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Nurturing ideology:
Representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction

Diana Beere
2000
Nurturing ideology:  
Representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the ways in which motherhood is represented in a corpus of contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian adolescent fiction. The 18 texts in the research corpus were those short-listed by the Children's Book Council of Australia for its annual Book of the Year: Older Readers award in the years 1992 to 1994 inclusive. The publicity, prestige and power attached to these awards means that short-listed books, taken to be 'good' books for children and adolescents, are often used as educational resources in Australian schools, particularly to support teaching and learning activities in literacy and English education. Recognising adolescent fiction as a potentially significant site of contestation over the social justice ideals that inform Australia’s national curriculum documents, the study sought to document the ways in which these texts are implicated in the production and reproduction of ideologies of motherhood.

The study was informed by the understanding that meanings are not inherent to texts, but are constructed by readers as they adopt particular subject positions in relation to texts and enter into what, in effect, are social relationships with them. From this perspective, the analysis required attention not only to textual features of the research corpus, but also to the various other resources on which readers might reasonably draw to construct meanings. This meant attending to intertextuality, that is, the relationships between the fictional narratives on which the study focused and other cultural texts, including the visual and spoken texts of everyday life, and to the ways in which readers are encouraged or required to draw on these intertexts as meaning-making resources. The study recognised that readers’ primary mean-making resources are common-sense ideologies, understood as the widely shared and taken-for-granted understandings about the social world that inform much of the everyday social action and interaction among members of a society.

The study was also underpinned by an understanding of motherhood as a social construct rather than an essentially biologically determined state, and therefore as having meanings that are subject to contestation and revision. To establish the range of contemporary understandings about motherhood on which readers might draw to make sense of textual representations of motherhood, the study drew on the findings of recent research into the discursive construction of motherhood, with particular attention to what currently prevails as common sense. These common-sense understandings about motherhood, together with the alternative discourses on which readers might draw to construct meaning, subsequently informed the analyses of the research corpus.
Given the size of the corpus, only six of the texts were selected for close attention. The analyses of these texts were supplemented with less detailed analyses of the remainder of the corpus, focusing on the themes that emerged most powerfully from the first six analyses. While some attention was given to the linguistic features of the texts, the analytical process focused most closely on their narrative features and the ways in which particular narrative strategies work to limit the range of possible meanings that readers can construct by rendering some meanings more ‘obvious’ than others. Particular attention was given to the focalising strategies through which fictional narratives exert much of their power to persuade readers to adopt certain subject positions rather than others, and hence to construct meaning in certain ways, with consequences in terms of the production and reproduction of ideologies.

The analyses revealed that prevailing common-sense ideologies of motherhood are not significantly challenged by the ways in which motherhood is represented in the research corpus. While there are points in some of the narratives that might serve as platforms from which to construct alternative understandings about motherhood, particularly for those readers who are equipped with critical reading strategies, the narratives never actively and unequivocally encourage readers to challenge common-sense understandings. Rather, their major contribution to contemporary ideological struggles over the meaning of motherhood is directed towards ensuring continued widespread acceptance of the discursively constructed ‘truths’ that work to legitimate a social order in which the lives of girls and women are regulated on the basis of their categorisation as potential or actual mothers. The study concluded that the texts in the research corpus are actively engaged in undermining contemporary social struggles for social justice and equity.

The study’s findings have a number of significant implications for theory development, policy, practice and future research, both within and beyond the field of education, and these are discussed in the final chapter. In particular, the findings are relevant to literacy education, where they highlight the need for educators to develop and implement critical literacy pedagogies that draw students’ attention to the textual workings of ideology. The findings suggest that what students need, arguably more than they need ‘good’ literature, are meta-level reading skills and strategies with which they can resist being manipulated by texts, whether they are fictional narratives of the kind analysed for this study or the various other written, spoken and visual texts that are typically encountered in everyday social life.
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I have heard it remarked that writing a dissertation is like having a baby, and given the topic of this study, it is tempting to invoke that analogy here, although like most analogies, its usefulness is limited. The main point, I suppose, is that the task of completing a doctoral study is long and extraordinarily challenging. Like pregnancy and motherhood, it can become a seemingly inseparable part of one’s life and being; it is physically and mentally demanding; it is often rendered more difficult by issues that have little to do with the particular task in hand; and, however satisfied one might be with the end product, it is typically not quite what was dreamed of at the beginning. Moreover, while there are always times when it feels like a very lonely task, it cannot be undertaken independently of others. Most importantly, it is the quantity and quality of their contributions that can make all the difference to both the experience and the outcomes.

There are many people without whose support this study might never have been contemplated, let alone completed, and I want to thank them all. Some deserve special mention. I am particularly grateful to Professor Peter Freebody and Professor Neil Dempster, who have both displayed infinite patience and good humour in helping me to make my work the best it could possibly be. I have valued not only their academic advice and support, but also their continued encouragement and their seemingly unshakeable confidence in my ability to reach my goal: if either of them ever doubted that I would do so, they never let me know it. I am also appreciative of the research training I gained as an Honours student from Dr Parlo Singh, and for the encouragement she gave me to pursue doctoral studies. As an associate supervisor in the early stages of this study, she constantly challenged me to be ever more critical in re-thinking my ideas, and the final product is undoubtedly the better for her input.

To all those friends and family who have shared even some of the worst and best of times in the past few years, I am deeply grateful. In particular, I thank Nancy, Philip, Michael and Richard; and Linda, Grace, Stephanie, Mal and Pete, Russell, Mary, Howard, Susheela, Philip, Eric, Jennifer, Bob, Nicole, Sandra and Audrey and Nicko, all of whom have supported me in a variety of ways that, in some cases, they themselves might not recall or consider significant.

If I have lived with this study for years, then so too has my daughter. She has not always done so happily, but my gratitude is all the greater for that. Had I not been Annah's mother, this study would never have been conceived as it was, so, in extending to her my most special thanks, it seems appropriate to return to the analogy with which I began. That neither of my ‘babies’ has turned out quite the way I planned is undoubtedly a good thing, providing me with more challenges and more opportunities to learn than I might have had otherwise. One of them, however, has always been infinitely more important to me than the other, and will remain so long after this one is finally a closed book.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted, in whole or in part, for a degree or diploma at this or any other university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it includes no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference is made in the text and notes.

Diana Beere
January 2000
My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.

I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.

M. Foucault (1983:231-232)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Statement of the problem

This study examines how the concept 'motherhood' is represented in critically acclaimed Australian fiction written for adolescents. It analyses a corpus of contemporary Australian novels and short stories categorised as ‘adolescent fiction’, examining the various ideas about motherhood that are constructed within them. It considers, as well, the implications of those ideas and their construction within such texts for contemporary social justice issues, particularly in the field of education. In doing so, its purpose is to offer new orders of interest to educational theorists and researchers, curriculum policymakers, teachers, writers and reviewers of children’s books, judges of children’s literature awards, and others with interests in children’s literature and education.

The specific texts with which this study is concerned are those that were short-listed by the Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) for its annual awards in the Older Readers category during the period from 1992 to 1994 inclusive. The publicity, prestige and power attached to the CBCA’s awards in Australia, particularly in the field of education, were important factors in the choice of this corpus of 18 texts. However, before explaining this further, some introductory issues must briefly be clarified.

Motherhood, in this study, is not taken to be a biologically determined state that is universally understood in an uncontested way; nor is it assumed that the question of who can be said to be a mother is straightforward. These issues are explored in detail in Chapter Four. At this point, however, it is noted that, for the purposes of this study, motherhood is understood as a socially constructed concept, with a history and a set of beliefs attached to it that are neither given nor fixed, but subject to ongoing contestation, revision and change. Although they are not necessarily articulated, social understandings of motherhood can vary considerably, and at any given historical moment a range of competing and conflicting understandings struggle for primacy. While these contests over meaning are played out in a variety of social and language practices, the focus in this study is on struggles over the meaning of motherhood that are discernible in contemporary, critically acclaimed written narratives designated as ‘adolescent fiction’.

The study also explores fictional narratives as cultural and ideological products. Narratives do more than tell a story: they are an important means by which humans share experiences and meanings, and seek to make sense of their lives (Bruner 1991; Cohan & Shires 1988; Stephens 1992; Tambling 1991). They are also productive: within them, cultural ideals, values and
Practices are constructed and reconstructed (Birch 1989; Bradford 1996a; Fairclough 1989; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Griffith 1993b; Jackson 1994; Moon 1992; Stephens 1992, 1996; Tambling 1991; Taylor 1993; Walters 1992; Weedon 1987; Zipes 1983). The enduring nature of written narratives gives them particular power, enabling them to be “resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers” (Ong, cited in Agee 1993:182). The context into which fictional narratives written for children are resurrected is frequently an educational one. Education and schooling are part of a complex network of social practices and institutions into which children’s fiction, like other forms of literature, is interwoven, and through which social understandings, identities and relationships are constantly produced, reproduced and transformed (see also Burbules 1986; Cohan & Shires 1988; Ebert 1988; A. Luke 1994; Schwartz 1995).

This study of representations of motherhood, therefore, is based on an understanding of representations as constructed, rather than as more or less accurate portrayals of lived experience. It is assumed that there is no underlying reality or experience to which it is possible to gain unmediated access, and that whatever reality is experienced is inevitably shaped by the way it is represented, even if it is also shaped by material conditions of existence; arguably, such conditions both influence and are influenced by representations (Birch 1989; Butler 1990; Ebert 1988; Gunew 1994a; Hall 1992a,c; Jackson 1994; Moon 1992; Rudd 1994; Walters 1992). This point is re-visited in Chapter Three, where it is proposed that this understanding of representations allows their political aspects and implications to be foregrounded. In this study, it highlights the need for critical attention to the social justice implications, for all members of a society, of the ways in which concepts of motherhood are represented in the fictional texts judged by that society to be among the best produced for its young people.

The following outline of the CBCA’s history and purpose, and its impact on children’s literature in Australia, serves to illustrate the significance of the corpus of adolescent fiction chosen for this study. In subsequent sections of the chapter, the study is contextualised within the current Australian educational and social climate, and its significance as a contribution to research is explained. Finally, the scope of the research problem is elaborated in more detail, and an outline of the remaining chapters is provided.

**The Children’s Book Council of Australia awards**

Since its establishment as a voluntary organisation in 1945, the stated objectives of the CBCA have been to promote children’s literature, particularly the work of Australian writers and illustrators, and to encourage Australian children to read, and to these ends, the Council has offered awards for ‘good quality’ Australian children’s books. The organisation of these has varied as the field has developed. Only one category of award, *Book of the Year*, existed until 1952, when the *Picture Book of the Year Award* was established; in 1982 the *Junior Book of the Year Award* was created. Currently, there are four awards: *Book of the Year: Older Readers*;
To be eligible for an award in any year, a book must have been written and/or illustrated by an Australian or a resident of Australia, and have been published in Australia during the previous calendar year. ‘Literary merit’ is the major criterion on which entries are judged, although there is no clear definition of what constitutes this. Judges must also take into account the quality of illustrations and other aspects of a book’s design and production, as well as its ‘child appeal’ (Bensemann 1993). Unlike many similar international awards for excellence in children’s literature, the CBCA’s awards operate on an ‘open entry’ system: books are entered by their publishers, although they are categorised by the judges, and no entries are culled before judging begins (Connor 1990). During the reading and assessment period from July until February, judges receive about 25 books every three to four weeks, and must read and provide a written evaluation of each one. Every judge’s report on each book is circulated among the other judges, and the judges also participate in a number of teleconferences to debate their opinions (Freier 1997). They then compile personal ‘long short lists’ of up to ten books in each category, and final selections are made by consensus during a four-day Judges’ Conference at which debate is said to be “heavy and intellectually precise” (Freier 1997:2). It is claimed that the “regime of reading, reflection, discussion and debate” is “one of the most exhaustive processes in literary circles” (Freier 1997:2), and that the CBCA’s awards are “among the most rigorously judged awards for children’s literature worldwide” (Van Every 1997:1).

The judging panel comprises one elected representative from each of the eight State or Territory branches of the CBCA. Each judge is elected for a two year term, but because only one half of the panel is elected in any one year, and judges cannot normally serve two consecutive terms, the panel’s actual membership varies every year (CBCA 1993b; Freier 1997; Van Every 1997). Judges must be acknowledged as experts in the field of children’s literature, be familiar with illustration techniques and book design and production processes, and have no vested interest in the outcome of the awards (CBCA 1993b; Connor 1990). They are not required to be librarians, as is the case on similar panels overseas. Typically, however, the panel is broadly representative of the CBCA’s membership which, although open to anyone with an interest in children’s literature, is dominated by librarians and teacher-librarians (Robinson 1996b; van Putten 1996). There are currently no requirements for gender equity on the panel and, as the overwhelming majority of members are women, only about fifteen per cent of judges in recent years have been men (van Putten 1996). Moreover, a gender balance on the panel is unlikely in the foreseeable future; the pool of people from whom the CBCA can draw its expert judges is presently dominated by females, and on the basis of current gender ratios in professions and tertiary-level courses concerned with children, reading, literature and literacy education, this dominance is likely to continue (van Putten 1996).3
Taking into account both the entry and judging procedures and the composition of the judging panel, it seems that if there is any apparent continuity in the values promoted in CBCA short-listed and award-winning books, it must be related to a continuity in the values of the Council and its membership, as well as to shared contemporary understandings of the nature and purposes of children’s literature, and to the social values that support its production and distribution. With this in mind, an initial exploration of the field of children’s literature is undertaken in Chapter Two.

While the CBCA’s terms of reference and criteria for determining excellence are similar to those of major international awards in the field of children’s literature, there are some significant differences in administrative procedures (Connor 1990). Of particular interest is the publication of a short list of books in each category of the awards, approximately four months prior to the announcement of the winners and Honour Books.

Concerns that too much attention was being focused on too few books prompted the CBCA’s decision to publicise a short list of books in each category from 1982 onwards (Hanzl 1993). A short list of up to six books in each category is now compiled by the judges during the final judging in April each year, and is announced immediately. The winners and the Honour Books, of which there may be two in each category, are included in these lists, but their titles are not revealed until the beginning of Children’s Book Week in mid-August (Bensemann 1993; Van Every 1997). Consequently there is considerable discussion and debate about the short-listed books, as well as speculation about the likely winners, during the months between the two announcements. The CBCA’s awards are not popularity awards, so the judges’ choices rarely receive overwhelming approval; indeed, they are often the focus of public controversy (Connor 1990; Freier 1997; Hanzl 1993; Robinson 1996a; Scutter 1999).

The intensity of debate over both the short lists and the final winners has been taken to indicate increasing public awareness and interest in children’s literature (Bensemann 1993; Hanzl 1993). It is widely agreed that the CBCA and its awards have been significant in the development of Australian children’s literature and the establishment of children’s book publishing as one of the few areas of growth in the Australian publishing industry (Hanzl 1993; Price 1990; Saxby 1993; Sheahan 1996; Sheahan-Bright 1998-99; Stodart 1995). Both the significance of the CBCA’s awards and their market value are evidenced in the fact that in 1996, shortly before the announcement of the award-winners for the year, Australia Post issued a series of stamps celebrating the first 50 years of the Book of the Year awards, together with a limited edition pack of ‘mini’ hardcover versions of four previous winners in the Picture Book category. This was additional to the considerable amount of award-related merchandise that is produced and marketed every year by and/or through the CBCA: book marks, posters, stickers, short list information books, badges, T-shirts, and resource materials for teachers and librarians to use with students in conjunction with the Book of the Year awards.
Notwithstanding the positive impacts of the awards, the value of producing and publicising short lists for the CBCA’s awards is a contested issue. Short-listed books are almost mandatory purchases for public and school libraries, are often adopted as texts for primary school reading and secondary school literature study, and may appear on Year 12 text lists (Hanzl 1993; Reeder 1981; Saxby 1993; Scutter 1996, 1999; Talty 1997; Tyquin 1992). At university level, children’s literature units often focus on award-winning and short-listed books “as easily identifiable examples of good texts” (Rossiter & Tandy 1993:43). Many of those involved in the field of children’s literature thus express concern about the ‘tyranny of the short list’ (Hamilton, cited in Hanzl 1993): a perceived tendency among teachers, librarians and adult members of the public, to rely heavily on the short lists when selecting fiction for children (Nevard 1990; Sheahan 1996; Sheahan-Bright 1998-99; Stodart 1995; Vandergrift 1993; Wignell 1990).

Among teachers, such dependence on the CBCA’s judges is understandable, if not recommended, practice. The trend to substitute a wide range of children’s literature for basal readers in classroom literacy programs has put further pressures on teachers at a time when their work is becoming increasingly complex, demanding and time-consuming. Within the current market-oriented educational context, in which control is centralised but responsibility is devolved, teachers are increasingly expected to be curriculum specialists (Blackmore 1997; Dempster & Beere 1996; Marginson 1993). Yet it is not surprising if they lack confidence in choosing suitable reading materials for their students; according to Hanzl (1993), even specialists in children’s literature struggle to deal with the quantity of new children’s books, professional texts and journals that have appeared in recent years. Nonetheless, uninformed selection by teachers of books for school students is potentially a serious problem. In a study of Australian teachers’ literature choices for children aged 0-8 years, Throssel and Byde (cited in Sheahan 1996) found that teachers relied heavily on word-of-mouth information, publishers’ book club publicity materials, booksellers’ representatives and publishers’ catalogues, and rarely made use of reviewing journals. According to Sheahan (1996:120), “this is clear evidence that analysis, reviewing or close reading of text [are] considered time-consuming indulgences amongst the teaching fraternity” (see also Sheahan-Bright 1998-99).

The expansion of children’s book publishing in Australia has also prompted concerns about the judging processes for the CBCA’s awards. Nevard (1990), for example, observed that the number of entries for the awards each year has become so high that the judges, of necessity, must read each one very quickly. While a hasty reading may be sufficient to recognise the general literary qualities of a book, however they are defined, it might mean that subtextual messages are overlooked. Given the continuing increase in the number of books submitted for judging each year, such concerns seem justified: 255 books were entered for the 1994 awards (CBCA 1994), 270 for the 1995 awards (CBCA 1995), and 297 for the 1996 awards (CBCA 1996). In 1996, the 65 entries classified as ‘information books’ were judged by a separate panel, apparently in response to concerns over the demands on judges. That same year, however,
entries in the *Older Readers* category increased by 29 to a total of 81; and the mean length of books in this category is also increasing (CBCA 1996). Thus the workload for judges in regard to the category of books with which this study is concerned is particularly high. This may at least partly explain the increasing levels of criticism directed at the judges’ choices in the *Older Readers* category by commentators who have begun to question even the literary value of short-listed books (Ireland 1995, 1996; Scutter 1999).

Arguably, the CBCA’s literary awards are the most influential in Australia in terms of sales (Price 1990). Selection for a CBCA short list effectively constitutes a ‘win’ in itself for a book’s writer and publisher: sales may increase by 10,000 copies in hardcover alone; and the release of a paperback edition becomes almost a certainty (Price 1990; Reeder 1981; Sheahan-Bright 1998-99; Wignell 1990). According to Hanzl (1993), short-listed books are in such high demand following the April announcement each year that the Australian Booksellers Association has been obliged to develop a system to ensure that copies of short-listed books are equitably distributed among bookshops.

As Sheahan (1993) commented, however, the intense attention on the short lists is potentially damaging for those writers whose works are not selected. Writers whose books are placed on a CBCA short list are likely to have subsequent manuscripts readily accepted for publication, perhaps to the detriment of others who have not yet achieved public recognition (Wignell 1990; see also Sheahan-Bright 1998-99; Wilson 1992). Published new writers whose books are not short-listed may remain virtually unknown, their books remaindered before the first print run has sold out. According to Wignell (1990), the narrow focus on a small group of books, combined with booksellers’ right of ‘sale or return’, results in many books being returned unsold to their publishers between April and August each year (see also Stodart 1995).

In response to such concerns, the CBCA began publishing an annual edition of *Notable Australian Children’s Books* in 1990, to promote books that are not short-listed but are nevertheless considered by the judges to be worthy of recognition (Bensemann 1993; Hanzl 1993). However, Stodart (1995) argued that this publication is not strongly promoted, and is inadequate in its format, and the extent of its impact beyond CBCA membership is uncertain. Among some critics, the perception remains that the CBCA’s awards are organised more for the purpose of gaining maximum publicity and sales for the short-listed books than for increasing the quality of Australian children’s literature; hence Scutter’s (1994:10) branding of the awards as “ready-reckoners of value” that are exploited by the publishing industry.

Whether or not this assessment is justified, it is clear that the CBCA’s awards and short lists are highly influential in Australia in a number of ways that are relevant to this study. First, books that are short-listed for the awards achieve very high sales to schools, libraries, and the general public, and can be assumed to reach a wide audience, not all of which will be children; second, because of their status as examples of excellence in Australian children’s fiction, short-listed
books are frequently used as educational materials, either for classroom reading or for more formal literature studies; and third – again because of the status attached to the awards – short-listed books become part of the contemporary canon of Australian children's literature (cf. Scutter 1999).

It is also clear that the sheer volume of work involved in judging entries for the CBCA’s awards, together with judging criteria that focus primarily on ‘literary’ qualities – without defining what these are, let alone acknowledging that literary criteria are never value-free or innocently applied (Birch 1989; Warhol & Herndl 1991) – is likely to preclude anything more than superficial and untheorised consideration of the social values and understandings embedded in, and effectively promoted by, these texts. Yet the acculturational work of texts must be recognised as at least potentially significant. It is important that researchers pay attention to more than the ‘literary’ qualities of critically acclaimed texts, particularly if they are targeted to young people and appropriated for educational purposes. The contribution of this study is in documenting the construction of concepts of motherhood in a corpus of texts short-listed for the CBCA’s awards and categorised as books for ‘older readers’.

While the texts with which this study is concerned are not specifically or exclusively educational, the study is situated in the field of education because they are often (although not always) used for educational purposes. In addition, as explained in Chapter Two, it is virtually impossible to discuss children’s literature without reference to the beliefs about children and their acculturational and educational needs that support the production of that literature. Accordingly, an outline of the current Australian educational context is necessary to the task of providing the background to this study. The following discussion also incorporates an overview of relevant aspects of the wider Australian social context so that the significance of the study in relation to contemporary social justice concerns can be clarified further.

The Australian educational and social context

In the mid-1990s, national curriculum statements and profiles were developed for use in Australian schools. These documents provide frameworks for developing curriculum and reporting student achievement within eight broad areas of learning: the Arts, English, Health and Physical Education, Languages other than English, Mathematics, Science, Studies of Society and Environment, and Technology. Both the statements and the profiles articulate a commitment to the notion of an inclusive curriculum as a necessary component of a socially just education system, and ultimately of a democratic society (e.g., Australian Education Council (AEC) 1994a,b). An inclusive curriculum seeks to address social justice concerns by moving beyond concepts of access and equity and broadening the base of knowledge and values from which the school curriculum is developed. Thus it is designed to recognise the experiences and needs of all students, including those whose interests have not hitherto been well served by the
Australian education system, such as members of the poor and working classes, of racial and ethnic minority groups, and of rural and remote communities, as well as white girls and women.

The national documents thus demonstrated a public policy commitment, on the part of the Federal Labor government (1983-1996), to social justice ideals and values; and while many of the policies implemented by the Liberal-National Coalition government elected in 1996 and re-elected in 1998 might suggest a weakening of that commitment (Amnesty International (AI) 1998; Gilbert 1998; United Nations Committees on Discrimination Against Women, and on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, cited in Reynolds 1998), the documents themselves remain current. Indeed it is important to recognise that, regardless of the political persuasions of governing parties, any contemporary public assurances that social justice issues have policy priority are made at the same time that various levels of government, in Australia and many other western democracies, are confronted with reactionary social forces in relation to a broad range of issues (Adams 1997; Dale & Ozga 1993; Johnson 1996; Marginson 1993; Reynolds 1998), forces that may be collectively described by the term ‘backlash’ (Hall 1992c; see also Blackmore 1997; Faludi 1992; Jackson 1994).

On the one hand, then, the explicitly stated focus on social justice in Australia’s national curriculum statements and profiles can be read as an achievement for human rights movements that, over the past three to four decades, have sought to secure freedom, equality and citizenship for all people, not only for those – generally white, middle-class, heterosexual males – whose interests have, historically, been best served by Australian school curricula. On the other hand, as Hall (1986, 1990, 1992c) has emphasised, these kinds of social struggles can never achieve outright or undisputed gains but only temporary shifts in the balance of power between and among a variety of social forces. Thus the social justice achievements of the national curriculum, like other social changes effected in the interests of hitherto marginalised groups, is threatened by a conservative backlash currently evident in both education and other social institutions (Antonios 1998; Blackmore 1997; Boulden & Parker 1998; Gilbert 1998; Ramsay 1997; Reynolds 1998). In this context, the practical benefits of the policy of inclusion are doubtful, as illustrated later in this chapter, and again in Chapter Two, in regard to the English curriculum and the educational use of contemporary children’s literature.

Backlash politics are complex, and cannot be understood simply as attempts by those whose power has been eroded or challenged by civil rights campaigns to re-assert their dominance (Hall 1986, 1990, 1992c). Thus, with reference to the broadly feminist concerns that guide this study, it is not only men but, in many cases, women who have been instrumental in the backlash observed by Faludi (1992) and others (e.g., Blackmore 1997; French 1992; Jackson 1994; Lees 1993; Luke 1992; Martinez 1994; Ramsay 1997; Snitow 1992; Walters 1992) against the gains made by the women’s movement. It should be recognised in this context that there are many feminisms, such that some women claim to be feminists even as they argue that feminism has ‘gone wrong’ or ‘gone too far’, while others, although evidently sympathetic to many feminist
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concerns, refuse identification as feminists lest they be associated with the more extreme views that are popularly attributed to ‘feminists’ (cf. Faludi 1992; Lumby 1997; Walters 1992). In this study, unless otherwise indicated, the terms ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’ are used in an inclusive sense. That is, whatever their other differences might be, all feminists and feminisms are understood to share an understanding of patriarchy as a powerful factor in the organisation of social, economic and political life, and a recognition that change requires overtly political work (cf. French 1992; Warhol & Herndl 1991; Weedon 1987).

It is also important to recognise that the politics of inclusion are problematic for feminism in Australia and elsewhere because they are “born of a liberal pluralism which can only be entertained by those who have the power to include” (Ang 1995:73; cf. Hage 1994) and based on notions of community and commonality that tend to privilege the perspectives of white middle-class women (see also Dill 1994; Gunew 1993, 1994a; Kilic 1994; C. Luke 1994; Murdolo 1996; Pettman 1992; Reade 1994; Yeatman 1995). Thus, the ongoing struggles between and among contemporary feminisms are themselves centred around issues of representation and inclusion; that is, they are struggles over questions about which women can legitimately represent which other women, and on which issues and under what conditions they may do so. Moreover, just as ‘woman’ cannot be understood as an homogeneous social category, and just as ‘feminists’ diverge in their thinking on a wide range of issues – not only on the basis of race, ethnicity and class (e.g., Alcoff 1988; Butler 1990; Caine 1995; Genovese 1996; Lumby 1997; Murdolo 1996; Pettman 1992; Reade 1994; Weedon 1987) – it cannot be assumed that all feminisms share similar theoretical perspectives in regard to motherhood. Contemporary struggles over understandings of motherhood and what it means to be a mother are particularly complex. As illustrated in Chapter Four, contemporary feminist theoretical and practical concerns are not always compatible with current socially accepted understandings about motherhood; and to the extent that they are, feminists can sometimes, however unwittingly, lend support to backlash responses to the achievements of women’s rights movements.

In Australia, the forces of reform and reaction have become engaged in struggles over, among other things, the gender perspective adopted by the school curriculum. While many educators, both male and female, attempt to ensure that the curriculum takes account of girls’ interests, the cry of ‘What about the boys?’ is heard increasingly often from many others, again, from both women and men (AEC 1992; Blackmore 1997; Boulden & Parker 1998; Gilbert 1998; Martinez 1994; Mills 1998). It is evident that the prevailing social order is one that has not only oppressed some women, and some groups of women, more than others, but has also disadvantaged many men (Boulden & Parker 1998; Mills 1998). However, many of the claims that accompany recent protests – for example, that feminism has ‘gone too far’; that women’s interests are now being served better than those of men; and that boys are the ‘new victims’ of gender equity programs – are not well supported by Australian educational research (e.g., AEC 1992; Blackmore 1997; Blackmore & Kenway 1993; Gilbert 1998; Martinez 1994; Mills 1998; Ramsay 1997; Yates 1993). Nor are they supported by current Australian research evidence in relation to family life,
labour force participation, income, domestic and sexual violence, sexual harassment and
discrimination, and participation in leisure activities (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
1996, 1997, 1998a; Department of Family & Community Services (DFCS) 1999a; Halliday 1998;
1999; Mills 1998; Office of the Status of Women (OSW) & ABS 1997; Pettman 1992; Probert
1994; Willis 1997); evidence of the feminisation of poverty in Australia and the disproportionate
dependence of women on the country’s welfare system (e.g., Cass 1988; Johnson 1996; OSW
& ABS 1997; Pettman 1992); or research into equity issues and the status of women world-wide
(e.g., AI 1998; Faludi 1992; French 1992; Ramsay 1997).

Nonetheless, in Australia as in other western countries, women’s struggles for equal rights, over
more than 30 years, have achieved some significant gains. These include:

- greater access to reliable means of control over fertility for all women … shifts in public
  policy to support the labour force participation of women, increased educational
  opportunities for women, and redefinition of the respective roles of men and women
  (McDonald 1995:35-36; see also Ramsay 1997).

For example, whereas the labour force participation rate for Australian women at the beginning
of the 1950s was approximately 8 per cent, 60-70 per cent of married women were in paid
employment by the early 1990s (McDonald 1995). By 1996, women had become substantial
contributors to the Australian economy, making up 43 per cent of the country’s labour force
(HREOC 1999). Accompanying this change has been a shift in the ways in which women define
their life roles: in 1971 motherhood was perceived by nearly 80 per cent of young married
women as their most important role in life, but by 1991 this figure had dropped to only slightly
more than 30 per cent, and the view that a woman can only be really fulfilled by becoming a
mother was held by only 10 per cent of young married women in Australia (McDonald 1995; see
also Marshall 1993).

The overwhelming majority of young Australians still expect to marry, although marriage is
occurring later in life, at least partly because women’s increased labour force participation has
lessened the economic pressure on them to marry (Gilding 1994). Whereas, in the early 1970s,
83 per cent of women had married before the age of 25, by 1991 this figure had dropped to 47
per cent (McDonald 1995; see also Gilding 1994). At the same time, about 35-40 per cent of
marriages currently end in divorce (McDonald 1995). In about 50 per cent of cases, the decision
to divorce is taken unilaterally by the woman, and in about 85 per cent of cases the children of
the marriage live with their female parent following the marriage breakdown (McDonald 1995;
see also Bittman & Pixley 1997). According to McDonald (1995), the introduction of ‘no fault’
divorce and a supporting parent’s benefit has particularly benefited Australian women, who had
often been unable to leave unsatisfactory marriages because of their financial dependence on
their male partners. However, he also observed that Australian men in general have not found it
easy to accept their loss of control over their spouses, and that this has often resulted in heated
legal battles over arrangements for the care and support of children and the division of property.
As Gilding (1994) remarked, decisions to end unsatisfactory relationships often still lead to
poverty for the women and children involved (see also Bittman & Pixley 1997; OSW & ABS 1997).

Indeed, despite the significant gains in Australian women’s rights, clear differences remain between their roles and those of men in families and society. Furthermore, it seems that issues relating to motherhood and women’s roles as mothers continue to present significant direct and indirect obstacles to the achievement of more enduring and comprehensive gender equity across all aspects of Australian social, economic and political life. Thus, women in heterosexual partnerships are still perceived as the principal homemakers and nurturers, and are consequently more likely than their partners to be in part-time or casual employment with poor work and/or pay conditions, and to have interrupted careers (ABS 1998a; Allport 1998; Bittman & Pixley 1997; Coggan 1999; DFCS 1999a; Gilding 1994; Johnson 1996; Luke 1993b; McDonald 1995; OSW & ABS 1997; Probert 1994; Richards 1994; Russell 1997). Moreover, although it should be noted that patterns of female employment are shaped by many kinds of discriminatory forces and practices, so that both the rate of labour force participation and the types of positions held can vary significantly between different groups of women (Pettman 1992; Probert 1994), the majority of Australian women in paid work continue to be clustered in a small number of industries, notably wholesale and retail trade, community services and occupations associated with traditional female domestic roles of nurturing and caring for children and others (Coggan 1999; OSW & ABS 1997; Pettman 1992; Probert 1994; Willis 1997). A woman’s income is still commonly viewed as supplementary to that of her male partner, whose role remains that of ‘chief provider’, even if he is no longer ‘sole provider’; her career is usually perceived as less important; and it is most often she who takes time off work to care for sick children or attend to other matters concerning children (Bittman & Pixley 1997; McDonald 1995). As recently as the late 1980s, about half of Australian men and women agreed that it is detrimental to family life when women are in full-time paid employment; and as many as 30 per cent of Australian men and women still believe that in heterosexual couples, the male’s role is to earn money while the female cares for the home and children (McDonald 1995). Meanwhile, more than 17 per cent of all complaints under the Sex Discrimination Act that proceed to conciliation still concern pregnancy discrimination, and consultations undertaken by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner indicate that the extent of workplace discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy or potential pregnancy is much greater than this statistic suggests (HREOC 1999).

Evidently, while it is now commonly accepted that women will participate in paid work, it is usually assumed that they will not do so on the same basis as men (Richards 1994; Russell 1997). Indeed, as Bittman and Pixley (1997) pointed out, increased female labour force participation in Australia has typically taken the form that is most compatible with the traditional model of the family, in which the male is a full-time breadwinner and the female is a full-time housewife. ‘Work’, it seems, remains a fundamentally masculine construct; the unpaid work commonly associated with motherhood is accorded little social status and rarely recognised as work: in everyday conversation, full-time mothers are commonly said to be ‘not working’, and are
sometimes asked if or when they are ‘going back to work’ (Gunn 1997; cf. Lewis 1991). Meanwhile, workplace policies and practices remain largely geared to the needs of the assumed male breadwinner. “Women enter the workforce defined as sexualised and family oriented people. Men, despite the fact they also possess sexuality and have families, are not defined in this way” (HREOC 1999:12; cf. Lewis 1991).

Consistent with current trends in other western countries, child-bearing is occurring later in the lives of most Australians (ABS 1998b; Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (AIHW) 1999c,e; McDonald 1995; OSW & ABS 1997), including Indigenous women, although such women tend to have children at younger ages than non-Indigenous women, and have higher birth rates in their teenage years and their early twenties (AIHW 1999d). While about 80 per cent of young people still envisage futures that include parenthood (McDonald 1995; see also Marshall 1993), parenthood is typically involving fewer numbers of children: as women’s labour force participation has risen, fertility rates have declined, to the extent that in 1998 the average number of babies per Australian woman was 1.74, the lowest ever (HREOC 1999); in the case of Indigenous women, the average was 2.2 (AIHW 1999d). Demographic studies suggest, however, that it would be simplistic to understand this pattern of declining fertility as the result of in-principle decisions not to have children. Marriage and children result in significant increases in women’s unpaid work (Bittman & Pixley 1997; Gilding 1994; Probert 1994); moreover, women who leave the workforce, even temporarily, to have children tend to have significantly lower lifetime earnings than those who do not (HREOC 1999; cf. Lewis 1991). Thus, in McDonald’s view (cited in HREOC 1999:15-16), the current low fertility rate results from “conflict between a liberal economic agenda and the persistence of social institutions which are premised upon the male-breadwinner model of the family.”

This view is further supported by evidence that Australian women’s participation in the paid labour force has increased far more significantly than has their partners’ participation in domestic labour (Bittman & Pixley 1997; DFCS 1999a; Gilding 1994; McDonald 1995; Pettman 1992; Probert 1994; Ramsay 1997; Russell 1997; Willis 1997). This situation is not uniquely Australian: throughout the western industrialised world, it is common for women to do most of the domestic work and to be more involved in childcare and child-rearing than men (Bittman & Pixley 1997; Brannen & Moss 1991; Brown, Lumley, Small & Astbury 1994; DFCS 1999a; Lewis 1991). In Australia, while there have been considerable changes in men’s professed attitudes to unpaid domestic chores, recent research indicates strongly that, in general, there is a considerable gap between those attitudes and their actual behaviour (Bittman & Pixley 1997; DFCS 1999a; Gilding 1994). Thus, the gendered division of domestic labour conventionalised since the late nineteenth century, whereby women perform tasks such as cleaning, cooking, shopping, laundry and child care, and men look after the garden and household repairs, remains largely intact (DFCS 1999a; Gilding 1994; Giles 1998; Hele 1996; Probert 1994), although McDonald (1995) suggested that the division is less clearly marked when women are in full-time paid employment and/or second marriages or co-habiting relationships. Gilding (1994) observed
that men’s avoidance of domestic work leads to ongoing disputes for many couples. According to a recent study reported by Hele (1996), however, most Australian men and women still assume the gendered division of labour to be natural and inevitable; and Giles (1998) found the same assumption to be well entrenched among girls in a metropolitan primary school. Thus a significant proportion of women express satisfaction with current arrangements, even though they spend twice as much time on domestic chores as their partners and do not necessarily enjoy such work (Hele 1996; see also Coggan 1999).

In this context, it is not surprising that surveys indicate that Australian girls resemble their British counterparts in that, while they are familiar with liberal feminist arguments that ‘girls can do anything’, and expect to spend a significant part of their adult lives in paid employment, most also expect their working lives to be shaped by domestic and child care responsibilities (Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Giles 1998; Hazell 1989; Probert 1994; Taylor 1989, 1993). Consequently, Australian girls struggle to resolve the tensions and contradictions between desires for personal success and autonomy and a sense of responsibility for, and obligation to, others; and there is some evidence that the increased ambition, energy and optimism evident in younger girls, in regard to the public sphere, diminishes somewhat as they become older (McLeod & Yates 1998).

The ambiguous attitudes of recent Australian governments towards women’s family and economic roles have not helped to ease these tensions. Affirmative action and equal employment opportunity programs have been justified both in terms of human rights and in the context of economic policies designed to increase productivity by utilising the skills and labour of both men and women; and, in response to evidence of persistent problems despite 15 years of anti-discrimination legislation, the Federal Government’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner was recently required to report on the extent of workplace discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy and potential pregnancy (HREOC 1999). However, much public policy still assumes women to be primarily responsible for domestic chores and the care and nurture of children in the home (Bittman & Pixley 1997; DFCS 1999a; HREOC 1999; Johnson 1996). For example, even as they purport to provide individual choice to families, current Government tax incentives for single-income families are clearly designed to encourage married mothers in part-time or low-paid full-time jobs to become full-time homemakers, in support of the current Australian Prime Minister’s belief that the ‘stable family’ – implicitly, one organised along traditional lines – is “the greatest welfare system devised by any nation” (Howard, cited in Bittman & Pixley 1997:260). Moreover, by failing to acknowledge the domestic caring work undertaken in two-income families, such policies tend to reinforce common assumptions that unpaid and untaxed domestic work has no economic value (Bittman & Pixley 1997).

Overall, then, there is little evidence so far of the development of a new cultural norm in Australia, such that child-rearing and domestic work would no longer be taken for granted as women’s work with which men might sometimes ‘help’, and family life would be understood to
involve men and women sharing both “the burdens and rewards of combining employment with domestic labour and the care of children” (Brown et al. 1994:203; see also Bittman & Pixley 1997; DFCS 1999a; Gilding 1994; Giles 1998; Hele 1996). Indeed, Luke (1993b) has questioned the validity of universalised notions of the ‘postmodernist’ and ‘postfeminist’ woman constructed in some contemporary cultural studies and feminist theorising, arguing that millions of women in the extensive non-urban areas of Australia, Canada and the United States live in communities in which feminism has had little obvious impact, and that the lives of these women often differ significantly from those led by their urban counterparts (see also Bayley 1999). The rural Australian women in Luke’s (1993b) study structured both their working lives and their leisure pursuits around their families; it was not expected that their families would adapt to them. Furthermore, it was the women in these families who were primarily responsible for childcare, including the pedagogic work involved in child-rearing (cf. Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn 1995; Griffith 1995; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989).

Surveying contemporary Australian family values, McDonald (1995) observed both a pluralism of values and a general trend towards liberalisation, consistent with that in other western countries. He found this trend to be particularly evident among the numerically dominant group of Australians who are of Northern and Western European origin, but argued that the family values of most other Australian ethnic communities are compatible with the plurality of social values currently accepted across Australian society as a whole. The trend towards more liberal values may be understood as linked to a more general shift, in the 1960s and 1970s, towards greater personal autonomy for both men and women, in both public and private spheres. Yet, while they are by no means an homogeneous group, it seems that achievement of that goal has generally involved, and continues to involve, more struggle and contradictions for women than men (ABS 1997, 1998a; Halliday 1998; McDonald 1995; OSW & ABS 1997). As Bittman and Pixley (1997:264) observed:

The individual right for women to compete in an unregulated labour market with men rules out responsibilities outside the market, and either rules out the creation or continuation of family life or reinforces male control over it. The potential to increase atomisation under a contractual model, where intimate bonds become more fragile and liable to bleak calculations of personal utility, give rise to nostalgia for the old breadwinner model – the [apparent] answer to everyone’s dreams for welfare and mutual affection.

Just as complex struggles over these and other equity issues, such as those of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic class, are played out on a daily basis in the broad field of Australian society (Antonios 1998; Halliday 1998), so too are they ongoing in the field of education. Thus, social justice ideals can be articulated in national curriculum documents even as they are assimilated into more conservative policies that are likely to limit unjustly the educational opportunities effectively available to many students, for example, the application of free market practices to school education (Blackmore 1997; Dempster & Beere 1996; Marginson 1993). It is a contention of this study that such struggles are also played out within the narrower but nonetheless significant field of Australian children’s literature. However, it is not only through its illustration of this that the study can contribute to current research. The significance of the study
is explained in the remainder of this chapter, which concludes with a review of the research problem in terms of the kinds of questions it raises about the selected corpus of texts, and a preview of the chapters to follow.

The significance of the study

This study is significant for more than its potential to document some of the ways in which fiction produced specifically for children and adolescents is implicated in the kinds of ongoing social struggles described above. Its significance lies also in the fact that fictional texts of the kind analysed here are frequently chosen for study in Australian schools. In other words, it is partly through the study of texts such as these that English curricula designed in accordance with the national guidelines must attempt to meet the social justice objectives set out in those guidelines.

It was argued above that the children’s books short-listed by the CBCA tend to become part of the contemporary canon of Australian children’s literature. Scutter (1994) has pointed out that any attempt to revise this canon is rendered more difficult by an awards system such as that adopted by the CBCA, which works to virtually erase all that is not rewarded or immediately acknowledged (see also Stodart 1995). Moreover, the operation of a canon, even when informally constructed from lists of award-winning books, is problematic, because it is inevitably exclusive in more ways than one: the concept of a list of literary texts with ‘universal’ themes seems bound to involve the privileging of certain ways of viewing the world and the devaluing and silencing of others (Vandergrift 1993; see also Birch 1989; Cope & Kalantzis 1992; Gunew 1994a; Schwartz 1995; Warhol & Herndl 1991; Wilson 1992). The virtually automatic appropriation of such texts into a school curriculum that purports to be inclusive rather than exclusive would seem to be equally problematic; yet, because of the status and publicity gained by books short-listed for the CBCA’s awards, this is often precisely what occurs.

The curriculum statement on English for Australian schools asserts the fundamental place of literature in the English curriculum, one of the aims of which is the development of “a broad knowledge of a range of literature, including Australian literature, and a capacity to relate this literature to aspects of contemporary society and personal experience” (AEC 1994a:3). According to this document, literature study should include classic literature, popular literature, mass media, everyday texts, and contemporary literature, the latter being “recent texts considered to be significant works”, which students should critically evaluate, examining the “ways in which [such] literature reflects or challenges current thinking on a variety of issues” (AEC 1994a:8). Individual State and Territory English curriculum and syllabus documents adopt broadly the same philosophy. In the case of Years 1 to 10 in Queensland, for example, it is recommended that resources for the study of English should have “recognised literary merit” and should include Australian novels, both for children and for adults (Department of Education, Queensland 1989:36; see also Department of Education, Queensland 1994). Similar recommendations apply at the Senior level in Queensland, with the more specific requirement
that the literary resources for English language study over Years 11 and 12 include three to four works of fiction (Board of Secondary School Studies 1987; cf. Talty 1997).

Thus, on the one hand, there exists a set of national curriculum documents setting out guidelines for the design of English curricula that will be inclusive of the needs and interests of groups whose knowledge perspectives have previously been marginalised in Australian school classrooms, while also apparently recommending the study of ‘significant’ fictional narratives such as those short-listed by the CBCA. On the other hand, there exists a corpus of children’s books whose ‘recognised literary merit’ appears to justify their study in school English classrooms. However, the implicit values of these texts are likely to be exclusive rather than inclusive; they may well go unquestioned by teachers whose workloads oblige them to rely on the judgements of others they recognise as experts; and they are not considered in any explicit and theorised way as part of the process that marks these texts as ‘significant’.

This study can therefore be regarded as significant from a number of perspectives. At a general level, it is significant for its focus on a body of children’s fiction which, being deemed to be of excellent literary quality, achieves high levels of sales and publicity and has the potential to reach a wide audience of both general readers and school students. As the review of literature in Chapter Five reveals, apart from some critical analyses of a few individual CBCA short-listed books and winners (e.g., Scutter 1999), there has been little serious and comprehensive analysis of the values promoted by this prestigious body of children’s literature since Reeder’s (1981) study of sex-role stereotyping in CBCA award-winning books. The study also makes a useful contribution to ongoing debates in the field of children’s literature about the value of the fiction currently being produced for young people and about the kinds of books short-listed by the CBCA’s judges, particularly in the Older Readers category.

At a more particular level, the study is significant for addressing a gap in current research on children’s literature. In Chapter Four it becomes evident that a developing interest in the institution of motherhood has given rise to a rapidly expanding body of broadly feminist research literature in a number of other disciplinary fields. So far, however, little research attention has been focused on the ways in which motherhood is conceptualised and represented in children’s fiction, and to what effect, in terms of the construction and maintenance of certain ways of organising the social world.

The educational use of fictional texts whose suitability for study has apparently been determined primarily on the basis of ‘literary merit’ is also rendered problematic by this study. Not only does it seem that the social values embedded in the texts in question have tended to evade the critical attention of researchers; it also seems likely that the relevance of these values for all Australian school students is taken for granted by classroom teachers. Yet the discussion above suggests that, in terms of the social values they promote, the texts are more likely to be exclusive than inclusive. In the field of education, then, the study links with contemporary social justice

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concerns about the development and implementation of an inclusive curriculum. Specifically, it considers whether the values implicit in the representations of motherhood in this corpus of adolescent fiction can be said to be inclusive of the full range of interests of all students. It questions whether the ways in which motherhood is represented in these texts are inclusive, in the sense that they recognise and value a broad variety of ways of understanding motherhood, as well as the possibilities for the development of new perspectives; or whether these representations are exclusive, in the sense of being conventionally narrow and potentially normative in their effects.

The study’s focus on representations of motherhood is particularly significant in the field of education. Just as this topic has received little attention with regard to children’s literature, it has also been neglected in educational research on issues of gender and education, although one implication of a review study by Hirsch (1981) is that feminist scholarship in education is inadequate if it does not examine how the maternal relationship is constructed in and through the network of social institutions and practices within which schooling is located. Early feminist concerns in the field of education generally centred around questions of access and equity, and focused on providing assistance to girls, who were targeted as the ‘problem’ (Blackmore 1997; Yates 1993). Attention has been given to the pedagogic work of mothers in preparing their children for school and fostering early literacy and numeracy skills in the home; and with respect to equity and access issues, such work has also been considered in terms of its acculturational effects on girls (e.g., Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). Comparisons have also been drawn between the construction, within progressive, child-centred education, of the ‘good’ teacher as a caring and nurturing facilitator of children’s ‘normal’ cognitive, social and emotional development, and the normative model of the ‘good’ mother; as Walkerdine (1984a, 1985, 1990; see also Tyler 1993a,b) has argued, notions of the mother as teacher and the teacher as mother have emerged as central to the scientific pedagogy drawn from developmental psychology and designed to ensure children’s ‘natural’ development into self-regulating democratic citizens. Recently interest has turned to consider what constitutes an appropriate education for both girls and boys, and has examined the construction of gendered identity through the policies and practices of schooling (Blackmore 1997; Blackmore & Kenway 1993; Yates 1993). However, such interest has not so far been extended to include analyses of how concepts of motherhood are constructed in classroom texts. This study addresses this gap in contemporary educational research by examining how concepts of motherhood are represented in critically acclaimed contemporary Australian fiction for adolescents, fiction that is often used for educational purposes in Australian schools.

By analysing the understandings of motherhood that are embedded in such fiction, the study seeks to document the ways in which these texts may work to reinforce, or alternatively to challenge, conventional understandings of motherhood based on notions of woman-as-mother and as central to the maintenance of the family. As illustrated in Chapter Four, such notions have proved resilient, despite ongoing challenges to the long-established assumption that a
woman’s primary purpose is to reproduce. The study takes the field of children’s fiction to be an important site of contemporary struggles over social justice ideals, including issues relating to female identity and the institution of motherhood, and suggests that, while contemporary fiction for young people may offer significant support for conventional understandings of motherhood, it may also be the case that, in such texts, representations of motherhood work to resist or even subvert such understandings.

The discussion so far makes it clear that the task of analysing the ways in which contemporary adolescent fiction works to endorse particular versions of motherhood while marginalising others requires more than a simple analysis of the attributes of those fictional characters who are identified as mothers, even assuming that the category ‘mother’ includes people who are not biological mothers, but take on what are conventionally regarded as parental responsibilities in relation to children. For example, the study must also consider the ways in which women who are not mothers are characterised in adolescent fiction, and the force with which the versions of femininity adopted by such women are presented as possible or appropriate ways to be female. In broad terms, the study is concerned with a number of related issues in regard to contemporary fiction for adolescents: the extent to which such fiction represents the identity of ‘mother’ as the primary identity of female parents, or as one of the multiple, shifting identities available in everyday social relations; the ways in which such fiction may work to construct and maintain, or to challenge, understandings of motherhood as the ‘natural’ destiny of all women and to promote particular models of motherhood over others; and the extent to which motherhood is differentiated in such fiction from fatherhood as a form of parenthood.

As stated above, the study focuses on those books that have been short-listed for the CBCA’s awards in the Older Readers category in the period from 1992 to 1994 inclusive. To analyse all of the books short-listed in all of the categories for more than a single year’s awards is beyond the scope of the study. However, no trends or patterns could be identified by an analysis of only those books short-listed in one year. A compromise between these two approaches is to focus on only one category of the CBCA’s awards, and for the purposes of this study, the Older Readers category appears most appropriate. The reasons for this particular focus are clarified in Chapter Two, in which the introductory work of this chapter is continued in a review of the major strands of contemporary debates about what constitutes children’s fiction, including fiction for adolescents.

Before proceeding with that review, however, and given that the complexity of the project is such that it must be contextualised in relation to research in a number of different fields, it will be helpful to outline the structure of the remainder of this study. The literature review in Chapter Two is followed, in Chapter Three, by an explanation of some key theoretical concepts. These concepts are useful in developing a theoretical framework from within which the analytical and interpretive tasks of the study can be tackled. More immediately, however, they facilitate the review, in Chapters Four and Five respectively, of research literature that illustrates the range of
meanings and values that are currently associated, explicitly or implicitly, with motherhood, and the relevant findings of previous studies of literature for children and adolescents.

Woven into the discussion throughout these first five contextualising chapters are the methodological considerations that underpin the study. In view of this, a brief review of these issues is required at the beginning of Chapter Six, with the remainder of that chapter serving to outline the research methods and practices used. The bulk of the analytical work of the study is presented in Chapter Seven, in the form of detailed analyses of 6 of the 18 texts in the corpus; these are supplemented, in Chapter Eight, with thematic analyses of the remaining 12 texts. Finally, Chapter Nine comprises a discussion of the findings of these two sets of analyses, the conclusions that can be drawn from them, their implications for theory, methodology, practice and policy, and some possible directions for further research.

1 In the meantime, the perceived vacuum, in terms of the recognition of young adult fiction as a distinct category, was filled by the establishment, in 1996, of the Sheaffer Pen Prize for Young Adult Fiction, as part of the Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards (Scutter 1999).

2 ‘Literature’ is a value-laden term in some usages, referring to novels, short stories, poetry and plays that are valued, within certain circles, for their quality of form or emotional effect (Birch 1989). However, as Tambling (1991:3) has pointed out, these are just particular types of narratives; “literature is and gives just a select set of ways of telling a story.” In this study, ‘literature’ is most often used in its broader sense to refer generally to written texts. In some cases, however, the two usages clearly overlap. Thus while the particular books analysed in this study are clearly ‘literature’ in the broad sense, they are also regarded as ‘literature’ in the former sense by at least some critics, and that is one reason why they have been selected for analysis. However, it is not the purpose or intention of this study to judge the literary qualities of these or other texts for children and adolescents. As the discussion later in this chapter indicates, the classification of these texts as ‘literature’ in the former, value-laden sense has been made prior to this study, and is not uncontested.

3 As yet, there are no equity guidelines of any kind regarding the composition of the CBCA’s judging panel, so it is not only the gender balance of the panel that is problematic. Given that members are predominantly teachers and librarians and that, in Australia, these professions continue to be dominated by members of the white middle class (Pettman 1992; Probert 1994), it can be expected that the judging panels will also continue, for at least some time to come, to lack balance in terms of their racial, ethnic and class composition.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Introduction

This chapter comprises a review of current debates about the phenomenon of ‘children’s literature’. The very existence of the CBCA’s Book of the Year Award: Older Readers is based on the premise that there is not only such a thing as a ‘children’s book’, but also a group of readers who can be identified as ‘older readers’. These categories, for the purposes of this study at least, have already been constructed, and indeed validated, retrospectively, through the CBCA’s awards system, and it is not the task of this chapter to theorise them. However, it is worthwhile considering how they have been constructed, and to what ends. The major purpose of the following sections is to review debates about what constitutes ‘children’s literature’, and about how and why certain types of books come to be perceived as such or, even more specifically, as ‘adolescent literature’. In doing so, the discussion touches on methodological issues that are dealt with more explicitly in Chapter Six. The first task at this point, however, is to address the question: which children can be taken to be ‘older readers’?

The CBCA concerns itself with books that are categorised as children’s books, and these evidently include books for children who are ‘older readers’. Decisions regarding the categorisation of books entered each year for the CBCA’s awards are made by the judges appointed for that year, each issued with a handbook of guidelines and rules. The task of categorising entries as ‘picture books’ or ‘information books’ is taken to be relatively straightforward, as these categories are not defined on the basis of the assumed ages or maturity levels of their readerships. However, books in these categories must be recognised as children’s books and, as the discussion in the following sections demonstrates, there is nothing straightforward about this. In differentiating the other two categories, the guidelines state only that awards in the Older Readers category “will be made to outstanding books which generally require sufficient maturity to appreciate the topics, themes and scope of emotional involvement”, whereas awards in the Younger Readers category “will be made to books for readers who have developed independent reading skills but are still developing in literary awareness” (CBCA 1993b:4). Thus, neither category of reader is clearly defined. Children deemed to be ‘older readers’ need not necessarily be older than ‘younger readers’, but are perceived to possess more ‘maturity’ and ‘literary awareness’ – qualities which themselves are neither defined nor necessarily related to age (cf. Scutter 1999).

