also that unless she published a book, her work would die with her. I am convinced that had women been equal to men of the time, we would have a body of work to remember her by. Instead, the vast majority of her work has probably been lost.

This is why when I wrote Emilia I wanted the play to be about the lost voices of women. I wanted it to be about who is listened to, who is treated with regard and who is remembered. Emilia is a play that celebrates not only a great woman writer but every woman and marginalised community that has been given the silent treatment.

The findings of the Emilia Report are important because they show why it is vital to listen to those outside a tiny group of white men. That the idea of women's writing being unimaginative and “domestic” is a lie and that our creations have as much to say about the human condition as those of men.

When Emilia first opened some criticism used the word “feminist” as if it was an insult. It is not. Emilia is unabashedly feminist. But it is also about more than a woman's right to be heard. It is about the universal voice and how that is reflected in the work of women as well as men. Emilia was speaking for us all, the struggles she faced, whether to write, to manage the conflicting demands of family and to earn a living are current and universal. Her story is one that chimes with us all.

Our society is not used to women working, what else explain the barriers to being taken seriously for our work that continue to undermine us. If you doubt that, it is worth remembering that women who work cannot easily claim for childcare when filing their tax return but could claim for a chauffeur. Those are structural values we need to challenge. By speaking out, the women interviewed for the Emilia Report are laying the groundwork for that conversation.

It is time to value what women do in their lives, whether at home or work. It is time to value their voices and challenge the structures that hold us back. It is time women like Emilia Bassano were not forgotten but celebrated and their place in society secured.

Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, March 2019 - Playwright

## Introduction: Why “Are You Serious”?

Emilia Bassano is a name that has been largely forgotten throughout history. Her reputation eclipsed by the men she knew. But this is a woman whose reputation is worthy of revival. A muse of Shakespeare and a candidate for the “Dark Lady of the Sonnets”, in 1610 she became the first published female poet. Her struggle for recognition as an artist equal in talent and ambition to men and to earn a living wage from her work chime with those struggles of her fellow women writers 400 years later.

To mark the West End opening of Emilia, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm’s spirited reinterpretation of the poet’s life, the producers of the play commissioned me to research the issues women writers face in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, comparing the publicity for 10 writers – five female and five male – who published books at the same time and in the same genres. I was also asked to interview established women writers, to see how much their experience of being published – both the coverage they receive and their ability to work as creative artists – had changed.

It may seem that the struggles of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century woman to be taken seriously as a poet are incomparable to modern women who have benefitted from three waves of feminism, 40 years of equality legislation, universal suffrage and advances in science that have freed them from the tyranny of their bodies, but, though the landscape of their lives may be different, the structures that inhibit their path to recognition and success are not.

The following report represents the findings of both strands of research and offers some direction for change.

Danuta Kean  
March 2019

## Part I: Comparison of broadsheet coverage of 10 male and female writers in the same market by Danuta Kean and Isabel de Vasconcellos

During her life Emilia Bassano received limited recognition and struggled to sustain an income that would enable her to continue publishing her work. Though the ecology of publication is far different in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, it remains that there is a virtual circle in which recognition helps create a viable income, which, in turn enables an author to continue writing and improve their craft, leading, hopefully, to wider recognition.

It was with this in mind that we compared five female and five male writers in the same field and asked if there was any difference in the amount and type of coverage they received in newspapers – the first step on the ladder for literary recognition.

All the books – by five men and five women - were published in 2017 or 2018. The writers and works compared were:

- Literary Fiction: Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* and Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*
- Prize winners: Jon McGregor’s *Reservoir 13* and Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*
- Debut novelists: Stuart Turton’s *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* and Imogen Hermes Gowar’s *The Mermaid and Mrs Handcock*
- Commercial fiction: Matt Haig’s *How To Stop Time* and Rowan Coleman’s *The Summer of Impossible Things*
- Fantasy fiction: Neil Gaiman’s *Norse Mythology* and Joanne Harris’s *A Pocket Full of Crows*

We looked at coverage of the authors and their books in the Guardian, The Observer, Sunday Times, Times, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, in the first year of publication. We also compared their coverage in the main tabloids, the Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, the Mirror and The Sun. For each article we noted the newspaper section, the writer of the article, their gender and personal references about the author.

