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Title	Virtual History Lessons
Author(s)	Kenny, John
Publication Date	2003-02-15
Publication Information	Kenny, J. (2003, 15 February) 'Virtual History Lessons.' Review of 'Another Kind of Life', by Catherine Dunne, and 'Wild Geese', by Lara Harte. 'The Irish Times', 'Weekend': 11
Publisher	The Irish Times
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/1097

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History in the Making

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Another Kind of Life.

By Catherine Dunne.
Picador, 483pp. £10.99

Wild Geese.

By Lara Harte.
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 250pp. £12.99

In terms of authorship and characterisation, women are prominently placed in the current predilection in Irish fiction for writing virtual history. The relevant novels have been more or less literary (see the most recent works by Emma Donoghue, Anne Haverty, Mary Morrissy and Anne Enright). Perhaps in deference to the generic ties between historical fiction and the romance mode however, a kind of composite style is practiced by other Irish women novelists; and their work seems to bridge the gap between the critically acceptable literary approach to women's lives and the expanding romantic approach that deserves more cautious sociological examination than the term "chick-lit" allows.

The researched historical settings, but undemanding styles, of Catherine Dunne's *Another Kind of Life* and Lara Harte's *Wild Geese* explore, consciously or otherwise, the possibilities for success on the middle ground.

Dunne's fourth novel is mainly set in Dublin and Belfast between 1886 and 1906. In three parts, subdivided into short character-specific sections, the stories of four women from a Catholic Dublin family are told. Hannah, Eleanor and May are the "Bright Brilliant Sisters" of the O'Connors for whom their mother, Sophia, has ambitions that are seemingly guaranteed when her husband, Edward, is promoted to a senior civil-servant position in Belfast.

After a "fall headlong into a different sort of life" when the family is disgraced by Edward's embezzlement of government funds, the women return to the maternal grandfather's house in Dublin and the divergent lives of the sisters are thereafter the focus. Hannah is married off to one Charles MacBride in Holywood; Eleanor trains as a nurse in London; May works as a governess in France.

Dunne has included a sizeable bibliography, and she steadily constructs exact historical coordinates for these women. The political situation in Belfast is particularly well delineated through two additional characters, the McCurry sisters: though their story is somewhat forcedly intertwined with Hannah's, the account of their labours and eventually violent trials in the predominantly Protestant Belfast mills humanises Dunne's recording of the public facts of the time.

There are some structural and plot-line problems. Pages from Eleanor's journal are interspersed with the third-person sections on the other characters: these pages are unconvincing in tone and distract from the quick pace of the story generally. Attempts at Irish idioms are so intermittent as to appear tokenistic. There is also a tendency towards the clichés of the novelette, from May's doomed romance with Philippe the Frenchman, to a dramatic drowning towards the end.

Commendably, nevertheless, Dunne's fictionalised history is accessible without being patronising. Her thematic concern continues to be with family and, primarily, female relationships in the humdrum domestic context. Even if stylistically unadventurous in developing these established themes, *Another Kind of Life* places them accurately and suggestively in a new period setting.

Lara Harte, in her third novel, gets down to business in a first sentence that is so directly class-specific as to be almost Austen-like: "Inside the brick walls of a terraced Dublin house, the briskly crackling fires and luxuriously appointed rooms testified to the prosperity of Mr Reily, a merchant of late middle age." *Wild Geese*, which promises on the cover "Romance and intrigue on the eve of revolution", is set in Dublin and Paris in the late 18th century and tells the tale of Mr Reily's niece, Isabella Carroll, who appears to be designed as a classic romantic heroine.

Isabella has just received a letter from her widowed father in Saint-Domingue; after long absence, he now wishes to be reunited with his daughter in retirement in Paris. The first of three parts relates the Carroll background and establishes mercantile Dublin, with its arranged marriages and societal suffocation, as a city the headstrong Isabella naturally yearns to escape. Parts two and three cover her life in Paris where she discovers that the Irish émigré world is not the haven she thought.

Harte's account of the period, as factual as a history seminar in places, initially seems romanticised. Overall, however, the novel is about the gradual destruction of a woman's idealism (Henry James's Isabel Archer is here in more than name). The novel's often dense prose identifies the complexities of French *philosophe* thought and raises the uncomfortable issue of involvement by the continental Irish in slave trading.

Wild Geese will not revolutionise Irish historical fiction, but it moves Harte in a serious new direction while indicating that a general interest in history can be encouraged by the attempt to organically incorporate the actual past with the lives of well-constructed virtual people.

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