It might be asserted, in a circular fashion, that an ‘older reader’ is simply a person who reads and enjoys books classified as being for older readers. It seems generally accepted, however, that books in the Older Readers category of the CBCA’s awards are most likely to be read by young people of upper primary or secondary school age, who might alternatively be described as...
adolescents or young adults, although these too are problematic categories (Alderman 1991; Hanzl 1993; Hudson 1984; Nodelman 1993; Steig 1993b; Wheatley 1994). 1

Literature for children

While definitions may be inferred from the explanations of the award categories, and ‘child appeal’ is among the criteria for judging (Bensemann 1993), the CBCA offers no definition of what constitutes a children’s book. Yet the question of what can be considered a children’s book is the subject of extensive debate. Rudd (1994) suggested that the various arguments could be grouped according to whether or not they claim that ‘children’s literature’ is distinctive. Thus there are some who argue that there is nothing distinctive about children’s literature, and that a children’s book is any book that a child reads and enjoys (Nodelman 1993; Steig 1993a; Sutherland & Arbuthnot 1986; Wheatley 1987). According to Steig (1993b), for example, there is nothing fundamentally different about reading as an adult and reading as a child; furthermore, all ‘good’ literature shares the same qualities, so all literature is potentially children’s literature. However, the assumption that ‘good’ literature transcends all social divisions, including those of age, is widely recognised as problematic (Birch 1989; Rudd 1994; Scutter 1999).

Another common claim is that the category ‘children’s fiction’ exists only as a marketing device, and that a children’s book is simply one that appears on a publisher’s children’s list (e.g., Steig 1993b; Townsend, cited in Hazell 1989). Sheahan (1996:122) has described the book industry as “obsess[ed] with lists for designated age-groups”, but publishers’ decisions are presumably not made randomly (Rudd 1994); moreover, it seems that their classifications of books as, for example, ‘children’s books’ or ‘adolescent fiction’ are usually accepted by teachers, librarians and booksellers. Books are displayed accordingly in school and public libraries (Sutherland & Arbuthnot 1986; Lumby 1997), as well as in retail outlets, where their classifications serve as guides to purchasers, most of whom are adults (Sheahan 1996). Evidently, whether or not it has any other distinctive characteristics, a large proportion of the literature that is generally taken to be ‘children’s fiction’ is in fact produced and marketed with children in mind (Nodelman 1993). This suggests two things: first, that a number of interested parties share some generalised ideas about childhood, and about the needs and interests of children; and second, that there is at least a loose set of conventions or features that these parties generally accept to be characteristic of reading materials suitable for children, or for sub-sets of children of particular ages (Nodelman 1992, 1993; Rudd 1994; see also Lumby 1997).

In other words, as Rudd (1994) stressed, those who claim that there is nothing distinctive about children’s literature usually do so by drawing on ‘evidence’ that is itself underpinned by the assumption that there is, in fact, something definitionally distinctive about children and their needs and interests. In this sense, these writers are actually in agreement with those who perceive children’s literature to be distinctive (Rudd 1994). The latter are simply more explicit in their references to what are claimed to be children’s distinctive needs and interests, as in Wheatley’s (1987) observation that a children’s book is usually one in which the point of view is
that of a child or adolescent, a definition that does not necessarily include books that are simply about a child or children.

Those writers who do insist on the distinctive characteristics of children's fiction often base their claims on stage theories of human development, although they do not necessarily explicate them. Similarly, a review of current trends in the teaching of children's literature in Australian universities (Rossiter & Tandy 1993) found that ideas drawn from developmental psychology appear to inform the design and content of most children's literature units, which often emphasise the importance of ensuring that children are introduced to literature that is 'developmentally appropriate' for them. Typically, the result is an ultimately circular claim that a children's book is one that can be read by children, as exemplified in Saxby's (1991:4) definition of a children's book as one in which

the image or metaphor is within a child's range of sensory, emotional, cognitive and moral experience and is expressed in linguistic terms that can be apprehended and comprehended by young readers (see also Brady 1991; Wall 1991).

Definitions such as this are also rendered problematic by their reliance on a notion of unmediated experience that can be separated from the ways in which it is constructed. Moreover, such definitions tend to conceptualise an ahistorical child, rather than recognising that childhood has been differently constructed at different times and in different cultural locations, and that it is largely through the theories and practices of education, developmental psychology and the publishing industry that the category of 'child' is constituted and children's experiences are rendered meaningful (Baker & Freebody 1989; Jenks 1989; Luke 1989; Nodelman 1990, 1992; Rose 1984; Rudd 1994; Scutter 1999; Sheahan 1996; Stephens 1992; Tyler 1993a,b; Walkerdine 1984a). Thus, Rossiter and Tandy (1993:44) observed that, with few exceptions, 'childhood' is understood within Australian university-level children's literature units "as a fairly fixed and unarguable notion", while children's literature is recognised for "its role in producing moral, socially functional, educated children rather than ... its function in the production of 'childhood' itself."

It seems, then, that among those who claim expertise in the field of children's literature, the ongoing debate about what constitutes 'children's literature' has left relatively unquestioned the taken-for-granted ideas and understandings that separate children and their reading materials from adults and their reading materials. Despite considerable research outside the immediate field of children's literature into the social construction of the category of 'child'; and despite extensive critique of the tacit assumptions that work to justify the differential treatment of children and adults (e.g., Jackson 1982; Jenks 1982; Kociumbas 1986; Luke 1991; Rose 1985; Speier 1976; Walkerdine 1985), there has been a tendency to accept the category 'children's literature' as given, and to focus debate primarily on questions of what can or cannot be included in it.

Wheatley (1987:187) remarked that, whereas such questions appear to be of profound interest to adults working in the field of children's literature, they rarely concern children themselves, who
“simply find what they are going to read and read it” (see also Krips 1990; Sheahan 1996). However, while it supports Avi’s (1993) well-founded observation that adults have a considerably greater investment in children’s literature than children do, her comment overlooks the fact that no text is simply ‘out there’ waiting to be found and read. The field of children’s literature comprises “a huge number of more-or-less creative events acted upon by an agglomeration of forces” (Alderson 1991:33), including educationists, psychologists, social reformers, librarians, parents, publishers, literary and art critics, and many others who, most often, are adults (see also Burbules 1986; Nodelman 1992; Poe, Samuels & Carter 1993; Scutter 1999; Sheahan 1996; Sheahan-Bright 1998-99; Vandergrift 1993). Children’s books must pass through a “maze of mediation” in order to reach their readers; while there is never any “pure route to the reader ... to get to kids you have extra hoops to jump through” (Winton, cited in Sheahan 1996:111).

For Rudd (1994:2), it is significant that, while there is no literary genre known as ‘adult literature’, “much effort has gone into making a ghetto of ‘women’s writing’” (Rudd 1994:92). The same might also be said of ‘ethnic’, ‘multicultural’ or ‘indigenous’ literature. Like ‘women’s writing’ and ‘children’s literature’, these categories of writing have only recently become objects of academic literature study (Bradford 1996b; Nodelman 1988; Paul 1987; Rossiter & Tandy 1993); but even as their legitimacy as literary genres has finally been conceded, their relegation to the ghetto serves to mark them, in Derrida’s (cited in Laclau 1990) terms, as supplementary or ‘other’ to the more ‘universal’ works of the traditional literary canon, whose production by white, middle-class males remains unmarked (Birch 1989; Macdonell 1986; Vandergrift 1993; Warhol & Herndl 1991). Rudd’s (1994) point is that children, like women and ‘people of colour’², have historically been perceived as ‘other’ to the assumed norm of the white middle-class male, and have consequently been marked by their specificity (Nodelman 1992; see also Luke 1989, 1991; Nodelman 1988, 1990; Paul 1987; Rose 1984, 1985; Walkerdine 1984a).

There is an important difference, however, between the category of ‘children’s literature’ and other literatures of the ‘other’ – one that tends to be overlooked in comparisons between, for example, children’s literature and ‘women’s writing’ (e.g., Clark 1993; Paul 1987; Nodelman 1988). The difference is that, whereas the literary genre known as ‘women’s writing’ comprises writing by women and, similarly, ‘ethnic literature’ is the work of writers who identify as members of particular national and/or cultural groups, ‘children’s literature’ is very rarely written by children. Far more commonly it is written for children, by adults, albeit adults who, having once been children themselves, can present themselves as not entirely ‘other’ to their readers (cf. Bradford 1996a; Nodelman 1992).

It may be, as Paul (1987:187) proposed, that women’s literature and children’s literature do share some common ground: “a theme that lies in a shared content (the enclosed, interior scenes of the action); and in a shared language (of otherness).” It should be noted that Paul (1987) did not clearly define ‘women’s literature’; sometimes her reference is evidently to literature written by women, but at other times she seems to have focused on the portrayal of women in literature. Her claim, however, was that both women and children have traditionally...
been subjected to “forms of physical, economic and linguistic entrapment” (Paul 1987:187), and that their literature has consequently tended to detail their lives inside their (usually domestic) traps and/or tell of their escapes, typically by means of trickery and subversion. In addition, Paul (1987:189) suggested that women and children have typically written in the more ‘private’ genres – “small-scale stories, often in the forms of journals, diaries, letters, little poems, or romance novels” – and that these genres have been perceived as trivial and insignificant in comparison to the ‘great works’ of male writers. From a similar perspective, Nodelman (1988:33) claimed that most writers and editors of children’s books, most children’s librarians, most scholars of children’s literature, and even most child readers are female, and therefore that “children’s literature ... is a feminine literature” (see also Robinson 1996b). He went so far as to propose that “children’s books that have been written by males have more in common with other children’s books than with other sorts of writing by men” (Nodelman 1988:32).

For both Paul (1987) and Nodelman (1988), the implication of these arguments is that feminist literary criticism and theory could usefully be put to work by scholars in children’s literature. However, while Clark (1993) agreed with both their claims and their conclusions, she argued that feminists themselves have sometimes been guilty of marginalising children and children’s literature, suggesting that feminists’ apparent ambivalence towards children’s literature is due partly to their fear of being associated with the immaturity of children and partly to their ambivalent attitudes to motherhood. Clark (1993) found such attitudes understandable, given the frequency of slippage from talking about women as mothers to focusing on children, and the consequent struggle for feminists who, wanting to celebrate motherhood, attempt to claim a separate identity for women who are mothers. However, she compared the attitudes of feminist critics towards children’s literature to the ‘stepping-stone phenomenon’ familiar to women of colour, whereby one marginalised group colludes in the oppression of another in order to assert its own claims. Thus, while agreeing that feminist theoretical perspectives may indeed offer useful insights and critical approaches for children’s literature criticism and research, Clark (1993) claimed that feminist theorists, too, are often more oriented to the interests of adults than to those of children (see also Kertzer 1996; Robinson 1996b; Vandergrift 1990, 1993).

Not only is children’s literature most commonly written by adults, it is also most commonly adults who write as reviewers and critics of children’s books. It is true that review journals occasionally make a point of recruiting actual child readers to add their comments to those of adult critics (e.g., “Young readers” 1995). Such journals, however, are not targeted at interested child readers, but at adults involved in the selection of reading materials for children – notably teacher-librarians and teachers (cf. Vandergrift 1993). Indeed, it seems difficult to extricate the field of children’s fiction from that of education (Hollindale 1988; Kociumbas 1986; Pausacker 1993): like the category ‘children’s literature’ itself, the relationship between children’s fiction and children’s education is taken to be so obvious that it is rarely questioned. Thus, Rossiter and Tandy (1993) observed that many of the children’s literature units taught in Australian universities are elements of teacher education courses; as such, they are frequently oriented towards literacy education and/or the tasks of acculturating children and enhancing their broad
learning experiences. As Hollindale (1988:4) remarked, “people slip without realizing it from talking about children’s books to talking about educational philosophy.”

In this regard, it is worth noting the large proportion of books on the CBCA’s short lists that are written by teachers or former teachers. For example, of the 18 books short-listed in the Older Readers category in the years 1992-1994 (the books on which this study focuses), at least 11 (i.e., Carter 1993; Caswell 1992; Crew 1993; French 1991; Gleson 1993; Kelleher 1991; McRobbie 1991; Marsden 1991, 1992; Moloney 1993; Nilsson 1991) were written by teachers or former teachers, and the writer of another (Marchetta 1992) was studying to become a teacher at the time her novel was published (Bensemann 1993; CBCA 1992c). It is reasonable to assume that these and other writers of Australian children’s books are well aware of the potential value, in terms of sales, of having their works adopted as classroom texts, and also of the influence of the CBCA’s awards, in terms of both sales and publicity, within and beyond educational settings. They can scarcely be ignorant of the significant advantages to be gained from writing books that will be received favourably by both educators and the CBCA’s judges, who are often, as noted in Chapter One, educators themselves (cf. Wilson 1992).3

To some extent, the link between children’s fiction and children’s education seems a logical and obvious one: after all, narrative literature in its various forms has long been valued for its educative qualities. Although particular ways of organising narratives may be culturally based, the telling of stories is an apparently universal means of shaping human experiences and linking them to particular ways of understanding the social world (Birch 1989; Cohan & Shires 1988; Griffith 1993a; Rosen 1984; Stephens 1992; Tambling 1991; Zipes 1983). For children, narrative literature is claimed to be a valuable source of vicarious experience and a means of enhancing their social, intellectual, moral, ethical and spiritual growth (Chambers 1985; Meek 1988; Price 1990; Saxby 1991; Zipes 1983), although, as is emphasised in the remainder of this chapter, what constitutes children’s ‘growth’ in these areas is largely a matter for value judgements. Nevertheless, it is generally recognised that fictional narratives operate as what Luke (1996b) termed ‘pedagogies of everyday life’, in that they are an important means of passing on prevailing social standards and values from one generation to the next, and hence contributing to some degree of social continuity (Bradford 1996a; Gibson 1988; Griffith 1993a,b; Hollindale 1988; Jenkins 1991; Lees & Senyard 1985; Rossiter & Tandy 1993; Scutter 1999; Stephens 1992, 1996; Tambling 1991; Vandergrift 1990, 1993; Zipes 1983). It is not surprising, then, that “arguably the most pervasive theme in children’s fiction is the transition within the individual from infantile solipsism to maturing social awareness” (Stephens 1992:3); children’s fiction is largely about how to become adult.

These widely accepted understandings of the value of literature are echoed in English curriculum documents, at both the national and state levels in Australia. Thus, in A statement on English for Australian schools (AEC 1994a:7), the value of literature is seen to lie not only in its recreational potential, but also in the opportunities it offers students to learn “through its imaginative representation of human experience”, its presentation of “a diverse range of socio-
cultural values, attitudes and beliefs”, and its varied use of language. Similarly, the Queensland syllabus documents note that narrative literature is important to most societies and has multiple social purposes:

story-telling in particular is a powerful genre, with its roots in the oral transmission of culture. It is a way of making sense of the world and our experiences, and of being socialised into a culture. Literature from other countries and cultures can help us to understand and value the diversity in our world (Department of Education, Queensland 1994:10).

To return to the notion of inclusive curriculum discussed in Chapter One, it is possible to read statements such as these as inclusive: they appear to recognise and value diversity. However, they can also be read as privileging ‘our experiences’, those of the dominant social group, as universalised and de-historicised ‘human experience’, while ‘other’ experience, as expressed in literature from ‘other’ countries and cultures in ‘our’ world, is effectively marginalised. Thus, even as the study of ‘literature from other countries and cultures’ is recommended for the purpose of helping ‘us’ to understand and grow, the inclusive social justice goals of school English curricula are rendered problematic; diversity – including, perhaps, diversity in values, attitudes and beliefs about motherhood – becomes something that is tolerated in order to better contain and regulate it (cf. Hage 1994).

Moreover, even as they acknowledge that its particular forms vary across cultures, statements such as these tend to assume a universalised and ahistorical notion of ‘literature’. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the relatively short history of children’s fiction, and its emergence from within Western European thought, are often overlooked in favour of similarly universalised understandings (Dankert 1991; Hollindale 1995; Kociumbas 1986; Sutherland & Arbuthnot 1986; Zipes 1983). The concept of childhood that emerged during the European Enlightenment remained dominant, both as a model and as a pedagogical goal, well into the twentieth century (Dankert 1991; Tyler 1993a,b; Walkerdine 1984a; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989); and it was in accordance with that concept that particular kinds of reading materials were produced for Australian children during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kociumbas 1986). In both Britain and Australia, those who claimed expertise on childhood – notably doctors and educational theorists – perceived children to have specific needs for literacy, social and moral education; and they generally agreed that the solution to perceived childhood problems, for example, premature sexuality, was for children to be kept separate from, but dependent on, adults. This solution required, among other things, the production of a separate literature for children; in turn, this served not only to ensure that children remained ignorant of the social, economic, political and sexual realities of the adult world but also to reinforce the belief that such ignorance was desirable (Kociumbas 1986; see also Jackson 1982).

In the light of critiques of contemporary child-rearing and pedagogic practices by researchers such as Luke (1989, 1991), Tyler (1993a,b) and Walkerdine (1984a, 1985), it seems no mere historical coincidence that the twentieth century has witnessed enormous growth in the children’s book industry at the same time as schooling has become legally mandated and the social
sciences, particularly psychology, have emerged as significant fields of inquiry. Rather, it becomes apparent that children’s literature is an important element of the home and school practices that work to produce the rational, morally self-regulated child (Beere 1992, 1994). The latter half of the twentieth century, in particular, has witnessed a phenomenal growth in the children’s book industry (Epstein 1980; Stephens 1992, 1996).

According to Hollindale (1988), much of the debate within the field of children’s literature, over whether literary or social values should be given priority in deciding what is suitable reading material for children, is actually part of a more general debate about the purpose(s) of education. While it may be that “all children’s literature is inescapably didactic” (Hollindale 1988:12; see also Vandergrift 1990), it seems clear that some books for children and adolescents are deemed to have more educational value than others; hence their selection as reading and study materials in schools (cf. Sheahan-Bright 1998–99). Regardless of whether it is literary or social values, or both, that are used as the basis for making such selections, it should be clear that no text is value-free, and that all children’s literature has the potential to influence its readers in a variety of ways (Belsey 1991; Birch 1989; Bradford 1996a,b; Cohan & Shires 1988; Fairclough 1989; Griffith 1993b; Hollindale 1988; A. Luke 1994; Meek 1988; Schwartz 1995; Scutter 1999; Stephens 1992, 1996; Tambling 1991; Zipes 1983).

The relationship between children’s fiction and the production and reproduction of ideology is explored further in Chapter Three, but at this point it should be noted that decisions about which texts will be used in educational settings, whether they are works of fiction or science textbooks, are always political decisions, because the potential of a text to influence its readers is likely to be enhanced by its “unrivalled status as legitimate school knowledge” (Luke, de Castell & Luke 1989:256; see also Apple 1989; A. Luke 1991, 1994). A similar argument can readily be applied to publishing and marketing decisions about children’s books, and also to the decisions involved in making literary awards. This is an important point to consider in a study such as this, because it is clearly not by accident, and arguably not simply on the basis of nebulous qualities such as ‘literary merit’ and ‘child appeal’, that the texts with which this study is concerned have gained their status (cf. Scutter 1999; Stephens 1996).

Children’s reading materials, then, do not simply or naturally emerge and wait to be discovered and read. Rather, as the objects of policies that seek to control what children may know and understand (Bradford 1996a; Nodelman 1992; Rose 1984, 1985; Zipes 1983), they are market-researched and niche-marketed commodities (Scutter 1999). At the same time, they are monitored with considerable vigilance (Niall 1984; Sheahan 1996; Vandergrift 1990), and are often subjected, directly or indirectly, to censorship that would not be imposed on literature for adults (Pausacker 1993; Scutter 1999). For example, it has long been an accepted convention of children’s literature that explicit discussion of sexual matters is avoided (Nodelman 1993). This, suggested Rose (1984), is the result of adults’ fear of childhood sexuality (see also Hawker 1994; Jackson 1982; Kociumbas 1986; Nodelman 1992, 1993; Sheahan 1996; Zipes 1983).
According to Nodelman (1992), adults also fear their own temptations to behave ‘like children’, even as they idealise childhood as a period of innocence and freedom. Drawing on Said’s critique of colonial European notions of ‘the Oriental’, he noted that this kind of contradiction is characteristic of colonialism. Adults’ contradictory perceptions of ‘the child’, he argued, underpin their colonisation of childhood, notably through their production of a specific form of literature for children. While children’s literature is commonly promoted as child-centred – that is, typically written from what purports to be a child’s point of view, and in accordance with what are deemed to be children’s needs, wants, and best interests – Nodelman (1992) proposed that, in effect, it is adult-centred: it promotes versions of childhood with which adults can feel comfortable (see also Avi 1993; Clark 1993; Rose 1984; Zipes 1983; cf. Burbules 1986).

Taken-for-granted understandings of childhood and children’s literature, Nodelman (1992) argued, assume children to be not only different from, but inferior to adults (see also Baker & Freebody 1989; Jenks 1982, 1989; Nodelman 1990; Speier 1976; Tyler 1993a,b), and thus unable to speak for themselves. In producing particular kinds of reading materials specifically for children and, in the case of the CBCA, judging their level of ‘child appeal’, adults take for granted their rights to interpret childhood and to represent children and children’s experiences to children themselves (see also Avi 1993). While experience ‘as it really is’ is inaccessible to all, Rudd (1994:90) observed that more powerful social groups – in this case, adults – are able to make their versions of experience more persuasive, more naturalistic. Moreover, not only do they define experience, they also define other groups in terms of how far short of this experience they fall.

In children’s books, Nodelman (1992) suggested, children do not speak for themselves, despite appearances to the contrary; rather, they are spoken for and about by adult colonisers, in ways that inevitably confirm their difference and inferiority. At the same time, the position of adults as authorities on children, and as having authority over them, is reinforced. Indeed, the writers of many of the books analysed in this study have been critically acclaimed for their perceived abilities to understand what it is ‘really’ like to be an adolescent. It has been claimed, for example, that in Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992) “the anguish of adolescence, with all its ups and downs and passions, is realistically captured” (CBCA 1993a:6; see also Ridge 1993); John Marsden has been praised for “his impressive ability to ‘get inside’ the mind [sic] of adolescent girls” (CBCA 1993a:7; see also Saxby 1993); and a former CBCA judge commented that Gary Crew is “well attuned to the adolescent psyche” (Steinberger 1993). One criticism of such claims, made strikingly obvious by the CBCA’s use of the singular ‘mind’, is their assumption that ‘adolescence’, or even adolescent girlhood, is a universal, ahistorical and homogenous experience. Moreover, while it might be argued that both the writers and the (adult) critics who praise them, having once been young people themselves, can justifiably claim expertise on adolescence, or on what constitutes ‘child appeal’, it must also be recognised that their memories of their early youth, their perceptions of childhood and adolescence as they observe it now, and their current understandings of what children and adolescents need and want have inevitably been mediated by more recent experiences (Clark 1993; see also Bradford 1996a).
What is at issue here is not the question of whether adolescents are any more or less capable than adults of expressing the ‘truth’ about what it means to be an adolescent; nor is it the complex question of who can speak, or write, for or on behalf of whom, and under what circumstances. These issues, as they pertain to this study, are explored further in Chapter Three. The crucial point here is that popular assumptions that children’s literature is child-centred, produced by those who understand and care about children, in order to entertain them and to address their needs and interests, are debatable at best. It is therefore important to consider the political question of whose interests are best served by children’s literature or, more specifically, by particular kinds of texts for children and adolescents, and the particular ways in which they portray the world (cf. Scutter 1999; Stephens 1996; Zipes 1983). This study, by focusing on representations of motherhood in adolescent fiction that is critically acclaimed and often read in educational contexts, raises questions about whose interests are served by particular ways of conceptualising motherhood, and thus whose interests are served by the appropriation of these texts for educational purposes.

Children and adolescents are often perceived to be subversive of ‘adult’ values and ideals, and as “the ultimate transgressors, appropriating, imitating and subverting adult ways” (Rudd 1994:90). Similarly, much contemporary children’s literature has been noted for its challenges to prevailing social values and its criticisms of the failings of the adult generation (e.g., Apseloff 1992; Avi 1993; Nieuwenhuizen 1993; Nodelman 1988, 1992, 1993; Paul 1987; Saxby 1993; Scutter 1993c, 1996, 1999; Steig 1993b; Zipes 1983). However, given that subversive children’s literature is not usually produced by children but by adults, it is no surprise to find that there is a limit to the subversive work performed by children’s books, a limit that typically accords with prevailing social norms and values (cf. Zipes 1983). Even as it deals with the frustrations and constraints of home and family life, children’s fiction almost always promotes home as, after all, ‘the safest and best place to be’ (Nodelman 1992); and although much contemporary Australian children’s fiction appears to challenge ‘adult’ society and values, it most often works, ultimately, to affirm them (Scutter 1996, 1999). Thus, as Avi (1993) remarked, the way many children’s books represent the transition from ‘childhood’ to ‘adulthood’ is somewhat contradictory: while they generally construct it as inevitable and essential for personal growth, they also tend to represent its successful achievement as, in some senses, a loss (see also Sheahan 1996; cf. Burbules 1986). Children’s literature, Avi (1993) argued, idealises childhood and pleads with children not to grow up, while also reminding them that they are more or less obliged to do so. It thus betrays a persistent social anxiety that children might, like the fictional Peter Pan, refuse to grow up, or that they might perhaps “grow up differently, assume alternative notions of adulthood and threaten the mature status quo” (Scutter 1996:2). In reminding children that they must grow up, children’s literature exhorts them to do so in ways that are socially, morally and intellectually acceptable to the adults who control the production and circulation of that literature.

Children’s literature, then, can be recognised as a site of considerable struggle, contradiction, and ambivalence on the part of adults, centring around questions regarding what children and
childhood, and adults and adulthood, are and should be, and about how the social world should be organised. It cannot be viewed as standing apart from these concepts and their construction in the social world, because it is inextricably bound up in the network of social practices that produce, reproduce and transform social understandings, identities and relationships. In view of this, the values at work in children’s fiction warrant ongoing examination; in the case of this study, that examination focuses on those values that are promoted by the representations of motherhood in contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian fiction for adolescents.

Much the same sorts of claims and debates as those discussed above have been generated by the question of what constitutes ‘adolescent fiction’ (Alderman 1991; Bator 1983; Hawker 1994; Hazell 1989; Kitson 1993; Kociumbas 1986; Nieuwenhuizen 1993, 1994; Scutter 1999; Sutherland & Arbuthnot 1986; Trites 1996; Wheatley 1987). While opinions differ as to whether adolescent fiction is simply a sub-category of children’s literature or something distinctly separate, literature for adolescent readers is perceived by many critics and researchers to have its own characteristic features (Alderman 1991; Hauck 1984; Hunt 1996; McVitty 1989; Nieuwenhuizen 1993, 1994; Pearce 1991; Reed 1985; Saxby n.d.; Sutherland & Arbuthnot 1986; Trites 1996). This being so, and given that the CBCA’s Older Readers category is generally equated with ‘adolescent fiction’, a brief outline of the development of a specific category of literature for adolescents, its perceived characteristics and conventions, and the controversies it sometimes provokes is presented below.

**Literature for adolescents**

There is general, although not universal, agreement that adolescent literature emerged as a recognisable phenomenon only in the middle of the twentieth century (Alderman 1991; Bator 1983; Hauck 1984; Hazell 1989; Hunt 1996; Peck 1993; Saxby n.d.), following the nomination of adolescence as a recognisable stage of biological, mental, emotional and social development (Alderman 1991; Hunt 1996; Kociumbas 1986). According to Bator (1983), literature for teenagers first began to appear during the 1930s in the United States, where Hazell (1989) observed it has a much longer tradition than in Great Britain or Australia. *Pastures of the Blue Crane*, written by Hesba Brinsmead and published in 1964 (and, incidentally, a CBCA award winner in the following year), is usually agreed to be Australia’s first genuinely adolescent novel (Hazell 1989). However the most significant international milestone in the field of adolescent literature is widely perceived to have been the publication, in 1951, of J.D. Salinger’s novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Although it was written for an adult audience, Alderman (1991) identified this as the classic adolescent novel of rebellion. Its significance is perceived to lie not only in its featuring of a teenage protagonist, but also in its adoption of an ‘adolescent’ viewpoint, use of ‘adolescent’ language and focus on ‘adolescent’ concerns – features that have become conventional in books for teenage readers (Alderman 1991; Hauck 1984; Hawker 1994; Nieuwenhuizen 1993; Scutter 1999; Sheahan 1996).
In Australia, a recent increase in the publication of fiction targeted at adolescents suggests that Australian publishers have recognised potential in the teenage market. However, as Scutter (1999:4) pointed out, it is not teenagers themselves who exert the greatest financial and institutional power in this marketplace, but schools.

Teenagers and young adults may well have long expressed a desire for books which speak to and for them … But this group is stranded in a socioeconomic limbo, largely still institutionalised in a culture which is protracting their education towards the mid-twenties. They don’t have the independent financial power to control or even make a claim on the market… On behalf of teenagers and young adults, teachers and teacher-librarians and librarians have opened up a space in the marketplace for young adult books as part and parcel of pedagogical strategies. Teaching texts are needed for English syllabuses: the upper ends of schools are full of young adults who in earlier times would have been out in the workforce (see also Pearce 1991; Saxby 1993).

In this context it is not surprising that the CBCA’s judges should have noted, in relation to the Older Readers category in both 1994 and 1995, “a push towards the adult range of reading” (CBCA 1995:3). In 1996 they commented that “the notion of a child and the boundary between ‘young adult’ and ‘adult’ fiction has become quite blurred and problematic for judges” (CBCA 1996:4), and the CBCA began to give serious consideration to a new award category, and to the need to clarify its definitions of an ‘older reader’ (Neary 1997). Marsden (1995; see also Nieuwenhuizen 1996) claimed that books for older teenagers have features that distinguish them as a new literary form: their protagonists are in their late teens; they focus on issues relevant to students in the final years of secondary school; and they are less restricted in their use of language, and more sophisticated in their treatment of relationships and sexuality, than books for younger adolescents. Thus, entries for the 1995 CBCA awards included novels focused on such subjects as sexual abuse, suicide, rape, race conflict, homelessness, Alzheimer’s disease, psychopaths, death, quadriplegia, coma, and brain damage (CBCA 1995). Marsden (1995) identified books targeted at the upper end of the Older Readers category as ‘crossover fiction’, because they can be marketed, sometimes somewhat differently, to both adults and adolescents. An example is included in the corpus selected for this study. Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992), which won the CBCA’s Book of the Year Award: Older Readers in 1993, subsequently became so widely popular that it was released in a format targeted at the adult market. The new format, published under the ‘Penguin’ imprint rather than as a ‘Puffin’ book, was explicitly marketed as ‘adult fiction’ rather than as ‘teenage fiction’; and the new cover displayed neither the CBCA’s award badge nor any critical recommendations that might have marked it as a ‘children’s book’. Together with the case of Marsden’s (1987) first novel, So Much To Tell You..., which was first submitted for publication as an adult novel but was revised for the children’s market and subsequently won the 1988 Book of the Year Award: Older Readers (Scutter 1999), Looking for Alibrandi further illustrates the difficulties of defining what constitutes a ‘children’s book’ or an ‘older reader’.

Typically, novels and stories for adolescents, whether younger or older, are written from what is purported to be a teenager’s perspective; they feature teenage protagonists; and they focus on issues that are perceived to be of contemporary concern to teenagers, which means they can easily lose their currency as social attitudes and concerns change (Alderman 1991; Hunt 1996).
In addition, adolescent novels are claimed to function as “informal rite-of-passage manuals” (Bator 1983:302; see also Alderman 1991; Avi 1993; Reed 1985; Wheatley 1994); that is, they are perceived to offer assistance to adolescents through what is argued to be a difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. Not all critics, however, agree on their value in this regard: Kitson (1993), for example, criticised the tendency she perceives in adolescent fiction for the narration to be offered as a form of therapy for both the narrating character and the reader.

From a perspective that takes children’s literature to be “a covert, but nonetheless powerful, disciplinary site” (Beere 1994:54), a noteworthy feature of adolescent fiction is the frequent use of first-person narrative and a confessional style, sometimes in the form of a diary, journal or letters (Alderman 1991; CBCA 1994; Gordon 1994; Kitson 1993; Pearce 1991; Saxby 1993; Scutter 1996; Sheahan 1996). The perceived therapeutic value of confessional narratives rests on the assumption that ‘freedom’ and ‘personal growth’ are to be gained through the enunciation of the truth about one’s self. Not only does the notion of an authentic self tend to overlook the need to recognise the relationship between the individual and the social, and to account for the position from which an individual speaks (Alcoff 1991-92; Martin 1982); the belief in the liberating effects of the confessional overlooks its power as a disciplinary practice (Foucault 1978; see also Martin 1982). Thus, confessional adolescent fiction can be recognised as a form of therapy, as Kitson (1993) suggested, but it is a form that may seek to discipline and constrain its readers, rather than to liberate them.

A strong emphasis on ‘realism’ is also evident in adolescent literature. McVitty’s (1989) explanation is that interest in reading so-called realistic fiction peaks during the teenage years, but Kitson (1993) and Saxby (1993) suggested that realism is regarded as somehow beneficial for adolescents’ personal growth. Whatever the reason, it has been observed that while adolescent novels may feature ‘ordinary’ protagonists, the activities and accomplishments of these characters are often extraordinary (Reed 1985); for example, in a number of the novels analysed in this study (e.g., Carmody 1993; McRobbie 1991; Nilsson 1991; Rubinstein 1992) elements of fantasy and/or the supernatural are combined with otherwise ‘ordinary’ characters and settings.

The degree of realism depicted in adolescent fiction is subject to variation, in accordance with the standards that are defined, more or less overtly, by the ‘agglomeration of forces’ prevailing at any time in the field of children’s literature (Bator 1983; McKenzie 1997; Ridge 1994; Saxby 1993; Scutter 1999). Even leaving aside, for the moment, the question of whether representations simply reflect reality or work to construct it – an issue that is addressed in Chapter Three – realism in adolescent fiction remains a controversial topic, as illustrated in ongoing debates about what has become known as the ‘problem’ novel.

The problem novel is a major but relatively recent category of adolescent fiction within the broad genre of realism (Hauck 1984; Reed 1985). Lees (1991) attributed the phenomenon to the rise of the social sciences, particularly sociology and psychology, which have fostered the idea that
children and adolescents need literature that can help them to deal with the problems of growing up in a complex and changing society. Defenders of such novels (e.g., Marsden 1994; Nieuwenhuizen 1993) have argued that it is reasonable and natural for adolescents to want to read, think and talk about problems related to love, death, sex, violence, family relationships and the future of the world. Indeed, Wheatley (1994), citing examples of nineteenth-century English novels, claimed that there is really nothing particularly new about the focus on dark realism in contemporary adolescent fiction. Critics of the phenomenon, however, perceive a growing trend to focus on the aberrant, the extreme and the sensational in problem novels, including some that have been short-listed for the CBCA’s Older Readers award: “if realism is the genre that aims to represent ‘reality’ as accurately and widely as possible, then ‘real’ realism takes the most extreme and exceptional cases and represents them as, somehow, typical” (Scutter 1996:7; see also Ireland 1995, 1996; Kitson 1993; Scutter 1993c, 1999).

In addition to those mentioned above, Saxby (n.d.) listed some typical themes of adolescent fiction: personal problems, such as insecurity and inadequacy, shyness, guilt, making decisions, confusion over sexual identity, homosexuality, sexual experimentation, pregnancy and single motherhood; family problems, such as parental irresponsibility and failure; and social issues, such as unemployment, delinquency, war, possible nuclear holocaust, racial and religious prejudice, politics, ethics, drug abuse, and environmental issues. Despite this catalogue of problems faced by its adolescent protagonists, Saxby (n.d.) insisted that contemporary fiction for teenagers is not gloomy and pessimistic, but generally positive in its outlook and supportive of the view that teenagers are capable of overcoming their problems (see also CBCA 1992b; Nieuwenhuizen 1993; Saxby 1993). According to Ireland (1995, 1996), however, the world view promoted in much contemporary fiction for adolescents, including Australian books that have been short-listed for CBCA awards, is extraordinarily negative, particularly in its relentless criticism of the adult generation (see also Alderman 1991; Kitson 1993; Scutter 1993c, 1996, 1999).

It should be noted that there remains a school of thought, exemplified in the arguments of Phillips (1992), that suggests that literature for young people can, and should, exist within a kind of social vacuum. According to this view, it is not the purpose of literature for children and adolescents to impart currently accepted social values; nor is it the role of teachers or librarians to become involved in manipulating young people’s reading or ‘purifying’ their literature. Phillips (1992) proposed that the focus on social issues in contemporary Australian fiction for children and adolescents is part of a worldwide trend, and evidence of the re-emergence of nineteenth-century didacticism in children’s literature. However, she argued, attempts to use literature to coerce young people into adopting particular standards of social or political correctness should be resisted, regardless of the apparent worthiness of the cause. Similarly, one writer of children’s fiction speaking at the 1996 national conference of the CBCA stated her belief that “it’s extremely wrong to look to fiction to change children’s views of the world. Fiction is not politics” (Cross, cited in Robinson 1996b:9). Given the history of children’s books, and in the light of the discussion so far, such arguments might seem idealistic, but they can more productively be
recognised as political moves in themselves, and further evidence of the prevailing climate of backlash politics described in Chapter One. Certainly such arguments constitute a threat to the development in young people of the kinds of critical literacy that the Australian national curriculum documents promote as essential for the achievement of a socially just society.

For the purposes of this study, a focus on books for adolescent readers seems particularly appropriate, if only because, according to Hunt (1996:4), there has been “a striking lack of theoretical criticism” of adolescent fiction to date (see also Trites 1996). Yet, as the preceding discussion has demonstrated, this category of literature for young people is very often vitally concerned with questions of identity, with issues of growing up, and with the critique of prevailing social values, thus reflecting the widely held belief that adolescence is “a crucial time in relation to educational and life choices” (Taylor 1993:127) and therefore has significant implications for future society (see also DFCS 1999b). Given this, it is important to consider the acculturational work performed by contemporary adolescent fiction, and to ask whose interests it best serves. This study considers these issues with regard to the representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian fiction for adolescents, and is therefore particularly relevant within the current Australian context of backlash politics and ongoing struggles over social justice issues.

Concluding comments

Issues of who and what can be taken to belong within the categories of readers and texts with which this study is concerned are subject to ongoing debate. However, decisions have been made and awards have been given on the basis of the existence of such categories, and their viability has been retrospectively validated by these activities. In order to avoid some of the confusion caused by the lack of clear definitions, the terms ‘children’s fiction’ and ‘children’s literature’ are used here to refer to the general field of written narratives produced specifically for young people ranging from infants to young adults. Within this field, the sub-category identified by the CBCA as ‘books for older readers’ is taken to comprise those books that are written primarily for teenagers and are otherwise known, sometimes for the purpose of further differentiating between them, as ‘adolescent fiction’, ‘teenage fiction’, and/or ‘young adult fiction’.

In this chapter, major areas of ongoing debates in the field of children’s literature, in relation to the categories ‘children’s fiction’ and ‘adolescent fiction’, have been reviewed. Assumptions underlying the development of distinct forms of literature for children and adolescents have been examined, and the questions of what counts as ‘children’s literature’, and whose interests it serves, have been considered. Also explored have been broader questions about the value of literature and its place in the school curriculum. It has been argued that ‘children’s fiction’ and ‘adolescent fiction’ are not naturally occurring categories of literature, and that it cannot be assumed that such literature represents the point of view of children and adolescents, although it typically purports to do so. Children’s literature has developed in conjunction with social understandings about what children and adolescents are and should be, and about how best to shape them into socially acceptable kinds of adults. Thus, while debate continues as to what
particular features, if any, distinguish a ‘children’s book’, the field of children’s literature remains primarily geared to adult concerns and values, and to adult understandings about what children want or need.

As a result, discussions about children’s literature are difficult to separate from discussions about children’s educational needs, because children’s literature is fundamentally bound up in the complex network of social institutions, including schools and families, that work together to persuade children and adolescents to adopt as their own the values and attitudes most acceptable to their society. It follows that what counts at any point in time as a ‘good’ book for children or adolescents – for example, one that is short-listed for one of the CBCA’s awards – is likely to be one that is expected by its judges to have something more than ‘literary merit’ and to do more than simply entertain its target audience on the basis of its ‘child appeal’. It is likely to be required to have some kind of educational value as well, even when ‘educational value’ is not an explicit criterion for judgement.

It was noted earlier that the issues raised in this chapter have significant implications in terms of the methodology of this study of representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction. Those implications are explored further in the final section of Chapter Three, where concepts drawn from narrative theory are used to explain the ways in which children’s literature works to produce and reproduce ideology, and then again in Chapter Five, where the findings of previous relevant analyses of children’s literature are reviewed. As previewed in Chapter One, however, it is necessary to turn now to the task of explaining the major theoretical concepts that inform this study. Elaboration of these key concepts at this point will facilitate the additional contextualising work undertaken in Chapters Four and Five.

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1 While this discussion remains relevant to the 1992-1994 awards with which this study is concerned, the CBCA has considered changes to the award categories and their related definitions. The 1996 National Annual General Meeting decided that, for the purposes of the CBCA’s constitution, ‘children’ would be defined as “people up to 18 years of age”, and a Young Adult category would be introduced “for readers 15 years and older” (Neary 1997:1). Although this has not happened (and may not; see note 1, Chapter One), it suggests that an ‘older reader’ might eventually come to be understood, if not clearly defined, as one who is less than 15 years old.

2 The use of the description ‘people of colour’ has become convenient and common practice, but it remains problematic. Not only does this term conflate race and ethnicity; it leaves ‘whiteness’ unmarked, and so works to obscure the complex ways in which language, culture and power interact in the construction of difference. Moreover, as Schwartz (1995:641) commented, it is “an exclusive term that signifies a social group based on perceived differences and described in the idiom of biology as opposed to the idiom of culture.” She also criticised the use of the alternative description ‘parallel cultures’, because it elides the issue of power relations between dominant and subordinated social groups. The descriptions ‘minority’ and ‘Third World’ have been rejected by Dill (1994), who argued that the former is disparaging, while the latter has an international connotation. Collins (1994) and Dill (1994) both used the term ‘racial ethnic’ to imply the solidarity of groups who have been the targets of racism and internal colonisation; but while Dill (1994) rejected the term ‘women of colour’, Collins (1994) used it in discussions of feminist struggles to distinguish the concerns of ‘racial ethnic’ women from those of middle-class white women. Yet she argued that neither of these latter terms successfully captures the...
complexity of experiences and issues involved (see also Cope & Kalantzis 1992; Gunew 1993, 1994a; C. Luke 1994; Pettman 1992). In this study the term ‘of colour’ is used, due to the lack of satisfactory alternatives, but its use is acknowledged to be problematic.

Indeed, the anecdotal evidence provided by their comments at gatherings such as book launches and CBCA seminars and ‘meet-the-author’ forums indicates that a number of successful Australian writers of children’s books are highly aware that the education market is crucial to their success.
CHAPTER THREE: KEY THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate a number of key theoretical concepts and draw them together so that they can be applied to the research task of this study, to analyse representations of motherhood in a corpus of fictional narratives for adolescents that have been short-listed, over a three-year period, for the CBCA’s Book of the Year Award: Older Readers. As indicated in Chapter One, the choice of this topic for investigation is based on the assumption that the ways in which motherhood is represented in contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian adolescent fiction can make some difference, in terms of social justice and equity, to prevailing social understandings about how the social world is and should be organised. Thus it is also a premise of the study that fictional representations of motherhood are not natural reflections of a pre-existing and independent reality, but are both shaped by and have an effect on the production of what comes to be understood in particular historical circumstances as the truth about motherhood, including what it means to be a mother; how, by whom and under what circumstances motherhood should be experienced; and what constitutes a ‘good’ mother.

Further, the study is based on the view that, in so far as the effect of particular representations is to affirm, as seemingly natural and obvious, a way of organising the social world such that the interests of some social groups are privileged at the expense of others, such representations can and should be displayed and challenged. Yet it is also acknowledged that this is not a simple matter of consciously and rationally rejecting one set of beliefs and ideas about the social world and how it should be organised – in this case, beliefs and ideas about motherhood – in favour of more socially just alternatives.

To explain and justify this position more fully, it is necessary to elaborate a number of key concepts that link together to form the theoretical framework for this study. The concepts addressed in this chapter are crucial to the methodological approach of this study, which is addressed more specifically in Chapter Six; to the analyses of the corpus of adolescent fiction that are undertaken in Chapters Seven and Eight; and finally to the task, in Chapter Nine, of considering the implications of these analyses and drawing some conclusions from them. More immediately, however, the explanation of these concepts at this point is a preliminary to the remaining work of contextualising the study in Chapters Four and Five.

The concept of ideology employed in this study is elaborated first, with particular attention to the role of common sense in constructing and maintaining existing social relations and institutions so that they appear to be natural and inevitable, rather than linked to the specific interests of one or more social groups. Following this, an approach to the concept of discourse that is compatible with this understanding of ideology is outlined, in conjunction with explanations of the relationship between power and knowledge, and the associated concept of subjectivity.
Emerging from this discussion is the question of what motivates individuals, in everyday social interactions and in their engagements with fictional texts, to take up particular subject positions rather than others, and hence to construct particular meanings, rather than others, from these experiences. In the third section of this chapter it is argued that the concept of desire, as developed by Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walker-dine (1984), is useful to an understanding of this process. Importantly, this approach also enables particular forms and expressions of desire — for example, the desire to have and/or be a particular kind of mother, or the desire to interpret representations of motherhood in particular ways — to be recognised as historically specific and produced through discourse, rather than as natural and inevitable. From this perspective, they are open to resistance and transformation.

In the fourth section below, the concept of ideology is further developed by introducing the concepts of hegemony, articulation and identity. In particular, it is proposed in this section that it is possible to conceptualise identity in a way that distinguishes it from subjectivity, so as to retain its political usefulness while at the same time avoiding the fixed and essentialist notions of identity that are commonly constructed in everyday social relations.

The elaboration of these theoretical concepts provides the necessary foundation for a more thorough explanation of the concept of representation, introduced briefly in Chapter One. As noted at that point, representation is understood in this study in a way that focuses attention on issues of politics and power relations. Such questions are central to the study's purpose in analysing representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction: to draw attention to the implications of those representations, not only for women and girls, but for all members of society, particularly in terms of the possibilities for the emergence of the kind of social order that is implicitly envisioned for Australia in its national curriculum documents.

The task of developing a theoretical framework is completed in the final part of the chapter. Here the concepts elaborated in the preceding sections are drawn together with some additional understandings developed in previous research into the relationship between children’s fiction and ideology, particularly in the work of Stephens (1992). At the same time, while methodological issues are introduced, at least implicitly, throughout this and preceding chapters, this final discussion moves further into the area of methodology, as a preliminary to, first, the review of relevant findings from previous analytical studies of children’s literature in Chapter Five and, second, the more explicit discussion in Chapter Six of the research design and method adopted for the study.

**Ideology**

It is beyond the scope of this study to explore the history or the trajectories of the now extensive debates over various and competing theories of ideology. However, given that the term
'ideology' has been used in many ways, it is necessary to explain how it is understood in this study. As a starting point, it is useful to consider briefly Althusser's (1971) development of orthodox marxist theory, in which ideology had been defined as the 'false consciousness' of the bourgeoisie, in opposition to the 'true' knowledge attainable through the supposed objectivity of scientific marxism (Althusser 1971, 1990; Gee 1990; Hall 1996b; Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Lather 1991; Marshall 1993; Ricoeur 1994; Threadgold 1986; Weedon 1987). Rather than being necessarily negative, distorted or characteristic of only one social class, Althusser (1971) perceived ideology as omnipresent, inherent in the everyday actions of all human individuals and fundamental to their ability to make meaning of their lives. His insistence that “ideology has a material existence” (Althusser 1971:165; see also Althusser 1990), such that it has real effects on people’s day to day lives, was a significant theoretical move that guided much subsequent theory development (e.g., Belsey 1991; Ebert 1988; Fairclough 1995; Hall 1996a,b; Henriques et al 1984; Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Marshall 1993; Purvis & Hunt 1993; Ricoeur 1994; Spivak 1982; Weedon 1987).

Gee (1990:23), for example, defined ideology as “a social theory ... which involves generalizations (beliefs, claims) about the way(s) in which ‘goods’ are distributed in society”, ‘goods’ being (not necessarily tangible) things that are socially valued and beneficial to those members of a society who have access to them. Thus, “ideologies simultaneously explain, often exonerate, and always partially create (in interaction with history and the material bases of society) the distribution of ‘goods’ ” (Gee 1990:23). This definition captures an important point made by Purvis and Hunt (1993:476), that the concept of ideology “implies the existence of some link between ‘interests’ and ‘forms of consciousness’ ”; and it supports their contention that “ideology exhibits a directionality in the sense that [it] always works to favour some and to disadvantage others” (Purvis & Hunt 1993:478; see also Marshall 1993).

It follows that ideology is not simply “a system of ideas in people’s heads”, but nor is it “a set of deliberate distortions” inflicted upon the helpless by their oppressors (Belsey 1991:594). Ideologies are not necessarily developed and explicated in a conscious and systematic way. Accordingly, Gee (1990) distinguished between ‘tacit’ and ‘explicit’ ideologies, arguing that the former are unconscious in the sense that they have not been subjected to reflection and critique, and therefore comprise all that is taken for granted and seems so obvious and natural that it is accepted without question. By contrast, the latter are developed through conscious research, reflection and debate. This distinction recalls that made by Gramsci (cited in Hall 1986) between ‘common sense’ and coherent and formally elaborated ‘philosophy’. Indeed, Purvis and Hunt (1993:479) proposed that a useful conception of ideology has less to do with ‘ideas’ or ‘thinking’ than with common sense, which is tacitly lived rather than consciously reflected upon:

It is precisely the ‘spontaneous’ quality of common sense, its transparency, its ‘naturalness’, its refusal to examine the premisses on which it is grounded, its resistance to correction, its quality of being instantly recognizable which makes common sense, at one and the same time, ‘lived’, ‘spontaneous’ and unconscious.

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*Key theoretical concepts*
For Gee (1990), it is tacit or common-sense ideologies that are of most concern to the analyst. Thus he emphasised the ethical imperative to explicate, in order to challenge, the common-sense ideologies that help to construct and maintain a social order that permits some groups greater access to social goods than others. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that any such project is not only a conscious political undertaking informed by an explicit ideology, but also a task that requires the application of a consciously developed and coherent theory to the analysis of common sense.

In other words, while it is useful for the purposes of this discussion to differentiate between them, common-sense ideologies and explicit ideologies do not exist independently of each other; each contains elements of the other, and each also shapes and informs the other. Following Gramsci, Hall (1986) suggested that common sense, as the basis of people’s everyday actions, comprises a variety of disjointed, fragmented and often contradictory traces of previously encountered explicit theories. Moreover, it seems that even a formally elaborated ideology must ultimately have its basis in something that is simply taken for granted, rather than made explicit, by those who subscribe to it. At the same time, as Hall (1986:20; see also Burbules 1986; Fairclough 1995; Hall 1996b) explained, an explicit ideology cannot make a difference in the social world unless it can “enter into, modify and transform ... practical, everyday consciousness or popular thought” and thus become embedded as common sense. To do so, however, it must compete with existing common-sense ideologies. These need not necessarily be traditional or reactionary (Purvis & Hunt 1993), but they form the constantly shifting terrain that “new conceptions of the world must take into account, contest and transform, if they are to ... become historically effective” (Hall 1986:20; see also Hall 1996b). It follows that new conceptions of the social world – explicit ideologies – are themselves being shaped and re-shaped constantly, in accordance with shifts in what prevails as common sense.

It is also important to recognise that, from the perspective of this study, not everything that counts as ‘common sense’ or as ‘explicit theory’ is necessarily ideological. As Marshall (1993) suggested, some common-sense ‘truths’ are demonstrable and uncontested, while others reflect interests and are contestable, and her example is an apt one in the context of this study: babies need to be kept clean if they are to be healthy, but there is no necessary reason why it should be their mothers who are responsible for keeping them clean. In the same way, explicit theories can include explicit ideologies as well as other theories that are not necessarily ideological. However, given that motherhood is understood in this study as a socially constructed and contested concept, it can be expected that both explicit theories and common-sense understandings about motherhood are ideological: as illustrated in Chapter Four, they entail interests that are served by particular ways of organising the social world.

Following Gee (1990), it is with the production and reproduction of ideologies of motherhood in the form of common sense that the analytical task of the study is most concerned, because common-sense ideologies belong in “the realm of the lived, or the experienced” (Purvis & Hunt
Key theoretical concepts

1993:479), and therefore constitute ideology in its most pervasive form (Fairclough 1995; Purvis & Hunt 1993). It is on common-sense understandings of how their social world is and should be organised – common-sense ideologies, in other words – that readers most often draw, in order to make meaning from representations of the social world and various aspects of it, a point that is elaborated later in this chapter. Thus it is by drawing on common-sense understandings of motherhood, rather than on any consciously and formally elaborated theories, that readers are most likely to make meaning from the ways in which motherhood is represented in fictional narratives. These understandings are among the widely shared and taken-for-granted, but not always coherent and consistent, common-sense ideologies that inform much of the everyday social action and interaction of members of a society, while also supporting particular ways of organising that society and the distribution of social goods within it, such that the resulting social order appears to be natural and inevitable.

Given that ideology is taken to have a material existence, it is also conceptualised in this study in terms of actual effects, rather than processes that may or may not have effects. The study adopts the distinction proposed by Purvis and Hunt (1993:496) “between discourse as process and ideology as effect.” The distinction is clarified in the following explanation of how discourse and the related concepts of power-knowledge and subjectivity are understood in this study.

Discourse, power-knowledge and subjectivity

In everyday usage, the term ‘discourse’ generally refers to language-based social interaction; and in some specialised fields, such as linguistics, it is similarly used to refer to the ‘surface’ of texts (Stephens 1992). As Stephens (1992:11) observed, however, it is “a conveniently loose term”; and in modern social theory it is associated with a focus on the role of language and other signifying systems in constituting social relations (Birch 1989). This usage has evolved out of a theoretical tradition different from that which produced theories of ideology, but the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘ideology’ are sometimes used as if they were virtually synonymous. Alternatively, notably in the work of Foucault, ‘discourse’ is conceptualised in opposition to ‘ideology’ (Purvis & Hunt 1993).

In addressing this problem, Purvis and Hunt (1993) proposed that while a distinction can and should be made between ideology and discourse, they need not be conceptualised as opposed; rather, they can be more productively understood as compatible concepts that supplement each other. Whilst acknowledging Foucault’s explicit attempt to formulate discourse in opposition to theories of ideology, Purvis and Hunt (1993) argued that the Foucauldian concept of discourse is not incompatible with the approach to ideology outlined above, if ideology is understood in terms of effects produced by discourses. What is important from this perspective is that discourses have potential rather than necessary effects; that is, discursive processes and practices work to produce discursive effects, but their production is not inevitable, and nor are the effects determinable in advance of their production (Purvis & Hunt 1993).
As suggested above, signs are components of discourse, but discourses are more than systems of signs: they are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972:49). Objects can exist independently of human consciousness, but it is only within discourse, and only in relation to other objects, that their specificity as an object of knowledge is constructed (Foucault 1972; Hall 1996a,b; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Purvis & Hunt 1993). Moreover, for Foucault (1972), knowledge cannot be understood independently of power. If there is no universal and objective truth, but only truths that emerge under particular historical conditions, then all knowledge is produced within historically specific relations of power, while all power relations rely for their legitimacy on the constitution of fields of knowledge. Thus, power and knowledge are mutually productive, joined together in discourse (see also Birch 1989; Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982; Foucault 1978; Henriques et al 1984; McHoul & Grace 1993; McNay 1992; Martin 1982; Purvis & Hunt 1993; Sawicki 1991).

Understood from this perspective, power is relational and power relations are productive. Rather than being located in particular persons, institutions or structures, or existing in any form that can be taken, given or held, power inheres in the entire network of social relations that constitute a society (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982; Foucault 1978; McHoul & Grace 1993). Thus "a society without power relations can only be an abstraction", although this does not mean that particular power relations are necessary, or that they cannot be undermined (Foucault 1982:223).

Furthermore, for Foucault (1978:94; see also Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982; McHoul & Grace 1993), "power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective." In other words, while there is no use of power that can be divorced from purpose, it is not always possible to trace the purpose back to an original source of power, because power is produced in all social relationships. However, Foucault (1982) stressed that power does not take a single, consistent form; rather, its forms are multiple and historically specific. Modern society, for example, is characterised by the emergence of ‘disciplinary power’, a form of power that has largely, but not completely, supplanted sovereign forms of power that make use of overt external force or threat and were more characteristic of earlier historical periods. Disciplinary power exerts itself through discourses, which establish their own rules about what counts as truth and knowledge, about what is sayable, when, and by whom, and about how it can be understood. However, Purvis and Hunt (1993) observed, because the boundaries between discourses are not fixed, such rules are not usually internally coherent, except in the case of technical or specialised discourses. Thus, while there is an “essential link between power relations and their capacity to ‘produce’ the truths we live by” (McHoul & Grace 1993:58), discourses are best understood as facilitating, rather than controlling, the possibilities for the production of particular truths (Purvis & Hunt 1993).