### General observations

- **No equality of coverage:** Though a more detailed breakdown of results appears below, what was immediately clear was that for writers in the most commercial markets there was no equality of coverage. New books by men received 56% of review coverage – 12% more than their female counterparts. At launch neither Joanne Harris or Rowan Coleman received any coverage of their books in broadsheet newspapers, despite being bestselling writers. In contrast, both Neil Gaiman and Matt Haig, to whom their books compare, received widespread coverage.
- **Commercial vs literary:** lines remain blurred between so-called literary and other genre fiction. That Haig’s book could be referred to in several reviews as light, positive and romantic, reflects the fact that the interpretation of the ‘what is literary fiction?’ is largely in the hands of the beholder, which explains the frustration of women writing in the same markets whose work is unnoticed (see part II for full analysis).

- **Reviews:** that books by men were more likely to be reviewed than books by women in the survey should be of concern. Women achieved just 44% of new books reviewed at launch. While it is a moot point that a review will sell a book, they flag quality and are used in marketing materials and promotion to literary prize juries. In a competitive market in which publishers cut lists ruthlessly, they contribute evidence that an author is worth retaining even if sales of the latest work have disappointed.
- **Women reviewers:** The number of women reviewers in national newspapers appears to have increased following criticism from the Vida Count, which monitors gender disparity in literary publications, with women reviewers and interviewers responsible for more than half of editorial.
- **Weighting of reviews by gender:** Contrary to widespread belief, there was no evidence that men only review men and women only review women. In fact, in the cases of Jon McGregor’s *Reservoir 13* 50% of the reviews were by women, whereas over 50% of the reviews of Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* were by men. Women reviewers dominated coverage of the debuts of both Stuart Turton and Imogen Hermes Gowar.
- **Personal references:** references to women writers’ ages were ubiquitous, even in reviews. Women were twice as likely to have their age referenced as part of a review. Only in the case of Kamila Shamsie and Jon McGregor did the number of personal references made of a man outstrip those of a woman. In the case of Sally Rooney, only five articles out of 16 failed to mention her age – of these three were reviews. As this was her second novel, it could be argued that her age was “old news”.

## Direct comparisons

### 1. Literary Fiction: Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* and Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*

- Amount of coverage: Coe = 10 articles; Rooney = 12.
- Type of coverage:
  - Reviews: Coe = 7 Rooney = 6
  - Interviews: Coe = 3 Rooney = 2
  - News: Coe = 0 Rooney = 7
  - Op Ed: Coe = 0 Rooney = 1
- Gender balance of writers:
  - Coe = 5 M 4 F Rooney = 3 M, 12 = F
- Personal references:
  - Age: Coe = 2 Rooney = 11
- Typical commentary:
  - Of Coe:
    - “In its politics, just as in its gripes about public transport, this is a great big Centrist Dad of a novel” – Sam Leith, *Guardian* (11/16/2018)
    - “Q: You’re married with two daughters. How do you manage to write at home in the midst of family life?” – Lisa O’Kelly, *Guardian*. (11/4/2018)
  - Of Rooney:
    - Julia Hunt’s news item in the *Times* (8/1/2019) focuses entirely on her age.

- “God forbid that, like Sally Rooney, you are a 27-year-old female writer - that leads to its own set of complications. I'm still smarting over the radio interviewer who asked whether she had conducted an affair with an older man, like one of the characters in her debut novel *Conversations with Friends*. When was the last time that anyone asked Bret Easton Ellis if he had butchered people while listening to Phil Collins?” Claire Cohen, *The Telegraph* 1/8/2018)
- “People are so unabashed about it,” Rooney said later. “I come on [radio] to talk about my book and I’m getting asked about my sex life. It’s so strange. So definitely on that level. But I made the mistake, in my opinion, of responding by saying ‘No’, when what I should’ve said was ‘It’s actually none of your business’.” In an interview with Anita Singh, *Telegraph* (7/12/2018)

