

## BOOK REVIEW

*A 'proper' woman? One woman's story of success and failure in academia*, Pat O'Connor, Peter Lang, Oxford, Berlin, Bruxelles, Chennai, Lausanne, New York, 2024, 205 pp., Volume 126 of Reimagining Ireland, ISSN 1662-9094, ISBN 978-1-80374-303-5 (Pdf); ISBN 978-1-80374-305-9 (softcover), DOI 10.3726/b21197, DOI [10.3726/b21197](https://doi.org/10.3726/b21197)

Pat O'Connor, the author of *A 'proper' woman? One woman's story of success and failure in academia*, is an emeritus Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Limerick and a Visiting Professor at the Geary Institute, University College Dublin. She holds the distinction of being the first female full Professor of Sociology in Ireland and faculty Dean at the University of Limerick (Peter Lang, n.d.). Pat's academic career spans over 120 publications, including nine books, strongly focusing on the gendering of management and organisations, particularly in academia (O'Connor, n.d.). Her work includes cross-national studies on women in leadership and EU-funded research on gender equality in academia. She has also written extensively about gender in private and public spheres, including friendships, family dynamics and professional environments (Gender Summit, n.d.).

Despite Pat's prolific academic publishing record, *A 'proper' woman?* is far from your standard academic text. It is neither a research study nor a teaching resource. Instead, it is a deeply personal memoir chronicling the life and career of its protagonist, Pat O'Connor. The book weaves an engaging narrative that draws readers in with its conversational tone and nuggets of humour, offering insights into Pat's life while addressing broader societal and institutional issues.

The Prologue sets the scene with a pivotal moment in Pat's life: a fork in the road where she must choose between two vastly different paths. One option is the conventional route — marriage, children, and a life replicating her mother's domestic existence. The other is a leap into the unknown, pursuing a PhD and a career in academia. Pat's decision to take the latter course frames the story that follows. While her choice was fraught with uncertainties and challenges, her teaching, research and perseverance had a ripple effect far beyond what she might have achieved as a conventional wife and mother. Through her narrative, Pat illustrates that despite failures and struggles, one can make a meaningful contribution to the world through determination and purpose.

The book is structured into seven chapters, tracing Pat's life journey. These chapters start from her early family history, childhood and schooling in Ireland during the 1950s and early 1960s, through her adulthood and career in academia, to her reflections on Irish societal and academic transformations — or the lack thereof — over her lifetime. The structure provides a chronological yet reflective lens, allowing readers to connect Pat's personal milestones with broader societal changes. I do not intend to give you, the reader of this review, a chapter-by-chapter outline of the book — I encourage you to read it for yourself! When you do, keep in mind that this book is more than a memoir; it is a commentary on academia and society, particularly in Ireland, over the last seventy years.

Throughout the narrative, Pat takes ownership of her choices with few regrets. She reflects candidly on the life she chose, balancing a sense of fulfilment with acknowledging its challenges. In the Epilogue, for instance, she recounts her response to Seán's third marriage proposal — a poignant moment when she deferred her answer until it was too late. Pat states unapologetically that she would make the same choice again, noting, 'We each live with the consequences of our choices in the context of the constraints on us.' (p. 205). This acknowledgment of agency, tempered by societal constraints, permeates the book and challenges readers to consider the intersections of choice, opportunity and structural barriers. Yet, despite her conviction, Pat's narrative ends with her frustration at enduring gender inequality, reminding us that the fight for equity is far from over.

The storytelling is rich, engaging and vividly descriptive. It captures the essence of growing up in mid-20th-century Ireland, with its deeply ingrained societal norms and expectations, particularly around gender roles. Pat's anecdotes from her schooling years offer glimpses into the rigid educational structures of the time and the pressures on women, sometimes subtle and other times blatant, to conform. As she transitioned into adulthood and academia, the narrative shifts to address the systemic challenges women faced in male-dominated academia. Pat's humour and self-awareness shine here, making even the most disheartening moments relatable and inspiring.

One of the book's strengths is its ability to intertwine the personal with the universal. While Pat's story is uniquely hers, it resonates with anyone who has navigated the complexities of ambition, identity and societal expectations. It offers a lens into the lived realities of women in academia, particularly in Ireland, but its lessons extend beyond national or disciplinary boundaries. The memoir invites readers to reflect on their own lives and the societal structures shaping their choices.

However, the book is not without its challenges for some readers. As someone unfamiliar with Irish geography, I occasionally wished for a map to illustrate the narrative's geographies. Key locations mentioned throughout the book, which hold significant relevance to Pat's journey, would have been easier to visualise with this addition. The lack of such a visual aid meant I often had to pause my reading to consult Google Maps, which disrupted the flow of the story. Similarly, a glossary of Irish Gaelic words would have been a welcome inclusion, as some terms and phrases required external clarification. While these elements do not detract from the book's core message, they would enhance accessibility for an international audience. Hopefully, such additions might be considered in a future edition.

Pat comments that many of the titles of her articles include a question mark, as do many subheadings in chapters of this book. Pat suggests that asking questions is a means of challenging power. So, I now pose a question: What can we, as readers, learn from Pat's story? Beyond its entertainment value, the book shines a light on the complexities of societal and institutional inequities. Pat's experiences highlight how discrimination — whether based on gender, class or other factors — shapes individual trajectories. Yet, her narrative also offers hope. In her final chapter, Pat recalls encounters with men who were able to transfer their experiences of discrimination of various kinds to an understanding of gender discrimination, seeing Pat as a woman *and* an equal. So, too, may we take Pat's story and use its lessons to enhance our

understanding of other forms of discrimination that remain prevalent in society and academia. An ability to connect across different forms of marginalisation is a crucial lesson for our times. Understanding one type of discrimination can and should pave the way for broader empathy and action against inequality in all its forms.

Ultimately, *A 'proper' woman?* is a story of resilience and courage, of choosing an unconventional path and forging ahead despite obstacles. It is also a story that asks us to look beyond an individual's success or failure and consider the systemic factors that shape our lives. For readers in academia, the book is a poignant reminder of the systemic gendered dimensions and a call to challenge entrenched hierarchies. For a broader audience, it is an inspiring tale of determination and agency.

Pat concludes her memoir by inviting readers to draw inspiration from her story and use it as a springboard for challenging power structures in Ireland and beyond. This invitation resonates deeply in a world still grappling with inequality. By sharing her life's journey, Pat O'Connor not only reflects on her personal choices but also empowers others to question, resist and envision a more equitable future.

In sum, this memoir is a compelling read that equally blends insight and critique with gems of humour. Whether you are familiar with Irish academia or approaching it from a distance, Pat O'Connor's story will leave you reflecting on your own choices and the societal structures that influence them. It is a book that deserves to be read widely and discussed thoughtfully, for its lessons are both timely and timeless.

## References

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