

Your life is no ordinary life: 'Commercial women's fiction'

I once made the mistake of thinking that the middle aged mum standing next to me was ordinary. We first met as we cheered madly for our sons to win a race, one school Sports Day. I lumped all of us together, women whooping in unison, all living in the same few streets. Ordinary mums. A year later I got to know her better. I found out that this woman had been a mother to another son, whom she had lost. She had then survived cancer and gone on to bear another child, against all medical odds. To her, her second son was a miracle. Her recent happier life, the ordinary life of school pick-ups and Sports Days, was precious and extraordinary. I felt deeply ashamed of the lazy assumptions I had made about her; about many of the women I had met at the schoolgate. How little we knew about each other; how few questions we ever asked of one another.

Look through the windows of any house on your street or glance into any car on the motorway and you think you see them; ordinary men and women, living lives that are just like yours and mine. And yet, look more closely. There is no such thing as an ordinary mum, or an ordinary woman, or an ordinary man. How easily we forget this; how well novelists remind us.

I represent quite a lot of commercial women's fiction. The term 'commercial women's fiction' is an ugly but necessary publishers' shorthand which I will now make shorter and uglier with the acronym CWF. Of course not all books by women are categorised by the author's gender. What 'commercial women's fiction' is publishers' code for, is books by women (and, less commonly, men) which somehow reflect the everyday female experience of life and love and which are accessible and true-to-life, romantic and emotional.

These novels usually follow one or two or more women as they change: from happy to sorrowful and back again; from shuttered and unself-aware to radiant; from poor to Women of Substance; from bereft to remade; from unfulfilled to successful. This is genre fiction, so there are unspoken - if relaxed - rules about the storytelling and about what works for the readers of these books and what doesn't. But the best writers write their own version of the accepted rulebook. And these authors are specialists and experts: their special interest is in [love](#), and their expertise is in the recovery of love, and self-love of course.

And I think the best authors of CWF make something tremendously difficult look easy. They lift the so-called ordinary and transform it into something extraordinary enough to be deserving of a novel. They see those stories to which most of us are blind. The protagonists of their books are necessarily 'ordinary' women - they have to be, it's one of the rules of the genre - because if the heroine isn't Just Like Us, then how can we identify with her journey, how can the book be accessible? These ordinary

heroines are weighed down, as we are, with ordinary challenges, such as how to pay the bills, and how to fit your child's toys back into the toybox so the lid lies flat, and how to share a bed with a man, and the attrition of repetitive or demanding paid work, and the comfort and bruise of being parented oneself.

And yet, underneath these everyday challenges, authors of CWF find our exceptional stories. They scrutinise the inner lives of us ordinary women and the detail of our existences and in that detail they find not dull lives but great tragedies and risks and victories too. Those miniscule hurts which can slowly build great enough pressure to cause terrible injury; the split second decisions which can trigger an avalanche; those sacrifices and compromises which seem to weigh more heavily every year; the hidden histories which we think we can walk away from only to find ourselves circling back, decades later; our great adventures - in self-expression, in passion; our dangerous voyages - to happiness, to forgiveness; our extraordinary tales.

When authors of CWF draw women's stories out and write them large, we recognise not only ourselves in the pages of their books but also that our extraordinary hearts are full of universal desires - not ordinary, but yes, held in common. Our common desires to be called beloved, to belong, to be our best selves. Not to be afraid of others, or love, or loss, or change, but to journey bravely on, arms open to what life has to offer us. The best CWF is inspiring, immensely comforting, cathartic and joyful.

I represent a lot of commercial women's fiction because I think the best writers of the genre are amongst the best writers in the industry. And those authors know that I genuinely love their work and admire their great skill. How could I not? I usually find myself in their novels somewhere; you will find yourself too.

A lot of patronising rubbish is written about genre fiction for and about women. I say to you writers of women: please keep your steady lights burning. Thank you for illuminating our ordinary lives.

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