## 2. Prize winners: Jon McGregor’s *Reservoir 13* and Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*

- Amount of coverage:      McGregor = 18              Shamsie = 21
- Type of coverage:
  - Reviews:              McGregor = 7              Shamsie =4
  - Interviews:            McGregor = 1              Shamsie =3
  - News:                  McGregor = 10             Shamsie =14
  - Op Ed:                 McGregor = 0              Shamsie =0
- Gender balance of writers:
  - McGregor =        8 = M                      6=F
  - Shamsie =         5 = M                      13 = F
- Personal references:
  - Age:                    McGregor = 4              Shamsie = 1
- Typical commentary:
- Of McGregor:
  - “Turning 41 this year, he is a slight man with a bone-dry sense of humour.” – Justine Jordan, *Guardian* (4/7/17)
  - “Jon McGregor has been quietly building a reputation as one of the outstanding writers of his generation since 2002, when he became the youngest writer to be longlisted for the Booker prize with his debut, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, published when he was 26.” Stephanie Merritt, *Observer* (23/4/2017)
  - “Fun fact: I have never been asked how I juggle writing and fatherhood. I’m not complaining; it’s nobody’s business, and nothing to do with writing. But I wonder what assumptions lie behind the question of juggling writing and motherhood coming up so regularly?” – Jon McGregor, *Guardian* (1/6/18)
- Of Shamsie:
  - “She was selected in 2013 for *Granta*’s list of the 20 most promising authors under 40 and became a British citizen in the same year.” Natalie Haynes, *Guardian* (8/10/17)
  - Six of the pieces were self-penned.
  - “The question Shamsie asks in this fearless but hugely troubling novel is why did Britain, so ineffably proud of its post-colonial “liberal tolerance”,

think that multiculturalism would be easy? Or even possible? And if it isn't possible, where do we go now? "We" including, of course, most British Muslims." John Sutherland, *The Time* (12/8/17)

### 3. Debut novelists: Stuart Turton's *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* and Imogen Hermes Gowar's *The Mermaid and Mrs Handcock*

- Amount of coverage: Turton =18 Hermes Gowar =20
- Type of coverage:
  - Reviews: Turton = 6 Hermes Gowar =11
  - Interviews: Turton = 0 Hermes Gowar = 2
  - News: Turton = 11 Hermes Gowar = 4
  - Op Ed: Turton = 2 Hermes Gowar = 2
- Gender balance of writers:
  - Turton : 5=M 10=F
  - Hermes Gowar: 3=M 12=F
- Personal references:
  - Age: Turton = 1 Hermes Gowar = 4

Typical commentary:

- Of Turton:
  - "His debut *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* might be praised as an "ingenious, intriguing and highly original mindbender of a murder mystery" by judges after it landed the Costa first novel award, but author Stuart Turton says that the process of writing it was "just awful"." Alison Flood in the *Guardian* (7/1/2019)
  - "It's the literary equivalent of Cluedo meeting Inception, with a healthy dose of Groundhog Day thrown in." Sam Lelic, *Guardian* (5/9/2018)
  - "as an intellectual thriller, the book can't be faulted, and in the end, it's the story that triumphs, with a series of last-minute revelations as dazzling as the finale of a fireworks show." Carrie O'Grady, *Guardian* (3/3/2018)
- Of Hermes Gowar:
  - "Her personal life was tough, too: her mother had been diagnosed with cancer, and Gowar had moved back home to Kingston upon Thames to look after her." Alex Clark, *Observer* (14/1/2018)
  - "'Historically I think we have always cast mermaids' freedom and sexual power as something dangerous [luring men away from home, dashing ships on rocks] and harmful to communities," she says.' Sarah Hughes, feature, *Observer* (7/1/2018)
  - "Would that showmanship were a gender-neutral word, though, because all the élan of this book is female, from the madams running their girls, to the book's most obvious literary forebear, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*." Hermione Eyre, *Guardian* (17/1/2018)
  - "Imogen Hermes Gowar writes with confident brio on historical territory mapped with much more restraint by Georgette Heyer and with more lascivious intent by John Cleland in *Fanny Hill*." Christina Hardyment, *The Times* (17/3/2018)