Thus, the truths that people live by are shaped within and constrained by discourses that work to define what counts as appropriate or normal in particular contexts, and to limit the possibilities for meaning within those contexts. Accordingly, discourses not only place limits on the
production of texts – for example, on what does or does not count as a children’s book at a
given historical point – they also constitute the principles of intelligibility of those texts (Birch
1989; Henriques et al 1984; McHoul & Grace 1993). With reference to children’s literature, it
follows that decisions about the literary qualities of children’s books, and hence about which
books are short-listed for and ultimately win awards such as those offered by the CBCA, as well
as decisions about which categories of children constitute the appropriate audience for those
books, are produced discursively, rather than on the basis of any universal, objective truths. It is
within historically specific discourses that ‘children’ and ‘literature’ come to be constituted as
objects of knowledge; those discourses both define what can count as truths about children and
literature, and establish who can or cannot be recognised as knowers of those truths. This
discursive work is directed towards supporting a hierarchical social order and an inequitable
distribution of social goods: knowledge and power, and the advantages they entail, as well as
literary awards and the material advantages that flow from them.

Similarly, as illustrated more fully in Chapter Four, ‘motherhood’ is not defined according to
universal truths, but within historically specific discourses that work to define, for example, who
can be said to be a mother and under what circumstances; what the role of ‘mother’ entails in
terms of duties, responsibilities, attitudes and behaviours; and what counts as a ‘good’ mother.
However, their effects are not uniform; rather, discourses of motherhood create a range of
possibilities for individual subjects, and position them in varying relations of power according to
the specific discursive sites and practices within which they are implicated (cf. Henriques et al
1984; Urwin 1985).

The notion of positioning invoked in this explanation refers to the concept of subjectivity, defined
by Cohan and Shires (1988:136) as “the condition of being (a) subject” (see also Althusser 1971,
1990; Belsey 1991; Britzman 1992; Butler 1990; Calhoun 1995; Davies 1992; Gentile 1985; Hall
1992b; Henriques et al 1984; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Purvis & Hunt 1993; Weedon 1987; Zizek
1990). Subjects are not the unified, rational, autonomous and unique individuals who, according
to liberal-humanist thought, are the sources of all social activity and meaning. Rather, people
are constituted as subjects within discourses, which position them in power-knowledge
relationships with other subjects and subject positions within those discourses.

Subject positions are necessarily relational; they exist only in relation to other subject positions,
and are therefore multiple, contingent and marked by difference (Butler 1990; Calhoun 1995;
1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Zizek 1990). Furthermore, because people are simultaneously
constituted as subjects within multiple discourses – such as those of gender, ethnicity, age,
sexuality and class, as well as the discourses of motherhood on which this study focuses – they
inevitably occupy multiple subject positions. Perera and Pugliese (1994) observed that the
concept of subject positions therefore highlights the embodied nature of the subject, and renders
problematic any notion of autonomy or neutrality (see also Barthes 1977; Calhoun 1995;
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Ellsworth 1992; Foucault 1978, 1982; Gentile 1985; Hall 1992b; McNay 1992; Sawicki 1991). 'The body' itself, as Butler (1990:8) pointed out, is a construction that has no signifiable existence prior to its constitution in discourse; it cannot be understood "as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will." Moreover, subjectivity is constructed in and through social relations and practices, and thus primarily through language and other signifying systems. These are never fully referential and meaning is, therefore, always contestable. It follows that subjectivity is not fixed or coherent, but an ongoing process of construction and reconstruction (Barthes 1977; Birch 1989; Belsey 1991; Britzman 1992; Butler 1990; Calhoun 1995; Cohan & Shires 1988; Davies 1989, 1992, 1993; Ebert 1988; Gentile 1985; Hall 1992b; Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Purvis & Hunt 1993; Threadgold 1988; Weedon 1987; Zizek 1990).

Nevertheless, people do often perceive themselves to be autonomous and coherent, the sources of their own beliefs and ideas, and responsible for making their own meanings. This, Davies (1992:64) argued, is because the truths produced by discourses, the truths that people live by and that constitute their common sense, include truths about the self: "what we have learned to call our true essential selves" is simply "that which the various discourses in which we participate define as or make thinkable as a self, or a true self."

Yet subjectivity cannot be explained simply in terms of the totality of all discourses encountered and subject positions occupied over the course of a person’s life. Such an understanding implies a "kind of discourse determinism" (Henriques et al 1984:205), and even though power does not reside within them, it is clear that human beings are not passive objects upon which power is simply exerted. On the contrary: "in human history there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society, and this is obviously what makes change possible" (Said 1991:246-247). Accordingly, Henriques et al (1984:205; see also Butler 1990; Macdonnell 1986; Ricoeur 1994; Purvis & Hunt 1993; Threadgold 1988; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989) rejected any suggestion that people are mechanically positioned in discourses, a view which leaves no room for explicating either the possibilities for change or individuals’ resistances to change, and which disregards the question of motivation altogether.

What must be recognised, Foucault (1978) argued, is that wherever there is power, there is also resistance, for the two cannot exist independently of each other. Like power, resistance does not necessarily originate from any fixed point; just as power is everywhere and inheres in all relationships, resistance is also everywhere, produced simultaneously in the same relationships (see also Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982; McHoul & Grace 1993). Yet, as Purvis and Hunt (1993) observed, Foucault gave no satisfactory account of the tensions and contradictions within discourses that allow individuals to reject particular subject positions in favour of others, and make it possible for alternative discourses to emerge (see also Said 1991). Such an account would have to avoid the implication of discourse determinism without falling back on the liberal-humanist notion of an always-already reasoning subject who makes free and rational choices.
from available subject positions. In order to address this problem, Henriques et al (1984) drew on aspects of Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories to conceptualise desire in a way that remains compatible with the concepts of discourse, power-knowledge and subjectivity explained above, while explaining what motivates individuals to take up particular subject positions, apparently in preference to a variety of possible alternatives.

**Desire**

The relevance to this study of the concept of desire becomes more clearly evident throughout this chapter, as the various components of the theoretical framework are drawn together. At this point it can be noted that the following explanation has multiple implications in terms of the subject positions that readers take up as they engage with and make meaning from fictional texts, and hence in terms of the power of the representations of motherhood in those texts to shape the production of ideologies of motherhood.

The concept of desire, as used in this study, has been developed out of Lacan’s psychoanalytic work on the role of signification in the construction of subjectivity. Although mainstream psychoanalytic theory has often been criticised as anti-feminist, bourgeois, normative, and historically and culturally specific, some aspects of it, particularly its recognition of the unconscious and the fundamental irrationality of human beings, have been perceived as useful, even by feminist theorists (e.g., Gentile 1985; Grosz 1990; Ireland 1993; E.A. Kaplan 1992; Weedon 1987). Accordingly, Henriques et al (1984) advocated selective and strategic appropriation of psychoanalytic concepts to further the theorisation of subjectivity. Of particular value, they argued, is Lacan’s distinction between needs and desires, according to which needs can, at least in principle, be fulfilled, whereas desires must ultimately remain unsatisfied.

According to Lacanian theorising, an infant is initially unable to distinguish between the self and the source of satisfaction of his or her survival needs, who is most commonly, although not necessarily, the mother. The infant exists in a realm of apparent plenitude, but without being able to experience it as such; according to Lacan (cited in Grosz 1990:34), this period preceding social and psychic development is characterised by “the lack of a lack.” Subsequently, however, the infant becomes aware of the self as a separate being, and of the (m)other as the source of satisfaction, and must therefore come to terms not only with his or her inability to control the satisfaction of his or her needs, but also with the anxiety that this lack of control produces.

According to the Lacanian account, it is through language that the child attempts to overcome, at the level of fantasy, his or her anxiety over the possible loss of the mother and the satisfaction associated with her. The displacement of the original object of satisfaction with words, however, begins the process of repression that forms the unconscious, and also establishes desires as distinct from needs. While language enables the child to speak his or her desire, it also “determines what and how the child can speak ... [so that] there will be a gap between the child’s
Given the implication of representation in both the production and the satisfaction of desires, Henriques et al. (1984) argued that discourses are necessarily permeated by loss, desire, and the search for satisfaction; they inevitably contain some reference to a fantasised point of certainty and fulfilment. Termed ‘the Other’ by Lacan, this is what “appears to hold the ‘truth’ of the subject and the power to make good its loss. But this is the ultimate fantasy” (Mitchell & Rose, cited in Henriques et al. 1984:216): the subject’s lost sense of wholeness was only ever based on an illusion. From a Lacanian perspective, then, “desire for the Other is ultimately rooted in desire for the Mother” (Urwin 1984). This, it must be stressed, is not any actual and inevitably imperfect mother, but the perfect mother of fantasy. It is this mother, or something that, at the level of the unconscious, comes to signify or represent her, that the subject invests with the power to restore his or her lost sense of wholeness.

In so far as it exists, the continuity of the subject can thus be explained in terms of the persistence of belief in the possibility of satisfaction – effectively, belief in the possibility of certain knowledge and truth – which motivates a person’s choices from the range of available subject positions (Henriques et al. 1984). In principle, that range is wide, but in effect it may be limited; and the ‘choices’ involved are not necessarily conscious or rational, because they may be influenced by “personal histories of being positioned in particular ways and of interpreting events through and in terms of familiar story lines, concepts, and images” (Davies 1992:57; see also Gilbert 1995). Moreover, taking up a desired position within discourse cannot actually make the subject a coherent whole, particularly given that people are simultaneously located within multiple discourses that may compete with and even contradict each other. However, “it is the imaginary quality of the individual’s identification with a subject position which gives it so much psychological and emotional force” (Weedon 1987:31).

By drawing on Lacanian theory on the production and satisfaction of desire, Henriques et al. (1984) not only developed a useful account of the motivational dynamics involved in taking up particular subject positions; they also showed how the forms of desire that work to position subjects in discourses are themselves produced discursively. Most importantly, however, they showed that particular forms of desire are not natural or inevitable, but are produced in particular social and historical contexts. In principle, then, they are open to transformation.

An example drawn from the work of Foucault and used by Henriques et al. (1984) to illustrate their argument is particularly apt in the context of this study. Foucault’s work on the history of
sexuality showed how nineteenth-century discourses positioned women as the objects of new medical interventions related to their reproductive capacities and their roles as mothers; in effect, the options available to women were confined and defined by a conjunction of medical and scientific discourses that conflated reproduction and sexuality. Furthermore, these discourses constructed women's sexual desires as dangerous and abnormal; women themselves as weak and irrational; and 'good' mothers as those who heeded the advice of scientific 'experts' in devoting themselves entirely to the care of their children. Within these discourses, “the good woman did not experience sexual pleasure but obtained her fulfilment in terms of her reproductive capacity and through the raising of her children” (Henriques et al 1984:221). Foucault’s work illustrated how women’s desires were discursively shaped such that their fulfilment appeared to lie in a life devoted to the care of children and others.

In more recent times, Henriques et al (1984) acknowledged, new forms of contraception have created the possibility of greater sexual freedom for women. However, they pointed out, this freedom has been constrained by discourses that continue to link women’s sexual pleasure with nymphomania and promiscuity, and also by the discourse of romance that pervades popular cultural texts such as films, novels and television soap operas, constructing romance and marriage – and, by implication, motherhood – as the ultimate solution to a woman’s problems (see also Gilbert 1988, 1989, 1990, 1993; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Taylor 1989, 1993; Walkerdine 1984b). As Davies (1992:61) observed, “within the terms of these romantic story lines, the desire to correctly constitute oneself as woman entails taking up as one’s own oppressive subject positions that none would ever rationally choose.”

This is not to say that the adolescent girls and women who are the main consumers of these popular cultural texts are the passive dupes of romantic discourses of femininity, marriage and motherhood. On the contrary, in regard to these as well as other issues, contemporary teenage girls are confronted with a range of competing and conflicting discourses, and their attempts to reconcile the ambiguities and contradictions in their lives involve them in considerable ongoing struggle (Christian-Smith in press; Gilbert 1988; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Hudson 1984; McLeod & Yates 1998; Taylor 1993). However, as illustrated in Chapter Four, the sexuality of teenage girls is discursively regulated in ways that make it difficult to understand male-female relationships outside the terms of the patriarchal discourses of marriage and motherhood that pervade romance fiction. Moreover, Gilbert (1988:14) observed that many adolescent girls have limited opportunities to read fiction that is not “extraordinarily predictable in its sex-role stereotyping and its emphasis on romance”; and partly as a consequence of this, many of them also have limited access to alternative discourses with which they might resist the versions of femininity offered to them in popular romance texts (see also Gilbert 1989).

The evidence in support of these arguments is discussed further in Chapters Four and Five. What is important to note at this point is that popular romance texts are historically and culturally specific. Therefore, as Walkerdine (1984b) observed, their production cannot be explained
simply in terms of a response to natural, pre-existing feminine desires. Such texts are not only produced discursively, they are themselves productive. That is, they work to produce and shape female desire in particular ways, such that its fulfilment appears to lie in taking up the subject positions offered to women and girls within the discourses that also produce these very texts (see also Christian-Smith in press; Henriques et al 1984). In other words, both as product and as process, popular romance texts are strongly implicated in the (re)production of romantic ideologies of femininity, marriage and motherhood.

These examples help to highlight the relevance of the concept of desire to the analysis, in this study, of representations of motherhood in adolescent fiction. In the light of the understandings of the field of children's literature developed in Chapter Two, and by drawing on the theoretical concepts elaborated so far in this chapter, it can be argued that the category of literature known as ‘adolescent fiction’ has emerged in conjunction with historically and culturally specific desires to categorise and conceptualise the stages of human development in certain ways. Judgements about what constitutes a ‘good book for adolescents’ can be understood as shaped by, among other things, historically and culturally specific desires to attach particular meanings to adolescence and to produce particular kinds of adolescents who will later become socially acceptable adults, as well as by discourses that work to define what constitutes ‘literary merit’ and ‘child appeal’, and are themselves historically and culturally specific.

Moreover, adolescents’ choices in reading narratives made available to them as ‘adolescent fiction’, and in taking up subject positions made available to them by those texts, can be recognised as discursively produced. They are produced not only through the discursive work of the texts themselves, as discussed later in this chapter, but also through the work of a range of connected and overlapping discourses and discursive practices, including those of English literature education that work to shape students’ interests in reading and their understandings of what constitutes a ‘good’ book. Further, although the way in which representation is understood in this study is yet to be fully elaborated, and the research literature on the discursive construction of motherhood has not yet been explored, it should already be apparent that both the ways in which motherhood is represented in contemporary adolescent fiction and the ways in which those representations are interpreted by readers are shaped by historically and culturally specific desires to attach particular meanings to motherhood – desires that are themselves the effects of discourses that have worked to construct motherhood in particular ways.

As noted above, people are simultaneously positioned as subjects within discourses that may compete with and even contradict each other, such that subjectivity is likely to be experienced as multiple, fragmented and contradictory rather than as unified and coherent. While a person may at times appear to him or herself, or to others, in terms of a unified and consistent identity, this is an achievement that involves ongoing conflict and struggle. Accordingly, from the theoretical perspective outlined so far in this chapter, the everyday notion of identity as fixed and stable, and as something that naturally inheres in individual persons or collections of like persons, is
problematic. Yet the concept of identity cannot be rejected entirely. Questions of identity are fundamental to the issue of representation, which is central to this study; and so it is important to conceptualise identity in a way that distinguishes it from subjectivity, but remains compatible with the theoretical concepts elaborated so far in this chapter. In the next section, this task is approached by returning briefly to the discussion of ideology in order to introduce the related concepts of hegemony and articulation, which inform the overview of contemporary discourses of motherhood in Chapter Four, as well as the final interpretive discussion in this study. However, the following explanation of them serves a more immediate purpose: it illustrates an analogy between the development of hegemony and the construction of subjectivity, and enables identity to be conceptualised in terms of a moment in an ongoing process.

Hegemony, articulation and identity

It will be recalled that, for the purposes of this study, a distinction has been made between common-sense ideologies and explicit ideologies, although the two are necessarily related. Thus, social change is dependent on explicit ideologies becoming embedded as common sense, and the concept of hegemony is central to an account of how this is achieved.

Understood by Gramsci as fundamentally an alliance of social classes, this concept has been further developed by Hall (1986, 1996a,b) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985; see also Laclau 1990; Slack 1996), who have argued that ideological unity among members of a social group can never be assumed. To the extent that unity is possible at all, it must be actively produced and requires constant maintenance. The achievement of hegemony, understood as a moment of popular ideological unity in a society, thus relies on the active development of a collective will. Hegemony is achieved through forging alliances and winning a substantial level of popular support by persuading different social groups, not naturally or inevitably disposed to align themselves with one another, of their common interests in a social vision. It is this dual process whereby interests are both expressed and contingently linked that is captured in the concept of articulation, which plays on the double meaning of ‘articulate’ (Hall 1986, 1996a,b; Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Slack 1996).

Like the construction of subjectivity at the level of individual persons, the development of hegemony across a social formation involves considerable struggle, and is never permanent or total. At best, hegemony is an unstable relationship of social forces and constitutes “a very particular, historically specific, and temporary ‘moment’ in the life of a society” (Hall 1986:15; see also Fairclough 1995; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Slack 1996). Indeed, Hall (1986) maintained that hegemony is rarely achieved.

Hall’s (1986) claim, however, seems to assume that hegemony is only constructed consciously, through the articulation of interests in support of an explicit ideology. Yet the active production and maintenance of a unity of ideas that is fundamental to the hegemonic process, together with the persuasive work required to articulate the interests of antagonistic social groups, is the work...
of discourses that produce not only explicit but also common-sense ideologies. Accordingly, it is
arguable that, at the level of common sense, hegemony is often achieved in a society.
Notwithstanding the internal fractures and contradictions within common-sense ideologies, the
very notion of ‘common sense’ implies a similar degree of unity of ideas to that implied by the
term ‘hegemony’, even if those ideas are lived rather than consciously elaborated and reflected
upon. An example is the widespread acceptance of the discursively constructed male/female
dualism, such that people usually have difficulty resisting their categorisation as males or
females and their positioning as such in everyday discourse (Davies 1992; see also Calhoun
1995; Davies 1989, 1993; Said 1990; Spivak 1990). While the work of those who have actively
and consciously sought to challenge the power of the male/female dualism by gaining popular
support for an alternative ideology of gender can be understood in terms of the articulation of
interests into a new hegemonic bloc, it can also be understood as counter-hegemonic, in that it
is directed towards undermining a hegemony that already exists at the level of common sense.
Similarly, representations of motherhood in contemporary adolescent fiction can work to support
an existing hegemony of common sense about motherhood, or they can form part of a counter-
hegemonic project to undermine that hegemony in the interests of social justice and equity.

As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) emphasised, the construction of hegemony requires more than
just the establishment of political alliances that would permit participating social groups to retain
separate and stable identities; it is a process that requires diverse social groups to identify with a
shared ideology, and therefore has consequences in terms of the fixity of all social identities.
Even the hegemonic goal cannot remain fixed or stable, but is constantly re-defined as the
hegemonic bloc itself is re-shaped and re-defined. Thus, from the theoretical perspective
developed so far in this chapter, identity, whether singular or collective, can best be understood
in terms of “a moment of arbitrary closure” in an otherwise ongoing process that articulates a
plurality of interests (Slack 1996:115; see also Hall 1990). In the case of collective identity, this
process is the development of hegemony; in the case of individual identity it can be understood
as the construction of subjectivity. At the same time, as illustrated in further discussion later in
this and the following section, the plurality of interests associated with multiple discourses and
subjectivities can, in practice, be subsumed under the one identity, and to the one set of
interests implied by that identity. For example, as illustrated in Chapters Four and Five,
motherhood is often constructed in discourse, and more specifically in children’s literature, in
terms of a fixed and heavily morally weighted identity, such that mothers are assumed to have
no legitimate interests that are not identical to, or compatible with, those of their children.

Just as subjectivity is made possible by the fact that meaning can never be fully referential, what
makes hegemony possible is the open and incomplete character of the social. As Laclau (1990)
pointed out, the lack of fixity of social signifiers – such as ‘gender equity’, ‘mother’ or
‘motherhood’, for example – is crucial to the hegemonic process (see also Hall 1992b, 1996a,b;
Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Zizek 1990). However, Hall (1996b:45) stressed the importance of
recognising that “no social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the

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concrete relations in which they have been located." The contingent, non-logical nature of articulated groupings of different elements and social forces does not mean that all relations and connections are entirely arbitrary and equally possible; on the contrary, Hall (1996a,b; see also Slack 1996) emphasised that there are ‘lines of tendential force’ that effectively privilege the articulation of particular elements under particular historical and material circumstances, and may present powerful barriers to alternative possibilities (cf. Calhoun 1995). Similarly, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the taking up of subject positions within discourse is not arbitrary, or simply a matter of making a conscious choice between a range of equally possible and available subjectivities; rather, ‘lines of tendential force’, created by discursively produced desires and by the particular material circumstances in which people are located, shape the articulation of individual identities.

Also emphasised by Laclau and Mouffe (1985:142) is the notion of a dislocated and therefore decentred social structure:

no hegemonic logic can account for the totality of the social and constitute its centre, for in that case a new suture would have been produced and the very concept of hegemony would have eliminated itself.

Hence there is no single centre, but instead multiple centres, as various antagonistic forces articulate themselves as hegemonic formations (see also Gunew 1994b). However, what is conceptualised here is not a simple or stable pluralism: power is not distributed evenly in relation to various hegemonic centres (Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; see also Hall 1992b, 1996a). Moreover, the boundaries of the hegemonic formations articulated around these centres are not necessarily clearly defined. To at least some extent, the multiple interests of any social group are likely to be in conflict, such that they cannot all be served at any one time by an alignment with one hegemonic bloc rather than another. The result is a constant shifting of the boundaries of hegemonic formations articulated around various centres, as interests are aligned and re-aligned in an ongoing struggle for recognition (Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

A useful illustration of the concepts outlined in this section can be provided by recalling the discussion in Chapter One regarding the struggles within and around the contemporary women’s movement. These struggles can be understood as hegemonic struggles in which a unity of interests among all women cannot be assumed simply on the basis of their biological sex. For example, in so far as they give priority to the needs and interests of their children, as much contemporary child care literature exhorts them to do (see Chapter Four), women who have children may find that the interests linked to their identities as ‘mothers’ are at times in conflict with their other interests as, among other things, ‘workers’, ‘wives’ and/or ‘feminists’ (cf. Calhoun 1995; Ellsworth 1992; Hall 1992b; Henriques et al 1984; Slack 1996; Weedon 1987). Even the group ‘women who have children’ includes women whose interests may be quite disparate, in accordance with a range of possible differences such as those of age, socioeconomic class, employment, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, marital status, sexuality and geographical location. Yet the very idea of a women’s movement assumes that there can be some articulation of interests between and among these different groups of women, such that they can identify with,
and work together to achieve a shared goal of gender equity. Such hegemonic articulations may be tendential, but they are not natural or inevitable; they involve antagonistic social forces, and so are always under threat, in constant need of repair and reconstruction.

Furthermore, the goal of gender equity cannot be achieved through the collective will of only women. It requires the support of at least some groups of men, who must be persuaded to articulate their otherwise disparate interests with those of a hegemonic bloc of diverse groups of women. In turn, this identification and recognition of common interests among different groups of both men and women requires the modification or transformation of their common-sense ideologies of gender, in accordance with the explicit ideology of gender equity supported by the hegemonic bloc. At the same time, the ultimate success of the contemporary women’s movement, like any other social movement, is not inevitable; nor can it be assumed to be permanent, if once achieved.

Indeed, given that all social relations are necessarily power relations, the goal of a harmonious society is ultimately an impossible one: “destroying the hierarchies on which sexual or racial discrimination is based will, at some point, always require the construction of other exclusions for collective identities to be able to emerge” (Laclau 1990:33; see also Foucault 1982; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Sawicki 1991). For Laclau (1990), this perspective need not be a negative one, a point that is clarified later in this chapter. It does, however, lend support to Hall’s (1986:21) claim that “popular beliefs, the culture of a people ... are not arenas of struggle which can be left to look after themselves”: they are material forces with material effects, and any social justice project requires extensive and ongoing political work to bring them together to form a collective intellectual, moral and ethical will (see also Hall 1996b; Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Such work must be conducted along multiple political fronts and across multiple sites including, for example, the social institutions of the family, educational and religious institutions, cultural organisations and the media. Thus, as in the case of the struggles of the contemporary women’s movement, new ideologies are likely to have an uneven and discontinuous impact across various sites of struggle (Hall 1986).

In terms of the theoretical concepts developed so far in this chapter, this study can be understood as an analysis of the ways in which motherhood is represented in a specific site of contemporary hegemonic struggles over issues of meaning and identity. That site is a corpus of contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian fiction for adolescents, of the kind often appropriated for educational use in Australian schools. In analysing such a corpus, the study recognises the crucial role played by a wide range of social institutions and processes – in this case, children’s literature and its uses in educational settings – in struggles for hegemony and the development of a collective will. It also recognises the importance in these processes of culture, understood in this context as “the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society” as well as “the contradictory forms of ‘common sense’ which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life” (Hall 1986:26). As a
dimension of culture, literature for children and adolescents can be a “resource for change as well as a barrier to the development of a new collective will” (Hall 1986:26). The overview of contemporary discourses of motherhood in Chapter Four indicates that the notions of what constitutes a ‘good’ mother produced within nineteenth-century discourses, and discussed briefly above, have proven to be remarkably resilient, to the extent that many of them have become embedded as common sense. Moreover, they have been reinforced in much of the fiction produced for children and adolescents during the twentieth century, as the research reviewed in Chapter Five reveals. This study seeks to ascertain whether this continues to be the case in contemporary Australian fiction for adolescents, or whether such fiction can be recognised as a counter-hegemonic resource for change.

One important issue to consider, in the light of the earlier discussion of desire, is the extent to which representations of motherhood in the research corpus may be implicated in the discursive shaping of female desire, such that motherhood, or a particular version of motherhood, comes to seem an obvious and natural destiny for a woman, and necessary for her complete fulfilment. It is also important to consider whether, and to what extent, motherhood is represented in this corpus in terms of a fixed, stable and morally weighted identity, and hence in ways that work to constrain the possibilities for those categorised as mothers or potential mothers to perceive and take up alternative subject positions or to pursue interests linked to alternative identities. In so far as the representations of motherhood in the research corpus are implicated in the discursive work of positioning women and girls as, first and foremost, mothers and potential mothers, the texts can be said to be actively engaged in the political work of undermining contemporary hegemonic struggles towards the goals of gender equity and social justice. To clarify this point, the discussion now turns to the concept of representation and its relationship to identity.

Representation

As previewed in Chapter One, it is assumed in this study that every act of representation necessarily involves the production of something new (Laclau 1990). Representations are not simply reflections of a pre-existing and independent reality, but are bound up in the constitution of reality, which can never be directly accessed. Reality is always mediated through signifying systems, which is not to say that it consists of nothing more than representations; the point is that what is generally taken for granted as ‘reality’ and ‘experience’ is inevitably shaped in accordance with the way in which it is represented (Gunew 1994a; Hall 1992a,c; see also Birch 1989; Moon 1992).

At the same time, it is also recognised that the term ‘representation’ can be used in two senses. First, it can refer to delegation, or speaking for and on behalf of an individual or group; second, it can refer to re-presentation, or speaking about, as in artistic or literary depictions (Spivak 1988; see also Alcoff 1991-92; Gunew 1994a,b). The two are related, however, in that both involve interpretation of what is represented. Furthermore, representation always involves making
subject positions available for others to occupy, even when one represents one’s self: the ‘I’ who
speaks for and about his or her self, thereby representing his or her self in a particular way,
necessarily invokes a particular ‘you’ who listens and is therefore also interpreted and spoken
about, albeit implicitly perhaps, in particular ways. Thus the practices of speaking for, whether
for the self or others, are not always easily distinguishable from the practices of speaking about

The primary concern in this study is with representations as cases of speaking about –
specifically, of speaking about motherhood in contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian
fiction for adolescents. However, as indicated in Chapter Two, children’s fiction also involves
speaking for: it commonly purports to represent the perspective of a fictional child or adolescent;
and it often makes use of a child or adolescent narrator, to promote the illusion of the authentic
child or adolescent voice speaking on the basis of personal experience. The implications of this
narrative strategy in terms of the subjective positioning of readers and the production of desires
are discussed in the final section of this chapter. More pertinent at this point, following the
examination in Chapter Two of what constitutes literature for children and adolescents, is the
recognition of fictional texts produced for adolescent readers as discursive sites in which adults
claim rights to speak for and about adolescents. It follows that such texts can be analysed in
terms of the interests that are served by the ways in which they interpret adolescence to and for
adolescent readers. In this study, the analytical task should include some consideration of the
implications, in terms of the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood, of the ways in which
female adolescence is represented in the research corpus.

Representations, then, are produced in discourses, and have potentially powerful ideological
effects. Both speaking for and speaking about can affect the lives of the individuals or groups
represented, in terms of the balance of power in their relations with others and, consequently, in
terms of their access to social goods (Alcoff 1991-92; Britzman 1992; Calhoun 1995; Moon
1992; Robertson 1995; Said 1990). In other words, representations are fundamentally
implicated in both the processes by which the interests of diverse social groups are articulated
into hegemonic formations and those counter-hegemonic projects that work to challenge
existing common-sense ideologies, for example, by promoting radically new ways of
conceptualising motherhood.

It follows that representations are also fundamental to the production of identities. As explained
earlier, any identity can be understood only as a moment of arbitrary closure in an ongoing
process; however, such moments are “always constituted within, not outside, representation”
(Hall 1990:222; see also Tucker 1990). Claims for identity, whether individual or collective,
always involve some kind of representation, while representations necessarily attribute some
kind of identity to those they represent. Moreover, identities are typically charged with some
degree of moral weight (Calhoun 1995). It is not surprising, then, that concerns about the
implications of personal and collective identities constructed through representations have given
rise to ‘identity politics’: collective and public struggles for autonomy, recognition, legitimacy and sometimes power (Butler 1990; Calhoun 1995). Identity politics involve challenging, refusing and transforming identities attributed by others, partly because others fail to see us for who we are sure we really are, or repress us because of who they think we are [but also because] socially sustained discourses about who it is possible or appropriate or valuable to be inevitably shape the way we look at and constitute ourselves, with varying degrees of agonism and tension (Calhoun 1995:213).

Alcoff’s (1988) examination of the potential political effects of two major strands of feminist theorising usefully illustrates the tensions between sameness and difference that lie at the heart of struggles over identity and representation (see also Butler 1990; Calhoun 1995; Forcey 1994; Hall 1990, 1992a,b,c). One major strand, she argued, focuses on the notion of a feminine culture, seeking to re-value and promote hitherto under-valued and supposedly feminine qualities of love, peacefulness, creativity, and the ability to nurture. The positive aspect of this ‘cultural’ feminism has been its challenge to the ‘liberal’ feminism that, instead of promoting the value of attributes hitherto taken for granted as inherently feminine, has encouraged women to compete with men according to masculinist standards (Alcoff 1988; Forcey 1994). However, in offering “an essentialist response to misogyny and sexism through adopting a homogeneous, unproblematized, and ahistorical conception of woman” (Alcoff 1988:413), and overlooking the variety in women’s lives and the significant differences between them, cultural feminism risks reproducing the same assumptions about women that it seeks to challenge. Thus it threatens to oppress them further, first by representing as normal an idealised version of adult femininity against which standard most women would be judged as lacking in some way; and second by restricting the possibilities effectively available to individual females to those linked with their pre-given identities as ‘women’ (Alcoff 1988; Weedon 1987; see also Butler 1990; Caine & Pringle 1995; Forcey 1994; Pettman 1992).

Much the same arguments apply in the case of essentialist representations of motherhood and the identity ‘mother’ which, as the research discussed in Chapter Four illustrates, tend to be based on the same assumptions as cultural feminism. They take capacities to love and nurture to be inherent in women, and thus construct as ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ an idealised version of the all-giving, all-loving mother, by comparison with which all women, not only those who are recognised as mother, can be judged, and/or judge themselves, inadequate. In so far as representations of motherhood are based on and work to reinforce such essentialist and highly morally charged notions, they can be read as oppressive: they work to limit the range of possible subjectivities effectively available to women and girls (Forcey 1994; see also Butler 1990). To borrow from Hall (1992c:30), their potential effect is to fix the category ‘mother’ “outside of history, outside of change, outside of political intervention.”

As Alcoff (1988) explained, a second major strand of feminism has developed within a broadly poststructuralist theoretical framework, consistent with that outlined so far in this chapter. Poststructuralist feminism has sought to challenge the fixed and essentialist notions of female
identity that, so long as they continue to be invoked routinely in everyday social exchanges and practices, constitute a virtually insurmountable barrier to the goal of overcoming sexism. This strand of feminism emphasises the partial, fragmented and contradictory nature of identity, the difficulty in this case being that the rejection of the category ‘woman’ renders the whole feminist project problematic: “What can we demand in the name of women if ‘women’ do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do?” (Alcoff 1988:420).

The difficulty is that, because representations are “as basic as language” (Said 1990:95; see also Calhoun 1995; Spivak 1990), it seems impossible to think at all without invoking categories based on sameness and difference. Yet, at the same time, the act of representing something can be recognised as “a kind of violence in the sense that it involves selections and exclusions which are carried out from certain positions and perspectives whose operations are usually rendered invisible” (Gunew 1994a:30; see also Said 1990). Spivak’s (1987) response was to advocate the strategic use of essentialist categories, in order to achieve particular political goals in specific circumstances (see also Calhoun 1995; Forcey 1994; Spivak 1990). However, because the production of identity through representation “can be as easily used to serve repressive interests as to promote the sense of group unity crucial in struggling against oppression” (Tucker 1990:92), any strategic invocation of essentialist categories entails an ethical obligation to consider its possible effects for others (Alcoff 1991-92; Calhoun 1995; see also Butler 1990; Caine & Pringle 1995; Forcey 1994; Gunew 1992b).

A crucial concern, warned Alcoff (1988), is that of ensuring that the future is not foreclosed through representations that work to preclude the emergence of radically alternative identities that may be inconceivable within available discourses. Laclau and Mouffe (1985; see also Laclau 1990) argued similarly, but suggested that the future can never be foreclosed entirely. They pointed out that if subjectivity is always constructed in relationships with others, the production of identity is necessarily dependent on a ‘constitutive outside’; yet, paradoxically, this outside is also what prevents the final achievement of full and independent identity, ensuring instead that it is always dislocated, partial and threatened. On the one hand, the result is that the goal of social emancipation, constantly thwarted by what Butler (1993:5) termed “the unmasterability of the Other”, can never be finally achieved; on the other hand, it is this very ‘failure’ that ensures the continued possibility of social struggles and prevents any final or absolute determination as to which identities will be granted legitimacy within the social field (Laclau 1990; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; see also Butler 1990, 1993).

Notwithstanding the ultimate unmasterability of the Other, it seems clear that representations that work to produce fixed identities based on essentialist or universalist assumptions constitute threats to the existing and future achievements of ongoing hegemonic struggles for a more socially just society. For example, representations of motherhood in contemporary adolescent fiction that work to establish and maintain universalised notions of both femininity and motherhood, and an apparently natural and essential link between them, can be read as working
to undermine the gains made by and on behalf of women in struggles to articulate a new hegemonic formation around the goal of gender equity. Such representations may not foreclose the future entirely; however, they certainly have the potential not only to restrict the range of alternative subject positions that are effectively available for contemporary girls and women, but also to constrain the possibilities for the emergence of radically alternative discourses of motherhood. On the other hand, the ways in which motherhood is represented in fiction for children and adolescents need not necessarily have such negative ideological effects. Children’s literature also has the potential to play a more positive discursive role (Schwartz 1995), through representations that work to challenge the justice of a social order that effectively limits or denies access by its members to the full range of social goods, both material and non-material, on the basis of their social grouping; or, alternatively, by means of the domestic and official pedagogies within which they are read.

In this study, the central analytical task of examining the extent to which the representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction work to fulfil this potential role for children's literature is directed towards enabling consideration of the ideological, and thus the political, implications of representations of motherhood and the identities they invoke, not only for those who may be categorised as mothers, but also for other categories of person. It should be clear at this point that representations of motherhood in contemporary adolescent fiction, including those texts selected for use in educational settings, are fundamentally and actively bound up in current hegemonic struggles over goals of equity and social justice, goals that Australia’s national curriculum documents seek to advance.

What is not yet sufficiently clear, however, is how fictional texts written for adolescents can work to produce particular ideological effects. The purpose of the following section is to address this question by showing how the conceptual understandings developed so far in this chapter can be applied in the field of children’s literature, and so form a theoretical framework within which the analytical task of this study can proceed.

**Children’s literature and the (re)production of ideology**

Notwithstanding the ongoing debates, discussed in Chapter Two, surrounding the nature and purposes of children’s literature, few researchers have attempted any comprehensive and coherent theoretical explanation of the relationship between that literature and the (re)production of ideology. It may be that research on narrative and ideology has simply overlooked children’s literature; as noted in Chapter Two, such literature has not, until relatively recently, been deemed worthy of serious academic study. It is also possible that, in regard to its implication in the (re)production of ideology, there has been no perceived need for any separate and specific attention to children’s literature: available explanations of the production and reproduction of ideology through fictional texts generally (e.g., Belsey 1991; Cohan & Shires 1988; Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Tambling 1991) are arguably as applicable to children’s fiction as to other types of
That argument does not hold, however, if children’s fiction is understood to be in any way distinctive; and although there is no consensus on this issue, it would seem, in the light of the debates reviewed in Chapter Two, that there are good reasons for paying close attention to the question of how ideology is (re)produced through children’s fiction as a distinctive field of literature.

Indeed, it seems likely that the lack of specific studies of the relationship between children’s fiction and the (re)production of ideology is at least partly an effect of the discourses that shape that field, including what can and cannot be said about books for children and adolescents. The emphasis placed by those working in the field on the importance of encouraging children to develop a lifelong love of reading has tended to mean that children’s books have been perceived, like children themselves, to be innocent and in need of protection, in this case, protection from serious criticism and analysis (cf. Bradford 1996b; Burbules 1986; Nodelman 1992; Rossiter & Tandy 1993; Scutter 1999). Thus, in a comparison of reviews of ‘children’s books’ with those of ‘adult’s books’, Scutter (1993b:37) observed a tendency to treat children’s literature as if it were “the motherhood and apple-pie of our culture”, and therefore beyond critical analysis (cf. Zipes 1983). This tendency was illustrated at the 1992 inaugural national conference of the CBCA, the theme of which, At least they’re reading!, could be taken to imply relief that children were reading anything at all. In her introduction to the published proceedings of the conference, the CBCA’s National President at the time claimed that the theme was actually intended to provoke debate about what children were reading and the quality of the literature available to them. Such debate does not appear to have been actively encouraged, however; it is clear from the published proceedings that speakers and activities at the conference gave most emphasis to the perceived problems and rewards of developing children’s interest in books and reading, and to promoting the work of contemporary Australian and international writers and illustrators of children’s books. Virtually no explicit attention was given to considering either the potential ideological effects of what children read or possible strategies to enable them to read more critically (CBCA 1992a; cf. Scutter 1999).

Yet, as illustrated in Chapter Two, Zipes’ (1983:11) observations about ‘classical’ fairy tales are equally applicable to narratives for children and adolescents: they “are not ageless, universal, and beautiful in and of themselves... They are historical prescriptions, internalized, potent [and] explosive.” Accordingly, children’s fiction should not be exempt from comprehensive criticism that attends to its potential ideological effects. Indeed, in recognition of this, a number of researchers have undertaken more critical analyses of selected texts and genres of children’s fiction in recent years, and examples of such work are reviewed in Chapter Five. The focus of the research considered in this section, however, has been less specific: it has been concerned at a more general level with the question of how ideologies are produced and reproduced through children’s fiction. In other words, it has sought to develop a coherent theoretical framework within which to undertake critical analyses of children’s fiction.

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Key theoretical concepts
Before turning to examine this body of work, however, it should be noted that from the perspective of narrative theory (or narratology), on which some of this work draws, it is important to differentiate between story, text and narrative. While ‘story’ refers to a succession of events, and the ‘text’ can be understood as the medium – writing, speech, pictures, diagrams, gestures and so on – through which it is presented, ‘narrative’ refers to the processes involved in producing the story as text. These include selecting and assembling the story elements – events, characters and their actions – as well as selecting and organising particular techniques, including a storytelling voice, or narrator, for conveying the story elements to an audience (Moon 1992; Stephens 1992). Clearly, the three concepts are interrelated: the narrative, which would not be such unless it told a story, is only available to readers (or listeners or viewers) by means of the text.

Narrative theorists also distinguish between ‘writer’ and ‘narrator’ and, correspondingly, between ‘reader’ and ‘narratee’, to emphasise that neither writer nor reader can literally enter the fictive world of the narrative: the relationship between them always remains outside the frame of the narrative transaction. Inside that frame, the existence of the narrator/narratee pair is not always made explicit – for example, by the narrator’s use of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’ – but it is always the case that someone, a narrator, is telling the story, and that it is being told to someone, a narratee (Stephens 1992; see also Wall 1991).

Despite its evident interest in linking broad theoretical understandings of the workings of ideology to the field of children’s literature, a significant problem with the research literature that explores the relationship between children’s literature and the (re)production of ideology is the lack of clear definitions of ‘ideology’. For example, in his early work in this area, Sutherland (1985:143) offered a broad definition of ‘ideologies’ as “notions of how the world is or ought to be.” It can be inferred from his discussion that he took ideology to be more idiosyncratic than it is understood to be in this study and did not relate it necessarily to interests and the distribution of social goods. He also suggested that although “most genres [of children’s literature] seem to be conveyors of ideological freight”, there are some that are “relatively value-free” (Sutherland 1985:144). On this latter point, Hollindale (1988:10) dissented: his own work on children’s literature and ideology stressed the omnipresence of ideology as “an inevitable, untameable and largely uncontrollable factor in the transaction between books and children.” Similarly, Stephens (1992:2) viewed children’s fiction as “pervaded by ideological presuppositions, sometimes obtrusively and sometimes invisibly” (see also Bradford 1996a; Scutter 1999; Stephens 1996; Zipes 1983). It is these latter claims that are most compatible with the theoretical framework developed in this chapter, from which perspective all literature produced for children and adolescents must simultaneously be understood as the material practices of prevailing discourses of childhood and adolescence; as ideological effects of those discourses; and as localised sites of a wide range of discursive struggles linked to ongoing struggles for hegemony.
Nevertheless, Sutherland’s (1985) work provides a useful starting point for developing an understanding of how children’s literature, or indeed any text, can have ideological effects. He proposed that such effects could be produced in three ways: through advocacy, through attack, or through the politics of assent. However, it seems that strategies of advocacy and attack operate in similar ways: according to Sutherland (1985), both are openly and consciously employed by writers, either to offer overt support to a particular cause or to explicitly oppose one (and, by implication, support an alternative view). Thus, in terms of the concepts elaborated in this chapter, strategies of advocacy and attack are typically concerned with struggles for hegemony at the level of explicit ideology, although such struggles may involve counter-hegemonic challenges to prevailing common-sense ideologies.

In contrast, the politics of assent operate more covertly. Drawing again on the concepts elaborated above, the politics of assent are in operation when both narrators and readers give passive assent to and hence reinforce an existing hegemony of common sense about how the world is or ought to be. This happens when narrators take it for granted that readers will draw on that common sense to construct meaning from the narrative and when readers, in turn, do so unquestioningly (cf. Fairclough 1989, 1995; Griffith 1993a,b). Thus, Sutherland (1985) argued, while it is usually not difficult to recognise the use of strategies of advocacy or attack, the politics of assent are less visible and can be highly pervasive and influential.

Stephens (1992) made a similar point, explaining that when the existence or identity of the narrator is not made explicit in the text, readers commonly take for granted the authority and reliability of the narration. In turn, the narration typically takes it for granted that readers will share the narrator’s view of the world. This has implications for the ways in which readers are likely to deal with the gaps and incoherencies that, despite their attempts to represent coherent, internally consistent fictive worlds, are inevitable in all fictional texts (Belsey 1991), and must somehow be filled if readers are to construct a coherent meaning. In Chambers’ (1985) view, it is affirming and empowering for young readers when children’s fiction encourages them to fill those gaps by drawing on the range of cultural resources that together comprise their knowledge and assumptions about the social world – in effect, their common-sense ideologies. However, by severely limiting the possible perspectives from which they can be interpreted, narratives can also work discursively to shape and reinforce common-sense ideologies instead of, perhaps, inviting their readers to question them (Stephens 1992; see also Moon 1992).

Because the politics of assent most often work to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing common sense, they tend to work against social change, sometimes even when this is not the writer’s conscious intention. Hollindale (1988) pointed out that the politics of assent, or what he termed ‘passive ideology’, can operate in a text alongside strategies of advocacy or attack, and can even work in opposition to those strategies (see also Stephens 1992). For example, the potential for a work of children’s fiction to effect social change by overtly advocating gender equity in the workplace could be undermined if, at the same time, the narrative implicitly invites
readers to construct meaning by drawing on common-sense ideologies that take the work of
nurturing and caring for children to be the ‘natural’ responsibility of women. Indeed, given the
inevitability of narrative gaps, it seems that such covert undermining of overtly counter-
hegemonic strategies in children’s fiction is likely to be common (cf. Zipes 1983).

Nevertheless, it is clearly possible for common sense to be transformed as a result of the
articulation of new hegemonic formations; indeed, social change is more or less constant.
Consequently, as Sutherland (1985) argued, it is relatively easy for contemporary readers to
identify the politics of assent at work in the children’s fiction of earlier historical periods: there is
often a lack of fit between what was once and what is currently taken for granted. However, it is
usually more difficult for readers to recognise the common-sense ideologies that pervade the
literature of their own time and culture, such as the texts on which this study focuses.

With this in mind, Hollindale (1988) emphasised the importance for educators of considering
how children read, not just what they read, and argued that developing their critical reading skills
will render children more resistant to ideological manipulation, not only as they engage with
fictional texts but also in their everyday social relations. Both Stephens (1992) and Scutter
(1999) have agreed that conventional methods of reading education do not serve children well.
For example, Stephens (1992:4) argued that educators tend to over-value texts that evoke ‘the
real world’; the effect, he suggested, is “to imply a one-to-one relationship between objects and
their representation, and hence to mask the processes of textual production of meaning:
representation becomes equated with ‘truth’.” Similarly, Scutter (1999) cited Kempe in arguing
that the reading practices commonly acquired in schools tend to discourage students from
recognising the constructed nature of texts, and hence the constructed nature of their apparently
‘personal’ responses to literature. She advocated more empowering pedagogies that draw
students’ attention to the textual workings of power and ideology, and encourage them to
construct socially critical readings of both fictional texts and the cultures that produce them (cf.

Arguing for a more sophisticated approach to analysing children’s fiction and its role in the
production of ideology, Stephens (1992) recommended drawing on insights from both critical
linguistics and narrative theory. As he explained, critical linguistics emphasises the importance,
for developing an understanding of how the social world is constructed and reconstructed in
everyday social practices, of the study of language as a signifying system. Language is
recognised as the primary site of ideological struggles, because struggles over the competing
interests of diverse social groups and over the distribution of social goods among those groups
are largely played out in language. At the same time, language is also perceived as an object of
ideological struggles because “an important aspect of social power lies in the power to
determine word meanings and legitimate communicative norms” (Stephens 1992:11; see also
Birch 1989; Fairclough 1989). Children’s books draw on a diversity of signifying systems, but as
it is primarily through language that texts for children are produced, Stephens (1992) argued that
insights from critical linguistics are essential to any analysis of the role of children's fiction in the (re)production of ideology. He added, however, that because fictional narratives employ a particular, highly structured and organised form of language and contain features not normally found in other kinds of texts, children's fiction must also be analysed in terms of its narrative features, using insights drawn from narratology.

Stephens’ (1992) work on ideology and children’s fiction is highly pertinent to the analysis, in this study, of representations of motherhood in contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian fiction for adolescents. However, like Sutherland (1985) and Hollindale (1988), he did not explicate his understanding of the term ‘ideology’, observing only that it is, in one sense, “a system of beliefs by which we make sense of the world” and without which social life would hardly be possible (Stephens 1992:8). Moreover, while he offered two compatible explanations of the concept of discourse, one drawn from linguistics and one from narratology, neither is fully consistent with the way in which discourse is conceptualised in this study. In view of this, Stephens’ (1992) explanations of narrative features and strategies in children’s literature, and of how they work to shape the possible meanings that can be constructed by readers, are developed below in a way that is compatible with the conceptual understandings developed so far in this chapter. To this end, the discussion also draws on narratological work outside the field of children’s fiction, notably by Cohan and Shires (1988), Rimmon-Kenan (1983) and Tambling (1991), and on developments in literary theory as outlined by Birch (1989) and Moon (1992).

One particularly useful aspect of Stephens’ (1992) work is his explanation, in terms of the concept of subjectivity, of the relationship between readers and fictional texts. This fills a gap left in the work of Sutherland (1985) and Hollindale (1988), and is crucial to this study, a major premise of which is that fictional narratives and the representations of the social world contained within them work to shape readers’ subjectivity and specifically their positioning within discourses of motherhood. For Stephens (1992), the relationship between a reader and a work of fiction is a social one, similar to other relations of power and desire through which subjectivity is constantly constructed and reconstructed in everyday social life. In this relationship, meaning is negotiated rather than discovered and, like subjectivity, is always relational and hence unstable; fictional narratives do not have meaning in and of themselves. At least in part, their meanings are products of their contingent relationships with other texts, which might include not only passages of written language, but also visual and spoken texts and the discourses that produce them, and the fragments of other texts and explicit theories that, together, constitute what currently prevails as common sense. In other words, no text is ever complete in itself; instead it is a complex network of incomplete meanings, “a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself” (Derrida, cited in Birch 1989:9; see also Barthes 1977; Cohan & Shires 1988; Foucault 1972; Gee 1990; Gentile 1985; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Nodelman 1990; Moon 1992; Perera & Pugliese 1994; Stephens 1992; Taylor 1993; Threadgold 1986, 1988).
Fictional narratives for children and adolescents, in other words, acquire meanings as other texts do, by working intertextually, that is, in conjunction with other texts. Thus, the potential of any particular work of children's fiction to impact on readers is likely to vary in accordance with their discursive histories, the discursive context within which they encounter it, and the range of possible subject positions from which they can interpret it (Gilbert 1995). In addition, various features of narratives can work to produce readers' acceptance of, or resistance to, the reading positions available to them (Stephens 1992; see also Birch 1989; Griffith 1993a,b; Moon 1992).

It must be stressed, however, that the effects, ideological or otherwise, of particular narratives on actual readers can never be predicted. While the way in which a reader positions him or herself in relation to a text, and thence constructs meaning from it, is neither arbitrary nor a simple matter of free choice, fictional narratives cannot determine how they will be read and understood. It was argued earlier that there are lines of tendential force that effectively privilege the articulation of particular social elements and forces, rather than others, at a particular historical moment, but do not necessitate them; and that influence, without actually determining, the ways in which people take up subject positions within discourse. Similarly, there are a number of aspects of fictional narratives that, in addition to their contingent relationships with other texts, work to form the complex lines of tendential force that, in any particular context, render some meanings more 'obvious' and 'natural' than others (cf. Belsey 1991; Birch 1989; Ebert 1988; Gilbert 1995; Moon 1992; Tambling 1991).

In working to establish these lines of tendential force, fictional narratives play on readers' desires, even as they also work to shape the form of those desires. Tambling's (1991) work suggests that there are at least four ways in which fictional narratives can offer to satisfy readers' desires, if only temporarily and at the level of fantasy. First, they provide readers with opportunities to identify with one or more characters, or to otherwise take up subject positions that enable them to experience themselves differently, for example, as more powerful, or less lacking in some other area of perceived deficiency. They do this primarily through the use of focalising strategies, as discussed below. Second, fictional narratives can appeal to readers' desires for the sure and certain knowledge and understandings of the world that seem to be the key to ensuring a sense of control over their own lives. Third, they can hold out to readers the promise of dispelling their anxieties, including, sometimes, anxieties the narratives themselves have generated. Finally, fictional narratives provide the pleasure of repetition. In a sense, all narratives are repetitions, told from the perspective of a finishing point at which the narrator and/or characters have arrived, but fictional narratives are usually repetitions in other senses as well. They typically conform to at least some generic and structural conventions that enable readers to experience a sense of familiarity even as they engage with an otherwise unfamiliar text. Moreover, the inherent intertextuality of fictional narratives requires readers to draw on, or re-visit, what is already familiar, in order to make sense of what they read. Thus the pleasure of repetition for readers can often be that of having their common-sense understandings about how the world is or should be organised affirmed and validated (cf. Gentile 1985).
It is clear, then, that the various forms of pleasure offered by fictional narratives are interrelated, and that neither they nor the kinds of enjoyment more commonly associated with recreational reading can be understood in isolation from each other. Their significance for this study is that they illustrate the extent of the explanatory power of the concept of desire: not only does that concept, as developed by Henriques et al (1984), assist in broadly explaining the continuity of subjects’ positioning in discourse; it also helps, at a more particular level, to account for readers’ choices of subject position(s) as they engage with fictional texts. Hence it can serve to explain the continuity of the meanings they construct from those texts, without precluding the possibilities for the construction of alternative or resistant readings (cf. Moon 1992).

As noted earlier, fictional narratives can never fulfil their promises to satisfy readers’ desires to experience themselves as whole and coherent, in possession of certain truth and knowledge about the world, except temporarily at the level of fantasy. However, the promise of having their desires fulfilled, at least at the level of fantasy, serves as an invitation to readers to take up particular subject positions, rather than others, in relation to fictional texts, and hence as an incentive to construct particular meanings rather than others. For example, readers’ desires for coherence, continuity and certainty are likely to render them susceptible, in their engagements with fictional texts and the ways in which they represent the social world, to being positioned as subjects within discourses that work to confirm their common-sense understandings of motherhood, rather than to encourage them to adopt resistant or oppositional reading positions from which to challenge them. An overview of what currently prevails as common sense in regard to motherhood is provided in Chapter Four, and helps to illustrate more clearly what may already be apparent: that the likely effect of the interplay between readers’ desires and fictional representations that rely on their acceptance of those understandings will be to reinforce an existing hegemony in regard to motherhood, and thus to undermine contemporary struggles to articulate a new hegemonic bloc around the goal of gender equity. Such an effect would clearly be counter to the social justice ideals set out in Australia’s national curriculum documents.

It was argued earlier that the relationship between reader and writer always remains outside the frame of the narrative transaction. Yet, in educational contexts, children and adolescents are often encouraged to locate themselves ‘inside’ a fictional text by aligning themselves with its protagonist and viewing the world from the perspective of that character, whom they are invited to understand as a ‘real person’, morally accountable for his or her actions (Moon 1992; Stephens 1992). To the extent that readers are able to locate themselves inside the frame of the narrative transaction, they must do so vicariously, for example, by identifying with one or more characters. It is not only conventional approaches to reading education that encourage them thus to engage in what Stephens (1992:4) claims is “a mode of reading which … leaves readers susceptible to gross forms of intellectual manipulation” (see also Gee 1990; Moon 1992; Scutter 1999; cf. Gentile 1985); as suggested earlier, a variety of narrative strategies also work...
to shape readers’ subjectivity in relation to the text, and hence their attitudes towards the characters and events represented, and their interpretations of the narrative’s ‘significance’.

As Stephens (1992; see also Birch 1989; Griffith 1993a,b) observed, fictional narratives have, or are conventionally expected to have, a significance: a ‘message’ for their readers, or a moral or thematic point to make. However, differences in reader subjectivity mean that although there may be broad agreement among readers as to the elements of a particular story, consensus on the significance to be derived from the narration of that story is less easily achieved. Consensus is perhaps least likely when the significance is not rendered immediately apparent (e.g., through explicit strategies of advocacy or attack). Stephens (1992) pointed out, however, that experienced readers of fiction will tend to construct one, although not necessarily consciously, as they negotiate their subjectivity in relation to a fictional narrative; again, this tendency is at least partly attributable to conventional educational approaches that encourage readers to look for a narrative’s significance. Readers typically construct significance not only by drawing on common sense to make sense of what they read, but also in response to the textual features and narrative strategies by which the elements of a story are shaped into a narrative. As a result, a considerable degree of consensus on a narrative’s significance can often be produced.

