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Paul Ryan (2012) *Asking Angela Macnamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives*. 228pp, Dublin:Irish Academic Press, ISBN: 9780716530381 hardback €60. 9780716530398 paperback €24.95.

Paul Ryan is to be commended for his recognition of the rich resource that the analysis of letters offers sociologists and others interested in the transformation of intimate relationships in the twentieth century. Ryan's book '*Asking Angela Macnamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives*' is based on an analysis of the 645 published letters and replies to *The Sunday Press* newspaper's 'problem page' and is a welcome addition to the substantial body of sociological literature on sexuality and intimacy in Ireland. Utilising the love/lust balance – women as loving, men as lustful - conceptualised by Wouters (2004), Ryan skillfully maps how the shifting balances of power between men and women were consequential for changes in intimacy and self-expression. His analysis of 'the renegotiation of the traditional balance between love and sex' (2011: 230) is based not only on problem page letters but he also includes Catholic advice literature on appropriate behaviour on dating and marriage, similar articles published in *The Sunday Press* and conducts life history interviews with male readers of the column. This comprehensive database is complimented by a critical biography of Macnamara, the accidental author of the column. Ryan writes that Macnamara's column was '...a confessional space.. where the truth of Irish sexuality was exposed and transformed into discourse' in which letter writers described their sexual transgressions and deviations with more frankness and detail than was available to them in the Catholic confessional (169); there was also less risk of condemnation.

Ryan describes Macnamara's ambition to mediate an open discussion of sex and relationships within the context of Catholic social teaching as 'mission impossible'. Radio and TV challenged traditional sexual mores in storylines and chat shows; men and women wanted to talk about sex before marriage, the possibility of divorce, how to use contraception without breaking the law while seeking sexual satisfaction, love and affection. Macnamara advised women unhappy in marriages where affection was rare and expressed as a prelude to sexual intercourse only, or women whose husbands were physically violent and emotionally abusive to them. Her replies were premised on the permanency of Catholic marriage, the different natures and psychologies of men and advising women not to confront their husbands but to negotiate and build on the new opportunities available to women for more equal relations between the sexes in marriage. In the latter years of correspondence, men who wrote to Macnamara were often disturbed by lustful women who sought more sexually satisfying relationships or who initiated sexual contact; Macnamara also disapproved of those behaviours that contested the moral boundaries long used as a personal touchstone contouring her religious belief system. Macnamara promoted self-education for parents so that they and not others could provide wise advice to their growing children. Though the readers of the column are described by Ryan as

conservative 'trend followers', his epistolary analysis reveals that the generation of women who fell in love, dated and married in the 1960s and 1970s were significant agents of change in the democratization of personal life (Giddens 1992).

Despite what might be considered as conservative and traditional responses to forms of social suffering, Macnamara continues to surprise. Her advocacy for and responsiveness to young people continued throughout her life; she challenged the use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline in the home, questioned authoritarian and distant fatherhood, advised parents to allow more freedom of choice to young adults in career, clothes and leisure pursuits and was knowingly or unknowingly part of the movement towards personal autonomy and more democratic parenting. Did Macnamara's advice change over the years as clearly as the interests and concerns of her correspondents did? Toward the final years of the column Macnamara responded to questions which challenged the sexual subjugation of women in marriage. One correspondent could not understand why rape was such a serious crime before marriage but not after the event. Why not? - she asked Angela, who responded that rape is '..an offence against the law of God' (2003: 97); marital rape was not on the legislative policy agenda in 1977 and did not become a crime in Ireland until 1991 until the introduction of the Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act. For Ryan, Macnamara '...is a perfect example of how the lived experience of one's own life and the exposure to the lives of others can alter the way in which the institutional teaching of the Catholic Church is understood' (204). It is clear that Angela Macnamara was distressed by the pain and suffering of others and worked to alleviate it as best she could. Though she regarded homosexuality as 'a passing phase' or an 'abnormal tendency' she neither condemned nor identified gay people as abnormal. Gay men who experienced conflict between their religious faith and sexual identity wrote to her for advice and Ryan writes that '(T)here was a contradiction in Angela Macnamara's advice on homosexuality in that she was encouraging young men to see these feelings as a natural transitory phase which they should not overly think or talk about while at the same time the column was providing one of the increasing number of forums where discussion was taking place' (175). Decriminalisation of homosexuality was not to take place until 1993. Through reading Ryan's account of the changing content of the personal problems in the letter pages, a strong sense of the deep structural disturbances in Irish society is communicated. In recounting and responding to personal problems in a public forum Angela Macnamara sought kinder connections and more tolerant consideration for other people's suffering; in this she represented a challenge to the political right. 'By speaking openly of sexuality Angela Macnamara's column became part of the tapestry that is the history of Irish sexuality and, curiously perhaps, part of its modernisation' (205).

Ryan weaves his personal story of childhood and adulthood lightly through the text; perhaps it is this that gives the books its resonance. The evident empathy of both authors is felt, as Macnamara and Ryan respond within different ideological frames, but nonetheless understanding the distress, needless anxieties and sometimes devastating consequences for generations

of people who wrote to the column, seeking personal contact through a letter to another, one who might understand how to adapt to or contest the weight of social forces as they bore down on their lives. This is a book that without doubt will be widely read by those who keenly anticipated the weekly column in *The Sunday Press* but also by those interested in the history of intimacy, sexuality and gender relations in the twentieth century. Clearly written and with scholarly insight, it is accompanied by a wealth of references. Paul Ryan's book is a welcome contribution to the sociological literature on epistolary studies of Irish society.

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