#### 4. Commercial fiction: Matt Haig's *How To Stop Time* and Rowan Coleman's *the Summer of Impossible Things*

- Amount of coverage: Haig = 12 Coleman = 3
- Type of coverage:
  - Reviews: Haig = 5 Coleman = 1
  - Interviews: Haig = 2 Coleman = 0
  - News: Haig = 2 Coleman = 2
  - Op Ed: Haig = 0 Coleman = 0
- Gender balance of writers:
  - Haig: M= 4 F= 7
  - Coleman: M = 0 F= 3
- Personal references:
  - Age: Haig = 2 Coleman = 0
- Typical commentary:
  - Of Haig:
    - “But *How to Stop Time* is written in a different, more minor key. It is plangent. It has designs on our heartstrings.” Hermione Eyre, *Guardian* (5/7/2017)
    - “His books tickle your mind and tug on your heart, and their pages slip by with beguiling ease.” William Skildesky, *Observer* (18/7/17)
    - “Haig now lives in Brighton with his partner and two young children, who are home schooled, so “there’s always noise in the house.” interview with Katy Guest, *Guardian* (30/6/2017)
    - “I used to think that if you were a ‘literary’ writer, you had to reflect the bleakness of existence and if you ever had a remotely happy ending you were selling out. That was just the typical, dark, twentysomething male author writing dark stuff.” interview with Katy Guest, *Guardian* (30/6/2017)
    - “Can he find her now? And love again? And stay out of the clutches of those who want his ageless genes for biotech?” – Wendy Holden, *Mail on Sunday* (6/7/2017)
  - Of Coleman:
    - “Coleman’s struggle with crippling anxiety inspired *The Summer of Impossible Things*, her novel about a time traveller given the chance to undo a tragedy, albeit at the risk of her own existence.” Danuta Kean, *Guardian* (2/8/2017)

#### 5. Fantasy fiction: Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* and Joanne Harris's *A Pocket Full of Crows*

- Amount of coverage: Gaiman = 4 Harris = 0
- Type of coverage:
  - Reviews: Gaiman = 3 Harris = 0
  - Interviews: Gaiman = 0 Harris = 0
  - News: Gaiman = 0 Harris = 0
  - Op Ed: Gaiman = 1 Harris = 0

- Gender balance of writers:
  - Gaiman = M = 1 F = 3
  - Harris = n/a
- Personal references:
  - Age: Gaiman = 0 Harris = n/a
- Typical commentary:
  - Of Gaiman:
    - “The halls of Valhalla have been crying out for Neil Gaiman to tell their stories to a new audience. Hopefully this collection will be just the beginning.” Natalie Haynes, Observer (12/2/17)
    - “Gaiman’s characteristically limpid, quick-running prose keeps the dramatic impetus of the medieval texts, if not their rough-hewn quality.” Ursula le Guin, Guardian (29/3/17)
    - “Gaiman is a magpie — he might, with his Nordic turn of mind, prefer a raven — for scraps of folklore and legend. In *Good Omens*, written with Terry Pratchett, he had the Four Horsemen (three horsemen and one woman, this being a progressive apocalypse) riding out to oversee the end of the world. In *American Gods* Loki, Thoth, Anubis, Kali (the Hindu goddess of destruction) and Anansi, the trickster-spider of African stories, pitch up in the US.” Laura Freeman, The Times (28/1/17)

## Conclusion

Data analysis suggests the following:

- Assumptions that an increase in the number of women reviewers would result in an increase in the number of women reviewed are based on a false correlation.
- Men remain the recipients of more reviews than women, even when writing comparable fiction.
- As Jon McGregor wryly observed, questions about family and parenthood directed to men are different in tone: there is no assumption that they are the main care-givers.

As with Emilia Bassano, women continue to be judged by ‘the pram in the hallway’ and not provided with an equal platform to men upon which their work can be judged. The difficulties they face in receiving lesser coverage in a highly competitive fiction market makes it harder for them to sustain an income and, ultimately, a career as a professional writer. It goes some way to explain the 25% gap between the average earning of men and women writers.

## Part II: Are You Serious? A qualitative survey of the experiences of 27 women novelists.

*Four-hundred years after Emilia Bassano became the first woman to publish a poetry collection, the perception that the work of female authors reflects a domestic rather than a universal agenda remains. Danuta Kean investigates.*

There is a scene in Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's play *Emilia* in which the protagonist – 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Emilia Bassano – dances in front of her lover William Shakespeare. But this is no erotic cabaret. Emilia twirls from writing desk to baby to the men demanding her time and admiration – including Lord Carey, the Lord Chamberlain, whose mistress she became at 16 and whose patronage she depends upon for the freedom to write.

Shakespeare too is dependent upon the benevolent aristocrat, but his body is not forfeit and, as the scene progresses, young Will encourages his lover to write, telling her: “If you strive you can achieve the same as I.”

It is a delusion, as Carey brutally points out a second later when he tells her that her work “is more of a hobby”. It is a brutal moment that chimes with contemporary women writers in a literary world that continues to regard the voice of white, middle class men as “neutral”, while books by women are “domestic”.