Among the narrative strategies discussed by Stephens (1992), one that is of particular importance to this study is focalisation. Stephens (1992) argued that the concept of focalisation is under-utilised in terms of its potential as an analytical tool, particularly in relation to fiction for children and adolescents. Yet, as he pointed out, attention to focalisation is crucially important in analysing fictional narratives and considering the implications of their representations of the social world, because it is through one or more focalising agents that narratives exert much of their power to structure readers’ acceptance of, or resistance to, the various subject positions from which they might be interpreted.

Whether or not it is easily apparent to readers, the characters, events and point of view of a story are always presented through a focalising agent or focaliser (Stephens 1992). The focaliser is not necessarily the narrator, nor is the focalisation necessarily consistent. There might be switches of focaliser within a narrative, for example, between the narrator and a main character, or among a number of characters. Significantly, however, shifts in focalisation do not necessarily involve a shift in point of view. Stephens (1992) stressed the importance of distinguishing between focalisation, a narrative strategy that is discernible in the text itself, and point of view, which is related to the interests that are served by the narrative, and this distinction seems particularly important in children’s literature. While the focalising agents in children’s fiction are almost always child or adolescent characters – hence the appearance of ‘child-centredness’ – the point of view, consistent with the nature and purposes of children’s literature outlined in the previous chapter, is almost always oriented to adult concerns and interests.
As Stephens (1992) emphasised, the effect of unqualified identification with a focalising character can be powerful in terms of readers’ subjectivity (see also Moon 1992). First-person narratives, for example, are generally focalised exclusively through the narrating character, and often the subject position most obviously available to readers is one that is virtually identical to that of the narrator. In taking up that position, readers subject themselves to the discourses that shape the narrative, aligning their values and understandings of the world with those of the narrator, at least while they engage with the text. First-person narratives that employ the confessional style common to much contemporary adolescent fiction can be particularly effective in shaping readers’ subjectivity in the longer term. These narratives invite readers not only to identify with the narrator and share that character’s perceptions and understandings, but also to share the apparent benefits, in terms of personal growth and empowerment, of the narrator’s discovery and revelation of the ‘truth’ about him or herself.

It will be recalled that even when the narrative does not take the form of a confessional, contemporary adolescent fiction often makes use of a first-person narrator to represent the narration as if it were the authentic voice of child or adolescent experience. Even in the case of autobiographical writing, however, the notion of an authentic voice is problematic: “the I is an empty signifier available to anyone. The mere use of I does not answer the question of what I actually stands for” (Furman, cited in Gunew 1992a:167; see also Alcoff 1991-92; Robertson 1995; Spivak 1988; Tucker 1990). First-person narration, in other words, is a literary convention that signifies truth-telling, but cannot be accepted as a guarantee of any such thing. At the same time, “one of the seductions of speaking in the first person, in one’s ‘own voice’, is that storytelling, narrative shaping, gives an illusion of power and control over one’s life” (Gunew 1992a:165). This point is relevant not only to autobiographical writing, but also to first-person fictional narratives, which most often present the perspective of only one character, the narrator. By encouraging readers to identify with this character, many first-person fictional narratives, in conjunction with some of the reading practices commonly advocated in schools, invite readers to experience themselves as having the control over their own lives that the narrator appears to have, even while they simultaneously work to severely restrict the possibilities for readers to recognise, and take up, alternative subject positions in relation to the text. In other words, the narrative appeals to readers’ unconscious desires, while at the same time working to shape the form of those desires, such that their satisfaction appears to lie in taking up particular subject positions rather than others, both in relation to the text and in everyday life.

In some cases, a first-person narrator is clearly unreliable, or is gradually revealed to be so; accordingly, readers may be unwilling to identify closely with that character or with the view of the world he or she represents (Stephens 1992). However, their recognition that the narrator’s perceptions are distorted does not necessarily render readers more capable of resisting being positioned by the narrative; in such cases, the focalisation tends to work oppositionally, implicitly inviting readers to take up a subject position associated with a more ‘correct’ view of the world than that of the narrator/focaliser. Because it flatters readers into believing themselves to be
highly perceptive for having discovered the narrator’s error(s) of judgement, even as it also subjects them to the discourses that shape the text, this narrative strategy, as Stephens (1992) observed, is potentially powerful in its effects.

There are also some cases in which two or more first-person narrators present their perspectives on events and characters, with the apparent purpose of encouraging readers to identify with more than one character, consider events and characters from multiple perspectives, and adopt a variety of subject positions in relation to the text. It does not necessarily follow, however, that such a text is not implicated in the (re)production of ideology. It may be, for example, that instead of inviting readers to draw on opposing discourses in order to recognise the legitimacy of more than one way of understanding the social world, the accounts of two seemingly different first-person narrators effectively complement each other in terms of the point of view they represent and the way in which they work to position readers. Another possibility is that, while being offered the accounts of a number of narrators, readers are gradually encouraged to align themselves with one narrator in particular, as others are increasingly shown to be naive or somehow lacking in credibility.

Stephens’ (1992) discussion of focalisation not only illustrates the importance of distinguishing between ‘focalisation’ and ‘point of view’; it also reveals that distinctions between first-person and third-person narratives are not always analytically useful; indeed, they can be misleading. Stephens (1992) showed that focalisation works in third-person narratives in much the same ways, and to similar effect, as it does in first-person narratives. Thus, in third-person narratives, there can be a single focaliser throughout, or frequent switches between a number of different focalisers. These switches are sometimes just as explicit as switches between different first-person narrators, and can work similarly to deter readers from identifying with only one character, or from taking up a single subject position in relation to the text, by presenting multiple perspectives on events and characters. However, two points should be noted. The first is that, as mentioned above in regard to multiple first-person narrators, switches of focaliser do not necessarily produce a balanced or objective account of characters and events, although they can serve the purpose of appearing to do so. Second, switches in the focalisation of third-person narratives can be very subtle, so they are not necessarily obvious to readers, particularly readers who have not been taught to recognise them. Nor will it always be clearly apparent to readers of third-person narratives that events and characters are not being represented by a disinterested observer, but through one or more focalisers. It is therefore quite possible that readers, particularly those who are familiar only with conventional school reading practices, will remain unaware of the ways in which the text works to manipulate their attitudes and perceptions.

There are some fictional narratives, termed ‘interrogative’ texts by Stephens (1992), that actively discourage readers from unquestioning acceptance of what prevails as common sense. These narratives make overt use of intertextuality by playing with familiar social and literary forms,
structures and meanings, and constantly reminding their readers of their fictional status and their existence as social and linguistic constructions; the effect is “to foreground the processes of signification whereby signs are related to things, and thence to draw attention to the social forces which determine what that relationship will be” (Stephens 1992:156). In the field of children’s literature, however, it seems that interrogative texts are more commonly picture books than the adolescent fiction on which this study focuses (Lewis 1990; Stephens 1992; see also Scutter 1993c). Moreover, it should not be assumed that such texts are in any way neutral or innocent of any involvement in the (re)production of ideology; what is different about the discursive work of interrogative texts is that it is more likely to be counter-hegemonic, directed towards subverting common-sense ideologies rather than towards the preservation of the status quo (Lewis 1990; Stephens 1992). Accordingly, in their encounters with interrogative fiction, readers are no less in need of critical reading strategies to facilitate their resistance to manipulation than they are when dealing with more conventional forms of fiction.

The insights from narrative theory introduced in this section are crucial to completing the task of developing a theoretical framework for this study, because they help to demonstrate the relevance of the conceptual understandings developed earlier in this chapter to an analysis of the ways in which motherhood is represented in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction. The work of Sutherland (1985) and Hollindale (1988) provides a useful general introduction to the relationship between children’s fiction and the (re)production of ideology, especially in regard to the potential of such fiction to reinforce common-sense ideologies through the politics of assent. However, as this section has served to illustrate, attention must be paid to both the linguistic and narrative features of children’s fiction, in order to understand more fully how such texts work to shape readers’ subjectivity, and hence to nurture the (re)production of ideology. Of central interest in this regard is the concept of focalisation which, together with the concept of desire elaborated earlier in this chapter, is valuable in explaining how readers come to take up particular subject positions rather than others as they engage with, make sense of, and derive significance from fictional narratives.

Thus, in this chapter, key theoretical concepts have been elaborated and drawn together to provide a theoretical framework from within which to approach the analytical task of the study. These concepts can also be used now to complete the work of contextualising the study, by informing the examination of two additional bodies of research literature, the first being literature that serves to explicate the ways in which, currently, motherhood is commonly understood. As emphasised in this chapter, the range of meanings and significances that can, in theory, be constructed from a work of adolescent fiction is inevitably constrained, in any particular social and historical context, by a number of related factors; so, too, is the range of potential effects in terms of readers’ subjectivity and the (re)production of ideology. Constraining factors include not only the various linguistic and narrative features and strategies that work discursively to limit, without necessarily determining, the interpretive possibilities that are effectively available to
readers of fictional texts, but also readers’ desires to construct meaning in particular ways. These desires are shaped by their histories of being positioned as subjects within multiple, often competing or contradictory discourses, and also by their ongoing investments in developing and retaining a sense of themselves as unified, whole and coherent individuals, in possession of true and certain knowledge about the world and their place in it.

In other words, readers are likely to construct their interpretations of fictional representations by drawing on the discourses that are most obviously invoked by the narrative. In the absence of narrative strategies that might encourage or require them to do otherwise, and without critical reading skills that would equip them to do otherwise, readers are unlikely to draw on alternative meaning-making resources to question or modify their existing common-sense ideologies.

It follows that in analysing the representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, and the implications of those representations for the (re)production of ideology, it is necessary to take into account the range of discourses about motherhood that are available as meaning-making resources. As part of the intertextual universe within which representations of motherhood in contemporary adolescent fiction acquire meaning and significance, these discourses work to position their subjects within particular power-knowledge relationships based on prevailing ‘truths’ about mothers and motherhood. They therefore have the power to shape and constrain the effective range of possible meanings and significances that their subjects can construct from representations of motherhood, whether they are encountered in adolescent fiction or other textual forms. Accordingly, an overview of those discourses of motherhood that are most salient to the analysis, in this study, of contemporary adolescent fiction is presented in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

Introduction

Among the range of issues that have attracted the attention of feminist scholars in recent years are those that relate to the ways in which historically specific ‘truths’ about motherhood are constructed in various discursive fields, and their implications for the (re)production of ideology. One purpose of this chapter is to indicate how this study contributes to research in this area through its analysis of the extent to which various ‘truths’ about motherhood are supported or challenged in a corpus of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction. However, it is also clear that, from the theoretical perspective outlined in the previous chapter, attention needs to be given to the discourses of motherhood that, in working to construct those ‘truths’, serve as significant meaning-making resources for readers as they encounter textual representations of motherhood. Thus, another major task of this chapter is to provide an overview of those discourses, including those that contemporary readers of Australian adolescent fiction might use as resources to construct counter-hegemonic understandings about motherhood. In fulfilling this objective, it is necessary to consider some of the ways in which motherhood has been theorised in other research, not for the purposes of asserting the legitimacy of any particular theorisation over others, but because in some cases these theories have impacted significantly on the ‘truths’ about motherhood constructed, either explicitly or implicitly, in other discursive fields. Moreover, they, or traces of them, have often become embedded in common sense. This is particularly evident in the case of some of the psychoanalytic theories discussed in this chapter, despite the high levels of contestation in and around this category of theoretical work.

In the first section of the chapter some of the definitional issues surrounding the use of terms such as ‘mother’, ‘motherhood’ and ‘fatherhood’ are explored. In the second section, a broad overview of relevant psychoanalytic discourses pertaining to motherhood is provided, with attention to some of those that have been informed by feminist concerns, but in particular to those that have impacted most significantly on twentieth century ideologies of motherhood. In the remainder of the chapter, the introduction provided in Chapter One to the status of mothers and motherhood in contemporary Australian society is supplemented with brief overviews of relevant discourses on those aspects of motherhood that are most salient to an analysis of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction (in other words, those aspects of motherhood that are most relevant to the processes of making meaning from such fiction). These overviews are drawn from the findings of recent research into the ways in which motherhood has been constructed in a range of other discursive fields such as developmental psychology, social welfare, education, and the law, and how they have impacted on common sense. They are also informed by the findings of some examples of recent research into the effects of those...
discourses on everyday social life, particular the lives of women who are mothers. Together these discussions serve to illustrate the pervasive power of the ideas about motherhood that articulate to form the prevailing hegemony that Chodorow and Contratto (1982) have termed ‘the fantasy of the perfect mother’ (see also Walkerdine & Lucey 1989).

This chapter can be viewed as an exploration of the various meanings that are commonly attached to these terms in the contemporary social world within which readers must make sense of the texts in the research corpus. Accordingly, the discussions below, first in relation to the term ‘mother’, and then in relation to ‘motherhood’, ‘fatherhood’ and ‘parenthood’ are best viewed as departure points for that exploration.

Issues of definition

Even at the level of explicit theory, questions about what counts as a ‘mother’ have never been straightforward. Formal and informal social arrangements for the ongoing day-to-day care of children, such as adoption and fostering, have long complicated those questions, and the emergence of new reproductive technologies in recent years, together with new possibilities for surrogacy, have added further complexities and few, if any, clear-cut solutions: disputes over surrogacy agreements, for example, have sometimes produced contradictory court rulings on what constitutes a ‘real’ mother (Schwartz 1994; see also Pateman 1988). Moreover, Butler’s (1990) challenge to distinctions between supposedly natural, biologically given ‘sex’ and culturally constructed ‘gender’ has implications that render any definitions of the term ‘mother’ that are based on either sex or gender problematic.

Despite these complexities, definitional issues are rarely impediments to everyday meaning-making. Distinctions between, for example, ‘adoptive’ mothers and ‘natural’ mothers, or between ‘genetic’ mothers and ‘gestational’ or ‘birth’ mothers, who are not necessarily genetically related to the children they bear, are made from time to time, most frequently in specialist discourses such as science, medicine and law, but it seems that for most everyday purposes, these distinctions are not considered relevant; it is taken for granted that ‘everyone knows’ what is meant by the term ‘mother’.

What this suggests is that there is widespread acceptance of at least some elements of the distinction Ruddick (1989) proposed between ‘birthing labour’ and ‘mothering’. The former, she argued, includes pregnancy and childbirth, and is exclusively women’s work, while the latter involves an ongoing commitment to the protection and nurture of a particular child or children. As such, mothering, in Ruddick’s (1989) view, need not be restricted to women, although she acknowledged that most mothers have been and are women. Similarly, Schwartz (1994:253-254) suggested that a framework of discrete gender/sex roles is not useful for understanding the concept of motherhood: “being a mother is a subjective experience rather than an objective category of definition” and mothering occurs “in a continuum of multiple subjectivities and
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relations” (see also Glenn 1994; Rothman 1994). However, despite the availability of these alternative understandings, it is evident that according to contemporary common sense, mothers, whether categorised as genetic, gestational, surrogate, adoptive or foster mothers, are female (Adams 1995; Glenn 1994; Pope, Quinn & Wyer 1992; Rothman 1994; Schwartz 1994; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a). This is taken for granted even in some of the research literature that takes motherhood to be socially constructed and challenges tendencies to interpret the concept in universalist terms (e.g., Bassin, Honey & Kaplan 1994b; Glenn, Chang & Forcey 1994; Phoenix, Woollett & Lloyd 1991; Thurer 1994; see also Marshall 1993). Even Ruddick (1989:42), after explicitly rejecting any necessary link between being a mother and being female, claimed that “understanding mothers involves understanding what it means to be a woman.” The fact that most mothers have been female, Ruddick (1989:41) argued, has “shaped our minds and lives”, such that “the womanly and the maternal are conceptually and politically linked.”

Indeed, for the purposes of this discussion, this is the crucial point, and Ruddick’s (1989) repeated references to the mother as ‘she’ provide further evidence of the power of common sense in this regard; evidently she herself found it difficult to separate, on a consistent basis, motherhood from femininity. What can be concluded at this point, then, is that, unless the meaning-making context indicates that an alternative understanding is required, the term ‘mother’, and hence also the term ‘motherhood’, most often invokes common-sense understandings that are more related to the ongoing care of children than to the circumstances of pregnancy and birth. While it is therefore possible to imagine men doing mothering work, mothers are commonsensically assumed to be female; accordingly, motherhood is understood as a female experience. How it is commonly understood as a form of ‘parenthood’, in relation to ‘fatherhood’, is discussed below.

**Motherhood, fatherhood and parenthood**

While Ruddick (1989) suggested that motherhood need not be understood as an exclusively female experience, she also insisted that ‘parenting’ and ‘parenthood’ are not adequate substitute terms for ‘mothering’ and ‘motherhood’. She made a qualitative distinction between fathers and mothers, claiming that the roles of fathers are shaped largely by cultural demands, while mothering is a response to children’s needs. It might reasonably be inferred from this argument that motherhood is a natural and universal experience, that children’s needs are similarly universal and objectively identifiable, and that motherhood (as a response to needs) is more important to children’s healthy development than fatherhood (a cultural ‘add-on’). Thus, Ruddick’s (1989) attempt to re-value motherhood actually works to reinforce understandings that have often led to what she evidently sought to avoid: the conflation of ‘parenthood’ with ‘motherhood’. That these two terms should be conflated is not surprising; as noted in Chapter One, by far the bulk of the daily work of parenting in most Australian families is in fact done by women, to the extent that it may often appear that, except in their roles as ‘providers’, men are largely redundant to the task of raising children to healthy adulthood. Moreover, analyses of contemporary childcare and parenting magazines (Luke 1993a, 1996a), popular childcare
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manuals (Marshall 1991; Rapoport, Rapoport, Streitz & Kew 1980), and the discourses of developmental psychology, social welfare, education and the law (Rapoport et al 1980; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989; Woollett & Phoenix 1991b; see also Tizard 1991) have found that explicit references to ‘parents’ are often, in effect, references to ‘mothers’.

Yet even as the articulation of these discourses produces common-sense understandings that frequently conflate the terms ‘parent’ and ‘parenthood’ with ‘mother’ and ‘motherhood’, contradictory understandings of the relationships and differences between motherhood, fatherhood and parenthood also prevail, and may also be accepted as common sense. For example, it is now popularly perceived that children, particularly boys, need fathers as much as they do mothers, although they are not always understood to need both parents for the same reasons (DFCS 1999a; Frey 1997; Lupton 1996; Marshall 1991; Marshall 1993; Tizard 1991). Thus, while the majority of men in a recent Australian study (DFCS 1999a:40) believed that men and women should take equal responsibilities for raising children, “a substantial number also believed mothers were naturally better at nurturing children and that pre-school aged children needed their mothers more than their fathers.” Similarly, the accounts of British women who had returned to work after maternity leave were underpinned by the belief that their separation from their children might cause the children harm, but these women never seemed to consider the possibility that the children could be harmed as a result of being separated from their fathers, who were also in paid employment (Brannen & Moss 1991; cf. Lewis 1991; Tizard 1991). It seems that, like those in a later Australian study (Brown et al 1994:221), these women were struggling with beliefs “that only mothers (and not fathers or other people) can provide certain things for children; that it is mothers who are ultimately responsible for children’s physical and emotional well-being” (see also Everingham 1994; Richards 1994).

Lupton (1996) found that expert writers on fatherhood rarely suggest that women and men are capable of responding to children in the same ways (see also Tizard 1991), and when Richards (1994:85) surveyed suburban Australian couples for their views on parenting, she found that “words like ‘devoted’ and ‘committed’ apply to mothers and not fathers.” Even when men and women do respond to their children in similar ways, it seems that the consequences for their children may be perceived to be different: for example, Woollett and Phoenix (1991b:35) found that within developmental psychology, a woman’s lack of sensitivity to her children’s needs is construed as pathologically harmful to their healthy development, although the same lack in fathers has often been represented more positively, as “providing children with a context in which they can learn about unpredictability and how to express themselves explicitly.”

There are some indications that the preferred cultural model of fatherhood has begun to resemble more closely that of motherhood (DFCS 1999a; Lupton 1996), but Woollett and Phoenix (1991b) maintained that the discourses of developmental psychology continue to construct mothers as the most crucial influences on their children’s lives. Accordingly, social expectations of mothers and fathers continue to differ. Thus, among the participants in
Richards’ (1994:86) study, “the few rules laid down for ['good' fathers] were about excesses in masculine behaviour: ‘doesn’t drink, doesn’t smack’ ”; by contrast, as the discussion of motherhood and subjectivity later in this chapter illustrates, the requirements of ‘good’ motherhood are highly prescriptive and set women up for inevitable failure. Moreover, while men now expect, and are expected by others, to be more involved with their children, and are indeed more visibly involved (Woollett & Phoenix 1991a), the tender and caring ‘New Man’ may not be as prevalent in everyday life as might be assumed from the frequency of his appearances in the popular media (cf. French 1992; Thurer 1994). The overview, in Chapter One, of the current Australian social context confirms this view, as do the findings of a recent Australian study (DFCS 1999a) that gathered data on primary school children’s perceptions of fatherhood. A review of studies of men’s ‘involvement’ with their children concluded that what has actually increased in recent years is their interest in and enjoyment of their children (Woollett & Phoenix 1991a; see also Thurer 1994). Similarly, Marshall’s (1991:78) analysis of popular childcare and parenting manuals found that while ‘shared parenting’ is constructed as desirable, “the notion of sharing does not entail equal time spent with the child, nor equal allocation of childcare tasks.” Rather, the gendered division of labour in the family is represented as inevitable, and mothers are assumed to do the routine ‘maintenance work’ while fathers share the more enjoyable aspects of childcare (cf. Frey 1997; Luke 1993a, 1996a; Tizard 1991). Moreover, according to Marshall (1991), the manuals imply that it is women who are morally responsible for ensuring that men are sufficiently ‘involved’ with their children; certainly it seems that, at least until recently, women have been the major driving force behind men’s increased involvement in parenting (DFCS 1999a).

According to Frey (1997:24), the assumption that children need both parents, but for different reasons, relates to a mythical quality that is popularly perceived to mark the difference between ‘parenting’, the kind of childcare activities that both parents can perform (although they are most often performed by women), and ‘fathering’, which, he argued, “occurs only when men are attempting to make ‘men’ of their sons.” The recent emphasis on fathers and fathering in the ‘men’s movement’, he proposed, is driven by homophobia and a fear of the feminine. While there is no evidence that homosexual men necessarily ‘act like women’, or that homosexuality is an effect of parenting patterns, Frey (1997) claimed that there are fears among supporters of the men’s movement that boys who lack contact with their fathers will identify too much with their mothers, and will consequently grow up as emasculated ‘sissies’, and possibly even as homosexuals. Traces of the psychoanalytic discourses discussed in the next section of this chapter are embedded in such beliefs, which imply that, for reasons related to what is perceived to be their greater need for individuation and separation in their psychosexual development, boys need their fathers more than girls do; conversely, it can be inferred from these discourses that girls, with their supposedly ‘natural’ relational qualities and inclinations, need their mothers more than boys do.
To summarise, a variety of competing and sometimes contradictory understandings in regard to the terms ‘motherhood’, ‘fatherhood’ and ‘parenthood’ is available to support everyday meaning-making, and it seems likely that they are often deployed, in the manner of common sense, on a pre-reflective and ad hoc basis, to meet the demands of different meaning-making contexts. In most social contexts, motherhood is likely to be understood to be a distinctly different form of parenthood from fatherhood, involving different roles and responsibilities, having different influences on children’s development, and consequently entailing a ‘natural’ division of parenting labour along gendered lines. At the same time, however, the fact that, as a result of that division of labour, most day-to-day parenting work is typically done by women means that the role of men in the task of rearing healthy children can easily be overlooked or marginalised; thus, in many contexts, the term ‘parent’ can be substituted with the term ‘mother’ without any disruption to the meaning-making process.

As illustrated above, then, despite increasing recognition of the complexity of concepts such as ‘mother’ and ‘motherhood’, “men still fade out of most motherhood discussions” (Snitow 1992:44), and it becomes clear in the following section that this includes those discussions conducted within the field of psychoanalysis. For the purposes of this study, it is important to pay attention to this field, not only because the focus by psychoanalytic theorists on the significance of early childhood experiences to human psychosexual development has led them to accord a unique significance to mothers and motherhood, but also because the influence of theories derived from the psychoanalytic work of Freud extends well beyond the field of psychoanalysis. Thus, while they may not be immediately recognisable as ‘psychoanalytic’, a range of theoretical positions have nonetheless inherited Freudian preoccupations with mothers and motherhood. In particular, this preoccupation features strongly in theories developed in the field of developmental psychology, many of which have, in turn, exerted significant influence in other discursive fields. As Doane and Hodges (1992:2) remarked, the impact of psychoanalytic theories testifies to “the incredible power of the psychoanalytic tale of child development popularized by child-rearing manuals, promulgated by pediatricians, and perpetrated by social policy.” Thus it becomes evident throughout this chapter that, either directly or indirectly, psychoanalytic theories have helped to shape the common-sense understandings about motherhood that constitute major meaning-making resources for readers of contemporary adolescent fiction and must therefore inform the analysis of the research corpus.

**Discursive constructions of motherhood in psychoanalysis**

Mainstream psychoanalysis has paid little direct attention to theorising motherhood, focusing instead on the child’s development of a sense of identity following the oedipal processes through which, supposedly, he or she comes to identify with the father (Doane & Hodges 1992; E.A. Kaplan 1992; Kitzinger 1978; Schwartz 1994; Thurer 1994). According to mainstream psychoanalytic theories, girls’ early identification with their female parents is replaced by a masculine identification, as it is for boys, such that female desire is explicable only in terms of
‘penis envy’ (Benjamin 1990; Grosz 1990; Ireland 1993; Irigaray 1985a,b; Schwartz 1994).

Normal female psychosexual development is understood to be founded on anatomy and the desire for a penis, and thus to lead ‘naturally’ to motherhood, when a baby – preferably a male baby – supposedly provides a compensatory substitute for the envied male organ (Contratto 1980; Ireland 1993; Irigaray 1985a,b; Schwartz 1994; Thurer 1994; see also Woollett & Phoenix 1991b). Some critics have disputed this conflation of the actual penis with the privilege that it represents, proposing that it is girls’ recognition and positive valuation of their own genitals that prompt desires for a child, but both arguments equate motherhood with biological femininity and women’s reproductive capacities (Schwartz 1994). Either way, from the perspective afforded by mainstream psychoanalytic theories, a woman who does not have or want children can only be understood in terms of pathology (Ireland 1993).

Even in heterosexual partnerships, a woman is conceptualised within mainstream psychoanalysis as something of a substitute mother to her male partner, whose first and lasting object of love, according to Freud (cited in Irigaray 1985a; see also Thurer 1994), is his own mother. At the same time, the woman as ‘mother’ is understood as both the figure of initial attachment and the one from whom the child must turn away in order to achieve healthy adulthood (Benjamin 1990). Her own subjectivity is assumed to be lacking, while that of the child, whose developmental needs and interests are prioritised, is constructed as unattainable or pathological so long as he or she remains attached to her. Mainstream psychoanalysis, then, constructs motherhood as not only the ‘natural’ biological and psychosexual destiny of all women, but also as an ambivalent force in the lives of children.

Recognising how this construct of the mother has often resulted in overwhelmingly negative representations of mothers in cultural texts, Chasseguet-Smirgel (1994:115) tried to distinguish between the all-powerful, terrifying maternal ‘imago’, “a kind of stereotyped mental picture that forms in the unconscious”, and the actual mother, arguing that the latter is not necessarily the biological mother, and need not even be female. She suggested that while the maternal imago has less to do with the quality of the actual mother’s care than with human babies’ prolonged dependency on others after birth, its conflation with the (typically female) actual mother of experience tends to produce representations of mothers as dangerously omnipotent (cf. Chodorow & Contratto 1982). Thus, “a relatively good external mother is as liable to generate a terrifying maternal imago as is an objectively frustrating and harmful mother” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1994:115), with the result that the negative qualities of the maternal imago come to be attributed to females rather than males, and indeed to all females, whether they have children or not. However, while this might, as Chasseguet-Smirgel (1994) argued, help to explain the origins of the strikingly negative representations of mothers and motherhood evident in some cultural texts, it does not offer a solution to the problem: Chasseguet-Smirgel (1994) maintained that the conflation of the maternal imago with actual women is an unconscious process, resistant to change by conscious means. Indeed, her description of the all-powerful and devouring imago
as ‘maternal’ illustrates the difficulty of understanding these concepts without linking them to biological motherhood and femininity.

Re-workings of mainstream psychoanalytic theories, often by feminists who have sought to develop more positive constructs of women and motherhood (Henriques et al 1984; Herndl 1991; Ireland 1993; E.A. Kaplan 1992), have taken a number of different directions. Of most relevance to this study are those known as ‘object-relations’ theories, which have had a powerful and continuing impact on twentieth century discourses of childcare and parenting, and consequently on common-sense understandings about motherhood.

**Object-relations theories**

The purpose of this section is to indicate such features of object-relations theories, and of various recent critiques of them, as are relevant to the research problem addressed in this study. This group of theories focuses on the pre-oedipal period during which the child, in recognising others as separate and independent ‘objects’, begins to develop a sense of self (Benjamin 1990; Everingham 1994; Ireland 1993; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). While feminists have consistently criticised the objectification of women, the notion of the mother as ‘object’ in object-relations theories has had some appeal because it stresses the importance of the child’s interactions with her in what has conventionally been her role as primary care-giver, rather than focusing attention, as mainstream theories do, on her physical/biological role in satisfying the child’s early survival needs (Thurer 1994; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989).

However, object-relations theories are not necessarily feminist in perspective; indeed, those of Bowlby and Winnicott, which significantly shaped western discourses of childcare and parenting in the latter half of the twentieth century, have been subjected to strong feminist critique (Doane & Hodges 1992; Jacobs 1990; M.M. Kaplan 1992; Tizard 1991; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). In effect, these theories supported both a large-scale return of women to the domestic sphere following World War II and a gendered division of parenting labour within the nuclear family, such that the woman cares for the child in the home while the man, through his paid work outside the home, ensures her a safe environment in which to do so (M.M. Kaplan 1992; Schwartz 1994; Tizard 1991). They warned of damaging consequences for a child’s emotional development if he or she is deprived of a continuous and loving relationship with his or her mother (Brannen & Moss 1991; Jackson 1994; Rapoport et al 1980; Thurer 1994; Tizard 1991; Woollett & Phoenix 1991b). Critics of these theories have claimed that what is actually important is the child’s bond with and attachment to another who need not necessarily be his or her biological mother, and further, that a physical separation, such as that necessitated by that person’s participation in the workforce, does not necessarily entail a break in that bond. Nevertheless, in the wake of claims about the dangers of ‘maternal deprivation’, it became popular to link “any hint of a mother’s absence (temporary or permanent) … to inner damage that resulted in the child’s delinquency and future disturbance” (Jackson 1994:110; see also Thurer 1994; Tizard 1991).
According to Doane and Hodges (1992) ‘motherhood’ and ‘womanhood’ are effectively conflated in these theories, which emphasise women’s supposedly ‘natural’ sensitivity, nurturing capacities and desire to merge self-interest with the interests of others, and propose that, because their ‘maternal instincts’ enable women to anticipate and provide for their children’s needs and desires, most women are naturally ‘good enough’ mothers (see also Everingham 1994; Thurer 1994). The implication that they need not be perfect, just ‘good enough’, seems to promise women relief from the enormous responsibilities entailed in notions of ‘maternal deprivation’; however, the construction of human behaviour as ‘natural’ often provides both a forceful moral justification and grounds for moral evaluations (Heritage & Lindstrom n.d.). Thus, the account of the ‘good enough’ mother as one who “loves to let herself be the baby’s whole world” (Winnicott, cited in M.M. Kaplan 1992:5) constructs an impossible ideal of motherhood, together with a moral imperative for women not only to emulate it, but to do so ‘naturally’ (see also Bassin et al 1994a; Doane & Hodges 1992; Everingham 1994; Schwartz 1994).

As subsequent discussions in this chapter serve to emphasise, women who are mothers thus become the objects of ‘expert’ regulatory discourses that work to marginalise those women for whom the role of full-time mother is not a viable or preferred choice, while those who can and do make such a choice are required to “submerge their own needs and interests in those of their children, a degree of self-effacement which in relationships other than the mother-child one would be judged pathological” (Woollett & Phoenix 1991b:36; see also Doane & Hodges 1992; M.M. Kaplan; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). Indeed, the discourse of the ‘good enough’ mother constructs as pathological what might, based on the findings of many of the studies discussed later in this chapter, be regarded as normal, namely women’s feelings of anger and frustration towards their children and the work of caring for them, often in isolation from other adults (e.g., Brannen & Moss 1991; Brown et al 1994; Everingham 1994; Heritage & Lindstrom n.d.; Jackson 1994; Marshall 1991; Nicholson 1983; Rich 1976; Ruddick 1980, 1989; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989; Woollett & Phoenix 1991b).

Feminist work in the field of object-relations has sought to challenge the gendered division of parenting work in the modern nuclear family. For Chodorow (1978:203), for example, that division is problematic because it is crucial to the reproduction of the patriarchal version of motherhood: it teaches men to value separateness, while “women come to want and need primary relationships with children.” She argued that the nurturing of female children by predominantly female parents encourages girls to retain an unconscious identification with their mothers and remain closely connected to them, even as they attempt to deal with their sense of being unindividuated and dependent by identifying, as boys do, with their fathers. Her work thus lends support to ‘cultural’ feminist claims regarding specifically female forms of identity and expression, and the need to re-value women’s supposed connectedness and capacities for nurturing and relationship (e.g., Ruddick 1980, 1989; see also Doane & Hodges 1992; Forcey 1994; Ireland 1993; E.A. Kaplan 1992; M.M. Kaplan 1992; Thurer 1994). However, adding to Alcoff’s (1988) criticisms of ‘cultural’ feminism, discussed in Chapter Three (see also Pettman...
1992), Benjamin (1990) proposed that attempts to re-value motherhood in this way ultimately collude in idealising the desexualisation of women, by working to construct them as objects of masculine desire rather than as active, desiring subjects.

Other feminist critics have argued that Chodorow’s (1978) proposal for male and female parents to share the work of childcare continues to privilege the child’s needs and desires over those of parents, and that, in effect, she conflated ‘good enough’ parenting with ‘good enough’ mothering (Doane & Hodges 1992; E.A. Kaplan 1992; see also Marshall 1993). Furthermore, they have pointed to a contradiction in her work: she claimed that it is women’s oppression within patriarchy that incapacitates them as mothers, but her argument implies that, in failing to nurture their daughters adequately, women themselves are responsible for the ongoing production of patriarchal motherhood (Thurer 1994; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989).

As illustrated later in this chapter, this attribution of blame for a range of individual and social problems to ‘bad mothering’ is not uncommon in other discursive fields; nor is it unique among feminist object-relations theories (Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). Benjamin’s (1990) object-relations theorising, for example, effectively blamed women for their daughters’ difficulties in achieving both femininity and a separate subjectivity; for the continuing imbalance of power between the sexes; and, ultimately, for a range of other social problems of domination and subordination (Walkerdine & Lucey 1989).

Reviewing major object-relations theories of mothering, Doane and Hodges (1992) concluded that by either implicitly or explicitly prescribing a model of the ‘good enough’ mother that conflates motherhood with womanhood and normalises women’s confinement in the home, object-relations theories effectively reaffirm many of the central themes of mainstream psychoanalysis in regard to motherhood. Thus, like mainstream theories, they cannot account for women’s choices not to have children without constructing such choices as abnormal and pathological; nor can they explain how it is that many women lead full and satisfying lives without children (Ireland 1993). Moreover, they take for granted the legitimacy of children’s ‘needs’ and the primary role of their mothers in meeting them. In the context of anti-feminist backlash described in Chapter One, it seems that feminist advocates of object-relations theories may serve conservative interests, however unwittingly, by embracing conventional notions of domestic and maternal femininity (Doane & Hodges 1992; Ireland 1993).

A problem common to the psychoanalytic theories discussed here, whether mainstream or revisionist, is that they tend to ignore issues of race, ethnicity and class: they take for granted the isolation of the mother-child unit, on the premise that the social world is divided into a public (male) political and economic sphere and a private (female) apolitical domestic sphere. However, such has rarely been the reality for large numbers of families – for example, single-parent, poor and working-class families, and members of racial and ethnic minorities (Collins 1994; Davin 1978; Dill 1994; Glenn 1994; Kilic 1994; Nicholson 1983; Nussbaum 1993; Perry
Feminist psychoanalytic theory, too, is vulnerable to criticism for its reference to a universalised woman for whom sexism is assumed to be the most significant form of oppression. In assuming for all women the privileges that enable white, middle-class women to concern themselves primarily with issues of personal autonomy, rather than with more pressing issues of survival, feminist psychoanalytic theories, like the mainstream theories from which they have been developed, tend to be racist, classist and eurocentric (Collins 1994; Whitford 1991).

Before turning to consider how motherhood has been constructed in other discursive fields, brief mention should be made of those psychoanalytic theorists who have drawn on Lacan’s revisions of Freudian theories to examine the construction of gendered subjectivity through language and culture. Among them, Kristeva (1986a,b) and Irigaray (1985a,b) are notable for their attempts to develop alternative, more positive understandings of motherhood than those made available within mainstream psychoanalytic theories (Grosz 1989, 1990; Ireland 1993; Jardine 1986; E.A. Kaplan 1992; Stanton 1986; Whitford 1991). However, these theorists have had little success in their attempts to develop understandings that can serve as serious challenges to the discursive ‘truths’ about motherhood constructed in mainstream psychoanalysis.

E.A. Kaplan (1992:41) found value in Kristeva’s conceptualisation of the maternal as a relation inherent in neither mother nor child (Kristeva 1986a,b; see also Grosz 1989, 1990; Zerilli 1992), pointing out that “I am only a mother in relating to my child, not outside of that relation.” This reading offers a challenge to discourses of ‘good’ motherhood, which accord what Calhoun (1995) termed ‘trump card’ salience to the identity of ‘mother’, by working to deny the legitimacy of other possible identities available to women, independent of their relationships with their children, and thus rendering women who have children morally accountable as ‘mothers’ at all times.

However, support for this challenge is not evident elsewhere in Kristeva’s work on motherhood, which critics have shown to be highly contradictory (Butler 1990; Doane & Hodges 1992; Grosz 1989, 1990, 1992; Moi 1986; Stanton 1986; Ziarek 1992), with a tendency towards the mother-blaming evident in object-relations theories (Doane & Hodges 1992; Grosz 1990; Zerilli 1992). Moreover, these critics have observed, it offers support to discourses that conflate motherhood with biological femininity, and ‘woman’ with ‘mother’; it denies women any subjectivity or place to speak, either inside or outside the maternal relation, and accords no legitimacy to their needs and interests outside their relationships with their children; and while it acknowledges the self-sacrifice involved in motherhood, it constructs this as something women willingly and naturally accept.

Irigaray’s (1985a,b) work has focused on the phallocentrism of mainstream psychoanalytic theory, which, she argued, constructs all females as ‘mothers’, with no autonomous identity as
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women, and enables mothers to be perceived only in one of two negative ways: as the omnipotent, ultimately life-denying mother of pre-oedipal fantasy, or as the castrated mother, defined in terms of lack and deficiency (Irigaray 1985a; see also Grosz 1990; E.A. Kaplan 1992; Whitford 1991). Critics have argued that in attempting to theorise a non-phallic feminine subjectivity that is not constructed through a relation of ‘otherness’ that relies on positive and negative terms, but through a concept of ‘pure difference’, Irigaray has ultimately resorted to biological essentialism (Grosz 1990; E.A. Kaplan 1992; Threadgold 1988; Whitford 1991). More immediately important from the perspective of this study is the theoretical complexity of her work, which remains largely inaccessible to non-theorists, and thus cannot offer a way of understanding motherhood that can serve as a coherent, viable and accessible alternative meaning-making resource to others already widely available, including those constructed as common sense.

So far in this chapter, the discussion has focused on the more significant of the various theoretical understandings about mothers and motherhood that have been developed in the field of psychoanalysis. In the remainder of this chapter, a range of other discourses of motherhood, or aspects of motherhood, are explored, in order to provide a more complete overview of the range of explicit and implicit understandings that, for the purposes of this study, are most relevant as intertextual meaning-making resources. It becomes clear in the discussions below that, like the ‘feminist’ psychoanalytic theories discussed above, counter-hegemonic research on motherhood in other discursive fields has had little influence, so far, in promoting popular acceptance of radically new ways of understanding motherhood. Where much of this research has proved most valuable, however, is in documenting the understandings that have become accepted as common-sense ‘truths’ about motherhood, and in drawing attention to the implications of those understandings in terms of social justice and equity.

Constructions of motherhood in other discursive fields

As the discussion so far suggests, the identity of ‘mother’ has often been both limited and marginalised; rather than being perceived as separate subjects, women with children have tended to be perceived as extensions of those children, and hence as the objects of ‘expert’ discourses designed to ensure ‘proper’ childcare (Benjamin 1990; E.A. Kaplan 1992; Perry 1992; Tyler 1993b). However, Rich’s (1976) analysis of motherhood initiated a shift of focus away from children and onto motherhood as a social institution, and prompted a proliferation of further analyses of the discursive construction of ‘truths’ about motherhood. Although, as Snitow (1992) pointed out, some feminist critics had previously begun to consider motherhood in terms of ideology, it is Rich’s (1976) analysis that is most often recognised as a landmark study (Bassin et al 1994a; Chodorow & Contratto 1982; Hirsch 1981; E.A. Kaplan 1992; M.M. Kaplan 1992). Since its publication, research literature in this area has become extensive. The task here is to draw on the findings of a range of recent studies across a number of discursive fields, in order to provide an overview of those understandings of motherhood, or aspects of
motherhood, that are most relevant to an analysis of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, and are feasibly available as meaning-making resources to contemporary readers of such fiction. As explained above, this overview, together with earlier discussions of definitional issues, supplements and expands the work of Chapter One, in which the outline of the educational and social context for this study also served as an introduction to some of the salient features of motherhood as it is typically lived and understood in contemporary Australia. The section is organised thematically, and begins with an exploration of the notion that all women are, or should be, mothers.

Motherhood as destiny

Linked to the understandings outlined in the first part of this chapter, that mothers are women, and that motherhood is, therefore, a distinctively feminine form of parenthood, is an assumption that motherhood is the “apotheosis of womanhood” (Miles 1994:31), the ‘natural’ and desired destiny of all ‘normal’ women. This assumption is made explicit in mainstream and object-relations psychoanalytic theories; moreover, it finds considerable justification, not only in the fact that most women are biologically capable of having children, but also in observations of contemporary Australian society. As noted in Chapter One, although Australian women are having fewer children, and they are having them later in life, most girls and young women still expect to bear children; furthermore, it is evident that significant numbers of women in Australia and comparable western countries are willing to go to extraordinary lengths in order to become mothers, for example, through long, stressful and often unsuccessful infertility treatments and in vitro fertilisation programs (AIHW 1999b; Klein 1994; Miles 1994; Sawicki 1991; Snitow 1992; Woollett 1991; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a), various kinds of surrogacy arrangements (Schwartz 1994; Thurer 1994), long waits and strict eligibility criteria for adoption (Woollett 1991), and expensive adoptions of overseas-born children (AIHW 1999a; see also Nicholson 1983).

However, the common-sense assumption that women’s desire to bear children is the inevitable result of the combined forces of their hormones and their ‘natural maternal instinct’ has been challenged by feminist analyses that conclude that the social institution of motherhood has offered virtually the only socially legitimated identity available to women in patriarchal western societies, even as it has also operated to isolate them and regulate their lives in accordance with discursively constructed sets of moral imperatives (Ireland 1993; Lewis 1991; Marshall 1991; Nicholson 1983; Perry 1992; Phoenix & Woollett 1991; Rich 1976; Roberts 1995; Saunders 1983; Snitow 1992; Woollett 1991; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a,b). From the perspective provided by these analyses, the ‘truth’ of common-sense understandings of motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment of normal female development to adult womanhood is rendered suspect by the very insistence of the pronatalist discourses that work to produce and maintain them (Faludi 1992; French 1992; Ireland 1993; Klein 1994; Marshall 1991; Marshall 1993; Miles 1994; Nicholson 1983). Those discourses have worked historically through a variety of cultural texts in which, unless they are members of religious orders, women who do not have children have often been represented in negative ways. However, these representations have been inconsistent, varying both thematically and in intensity. Old Testament stories, for example, depict women without
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children as worthless failures and objects of pity (Thurer 1994; see also French 1992; Pateman 1988; Rich 1976); in the wake of strengthening feminist movements, early 1970s news media and popular cultural texts tended to applaud women who rejected marriage and motherhood as claustrophobic and unfulfilling (Faludi 1992); but by the mid-80s, the same media were representing the same women as lonely and unfulfilled career women who had disregarded their ‘biological clocks’ at huge personal cost (Faludi 1992; see also French 1992; Ireland 1993; E.A. Kaplan 1992; Snitow 1992). In response to growing social anxieties about the consequences of allowing the achievements of feminism to continue unchecked, pronatalist discourses became increasingly insistent (Faludi 1992; see also French 1992; Jackson 1994; Pope et al 1990; Snitow 1992; Thurer 1994), to the extent that Ireland (1993) argued that representations of women who choose not to have children have come to be dominated by two sometimes interrelated common-sense understandings: that such women do not value or are incapable of sustaining close personal relationships; and that they are overly concerned with their careers at the expense of their ‘real’ purpose in life. These representations have worked discursively, not only to reinforce common-sense understandings, but also to render women who choose not to have children constantly vulnerable to charges of being ‘unfeminine’ and psychologically inadequate (Lewis 1991; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a). In this context, all childless women, whether they are voluntarily so or not, can find themselves having to account for their non-conformity to their ‘proper’ and ‘natural’ life roles as fully adult women (Woollett 1991), while women who break the moral imperative that ‘mothering is for life’ by leaving (‘abandoning’) their children are popularly perceived as ‘unnatural’ and ‘deviant’ social criminals (Jackson 1994; Roberts 1995; cf. Nicholson 1983).

Furthermore, while legal abortions are now available to many women, abortion remains a criminal offence in many countries; and even where this is not the case, strong anti-abortion lobbies continue to engage in bitter and often violent campaigns for the repeal of abortion reform legislation (Faludi 1992; French 1992; Nicholson 1983; Snitow 1992; Thurer 1994). As Roberts (1995) argued, to criminalise abortion is to reinforce common-sense assumptions that women should ‘naturally’ want to bear children, by literally compelling them to do so and punishing them if they refuse (cf. Glenn 1994). At the same time, it seems that women’s increased access to contraception and abortion has modified contemporary understandings about the ‘naturalness’ of motherhood, such that Marshall (1993:32) observed that “an emphasis on social normality overlays any biological determinism.” Thus, a number of Australian surveys on understandings of parenthood, conducted in the 1970s and 80s, concluded that having children was regarded as the usual choice for married couples, and often as an important aspect of marriage. In other words, having children was understood as ‘natural’ in the sense of ‘normal’, as well as being desirable and ‘right’ for married couples (Marshall 1993). Consistent with both these findings, a discourse analytic study of a corpus of childcare manuals that sell extensively in the United Kingdom found that they often suggested that the ultimate way for a woman to express her love for a man is by having a child ‘for’ him. The manuals also emphasised the special quality of
‘maternal’ love that is supposedly ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’ between a woman and her child (Marshall 1991; see also Urwin 1985).

In discussing her personal experiences of motherhood, Rich (1976:25) recalled the sense of approval that she experienced during her first pregnancy, noting that it was not derived simply from the approval of others, but also from her own internalised perception “that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to be ‘like other women’”; thus she felt, “for the first time in my adolescent and adult life, not-guilty” (Rich 1976:26). Women with reproductive problems typically suffer feelings of failure as both mother and woman, as in the case of a woman in Woollett’s (1991:54) study: “there is the feeling of not being a proper woman, affecting your image of yourself sexually.” In a later study by Lewin (1994), lesbian women cast doubt on lesbian feminist theorising of lesbian motherhood as a challenge to patriarchy by explaining their desires to have children in terms of ‘nature’ and ‘hormones’, and associating the bearing of children with adulthood, social responsibility and ‘settling down’. In a manner reminiscent of conventional female acculturation with patriarchy, they often perceived themselves to be better people for having had children. One hundred women from a variety of backgrounds, and with varying histories of pregnancy and reasons for not having children, were interviewed by Ireland (1993), and among them were many who reported feeling damaged, and as if they were not fully women, because they had no children. Others had more positive perspectives and were more resistant to common-sense understandings of childless women as empty and lacking. However, Ireland (1993) argued that most had internalised dominant social attitudes to the extent that many of those who had found fulfilment in developing aspects of their lives other than the maternal still struggled to reconcile this with their understanding of motherhood as the socially prescribed mode of fulfilment for women (see also Klein 1994).

Not surprisingly, the voluntarily childless couples in Marshall’s (1993) longitudinal Australian study also had positive perceptions of life without children, but this did not prevent some of them, including significantly more women than men, from characterising themselves as ‘selfish’. Marshall’s (1993) findings suggest that while these women had resisted the social expectation that they should have children, their childlessness did not amount to a challenge to common-sense understandings about motherhood as the ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ destiny of women; rather, it seems that they implicitly accepted those understandings, and characterised themselves as, in effect, ‘abnormal’ on the grounds that, unlike other women, they were not prepared to make the sacrifices that they understood motherhood to entail. At the same time, however, as indicated in Chapter One, even voluntarily childless women are vulnerable to workplace discrimination on the grounds of their perceived potential to become mothers, because employers often assume, commonsensically, not only that all women are, or should be, mothers, but also that motherhood necessarily entails a level of commitment to the care of children that is incompatible with their ideas about ‘good’ workers (Lewis 1991; see also HREOC 1999; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a).
As the discussion in Chapter One suggests, there is an increasing awareness among social researchers that, for many women, the decision not to have children is not so much a rejection of motherhood as a pragmatic response to the costs of having children in the absence of both ‘family-friendly’ workplace policies and practices and a willingness on the part of their male partners to share responsibilities for routine domestic and childcare work (cf. Lewis 1991). While this awareness might be contributing to a softening of popular perceptions of women who do not have children, it need not necessarily impact on prevailing common sense, according to which “all women are defined as potential, actual or failed mothers” (Morgan & Scott, cited in Harrison 1996:2). Ireland (1993) argued that this understanding will eventually be transformed if more women make the choice not to have children and demonstrate that it is possible, and not ‘abnormal’, for women to lead fulfilling lives without children; however, she conceded that resurgent pronatalist discourses can and do work to stall that process. In the meantime, as Snitow (1992) noted, feminist theorists of motherhood continue to struggle with the difficulty entailed in questioning women’s continued desire to become mothers without implying either that they should not want children or that they are ideological dupes (see also Chodorow & Contratto 1982; Kitzinger 1978; Kristeva 1986).

Together with the outline of the current Australian social context in Chapter One, the literature reviewed here suggests that the belief that “whatever else they do with their lives, women are supposed to be mothers” (Woollett 1991:51) persists in common sense, and must therefore be recognised as a significant meaning-making resource for contemporary readers of Australian adolescent fiction. However, counter-hegemonic discourses are gathering strength as increasing numbers of women choose not to become mothers, and these might reasonably be expected to become more widely available as intertextual resources. Moreover, it is important to recognise what the remainder of this chapter serves to emphasise: that it is evidently not commonsensically understood that all women should be mothers no matter what. The perceived desirability of women becoming mothers varies in accordance with social perceptions about, among other things, their racial, ethnic and class category membership, their marital status, the appropriateness of their age for child-bearing, the number of children they already have, and their sexual preferences. Thus, even as married, heterosexual, white middle-class women are exhorted to fulfil their ‘natural’ and ‘proper’ destiny by bearing children, the reproductive rights of ‘other’ women can often be denied or marginalised, for example, through forced sterilisation or contraception (Collins 1994; French 1992; Pettman 1992; Phoenix & Woollett 1991), or through their inability to meet the implicitly racist, classist and heterosexist eligibility criteria for entry into IVF programs (Sawicki 1991). At the same time, however, as explained in Chapter Three, the social field comprises multiple centres of power and resistance. Accordingly, while certain groups of women may be more vulnerable than others to the disciplinary power of normative discourses of motherhood, even married, heterosexual, white middle-class women are rarely positioned outside those discourses, as the following discussion reveals.
Motherhood and subjectivity

Like psychoanalytic theories, prevailing common sense in regard to motherhood and subjectivity has its origins in liberal humanism and nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, which brought middle-class domestic values to dominance in the western world. Modernist discourses of motherhood normalised the concept of a mother-child unit isolated within the domestic sphere, and established the medical profession as ‘experts’ on not only the physical care of children, but also their moral care and training, even before the emergence of psychoanalytic theories about the significance of mothering to the child’s psychosocial development (Kociumbas 1982; Perry 1992). These discourses idealised the mother as ‘the angel of the house’, provided she heeded the professional advice of the ‘experts’ (Adams 1995; Bassin et al 1994a; Bittman & Pixley 1997; Chodorow & Contratto 1982; Davin 1978; Jackson 1994; Kitzinger 1978; Kociumbas 1982; Nicholson 1983; Nussbaum 1993; Perry 1992; Reiger 1993; Thurer 1994; Tyler 1993b; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). As discussed in the first part of this chapter, the norm of the isolated mother-child unit has also been assumed in psychoanalytic theories, which have consistently privileged the subjectivity of children and their supposed needs over the subjectivity of the women whose assumed role it is to meet those ‘needs’ unfailingly.

As a result of their focus on the relationship between the child’s earliest experiences and his or her subsequent psychosexual development, psychoanalytic theories have had a powerful impact on twentieth century ‘scientific’ discourses of child psychology and development, which purport to know the needs and nature of all children and the conditions necessary for their healthy development into adults, and have thus, in turn, impacted on a variety of educational and other social practices concerning children, as well as on contemporary common sense (Everingham 1994; Griffith 1995; Tyler 1993a,b; Urwin 1985; Walkerdine 1984a; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a). Moreover, the insistence by developmental psychologists that the child’s healthy development requires not only that children’s exhaustive list of ‘needs’ be met, but also that they be met primarily by mothers, has meant that social arrangements concerning children have typically concerned women as well (Griffith 1995; Tyler 1993a,b; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989; cf. Ross 1995).

Thus, the proliferation of twentieth century advice literature that has popularised the discourses of child psychology and worked to embed them in common sense is nominally about child-rearing, but as Weiss (cited in Griffith 1995:113) observed, it might just as well be described as ‘mother-rearing literature’: it has “as much to say about the lives of women as about the children for whom they are caring” (see also Kitzinger 1978; Luke 1993a, 1996a; Marshall 1991; Miles 1994; Nicholson 1983; Thurer 1994; Urwin 1985; Woollett & Phoenix 1991b). What it has to say is constructed as ‘expert’ advice that the ‘good’ mother is exhorted to follow in preference to ‘old wives’ tales’ and the advice of her own and other mothers, who, according to one ‘expert’, “may not necessarily be the best advisers of the present generation” (Jolly, cited in Marshall 1991:73). This ‘expert’ advice, consistent with the consensus among developmental psychologists on the importance of maternal ‘sensitivity’ or child-centredness (Tyler 1993b; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989;
Discursive constructions of motherhood

Woollett & Phoenix 1991b), amounts to the denial of any legitimate subjectivity for women who have children – and hence the denial of any legitimate identity, needs, desires or interests – outside their relationships with those children. In the words of another of these ‘experts’, for example, and illustrating the influence of object-relations theories on the discourses of developmental psychology, “taking the baby’s point of view does not mean neglecting yours … your interests and his [sic] are identical” (Leach, cited in Marshall 1991:76; see also Chodorow & Contratto 1982; Everingham 1994; Jackson 1994; Kitzinger 1978; Nicholson 1983; Thurer 1994; Urwin 1985). However, research on maternal ‘sensitivity’ has rarely considered what the costs of this level of self-effacement might be for women (Kitzinger 1978; Marshall 1991).