This is the stark finding of research commissioned by the producers of *Emilia* to mark the West End transfer of Malcolm Lloyd's sharp and funny play. “For a man writing is a career,” says Rowan Coleman, who despite a string of bestsellers over the past 20 years has never been reviewed in a broadsheet newspaper, unlike men like Matt Haig and David Nicholls who write comparable commercial fiction. “For a woman, so often her writing is treated like it's a hobby, it is a nice thing to do on the side. That attitude is deeply embedded in our culture,” she adds.

Coleman is not bitter: she has sustained a career as a full-time novelist in a brutally competitive publishing environment, but like all the women spoken to for this research, she is keenly aware of the impact that gender has on the way a book is marketed. “If they published *Jane Eyre* today, it would be published with a cute little cover in pink,” she adds wryly.

Susan Hill, author of the gothic thriller *The Woman in Black* is clear: women writers have a tougher time being taken seriously now than when she published her debut novel, *The Enclosure*, 60 years ago. “Oddly, things have got worse,” she says. “When I had my first novel published, in 1961, it came out on the same day as a Graham Greene's *A Burnt out Case* and three papers reviewed me above him. Which was quite wrong but goes to show I got a lot of publicity because I wrote the book when I was at school, but not because I was a schoolgirl.”

Hill believes the situation has become tougher for women over the last 20 years in part reflecting stiffer competition for coverage in a market in which 200,000 new novels are published a year. But that does not explain gender bias in reviews, she adds. “I notice several things,” she says. “My crime novels are only ever reviewed under genre, which is normal. But very often banded together with other women crime writers. The ghost stories are

different as not so many people write them and they seem to be treated separately, reviewed by both men and women.”

## Domestic agenda

A reason cited for female novelists’ work being over-looked is the claim that women focus on “domestic” issues. In 2005, Ali Smith, no stranger to the most prestigious literary awards, and fellow author Toby Litt wrote a notorious condemnation of women’s writing in the introduction of a collection of poetry, short stories and extracts. “On the whole the submissions from women were disappointingly domestic, the opposite of risk-taking - as if too many women writers have been injected with a special drug that keeps them dulled, good, saying the right thing, aping the right shape, and melancholy at doing it, depressed as hell,” they wrote.

Joanne Harris, author of *Chocolat* and, more recently, fantasy novels based on Norse mythology, has witnessed the impact of this viewpoint in the reception of her own work. “In general, when you compare the coverage of my work to that of men writing in similar areas, the emphasis in my case has been on the domestic, and in theirs on the academic,” she says. “I think this generally happens with women's writing.”

There is support among male writers for the claims of their female colleagues. S J Watson, the author of the global bestseller *Before I Go To Sleep*, says that though he would like to think gender doesn’t matter, “my suspicion is that if I’d been female it would’ve been harder to get the book noticed in quite the way it was”. He adds: “I dearly wish it didn’t make a difference how the author of the book identifies, certainly in terms of gender and sexuality, but I’m not naive enough to think we’re there yet.”

The perception of female novelists is deep rooted, according to author Kate Mosse. She blames F R Leavis, whose white, male-dominated literary canon has held sway over British literature since the mid-20th century. “There is the idea of a neutral literary voice, which means that a man writing a novel about men is universal whereas often women writing about women are seen as domestic,” the founder of the Women’s Prize for Fiction says. “Literature with a capital L is still not seen as a neutral literary voice if it is women writing from their own point of view.”

Recognition of a gender bias in literature was one reason Mosse launched the prize, now in its 24<sup>th</sup> year. The failure to acknowledge the talent and aspiration of women meant that, as with Emilia Bassano, outstanding work risked being lost to posterity. Mosse points to the fact that 90% of editors on Wikipedia are men which has resulted in a gender bias towards articles about men on the site, acknowledged by the online encyclopaedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender\\_bias\\_on\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bias_on_Wikipedia)). “When you look at someone like Emilia Bassano, she was an important voice, but unless you have people saying that she is important she is forgotten,” says Mosse of the need to ensure outstanding work by women is acknowledged.

## Serious work

Critics and Wiki editors are not entirely to blame for the gender bias in book publishing, according to those interviewed for the Emilia Report. Some male writers must be held to account, as historical novelist Elizabeth Chadwick points out. “I went to a conference for

historical novelists and the men were all huddled together in a little clique taking each other seriously and dismissing the rest of us,” she recalls. “One male author said: ‘You’re just a romantic novelist. You write bodice rippers.’” His comments, she says, ignore the historical research that underpins her work and has led to regular invitations to speak at academic conferences. “It is as if you can’t be serious about your craft unless you are a male novelist,” she adds.