Not only has developmental psychology tended to conceptualise ‘influence’ as something that operates in only one direction, from women to their children, it has also tended to ignore the range of other influences on children, including the material conditions of their lives, as well as other family members, other children, television and other forms of popular culture, and schools and other social institutions (Marshall 1991; Tizard 1991; Tyler 1993b; Woollett & Phoenix 1991b). Instead, “the childrearing practices of individual mothers [are] seen as the main if not only determinants of the values and behaviours of later generations”, and social problems are implicitly attributed to faulty mothering (Marshall 1991:83; see also Adams 1995; Tyler 1993b). It follows that the categorisation of mothers as more or less ‘sensitive’ in their orientation to their children's ‘needs’ amounts to an evaluation that can serve to justify ‘expert’ intervention in the supposedly ‘private’ sphere of the home and family. Thus, “modern mothering has become one of the central aspects of the regulation of women” (Walkerdine & Lucey 1989:20; see also Griffith 1995; Heritage & Lindstrom n.d.; Marshall 1991; Miles 1994; Phoenix & Woollett 1991; Pope et al 1990; Rich 1976; Roberts 1995; Tyler 1993a,b; Urwin 1985; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a).

Revealing something of what that regulation means in women’s lives, Rich (1976) described the feelings of guilt she experienced as a consequence of her unquestioning belief that a ‘good’ mother is completely satisfied in devoting herself to her children, while a woman who is unable to selflessly and unconditionally love her children must be ‘abnormal’. In Foucauldian terms, Rich’s (1976) argument is that discourses of ‘good’ motherhood exert disciplinary power over virtually all women, not only those who are mothers, by constructing all women as more or less guilty of failing their children, in some cases by not becoming mothers at all. Representations of idealised mothers in popular cultural texts, for example, work to foster a sense of guilt in those who are less than perfect, encouraging them to strive harder to emulate the ideal, while representations of ‘bad’ mothers similarly work to remind other women to do better. However, Urwin (1985) stressed, this is not a process of simple coercion. Rather, as suggested by the discussion of the concept of desire in Chapter Three, it operates with the collusion of women themselves, by playing on their existing desires and fantasies – themselves discursively produced – in regard to not only having children but also caring for them in particular ways (see also Rich 1976). In other words, as in the case of romance fiction, the representations of
motherhood in popular cultural texts, including childcare manuals and advice literature, work to produce and shape female desire in such ways that its fulfilment appears to lie in taking up particular subject positions within the same discourses that produce these texts. As Rich’s (1976) account serves to illustrate, however, this does not mean that women who take up those subject positions encounter no conflicts or contradictions. Moreover, those who attempt to position themselves within counter-hegemonic discourses rarely do so without struggle, as the accounts of childless women, discussed above, illustrate (cf. Brannen & Moss 1991; Brown et al 1994; M.M. Kaplan 1992; Nicholson 1983; Richards 1994; Snitow 1992; Urwin 1985).

Other illustrations of the difficulties that women experience in resisting dominant discourses of motherhood, particularly in relation to the mother’s subjectivity, include the accounts of the 90 women interviewed in an Australian study by Brown et al (1994). Despite their varied social backgrounds, these women shared normative understandings about ‘good’ motherhood, such that few of them acknowledged a mother’s needs as important and separate from those of her children, even though they evidently struggled with their own desires to take some time for themselves, away from their two-year-old children. Based on the qualities these women mentioned most frequently as those of a ‘good’ mother, Brown et al (1994) formulated a prescription that is worth quoting at length. It is strikingly consistent with not only the ideal constructed in popular childcare literature, but also the idealised mother who appears so frequently in popular cultural texts (E.A. Kaplan 1992, 1994; M.M. Kaplan 1992; Luke 1993a, 1996a; Walters 1992) and the requirements for ‘good’ motherhood offered by participants in other Australian studies (Everingham 1994; Marshall 1993; Richards 1994), studies in the United Kingdom (Brannen & Moss 1991; Lewis 1991; Urwin 1985), and studies in the United States of lesbian mothers (Lewin 1994) and Chicana and Mexican immigrant mothers (Segura 1994). Participants in these studies consistently emphasised passive notions of nurturance and self-sacrifice, together with the importance of prioritising the ‘needs’ of children (cf. Caplan 1989).

The ‘good’ mother is required to be loving and caring, to have ‘never-ending’ supplies of patience, to willingly and regularly spend time with her children, and in this time provide her children with the right sort of attention, stimulation and guidance. She is required to remain calm and relaxed at all times, to be a good listener and communicator, and to be understanding and sensitive to children’s needs. Amongst the tasks she must competently perform are the disciplining of her children, teaching of appropriate behaviour, and everyday basic care tasks of feeding and keeping children clean. In order to manage all this she must have highly developed skills in juggling competing demands; she must be responsible, consistent, fair, able to handle (control?) her children in any situation, never lose her temper – and it would help also if she was energetic, creative, and had a sense of humour (Brown et al 1994:141).

Significantly, the recognition by these women that only a ‘superwoman’ could be a ‘good’ mother on a constant basis did not prevent them from being highly critical of themselves in comparison with other mothers, some of whom were actually television characters. Thus, when they could not “remain patient, calm, understanding, loving and attentive to their children’s needs”, or even when they did not feel able to do so ‘naturally’, as they believed a ‘good’ mother would, they constructed themselves as inadequate (Brown et al 1994:152). Many of the mothers in another Australian study (Everingham 1994) felt similarly inadequate when they could not immediately...
identify and gratify their babies’ physical and emotional needs. They also reported feeling ‘terrible’ or ‘guilty’ after displaying anger towards their children, and were keen to make amends afterwards, often by apologising to the children and explaining their anger in terms of their own tiredness rather than in terms of the children’s behaviour, for which they evidently felt themselves to be responsible. Everingham (1994) noted that none of the fathers she interviewed, even those that were highly involved in caring for their children, felt the same intensity of remorse for their displays of anger or any need to justify themselves. As Brown et al (1994:162) observed, it seems that “socially constructed and sanctioned ideals are translated into self-imposed demands that women tell themselves they must meet if they are to live up to the ideals of good motherhood” (cf. Roberts 1995).

According to Richards (1994:85), even women in her study who worked outside the home commented to the effect that the ‘good’ mother is one who, in the words of one such woman, is “loving and I suppose patient. It’s harder than being a good father because we’re there all the time.” This suggests, Richards (1994:85) argued, that descriptions of the ‘good’ mother that refer to her being ‘available’, ‘on call’ and ‘there all the time’ “are less about actual time allocation than about priorities and options. Read this way, the definitions of good mothers almost all contain assumptions that mothering is first priority.”

Thus it seems that, while the ideal mother is still constructed as one who is not also a ‘worker’, especially when her children are very young, common-sense understandings about ‘good’ motherhood no longer preclude women with children from participating in paid employment outside the home (Lewis 1991; Richards 1994). The transformation of common sense resulting from the re-articulation of interests that enabled the mass entry of women into the workforce has brought greater social acceptance of paid employment among single mothers and others who are perceived to need the money, provided that they do not prioritise their work over their children; however, it has also left mothers who are not perceived to be financially needy, or are highly committed to their careers, vulnerable to the negative connotations of the term ‘working mother’. Lewis (1991:198) pointed out that ‘working mothers’ “are problematic precisely because they are defined as problems. Employed fathers are not considered to be, or to have problems, because the social construction of fatherhood subsumes both worker and provider role.” ‘Working mothers’, Lewis (1991:206) found, “tend to be very sensitive to any suggestion that they might be doing the wrong thing, especially if, as so often happens, this comes from the children themselves, who quickly absorb the idea that mothers do not have the same rights as fathers to go out to work” (cf. Woollett & Phoenix 1991a). She interviewed many women who gained considerable satisfaction from their work but felt somewhat guilty about this, apparently because it was incompatible with their belief that a ‘good’ mother gives priority to her children’s needs, not her own. Accordingly, like many women in Australia, where, as noted in Chapter One, women’s increased participation in the workforce has generally taken the form that is most compatible with the ideal of the full-time wife and mother, many of them chose to work part-time, although they were well aware of the likely short- and long-term consequences for their careers.
and incomes. Evidently they perceived this as the only way of gaining some of the benefits and satisfactions of employment without transgressing their ideals of ‘good’ motherhood too seriously.

Another ‘solution’ for employed women with children, identified in a number of studies (Brannen & Moss 1991; Brown et al 1994; Lewis 1991; Marshall 1993; see also Urwin 1985), is in the notion of ‘quality time’. Many of the women in these studies sought to overcome their feelings of guilt, and compensate their children for the time they spent at work, by ensuring that the time they spent with them was ‘quality time’, involving one-to-one interactions such as playing with them and reading to them. Even then, many of the women in the Australian study by Brown et al (1994) expressed anxieties about whether they gave enough quality time to their children and whether it was of sufficient quality. In their British study, Brannen and Moss (1991) found that the strategies women used to reconcile their participation in the workforce with their beliefs about ‘good’ mothers usually involved learning to tolerate a certain amount of guilt, which, because it was derived from their positioning within discourses of ‘good’ motherhood rather than from evidence of problems, often manifested itself even when there was no indication that their children were actually suffering (cf. Griffith 1995). As Lewis (1991) remarked, the focus on ‘quality time’ with children recognises the possibility of satisfactory alternatives to full-time mothering, but it nevertheless retains full-time motherhood as the standard against which other forms are judged; moreover, it is as much a product of the discourses of popular developmental psychology as it is a result of the practical constraints of busy lives (Brannen & Moss 1991; see also Urwin 1985; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989).

Clearly there is considerable evidence to support Lewis’ (1991:206) claim that “women are seldom able to reject completely the notion of the ideal (non-employed) mother”, and that even women who articulate counter-hegemonic discourses are likely to experience some feelings of guilt and conflict over their inability to live up to the ideals of ‘good’ motherhood that have become embedded in common sense. Indeed, Snitow (1992:42) argued that the common-sense understanding that children’s needs and interests should properly take priority over those of their mothers is so well established that “guilt complicates feminist rage” against motherhood as a patriarchal institution (cf. Roberts 1995). That women can often be wary of expressing their anger about their oppression within that institution, in case it somehow hurts their children, is evidenced in the statement with which Nicholson (1983:83) concludes her personal account of the experience of motherhood: “I am now worrying about what they [her children] will say, or think, when they read this book.”

Tyler (1993a:39) made the important point that the criteria for ‘good’ motherhood are not constant; they vary in accordance with changes in the perceived ‘needs’ of children. Thus, the ‘good’ mother is “a contingent figure, produced through her relationship to authoritative knowledges of the ‘nature’ of children and her capacity to rear children possessing particular attributes…, rather than to any set of eternal truths.” Nonetheless, the research evidence
discussed in this section indicates that at least one theme has been a sufficiently consistent element of modern discourses of ‘good’ motherhood to become firmly embedded in contemporary common sense: the notion that the ‘good’ mother is one who willingly and ‘naturally’ sets aside her own needs, interests and desires for the sake of fulfilling those of her children. In other words, one of the major meaning-making resources available to readers of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction is the common-sense understanding that “motherhood subsumes a woman’s identity as an individuated self” and a full human being (Roberts 1995:107). Accordingly, together with a number of other key understandings about motherhood that follow from it, this commonsensical denial of women’s subjectivity outside their relationships with their children is a major resource to support the analysis of representations of motherhood in the research corpus. These other understandings are discussed in the remainder of this chapter, beginning with the idea that there is a ‘right’ time for women to become mothers.

**The ‘right’ time for motherhood**

As might be expected, given the widespread expectation that all women are, or should be, mothers, Harrison (1996) observed that most expectant mothers find themselves recipients of public approval. However, as illustrated in the above discussion of motherhood and subjectivity, they also become the objects of regulatory institutional and public discourses. Among other things, these discourses work to shape social expectations concerning the appropriate age for motherhood, such that women are liable to face public censure if they transgress social norms in this regard (Berryman 1991; Faludi 1992; French 1992; Harrison 1996; Phoenix & Woollett 1991; Woollett 1991). For example, Berryman’s (1991:114) study of women who had given birth after the age of forty found that most of them had been pleased to discover they were pregnant, but that “shock, horror and disgust were not uncommon reactions” among their families and friends.

Social norms regarding the ‘right’ time for motherhood are partly shaped by evidence of biological limits to a woman’s reproductive life (Berryman 1991), although the strength of that evidence has increasingly been challenged as new reproductive technologies become available (AIHW 1998). Regardless of biology, however, it is clear that patterns of child-bearing change across cultures and time in response to a variety of factors. Thus, the widely held belief that the medical risks, for both mother and child, of later child-bearing are such that some women are too old to bear children (Berryman 1991; Phoenix & Woollett 1991) is a relatively recent phenomenon that is already undergoing transformation, in line with changing social reality: as indicated in Chapter One, the current Australian trend is towards delaying motherhood, such that the average age of women having their first child reached a record high of 26.8 years in 1997. At the same time, however, it must be noted that 70 per cent of women who become mothers have their first child while they are still in their twenties, and only one in twelve delays child-bearing until after the age of 35 (AIHW 1999c,e; OSW & ABS 1997).
While women who bear children after the age of 50 are still likely to incur public disapproval, particularly if they do so with the assistance of IVF programs ("Age, gender and IVF" 1998; Eccleston 1998; McGarry 1998), it is women who bear children 'too young' who are currently most likely to be constructed as 'problems'. In particular, Harrison (1996) argued, pregnant teenagers are likely to face public censure, especially if they are unmarried, and they are typically targeted for 'expert' intervention, often with the aim of terminating the pregnancy (see also Phoenix & Woollett 1991). In the discourses of social welfare, politics, medicine and education, as well as in popular news media, teenage motherhood is commonly linked with social problems such as unemployment, poverty, dependence on social welfare, inadequate knowledge of child development and childcare, neglect and/or abuse of children, linguistically deficient home environments, low educational achievement for both women and their children, and even to the generational reproduction of teenage motherhood, such that the daughters of teenage mothers are often perceived to be particularly susceptible to teenage motherhood themselves (Benn 1998; Freebody 1995; Gunn, Forrest & Freebody 1995; Harrison 1996; Phoenix 1991; Phoenix & Woollett 1991).

Teenage mothers are typically highly conscious of these negative perceptions of them, and have a strong investment in defending themselves and avoiding what they perceive to be likely criticisms of them. Phoenix (1991) found that they frequently maintained a positive sense of self by disassociating themselves from other mothers in similar circumstances and constructing themselves as exceptional in some way (see also Harrison 1996). In other words, the teenage mothers in Phoenix's (1991) study often implicitly accepted the general 'truth' of normative discourses about the 'right' time for motherhood, and reproduced negative representations of (other) teenage mothers in their own talk. In the same way, they also took advantage of the contradictory nature of common sense, which allowed them to cull a variety of available discourses, in ways that were not always consistent, in order to suit their own particular purposes (Phoenix 1991).

As Phoenix (1991) pointed out, the evidence that teenage motherhood is detrimental to mothers and their children is not clear cut, and indicates that the negative characteristics that are popularly attributed to all teenage mothers actually apply only to a minority of them. She also observed that unmarried teenage mothers are often stereotyped in contradictory ways: they are commonly assumed to be irresponsible and to have become pregnant accidentally, but at the same time it is also popularly believed that teenage girls become pregnant deliberately in order to gain social welfare benefits (see also Benn 1998; Freebody 1995; Gunn et al 1995). Indeed, the prevalence of the latter belief has prompted a number of British and North American studies, none of which found any relationship between welfare policies, levels of benefits and the incidence of teenage motherhood (Phoenix 1991). Teenagers who have children do so for a variety of reasons, Phoenix (1991) proposed, just as older women do (see also Anwar 1999; Benn 1998; Harrison 1996). Public disapproval of teenage mothers, however, is due not only to
perceptions of teenagers as too immature and irresponsible to care properly for children, but also to prevailing social anxieties about female sexuality, an issue that is examined below.

**Motherhood and sexuality**

Discourses of motherhood that work to construct the ideal mother as one who lacks subjectivity outside of her relationship with her children have profound implications for common-sense understandings about motherhood and sexuality. The idealised mother who is devoid of any desires, interests and needs that are incompatible with those of her children implies one who also lacks sexuality, except in so far as it relates to motherhood. Moreover, the latter understanding is supported by psychoanalytic discourses that construct female desire in terms of ‘penis envy’ and/or the supposedly ‘natural’ inclinations of females to sacrifice self in nurturing others, and thus also link female sexuality necessarily to reproduction and motherhood.

The existence of female desire was widely accepted, if not always positively sanctioned, while women’s sexual pleasure was still assumed to be, like men’s, necessary to reproduction (Perry 1992). However, one aspect of the “quiet moral revolution” (Perry 1992:125) in the western world that saw middle-class domestic values rise to dominance was the redefinition of women, by the middle of the eighteenth century, as maternal, rather than sexual beings. The suppression of active and non-reproductive female sexuality and passion in favour of passive nurturance made women morally responsible for the reproduction of liberal democracy by constructing them, not as reasoners and knowers, but as nurturers of (middle-class) reasoners and knowers (Foucault 1978; Henriques et al 1984; Perry 1992; Thurer 1994; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989; cf. Bittman & Pixley 1997; Chodorow & Contratto 1982). Sexual desire came to be understood as an attribute of only men and ‘other’ women, typically lower-class white women and women of colour (Carrington 1990; Greer with Breckenridge 1992; Pettman 1992; Thurer 1994; see also Nussbaum 1993).

However, other, contradictory understandings of female sexuality have also retained considerable power and continued to shape western social attitudes, arguably because, like the paradoxical notion of the asexual woman/mother, they work to support patriarchy through the regulation of female sexuality. For example, as Cotes (1997) observed, beginning with the story of the disobedient Eve who led Adam into temptation, biblical representations of unbridled female sexuality as a dangerous threat that can lead even the strongest of men astray have long worked to justify such regulation, not only within religious institutions but also in the wider social world. The noteworthy exception to the generally negative representations of women throughout both Christian and Jewish scriptures is the Virgin Mary, who is idealised in opposition to the ‘other’ woman, exemplified by the whore, Mary Magdalene. Significantly, the biblical role model of the passive and asexual Madonna simultaneously exemplifies the modern western ideal of femininity promoted in the secular discourses outlined above (see also Faludi 1992; French 1992; Rich 1976; Thurer 1994).
The construction of women as ‘mothers’ with moral responsibility for the welfare of children not only tied them to the domestic sphere and justified ‘expert’ intervention in their everyday domestic lives (Bittman & Pixley 1997; Carrington 1991; Faludi 1992; French 1992; Roberts 1995; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989), it also enabled the strict regulation of female sexuality and reproduction essential to the survival of a patriarchal social order that depends, in part, on men being confident that their inheritors are actually their own children (French 1992; Lees 1986, 1993; Pateman 1988; Pettman 1992; Rich 1976; Rothman 1994; Thurer 1994). Accordingly, despite the considerable pressure on women, as discussed above, to fulfil their ‘natural’ destiny by becoming mothers, the achievement of motherhood still incurs, at best, only marginal social approval if it occurs outside marriage or a marriage-like heterosexual relationship (Benn 1998; Faludi 1992; French 1992; Marshall 1991; Pateman 1988; Phoenix & Woollett 1991; Rich 1976; Richards 1994; Roberts 1995; Thurer 1992; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a,b). Moreover, single mothers who depend on the state and/or welfare agencies for help in supporting their children have often found assistance limited or withheld when they have been known to be sexually active (French 1992). Similarly, court decisions in some child custody disputes have been shaped by discourses that construct the ‘good’ mother as one who abstains from all forms of sexual activity, although it seems that fathers are not required to forego their ‘natural’ need for sexual intercourse (French 1992; Lewin 1994; Rich 1976).

The development and availability of reliable contraceptives and the easing of controls on abortions have enhanced the possibilities for non-reproductive sexual activity outside marriage (although the risks of sexually transmitted diseases have increased), and sex education programs and materials for adolescents now typically assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that they will be sexually active before marriage; indeed, many, if not most, become sexually active while still teenagers (Anwar 1999; Bland 1983; Lumby 1997). Accordingly, sex education aims to reduce risk-taking behaviours and “assist young people … to make considered, informed and responsible decisions about relationships and sexuality” (Anwar 1999:19). The latter goal takes account of evidence that as many as one third of sexually active teenage girls report having been pressured into their first experience of sexual intercourse (Anwar 1999). It thus implicitly recognises that the ‘sexual revolution’ that began in the 1960s offered fewer benefits to women than men in the short term (Bland 1983; Henriques et al 1984; Saunders 1983; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989) and has been slower to deliver them to women in the long term. At the same time, it also lends some support to Harrison’s (1996:4) claim that adolescent female bodies continue to be targeted for strict regulation, even as they are also objects of male desire; during adolescence, “female desire is viewed as burgeoning and particularly malevolent (in need of constant disciplining).” The regulation of the adolescent female body, Harrison (1996) proposed, is crucial to the ongoing construction of female sexuality as inherently maternal in its expression, and the pregnant adolescent body remains a signifier for all the supposed dangers of unregulated female sexuality.
Moreover, discourses that construct maternal feeling as the antithesis of sexual desire still find expression in common-sense understandings that women do not need sex, or do not need it as much as men do, and that the overt expression of female sexual desire is ‘unnatural’ and ‘unfeminine’ unless it is linked with maternal feeling within a heterosexual marriage or marriage-like relationship (Contratto 1980; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Lees 1986, 1993; Perry 1992; Saunders 1983; Taylor 1989, 1993; Thurer 1994). Meanwhile, the belief that men ‘need’ sex (in the same way, for example, that they need food) still attracts sufficient support at the level of common sense to be offered, and often popularly accepted, as an excuse for sexual harassment, prostitution, pornography, rape and even incest (AEC 1992; Bland 1983; Breckenridge & Berreen 1992; Carmody 1992; Carrington 1990; Faludi 1992; French 1992; Herbert 1989; Jackson 1982; Jacobs 1990; Pettman 1992; Rich 1976; Thurer 1994). Linked to this idea of male sexuality is a persistent belief “that women are responsible for tempting men and by the way they dress or behave, leading them on into uncontrollable rape and violence” (Lees 1986:21; see also Carmody 1992; French 1992; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Herbert 1989; Laing 1992; Lees 1993; Pettman 1992; Rich 1976; Taylor 1989, 1993); thus, victims-of-crime compensation can still be denied to Australian women if they are deemed to have provoked the attack (Koch 1997; Monk 1997).

Thus, notwithstanding the social changes in the wake of the ‘sexual revolution’, social acceptance of women’s active sexuality outside a heterosexual marriage or marriage-like relationship remains ambiguous. Fashions in clothing, hair styles and make-up have ensured that, although western women have recently begun to turn the sexual gaze onto men, it is most often women who are the objects of the male sexual gaze, not vice versa (Bland 1983; Lumby 1997), and it is still women who are most at risk of being condemned for promiscuity (Bland 1983; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Herbert 1989; Lees 1986, 1993; Taylor 1989, 1993). Women and girls without male companions are still commonly perceived, and perceive themselves, to be vulnerable to sexual harassment or attack, and still find themselves having to construct their sexuality within the difference, identified by Lees (1986, 1993; see also Carmody 1992; Herbert 1989), between being a ‘drag’ (rejected by males as unattractive and unfeminine) and being a ‘slag’ (sexually available and ‘asking for it’). It is not surprising that, for many women, marriage, as the only apparent context within which female sexuality can legitimately and safely be expressed, still seems to offer the most viable long-term solution to the problems and contradictions that routinely emerge out of common-sense understandings of female sexuality (Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Lees 1986, 1993; Taylor 1989, 1993). At the same time, it may be partly because female sexuality continues to be regulated by and within the social institutions of marriage and motherhood that many women reject feminist ideas, perceiving them as threats to their relationships with their male partners and children, and thus also to the legitimate expression of their sexuality (Lees 1993).

While a steady heterosexual relationship may appear to offer safety, girls and women are far from safe from physical and/or sexual attack by their own boyfriends or partners, and most
recognise this (ABS 1997; Herbert 1989; Lees 1986, 1993; OSW & ABS 1997; Pateman 1988; Pettman 1992; Rich 1976). Indeed, the level of domestic violence in Australia defies the persistently common belief that the home is a safe haven from the dangerous outside world: statistically, women and children are in more danger of being harmed by the males in their private lives and homes than by male strangers in the public sphere (Bittman & Pixley 1997). Hence the perceived importance of choosing the ‘right man’, an essential criterion being ‘romantic love’ (Lees 1986). Taylor (1993) offered a convincing account of romantic love as a discourse that works to persuade women to enter willingly into dependent and submissive relationships with men, and ultimately with their children as well, and is therefore crucial to the reproduction of patriarchal gender relations (cf. Bittman & Pixley 1997; Pateman 1988). Yet despite the evident achievements of feminist movements, the discourse of romance continues to play a central role in the lives of adolescent Australian girls, through the popular culture within which they are immersed on a daily basis (Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Taylor 1989, 1993). It is a powerfully appealing discourse (Christian-Smith 1993; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Lees 1986; Walkerdine 1990), not least because the supposedly ‘selfless’ and ‘pure’ qualities of romantic love coincide with those of idealised maternal love, enabling the expression of female sexual desire to assume an enhanced legitimacy within the context of marriage or a marriage-like heterosexual relationship. Thus, paradoxically, “‘falling in love’ is … both a denial and an expression of sexuality” (Lees 1993:108; see also Bland 1983; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Lees 1986; Taylor 1989, 1993).

The set of somewhat contradictory discourses of female sexuality outlined in this section, together with those that construct motherhood as the ‘natural’ and desired destiny of all women, are articulated towards a common ideological end: the regulation of female sexuality within the patriarchal institutions of marriage and motherhood. Discourses that construct women as ‘naturally’ lacking in sexual desire, except in so far as it relates to their supposed primary role as mothers, work to pathologise the active expression of non-reproductive female sexual desire as ‘abnormal’ and thus in need of containment. In doing so, they are supported by discourses that construct unregulated female sexuality as rampant and dangerous to ‘good’ men, as well as others that construct women as vulnerable and in need of protection from men’s supposedly natural ‘need’ for sex. Within all of these discourses, the solution to the ‘problem’ of female sexuality becomes the regulation of sexuality within marriage, a social institution that serves the function of protecting men’s property rights and ensuring the reproduction of patriarchy, and within which, as noted above, having children is widely assumed to be both normal and desirable. Viewed in this context, the discourse of romance, which pervades contemporary popular culture and works to persuade girls and women that the ultimate fulfilment of their desires, and thus the solution to the problems and contradictions involved in being female in a patriarchal society, lies in marriage to the ‘right’ man, must be recognised as one that always implicitly incorporates discourses about female sexuality and motherhood (cf. Taylor 1989, 1993). What must also be recognised is that adolescence is a critical moment in this process of constructing female desire; hence, in this study, it is important not to overlook or underestimate
the significance of the discourse of romance to the work of adolescent fiction in (re)producing ideologies of motherhood.

**Motherhood and ‘other’ women**

It was argued earlier in this chapter that psychoanalytic discourses of motherhood have typically been based on universalised understandings that take the white middle-class woman/mother as the norm, and thus implicitly construct all ‘others’ in terms of deficit. It should also be clear from the summaries, so far, of the major ‘truths’ about motherhood that currently dominate other discursive fields that these ‘truths’ are highly compatible with psychoanalytic constructs of motherhood; indeed, they have often been significantly shaped by them. Accordingly, they, too, tend to be implicitly racist and classist in their assumptions. For example, like object-relations theories of motherhood, common-sense understandings of ‘motherhood’ and ‘fatherhood’ as qualitatively different forms of parenthood have their origins in the notion of a social world divided into separate, gendered ‘public’ and ‘private’ or ‘domestic’ spheres, with a consequent division of labour along gendered lines. As noted earlier, however, historically large numbers of women have been excluded from the ‘cult of domesticity’ entailed in this construction of the social world; thus, suggestions that the shift in the boundary between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres is a recent development render many poor, rural, Aboriginal and migrant women invisible, “by ignoring their frequently disproportionate responsibility for their own and their family’s upkeep [and for] relieving some white women of their own childrearing and domestic labour” (Pettman 1992:64-65; cf. Adams 1995; Davin 1978; Nicholson 1983; Nussbaum 1993; Pope *et al* 1990; Ross 1995; Thurer 1994). In turn, these ‘other’ women have often had to share responsibility for caring for their own children with other members of their families and communities, who have not always been women (Collins 1994; Glenn 1994; Pettman 1992; Roberts 1995; Segura 1994; Stack & Burton 1994; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989).

According to Roberts (1995), the privileging of the white middle-class norm of motherhood is also evident in the varying ways in which the prevailing belief in the supposedly ‘natural’ destiny and desire of all women to be mothers is played out in practice. Thus, as noted above, it has not always been perceived desirable for Aboriginal and other non-white women to become mothers. Furthermore, although it is usually assumed, both in adoption laws and in common sense, that ‘maternal instinct’ is such that the unwanted loss of a child is harmful to a mother, it is often expected that poor, unmarried and minority group mothers either have no such instinct or should express it in an entirely different kind of maternal selflessness to that expected of white middle-class mothers. Accordingly, these ‘other’ mothers are liable to both public and legal censure for their ‘selfishness’ if they refuse to give their children ‘a better life’ by allowing them to be adopted into white middle-class homes (Roberts 1995). In Australia, where disproportionately large numbers of Aboriginal children are still ‘taken into care’ by the state, the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their mothers, ‘in their best interests’, until well into the second half of the twentieth century was particularly brutal in its assumption that Aboriginal mothers lack the ‘maternal instinct’ that is constructed as ‘natural’ in white women (Carrington 1990, 1991; HREOC 1997; Pettman 1992).
However, a lack of ‘maternal instinct’ is not the only way in which ‘other’ mothers have been constructed as ‘deficient’ in relation to the norm of white middle-class motherhood. For example, black mothers in racist and colonial societies such as Australia have frequently been represented as dirty and unreliable (Pettman 1992), even though, as noted above, they have also often been employed as domestic servants, to look after the children and homes of white women. In child abuse and neglect cases, Carrington (1990, 1991) argued, the committal of children to state care frequently has less to do with the nature of the alleged offence than with the perceived character and competence of the child’s family, and specifically the mother within that family, who “is often the one singled out for particularly intense forms of censure and moralisation” because of what is perceived to be her greater responsibility for the rearing of children (Carrington 1990:6). Moreover, “because dysfunction is often defined in relation to what is regarded as the normal nuclear family, cultural differences in family form can be equated with dysfunction”, as can poverty and welfare dependence (Carrington 1991:115; see also Carrington 1990). Thus, families in areas where there are high proportions of state housing tenants and in Aboriginal communities are subjected to significantly higher levels of surveillance of and intervention in their lives by the state than are white middle-class families; it is these ‘other’ families that have “borne the brunt of punitive child protection policies directed at ‘incompetent parents’ and ‘bad mothers’ under the pretext of ‘saving children’ ” (Carrington 1991:118).

Similarly, Roberts (1995) argued that, in North America, race and class factors influence the decisions of criminal courts regarding appropriate sentences for mothers, such that poor, working-class and black mothers are more likely to be considered unfit to mother, and thus to be given custodial sentences, than white middle-class mothers; the latter, apparently, are judged to be more educable and redeemable.

A similar pattern of varying perceptions and judgements of mothers on the basis of race and class is evident in educational discourses (Freebody et al 1995; Griffith 1995; Tyler 1993b; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). For example, in a recent Australian study, Gunn et al (1995) found that, in middle-class schools, working mothers are perceived by teachers to be highly involved in their children’s education; their lack of time is not constructed as a disadvantage in terms of their children’s learning. In schools in low socioeconomic status areas, however, the necessity of paid employment for both parents is constructed by teachers as detrimental to their children’s school achievement; their lack of time is not constructed as a disadvantage in terms of their children’s learning. In schools in low socioeconomic status areas, however, the necessity of paid employment for both parents is constructed by teachers as detrimental to their children’s school achievement, because mothers are assumed not to have time to support their learning at home. On the other hand, if mothers in low socioeconomic status areas are not in paid employment, it is assumed that their children’s learning will suffer as a result of the family’s lack of financial resources, apparently regardless of the extra time that these mothers have available to them.

Because high unemployment, itinerant labour patterns, imprisonment and/or welfare regulations have tended to prevent Aboriginal men from living permanently with their families, Aboriginal women are more often the heads of single-parent households than other Australian women. As
such, Pettman (1992:65-66) argued, they are frequently represented in both racist and sexist terms as overly dominant ‘black matriarchs’ and berated for their very survival and capacity to cope. They can then be blamed for their children’s problems, for youth’s delinquency, for emasculating ‘their’ men, and for usurping male roles in the family… Aboriginal men are blamed for failing to be providers and heads of households, while … Aboriginal women are blamed precisely for being providers and heads of households.

In the discussion of motherhood and sexuality above, it was noted that, while white middle-class women are commonly assumed to be devoid of sexual desire, the contrary has been assumed in respect of poor and working-class women and women of colour. In colonial Australia, Indigenous women were represented as loose and wanton sexual predators and menaces to white men, in discourses that served to justify their massacre, abduction, rape and sexual exploitation as part of the ‘spoils of war’ (Greer with Breckenridge 1992; Pettman 1992). However, Pettman (1992) argued that racist and sexist representations of these women and their sexuality continue even now, such that they are still widely assumed to be immoral, highly sexed and ‘available’. The continued prevalence of popularised myths and fantasies about the sexuality of the black female body, together with fears “that nice white boys … might be tempted into the dens of black seductresses”, means that, even more than their non-Indigenous peers, adolescent Aboriginal girls are targeted by moralising discourses that seek to regulate their sexuality, making them effectively responsible for male sexual fantasies (Carrington 1990:8).

To summarise this discussion, it is evident that, whether they are explicitly articulated or embedded in common sense, the dominant contemporary understandings of motherhood outlined so far in this chapter are inflected with negative discourses of ‘otherness’, particularly in regard to race and class. Thus, the ‘normal’ mother is often commonsensically assumed to be white and middle-class, while ‘other’ mothers are understood in terms of negative difference from that norm in regard to, for example, their level of ‘maternal instinct’, their sexuality, their ability to support their children’s healthy development across a range of dimensions and, ultimately, the desirability of them becoming mothers at all. It follows that these ‘other’ mothers are even less capable of living up to the fantasy of the perfect mother, discussed below, and even more vulnerable to the mother-blaming that is the dark side of that fantasy.

*The fantasy of the perfect mother*

In their examination of 1970s feminist writings on mothering, Chodorow and Contratto (1982:55) identified a number of common themes, in particular, “a recurrent tendency to blame the mother on the one hand, and a fantasy of maternal perfectibility on the other.” They remarked on the striking consistency between these themes and those of dominant discourses about motherhood, such as those discussed above. The common factor, they argued, is an unquestioning acceptance of discursively constructed ‘truths’ about childhood, child development, the legitimacy of children’s ‘needs’, and the importance of those ‘needs’ always being met. As a result, both feminist writings on mothering and dominant discourses of motherhood are underpinned by an implicit belief in a fantasised mother who has all the
capacities required to meet those ‘needs’ at all times, but who can also incur the blame for both
the perceived failings and problems of her children and an extensive variety of social problems
that are their purported consequences (Chodorow & Contratto 1982).

In effect, what Chodorow and Contratto (1982) identified is the prevalence, in both feminist and
non-feminist discourses of motherhood, of the notion that mothers could be perfect, ‘if only...’. In
feminist writings, they observed, it is the social conditions of patriarchy that are targeted for
change, the implication being that “if only we could remove these patriarchal constraints,
mothering could be perfect”, for both those who mother and those who are mothered (Chodorow &
Contratto 1982:57; cf. Bassin et al 1994). In other, non-feminist discourses of motherhood, as
preceding sections of this chapter have illustrated, it is more typically women, as mothers or
potential mothers, who have been targeted for regulation, surveillance and ‘expert’ interventions
designed to perfect mothers and mothering practices, and thereby ensure the production of
Although the specifics of these regulatory discourses and interventions have varied over time,
the pattern has been remarkably consistent. Mothers and motherhood, these discourses imply,
could be perfected, if only women would heed the advice of childcare experts regarding, for
example, their children’s diets and/or sleeping patterns, toilet training, discipline, play equipment,
television viewing habits, reading materials and education; if only women would remain within
the domestic sphere where they ‘naturally’ belong, and devote themselves to their ‘proper’ life
roles; if only they would not have their children too early, or too late in life, or outside marriage; if
only, in some cases, they would not have children at all (Chodorow & Contratto 1982).

The fantasy of the perfect mother, Chodorow and Contratto (1982:63) argued, has its origins in
“unprocessed infantile fantasies about mothers”, which themselves derive, in part, from the
child’s experience of being mothered exclusively by one woman, who comes to be understood as

the source of all good and evil ... For the infant, the mother is not someone with her
own life, wants, needs, history, other social relationships, work. She is known only in
her capacity as mother. Growing up means learning that she, like other people in
one’s life, has and wants a life of her own, and that loving her means recognizing her
subjectivity and appreciating her separateness. But people have trouble doing this and
continue, condoned and supported by the ideology about mothers they subsequently
learn, to experience mothers solely as people who did or did not live up to their child’s
expectations ... Psyche and culture merge here and reflexively create one another

One does not have to accept the psychoanalytic theories that inform this explanation to
recognise the disciplinary power that the fantasy of the perfect mother exerts through regulatory
discourses of motherhood such as those discussed above. One of the ways in which that
fantasy is most commonly played out is through its shadow side, which has also been mentioned
at various points throughout this chapter: the widespread phenomenon of mother-blaming. “The
failure of lived experience to validate, or even correspond to [the idea of maternal perfection], far
from exploding it, often produces either intensified efforts to achieve it or a destructive cycle of
self- and/or mother-blame” (Pope et al 1990:442). Thus, always-imperfect human mothers are blamed – and also learn to blame themselves, as evidenced in the mothers’ accounts discussed in relation to motherhood and subjectivity – for the various individual and social problems that are perceived to result from their inevitable failures to live up to the fantasised possibility of maternal perfection (cf. Brannen & Moss 1991; Breckenridge & Berreen 1992; Brown et al 1994; Caplan 1989; Everingham 1994; Jackson 1994; Jacobs 1990; Lewis 1991; Miles 1994; Rich 1976; Roberts 1995; Thurer 1994; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989).

For example, Lewis (1991) argued that ‘working mothers’ have commonly been blamed for, among other things, children’s developmental problems, juvenile delinquency, marital breakdown, and the decline of the traditional nuclear family. Others, too (e.g., Adams 1995; Carrington 1990, 1991; Tyler 1993b), have commented on a tendency to identify mothers as the key pathogens in ‘dysfunctional’ families. Moreover, it seems that the fantasy of the perfect mother has fostered a widespread perception that, in cases where children are harmed, “no matter who actually harms the child, the mother has failed in her duty to create a safe environment for her young” (Martin, cited in Roberts 1995:106). Thus, Jacobs (1990:501) argued that “existing theories of sexual abuse and family pathology incorporate … a strong bias towards mother blame”; constructing mothers as somehow impaired, they accord them responsibility for the behaviours of fathers. Furthermore, she noted that mother-blame is also common among victims of incest and sexual abuse, who often express more strongly negative feelings towards their mothers than they do towards their fathers (the offenders). She suggested that victims’ anger towards their mothers is often related less to the role that the women actually played in the abuse than it is to idealised expectations of mothers and their abilities to prevent their children from being harmed. A similar tendency towards mother-blaming was observed by Breckenridge and Berreen (1992) among Australian health and welfare workers dealing with cases of incest and child sexual abuse, despite research evidence that challenged their assumptions that mothers are often covert conspirators in abuse. Breckenridge and Berreen (1992) argued that the state is an active participant in mother-blaming practices, through post-disclosure practices, such as the removal of children from ‘bad’ families, that are based on assumptions that mothers have failed to act sufficiently protectively when their children have been sexually abused.

Discussing cases of a similar nature in the United States, Roberts (1995) highlighted the ways in which the fantasy of the perfect mother can even lead to mothers being prosecuted for failing to protect their children from abuse by others, regardless of any factors that might have limited their ability to do so. She argued, for example, that while courts are beginning to acknowledge the constraints that keep battered women in violent homes, these constraints tend to be overlooked when both mother and children are battered. A woman’s ‘natural maternal instinct’ to protect her children is apparently expected to enable her to overcome all possible barriers to escape, as if becoming a mother is “a transcendent moment that can carry every woman outside the complexity of her particular history” (Tsing, cited in Roberts 1995:107). When this proves
not to be the case, women are targeted for blame in a way that is no more reasonable than the fantasy of perfection from which it derives.

Chodorow and Contratto (1982:64) suggested that the fantasy of the perfect mother “who would guarantee both morally perfect children and a morally desirable world” amounts to a pervasive ‘cultural ideology’. From the theoretical perspective outlined in Chapter Three, it can be understood in terms of a hegemony at the level of common sense, produced through the articulation of a variety of sometimes competing and conflicting discourses of motherhood towards a common goal, the achievement of an ideal social world. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the fantasy of the perfect mother must be recognised as a major resource for constructing meaning from representations of motherhood in contemporary adolescent fiction.

Concluding comments

A major purpose of this chapter has been to provide an overview of the ‘truths’ about motherhood that are most likely to be available for use by contemporary readers of Australian adolescent fiction as resources for making meaning from textual representations of motherhood. Given that, as explained in Chapter Three, the meaning-making resources most obviously available to readers are likely to be those that have become embedded as common sense, the primary focus in this chapter has been on contemporary common-sense ideologies of motherhood, or those aspects of them that are most relevant to the analytical task of this study. However, in drawing attention to the ways in which common sense has been constructed discursively, is often contradictory and is always subject to change, the discussion throughout this chapter has also drawn attention to the possibilities that, as argued in Chapter Three, are always available for the construction of counter-hegemonic understandings of motherhood. Such understandings challenge the idealised versions of motherhood constructed in dominant western discourses, and can thus be recognised as possible alternative meaning-making resources to those more obviously available in the form of common sense.

What has also been made clear in this chapter is that neither common-sense ideologies of motherhood nor the discourses that contribute to their (re)production necessarily correspond in any direct way with the variety of actual childcare and child-rearing practices in which individuals and families in contemporary western societies engage on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, it seems that people’s everyday experiences and practices routinely bring them into conflict with the idealised and normative expectations constructed in discourses of ‘good’ motherhood, and often demonstrate the fundamental impossibility of meeting those expectations. Moreover, according to Lumby (1997), the plethora of mass-media images that circulate throughout daily life in western societies offers increasing encouragement to women and girls in particular to explore a much wider range of subject positions than have previously been available to them, and to create new, alternative meaning-making possibilities by playing with and subverting those same discourses for their own purposes. It must be recognised that people are not simply the passive
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recipients of a hegemony of common-sense understandings about motherhood. However, this does not necessarily mean that they can locate themselves outside that hegemony; on the contrary, the research evidence presented in this chapter suggests that people are rarely able to do this. Instead, their daily lives can routinely require them to challenge that hegemony and the discourses of motherhood that support it, and to negotiate alternative subject positions for themselves. In other words, even though their behaviour is non-compliant, it can still be understood as a response to discourses that work to shape it. This is because normative expectations do not simply “perish when exposed to the cold light of contradictory evidence” (Bittman & Pixley 1997:14). Rather, they can display an extraordinary resilience (see also Marshall 1993; Richards 1994), particularly when they appear to promise the fulfilment of popular desires and fantasies, as in the case of the fantasy of the perfect mother, which exerts enormous power through its appeal to discursively and, according to Chodorow and Contratto (1982), psychically constructed desires to have and/or to be the perfect mother.

Thus, as a number of researchers have observed, common-sense ideologies of motherhood continue to have material effects on people’s lives, particularly on the lives of women. They impact significantly on both women’s beliefs about the sorts of mothers they are and should be and the judgements and expectations of others on these same issues (Bittman & Pixley 1997; Brannen & Moss 1991; Brown et al 1994; Marshall 1993; Pope et al 1990; Richards 1994; Roberts 1995; Woollett & Phoenix 1991a; cf. Benjamin 1990; Chodorow & Contratto 1982). Moreover, they work to justify and perpetuate a social order within which, notwithstanding the considerable achievements of feminist movements in recent times, as outlined in Chapter One, the rights of girls and women to access the full range of social goods, including “a person’s ability to define herself and to determine the course of her own destiny” (Roberts 1995:102), can still be limited or denied on the grounds of their identities as ‘mothers’ or potential ‘mothers’. At the same time, it should be clear that a social order in which the lives of women and girls are discursively regulated within the institutions of marriage and motherhood also impacts on the rights of men and boys, albeit in different ways.

As explained in Chapter Three, and as illustrated in this chapter, ongoing social struggles over competing ‘truths’ about motherhood are played out across multiple discursive and institutional sites. These sites include the field of children’s literature and, within that field, the adolescent fiction on which this study focuses. It will be recalled that a fundamental premise of this study is that competing and conflicting representations of motherhood in children’s literature, as in other textual forms, cannot simply be dismissed as innocent and non-partisan reflections of social struggles that are played out independently of those representations; they are themselves implicated in, and have the potential to influence, the patterns and outcomes of those struggles. Accordingly, the study examines whether and how representations of motherhood in the research corpus have served to feed or expose the fantasy of the perfect mother, and hence to reproduce or challenge the prevailing hegemony of common-sense understandings about motherhood. In order to show how this examination relates to and builds upon existing research
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in the field of children's literature, a review of the relevant findings of previous analyses of reading materials for children and adolescents is presented in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: MOTHERHOOD IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Introduction

So far, this study of representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction has been located within a number of broad overlapping areas: the current educational context, specifically in relation to the social justice ideals that inform Australia’s national curriculum documents; the wider Australian social context, with particular attention to the status of women in a climate of backlash politics; the politics surrounding the CBCA’s influential Book of the Year awards; the ongoing debates in the field of children’s literature over the nature and purposes of such literature; and finally, in Chapter Four, the context of contemporary discourses of motherhood. The purpose of this chapter is to complete the task of contextualising the study by reviewing the relevant findings from studies of children’s literature.

Specific attention has been given to the representation of mothers and motherhood in studies of a variety of other textual forms, such as folk tales and various genres of adult fiction (e.g., Barzilai 1990; Christian 1994; Dixon 1995; Jackson 1994; E.A. Kaplan 1992; Walters 1992), popular films (e.g., Jackson 1994; E.A. Kaplan 1992, 1994; Walters 1992; Wong 1994), art (e.g., Kristeva 1986a; Suleiman 1994), developmental psychology research literature (e.g., Phoenix & Woollett 1991; Woollett & Phoenix 1991b, 1996), feminist writing (e.g., Chodorow & Contratto 1982; Snitow 1992) and medical and childcare literature (e.g., Berryman 1991; Davin 1978; Kociumbas 1982; Luke 1993a, 1996a; Marshall 1991; Urwin 1985); and the findings of some of these studies have been discussed in Chapter Four. To date, however, there has been little research in the field of children’s literature that has focused specifically on issues related to motherhood, and none on the scale of the present study. Indeed, consistent with the taken-for-granted view that children are of most significance in children’s literature, an encyclopedic work on Australian children’s literature (Lees & Macintyre 1993) includes an entry on the topic of ‘girls’, but none that discuss the representation of adult females, whether they are mothers or not. Nevertheless, there have been numerous studies that, in exploring other interests in relation to children’s literature – sexism in school reading materials, for example – have reported findings in passing that are relevant to the research question examined here.

In view of this, and as an aid to the organisation of this chapter, the research literature is considered in two broad categories. The first includes reports on studies of children’s reading materials that, although not specifically concerned with motherhood, have nonetheless produced findings that are relevant to this study. Given that its focus is on Australian adolescent fiction within the Australian educational and social context, only research on Australian children’s literature is considered in this category. However, the findings of these studies have been
generally consistent with studies in the comparable fields of British and North American children’s literature.

Included in the second category of research literature reviewed below are reports of studies of children’s fiction that have been centrally concerned with issues of more immediate relevance to this study. For the reasons given above, this second category mainly comprises reports on studies of Australian fiction for children and adolescents, but it also includes some relevant analyses of children’s fiction published elsewhere. Throughout the chapter, the value of both the findings and the analytical approaches of the studies reviewed in both categories of research literature are discussed in terms of their implications for this study, with the final section serving as a summary of these discussions.

**Motherhood in children’s literature: Findings in passing**

In the context of contemporary human rights struggles and of increased recognition, particularly among educators, of the need to address gender equity and other social justice issues as they relate to children’s literature, a number of studies have considered the extent of sexism and sex-role stereotyping in reading materials produced for Australian children and adolescents. While they have not set out explicitly to examine representations of motherhood, such studies have often addressed issues of relevance to the present study in the course of pursuing more general concerns with documenting and/or theorising the representation of girls and women in children’s literature. As an aid to organising the review of this first category of research literature, it has been sub-divided further according to the kind of children’s literature on which it has focused. Considered separately here, then, are analyses of school reading materials, studies of general children’s fiction, including CBCA award-winning and short-listed books, and critiques of romance series fiction for adolescents.

**Motherhood in Australian school reading materials**

Reading materials produced for Australian school children in the early twentieth century were often overtly concerned with ensuring their readers’ adoption of contemporary social ideals and values. For example, Kociumbas (1986) found that the *Commonwealth School Paper*, which appeared in 1904, together with the readers used in government and Catholic school systems, commonly valorised female submission and obedience, self-sacrificing motherhood, and the value of homemaking. While Queen Victoria was esteemed as a role model for Protestant girls, the Virgin Mary was offered as an example for Catholic girls; “epitomizing the tensions inherent in the sexual role expected of girls, she symbolized glorious motherhood and chastity as well” (Kociumbas 1986:34).

More recently, in an educational context that has avoided such overt didacticism, the content of materials produced and used for the purposes of teaching young children to read has commonly been assumed to be of little or no significance. However, as Baker and Freebody (1989) argued, the content of early school readers often becomes the basis for other classroom
learning activities, and thus warrants closer attention. Such attention seems particularly important when it is considered that basal readers, like many other books for young children, are likely to be read over and over again; it is not only their intended literacy lessons that are reinforced in this way, but also their more covert, and not necessarily intended, lessons about how the social world is and should be organised (Burbules 1986; Tunstall 1992).

In 1974, a content analysis of a corpus of Australian school reading materials led Healy and Ryan (cited in Tunstall 1992:13) to conclude that these texts presented a one sided norm of the adult female as housebound mother/wife. This constitutes a denial of the social reality and acceptability of the working woman and (very importantly) working mother and implies a value judgement about who should work, what sort of work they should do and the overall ‘maleness’ of the world of work.

Following a 1975 Commonwealth Schools Commission report, *Girls, School and Society*, that addressed the problem of gender inequities in school education, and a subsequent report, *Girls and Tomorrow: The Challenge for Schools*, that criticised the gender bias in school reading materials, there was a greater public emphasis on promoting gender equity in Australian schools (Anderson & Yip 1987). However, in a comparison between the 1966 and 1980 editions of a widely used Australian reading scheme, Anderson and Yip (1987) concluded that the impact of gender equity concerns on the more recent set of readers had been minimal, with gender stereotyping still strongly evident. More specifically, they observed that, in the later readers, none of the mothers were employed outside the home, and that the texts always portrayed women as highly involved in home duties, with exclusive responsibility for domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and shopping, and primary responsibility for the care of children. Unlike some of the male characters, the women were not given individual names, but were identified in terms of their age or their relationship to other characters. It was noted, however, that illustrations of mothers in the later readers were less stereotyped than those in the earlier edition. Thus, the apron that earlier studies of picture books had observed to be standard apparel for mothers had been removed, and mothers were occasionally shown outside the kitchen, if not outside the domestic sphere.

Consistent with earlier research findings, an analysis of 163 basal and supplementary readers used in Australian primary schools (Baker & Freebody 1989) found that boy characters outnumbered girl characters by a ratio of about three to two. Parents, however, were in some respects treated similarly, regardless of their sex: mothers were found to be about as well represented as fathers; most parents, whether male or female, were given no proper names; and parents of both sexes were referred to and addressed in terms of their identities as parents. However, the study found evidence of stereotyping in the activities and behaviours of parents in the corpus, with some activities represented as apparently unique to mothers or to fathers. For example, only fathers were depicted fixing things, driving a car, watering the garden or shouting, while only mothers were shown baking cakes, picking flowers, or dressing, hugging or kissing children. Of particular interest is the finding that neither mothers nor fathers were represented in these readers as participants in activities unrelated to their children. It could be inferred from
this, Baker and Freebody (1989:57) argued, that “caretaking chores ... are all a child would notice or need to know about adult life.” In demonstrating how beginning school readers, like most children’s fiction, work to construct a social world that is divided according to generation as well as gender, and to create the illusion of a world in which there are no other perspectives except those of children, Baker and Freebody (1989) raised an issue of interest to this study: whether it is possible, within the apparently child-centred world constructed in children’s literature, for parents to be represented as having identities that are independent of their relationships with their children. As suggested in Kertzer’s (1993-94, 1996) work, reviewed later in this chapter, this may be particularly problematic in the case of mothers, given the discursive constraints on the identities available to mothers even outside the child-centred fictive world of children’s books.

According to Gilbert and Rowe (1989), the restricted representations of males and females evident in early school readers are also typical of the literature-based reading programs commonly used in Australian primary schools. Such programs, which incorporate fictional narratives that have not been written specifically for classroom use, have gained popularity following the development of ‘whole language’ approaches to language and literacy education. While Gilbert and Rowe (1989) observed a trend towards more blurred gender roles in children’s fiction, they showed that gender stereotyping was still evident in both the visual images and the written texts of most of the reading materials readily available to Australian school children (see also Davies 1989; Gilbert 1995).

A number of other studies have focused on the broader range of reading materials published for Australian children and adolescents to read outside educational settings. Many of these, like those reviewed above, have been concerned with determining the extent of sexism and sex-role stereotyping in such literature, while others have set out to document historical changes in the kinds of literature produced for young Australians. These concerns have generated, in passing, a number of findings of interest to this study, as discussed in the following section.

**Sexism and sex-role stereotyping in Australian children’s fiction**

In an historical study, Kociumbas (1986) found that Australian children’s books of the nineteenth century, such as the very popular Cole’s *Funny Picture Book*, first published in 1879, illustrate the differences in contemporary social attitudes to boys and girls. At the same time, they reflect popular acceptance of the concept of the asexual child, and more specifically the asexual girl child. These reading materials emphasised to female readers their roles as little mothers to their brothers and fathers, and their necessarily sexual roles as the future mothers of sons, even as they also promoted a concept of child-like, naive and asexual femininity. An emphasis on the latter concept was still characteristic of Australian children’s books of the 1950s, according to Lees and Senyard (1985). They noted that the adolescent boy characters in these later novels are portrayed as escaping domesticity and the control of their mothers to lead lives of action and excitement; their female counterparts remain in the domestic sphere and enter an extended.
period of adolescence, during which they are initiated into their future roles as wives and mothers.

Nineteenth-century Australian children’s literature offered lessons to children, both as children and as future parents, and also to mothers as they read to those children. According to Kociumbas (1986), the first Australian children’s book, Charlotte Barton’s A Mother’s Offering to Her Children, published in 1841, exemplifies the emphasis in such literature on the harshness of the Australian environment and the vulnerability of children whose mothers fail to give them full-time protection and care. Heavily didactic, it stresses the inadequacies of Aboriginal mothers and the carelessness of working-class mothers, and thus promotes the ideal of the white middle-class mother, tying her securely to the home and holding her accountable for the welfare of her children. Later in the century, the fiction considered most appropriate for girls included school stories and tales of romance, marriage and motherhood (Kociumbas 1986). Again, such fiction evidently provided readers with lessons in socially acceptable adult femininity to guide them through their future lives.