The unnamed male novelist was not speaking in a vacuum, according to Serena Mackesy. Though she now writes psychological thrillers under the name Alex Marwood, her career as a novelist began in commercial women’s fiction (about which more than one respondent asked: “where is the commercial men’s fiction?”). “I was very aware as a ‘chick lit’ author that I got asked many more personal questions and more intrusive stuff and in part that was because my work was less valued,” she says. “Nobody asked if I had researched my work, but with crime, people always ask that.”

Mackesy touches on a sore point among the women interviewed: the assumption that women write from experience and men from imagination. “Women are always treated as if what they are writing is autobiographical or conceived in some sort of emotional miasma or from suffering,” says Bidisha, who published her first novel aged 16. “They are rarely treated as *avant-garde* artists. We are not given credit for our cerebral powers. It’s always for our emotional force,” she adds.

For Bidisha, this treatment involved a cost. “I have stopped writing fiction for a while, because it was too constricting. They ask you such facile questions,” she says. “You are asked about your feelings, emotions or whether you are overwhelmed by your success.”

Rowan Coleman agrees and points to the disparity in how the Irish writers Marian Keyes and Roddy Doyle are regarded. “They both write witty, emotionally-driven, deft and thoughtful work, but one won the Booker and one is described as ‘chick lit’,” she says. Though she admits she benefited from the wave of so-called “chick lit” that washed over publishing 20 years ago, she adds: “I have never liked it [as a label]. What does it even mean? It’s nonsense. We shouldn’t be using the word ‘chick’ to describe women writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We just shouldn’t.”

The coinage of “chick lit” to describe a slew of books of widely varying literary merit and subject matter, written by women, pander to hackneyed female stereotypes reflected in the way these books were invariably jacketed: pastels, shopping, flowers and shoes. As one writer who asked not to be named, complains: “The women on my covers were all headless, as if what was inside wouldn’t appeal to their brains.”

Julie Cohen agrees that covers treatments have helped undermine female novelists. “I’ve published 25 novels and up until this current one, my books have been packaged exclusively for a female audience,” says the author, whose latest book *Louis & Louise* concerns the impact of gender on our lives. Pointing to covers with cartoons, cursive font, photographs and illustrations of women, images of flowers, leaves and butterflies and in pastel colours, she adds: “It seems to be the default. I have no problem with gendered book covers if that suits the content of the novel, but it’s my experience that most women will read a book with any cover, and most men will not read a book that is coded female.

## A devil's binding

Book jackets are one of the most contentious issues in book publishing: authors may have strong views of how their covers should look, but the final say is always with retailers who want covers that are easy to categorise. “I don't think big booksellers reward gender-neutral marketing for commercial books,” says one author who asked not to be named. “With a previous novel of mine, which was chosen for a major promotion [by a retailer], I had a choice between a specifically gendered cover with a woman on it, and a more neutral cover with no person pictured. I was told the retailers liked the more gendered cover, so we had to choose that one.”

It is a sign of how contentious the issue is that interviewees insisted on anonymity. One acclaimed writer, whose work has been reviewed across the broadsheets, believes her recent covers have undermined her literary credibility as well as her appeal to men. “I was very unhappy about the paperback cover for my latest novel. Written from a male perspective and definitely not a romance, but a ghost story, it looked like a medieval Mills & Boon,” she says.

The lack of review coverage and packaging that places women firmly in a gendered market has created, according to all but one interviewee, a vicious circle in which the only publicity they receive emphasises their personal lives not their skill. This further underscores the perception of their work as autobiographical and emotional rather than imaginative and serious. “Women are expected to expose themselves, because of the kind of coverage they get, which is in women's magazines and that is what their readership wants,” crime writer Sarah Hilary says. “I would love to see where men are being asked to bare their personal lives.”

Hilary believes the tone of coverage enables men to “keep their mystique and be judged by their books not their lives”. It also means they rarely face the dilemma of sacrificing privacy for coverage. “I know women who've done that and lost friends and family as a result and have been left feeling isolated,” the crime writer adds.