While the literature produced for Australian adults in the period around the turn of the century tended to promote what were perceived to be desirable national characteristics of hardy independence and rugged resourcefulness, Kociumbas (1986) argued that the children’s literature of the same period reveals that these characteristics were understood to have little relevance for girls. Observing that the spirited and courageous girl characters in the Australian family stories of this period had no equivalents in contemporary British children’s literature, White (1990) suggested that the distinctly feminine bias in these narratives can be read as a challenge to the masculine bias of the Australian national culture of the period; however, she conceded that “one of the ironies of the Australian girl in literature was that the special childhood freedoms deemed the privilege of all Australian children, served later to emphasise the restrictions of womanhood” (White 1990:138). The character of Judy in Ethel Turner’s Seven Little Australians, a novel still popular with contemporary readers, displays courage, initiative and defiance, but these qualities arguably lead her to her death, while the novel’s sub-plot, which revolves around Judy’s older sister Meg, valorises a contrasting, compliant and domesticated version of femininity. Norah, the central character in Mary Grant Bruce’s perennially popular Billabong series, shares some of Judy’s physical confidence, self-reliance and adventurous attitude to life. However, the novels also emphasise her domestic capabilities and her deference to male authority, as represented by not only her father, but also her older brother, in whose adventures she plays only a subsidiary, nurturing role (Kociumbas 1986; Lees 1991; Lees & Macintyre 1993). For Kociumbas (1986), Norah’s unconventionally active life is attributable to her upbringing on a pastoral property, but Judy’s non-conformist version of femininity cannot be explained in this way. What the characters of Judy and Norah do have in common is that their mothers are dead; however, Kociumbas (1986) did not explore the possible link between their representation as motherless and their representation as unconventionally feminine.
The possibility of such a link is supported by Reeder’s (1981) comments regarding the six motherless child characters in the corpus of children’s fiction that won CBCA awards during the period from 1950 to 1980. According to Reeder (1981), the four motherless girls are the most self-assured, active and adventurous of all the girl characters in the corpus, although all but one of them adopts a more conventional form of femininity by the close of the novel. Reeder (1981) observed that the two motherless boy characters, by contrast, are initially introverted, with this apparently being a ‘problem’, but develop more conventionally masculine, and implicitly less problematic, characteristics as the narratives progress. Reeder (1981) documented these features without analysing them, but her findings suggest that in at least some of the narratives concerned, closure may be marked by the child protagonist’s successful achievement of his or her ‘correct’ gender characteristics. In the case of girls, this means a form of femininity that emphasises the relational qualities conventionally linked with their future roles as mothers; for boys, it means moving beyond their relationships with their mothers to independence in the world outside the domestic sphere.

Thus, Reeder’s (1981) findings also point to a need for further research into the significance for the child protagonists in children’s fiction of having, or not having, a mother, and whether this significance is constructed differently for boys and girls. For example, on the basis of her findings, together with the representations of Norah and Judy discussed above, it can be inferred that not having a mother enables girls, or at least girl characters in fiction, to become more confident, active, independent and adventurous than they would otherwise be, but that these characteristics are constructed as problematic in terms of their future roles as women. On the other hand, it may be that motherlessness is constructed as an advantage for some boy protagonists, who would otherwise be held back from developing those same characteristics, understood as necessary for their future roles as men. Niall’s (1984:264) observation that, in Australian children’s fiction published before 1980, “mothers usually fail their children only by absence or death” implies a more positive representation of what it means to have a mother; however, it also indicates that the narratives in her corpus work to idealise mothers and motherhood.

Regardless of whether it is physical, emotional, or even intellectual, in children’s fiction the absence of his or her mother commonly means that a child protagonist, usually female, assumes a maternal role and responsibilities. Typically in such cases, the resolution of family problems involves the reconstitution of the family along the lines of the nuclear family, albeit often with the daughter in the role of surrogate mother (Scutter 1996, 1999). Lees and Macintyre (1993) remarked on the enduring popularity of the motif of the surrogate mother, citing a number of examples of central girl characters who nurture their younger siblings and struggle to keep their families together after their mothers have died. Alternatively, it may be her mother’s illness that leads a daughter to assume the roles of housekeeper and surrogate mother, as in Mavis Thorpe Clark’s novel, *The Min-Min*, which was the CBCA’s *Book of the Year* in 1967 and typifies the emphasis in such novels on the girl protagonist’s determination,
maturity, and strength of character (Lees & Macintyre 1993; Niall 1984). For Niall (1984), whose study was primarily concerned with what Australian children’s literature can reveal about Australian social history, such narratives and their representations of girl characters reflect the realities of a social world that had not yet been significantly influenced by feminism. However, these narratives do more than act as a mirror to society; as emphasised in Chapter Three, representations always impact upon the lives of the groups of people they represent, and so the representation of gender roles in children’s fiction can contribute significantly to the legitimation or transformation of the prevailing gender order in society. In this case, these narratives evidently work to reinforce traditional notions of maternal femininity, and to naturalise the gendered division of domestic labour.

Over the 30-year period on which her study focused, Reeder (1981) found that CBCA award-winning books consistently represented women with children in stereotypical ways. In most examples in this corpus, it is female family members who take primary responsibility for household chores and childcare; and while some adult female characters are employed in traditionally ‘feminine’ occupations such as teaching, nursing or secretarial work, most do not have paid work outside the home. Similarly, Hazell (1989) reported that most of the fictional mother characters in a corpus of 220 Australian novels for adolescents, published between 1947 and 1986, are represented as excellent cooks and housekeepers. These findings are consistent with those of Niall (1984), who studied Australian children’s fiction of the period 1950-1980; those of Lees and Senyard (1985), who focused on the representation of gender and class in Australian children’s fiction of the 1950s; and also those of Welch (1994) on the representation of parents in Australian adolescent fiction of the 1960s and 1970s (see also Lees 1991). The latter studies all observed an emphasis on middle-class family values and the role of the gentle, loving mother in maintaining the emotional unity of the family. Niall (1984:264) commented that, in her corpus, the family stories, which primarily focus on female relationships, are “usually dominated by daughters and written for girls”, a finding that indicates that such fiction works to support common-sense understandings about women’s ‘naturally’ superior relational capacities.

According to Niall (1984) the later novels in her corpus often feature a troubled and alienated adolescent, usually male, and thus work to support assumptions that rebellion and alienation are typically masculine characteristics. Moreover, her analysis indicated that whereas the few rebellious female characters are in conflict with their families, or with family members, and the final reconciliation takes place within the family, rebellious male characters are likely to be in conflict with society in general, and sometimes remain alienated at the close of the narrative. Consistent with the valorisation of ‘feminine’ relational capacities discussed above, Hazell (1989) found that in areas of conflict, especially between father and son, it is commonly the mother characters who take peace-making roles (see also Welch 1994).

In adolescent fiction published before 1980, most mothers in two-parent families were found by Hazell (1989) to be represented as weak, ineffectual, and almost totally subservient to their
husbands and other male family members. Even among those who are alternatively represented as sensible, hard-working centres of strength in their families, she observed many who encourage their husbands’ beliefs in themselves as the authorities in their homes. However, Hazell (1989) claimed that there is evidence of change in the 1980s novels: her analysis found that they represent mothers in two-parent families as more assertive, self-confident and independent than their earlier counterparts.

In the adventure books in Reeder’s (1981) corpus, the children’s mothers are often supportive; for example, they may pack picnic lunches and provide their children with a comfortable home base from which to pursue their active lives. Alternatively, they are restrictive, and attempt to curb their children’s activities. Again Reeder’s (1981) findings indicate ambivalence towards women as mothers, such that they may be represented as enabling or disabling agents in their children’s lives, or perhaps as both. Ambivalence also seems to be evident in the ways in which single women without children are represented in Reeder’s (1981) corpus, and also in Hazell’s (1989). These representations add support to a claim by Wignell (cited in Reeder 1981) that single women without children are usually depicted in children’s books in one of two ways: either as mean, fussy, lacking in understanding of children, and liable to spoil their fun, or as eccentrics whose lively company children value positively. The former characterisation both draws on and works to reinforce the pronatalist discourses discussed in Chapter Four, that construct women without children as selfish and incapable of developing and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships; but it can also be inferred from such representations that these fictional women would not be so unpleasant had they experienced the joy and fulfilment that purportedly accompany motherhood. On the other hand, the representation of childless women as fun-loving and eccentric betrays some recognition of the burden of sheer hard work that commonly accompanies motherhood and may leave mothers with little time or energy to have fun with their children. Reeder (1981) commented that the characterisations of single women without children in her corpus seemed to be more related to conventional understandings of women’s ‘proper’ social roles than to the social reality of the period in which the books were published. According to Hazell (1989:75), the representation of three ‘eccentric spinsters’ in her corpus as strong-minded scientists with little interest in their appearances suggests that “in giving these women the power which is usually the prerogative of men, … authors have found it necessary to make them resemble men physically.” These findings are thus consistent with an earlier finding that in Australian children’s picture books: “old ladies who are sexually neutral often give a writer an opportunity to portray a woman with social power” (Bradley & Mortimer, cited in Anderson & Yip 1987:159).

While Hazell (1989) found that the single women with children in the earlier novels she analysed are usually widows, she observed that, in the later novels, they are more likely to be separated or divorced, a change that is consistent with recent social changes (cf. MacDonald 1995; Tunstall 1992). Throughout her corpus, she found that women who are represented as raising children alone are generally better models of strength and self-sufficiency than those in two-
parent families, and that in Australian adolescent novels of the 1980s, single women with children are progressively represented as more confident and self-sufficient. The significant exceptions, she observed, are the single mothers of adolescent boy characters, who are represented as restrictive and over-protective of their sons (Hazell 1989), a finding that warrants further investigation, particularly in the light of Reeder's (1981) comment, discussed earlier, regarding the motherless boy characters in her corpus. On the basis of both Reeder's (1981) and Hazell's (1989) brief comments, it seems that representations of over-protective mothers of sons draw on and also work to reinforce notions derived from mainstream psychoanalytic theory and now embedded as common sense, of the omnipotent, life-threatening mother from whom boys must escape lest their psychosexual development into ‘proper’ men is impeded.

Tyquin's (1992) study of the ways in which gender is portrayed in the books short-listed in all three categories of the CBCA's 1992 Book of the Year awards includes an analysis of six of the books with which this study is concerned, namely those that were short-listed in the Older Readers category. However, Tyquin (1992) confined herself to examining only short extracts from these longer novels, although she analysed the complete texts and illustrations of the six picture books and two of the books in the Younger Readers category. Moreover, she concerned herself only with ‘female characters’ and ‘male characters’, and thus did not pay particular attention to the relationships between them, or to representations of characters identified as mothers. She found that while most of the central girl and boy characters in her corpus are characterised in ways that challenge gender stereotypes, minor characters of both sexes are often represented in stereotypical ways. For example, minor female characters, at least some of whom are the protagonists’ mothers, are often shown in domestic situations and/or caring for young children, and tend to play only minor and passive roles in the development of the plot.

Many of the studies reviewed in this section (e.g., Kociumbas 1986; Lees & Senyard 1985; Niall 1984) have taken an historical perspective, focusing on the children’s literature of particular periods in order to document changes over time; and for some researchers (e.g., Hazell 1989; Reeder 1981), a major concern has been to determine whether or not the representations of girls and women in Australian books for children reflect the social realities of the period in which they were published. However, these studies appear to have given little consideration to the ways in which children’s literature can work to shape social reality, for example, by constraining the range of possible worlds and possible ways of being a person that can be envisaged by readers. Davies (1989:45) proposed that critiques of children’s fiction must attend to “the metaphors, the forms of relationship, the patterns of power and desire that are created in the text”; simply to document content is insufficient. As argued in Chapter Three, it is necessary to consider how the linguistic and narrative features of fictional texts for children work discursively to achieve particular ideological effects.

Also common to a number of these studies, as well as to many of those reviewed in the previous section, has been a concern about the extent of sexism and sex-role stereotyping in Australian
children's reading materials, a concern that is evidently well founded. However, as argued in Chapter Three, encounters with fictional narratives require readers to draw on a range of meaning-making resources, including their common-sense understandings of the world and a variety of possibly competing and contradictory discourses; and these encounters may involve them in considerable struggle as they attempt to take up and/or resist the various subject positions made available to them as they read. Thus, as Davies’ (1989) research on young children’s interpretations of ‘feminist’ fairy tales has demonstrated, engagements with such texts are not enough, on their own, to overcome children’s existing ideas about what constitutes ‘proper’ behaviour in males and females. It follows that, on its own, an increase in the percentage of fictional women characters who have children and are also, for example, employed in occupational fields conventionally dominated by men, is unlikely to have a significant impact in countering the prevailing hegemony of common-sense understandings about motherhood and what it means to be a mother. Moreover, in the light of the research findings discussed in Chapter Four, it should be clear that the restricted representations of mothers documented in the studies reviewed above can most usefully be understood as the products of historically and culturally specific discourses that work to reinforce and legitimize a fundamentally patriarchal social order in the face of ongoing feminist challenges. Again, in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of these representations and their implications for contemporary social justice struggles, what is needed is an analytical approach that pays attention to the various linguistic and narrative strategies utilised in fictional texts, and to the intertexts they invoke, such that some meanings are rendered more ‘obvious’ to readers than others.

Another significant concern guiding many of the studies of Australian children’s literature reviewed above relates to a perceived lack of ‘positive’ female role models in children’s fiction, both for the girl protagonists in the narratives themselves and for readers. As Bauer (1993) suggested, such concerns can be limiting if they result in studies that consider representations of women and girls in children’s fiction only in terms of their impact on female readers, rather than considering their implications for a wider readership (cf. Gilbert 1995). While the fictional role models available to girls, whether ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, may well work to shape their perceptions of the possibilities available to them in their own lives, so too do a variety of other discursive factors, including the expectations that others have of them, based on their own understandings of the social world and how it ought to be organised. Similarly, it is important to recognise that the understandings about motherhood that readers of either sex develop, in part through their engagements with fictional narratives, have potential effects not only in terms of their own lives and the possibilities they envisage for themselves, but also in terms of their expectations of and for their own mothers. A 1973 study of a corpus of picture books recommended for inclusion in Australian school libraries (Bradley & Mortimer, cited in Tunstall 1992:14) evidently recognised at least some of the complexities of this problem: it concluded that “small children will not, through these books, learn to accept their mother’s desire for some fulfilment outside their home as legitimate.”
According to Lees and Senyard (1985; see also Lees & Macintyre 1993), the search for ‘true romance’, leading to the fulfilment of having their own homes and families, is the main preoccupation of teenage girl characters in Australian children’s fiction of the 1950s. Similarly, while Reeder (1981:15) observed that, in her corpus, the leisure activities of the girl characters are not strongly stereotyped, she also found that their career ambitions are limited: “in most cases a job is seen only as an apprenticeship course with the ultimate goal being marriage and motherhood.” The desirability of this future is not questioned. According to Lees and Senyard (1985), the texts in their corpus represent marriage as a marker of the successful achievement of acceptable femininity. However, they also argued that these narratives represent the increased self-esteem and sense of fulfilment to be gained from caring for their families, not just their husbands, as women’s compensation for their loss of independence through marriage. It seems, then, that what might be a more accurate marker of the successful achievement of adult femininity in these narratives is the entry into motherhood.

While a focus on developing relationships with boys has been characteristic of Australian fiction featuring adolescent girl characters throughout this century, according to Hazell (1989), series romance novels have had a significant impact on the adolescent market, both in Australia and internationally, in recent years (Christian-Smith 1993; Ebert 1988; Gilbert 1988, 1990, 1993; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Pearce 1991; Taylor 1989, 1993). Consequently, they have also been targeted for particular attention in a number of studies conducted from a feminist perspective. In so far as they are relevant to the research question examined in this study, the findings of some recent studies of romance series fiction are discussed in the following section. Also included for discussion below is a report on a study of some Australian adolescent novels that might be offered to teenage readers as alternatives to series romances (Pearce 1991).

**Motherhood in romance series fiction**

Because series romance novels often combine formulaic plots with minimal character development and predictable ‘fairy tale’ endings, studies of this genre have not only analysed the texts themselves, but have also sought to account for their popularity. Additionally, they have considered the role of series romance fiction in constructing gendered reading practices, and in affirming and reproducing passive, dependent, selfless and domesticated forms of femininity. In doing so they have stressed the need to recognise the ways in which romance series novels work intertextually with the full range of meaning-making resources that readers encounter in their everyday lives. Most of these intertexts work to construct a social world that is clearly divided into male and female (Davies 1989, 1993), a world in which it seems ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ that “books are channelled to or from children according to their gender” (Cooper 1993:9) and that girl readers should progress from fairy tales to romance fiction. That progression comes to seem all the more inevitable because romance is a central theme in the lives of teenage girls, both in the popular cultural texts – magazines, soap operas, films, advertisements, and so on – that are an everyday feature of their lives (Gilbert 1989; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Taylor 1989, 1993). Thus, the popularity of series romances among teenage girl
readers is often perceived commonsensically, as a logical extension of girls’ ‘natural’ interests in romance and the opposite sex, rather than as the effect of the discursive construction of female desire in such a way as to link the achievement of acceptable womanhood with “the finding of the prince (the knight in shining armour, ‘Mr Right’)” (Walkerdine 1984b:163; see also Ebert 1988; Gilbert 1988, 1989, 1990; Gilbert & Taylor 1991). Although it is possible for boys and men to read and enjoy romance fiction, and no doubt some series romance readers are male, Ebert (1988) argued that because male identification with female subjectivity is inhibited by gendered discourses that stigmatise the not-male, romance readers are almost always female.

While it has been limited in scope, some attention has been given in recent research to examining how motherhood is represented in the romance series fiction produced for Australian teenage readers. For example, when Gilbert and Taylor (1991) analysed the first 18 titles of Dolly Fiction, an Australian teen romance series that first appeared in 1988, they commented that the mother characters in these novels are generally supportive of their daughters’ moves towards romance and a romantic version of femininity. For example, they read fashion magazines, and encourage their daughters to look ‘desirable’ and ‘feminine’; they are caring and loving; and they are experts on the topics of romance and broken hearts. In other respects, the analyses by Gilbert and Taylor (1991) indicate that the representations of most of these women are consistent with those that have been found typical in both Australian school reading materials and the fiction produced for more general consumption by Australian children and adolescents. That is, the mothers in this corpus of early Dolly Fiction novels do not usually work outside the home, and if they do, it is generally in traditionally ‘feminine’ occupations, such as nursing and welfare work. Moreover, they are most commonly depicted in the kitchen, preparing food for their families. One exception noted by Gilbert and Taylor (1991) is a woman who is a student, and is resented by her daughter for having too little time for her, but as they offered no further analysis of this case, it is not possible to determine how the narrative strategies in the novel work to align readers’ sympathies in relation to these two characters. As indicated in Chapter Three, the focalisation strategies employed in narratives can have significant effects on the meanings that readers construct; in this case, an analysis of focalisation would be important in determining whether the narrative’s unconventional representation of the girl’s mother as a student works to affirm or challenge the common-sense ideology of motherhood that is evidently supported in the remainder of the early Dolly Fiction novels.

In a subsequent study, Gilbert (1993) examined 12 novels in the Dolly Fiction series that were published in 1990, and found the representations of women and their daughters in this later corpus to be more consistent with contemporary social reality. For example, she noted, most of the mother characters in the later novels are employed outside the home, albeit in traditionally ‘feminine’ occupations; also, conventional nuclear families appear less often in the later corpus, and not all of the women are represented as partners in stable marriages. Some of the ways in which mothers are represented, Gilbert (1993) argued, work to construct a range of positive possibilities for women, but she also noted that generally these involve the development of a
new romance. Thus, in relation to these women as well as their daughters, the most common form of narrative closure in the corpus is the achievement of a stable heterosexual relationship with the ‘right’ man (cf. Ebert 1988).

In the light of contemporary concerns about both the literary qualities of series romance novels and the version of femininity that they commonly promote, Pearce (1991) examined a corpus of 20 contemporary Australian adolescent novels that teachers and librarians might offer to teenage girls as alternatives to series romances. She argued that although relationships with boys are still significant themes in these novels, and most end with the female protagonist involved in a romantic heterosexual relationship, they are generally less formulaic, more relevant to Australian social life, more concerned with social issues, and less predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon and middle-class in their values than typical series romance novels.

According to Pearce (1991:12), the younger adolescent girl characters in these ‘alternative romances’ are likely to be “extroverted, loud, brave, rebellious and assertive – natural leaders in fact.” However, she noted that as both the targeted readers and the female protagonists mature, these characteristics tend to be modified by domestic concerns, the adoption of nurturing roles, and a sense of family responsibility. This finding recalls that of Reeder (1981), discussed in the previous section, regarding the motherless girls in her corpus, who eventually adopt more conventional forms of femininity than they initially display. It also suggests a possible link with Tyquin’s (1992) observation that minor female characters in her corpus – many of them presumably the protagonists’ mothers or other older women – are represented as more conventionally feminine than the central girl characters. Collectively, these findings suggest that, while fictional narratives for children and adolescents may work to promote less conventional forms of femininity for young girls by representing pre- and early adolescent girl characters as physically active, confident, independent, intelligent and assertive, they also work to construct such versions of femininity as increasingly inappropriate as girls grow older. Older adolescent girls and young women, these texts imply, should be developing a more conventionally feminine subjectivity, in preparation for their future roles as wives and mothers.

Unlike most series romance fiction, the novels in Pearce’s (1991) corpus generally represent the central girl characters as intelligent and successful at school; but, as in series romances, Pearce (1991) observed that their developing relationships with boys are of more concern to the girl protagonists than their future careers. Furthermore, many of the mother characters in her corpus are depicted in stereotypical ways; few of them work outside the home; and none are successful career women. Two significant exceptions to this general pattern were noted, however, one of them being the mother of the main character in Mary K. Pershall’s novel, You Take the High Road, which was short-listed for the CBCA’s Book of the Year: Older Readers award in 1989. The characters in question do not conform to conventional versions of femininity and ‘good’ motherhood. However, Pearce (1991) noted that each of them experiences the death of one of her children, and she argued that these deaths can be read as punishments for
the waywardness of these women, both of whom are rendered more docile by their loss. Pearce (1991) found the novels in her corpus less blatant than most teen romances in their depiction of motherhood as the ‘proper’ and inevitable destiny of all girls, but the ways in which these two women are represented evidently lends strong support to a version of motherhood that denies women the right to identities independent of their relationships with their children.

As argued in Chapter Four, the discourse of romance is inextricably linked with patriarchal discourses of marriage and motherhood. However, romance fiction usually focuses specifically on the development of a romantic relationship and its culmination in marriage to the ‘right’ man, rather than on what follows from that point. In other words, marriage is represented as the final solution to a girl’s problems. As for motherhood, its discursive link with marriage, and to the feminine selflessness and devotion to others idealised in romance fiction, means that it comes to seem like an obvious, inevitable and natural part of the ‘happy ever after’ narrative resolution; however, its inclusion in that resolution is usually implied, rather than explicit (cf. Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Walkerdine 1984b). Thus, studies of romance series fiction have tended to focus on its role in the (re)production of particular versions of femininity through the discourse of romance, without considering the ways in which that discourse also works in romance fiction to promote particular versions of motherhood. Yet it is significant that the typical romantic heroine is, or learns to become, gentle, loving, selfless, nurturing, helpful, submissive and domesticated (Gilbert 1990; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Pearce 1991; Taylor 1993; Walkerdine 1984b): she is effectively the same person, albeit younger and still childless, as the typical mother character identified in the studies of Australian children’s reviewed in previous sections of this chapter. In other words, in achieving ‘happy ever after’, she has also developed the qualities she will need to become a ‘good’ mother.

Despite their concerns with the role of series romance fiction in the reproduction of female subjectivity, studies of this genre of adolescent fiction have resembled most of the other studies reviewed so far in this chapter in regard to their attention to motherhood. That is, they have tended to focus on simply documenting how fictional mothers are represented, and, in doing so, to treat motherhood as a social fact with a universal and stable meaning, rather than recognising it, like ‘femininity’, as a socially constructed concept and hence a site of ongoing discursive struggle. From the perspective of this study, such an approach has limited value. For example, to focus most, if not all, analytical attention on fictional mothers is to risk overlooking the importance of considering the ways in which the representations of other characters, both male and female, may also work to shape readers’ understandings of motherhood. In addition, such an analytical focus limits the possibilities for exploring the narrative significance of the absence or presence of mothers in children’s fiction, although it is evident from the research findings reviewed so far that this is an important area for further investigation. These and other limitations in the research literature reviewed so far have been addressed in a number of the studies discussed in the remainder of this chapter. These focus more directly on issues related
to the representation of motherhood in children’s fiction than the studies reviewed so far have done.

**Motherhood in children's literature: Findings of focused studies**

For the sake of thematic coherence, the studies in the second major category of children’s literature research have been organised into two broad and overlapping groups. The first comprises studies that have focused on maternal relationships and identities, while the second includes studies relevant to the theme of mother-blaming. However, Tunstall’s (1992) study of the ways in which mothers are represented in picture books does not fit well into either of these groups, and is considered separately in the following discussion. Also considered separately, but towards the end of this chapter, are Scutter’s (1999) critiques of a number of texts that are included in the research corpus for this study.

Despite its more specific focus, the content analysis approach of Tunstall’s (1992) study means that it has much in common with many of those included in the first major category of research literature. The corpus in this case comprised 282 children’s picture books published after 1970, which Tunstall (1992) selected as representative of the range of such books available in Australian public libraries. Her study focused specifically on the representation of characters identified as mothers, and because anthropomorphism is a common feature of children’s picture books, these included animal mothers attributed with human characteristics. The analysis took into account both written texts and illustrations, enabling Tunstall (1992) to consider the physical attributes of mothers in her corpus, as well as their personal characteristics and behaviours.

The 91 mother characters in her corpus, Tunstall (1992) found, are most commonly represented as home-makers; if they are shown away from the home, it is because they are out with their children, collecting them from school, taking them to the park, or shopping, for example. Rarely are these mother characters involved in any creative or leisure activities, and then only in conventionally ‘feminine’ pursuits like reading and knitting. Even the ten per cent of mother characters in the corpus who are employed outside the home are actually only seen by readers outside working hours, when they are at home, and Tunstall (1992) noted few references to the ways in which their paid work impacts on their families. Thus, in most cases, apparently, it is as if the woman does not really have a job, or at least not one that has any value in comparison to her ‘real’ work of looking after her family, and the conventional image of the self-sacrificing mother whose family’s needs have priority over her own remains intact. Tunstall (1992:56) expressed disappointment at the very few mother characters in the corpus who challenge the stereotype of the passive, nurturing, comforting, protecting mother: “rarely do mothers [in these texts] display intelligence or initiative, seldom do they behave independently or develop creatively and even a sense of humour is rare.”
Because of her content-analytic approach, Tunstall’s (1992) study shares many of the limitations of the studies reviewed in previous sections, including one not yet discussed: in documenting how mother characters are represented in picture books, it is silent on issues of race, ethnicity and class. The studies reviewed so far have raised no serious concerns about the failure of children’s literature to represent the full range of differences from the taken-for-granted norm of the white, middle-class, full-time mother in a heterosexual, two-parent nuclear family. While Tunstall (1992:29) noted that ‘single mothers’ and ‘working mothers’ were under-represented in her corpus; that the ‘cult of the apron’ was still evident; and that “glasses were used to create an image of intelligence” in the only two mother characters with professional occupations, the apparent absence of any women of colour from Tunstall’s (1992) large corpus of Australian and international picture books went unremarked. It seems that at least some of the attributes of the ‘normal’ mother remain taken-for-granted by researchers themselves: mothers are assumed to be white, middle-class and heterosexual, and to differ only in their employment and marital status.

In contrast to Tunstall’s (1992) content analysis approach, a number of studies have attended to the discursive work of fictional texts for children in supporting or challenging particular ideologies. Of particular interest are the studies that have considered the narrative significance of maternal relationships and identities, as summarised in the following section.

**Maternal relationships and identities in children’s fiction**

The studies reviewed below analysed a variety of fictional texts for children: picture books and longer novels; recent publications, as well as some that have remained popular over some decades; and texts that have won or been short-listed for Australian and/or international children’s literature awards. These studies have tended to focus on fiction in which the narrative significance is constructed largely through the representation of the relationship between a child or adolescent and his or, more commonly, her mother. It is worth noting here that, according to Bauer (1993), fictional narratives for children and adolescents rarely centre on relationships between boy characters and their mothers; children’s fiction that features boy characters is more likely to be concerned with issues of individuation than with issues of relationship. Moreover, like romance fiction which, by inviting readers to identify with female subjectivity, tends to alienate male readers, fiction that focuses on mother-daughter relationships is evidently produced for a predominantly female market, even if this is not made explicit by the publisher’s ‘blurb’ (cf. Beere 1992; Cooper 1993; Ebert 1988).

In an examination of the link between the discourse of romance and the construction of motherhood within patriarchy, Rutherford (1993) analysed two critically acclaimed Australian novels for adolescents. *Playing Beatie Bow*, by Ruth Park, won what was then the CBCA’s *Book of the Year* award in 1981, while *The Devil’s Own*, by Deborah Lisson, was short-listed in the *Older Readers* category in 1991. In both novels, Rutherford (1993) argued, the female protagonist is represented initially as a problem to her parents: she rejects their values and authority and, in seeking independent happiness, challenges the apparent naturalness and
rightness of the patriarchal nuclear family. Thus, in *Playing Beatie Bow*, Abigail rejects her mother’s faith in romantic love and her desire to be reunited with her estranged husband, and in doing so threatens one of the myths of patriarchal motherhood: “deconstruct the apparent coherence supplied by romance and what is left is the drudgery of maternal responsibilities and the conclusion which positions the child as enemy” (Rutherford 1993:3). In *The Devil’s Own*, Julie’s involvement with a gang of teenage law-breakers represents a challenge to both the authority of her strict but loving father and the stability of the patriarchal social order.

However, Rutherford’s (1993) analysis showed how both of these wayward girls are subdued through their experiences of romantic love, which in both cases occur during an earlier period in Australian history, to which the girls are transported by means of a time-slip. The experience of romantic love, and of the protection provided by the romantic lover from a predatory world in which females are constantly vulnerable to male violence, transforms both girls from anti-social children into chastened, mature young women who wholeheartedly embrace their parents’ values and their own familial responsibilities. When they return to their own time, their reward for becoming more submissive, self-effacing and self-sacrificing, more open and giving, and more domestically heroic, is the promise of a love, and ultimately a family, of their own (Rutherford 1993).

Nevertheless, Rutherford (1993) argued that *Playing Beatie Bow* in particular lends itself well to a feminist reading that highlights both the oppression and harassment of women within the traditional family, at the hands of their fathers, their husbands and their male children, and the limits of women’s freedom outside the traditional family. Indeed, the anger and defiance of Abigail and Beatie, the other major girl character, is at odds with the novel’s romantic resolution. It is significant, Rutherford (1993:5) observed, that this resolution is achieved only by means of a fantasy element, the time-slip, and that the romantic image of the family only remains intact because it is always a promise, never visible in the present ... The only functioning model of the family dramatised in the book is one comprised of mothers or mother-surrogates and children, the model of feminine domestic cooperation. The husband is always absent, a promise (or memory) of bliss to the woman, which is never visibly fulfilled.

Thus it is important, Rutherford (1993) argued, that in both *Playing Beatie Bow* and *The Devil’s Own*, the female protagonists are represented initially in terms of lack. Abigail, for example, is depicted as childish and less physically developed than normal for her age; she lacks sensitivity to her mother’s pain; indeed, she recognises herself as lacking, abandoned by her father. The secret emptiness that she feels inside herself is subsequently filled, not by the return of her father, but by her self-sacrificing love for Judah; and it promises to be more permanently filled, back in her own time, through her union with Robert and their formation of a new family (*cf.* Scutter 1999). Similarly, Julie is represented initially as lacking maturity, discipline, and respect for the law; and she feels misunderstood and unloved. However, her “love for Dirk fills an absence within her ... making her simply content. He is her complement” (Rutherford 1993:11). Like Abigail, Julie is prepared for a future in which a husband and children will permanently fill
her lack, but for Rutherford (1993) it is significant that in both cases the promise is never fulfilled within the time-frame of the narrative.

Rutherford’s (1993) analyses provide some insight into the differences that Pearce (1991) observed between younger and older adolescent girl characters in her corpus of possible alternatives to series romances. *Playing Beatie Bow and The Devil’s Own* deal with the transformation of the female protagonists from the young (immature), rebellious and assertive extroverts characteristic of novels apparently targeted at younger adolescents, to the more mature, docile, family-oriented young women featured in novels apparently intended for older adolescent readers. This reading is supported by Agee’s (1993) analyses of another two novels that also depict the transformation of their central female characters from spirited, independent and adventurous girls into docile and domesticated young women. *Caddie Woodlawn*, by Carol Ryrie Brink, was published in the USA in 1935 and won the prestigious Newbery Award, as did Katherine Paterson’s 1980 novel, *Jacob Have I Loved*; but Agee (1993) argued that despite the many years between their publication dates, the award is not the only link between them. Both were written by women; both centre around a mother-daughter relationship; both represent the mother as the primary socialising influence on her daughter and as, in many ways, stereotypically patient, nurturing, passive and self-sacrificing; and both portray their girl protagonists as undergoing “a painful rite of passage from child to adult” (Agee 1993:165).

According to Agee (1993), *Caddie Woodlawn*, like *Playing Beatie Bow*, can be read as a feminist text that offers an intelligent, capable, assertive and independent female character as a role model for its readers. Again, however, such a reading can only be achieved by overlooking the ending, in which Caddie earns her parents’ approval by rejecting her rebellious past and embracing domesticated femininity. While Caddie is initially ambivalent towards her mother’s version of femininity, by the close of the narrative she has accepted it as her own, and perceives herself as a better person for having done so (Agee 1993). Similarly, the young Louise in *Jacob Have I Loved* is appalled to learn that, because it seemed romantic, her mother gave up her dream of studying in Paris to marry Louise’s father and lead “a lifetime of passive waiting” (Brink, cited in Agee 1993:175) in an isolated island fishing community. While her mother shrugs off her earlier aspirations, Louise is haunted by them and determines to become a doctor; but finally she, too, is lured by the prospect of romance to find fulfilment in marriage and motherhood (Agee 1993).

Agee’s (1993) analyses focus on the socialising roles of not only the girls’ mothers in these novels, but also of the female writers of these and other fictional narratives – for example, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* – that also depict “the taming of the tomboy” (Agee 1993:180). Thus it is not only that the stories of these women and their daughters demonstrate how women come to collude in their own continuing marginalisation through the institutions of marriage and
motherhood; in creating spirited girl characters who are finally moulded to fit traditional gender roles, the female writers of these novels have demonstrated their own ambivalence towards the normative version of adult femininity that is commonsensically linked with marriage, domesticity and motherhood (cf. White 1990). The same can be said of the female writers of Playing Beatie Bow and The Devil’s Own; and Agee’s (1993:182) comments on Caddie, Louise and their mothers are similarly applicable to Abigail, Julie and their mothers:

the strong similarities between these fictional mothers and daughters and the working out of their gender roles – even with nearly a half-century gap – reflect the inherent socio-ideological contradiction between becoming a strong, independent woman and becoming a ‘good’ daughter, wife, and mother.

Another significant study is Ford’s (1993-94) analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in Gene Stratton-Porter’s 1909 narrative, A Girl of the Limberlost, one of a number of enduringly popular novels that, according to Ford (1993-94:148) “illustrate nineteenth-century female writers’ general preoccupation with deconstructing and reinventing the mother/daughter relationship” (others include L.M. Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables and The Secret Garden, by Frances Hodgson Burnett). A Girl of the Limberlost, she argued, ensures its continued relevance to contemporary readers by presenting an extensive array of mother types, drawing sharp contrasts between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothering.

The mother of Elnora, the novel’s fatherless protagonist, is initially represented as psychologically and physically absent; yet Elnora thrives, developing strength, intelligence, independence and determination. “The implication of the ‘evil mother’ method”, Ford (1993-94:149) argued, “is that as female children develop, they need hardship and real resistance as inducements to excel.” Elnora does, however, receive conventional nurturing from one of two other significant women in her life; the second, a naturalist known only as the Bird Woman, encourages her interest in the natural world and her desire to study, and illustrates the possibility of alternatives to the conventional female role. Elnora herself, at the age of 18, is evidently a positive role model for readers, apparently affirming

the power of everything but traditional mothering: absence, malice and substitute mothering produce a wonderful daughter, who is ... healthier, smarter, more talented, more creative, more self-reliant, more ambitious and – although as beautiful as a butterfly unfurling its wings – less vain than all the other girls in her high school class who have, presumably, had ‘normal’ mothers (Ford 1993-94:150).

It is significant, Ford (1993-94) argued, that at this point Elnora’s mother sets out to transform herself. Having become the ideal daughter, Elnora apparently no longer needs an ‘evil’ mother. Now, as a marriageable young woman, she needs a more conventional ‘good’ mother. Moreover, as if to complement the change in her mother, Elnora also begins to change: after she meets Philip, her ambitions and determination dwindle to no more than a wish to marry him and create a loving home for him and their future children. According to Ford (1993-94), she is guided in this transformation by four other female characters and the versions of femininity they represent: the Bird Woman, whose social isolation now demonstrates the dangers of choosing an unconventional and independent form of femininity; Elvira, whose suffering from a painful and
lingering cancer can be read as a punishment for her uncontrolled sexuality; Edith, whose self-centredness and jealous temper have caused her to lose Philip's love; and finally the Swamp Angel, "the archetypal angel in the house, a mother for whom motherhood is all" (Ford 1993-94:152), who provides Elnora with the glimpse of maternal fulfilment that makes her future clear for her.

This analysis of *A Girl of the Limberlost* highlights the ambivalence that surrounds traditional understandings of what constitutes a 'good' mother, particularly for daughters, and supports Agee's (1993) claims about the ambivalence of female writers of children's fiction towards their non-traditional female characters. According to Ford (1993-94:148), "no kind of mothering and no combination of mother figures can save Elnora from convention"; and indeed, in the light of the findings of other studies discussed earlier (e.g., Agee 1993; Kociumbas 1986; Reeder 1981; Rutherford 1993), it seems that few such female characters in children's fiction are saved from convention, except perhaps by death, as in the case of Judy in *Seven Little Australians*. Indeed, Lees (1991) observed that even Judy died in a 'womanly' way, sacrificing her life for her 'baby' brother; and during her final moments of life, her stoic attitude and anxiety that her family not be too distressed by her death, are also noteworthy as conventionally 'feminine' forms of heroism.

Yet another example is Meg, the “math and science whiz with a sharp and unabashed tongue” (Schneebaum 1991:30) who features in Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*, a children’s book that has been consistently popular since it was first published in 1962. In this case, Meg’s mother appears to epitomise the ideals of liberal feminism: “Mrs Murry ... is herself a whiz at juggling the roles of mother, faithful wife, and brilliant chemist” (Schneebaum 1991:30).

However, as Schneebaum (1991) observed, while Mrs Murry appears to both readers and other characters to be a 'wonderwoman' who copes superbly even after her husband disappears, she is liberated only to the extent that she is free to take on roles and responsibilities that are additional, rather than alternative, to those of a conventional mother. The narrative constructs a significant silence around the stresses and struggles that this involves.

Moreover, it becomes clear that a wonderwoman is not necessarily the best role model for an adolescent girl, who may, like Meg, perceive herself as inadequate in comparison. Indeed, like the characters of Abigail and Julie discussed above, Meg is initially represented in terms of lack: family, friends and teachers tell her that she lacks the ability to moderate her extremes of behaviour and emotions, and must seek a ‘happy medium’. However, Schneebaum (1991) noted, characteristics that are ‘faults’ in Meg go unremarked in male characters. Moreover, it emerges that the ‘happy medium’ that Meg must find “is the ‘most fortuitous sphere’ in which she, as a woman, can function. In keeping with age-old gender-role stereotypes, that sphere is one of morally redemptive love” (Schneebaum 1991:31). This reading is borne out as it becomes clear that, in her quest to find her father and rescue her brother, Charles Wallace, from the powers of darkness, Meg’s supposedly undesirable extremes can be assets.
Schneebaum (1991) also noted the significance of Meg’s vulnerability, in comparison with the male characters, who emerge apparently unscathed from a confrontation with the Dark Thing, while Meg is both physically and emotionally damaged, and also appears to have lost her moral strength. What is invoked here, Schneebaum (1991:35) argued, is the notion of “the fallen woman, more easily tempted by evil than man.” However, it becomes clear that only Meg can save Charles Wallace, and Schneebaum (1991) pointed out that gender is the criterion by which this is decided. Their father’s love, apparently, is not sufficient to the task; it turns out to be a specifically ‘maternal’ love, learned by Meg as she is nurtured back to health by Aunt Beast, that is required to save her ‘baby’ brother. Thus, what is promoted in *A Wrinkle in Time*, Schneebaum (1991:36) argued, is the idea that a girl becomes a woman only when she voluntarily takes on the role of moral leader and keeper of love, subordinating her other interests and capabilities to this … it is simply woman’s destiny and duty to care for the moral health of others.

Clearly, it is not the formula of romance, marriage and motherhood that is emphasised in *A Wrinkle in Time*, as in the other novels discussed so far in this section. Nevertheless, it is evident that what Meg has learned about the power of ‘maternal love’ is part of her preparation for a future in which romance, marriage and motherhood will feature strongly. Motherhood might require Meg to become, like her mother, something of a wonderwoman, but the narrative implies that, given the extraordinary power of ‘maternal love’, she will be equal to the task.

The heroic nature of specifically female forms of power, such as the ‘maternal love’ displayed by Meg and Aunt Beast, and also by Judy in *Seven Little Australians*, was asserted by Rubinstein (1993), an Australian writer for children whose novel, *Galax-Arena*, is analysed in this study. It is typical of her own novels, she claimed, that boys with conventionally heroic qualities lead the child protagonists into trouble, and that ‘ordinary’ girl characters displaying ‘feminine’ qualities such as empathy and compassion emerge as the genuine heroes. Rubinstein (1993) evidently valorises the ‘feminine’ qualities that, according to the feminist object-relations theories discussed in Chapter Four, derive from girls’ less rigid ego boundaries and their more relational sense of self. Her work, however, does not promote conventional femininity; on the contrary, according to Minchinton (1994:116), it typically juxtaposes a “strong but sensitive, gutsy but thinking” female hero with an “appearance obsessive, boy-crazy” teenager, and clearly implies that, while a fascination with animals is acceptable, a preoccupation with boyfriends, clothes and make-up is not. However, as in the boarding school fiction analysed by Frith (1985), the issue of emerging female sexuality is constantly evaded in Rubinstein’s novels and, as a consequence, Minchinton (1994:122) argued, her heroines “may as well be heroes – they are not specifically female at all.” Another of Minchinton’s (1994) findings, that contradictory ideas about women and girls are played out in Rubinstein’s novels, is discussed later in this chapter.

The influence of both object-relations theories and ‘cultural’ feminism is evident in Trites’ (1993-94) analyses of four narratives that feature mother-daughter or grandmother-granddaughter relationships. All four texts incorporate a narrative within another narrative, a form that,
according to Trites (1993-94), both challenges conventional linear narrative and suggests feminine fertility. She argued that these novels work to affirm the value of motherhood and maternal relationships, and constitute a powerful challenge to both patriarchal narrative structures and patriarchy’s denigration of motherhood. All four are concerned with artistic creation and with birth or maternity; all feature multi-generational story-telling as nurturing mother figures offer their stories to a subsequent female generation in order to build and strengthen matrilineal links; and all connect maternity and creativity through both form and content.

According to Trites (1993-94:167), the fact that the daughter characters in the four novels, as well as in the stories embedded within them, are all about 12 years old makes the linking of artistic creation with procreation all the more significant: the girls “learn about the power of narrativity while they are on the brink of physical fertility.” She argued that the stories told to the girl characters are empowering, enabling them to accept their mothers and draw strength from the mother-daughter relationship. Besides offering an escape from the confines of patriarchy through the use of creative imagination, as Paul (1987) proposed children’s literature characteristically does, Trites (1993-94) claimed that the novels promote the adoption of a ‘maternal’ subjectivity as an alternative escape route. Within these novels, she argued, such a subjectivity is neither of the two extremes constructed in the discourses discussed in Chapter Four; “neither perfect nor evil ... maternity is simply part of the life process, albeit a necessary and beautiful part of it” (Trites 1993-94:168).

However, as Trites (1993-94) herself observed, the similarity in the girls’ ages, and the timing of the maternal narratives in their lives, can hardly be viewed as coincidental. From an alternative feminist perspective, such as that adopted by Agee (1993), Rutherford (1993) and Schneebaum (1991), it is crucial to the discursive work of the novels that the girls, and also the girl readers who align their subjectivity with theirs, learn to value maternal relationships at a time when they are developing their physical potential to become mothers themselves. From this perspective it is arguable that the stories told to the girl characters by their mothers or grandmothers do not empower them, but instead work to shape their desires such that, apparently of their own free will, they embrace a subjectivity that limits their power to the domestic sphere. For example, as Trites (1993-94) has outlined the story, Willa in Patricia MacLachlan’s 1984 novel, Unclaimed Treasures, initially cannot understand why her mother gave up ballet to have a child. She herself wants to do something ‘important and extraordinary’, but she learns to view motherhood as precisely this, and to understand its value to her mother. The story echoes Agee’s (1993) description of Jacob Have I Loved, and closes as Willa herself becomes a mother, with her own story to pass on to the next generation of girls (Trites 1993-94). It is also noteworthy, given Agee’s (1993) claims that female writers of children’s books, like the fictional women they create, often collude in the reproduction of motherhood within patriarchy, that all four of the novels analysed by Trites (1993-94) were written by women.
It was suggested in Chapter Two that it is important to consider who speaks in and through children’s fiction. Kertzer (1993-94) addressed this question in her analyses of 20 picture books about women and their daughters published since 1976, and she re-visited it in her study of the treatment of mothers and the ‘maternal voice’ in contemporary revisions of the Little Red Riding Hood story (Kertzer 1996). She found that while many picture books are written by women, and it is frequently female parents who read picture books to and with their children, such books are places “where mothers are to be seen, but rarely heard” (Kertzer 1993-94:159). There can be no such thing as a universal ‘mother’s voice’, but Kertzer (1993-94) claimed that the ways in which the speech of mother characters is silenced or controlled in picture books work to construct an essential ‘maternal voice’, such that the fantasy of the perfect mother discussed in Chapter Four can remain intact.

As explained in Chapter Two, while most definitions of children’s fiction insist that it is written from the perspective of a child, its ‘child-centredness’ is an illusion: child characters in children’s fiction are almost always the constructions of adults, and the apparent interests of those fictional children are, in effect, the interests of the adults who write, buy and regulate the production and circulation of children’s literature. Acknowledging that it therefore only appears to be the case that all adult perspectives are marginalised in children’s fiction, Kertzer (1993-94:159) nonetheless proposed that “mothers’ voices are controlled in picture books in a way that other adult voices are not” (see also Kertzer 1996). This, she argued, is an effect of the conjunction of the discourses of children’s literature with those of popular psychology, which is similarly concerned with the notion of the child’s point of view. Both sets of discourses, Kertzer (1993-94) observed, share an investment in the fantasy of the perfect mother. Accordingly, children’s picture books constantly objectify mothers, because “the objectified mother, the mother in the picture frame, even the animal mother, can remain perfect, in a way the speaking human mother cannot” (Kertzer 1993-94:160). It is in comic fantasies and picture books about anthropomorphic animal characters that mothers’ voices are most conspicuously vocal, Kertzer (1993-94:163) found, but she argued that the powerful mother’s depiction as either an animal or a comic fantasy character “only emphasizes how marginal and impossible human mothers’ voices remain.”

In the light of these arguments, Gibson’s (1988) claim that many children’s books offer alternative representations of mother characters and show that there is life for women beyond the apron, is unconvincing: all but one of her examples are anthropomorphic animal mothers. The other is Mary Poppins, a fantasy character with magical powers, whose very presence as a nanny in the Banks household can be read as testimony to the impossibility of being a ‘good’ mother while also having a life outside the home. In a more recent study, Welch (1994) commented on the positive and unconventional parents represented in some recent Australian adolescent fiction, such as Judith Clarke’s _Al Capsella_ series. However, as all her examples are humorous novels, they serve to confirm that it is only “through the use of humorous
exaggeration” that unconventional mothers can be presented positively in children’s fiction as “interesting, idiosyncratic but by no means ineffectual, antagonistic or absent” (Welch 1994:9).

In a recent collection of 38 revisions of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, Kertzer (1996) identified three major trends: some tales focus on Red Riding Hood’s independence from male protectors and rescuers; some present the story from the wolf’s point of view; and some experiment with alternative narrative forms. She found, however, that despite the revisions, Red Riding Hood’s mother remains peripheral to the story. For Kertzer (1996:20), the implication is that contemporary writers “find some cultural patterns harder than others to question”; for example, it seems impossible for them to imagine Red Riding Hood being rescued by her mother.

Three contemporary adolescent novels about daughters searching for their missing birth mothers – *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye*, by Lois Lowry; *Wolf*, by Gillian Cross; and Jean Thesman’s *The Rain Catchers* – are also re-workings of the Little Red Riding Hood story, according to Kertzer (1996). In these novels, she argued, challenges to narrative conventions disrupt our expectations by drawing attention to the voices of mothers even as the novels’ narrative strategies remind us of our continuing resistance to hearing such voices (Kertzer 1996:20).

Thus her analyses highlight the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding these representations of the girls’ mothers and their stories. For example, in all three novels the women and their stories are the focus of the daughters’ desires to establish their identities. To recall the discussion of the concept of desire in Chapter Three, it is as if the mother’s story represents the certain knowledge and truth that would, in fantasy, restore the daughter’s sense of wholeness and coherence. However, at the same time, the daughter’s quest is represented as dangerous, and the mother and her story as threats to the daughter’s sense of self. Thus the girls have difficulty hearing their mothers’ stories and accepting their mothers’ heroic qualities.

Furthermore, Kertzer’s (1996) analyses illustrate how the mothers’ voices are always in some way limited and controlled. One mother, for example, shares her story with her daughter by lending her the diary she kept as an adolescent; her voice is thus safely contained by both the form of the diary and its location in the past. This example is a useful reminder of the importance of attending to narrative strategies in children’s fiction: they are crucial to the process of controlling whose voice can be heard. Thus Welch’s (1994:9) claim that, in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction,

relationships with parents are more complex, so that the reader has sympathy with both the young people and the parents ... [and] there is a more balanced view of the pressures of family life and an appreciation that parents have needs, failings and strengths

is somewhat at odds with her observation that the frequent use of a first-person narrator means that parents in these novels tend to be represented only from the perspective of the main character.
The patterns to the construction of mothers' voices in picture books, as identified by Kertzer (1993-94), are not immediately relevant here, but her examples are informative illustrations of the discourses at work in these narratives. One pattern, in which the woman remains silent while her daughter talks, is exemplified by This Quiet Lady, by Charlotte Zolotow, in which a daughter narrates her own version of her mother's story until the time of her birth. According to Kertzer (1993-94:161), she constructs a narrative in which the mother's identity is singular. Her mothering is neither a function nor a relationship within a more complex subjectivity; it is an essence that biologically (and culturally) labels her just as it will one day label the daughter. The mother's shape may change, but her meaning does not; always she is destined to be what she has become, the daughter's mother.

Although in other cases the 'maternal voice' is constructed in different ways, Kertzer (1993-94) found that many of the narratives in her corpus work similarly to reinforce the idea that female development leads 'naturally' and inevitably to motherhood. In picture books about women and their daughters, she argued, it is often the case that "mother-daughter relationships remain constant, and women who are mothers speak of themselves only as daughters who became mothers" (Kertzer 1993-94:163). In this way they resemble the archetypal representations of eternal mother figures discussed by Gibson (1988:177), who, following Jung, explained that an archetype is an idea that exists in all human minds, although its "concrete manifestations, the representations or expressions of the idea, may vary from era to era and country to country." Thus, according to Gibson (1988), the Demeter/Persephone myth exemplifies the archetype of the 'eternal womanly', incorporating images of both mother and daughter, and of endless renewal. She proposed that, in contrast to the limiting effects of stereotypes, archetypes provide for diversity. Kertzer's (1993-94) argument, however, suggests that the effects of the use of archetypes are just as limiting as those produced by the use of stereotypes. Moreover, the "fantasy of the perfect mother whose perfection is defined by the daughter's assumed need to see her as a woman with no other stories to tell ignores history and sets us up for failure and disappointment" (Kertzer 1993-94:163).

Recalling her personal experiences of motherhood, Rich (1976:23) described feeling "haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional'; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity." Kertzer's (1993-94:160) study shows how picture books continue to make such images available to readers, to the extent that the process of learning to read as a child is also a process of learning to view the mother as "the ultimate objectified other." One result is that "we want the mother who does what the books ... lead us to expect" (Arcana, cited in Kertzer 1993-94:163); at the same time, "we ensure that vocal daughters grow up to become silent mothers" (Kertzer 1993-94:160).

Here Kertzer (1993-94) has raised the issue that Agee (1993) highlighted in her discussion of Caddie Woodlawn and Jacob Have I Loved: the collusion of women in their own continuing marginalisation. The voices of mother characters in picture books are not silenced by children, even if it sometimes appears that way; for example, this appears to be the case in the picture
books discussed by Kertzer (1993-94) that depict women and their daughters engaged in
dialogue that is controlled by the daughters. If the mother’s voice is silenced in books for
children, it is silenced by the network of adults who work to make those books available. Many
of these adults are mothers themselves, and have apparently come to understand motherhood
in terms of the discourses discussed in Chapter Four, that deny women with children any
separate subjectivity beyond their identities as mothers. Kertzer’s (1993-94) analyses suggest
that if the voices of women as mothers are silenced in books for children, they are silenced by
the conjunction of discourses that seek to define what counts as a children’s book and what
constitutes a ‘good’ mother.

An Australian novel for adolescents that has received much critical attention is John Marsden’s
So Much to Tell You..., which won the CBCA’s award of Book of the Year: Older Readers in
1988, as well as a number of other Australian and international awards. It has often been
adopted as a text for study in secondary school English lessons; for example, it has appeared on
the Certificate of Education Year 12 Literature text list in Victoria, and is frequently studied in the
lower secondary years (Scutter 1996, 1999). It is of particular interest to this study because its
companion volume, Take My Word For It (Marsden 1992), was short-listed by the CBCA’s
judges in 1993, and is thus included in the research corpus. So Much to Tell You... has been
criticised for, among other things, its exaggerated social realism, its representations of ‘good’
and ‘bad’ mothers, and the way in which it effectively condones men’s domestic violence

Like the characters of Abigail, Julie and Meg discussed above, the female protagonist of So
Much to Tell You… is represented initially in terms of lack. Marina effectively lacks parents, a
home, the ability to communicate and physical attractiveness: her father has been gaoled for
throwing acid in her face; her mother has remarried; and she, now an elective mute, is attending
boarding school on psychiatric advice. The narrative takes the form of a journal that Marina
maintains as part of her English studies, and it documents how she is apparently made whole as
she learns to forgive, find forgiveness and communicate again (Mills 1993). However, this
healing process is achieved at the expense of Marina’s mother who, as her husband’s intended
victim, is blamed for Marina’s disfigurement. According to Mills (1993), Marina gradually comes
to exonerate her father completely for his act of violence, blaming her mother instead for
provoking him – even wishing that her father’s aim had been better – and she seeks her father’s
forgiveness for her own perceived role in the events that lead to him being gaoled. The novel
closes as Marina takes the initiative in bringing about a father-daughter reconciliation, excluding
her mother and also rejecting any possibility of a future close relationship with her (see also
Nevard 1990; Scutter 1999). Marina’s mother is made more expendable, Nevard (1990:13)
argued, by her daughter’s description of her as shallow, fickle and self-centred, “not unlike the
‘rich-bitch/sex-siren’ characters so beloved by soap opera writers”, which works to justify her
husband’s violence. Similarly, Scutter (1999:122) noted the way the narrative works to assign

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blame to “the Bad Mother, the one who leaves the family nucleus”, contrasting her with the English teacher’s wife,
safely housebound with three angelic children, cooking up a storm when Marina comes a-visiting and sending her back to school with a doggy bag of cookies. What is more, Mrs Lindell speaks six languages.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Mills (1993) suggested that the father’s disfigurement of his daughter can be interpreted in terms of an unconscious desire to render her sexually unattractive, and thereby ensure that he need not compete with other men for her love, as apparently he has had to do, unsuccessfully, for his wife’s love. In other words, Marina’s disfigurement can be interpreted as an attempt to control her sexuality, just as the disfigurement of her mother would have both punished her expression of sexual desire outside her marriage and worked to constrain it. Mills (1993:38) also claimed that Marina’s forgiveness of her father allows her “to win the girl’s version of the Oedipal struggle. As victim and forgiver she has her father to herself, without competition.” For Mills (1993), neither her father nor Marina is an innocent victim; both are active agents in the blaming and punishment of the mother. Moreover, despite the apparently restorative ending, Marina’s healing cannot be complete: her “mutilated female body speaks mutely and powerfully about the betrayal of women and the failure of words to make their writer new” (Mills 1993:41).

It was noted above that the texts analysed in the studies of maternal relationships and identities reviewed in this section are dominated by narratives that feature mother-daughter, rather than mother-son, relationships. This should not be dismissed as mere coincidence; nor should it be understood simplistically as either a reflection of supposedly feminine capacities for relating to, nurturing, and caring for others or a market response to female readers’ purportedly ‘natural’ interests in exploring issues of relationship. Rather, this pattern lends support to the thesis that fictional narratives for children and adolescents not only operate as ‘pedagogies of everyday life’ (cf. Luke 1996b), but also, in doing so, work to shape readers’ subjectivities and desires in gender-specific ways that are unlikely to be compatible with the social justice ideals expressed in official educational discourse. Again, this is an issue that warrants attention in this study. For example, it is important to consider whether and how contemporary adolescent fiction works to shape female readers’ desires such that, like the girl characters in many of the texts discussed above, and apparently of their own free will, they come to embrace a ‘maternal’ subjectivity that limits possible female identities to that of ‘mother’ and confines women’s interests and power to the domestic sphere.

As illustrated in Chapter Four, the kind of mother-blaming evident in So Much to Tell You... is a common feature of contemporary discourses of motherhood. In the following section, it becomes apparent that mother-blaming is also a familiar feature of children’s literature, especially adolescent fiction published in the last two decades. Furthermore, it is not unusual for reviewers, critics, and scholars in the field of children’s literature to actively participate in the wholesale attribution of blame to women as mothers.
Motherhood in children’s literature

The studies discussed above were particularly critical of the way the narrative in So Much to Tell You... works to blame Marina’s mother for her family’s fate. However, Mills’ (1987) study of orphaned children in twentieth century children’s fiction adopted a less than even-handed attitude to parents, and thus colluded in the attribution of blame to fictional mothers and, by implication, in the blaming of mothers as a social group. According to Mills (1987), the orphaned child was a frequently recurring motif in Victorian literature, and has continued to symbolise both the dangers and the possibilities of childhood in twentieth century fiction for children (see also Walter 1992). Orphan stories offer their readers vicarious escape from the restrictions of family life, but typically they work to reinforce the importance of the family: ultimately, “almost every orphan novel ... is about the search for a family” (Mills 1987:228). In the children’s fiction of this century, Mills (1987) identified three distinct stages of interest in the representations of orphans, each corresponding to a particular social understanding of childhood.

Of most relevance to this study are the orphans depicted in children’s books since the late 1960s. According to Mills (1987), these characters are typically not orphans at all, but abandoned or abused children in need of foster homes. This trend, she proposed, does not necessarily reflect a change in social reality so much as an increased interest in social realism and a greater awareness of the extent of child abuse. Her study focuses on the positive aspects of novels such as The Great Gilly Hopkins, by Katherine Paterson, and The Pinballs, by Betsy Byars, arguing that they do not glorify childhood, as earlier orphan stories have done, but emphasise the need for children to grow up, showing the central child characters moving from bitterness, resentment and anger towards greater maturity. Mills’ (1987) discussion suggests that this maturity is usually characterised by some kind of acceptance on the part of the child protagonists: perhaps some acceptance of their biological parents’ unreliability, and hence of the importance of self-reliance; or an acceptance of their biological parents’ flaws; or acceptance of their place within their foster families and the unstinting love of their foster parents. However, despite this apparently even-handed approach, Mills’ (1987) analyses tend to equate ‘parent’ with ‘mother’, and so it is primarily the contemporary generation of female parents, rather than male parents, who are implicitly condemned for their own refusal to grow up. Mills’ (1987) discussion implicitly compares the children’s ‘selfish’, ‘immature’ and ‘irresponsible’ biological mothers with the foster mothers who are able to heal these bitterly angry, persistently hostile children, simply, it seems, by administering a combination of unconditional love and firm discipline.

“Parents are the problem” for the teenage protagonists in much of the fiction produced for adolescents, Burner (1989:42) commented, noting that parents are often depicted as ineffectual or self-absorbed. A brief overview of the representations of parents in Australian adolescent fiction of the past 30 years led Welch (1994) to a similar conclusion: without differentiating between male and female parents, she proposed that the emotional absence of fictional parents has come to have more narrative significance than their physical absence. In the more recent
examples of adolescent fiction, she noted, parents are often represented as neglectful of their parental responsibilities, while young protagonists are represented as having to shoulder heavy emotional responsibilities alone.

However, in discussing this implied, and sometimes overt criticism of the contemporary adult generation, Scutter (1996, 1999) claimed that it is female parents who bear the brunt of the criticism in the kind of children’s fiction known as ‘social realism’. Hunter’s (1996) review of seven recent novels for Australian adolescents lends support to this claim. The boy protagonist in all but one of these narratives is represented as effectively motherless, typically as a result of his mother’s neglect or desertion. In one case, Hunter (1996:8) noted, “his mother has left him and his dad to find a new life”, while in another, “loneliness, isolation, the responsibility for his younger half-brother, when mother, sister and aunt abandon them, take their toll on his ability to love.”

More covert criticism of contemporary women as mothers can be inferred from the nostalgic preference, observed by Scutter (1993a:16; see also Scutter 1999) in other recent Australian children’s fiction, for “snapfrozen mothers from an imagined past. The ideal home and garden has a present mum with an absent mind, the latter trait being represented as endearing rather than resistant.” One example of this phenomenon of the ‘present absent’ mother might be Mrs Lindell, the English teacher’s wife mentioned in the discussion, above, of John Marsden’s So Much to Tell You…; as Scutter (1999:122) noted, despite her supposed ability to speak six languages, “the text reports a mere nine words she says in her mother tongue.” Scutter (1999:202) argued, however, that more common than representations of mothers that invoke the notion of ‘present absence’, and far more common than the remarkably rare examples of ‘absent absence’ and ‘present presence’, are:

- two different kinds of absent presence: in the one, a dead and absent mother may hover, like a blessing, to influence the protagonist’s identity and subjectivity …; in the other, a living absent mother (invariably represented as abandoning) may loom, like a curse, to determine the protagonist’s choices (as in John Marsden’s So Much To Tell You).

Explicit criticism of contemporary mothers is evident in a study by Apseloff (1992), who remarked on an increasing number of ‘abandoning mothers’ in contemporary children’s fiction. Whereas it was more often the father who deserted the family in the children’s books of earlier periods, Apseloff (1992:101) claimed that “now the person who wants to do her own thing is the mother.” Like Mills (1987), Apseloff (1992) commented that in many of the novels in her corpus the child protagonists develop greater self-reliance and insight as they come to terms with their situations. However, this aspect of the novels was not her primary interest. Instead, Apseloff (1992:102) claimed that her examples constitute evidence that “abandonment in the eighties is a fact of life” and provide “commentary on contemporary life and priorities”, particularly the priorities of contemporary women in their roles as parents. The examples she cited include Cynthia Voigt’s Homecoming and its sequels, in which the oldest of four children left in a shopping mall by their mother takes responsibility for keeping her siblings together while they
attempt the journey to their grandmother. Apseloff (1992:102) made no criticism of the
children’s father, who had left them and their mother years before; instead, even as she
acknowledged that the children’s mother is emotionally disturbed, she offered this series of
novels as early examples of the 1980s phenomenon of the ‘abandoning mother’ in children’s
fiction, backing up her claim with examples of more recent novels that “portray mothers so intent
upon finding themselves and doing their own thing that they are willing to leave their families in
the process.”

Unlike Mills (1987), Apseloff’s (1992) view is that the trend she has observed in children’s fiction
reflects the contemporary social world in which, increasingly, women are entering the paid
workforce and/or returning to study, and are insisting on rights equal to those of men. Such
behaviour, she maintained, is selfish in women, although it has long been considered acceptable
in men. Apseloff’s (1992) arguments, and perhaps also the narratives in her corpus, can be
read as exemplifying the backlash politics discussed in Chapter One, that work to undermine the
achievements of feminism and restore women to their ‘proper’ place in the domestic sphere (cf.
Scutter 1999). Her view of fiction as reflective of social reality apparently led her to accept the
fictional women in her corpus as evidence of what contemporary women are actually like. Thus,
on the basis of brief analyses of some 1980s children’s books, rather than empirical sociological
evidence, Apseloff (1992:105) argued that

the message of the eighties for children appears to be that adults are human, too, with
faults and weaknesses and with a need, almost a basic right, to consider their own
psyches and well-being before those of other members of the family. Being a wife and
mother no longer suffices; one must be true to oneself first. That leaves this reader
with the uneasy feeling that responsibility to others has taken a back seat to
selfishness. There is no element of compromise, of trying to be your own person
within the family unit ... Such novels, even when they end with reunions, must leave
the reader with an uneasy feeling: ‘Could it happen to me?’.

Arguments such as these serve to illustrate the struggles and conflicts involved in articulating a
hegemonic bloc around social justice ideals, particularly those related to gender equity. The
achievement of hegemony in this case requires, among other things, that diverse groups of
females, including those who are parents, be persuaded of their shared interest, as ‘women’, in
the social goal of gender equity, however that may be defined at any moment in the hegemonic
struggle. However, to the extent that females are also successfully positioned as subjects within
discourses of motherhood that work to construct their identities in terms of their reproductive
capacities – that is, as actual or potential mothers – such that they have no legitimate interests
that are not identical to, or compatible with, the interests of their children or future children, the
process of articulation becomes virtually impossible.

The representation of girls as heroes by Australian writer Gillian Rubinstein was discussed
earlier in this chapter. In comparing these representations with those of women in the same
children’s books, Minchinton (1994:116) found that Rubinstein depicts women, especially those
who are mothers, as “pretty low on the ladder of humanity”, and draws heavily on stereotypes
that are “inexplicable in terms of the consistency and depth of the ugliness she portrays.”
According to Minchinton (1994), Rubinstein frequently employs the motifs of the ‘Working Mother’, whose children are represented as suffering from her lack of attention to them, and the ‘Deserting Mother’, who is represented as more explicitly wicked because she prioritises her own interests over those of her children. It might be argued that Rubinstein has merely employed a standard narrative device in children’s fiction – that is, the removal of the adults so that the child characters are free to have adventures – but Minchinton (1994:117) found it to be “a peculiarly and pervasively negative image [of mothers] that is projected” in Rubinstein’s work (cf. Scutter 1996, 1999). She acknowledged that Rubinstein has occasionally created the more positive images of the ‘Earth Mother’ and the ‘Perfect New Age Mother’, but argued that these are idealised and impossible images of women who are utterly devoted to the needs, interests and perspectives of their children. It seems likely that they also operate in binary opposition to the ‘Working Mother’ and the ‘Deserting Mother’, and thus to emphasise further the failings of these latter women.

By juxtaposing her analyses with Rubinstein’s own comments about her work, Minchinton (1994) provided evidence to support her claims about the writer’s beliefs and unconscious motivations, claims that might otherwise be dismissed as highly speculative. For example, according to Minchinton (1994), Rubinstein’s remarks about how she writes suggest that her plots are developed and controlled according to her conscious and rational ideas about the world; in other words, they are based on an explicit ideology. By contrast, however, her representations of mother characters are “basically primary images [that] come up from the subconscious” (Rubinstein, cited in Minchinton 1994:115), and are not subjected to the same sort of conscious reflection and reasoning that she claims to apply to her plots (Minchinton 1994). The findings of the studies reviewed in this chapter suggest that Rubinstein is not unusual in this regard: it seems that the ways in which mothers have typically been represented in children’s fiction have been similarly informed by common-sense understandings of motherhood.

The ‘abandoning mother’ consistently features in the numerous versions of the story of Hansel and Gretel derived from the folk tale collected and re-told by the Grimm brothers. Although there are variations (e.g., in some versions the mother is a stepmother) the story remains largely consistent: typically, it is the children’s mother who suggests losing them in the forest, and when they eventually return home they are welcomed warmly by their father, who now lives alone (Walter 1992). One reading of the tale of Hansel and Gretel (Walter 1992) takes a view similar to that of Mills (1987) in regard to contemporary orphan stories, suggesting that it is a ‘coming of age story’ about children developing self-reliance and independence in dealing with the world and learning to make use of symbols in working through psychological struggles. According to Walter (1992), the story has contemporary relevance, at least for children in the United States: child abandonment, she claimed, remains a problem there. In support of her claim, however, she made no mention of contemporary fathers; instead, children have somehow come to be “waiting for foster homes”, or their “addicted mothers” have left them (Walter 1992:206). Here again, then, blame is directed at mothers, while fathers are apparently acquitted of responsibility.
for their children’s fate; and this is precisely what happens in most versions of the Hansel and Gretel story.

Some versions of the tale represent the children’s mother/step-mother as more explicitly evil than others do, but Walter (1992) argued that she is always the villain of the piece and always excluded from the happy ending. The children’s father, on the other hand, is typically represented as being as much a victim of his wife as his children are; yet he can hardly be considered an innocent player, and must at the very least be guilty of having passively complied with his wife’s plan. However, rather than being punished, as she is, for his crime of collusion, he retains his children’s love and shares the story’s happy ending with them. Clearly, there are traces of the Hansel and Gretel story in John Marsden’s *So Much to Tell You…*, discussed above. It is also noteworthy that there is a distinct contrast between this lenient treatment of the culpable father in the Hansel and Gretel story and the contemporary judicial and social services treatment, discussed in Chapter Four, of women in cases of family violence, such that regardless of who actually harms children, their mothers can be accused of failing to protect them adequately, even when they themselves are victims of physical abuse (Roberts 1995).

The findings of the studies reviewed in this section suggest that, while criticism of the parent generation in general has become a feature of the children’s fiction of the last two decades, much of this criticism is specifically targeted at women as mothers. Thus, the problems faced by the child or adolescent protagonists in contemporary children’s fiction are often represented as somehow attributable to failures on the part of their mothers. Evidently, the fantasy of the perfect mother, from which are drawn both the motif of the ‘ideal mother’ and that of the ‘evil mother’, as well as their various permutations, such as the ‘earth mother’ and the ‘abandoning mother’, has had a significant influence on the ways in which motherhood has been represented in children’s fiction, as it has also on understandings of motherhood constructed in other discursive fields.

However, the apparent shift in the patterns of representing female parents in children’s fiction, such that the generally idealised mothers of the 1950s and 1960s have been replaced by the more negatively represented women of contemporary children’s fiction, cannot be dismissed as simply a reflection of changing social reality. Given the timing of this shift, it seems more likely that it is linked to contemporary hegemonic struggles over issues of social justice and gender equity. These struggles have not only led to improvements in the status of women, but have also provoked a backlash movement that has sought to undermine those achievements, in part by drawing on discourses that work to conflate adult femininity with motherhood, to deny the legitimacy of women’s identities and interests outside the domestic sphere, and to hold mothers accountable for their children’s successful development into socially acceptable adults. Scutter (1999) made a similar point in her recent examination of Australian fiction for teenagers and young adults, which includes critiques of some of the texts in the research corpus for this study, as discussed below.
Critiques of texts in the research corpus

While Scutter (1999) gave considerable attention to representations of mothers and motherhood in an extensive corpus of contemporary Australian fiction for teenagers, her analyses also focused on a variety of other themes and issues. Thus, not all of her comments on the six texts that are common to both her corpus and the corpus used in this study are directly relevant to the analysis of representations of motherhood. Nevertheless, it is worth reviewing her critiques of these texts and some related texts by the same writers. Even when she has not specifically addressed the topic of motherhood, Scutter’s (1999) comments serve as useful introductions to some of the texts in this corpus, as well as offering some interesting insights into the contentious nature of the ‘literary’ qualities for which they have all received critical acclaim.

For example, in regard to Melina Marchetta’s Looking for Alibrandi, the highly acclaimed and popular winner of the CBCA’s award of Book of the Year: Older Readers in 1993, Scutter’s (1999) brief critique focused on the ways in which readers are positioned to admire the teenage narrator’s self-congratulatory and smug sentimentalism, and also on the apparent ‘obviousness’ of the link between that sentimentalism and the narrator’s femininity. She commented more positively on the Pagan series by Catherine Jinks, the first of which, Pagan’s Crusade, is analysed in this study. Scutter’s (1999:137-141) attention focused instead on the third novel in the series, Pagan’s Vows, noting that while it, like Looking for Alibrandi, is “full of sentiment … that sentiment is always contained, held in check by the incisive mind that observes it”, such that “nothing and no one is idealised.” Through the narration of Pagan, “a brilliant smartarse with a high sense of humour, his language full of puns, syllogisms, logic”, everything is ironised, ridiculed and satirised, including the intensely Pauline attitude to women espoused at the monastery in which Pagan is a novice; here, women are understood as dangerous both to men’s bodies and their souls. Scutter (1999:141) praised the novel’s “marvellous insistence on the power of outsiders and larrikins and hotheads to escape and to resist institutional bounds and to explore the spaces outside.”

Scutter’s (1999:184-191) analysis of Dougy, by James Moloney, again focused on issues unrelated to motherhood, drawing attention instead to problematic aspects of the narrative’s “well-meaning” treatment of issues that are central to it, namely, Aboriginality and racism. She noted, for example, the failure to historicise white colonisation or black detribalisation and disempowerment; the silence on Aboriginal links to the land, and thus on the significance of the issue of land ownership to racial conflict; the tendency to homogenise Aboriginality and relegate it to a mythic past; and the valorisation of white education as the key to the future for Aboriginal youth.

The joint winners of the CBCA’s award for Book of the Year: Older Readers in 1994, Angel’s Gate, by Gary Crew and The Gathering, by Isobelle Carmody, were both discussed at length by Scutter (1999), with some attention to issues relevant to this study. In regard to Angel’s Gate, for example, Scutter (1999:242-248) observed that one way of interpreting the narrative is to
understand Kim, the protagonist-narrator, as having been “made timid by his authoritarian
doctor-father”, but another interpretation, more consistent with the narrative as a whole, involves
recognising him as “over-protected by his nurse-mother and thoroughly manipulated by his
bullying and scaremongering older sister Julia.” Motherhood was not the main focus of Scutter’s
(1999) analysis of this text, but she noted, nevertheless, that it represents females as
“monstrously dominating”; “phallicised”; “stultifiers and impeders”; and “too present when they
are actually there”, while also being prone to abandoning their men. She noted, too, the
apparent anxiety throughout the narrative regarding incest, as well as even greater concerns
about male sexuality and constructs of masculinity, and suggested that “the real anxiety”
underpinning the whole is about homosexuality. Finally, Scutter (1999) commented on the
highly circumscribed parameters of Julia’s supposed rebellion against her father’s authority:
“anyone who subscribes so enthusiastically to a combination of romance and capitalist values is
a true daughter of the patriarchy.”

In a critical analysis of *The Gathering* – “opportunistic exploitation of a vulnerable teenage
audience cannot get much worse” – Scutter (1999:230-236) found that “the family home and the
school are represented in this book as sites of the greatest possible danger for the child.” In the
fictive world of this text, the child is “filled full of magic belief”, as a variation on original sin, while
“adults, lacking this desirable belief, functioning only on detached rationality, are … empty
vessels waiting to be filled with predatory evil.” With evil represented as “impersonal,
dissociated, free-floating, like a kind of ectoplasm waiting for a host”, the result is an adult world
that is almost universally evil. An interesting and ambiguous exception, Scutter (1999) found, is
an elderly former schoolteacher. Although not a mother herself, she is represented as an ideal
mother figure who believes children are so important that she chose not to have any of her own
so that she could focus on teaching. The other significant mother is that of the male protagonist,
Nathaniel; she is a present absent mother who “is to blame for not keeping the monster his
father (thus also absent/present) out of Nat’s nightmares and daily life.” Scutter (1999) also
noted that, although the small band of teenagers, both male and female, who come together to
fight the evil that possesses their town are not stereotyped in terms of the ways in which they
deal with evil, ‘good’ is feminised through Lallie, the visionary character who guides them, and
whose power is spiritual and psychic rather than physical. At the same time, ‘evil’ is
masculinised, notably through the character of Mr Karle, the school’s deputy principal and
“clearly a Hitlerite leader”, through the town’s police force, and through the “predominantly male
group of thugs” who form the core of the ‘youth group’ known as the Gathering, itself reminiscent
of Nazism.

Comments by Scutter (1999) in regard to the representation of motherhood in John Marsden’s
*So Much to Tell You…*, the ‘companion’ volume to which is included in the corpus for this study,
were noted earlier in this chapter. However, another novel by Marsden, *Letters from the Inside*,
is also included in the research corpus for this study, and was discussed by Scutter (1999) as an
example of the extremes of social realism found in much contemporary adolescent fiction. She
made no specific comment on the issue of motherhood, but observed that this narrative, too,
follows the recent trend, discussed earlier in this chapter, of presenting an overwhelmingly
negative view of adults. In this supposedly ‘realist’ text, she suggested, adults are represented
as so incompetent that readers’ willingness to suspend disbelief is tested to the limit:
How credible is it that an ordinary middle-class family will turn a blind eye to a teenage
boy with a bedroom full of guns and gun magazines, and behaviour and language full
of violence and obscenities? (Scutter 1999:22).

Similarly, Scutter (1999:215) questioned the legitimacy of the claim to realism in Del-Del, which
is also analysed in this study, arguing that the writer, Victor Kelleher, “makes opportunistic and
technicolour use of every possible possession narrative, fantastic, ghostly, sci-fi, psychological.”
Again she observed that parents are represented as ludicrously incompetent. Indicating a
number of points in the narrative where “no adult reader could sustain the fictional
credulousness required”, she questioned the motives of “writers, publishers, awarding
institutions and schools [that] positively exploit such credulousness” in children’s fiction (Scutter
1999:221). The representation of motherhood was also considered in some detail, with Scutter
(1999:215-222) commenting in particular on the way that Beth, the older sister in the “veritable
exemplar of a dysfunctional family” that is featured in the novel, becomes a surrogate mother
figure, “motherliness incarnate.” She also noted the contradictory, but ultimately “reactionary
and nostalgic” messages about ‘proper’ gender roles embedded in the narrative. “On the
surface, Kelleher is intent on displaying unstereotypical roles and functions”; accordingly, Dad is
an image-conscious hotel receptionist, while Mum is a successful lawyer. However,
underneath, there’s a powerful narrative insistence that this modern family has gone
wrong in ... its transgression of gender roles at home and work, and the critical failures
of the father to act with decisive authority and of the mother to be there, all healing
feeling, when she was needed.

Scutter’s (1999) chapter on the representation of motherhood closes with a remark that is
evidently about Del-Del in particular, but invites interpretation as a more general comment about
the representation of motherhood in contemporary Australian fiction for teenagers. She
emphasised the importance of recognising
the reactionary and nostalgic nature of this fiction for what it is, a narrative rearguard
action impelling women back to a notional domestic and familial bliss that never was.
There are more than enough forces at large colluding in keeping mum.

In other words, Scutter (1999) has recognised not only that contemporary children’s fiction can
reflect ongoing hegemonic struggles over issues of social justice and gender equity, but also,
and more importantly, that such literature must be understood both as a site in which those
struggles are played out and as one through which the course of those struggles may, to some
extent, be shaped. If the negative representations of mothers that have been reported, or in
some cases constructed, in the analyses reviewed in the latter sections of this chapter seem to
suggest that these struggles are somewhat one-sided, this might be because, in some cases at
least, the texts offered in evidence were chosen in order to illustrate particular arguments.
Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, it seems that the conventional emphasis on the primacy of
‘the child’s point of view’ renders the field of children’s fiction particularly susceptible to the
effects of backlash discourses that construct women’s desires for fulfilment outside the domestic sphere as illegitimate. In other words, it may be that in fictional narratives for children, where the child-centred discourses of ‘good’ motherhood are able to overlap and work in conjunction with the (purportedly) child-centred discourses of children’s literature, representations of mothers and motherhood are likely to be particularly powerful in supporting a fundamentally patriarchal social order. Conversely, they are unlikely – perhaps more so than in any other discursive field – to promote counter-hegemonic understandings of motherhood.

As noted in Chapter Four, Lumby (1997) has pointed out that postmodern popular culture is rife with images that actively promote the possibilities for playing with and subverting existing discourses for the purpose of exploring alternative subject positions, creating new identities and developing new meanings. These new possibilities are thus available to readers of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, even if they have not yet impacted significantly on common-sense understandings of motherhood. At the same time, however, it must also be recognised that, as indicated in Chapters Two and Three, the nature and purposes of children’s literature are such that its representations of the social world are more likely to be underpinned by the modernist discourses of liberal humanism – significantly, the same discourses that underpin contemporary common-sense understandings about motherhood – than by postmodernist discourses. Thus, as Scutter (1999:203) argued,

given that children’s fiction has remained in a reactionary philosophical and moral cast for most of its history, as has adolescent fiction too, despite the overt bravado of some of its representations, it should not seem surprising if reactionary cultural movements in the wider social community are concentrated, and even exaggerated, in the worlds of children’s and young adult books.

It might be expected, then, that readers of the adolescent fiction in the research corpus selected for this study will be more often invited by the narratives to draw on common-sense understandings of motherhood as meaning-making resources than to challenge those understandings and develop new ones. These are issues that merit further research attention, because fictional narratives for children and adolescents function as public pedagogies (cf. Luke 1996b); that is, they are sites for the education of young people in the knowledge and understandings most valued by the contemporary generation of adults. Closer research attention is particularly warranted, however, given the more formal role of children’s literature in school language and literacy education generally and, in the Australian context, in English curricula developed according to the social justice principles of Australia’s national curriculum.

Concluding comments

The analyses of children’s fiction reviewed in the previous two sections are useful in supplementing the findings of the first category of research examined in this chapter. Research in the second category has been more directly concerned with the representation of motherhood in children’s fiction. Moreover, by employing analytical approaches that have moved beyond simple content analysis to focused on the patterns and trends in narrative themes, the use and
significance of motifs and metaphors, and the relationship between fictional texts and social reality, these studies have not only considered how mothers are represented; they have also begun to explore the meaning and value attached to particular versions of motherhood in fictional narratives produced for children and adolescents. In analysing examples of such texts, they have considered the narrative significance of the relationships between fictional mothers and children, and in some cases this has involved considering the significance of the mother’s presence or absence.

By focusing on only a small number of texts, many of these studies discussed in the latter sections of this chapter have been able to undertake more detailed analyses than those in the first category of research. However, this narrow focus has had its own limitations, one being that some of these studies have simply presented their findings as interesting features of particular children’s books or groups of books, indicative of a need for further research; they have scarcely begun to consider the social implications of those findings. They have therefore been able to make only a limited contribution to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of how, and with what possible effects, motherhood is represented in children’s literature.

Furthermore, like those considered within the first category of research, these studies have paid little or no attention to addressing issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class or sexuality in the representation of motherhood in children’s literature. It might be inferred, then, that even among those researchers in the field of children’s literature who have challenged some of the ways in which motherhood has been represented in such literature, some aspects of those representations have been left largely unquestioned. It seems that underpinning most, if not all, of the studies discussed in this chapter, as well as the narratives on which they have focused, are many of the common-sense understandings of motherhood that, as illustrated in Chapter Four, have been constructed in a wide range of other discursive sites, such that the ‘normal’ mother is assumed to be white, middle-class and heterosexual. Yet, as emphasised in Chapter Three, it is crucial to the task of analysing fictional representations and considering their implications for the (re)production of ideology that such understandings are not accepted as social facts, or as factors that can somehow be bracketed out of the analytical task. Rather, they must be recognised as being among a range of discursively constructed meaning-making resources that work in conjunction with fictional narratives to shape readers’, and text analysts’, interpretations of those narratives.

Admittedly, as explained in Chapter Three, some of these meaning-making resources, typically those that are taken to be common sense, are more readily available than others, and are motivated by concerted interests, although their claims to ‘truth’ are not necessarily any more legitimate than others. However, this points to another noteworthy limitation of the studies discussed in this chapter: they have not attended to the ways in which the linguistic and/or narrative features of a text, and/or its intertextual relationships with other texts, work together to position readers as subjects in particular relations of power and desire, such that some
meanings do, in practice, come to appear more ‘obvious’ or ‘true’ than others. Thus, given that narratives can shape, but not dictate, how they will be read and understood; and given, also, that many of the studies reviewed above lack clear explanations of their theoretical bases or analytic methods, some of the analyses discussed in this chapter can be read only as possible interpretations among a range of other possible interpretations. Moreover, in many cases it remains unclear how any of these possible interpretations need have any impact at all, either on the subjectivities of the readers who construct them or on the organisation of the social world. In this study, these problems are overcome through the use of an analytical approach that is underpinned by the theoretical understandings set out in Chapter Three.

Before turning to outline that approach in Chapter Six, however, it is worth briefly reviewing the value, from the perspective of this study, of the research literature examined in this chapter. When considered as a whole, and notwithstanding the limitations mentioned above, this body of work has been useful in providing a broad view of the limited ways in which motherhood has commonly been represented in the reading materials produced for Australian children and adolescents throughout the twentieth century. It clearly demonstrates that the typical mother in children’s literature has been either a white, heterosexual full-time domestic labourer, whose selfless devotion to the care of others is a powerful force in holding her middle-class, two-parent nuclear family together in times of crisis, or she has been a character whose differences from this normative ideal have served more to promote it than to challenge it.

At the same time, the review of research literature has also indicated some of the ways in which this study can build on the findings of previous research, by highlighting a number of issues relating to the representation of motherhood in children’s literature that warrant further research attention. These and other issues raised in previous chapters are explored in this study through the analysis of representations of motherhood in fiction short-listed for the CBCA’s *Book of the Year: Older Readers* award in the years 1992 to 1994. As critically acclaimed examples of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, these texts are widely available in Australian school and public libraries, and are often used in secondary school English language and literature studies. Together, therefore, they constitute an important site for the investigation of the extent to which historically specific ‘truths’ about motherhood are (re)produced, resisted and/or challenged in the context of ongoing struggles over the social justice ideals that, according to Australia’s national curriculum documents, should be guiding the development of school English curricula.

Finally, this review of research literature has served to support the argument, outlined in Chapter Three, that the investigation of these issues requires attention to more than the content of the texts in the research corpus; consideration must also be given to their linguistic and narrative features, and to the ways in which those features work intertextually with other meaning-making resources to limit the range of possible meanings that can feasibly be constructed by readers. Analytical attention to these features can enable consideration of the implications, in terms of the
(re)production of ideologies of motherhood, of the ways in which motherhood is represented in the research corpus. The task in the following chapter is to explain how, in practice, these matters are dealt with in this study.
CHAPTER SIX: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter has two purposes: the first is to clarify the methodological assumptions that underpin the study; the second is to explain the practices and strategies employed to explore the research problem. As previewed in Chapter One, methodological issues have been addressed either directly or indirectly throughout the previous five chapters. In addition, discussions in the final section of Chapter Three and in Chapter Five have pointed to the need to interrogate the research corpus through the use of certain analytical strategies. In view of this, the first section is intended to draw together and highlight briefly the key methodological assumptions that inform the study.

Key methodological assumptions

It has been emphasised at a number of points in the preceding chapters that texts, including the fictional narratives for adolescents with which this study is concerned, do not have meaning in and of themselves. Rather, meanings are constructed by readers, listeners or viewers as they enter into what, in effect, are social relationships with texts. Consequently, it can never be claimed that a text has any essential or ‘true’ meaning: meanings are multiple, always contestable and constantly shifting. It has also been argued that, although this suggests that there may be no limit to the possible meanings of a text, there are a variety of factors that work discursively in any given context to constrain the practical limits of meaning-making. Thus, some meanings are rendered more ‘obvious’ or ‘natural’, and are hence more commonly produced, than others. What must be stressed at the same time, however, is that while it is often possible, through text analysis, to recognise these discursive factors in operation, it is not possible to predict with certainty what meaning(s) or significance(s) readers of a particular narrative will construct from it.

Accordingly, it is not the task of this study to predict how adolescent readers will interpret the representations of motherhood in the texts short-listed for the CBCA’s Book of the Year: Older Readers award in the years 1992 to 1994. Nor is the study an attempt to discover what effects the representations of motherhood in these texts actually have on the subjectivity of adolescent readers or, in turn, on the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood. Such research goals would entail distinctly different research methods, focusing more on actual readers rather than on texts; moreover, the effects, ideological or otherwise, of particular texts on actual readers can never be precisely determined. Furthermore, as Burbules (1986:241) pointed out, a focus on actual effects can distract attention from the importance of “what we can learn about ourselves and our culture by examining the kinds of books we produce for our children to read.” Thus, the analytical task in this study is to consider the range of possible ways in which the
representations of motherhood in a corpus of contemporary, critically acclaimed, Australian adolescent fiction can, and might reasonably, be interpreted by contemporary readers; and hence to consider what kind(s) of social order, and whose interests, are likely to be best served by these representations, and by their appropriation for educational purposes.

The analysis is therefore driven by a political concern that extends beyond an interest in the texts themselves (Birch 1989). The intention is to highlight the potential effects of representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, in terms of nurturing existing ideologies of motherhood or, alternatively, supporting the articulation of new, counter-hegemonic discourses around alternative conceptions of motherhood. More specifically, given that the texts on which the study focuses are highly acclaimed as ‘good’ books for adolescents and, as such, are often utilised for educational purposes in schools, the study is intended to highlight the potential for these texts, through the ways in which they represent motherhood, to support or subvert the social justice ideals and values articulated in Australia’s national curriculum documents.

As explained in Chapter One, the study is grounded in feminist concerns about the systematic and purposeful marginalisation, in everyday social life, of the interests of women and girls. Accordingly, it is informed by insights developed in the work of feminist literary critics, who stress the gendered nature of texts and readings, and draw attention to the ways in which texts work to reinforce, or alternatively to undermine, the prevailing patriarchal social order (Birch 1989; Moon 1992; Warhol & Herndl 1991). At the same time, it is acknowledged that patriarchal social relations have never been equally oppressive of the interests of all women, and nor has it only been women whose access to social goods has been constrained or denied by the structures of patriarchal society. Consistent with this understanding, it is important that, in considering the social justice implications of representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, analytical attention is not confined to the interests of those who are categorised, according to common sense, as ‘mothers’. Attention must also be given to the interests of members of other social groups, in terms of the possible identities that are made available, or perhaps closed off, to them. Also important in this context are some of the understandings highlighted in Chapter Four: that the category ‘mother’ is a variegated construct; and that those who are so categorised do not constitute an homogeneous group, but have a diverse range of identities and associated interests beyond their identities as ‘mothers’.

Linked to these premises is the ethical issue noted in Chapter Three, in the discussion of the politics of representation and identity. As explained there, the production of identity through representation, particularly when it entails the attribution of what Calhoun (1995) termed ‘trump card’ salience to that identity, can serve repressive interests just as easily as it serves those that struggle against them. Consequently, categories must be invoked cautiously, with attention to the possible negative effects for those persons or groups who are thus represented. On the one hand, it must be recognised that text analysis, as a dynamic social practice, is no more innocent or neutral than the representations on which it focusses: it is itself a discursive and hence
productive process that necessarily entails political moves on the part of the researcher, including the use of categories. On the other hand, recognition of the consequent ethical imperative highlights an important angle of interrogation in this study, suggesting the need to ask to what extent, and with what social justice implications, motherhood is represented in the research corpus as fundamentally affixed to those categorised as ‘mothers’. In other words, is it the case that, regardless of the social context in which they are operating, their identity as ‘mothers’ is always, or always expected to be, a part of their being in the world, and one with supreme moral weight?

In regard to meanings, Birch (1989) argued that it is of less value to ask what a fictional narrative means than to ask how it means. The latter question challenges the relevance and feasibility of attempts to ascertain the writer’s conscious or unconscious intentions, and recognises the ultimate futility of attempts to identify the ‘real’ meaning of the narrative. As Burbules (1986:241) pointed out, even if it were possible to ascertain, in a reliable and valid way, a writer’s intentions, “what interpretations the text will plausibly bear are legitimate whether or not the author intended them.” The question of how a fictional narrative means directs attention instead towards a consideration of the discursive work the text actually undertakes, a task that necessitates recognising intertextuality, and taking into account the complex network of institutions and discursive practices that constitute the reader’s social world. In other words, this question focuses the analyst’s attention not only on the various features of the narrative itself that invite readers to construct meaning in particular ways, but also on the discursive truths and understandings on which readers must draw in order to make those or alternative meaning(s), and which can thus be effectively validated and privileged over other available versions of reality (Birch 1989). These discursive truths and understandings are not necessarily made explicit in the text itself. Indeed, it is likely that in many cases they are deeply implicit, being elements of what Macherey (1978) suggested are the conditions that make the narrative possible, preceding it so absolutely that they seem transparently obvious, even though they cannot be found within it.

Implicit in the above discussion is a recognition that the analyst is not a disinterested observer of a text and its meanings, able to produce a finished and objective body of truth based on a definitive theory and set apart from the processes of history (cf. Calhoun 1995; Gentile 1985; Weedon 1987). As a subject who is necessarily located within, rather than outside, the institutions and discursive practices that constitute the social world in which the text is read, the analyst is an active participant in the construction of meanings. Furthermore, he or she has both an acknowledged political purpose and a discursive history that limits or guides the achievement of that purpose. Under such circumstances, there can be no entirely objective analysis. Text analysis necessarily becomes something that must be accepted as an ongoing project, rather than “an accumulation of finished truths” (Calhoun 1995:285), and indeed as a somewhat indeterminate project at that. Thus Rosenau (1992:117) remarked of this kind of research orientation:

> All its methods relinquish any attempt to create new knowledge in the modern sense of the word. [It] presumes methods that multiply paradox, inventing ever more elaborate
repertoires of questions, each of which encourages an infinity of answers, rather than methods that settle on solutions.

Accordingly, in critically interrogating fictional narratives rather than simply reading them for ‘the’ meaning (Birch 1989; Moon 1992), the analyst must be willing to recognise multiple perspectives and readings, and thus to entertain tensions, contradictions, uncertainties and ambiguities, without necessarily expecting to resolve them in any final way. It has also been argued, in the context of feminist film criticism, that the analyst must be willing “to interrogate [his/her] own thought process and analytical style” (Gentile 1985:14). However, this too must be accepted as an ongoing and always incomplete project: “one cannot … ‘choose’ to step out of ideology. The most responsible ‘choice’ seems to be to know it as best one can…” (Spivak 1982:263). Necessarily, then, “we deal in better and worse understandings, not clear-cut truths” (Calhoun 1995:295).

While it is therefore not feasible to approach fictional narratives in the expectation of producing an absolutely objective and completely definitive analysis, it is nevertheless possible, within the framework of methodological understandings outlined in this section, to avoid the alternative extremes of total subjectivism and incoherence. How this has been achieved in this study, in terms of the research practices and strategies employed, is explained in the remainder of this chapter.

Research practices

The previous section is, effectively, a brief review of the methodological assumptions that permeate all five of the preceding chapters. Similarly, although this section provides an introduction to some of the research strategies and practices employed in this study, it also serves to some extent as a reminder of analytical approaches and questions mentioned previously, particularly in Chapters Three and Five. Where it may be helpful, some of the explanations that follow are illustrated using examples from the research corpus. The purpose of this section, however, is to provide a broad outline of the analytical process, and to illustrate the overall pattern of text interrogation that was developed during that process, rather than to set out a precise, pre-determined template for the analyses presented in the next two chapters. As suggested by Slack (1996), it is impossible in a study of this kind to distinguish a research method that can be packaged separately, either from the theoretical perspectives that inform it or from its application in practice. Accordingly, she advocated working with a conception of method as ‘practice’, which suggests both techniques to be used as resources as well as the activity of practising or ‘trying out’. In this double sense, techniques are borrowed and combined, worked with and through, and reworked (Slack 1996:114).

At the same time, in regard to its practical implementation, some aspects of the analytical task were mapped out well before the process of text interrogation was commenced, as explained below.
**Preliminary planning**

Central to the early planning stages of the study was the selection of an appropriate corpus of adolescent fiction. The decisions to focus on fiction short-listed for the CBCA’s annual awards, and on the *Older Readers* category in particular, have been explained in Chapter One. However, it was important that the texts selected for the study be as recent as possible, and thus still part of the contemporary canon of acclaimed children’s literature likely to be deployed for educational purposes in school and classroom settings. Also, it was important that they should be representative of the kinds of texts typically short-listed for the award of *Book of the Year: Older Readers*. Accordingly, because the study was conceptualised and begun in early 1993, it was decided to focus on the years 1992 to 1994 inclusive, and to analyse all six of the texts short-listed for the *Older Readers* award in each of those three years.

Consequently, although the study focused on 18 texts altogether, only 6 of these could be identified by their titles at the time it commenced. These were the books that were published in 1991 and short-listed for the *Older Readers* award in 1992, namely:

- *Change the Locks*, by Simon French (Ashton Scholastic);
- *Del-Del*, by Victor Kelleher (Random House Australia);
- *Mandragora*, by David McRobbie (Mammoth Australia);
- *Letters from the Inside*, by John Marsden (Macmillan Australia);
- *The House Guest*, by Eleanor Nilsson (Viking); and
- *Peter*, by Kate Walker (Omnibus Books).

When the study commenced, the six books that were subsequently short-listed for the 1993 *Older Readers* award had been published in Australia, and were available from children’s book shops and some libraries. However, the short list itself was still being selected by the CBCA’s panel of judges. When it was announced in March of that year, the 1993 short list comprised the following texts:

- *A Cage of Butterflies*, by Brian Caswell (University of Queensland Press);
- *A Long Way to Tipperary*, by Sue Gough (University of Queensland Press);
- *Pagan’s Crusade*, by Catherine Jinks (Oxford University Press);
- *Looking for Alibrandi*, by Melina Marchetta (Penguin Books);
- *Take My Word For It*, by John Marsden (Macmillan Australia); and

The inclusion of *Take My Word For It* (Marsden 1992) in the 1993 short list presented a problem for the study because of its close intertextual relationship with *So Much to Tell You...* (Marsden 1987), which won not only the CBCA’s 1988 *Book of the Year: Older Readers* award but also a number of other awards, and has been enormously popular in Australia and overseas. As a ‘companion volume’ rather than a sequel, *Take My Word For It* does not rely on readers having previously read the earlier novel. Nevertheless, as the judges for the 1993 awards observed, the two narratives “combine in a rich and complex interweaving” (CBCA, 1993a:6). Moreover, they...
share a number of story elements, including the setting, the time frame, many of the main characters, and some of the events; both take the form of a journal; and both are constructed in such a way that readers are likely to be left with unanswered questions. It therefore seems likely that the majority of readers of *Take My Word For It* either would have previously read *So Much to Tell You*... or would read it subsequently, if only in the hope of clarifying their uncertainties or confirming their guesses. Furthermore, it could be reasonably expected that many of those who had previously read *So Much to Tell You*... would re-read it after *Take My Word For It*, and indeed that multiple re-readings of both novels, or sections of them, would not be unusual. As a result, each of the two narratives could be expected to be a meaning-making resource for the other. With this in mind, it was decided that, although the inclusion of *So Much to Tell You*... as an additional text in the research corpus was not warranted, the analysis of *Take My Word For It* had to recognise the earlier novel as a major intertext.

The remaining six texts in the corpus were all published in Australia during 1993, although they could not be identified by title until March 1994, when the short list for that year was announced as follows:

- *The Gathering*, by Isobelle Carmody (Penguin Books);
- *The Collectors*, by Robert Carter (Harper Collins);
- *Angel’s Gate*, by Gary Crew (William Heinemann Australia);
- *Love Me, Love Me Not*, by Libby Gleeson (Viking);
- *Seeing Things*, by Robin Klein (Viking); and
- *Dougy*, by James Moloney (University of Queensland Press).

Other questions that emerged in the early stages of the study concerned the level of analysis that could manageably be applied to 18 works of adolescent fiction, and the manner in which the analyses could best be presented. Most of the texts in the corpus are more than 150 pages long, and some comprise 200 or more pages of close print. Also, it was anticipated that some of the texts would lend themselves more productively than others to close and detailed analysis of the ways in which they represented motherhood, although in the light of some of the research findings discussed in Chapter Five, differences in this regard were not necessarily expected to be related to the prominence of a mother character. Resolution of these questions was delayed until after most of the texts had been read and subjected to initial analysis.

Eventually it was decided to limit detailed analysis to one third of the corpus, and to accommodate the different levels of analysis of the remaining two thirds by presenting the analyses in two chapters. Accordingly, Chapter Seven comprises the bulk of the analytical work of the study, and presents comprehensive, although by no means exhaustive, individual analyses of six texts that are drawn from all three of the short lists, and include two award-winners and three Honour Books. These texts are therefore roughly representative of the whole corpus in terms of their year of publication and their final award status. More importantly, however, they were selected for detailed analysis because of the wide variety of interesting and
significant ways in which motherhood becomes relevant, in these narratives, to the production of
meaning; in addition, exposure of this variety opened up a wider range of possibilities for further
illustrative analyses of the rest of the corpus. The six texts analysed in Chapter Seven are:

- *Angel's Gate* (Crew 1993), joint winner (with Carmody's *The Gathering*) of the 1994 award
  for *Book of the Year: Older Readers*;
- *Change the Locks* (French 1991), a 1992 *Honour Book*;
- *Seeing Things* (Klein 1993), short-listed in 1994;
- *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), winner of the 1993 award for *Book of the Year: Older Readers*;
- *Dougy* (Moloney 1993), a 1994 *Honour Book*; and

The analyses of these texts are supplemented in Chapter Eight with broader thematic analyses
of the remaining 12 texts in the corpus. It was expected that a number of significant themes or
issues would emerge from the detailed analyses, and that these could then provide the basis for
a less detailed discussion of the representation of motherhood in the remainder of the corpus,
and this proved to be the case. Accordingly, rather than being structured on the text-by-text
basis adopted for Chapter Seven, Chapter Eight is organised on the basis of four broad and
interrelated themes that were identified following completion of the detailed analyses for Chapter
Seven. The selection of these themes took into account not only the themes and issues that
emerged most powerfully from these analyses, but also those that had featured significantly in
the overview of contemporary discourses of motherhood in Chapter Four, and those that were
becoming most strongly evident as the analysis of the remaining texts continued. Again,
however, as could be expected, not all of the remaining texts lent themselves equally well to
analysis in terms of each of the selected themes or issues; even had they done so, it would not
have been feasible to detail all of the various ways in which each theme inflects each of 12
narratives. Given that the primary purpose of Chapter Eight is to supplement the more detailed
analyses presented in Chapter Seven, each of the themes is used as the basis for brief
analytical discussions of a selection of relevant texts from the 12 remaining in the corpus. Some
texts receive closer attention, overall, than others, because of the greater variety of ways in
which discourses and ideologies of motherhood are made relevant in these narratives.

Another practical problem identified early in the study was suggested by Stephens’ (1992) claim,
noted in Chapter Three, that any analysis of the role of children’s fiction in the (re)production of
ideology should take into account both the linguistic and the narrative features of the texts in
question. Stephens’ (1992) work focused on fiction produced for children of up to about 12
years of age, and accordingly many of his examples were drawn from picture books and short
narratives for beginning and early readers, texts that tend to be well suited to close linguistic
analysis as well as to narrative analysis. However, the space and time constraints of this study,
together with the number of texts in the research corpus and the length of each one, limited the
possibilities for close linguistic analysis. While these factors did not preclude giving appropriate
attention to some of the more significant linguistic features of the texts, particularly those selected for detailed examination, it was concluded that it would be more practical and productive to give most analytical attention to their narrative features.

Of central concern throughout the analytical process was the issue of evidence. It is vital to the credibility of the analytical process that whatever readings it produces can be supported by evidence. In this study, evidence includes not only the texts in the research corpus, or extracts from them, but also evidence of the availability of the intertextual meaning-making resources necessary to support the construction of the various readings offered; hence the importance of the review, in Chapter Four, of contemporary discourses of motherhood. As far as is feasible, the analyses presented in Chapters Seven and Eight are supported by both kinds of evidence.

**Getting started**

Spitzer (cited in Birch 1989) suggested that text analysis might sometimes begin with an observation that triggers further inquiry, while Hartman (cited in Birch 1989:98) invoked the idea of a football game: “you spot a hole and you go through.” Although both assumed that these tactics could eventually lead the analyst to the ‘true’ meaning of the text (Birch 1989), their comments are useful in highlighting two important points. The first is that productive text analysis of this kind can rarely, if ever, proceed in a uniform, orderly and linear manner. In this study, a number of possible lines of initial interrogation became evident during the first reading of each text, and were utilised as appropriate, sometimes in conjunction with each other. Also, each step in the analysis opened up new possibilities, often in more than one direction, for furthering the process.

As could be expected, the process of analysis involved a number of re-readings of each text – more in some cases than in others – and often required doubling back to earlier sections of the narrative, or jumping forward to others, so that some sections of each text were examined more frequently and more thoroughly than others. Often, too, the findings of an analysis of one text prompted a re-examination of one or more of the others in the corpus, along a new or modified line of inquiry, sometimes even when analysis of those others had seemed complete. In other words, the analytical path might best be conceptualised as zigzagging in two directions: backwards and forwards through each individual text; and sideways and back again from text to text. Arguably, the process remains incomplete in the sense that further re-readings of the corpus would produce new findings and prompt additional questions, particularly with the passage of time. Certainly, as noted above, while the analyses presented in Chapters Seven and Eight are as comprehensive as possible within the constraints of the study, they are far from exhaustive.

The second point highlighted by the above comments, particularly the football game analogy, is that regardless of its apparent success in creating a seamless fictive world, a narrative is always riddled with gaps, silences, inconsistencies and/or contradictions, and that these offer a ‘way in’ for the analyst (Belsey 1991:604; Davies 1989, 1992; Ebert 1988; Gee 1990; Gentile 1985;
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Gilbert 1988; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Henriques et al 1984; Moon 1992; Tambling 1991; Taylor 1993). Analysis of the texts in this study often began from these ‘holes’, using them as departure points from which to construct multiple readings. Moon (1992) described three categories of readings, or meanings, that can be constructed from texts: preferred or dominant readings, which usually have privileged status, particularly in educational settings, because they draw heavily on prevailing common sense; alternative readings, which are less commonly constructed and are somewhat marginalised in most institutional contexts, but offer no serious resistance to the common-sense understandings that underpin preferred readings; and oppositional or resistant readings, which are relatively rare and are typically marginalised because they are inconsistent with, and threaten to disrupt, prevailing ideologies. While it does not necessarily follow that, in practice, a reading in all three categories can be produced from every text, comprehensive analysis of a text should at least attempt to identify possibilities for meaning-making within each category.

As a starting point for analysis in this study, attempts to utilise narrative gaps and silences to construct alternative or resistant readings often meant considering a narrative in terms of what it does not say, or does not acknowledge, rather than what it does. Tambling (1991:82) claimed that “narrative is also ‘about’ what it excludes”, but in addition it should be recognised as being ‘about’ what it perhaps only seems to exclude. This is not to say that anything and everything can be considered relevant, whether it can be found in the text or not; the point here, as Macherey (1978:150) explained, is that

\[ \text{a true analysis does not remain within its object, paraphrasing what has already been said; analysis confronts the silences, the denials and the resistance in the object – not that compliant implied discourse which offers itself to discovery.} \]

In other words, the question of how a fictional narrative means can often be answered by considering what has been rendered invisible, taken for granted, naturalised, displaced or marginalised in its construction. In analysing representations of motherhood, this involved paying attention to what aspects of, or ideas about, motherhood are not (or not explicitly) represented in the narratives, and to the significance of their omission, as much as attending to those aspects and ideas that are more actively represented.

As in many of the examples of children’s literature research reviewed in Chapter Five, what was most obviously missing, in one sense or another, from a number of the narratives in the research corpus was a mother. Particularly in those cases where a mother is physically (rather than emotionally) absent and is either not mentioned at all or does not appear as a character, this often meant that the most useful way in to the analysis was to focus on the absence rather than the presence of the mother, and explore its significance and implications. In *The House Guest* (Nilsson 1991), for example, it quickly becomes apparent to readers that, for reasons not initially revealed, 12-year-old Gunno’s mother does not live with him and his father. Nonetheless, a number of somewhat cryptic references establish her as a mysteriously ‘absent presence’ in Gunno’s life. Eventually her whereabouts and the reason for her absence become clear, but in the meantime the narrative implicitly links Gunno’s membership of a gang of
adolescent housebreakers, known as the HBS, to his mother’s absence. Thus, readers learn early in the narrative that:

- from the perspective of Jess, another HBS-member, there is something about Gunno that suggests that he’d play the piano or something dumb like that – not be roaming the neighbourhood with the HBS (p. 2);
- Gunno’s father was out all day and sometimes half the night as well, for he had two jobs (p. 2);
- on the rare occasions when Gunno has face-to-face, rather than note-on-the-fridge, contact with his father, the latter is fretful and too tired to want to do anything (pp. 15-16); and
- there was [never] any money to do anything with (p. 16), because neither of [the jobs] paid much. And [also] there was Mum (p. 28).

Readers can infer from the above information that Gunno is not ‘the housebreaking type’, and might not be involved with the gang under different circumstances. By drawing on their common-sense understandings about ‘proper’ family life and the responsibilities of parents, particularly mothers, contemporary adolescent readers might reasonably conclude that if those different circumstances involved Gunno’s mother living with them:

- his father would not need two jobs (his mother’s absence is evidently a drain on his father’s financial resources), and could spend more time at home;
- both his parents, rather than neither of them, would be able to attend to his needs and interests, including his moral education;
- housebreaking would hold less appeal for him, because his parents would be better placed to provide for him financially; and
- his activities would be more closely supervised, so that he had fewer opportunities to stray outside the law.

In other words, while the narrative does not explicitly encourage readers to apportion blame to his mother, it nonetheless invites them to understand Gunno’s involvement in the HBS as attributable in part to her absence. Given that Gunno’s housebreaking activities and their consequences are central story elements, along with his emerging awareness and fear of the unsettling thoughts and sensations he shares with his ‘fanciful’ and ‘unbalanced’ mother (p. 108), Gunno’s absent mother plays what is, in effect, a significant role in the narrative. Within the terms of this study, then, it was necessary to focus not only on the ways in which she is represented in the parts of the narrative that refer directly to her, but also on the ways in which her absence is represented, and to consider the implications of these representations for the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood.

It should be noted that while gaps and silences often served as departure points from which to begin the analysis of the narratives in the research corpus, as did inconsistencies and contradictions, they were also significant throughout the analytical phases of the study. Given
that the sometimes extensive gap-filling work involved in making meaning from written texts is performed at a largely unconscious level, it can often be difficult, even for the text analyst, to identify narrative gaps in a first or second reading: it seems that the more ‘natural’ and taken-for-granted the common-sense understandings with which a gap is sealed, or an inconsistency is ‘smoothed over’, or a silence is accepted as ‘natural’, the less obvious the rupture is likely to be to the reader. Taking into account the extensive range of often inconsistent and contradictory, yet taken-for-granted, understandings about motherhood described in Chapter Four, and the extent to which they are embedded in contemporary everyday social life, it is perhaps not surprising that, in the case of some of the texts in the corpus, some of the narrative gaps, silences, inconsistencies and contradictions in relation to motherhood did not become clearly evident until the analysis was well under way.

Thus, questions that required continuing attention to these aspects of each narrative were among the many that were raised for ongoing consideration, even after a starting point for analysis had been identified. The following examples illustrate the kinds of questions that were used to highlight and explore the ruptures in what initially seemed to be seamlessly constructed narratives.

- To what extent does the narrative assume readers’ familiarity with particular ideas or understandings, and their ability to make associated meanings? Is the preferred meaning literal, or denotative, or is it effected through connotation? What must readers already ‘know’ if they are to find the preferred or most ‘obvious’ reading unproblematic? For example, to what extent, and how, does the narrative rely on readers to draw on any of the common-sense understandings of motherhood discussed in Chapter Four, or perhaps on related discourses, such as the discourse of romance, in order to construct meaning? What are the implications, in terms of the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood?
- What, if any, norms of motherhood are constructed or reinforced in the narrative through its treatment of diversity, for example in terms of age, marital status, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class or sexuality?
- What alternative discourses or intertextual resources could readers feasibly utilise for mean-making, and to what effect? What are the possibilities for readers to draw on counter-hegemonic discourses of motherhood, to construct an alternative or oppositional reading of the narrative? Does the narrative invite or require readers to question their common-sense understandings about motherhood, and use alternative discourses or intertextual resources to construct meaning?
- Does the narrative employ explicit strategies of advocacy or attack that are at odds with the discourses of motherhood that it implicitly supports? If so, what possibilities for resolving the inconsistencies and contradictions are feasibly available to readers? For example, what other discourses of motherhood could readers draw on, in order to ‘smooth over’ the ruptures?
In resolving inconsistencies and contradictions, are readers obliged to privilege some understandings about the social world over others? What are the implications for the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood?