Rowan Coleman says it can be hard to resist demands for personal revelations. “I've been bullied – not by publishers – to bear myself, which makes it not about the novel but about your personal life,” she says. “There are a lot of features about how you are as a person rather than your work. I think that is more prevalent among women writers than men,”.

## The pram in the hallway

The idea that women writers expose and men extoll feeds into the questions asked of women by journalists, a point made by 2017 Costa Book Award winner Jon McGregor. In an article for the Guardian (<http://bit.ly/2BxLY2h>), he writes: “Fun fact: I have never been asked how I juggle writing and fatherhood. I'm not complaining; it's nobody's business, and nothing to do with writing. But I wonder what assumptions lie behind the question of juggling writing and motherhood coming up so regularly?”

To Joanne Harris the answer is clear: it is sexism. In her sights are sexually charged questions, differences in photographic styles for male and female novelists and “the constant banging on about ‘juggling’ family life and career” alongside, “prominent male writers talking garbage about the superior nature of men's writing (hello, VS Naipaul)”. “All this suggests to me that women are still viewed as a niche group, dealing solely with women's

issues, whereas men (even in the same area) are thought of as dealing with important, universal themes,” she adds.

Carol Drinkwater, who has been a successful novelist for the past 20 years and has not acted for a decade, says there is little that is gender neutral in the coverage she receives. “I am always asked my age when being interviewed,” she says. “My marital status comes up, number of children or in my case no children. Most of the time I am dealing with the prejudices of ‘actress-turned-author’, as though actresses are less intelligent, less erudite.”

Women also complained about the seedy nature of some questioning – especially from male interviewers asking about sex scenes in their work. Sally Rooney was asked by one radio host if she had had an affair with an older man, like the character in her debut *Conversations with Friends*. As Claire Cohen points out in an interview with the author in the *Daily Telegraph*, when did anyone ask Bret Easton Ellis if he had butchered anyone while listening to Phil Collins?

Sometimes questions cross the line. “A tabloid journalist asked for a kiss after an interview and more than one male journalist asked if I wanted to go for a drink at the end of an interview,” says one author of their experience of being published in her early 20s. She adds: “I’m so surprised that there has been very little about #MeToo in publishing. I’m waiting for it to happen, to be honest, I know of countless men who go to literary festivals and harass women.” That women remain quiet about “#MeToo moments” reflects, she believes, the fear that anyone who speaks out will lose their career.

One novelist who has spoken out is the award-winning novelist and memoirist Monique Roffey, who was among those who protested about an incendiary essay by Jamaican poet and Forward Prize winner Kei Miller entitled *White Women and the Language of Bees*. The essay attacked the right of white women writers to speak for the Caribbean. “No one ever complains about white Caribbean male writers. They are men. They are the boy’s club too,” she says.

By speaking out about double standards Roffey is aware she risks censure, but she refuses to remain quiet. “My attitude has been to stand firm about who I am, which is an outsider in British society with a long feminine French name, a Caribbean/European background, bi-national status, and to be very out when it comes to speaking the language of sex and sexuality,” she adds. “It’s not been easy but I’m no shrinking violet and I’m still here after almost 20 years of publishing.”

### **Will quality triumph?**

Not all respondents regarded the emphasis on the personal as detrimental to female novelists’ careers. Jane Thynne, author of the acclaimed *Clara Vine* spy novels, says for female writers their marital and parental status or physical attraction may be fair game – though, she adds the latter is “largely implied rather than stated, as in a recent interview with Siri Hustvedt that described her tucking ‘her long legs’ beneath her on the sofa”. But, she adds: “The fact that coverage of Hustvedt’s novels now eclipses that of her husband, Paul Auster, suggests to me that ultimately literary quality can triumph over embedded gender bias.”

Looking further back, she points to Elizabeth Jane Howard, who was “very much the lesser figure” when married to Kingsley Amis, but whose Cazalet novels have ensured she is now more widely read than him.

Amis notoriously claimed that “the pram in the hallway was the enemy of promise” – as an excuse for the dominance of men in fiction. Though discredited as a theory about the quality of writing by women, it does have an impact on how female novelists promote their work, as Jo Nadin points out. The author, whose work ranges from the children’s book *Joe All Alone* to the adult novel *The Queen of Bloody Everything*, is a single parent, which has had an impact on her ability to build on critical acclaim for her work in the UK and abroad. “I got an offer to go to Brazil for a week. I can’t do that, but male authors I know can. They are fathers but they are not expected to provide childcare,” she says. “The pram in the hallway means I write in school hours or snatched bits of time. I’ve not been able to collect any of the awards I’ve won because I have got to do the school drop off.”

Nadin’s experience is not unusual and suggests a need for the industry to widen the opportunities for women writers to promote their work in ways not bound by family constraints if they are to enjoy a level playing field.

Issues faced by women writers are compounded where gender identity intersects with other identities, whether race, sexuality, disability or class, a point made by award-winning children’s author Kit de Waal. “Being a woman and a woman of colour has meant that there are barriers to my being published at all and where this intersects with class even more so,” she says. Though she acknowledges that it is not easy for anyone to be published, she adds: “There are most definitely additional issues if you are a woman, particularly those with caring responsibilities or if you are a woman of colour who may face stereotyping both in the types of books you are expected to write and where and how you may be marketed.”

In an industry dominated by a white middle-class workforce Dreda Say Mitchell sees stereotyping as a particular problem for female writers of colour and cites it as a contributing factor in her decision to move from traditional publishing to independent publishing. “I was in this middle class world that didn’t understand me or the things I had to offer [as a working class black woman],” she explains. “I felt ghettoised. The only thing they wanted me to write about was East End gangland. I’m more than that.”

In independent publishing Say Mitchell has found a solution to discrimination, which, she adds, explains why the ranks of independent authors are more diverse in gender, sexuality, class, and race than she found in traditional publishing. In that she is not unusual. Where women struggle for recognition they adapt, whether like Serena Mackesy by changing their name and genre or Kate Mosse by challenging head on assumptions made about the quality, breadth and universal appeal of writing by women. “It’s not about keeping other people from the table,” she says when asked about the willingness of the literary world to change. “It’s about getting a bigger table. It is about challenging the structures,” she insists. “These things take a long time.” Let us hope that is less than 400 years.



## Key recommendations

**Cover treatments:** retailers need to be challenged about the use of gender stereotypes in cover images that undermine the credibility of fiction by women and their ability to be taken seriously.

**Coverage:** literary editors need to examine any gender bias in their review coverage of writers of commercial fiction, rather than assume that appointing more women reviewers will automatically lead to more work by women being reviewed.

**Boundaries:** a code of conduct needs to be agreed by journalists and publishers about the treatment of women writers in interviews in order to ensure women writers do not face harassment.

*For further information please contact: [susanna@stagetraffic.com](mailto:susanna@stagetraffic.com)*

## The Emilia Report Methodology

The Emilia Report was commissioned as an in-depth investigation into the situation faced by women novelists. The methods chosen for this was a comparative study of 10 novelists, five female and five male, published in the same genre and period of time.

### Part I Comparative study:

- The writers and works were chosen to best reveal any gender bias in the way the books were covered in the national press.
- Comparisons involved the review, news and profile or interview coverage of the books in the five main broadsheets and four main tabloids. The reason for this was that the broadsheets are an influential indicator of the literary quality and prize and sales potential of a novel and also appeal to readers across genders.
- Tabloid coverage was used as a counterweight to any bias towards books by genre.
- The researchers noted the gender of the reviewer/journalist and any reference to age, appearance (body type and build), dress/fashion sense, marital status and parental status

### Part II Qualitative study:

- This involved in-depth interviews with 27 published female novelists across genre, age and experience.
- Respondents were asked about their experiences as published authors and if their gender had had any impact on that.
- The questions asked were:
  - During your time as a published author what impact has your gender had on the coverage you receive?
  - How, if at all, has the situation changed during your career?
  - What coverage have your books received in national broadsheets and elsewhere?
  - What impact, if any, has your gender had on the publicity campaign for your book?
  - What impact has your gender or the perceived gender of your readership had on the packaging of your book?
  - How do you feel about the way your books have been packaged?
- The answers to the interviews were then transcribed and collated to draw the conclusions in an essay.

## About the authors of the report

\*DANUTA KEAN is an award-winning investigative journalist and editor. A specialist in book publishing, she has also written and edited reports into diversity in the creative industries, most recently Writing The Future, about access to publishing for BAME authors and would-be publishers, and Centre Stage, about pathways into the theatre for BAME talent, commissioned by the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation. All 4 reports have resulted in innovation and change within their respective sectors aimed at broadening the pool of talent from which they recruit.