To what extent, and how, does the narrative limit the range of ways in which readers can ‘smooth over’ gaps, silences, inconsistencies and contradictions, and thus limit the possibilities for meaning-making? What might be the effects of this, in terms of readers’ understandings about motherhood?

What aspects of motherhood are marginalised or silenced by the narrative, and to what effect?

Whose perspectives are marginalised or silenced, and with what possible consequences, in terms of understandings of motherhood? For example, is the viewpoint of a child or adolescent protagonist privileged over that of other characters, and if so, what effect does this have on the perspectives available to readers?

As noted earlier, because such questions, together with the insights that emerged from them, typically prompted further questions, in relation to both the particular narrative under consideration at the time and others in the research corpus, they became part of an ongoing, multi-directional analytical process.

**Characterisation and focalisation**

Regardless of the starting point in each case, a major line of interrogation for each narrative focused on the construction of characters. It was important to give attention to all characters in each narrative and their relationships with each other, not just to focus on those identified as mothers. It was noted in Chapter Three that the recognition of the research corpus as a collection of discursive sites in which adolescence is interpreted to and for adolescent readers suggested the need for attention to whether, and how, female adolescent characters are represented in the corpus in ways that work to nurture, or perhaps challenge, certain explicit or common-sense ideologies of motherhood. It might be, for example, that adolescent female sexuality is represented as dangerous and in need of regulation; or that adolescent females are represented as vulnerable to attack without the loving protection of the ‘right’ man; or that female adolescence is represented as a stage of life that ‘properly’ and ‘naturally’ leads to a woman’s eventual fulfilment as a wife and mother.

Similarly, the reviews of discourses of motherhood, in Chapter Four, and of the relevant findings of previous studies of children’s literature, in Chapter Five, suggest the importance of paying close attention to the ways in which male-female relationships are represented in the research corpus. Ultimately, however, it was important to consider the representation of all characters, and their relationships with each other, with the same broad question in mind: what are the implications in terms of the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood? This is because characters are not inserted into fictional narratives randomly or accidentally; even if it is not transparently evident, they always serve some function(s), most notably through their operation as signifiers of ideologies, which critical reading practices can expose for critique (Moon 1992).
It was noted in Chapter Three that, largely as a consequence of the ‘personal’ reading practices that are typically encouraged in school contexts, and are arguably most likely to be employed by contemporary adolescent readers, fictional characters are more commonly understood as real, morally accountable ‘people’. Even from this perspective, however, it can be recognised that, as illustrated in Chapter Four, it is not only through mothers themselves that ideologies of motherhood are (re)produced. In this study, then, the possibility of a ‘non-mother’ character being implicated, directly or indirectly, in the ways in which a fictional narrative represents motherhood could not be discounted without investigation.

In pursuing this line of investigation, a key step involved identifying the focalising character or, in some cases, characters in each narrative. It was explained in Chapter Three that the ways in which a narrative is focalised work in conjunction with the discursive features of texts in appealing to readers’ conscious and unconscious desires, as well as to their common sense; and they can therefore serve as powerful inducements to readers to identify with certain characters while distancing themselves from others. It follows that focalisation strategies have considerable potential to influence not only the extent to which readers align themselves with the discourses and ideologies represented by those different characters, but also their ability to recognise, and hence accept or reject, the various subject positions from which a narrative might be interpreted.

Focalisation is a narrative strategy, discernible in the text itself. Thus, the identification of the focalising character(s) in each narrative was important in providing a convincing account of how, other than simply through habits instilled in school, readers of these texts might come to identify with certain characters in preference to others, and hence to align themselves with certain discourses of motherhood rather than others. As proposed in Chapter Three, however, recognition of the workings of desire and intertextuality also had considerable explanatory power, in terms of how a character might hold such powerful appeal to readers that they would be willing, even eager, to identify with him or her, and align their subjectivity accordingly. At the same time, however, it was important not to overlook the possibilities for readers to construct alternative or oppositional readings by resisting the narrative’s focalising strategies and its invitations to identify with a preferred character.

In the case of *The House Guest* (Nilsson 1991), discussed above, it may be that, for some readers, there is considerable appeal in aligning themselves, temporarily and at the level of fantasy, with someone who is engaged in illicit and risky adventures. However, Gunno’s involvement in housebreaking and theft might reasonably be expected to discourage many readers from identifying closely with him. Indeed, it is possible that some readers with strongly held beliefs about right and wrong behaviour would successfully resist identifying with Gunno, but the way in which the narrative goes about constructing him as a character and introducing him to readers is likely to undermine whatever reservations they might have. Within the first few pages of the narrative, Gunno is depicted as someone on whom readers might well want to model themselves: intelligent and articulate; neat, methodical and sensible; someone to whom
others turn for sound advice; yet also someone who is slightly dreamy, thoughtful and intuitive. Readers learn that he likes drawing, has nice, sensitive-looking hands, shows concern for animals, likes books, and is sensitive to the feelings of others. Importantly, however, as noted earlier, Gunno is represented as ‘not really the housebreaking type’, so that readers who might otherwise remain reluctant to identify with him are, in effect, given permission to do so after all. As a further incentive to identification, Gunno is also revealed as accessibly ‘human’ and vulnerable (cf. Gentile 1985): motherless and effectively fatherless; a loner and something of a misfit, despite his involvement with the gang; and prey to occasional anxieties and troublesome dreams.

Most of this narrative work of positioning readers is undertaken within the opening pages when, significantly, the initially ambiguous and shifting focalisation suggests a disinterested narrative perspective. Thus, the narrative opens as follows:

*It had almost been too easy. They hadn’t been sure whether to do it or not, at first. Indeed, they’d nearly had a quarrel about it. Not that they ever really quarrelled. Jess saw to it that they didn’t.*

*They’d been working on the plan. Jess and the others brought him the information, and Gunno drew it up. He liked drawing and diagrams and it was easier to follow when he did it. So usually they just left it to him (p. 1).*

It is difficult to clearly identify the focaliser here: it could be Jess or Gunno, or it might be the unidentified third-person narrator. For one lengthy paragraph on the second page, however, the focaliser is clearly Jess:

*Yet the thought came to her that Pete and Wally were somehow right too when they complained about his language. Gunno was cool, very cool, and sensible. Good on the job when the others got flustered. But there was something dreamy about him… (p. 2).*

In subsequent paragraphs the ambiguity returns until, on the fourth page, there is another shift, this time to Gunno:

*But this time Gunno insisted on going himself. He was almost dizzy with nerves which wasn’t the way he was used to feeling at all. He looked at the others. They seemed much as usual – Jess capable and calm, Pete a bit jumpy, and Wally as he always looked – a sort of failed version of Pete. They didn’t seem to feel it then. But there was something about this job, this house, that made him uneasy – worse than uneasy – upset (p. 4).*

From this point, half-way through the first short chapter of the narrative, readers are increasingly invited to share Gunno’s thoughts and feelings; thus, the second chapter opens as follows:

*Sometimes Gunno was troubled by what he feared were obsessions. Something someone had said or done or that he had said or done would repeat itself over and over in his mind until he could hardly bear to be himself. It worried him because of his mother. It had never happened before with a place, but he feared it was starting to happen even with that (p. 12).*

For the remainder of the narrative, the focalisation through Gunno is unequivocal. In those first few pages, however, the seemingly detached, yet sympathetic, introduction to him is important in fostering readers’ willingness from the outset to put aside whatever concerns they might have
about his housebreaking activities, and in securing their support for him and his view of the world, including his beliefs and understandings about motherhood.

As indicated in the above discussion, however, it was not sufficient for the purposes of this study to show how forcefully the narratives in the research corpus invite readers to align themselves with, or distance themselves from, various characters. The crucial task was to show what the effects of this might be, in terms of the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood. In other words, the analysis had to show how, in aligning themselves with or distancing themselves from each character, readers would also be positioning themselves, at least during the period of their engagement with the narrative, in relation to the discourses and ideologies represented by that character.

The discourses and ideologies signified by a narrative’s characters are identifiable by a range of means, some of which have been mentioned already. For example, it is sometimes a matter of asking what common-sense understandings underpin a character’s description or behaviour; or what values, beliefs and attitudes are connoted by the narrative’s description of the character’s physical appearance, speech, or mannerisms; or what intertextual resources readers are required to utilise in order to interpret that character. In other cases, it is useful to explore the ways in which characters are constructed in binary opposition to each other, such that a particular way of being is privileged over another. In such cases, a particular value may not be explicitly linked with one character, but the attribution of an opposing value to another character who is constructed in opposition to that character can be enough to encourage readers to draw their own conclusions. In still other cases, a character’s attitudes on various issues are made evident in his or her conversation, or they are more or less explicitly interpreted by the narrator on the reader’s behalf (and sometimes judged as well).

Typically, a combination of these methods is used to indicate to readers what discourses and ideologies are signified by the various characters, often as each one is introduced. In Peter (Walker 1991), for example, the narrative opens as Peter’s attempt to sleep in on a school holiday morning is foiled by the cleaner’s entry into his bedroom at nine o’clock. Mrs Minslow’s comment – ‘Sleeping in at your age? I don’t know what your mother’s thinking of’ (p. 1) – clearly expresses her disapproval of not only Peter, but also his mother for indulging what she herself regards as an unhealthy inclination. She then does what, in her view, a mother should do, by obliging him to get out of bed so that she can wash the sheets. Adolescent readers are already likely to sympathise with Peter’s wish to sleep in during the holidays; and they are positioned, as a result of the narrative’s exclusive focalisation through him, to align their subjectivities with his. They can have little hesitation, then, about rejecting Mrs Minslow’s views on what constitutes a ‘good’ mother, particularly given Peter’s highly negative description of her as a stereotypical ‘interfering old woman’: our cleaning lady-cum-semi-resident snoop; her floral stomach advancing on me; this nosey old jelly-roll (p. 1). Perhaps most importantly, however, Mrs Minslow is shown to be insensitive to 15-year-old Peter’s masculinity:

She never knocks, just barges straight in. You could be doing anything!
I had my underpants on but I grabbed my clothes off the chair and held them in front of me as I edged out the door. What a way to start the day – being perved on by a myopic old cleaning woman (p. 1).

Two pages later, readers are introduced to Peter’s mother, or at least his view of her:

Mum’s a nurse in a doctor’s surgery and she’s great, you’d like her. She’s the one who took me through the ‘birds and bees’ routine when I was eleven. Of course I knew most of it already anyway, from dirty jokes and drawings on the back of toilet door, but I liked the way she did it – straight from the hip. Know what I mean? Like I was a man and understood all the big words she was using (p. 3).

In focusing first on this particular aspect of his mother, Peter signals that issues of male sexuality and what counts as an appropriate version of masculinity are central to his narrative. Moreover, in less than three pages, a clear binary opposition, in relation to these and other issues, has been established between Mrs Minslow and Peter’s mother. Thus, without the aid of any physical description of the latter, readers can infer that she is not old, fat or myopic; does not wear floral dresses; and is probably attractive. Also, she is not a ‘snoop’; she does not treat Peter like a child; and she would not dream of threatening his emerging manhood by barging into his bedroom without permission. For all these reasons (and others not yet revealed), Peter’s mother is shown to be a ‘good’ mother, in stark contrast to Mrs Minslow, whose ‘motherly’ concerns for Peter’s welfare he finds repellent and invasive, to the extent that he backs away and opens a cupboard door between her and himself when, remarking that he looks pale, she moves to feel his temperature (p. 13). Although it is not clear whether Mrs Minslow is a mother at all, readers can be left in little doubt that she represents a version of motherhood that is an obstacle to independent manhood, while Mrs Dawson signifies a version that actively supports it, and the focalisation of the narrative through Peter is a key factor in securing this outcome.

As these examples from The House Guest (Nilsson 1991) and Peter (Walker 1991) help to illustrate, a focus on the construction of characters in each narrative was fundamental to the analytical task. In particular, it was important to pay close attention to the character or characters through whom the narrative is focalised; to the strategies by which readers are encouraged to align their subjectivities with, or alternatively to distance themselves from, these characters; to the relationships between these and other characters; and to the discourses and ideologies represented by each one. All these aspects of characterisation have implications for the process of meaning-making, and hence for the narrative’s discursive power in supporting, or challenging, the prevailing hegemony of common sense about motherhood.

Problems, outcomes and significance

In yet another analytical strategy that pays attention to what is not there as well as to what is, Lees (1991) suggested the value of considering how the problem on which a narrative focuses is eventually resolved and narrative closure is achieved. It is largely from these aspects of a narrative that readers construct its moral and thematic significance, with implications in turn for their construction of subjectivity and the (re)production of ideology. However, it follows from the
discussion of the nature and purposes of children’s literature in Chapter Two, and also from the explanation of the concept of discourse in Chapter Three, that what constitutes a problem of sufficient magnitude to be the focus of an adolescent novel is not a matter of universal agreement, but the effect of historically specific discourses. Thus, it was useful in this study to consider what is constituted in each narrative as a problem in the first place, and the extent to which, implicitly or explicitly, this is linked to or reliant upon particular discourses of motherhood.

For example, the problem around which the narrative is constructed in Change the Locks (French 1991) is that most of 11-year-old Steven’s early childhood memories are missing or fragmented. This not only creates uncertainty and confusion for him, but also leads him to suffer ongoing anxieties and intermittent nightmares. The narrative thus appears to be centrally concerned, like many other fictional narratives for adolescents, with a struggle for identity. However, in this case the struggle is not an internal one that Steven must resolve for himself as part of the process of growing up: instead, by showing his mother to be constantly evasive when confronted with his questions about their past, the narrative invites readers to recognise her as the ultimate cause of his distress. The invitation is made all the more forceful both by her representation very early in the narrative as insensitive and neglectful — in Steven’s own terminology: slack (p. 16) — in regard to her children’s physical and psychological needs, and by the construction of a binary opposition that starkly contrasts her with the ‘good’ mother of Steven’s best and much envied friend, Patrick. Ultimately, the resolution of Steven’s problem requires a fundamental change in his mother, such that she not only fills in the gaps in his personal history, but also begins to transform herself into a better mother. In effect, then, one of the major concerns of the narrative is the question of what constitutes a ‘good’ mother.

It should be noted that the desire for narrative closure, both in terms of drawing a story to a satisfying conclusion, and in terms of achieving a coherent thematic significance, is itself a discursive effect and one that, according to Stephens (1992; see also Culler, cited in Birch 1989; Lewis 1990), writers often frustrate by leaving the end of a narrative ambiguous or uncertain. This again had implications for the analysis, because ‘open’ endings do not necessarily prevent readers who have learned to expect some sort of resolution, and whose desires for completeness and coherence may demand satisfaction, from imposing closure themselves (Stephens 1992; Griffith 1993a). Moreover, the fact that its ending is left open does not necessarily mean that a narrative does not work to (re)produce any particular ideology, only that it does not do so explicitly. According to Stephens (1992), the acculturational purposes of children’s literature tend to militate against open endings, but he observed that whether open or closed, and even in pessimistic texts in which ‘good’ apparently fails to triumph over ‘evil’, endings in children’s fiction most commonly work to reinforce an existing hegemony. Thus, in regard to problems, outcomes and significance, some of the questions the analysis sought to explore were as follows:

- What are the central problems with which the narrative is concerned?
- To whom or what does a preferred reading of the narrative attribute these problems? To what extent, if any, does this attribution rely on particular discourses of motherhood?
Could the source of the problems feasibly be recognised differently through an alternative or oppositional reading?

- Does the narrative provide readers with a satisfying (closed) resolution to the problems on which it focuses? If so, what form does that resolution take, and how is it achieved?
- What are the implications in terms of the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood?
- What other resolutions might have been possible, and to what effect?

- If the resolution remains open, or partially open, to what extent, and how, does the narrative invite readers to invoke and affirm particular discourses in constructing their 'own' resolution? What are the implications of this, in terms of the research question?

Concluding comments

The purpose of the preceding discussion is to provide a broad illustration of the research practices employed in this study. Guiding the implementation of these practices was a recognition of the narratives in the research corpus as sites where a variety of complex, sometimes interrelated, and never-resolved cultural struggles over meanings and identities, not just struggles over ideologies of motherhood, are played out. This in turn entailed a recognition that while these narratives could be understood as disciplinary sites for both the regulation of adolescence and the nurturing, in adolescent readers, of self-regulated conformity to social norms of adulthood, including norms of motherhood, they also had to be understood as possible sites for nurturing resistance to those norms and the construction of alternatives. Accordingly, the process of analysis sought to draw attention to the implications, in terms of the inclusive values of social justice and equity that inform Australia’s national curriculum documents, of the ways in which motherhood is represented in contemporary, critically acclaimed adolescent fiction. At the same time, it recognises the ambivalence inherent in all texts and all readings, such that no text can be read, and no reading can be understood, as unproblematically linked to a single political interest or motive.

In the following chapters, the analyses that resulted from the application of the research methodology and practices outlined in this chapter, within the theoretical framework developed in Chapter Three, are presented. As explained earlier, Chapter Seven comprises detailed analyses of 6 of the 18 texts in the research corpus, presented on a case-by-case basis, while analyses of the remaining 12 texts, organised according to key themes, are presented in Chapter Eight.

1 It is also worth noting here that, at a 1993 public lecture organised by the CBCA’s Queensland branch, Marsden stated that there had been a strong demand from readers for a sequel to So Much To Tell You....
CHAPTER SEVEN: DETAILED ANALYSES OF SELECTED TEXTS

Introduction

In this chapter, detailed analyses of 6 of the 18 texts short-listed for the CBCA’s award of Book of the Year: Older Readers in the years 1992 to 1994 are presented. Each of these individual studies is introduced with an indication of the status of the text in question, a synopsis of sufficient detail to aid readers unfamiliar with that text, and an explanation of the narrative features that are most significant to the analysis that follows. The major themes that emerge from these detailed analyses and from the literature reviews in Chapters Four and Five provide the basis for the thematic analyses, in Chapter Eight, of the remainder of the corpus. The conclusions that can be drawn from both sets of analyses, together with their implications, are set out in Chapter Nine.

The case of Seeing Things (Klein 1993)

Robin Klein is recognised in Australia as an outstanding writer for children of all ages; many of her books have been short-listed for, or have won, CBCA or other awards and commendations, and one has been made into a children’s television series. Seeing Things (Klein 1993) was short-listed for the 1994 CBCA awards in the Older Readers category; and the length and style of the narrative suggest that it is most likely to appeal to younger adolescents, including readers in upper primary school. The novel concerns Miranda Palgrave, a girl in Year Six at school and thus about 11 years old, who startles her family by appearing to develop psychic abilities. Eventually, but not before she and her younger brother, Jimmy, have been abducted by her older sister Yvette’s ex-boyfriend, it becomes clear that Miranda’s imagination and excellent memory have aided her in constructing an elaborate, attention-seeking hoax.

The omniscient third-person narrative is focalised entirely through Miranda, often so closely that readers appear to be ‘listening in’ on what is represented as the random flow of her thoughts. While they are therefore privy to many of Miranda’s opinions, feelings, daydreams and fantasies, and much of her everyday thinking, they are also able to maintain some distance from her, at least in relation to some issues, because she is represented as someone who is not entirely likeable. For example, she evidently derives some perverse pleasure from being rude, aggressive and defiant in her dealings with both teachers and other students at school. At the same time, readers are likely to be more sympathetic towards Miranda than they otherwise might be, because it becomes clear that her pleasure is mixed with considerable pain. For example, at one point Miranda is given ‘time out’ for fighting in the school playground:

*Miranda went, whistling softly to herself, hands crammed into her jeans pockets, elbows braced at an angle calculated to jab anyone she met in the ribs ... but when*
she reached the deserted multi-purpose room there didn’t seem to be much point in maintaining pretences. Only pride kept her from covering her face with her hands to create a tearful barrier between herself and the world with all its jangling problems (pp. 82-83).

The nature and source of these ‘jangling problems’ have by this time been gradually revealed to readers by means of a series of hints and allusions, the first of which is offered in the first chapter, when Miranda’s teacher is reading to her class at school. Up to this point in the narrative, the only clue to Miranda’s pain is the silence around the topic of her parents, a silence that is particularly marked, because a variety of other people with whom she evidently shares her everyday life – Jimmy, Grandma, Yvette and her baby, and Uncle Bernie – have all entered her thoughts within the short time-frame encompassed by the first five pages.

> Being read aloud to was about as fascinating as boiled parsnips. She’d always disliked it, even as a small child, no matter who had done the reading. Even if it had been...

> Some things you didn’t allow into your mind – you had a secret foolproof mechanism for dealing with them. Miranda used the mechanism briskly enough to send the image far out into space, that image of a person sitting by her bed reading aloud (pp. 6-7; ellipsis in original).

Soon afterwards, Miranda and Jimmy are walking home from school through the cemetery, and while Jimmy pauses to play in a puddle, Miranda wanders down a gravelled path to two graves side by side and stood quite still, gazing down at them (p. 10). She tries to recall a sequence of lines ... from “Palgrave’s Golden Treasury”, which she’d adopted as her own special book because of the surname. Palgrave, the same name as on the two headstones.

> “... But she is in her grave, and, O!
The difference to me!” she whispered, feeling an odd sensation behind her eyelids. But tears and Miranda Palgrave had absolutely nothing to do with one another, so she went briskly and separated Jimmy from his puddle (p. 10).

Simultaneously, these hints work to shape readers’ interpretations of the narrative, and particularly their interpretations of Miranda, in a number of ways. First, readers can conclude that Miranda’s parents are dead (eventually it becomes evident that they were killed in a level crossing accident two and half years previously), and can insert themselves, in fantasy, into her situation and draw on their own anxieties and fears of loss to identify with her. They can thus recognise the depth of her pain while also recognising her own denial of it, as evidenced by her repeated refusal, as in the quotes above, to entertain thoughts of her parents. Moreover, they can use their understanding of that pain as a meaning-making resource to explain her problems and her outward surliness and defiance, and to perceive that her interpretations of other people’s actions and motives are sometimes distorted. In other words, readers are encouraged to see themselves as more perceptive than Miranda, able to understand her better than she understands herself; consequently, they are able to empathise with her without necessarily aligning themselves with her on all issues. For example, they may well decide that Miranda’s hostility towards her classmate, Tiffany Lawrence, and her interpretation of Tiffany’s attempts to befriend her, are cynical and unfair, and on this issue their reasoning is eventually confirmed. However, as the discussion below illustrates, readers’ empathy with Miranda in regard to the loss of her parents has implications for their acceptance or rejection of her beliefs about ‘proper’
parents, and for the meanings they are likely to construct from the narrative’s representations of motherhood.

Since their parents died Grandma has assumed the role of substitute parent for Miranda, Jimmy and Yvette. The latter is now a parent herself, but following her separation from her partner, Dave, she is staying with a friend while she looks for another place to live, and has left her three-month-old son, Regan, in Grandma’s care. Thus, as well as caring for Jimmy and Miranda, Grandma has taken on the everyday work and responsibilities involved in caring for Regan; and she continues to take some responsibility, albeit at a distance, for Yvette’s welfare. A further addition to both the household and the workload is Grandma’s younger brother, Uncle Bernie, whose apartment is being renovated and who evidently contributes little in the form of domestic labour.

In the absence of her parents, and with Grandma worn to a frazzle (p. 2), Miranda is represented as a girl with cares and responsibilities beyond her age. Readers learn within the first three pages of the narrative that, although she is still in primary school, Miranda’s thoughts are tinged with habitual anxieties of one kind or another (p. 1). Thus, during the afternoon at school, she wonders what to cook for dinner to help Grandma, remembers to order more firewood, considers how much work might be involved in re-painting her bedroom, and resigns herself to making do with worn shoes and a threadbare jacket for the winter, in the absence of any money to replace them. Miranda evidently tries to ease Grandma’s workload, for example, by taking on much of the work and responsibility of caring for Jimmy, and also assisting with Regan’s care, despite her professed dislike of babies. From the perspective afforded by ‘cultural’ feminism, this could be read as a positive representation of female strength and ‘feminine’ relational and nurturing capacities, although such a reading supports an essentialist understanding of femininity. However, the narrative positions readers such that the most ‘obvious’ interpretation is that Miranda’s responsibilities are excessive for a girl of her age, and that she herself is in need of nurturing (the two readings are not incompatible). Indeed, by the close of the narrative, readers can hardly doubt that it is Miranda’s continuing grief over the loss of her parents, together with the failure of the remaining adults in her life to recognise and attend to her legitimate needs as a child, that prompts not only her anti-social behaviour at school, but also the hoax that finally places her at the centre of attention.

In particular, readers are positioned by the narrative, working in conjunction with the prevailing common-sense understandings about motherhood discussed in Chapter Four, to perceive that it is the loss of her mother that has ‘naturally’ been most distressing for Miranda. This is not explicitly stated, but while there are a number of specific references to Miranda’s mother in the narrative, her father is explicitly mentioned only once, and this is in his capacity as ‘Grandma’s son.’ Moreover, the occasional non-specific references to a ‘parent’ work as invitations to readers to fill in the gaps by using their existing knowledge and understandings as meaning-making resources. As explained in Chapter Four, the word ‘parent’ is often readable as ‘mother’ without any disruption to the meaning-making process. Readers not only ‘know’ that mothers
are more central than fathers to their children’s lives, they are also likely to know, on the basis of both their own lived experiences and their familiarity with a range of popular cultural texts, that certain parenting roles and responsibilities, including the pedagogical work of reading to children, are more typically allocated to mothers than fathers. Thus, in the case of the extract quoted earlier, when Miranda recalls an image of a person sitting by her bed reading aloud (p. 7), readers are likely to take it for granted that she is thinking of her mother rather than her father. In the scene at the cemetery, also discussed above, they are directed more overtly by the narrative to assume this, when Miranda quotes, But she is in her grave, and, O! The difference to me! (p. 10), as she gazes at the graves of both her parents.

There are so few adult male characters in this novel that readers could reasonably infer that men are redundant when it comes to childcare; indeed, they might even be read as threats to children’s welfare. Grandma’s husband is never mentioned; there is no indication of whether, or to what extent, the children’s father was involved in their care before he died; Dave’s professed interest in seeing his son is represented as being primarily motivated by a desire to harass Yvette; and while Uncle Bernie, a bachelor with no children of his own, is evidently fond of the children, he also perceives them as objects that are often in the way. For example, when he wants to impress an afternoon visitor, he suggests sending Jimmy and Regan to a childcare centre. While Uncle Bernie is represented as far more likeable than Dave, both are characterised as motivated by greed and self-interest in their dealings with children, rather than by the selfless concern for the welfare of others that is commonsensically associated with women: Dave is keen to use Miranda’s apparent psychic abilities for criminal purposes, while Uncle Bernie envisages more legitimate money-making activities, with himself in the role of Miranda’s manager.

None of the male characters can be read as caring or nurturing; these relational qualities and concerns are represented in the narrative as specifically ‘feminine’, in opposition to ‘masculine' interests in more material concerns, outside the domestic sphere. Moreover, the work of caring and nurturing, together with other domestic forms of work such as cooking and sewing, is constructed as women’s primary, if not their only, form of work. Jimmy’s teacher, the school principal, and Grandma’s neighbour, who does ironing for a local family, are the only female characters who are explicitly depicted as having paid employment outside their homes, although Grandma takes occasional work making curtains at home and Yvette has applied for a part-time job at a cinema complex. Miranda herself is not represented as having any interests beyond her home and family, or any particular career aspirations, although she is evidently intelligent and Grandma observes that she is capable of better results at school than she has been achieving.

Some of these females, notably Grandma and Miranda, are represented as strong, independent, intelligent and capable, in contrast to the representations of Dave and Uncle Bernie as shallow, weak and foolish. Moreover, Miranda can hardly be described as conventionally feminine, particularly in terms of her appearance – she dresses in a deliberately unappealing way – and her behaviour at school. Yet none of these characters is represented in a way that effectively
challenges the established, gendered division of labour, either within the home or in the paid workforce. Furthermore, while Miranda makes a point of deriding the conventionally feminine interests of Tiffany Lawrence and her friends, it can be inferred from her ambivalent reaction to Yvette’s gift of pretty notepaper, and later from her pleased acceptance of Tiffany’s invitation to visit, that her derision is related more to her hurt at not being part of such a group than to any genuine rejection of Tiffany and the kind of femininity that she and her friends represent.

However, while motherhood and the work involved in caring for children are strongly linked with femininity in this narrative, the female characters are not shown to perform the work of parenting equally well. In effect, a number of contrasting versions of motherhood are represented through the characters of Yvette, Grandma, Miranda, and Miranda’s dead mother.

Evidently Miranda not only misses her parents, but also feels that they have somehow been inconsiderate in abandoning her. She is insistent that parents, and specifically mothers, are supposed to remain constant in their children’s lives. Accordingly, when Jimmy wishes that Regan could stay with them permanently, Miranda reminds him that Regan is Yvette’s baby, and that parents and kids belong together (p. 18). Shortly afterwards, when Grandma refers to Regan as her own responsibility, Miranda thinks, He’s not! He’s Yvette’s... Mothers should be around for their kids, right from the word go, they should stick around until their kids grow up (p. 19). Later, she imagines herself telling Yvette, Kids shouldn’t have to go through that! They should have proper homes, proper parents who stay put and don’t... don’t... (p. 35; ellipses in original). Readers can infer that Miranda is thinking not only of Yvette’s responsibilities to and for Regan, but also of her own absent parents, and their sympathy for her loss is likely to encourage them to support her views, even if it seems unreasonable to blame Miranda’s parents for dying. Further, the linking of ‘parents’ with Yvette and the specific reference to ‘mothers’ mean that, in effect, ‘parental’ responsibilities are equated with those of biological mothers; hence, readers can again reasonably infer that Miranda is thinking more of her mother’s unfulfilled responsibilities than her father’s.

While Miranda’s mother can be read as having failed, albeit unintentionally, to fulfil the requirements of a ‘good’ mother, she is also idealised in her absence. Indeed, as an absent presence (cf. Scutter 1999) in Miranda’s life, her significance is disproportionate to the number of explicit references to her in the narrative. The lack of any specific information about her, as a result of Miranda’s constant refusal to let her thoughts dwell on her, works as an invitation to readers to fill in the gaps by drawing on their own resources, including their own fantasies of the perfect mother, in order to accept what Miranda herself apparently believes: that, had her mother not died, she would have no problems; nor, perhaps, would Jimmy be such a dreamer, in trouble at school for not paying attention, and bullied in the playground; and nor, indeed, would Yvette’s life be so chaotic.

Yvette has left Regan in Grandma’s care because she says she cannot cope with him at her friend’s flat, and fears that Dave, an ex-criminal against whom she has taken out an injunction
order, will attempt to kidnap him. However, a number of aspects of the narrative work together to prevent readers from identifying with Yvette or feeling much sympathy for her, and to encourage them instead to recognise her as a deficient mother. For example, Miranda herself, through whom the narrative is focalised and with whom readers are most likely to align themselves, does not think highly of Yvette, and tells Grandma that *the odds are stacked against that poor little kid good and proper ... having a ratbag like Yvette for a mum* (pp. 29-30). It is also clear that she doubts the validity of her sister’s claims:

> Although she always claimed to be on the verge of financial disaster, she’d somehow managed to buy extravagant status symbols for Regan... Yvette playing dolls, Miranda thought sardonically. Only she’s discovered this particular baby doll makes messes and won’t sleep through at night. So she’ll leave all that part to Grandma, thanks very much, and the other business with Dave is probably just a very convenient excuse... (pp. 20-21).

In addition, as noted in Chapter Four, women who leave their children, for whatever reason, are typically represented in overwhelmingly negative ways which work intertextually with this narrative, and particularly with Miranda’s views, discussed above, to encourage readers to interpret Yvette as an ‘unnatural’ mother, lacking in ‘proper’ feelings for her child. Moreover, these intertextual resources are further reinforced by others, also discussed in Chapter Four, that construct unmarried teenage mothers like Yvette as irresponsible transgressors of social norms. Thus readers are positioned to align their own views of Yvette, and the version of motherhood she represents, with Miranda’s:

> I could just about kick Yvette! she thought angrily. Never taking responsibility for anything and making people feel sorry for her into the bargain. Just *dumping* a three-month-old baby on Grandma, there’s no other word for it! Gran’s too old, it’s just not fair, specially when she’s already got Jimmy and me to bring up ... It’s Yvette’s own stupid fault for getting tangled up with a creep like Dave in the first place! Yvette the birdbrain, nothing but trouble... (p. 19).

Grandma is more sympathetic, but eventually expresses some impatience with Yvette, and in so doing she makes her own views on motherhood absolutely clear:

> They call it some fancy name now, bonding or something, but what it boils down to is that little boy getting to know just who his real mother is! You’re going to have to face up to your responsibilities sooner or later, Yvette. Regan can’t stay here with me indefinitely and you can’t pop in to see him just when it suits you, either – it’s not good enough! ... I know you feel you can’t cope, but it’s not going to get any easier if you don’t make a start. I’ll help out as much as I can, you don’t have to be told that, but Regan’s got to be with *you* – where he belongs. Just as soon as possible (p. 133).

Evidently it is not the quality of the love and care that Regan is receiving from Grandma that is in question; the problem, as it is presented here, is that Regan is not ‘bonding’ with his ‘real’ mother, with whom he belongs and for whom Grandma is ‘naturally’ an inadequate substitute. Here Grandma draws on the discourses of popular psychology and childcare literature that stress the importance of the ‘natural’ bond between infants and their biological mothers, thus implying that mothers are more important to their children’s healthy development than fathers. Significantly, it does not occur to Grandma, and nor is it likely to occur to readers already familiar with common-sense understandings on this issue, that Regan has ‘got to be with his father, where he belongs, just as soon as possible’; indeed, she, together with the rest of the family, is...
Detailed analyses of selected texts

at pains to ensure that Dave does not discover Regan’s whereabouts. In the meantime, Grandma distances herself from ‘they’, who ‘call it by some fancy name’, and thus presents her view of motherhood as a universal ‘truth’ that is so ‘obvious’ and ‘natural’ that it hardly needed the confirmation of experts. The fact that it is advocated by Grandma, who is characterised as a sensible woman whose judgements are unerringly correct, and whom Miranda evidently admires and respects, helps to establish this view of motherhood as virtually beyond question for readers.

Certainly Yvette does not question the discourse of motherhood articulated by Grandma. On the contrary, she offers the loss of her own parents as the explanation for her problems, although given that mother-infant bonding is the topic under discussion, readers can easily infer that, again, ‘parents’ means ‘mother’. While she acknowledges the quality of Grandma’s care for her, Yvette’s defence of herself is based on the premise that such care is not the same as the ‘proper’ parenting done by biological parents, specifically, it can be inferred, by biological mothers. As she reminds her family of her own loss, she seeks from them (and also from readers) the same sympathy that readers have already, in all likelihood, extended to Miranda, and her words play yet again on readers’ fantasies and fears of loss, inviting them to soften their opinions of her:

Everyone seems to think that just because I’m the oldest I got over it better than the other two. Well, I didn’t, and I’m not even out of my teens yet, either, and expected to... manage... (p. 133; ellipses in original).

The representation of Yvette as a teenage mother whose life is in chaos offers multiple warnings to readers. First, it can be read as a signifier of the consequences of inadequate parenting. Readers are invited to attribute Yvette’s unwise life choices, particularly her choice of the ‘wrong man’, and their negative effects for herself, her family and society, to her lack of parental care and guidance, and particularly to her lack of a ‘proper’ mother. Second, Yvette signifies the potential dangers in the expression of female sexuality, and serves as evidence of the need for the constant regulation of female desire, especially during adolescence. Third, Yvette’s story provides a warrant for moralising about adult (female) responsibility, as in the case of Grandma’s explicit pronouncements on the responsibilities of motherhood and the narrative’s more covert allusions to responsible sexual behaviour. Thus, Grandma’s observation that Dave’s kidnapping of Miranda and Jimmy has shocked Yvette into taking over the task of caring for Regan is vital in enabling readers to construct a satisfying narrative closure: previously positioned to read Yvette as a ‘bad’ mother, they can now welcome the signs of her transformation into one whose willing acceptance of responsibility for both her own and her child’s life is evidence of her successful transition from childhood to womanhood.

Grandma herself is represented as loving, capable, self-sacrificing and protective, with the ‘instinctive’ expertise of the ‘good enough’ mother described in Chapter Four. She works constantly inside the home, her only paid work being the occasional sewing job that she undertakes at home in order to help her support her extended family. From Miranda’s perspective, she is always busy devoting her energies to the care of others, with no time to just...
sit still for once with her hands in her lap doing nothing at all (p. 23). Miranda’s comments on her grandmother’s workload can be read in feminist terms, as a critique of the drudgery often experienced by women confined to the domestic sphere, but this interpretation is undermined by the absence of other opportunities to construct a feminist reading of this narrative. Moreover, it is also rendered problematic because of the difficulty of constructing an unequivocal reading of Grandma as a ‘good’ mother. One problem with such a reading is that, as already noted, she is not the children’s biological mother; thus, according to her own arguments and the discourses on which they rely, and also as Miranda and Yvette both imply, she can never be an entirely adequate substitute for a ‘real’ mother. Moreover, it seems that if Grandma’s life is unreasonably hard, it is not necessarily because much of the work associated with motherhood is drudgery, but because she is too old for motherhood, which might feasibly be less onerous for a ‘proper’ mother.

On this issue, readers are invited to align their perspective with Miranda’s, made evident in her thoughts about Yvette, quoted earlier – Gran’s too old, it’s just not fair (p. 19); that is, Grandma is too old to be undertaking the sheer hard work of looking after children, particularly a young baby. In support of this view, a neighbour points out that babies need someone young and energetic to look after them (p. 44), a statement that is based on particular assumptions about what babies need, although admittedly it does not assume that the ‘someone’ should be the baby's biological mother, or even a female. The statement, however, has the weight of a self-evident truth, in the light of Miranda’s observations of Grandma’s exhausted appearance and frantically busy life, and what readers have come to understand of Miranda’s needs. ‘Someone young and energetic’ would presumably be better able to cope with the physical work of caring for three children, and might then have had time to notice and attend to Miranda’s emotional needs earlier than Grandma does. Furthermore, it was awful, the way Grandma had to toil and cope with so many things. Elderly people could die from heart attacks through overwork (p. 25). Even with the best of intentions, and despite her many other virtues, Grandma cannot overcome biology, and so she may not be able to fulfil Miranda’s requirement that ‘proper’ mothers stick around until their kids grow up (p. 19).

If Grandma is not a ‘proper’ mother, neither is Miranda; at least, not yet. From her own perspective, one that readers are invited to share, looking after Jimmy ‘properly’ would involve being more patient with him; spending time with him and doing things that he wants to do, even things she does not enjoy herself, like reading him that stupid Robin Hood book he’s so rapt about (p. 15); protecting him from danger: she wondered sometimes how he would manage to get through life if she wasn’t there to look out for him (p. 12); and teaching him how to deal with life: You shouldn’t ever let people put things over on you (p. 16). This prescription is reminiscent of the prescriptions for ‘good’ motherhood discussed in Chapter Four, and Miranda does not question it; instead, like many of the women whose personal accounts of motherhood contributed to the studies discussed in Chapter Four, she feels ashamed that she does not do these things sufficiently or consistently, and that Jimmy exasperates her so easily. Thus she thinks, I’m not very nice to him … not as much as I should be (p. 14), and repeatedly resolves to
be more accommodating to his needs and wishes. Miranda’s ‘confession’, her recognition of
herself as lacking, and her resolutions to improve herself make ‘obvious’ sense within the terms
of normative discourses of motherhood that link femininity ‘naturally’ with a self-sacrificing
concern for the needs and interests of others, particularly children. By implicitly assuming
readers’ acceptance of such discourses, the narrative invites readers’ assent to them, and works
to embed them even more firmly within contemporary common sense.

Interestingly, the extent of Miranda’s concerns for Jimmy’s needs and interests highlights the
flipside of the same problem. She couldn’t help hovering ... she would, if possible, have moved
all the way back down the school into the prep grade in order to be with him and protect him (p.
9); indeed, her involvement in the playground fight mentioned early in this analysis results from
her leaping too hastily, and unnecessarily, to his defence. Grandma observes that Miranda’s
form of mothering is ‘smothering’, and potentially damaging for Jimmy’s development:

I’ve held all along he’s not as slow as those teachers at the school make out. And if
certain people a bit closer to home would only give him some space... I mean, not
keep coddling him... (p. 182; ellipses in original).

Here Grandma’s comments serve as advice to Miranda, and also to readers, about the finely
tuned judgement required in order to be a ‘good’ mother, who must be constantly available to
her children, and alert to their needs and interests, while also giving them space in which to learn
independence.

Despite her alleged over-protection of Jimmy and her professed opinion that little kids and
babies are pains (p. 18), Miranda evidently does not lack the ‘maternal instinct’ necessary to
become a ‘good’ mother. For example, Regan feels small and helpless enough in her arms to
rouse a measure of protective instinct (p. 19), the same ‘instinct’ that also, readers can infer,
prompts her protective attitude to Jimmy. However, readers are also invited to recognise that it
is not yet appropriate that Miranda, still a child with legitimate needs and interests of her own,
should renounce those needs and interests and devote herself to the care of others. She has
plenty of time to develop her mothering abilities, and the narrative’s resolution suggests that,
during that time, she will receive the kind of care and support that will prepare her to become, in
due course, a ‘good’ mother herself.

The versions of motherhood represented by the characters in Seeing Things do not initially
appear to be conventional: one is dead; one is a grandmother and great-grandmother; one is a
child; and one is an unmarried teenager with spiked and coloured hair. Nor can it be said that
either of the two separate but linked family units formed at the close of the narrative – that is,
Grandma, Uncle Bernie, Miranda and Jimmy living together in Grandma’s house, and Yvette and
Regan living in Uncle Bernie’s apartment – bears much outward resemblance to the
conventional nuclear family. Nonetheless, the models of motherhood represented in this text
work to reinforce, rather than to challenge, common-sense understandings that link the work of
mothering with biology, and hence with females and their supposedly ‘natural’ instincts and
desires to subordinate their own identities and interests to those of others. Furthermore, while it
offers some criticism of purportedly ‘masculine’ values, the narrative cannot be read as a coherent critique of the notion of separate spheres that underpins the conventional nuclear family; and nor does it constitute a challenge to normative discourses of ‘good’ motherhood that effectively construct all mothers, indeed all women, as more or less deficient.

The case of Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993)

A more complex novel, evidently targeted towards older adolescent readers, is Gary Crew’s Angel’s Gate (1993). This book shared the 1994 award of Book of the Year: Older Readers with The Gathering (Carmody 1993), and again, its writer is recognised as a major talent in the field of Australian children’s literature. Many of his picture books and novels have won, or been short-listed for CBCA awards, and he has a number of other awards for children’s fiction to his credit.

In Angel’s Gate, the lives of a rural doctor’s family are disrupted following the discovery of the body of an itinerant fossicker, apparently murdered at his isolated bush camp. Uncertainty surrounds the fate of two unkempt children occasionally seen by locals in his company; and during the months before first one child, and then the other, is brought into the doctor’s care, their night-time raids on local farms in search of food generate considerable speculation within the local community about murderers, ghosts, monsters, and feral children. The story of the ‘wild’ children, Leena and Micky, runs parallel to the story of Julia and Kim Marriott, the doctor’s children, who are of similar ages; and in both cases issues of freedom and independence feature strongly.

The narrator is Kim, who was ten years old at the time of the events he relates. The older Kim does not contextualise his retrospective account, and only his remark that an art supplies catalogue was the first of many that I would come to own (p. 105) signals to readers that any significant length of time has elapsed since the events of which he writes. This comment also identifies Kim as an artist, and in conjunction with his descriptions of himself as a child, surveying the world from his perch in the camphor laurel tree or his ‘eyrie’ on the roof, or eavesdropping on conversations, it suggests to readers that he is an observer of life, more than a participant in it.

Indeed, much of Kim’s account is based on what others told him during the brief period he describes, or on what he overheard of other people’s conversations. Thus, as well as Kim’s own interpretations of events, the narrative incorporates some of the interpretations offered by other characters, although these are always mediated through Kim, who remains the focalising character throughout. This does not mean, however, that readers are likely to align their subjectivities closely with Kim’s; on the contrary, they are positioned, by means of the focalisation through Kim, to regard most of the characters in the novel, including Kim himself, with scepticism, and to be wary of identifying too closely with any of them. For example, while the young Kim is likeable enough, readers may be reluctant to identify closely with someone who
is evidently perceived by many of the other characters to be over-protected and overly impressionable. At a number of points in the narrative, readers are invited to recognise Kim’s perspective as naive, and to rely instead on (what they perceive to be) their own, more astute interpretations. However, the range of subject positions effectively available to readers is limited by the ways in which the narrative works intertextually, primarily by invoking a range of discourses that underpin prevailing social anxieties and contemporary common sense. Hence, the scope of readers’ ‘own’ interpretations is likely to be limited. Similarly, the possibilities for interpreting the ways in which motherhood is represented in the narrative may also be constrained. While the issue of how motherhood should properly be understood is not explicitly central to the narrative, its representations of Kim’s mother, his 15-year-old sister Julia, and Leena, the older of the ‘wild’ children, are of particular interest to this study.

Kim’s family is conventionally middle-class. His father, Ivan, typifies the patriarchal head of the family, the other members of which live in varying degrees of fear of him. His mother, Helen, is a nursing sister, but as she works for her husband, whose surgery is in the house, she is effectively at home even when she is at work, and vice versa; she is therefore almost always available to her family. Most commonly, Helen is depicted in the kitchen, which serves as the central gathering point for all family members; but unlike the others Helen is rarely shown to leave the house. She makes two trips to the coast with Julia, one to buy her a new dress for the Spring Dance, and one to attend an orientation session at her prospective boarding school, but these trips are linked with her identity as a mother, rather than with any interests of her own. Indeed, it seems that she has none; although she is evidently well regarded in the community, she appears to have no friends or social life. While this is also true of her husband, he finds time for leisure activities that are independent of both his relationship with his family and his professional identity, whereas Helen appears fully occupied with her domestic responsibilities and a professional life that keeps her close to the domestic sphere, and within which she is constructed as an extension of her husband.

Kim evidently adores his mother and wants to please her; for example, he is very distressed when he angers and upsets her by fuelling local gossip with his stories at school about Leena: I wouldn’t have hurt my mother for anything (p. 118). Even when she is angry with Kim, however, she remains loving and gentle: I started crying and she put her arm around my shoulder. ‘Poor Kimmy,’ was all she said, but she patted me and stroked my head (p. 119). She also tells him, I haven’t told your father, and I don’t think I will. He might not be as lenient as me. You know his temper (p. 118).

Indeed, Helen frequently mediates, covertly or overtly, between her husband and her children, particularly Julia, who is engaged in an ongoing battle of wills with her father. As in the case above, Helen usually acts on behalf of her children, to moderate their father’s authoritarian parenting. Thus, while Ivan disapproves of Julia’s boyfriend, Helen is more sympathetic: without her permission, Bobby wouldn’t have been allowed anywhere near our house (p. 89). Helen’s sensitivity to both husband and children sometimes enables her to anticipate and smooth over...
difficulties before they develop; for example, she asks Kim to accompany his father when he collects Julia from the Spring Dance, because I don’t want any more trouble between your father and Julia (p. 83). Similarly, when Ivan is having difficulty hanging some pictures and Bobby offers to help, my father swung around ready to confront him, but my mother was faster. ‘Here,’ she said, holding out a jar of nails to Bobby, ‘Would any of these do?’ (p. 191). At other times, Helen’s peace-making interventions are more overt, for example when Julia wants to extend the visit to the boarding school to include an overnight stay at a hotel, and Helen gently reasons with Ivan to gain his consent. On one occasion only, when he disapproves of the dress Julia buys for the dance, Helen openly defies Ivan, although in a manner that remains calmly firm: I was with Julia when she chose this dress. It won’t be going back (p. 82).

It is evident, then, that the work of parenting in the Marriott household, like the domestic and professional work, is divided along strictly gendered lines. Helen is portrayed as a strong and capable woman who deals kindly but firmly with her husband’s patients, including Leena and Micky, and demonstrates an admirable assertiveness in dealing with the visiting welfare officers. Nevertheless, she represents a form of parenting that is characterised by stereotypically ‘feminine’ qualities and concerns, while the kind of parenting in which Ivan engages is conventionally ‘masculine’, marked by physical and emotional remoteness, strict discipline, and a lack of overt displays of affection. These representations work to reinforce common-sense understandings of motherhood and fatherhood as qualitatively different forms of parenthood, linking the work involved in being a mother with biological femininity.

Helen’s conventional version of motherhood initially appears to be beyond reproach; certainly Kim makes no overt criticisms. However, the narrative works subtly to undermine a positive reading of Helen through its positioning of readers in relation to Julia. Kim is very attached to his sister, and does not look forward to her departure for boarding school. Julia’s approval is at least as important to Kim as Helen’s: when she too berates him over the incident for which Helen has already reprimanded him, he comments, I could stand anything but Julia hating me – anything (p. 120). In the face of her continuing harangue, he recalls, I lost my willpower then. I lost all pride and determination. I just couldn’t get along without her liking me (p. 122).

However, Julia is not an entirely appealing character, and her treatment of Kim does not appear to warrant the high regard in which he holds her. She is portrayed as intelligent, quick-thinking, ambitious and determined, and she craves independence, but she also has some less admirable qualities: she is deceitful – a truly accomplished liar (p. 21) – manipulative, self-centred, cruel and inclined to sulk when she cannot have her own way. Also, she often makes use of her sexuality to get what she wants. Thus, it is the esteem in which he holds Julia that most strongly encourages readers to question Kim’s perceptions. Indeed, although Julia remains the object of the reader’s gaze, just as she is the object of Kim’s gaze, and although readers are likely to be disinclined to identify too closely with her, they may nonetheless concur with her assessment of Kim: You’re such a baby, I worry that you’ll ever grow up (p. 25). Readers are invited to perceive what the young Kim apparently cannot, and thus to endorse,
albeit reluctantly, Julia’s repeated assertions that he is stupid, if only because he persists in adoring her, despite her constant manipulation and bullying. For example, Julia insists on joining him when he reveals his intention to attend the inquest into the fossicker’s death:

> I couldn’t believe my ears. ‘Julia,’ I said, ‘that’s not fair. You know that will spoil it for me. You know it will. If anyone sees you...’
>
> She licked her finger and turned a page.
>
> ‘Julia,’ I tried again, but she cut me off.
>
> ‘If you make plans with Bobby behind my back...’ she pretended to give her attention to something on the page, ‘...then you can expect me to ruin them if I’m not included. So, since I’m going now, you’d better fill me in.’
>
> I knew that I was trapped. Reluctantly I revealed my plan (pp. 45-46).

While her treatment of Kim may alienate readers from Julia, her determined efforts to assert her independence and defy her father’s authoritarian rule invite sympathy, even admiration. When the first of the ‘wild’ children is caught, Julia comments to Kim, *They get all of us sooner or later* (p. 2). Her remark is rendered more powerful by its repetition in the narrative; Kim recalls it first at the end of the brief introductory chapter, and then repeats it later as part of his chronologically sequenced account. In evoking an image of childhood as entrapment, Julia’s comment calls upon readers to identify with her as fellow prisoners seeking freedom, and to recognise adults and their values as the ‘they’ who keep them imprisoned. Julia perceives life in a small and conservative rural community to be suffocating, and she does not want to be *locked up in some snooty girls’ school* (p. 141). In the context of these images of entrapment, readers are encouraged to share her view that her parents’ desire for Julia to grow up a lady (p. 140) is a threat to her freedom that should certainly be resisted. Readers are thus positioned to view Julia’s final departure to the coast as a triumphant escape to freedom, and without the aid of critical reading strategies, they are unlikely to recognise that it is a highly constrained form of freedom towards which she is so rebelliously headed. As Scutter (1999:248) pointed out, and as the remainder of this discussion illustrates further, Julia is indeed a “true daughter of the patriarchy.”

While Julia’s attitude to Darling McMurtry might seem overly vicious, the given name of ‘Darling’ and Kim’s description of her dresses *copied straight out of ‘Pollyanna’*—*either powder blue or anaemic pink* (p. 79) invite readers to perceive Darling as representative of a passive, pretty and insipid form of femininity that, again, should rightly be rejected. Thus the narrative works to position readers such that while they are unlikely to align their subjectivity with Julia’s, they are also unlikely to reject her view of the world entirely. Consequently, when Julia comments that Kim is *mummy’s little darling* (p. 131), and makes repeated innuendoes to the effect that Helen does too much for him, readers cannot simply dismiss this as further evidence of her unpleasantness. Moreover, the possibility that Julia might be right is strengthened by, for example, Kim’s description of Helen’s fussing over preparations for his camping trip with Bobby, and by his remark to Bobby that *My parents won’t let me out of their sight, unless I’m with [Julia]* (p. 211). When their father reprimands Julia for being a poor role model for Kim, she defends herself: *I am a good model for him. If it wasn’t for me, he’d be the...* (p. 143). As she is cut short by Helen, readers can only speculate about what Julia believes Kim would be; but in the context...
of her other comments to and about Kim, and her own complaints of being suffocated, readers can reasonably infer that she thinks Kim is cosseted and over-protected, particularly by their mother, just as Jimmy is by Miranda’s over-zealous care in Seeing Things (Klein 1994).

Thus, Kim’s positive representation of Helen as a mother is called into question by the ways in which Julia is represented and the contradictory ways in which readers are positioned in relation to her. They must at least consider the possibility that Helen is actually over-protecting her son and inhibiting his growth to maturity, apparently without him realising it, possibly not even from his present adult perspective. This idea works intertextually with notions derived from mainstream psychoanalytic theories and made familiar by persistent images of the suffocating, life-denying mother in the texts of popular culture. Moreover, the story of Leena and Micky reinforces it further.

Leena is in the care of the Marriott family for some weeks before Micky is brought in, and during this time she becomes very attached to Kim. Following his initial success in gaining a positive response from Leena, Kim spends much of his spare time in her room. Here he plays the role of ‘parent’ to her ‘child’, eliciting her story as he encourages her to draw, engages her in pedagogic play, and devises strategies for teaching her to read while appearing to accept her insistence that she can already do so. In other words, in his relationship with Leena, Kim offers some challenge to the common-sense understandings in regard to motherhood, femininity, and the gendered division of domestic and caring labour that are reinforced elsewhere in the narrative and also, as discussed above, in Seeing Things (Klein 1993). He demonstrates that neither the relational capacities nor the pedagogic skills of ‘good’ mothers are exclusive to females. However, in indicating what Kim’s capabilities might be, were he permitted greater independence, this aspect of the narrative also serves to support Julia’s belief that he is over-protected at other times.

An even more powerful reinforcement to this suggestion comes at the climax of the narrative. Kim, normally very fearful, is left at home one night in a violent thunderstorm to look after Leena and Micky while Ivan attends an emergency; Helen and Julia are absent overnight on a trip to the coast. Kim secures the house from the storm and acts calmly when the power fails: as I lit a candle, I congratulated myself on how well I had handled the crisis (p. 253). Later, when someone breaks into the house looking for Leena and Micky, Kim locks them safely in their room and confronts the intruder alone in the dark, in an incident that earns his father’s pride and finally solves the mystery of the fossicker’s death. While it is characteristic of children’s fiction that such adventures occur in the absence of adults, it is also crucial to the representation of Kim as a victim of over-protective and manipulative females that this incident occurs during the rare absence of both Helen and Julia. It is also significant that it is his normally remote father who trusts Kim to be responsible, who steps in to aid him at the end, and whose praise Kim evidently values most. The implication that it is only during the absence of his mother and Julia that Kim can develop a meaningful (male) bond with his father both draws on and works to
reinforce popular discourses that construct mothers as dangerous threats to their sons’ masculinity.

The parallelism of the relationship between Julia and Kim with that between Leena and Micky also works to reinforce the representation of Kim as a child whose growth to independence is being impeded by women. Leena is unsure of her exact relationship with Micky, but she has cared for him in the absence of both their mothers since he was a baby and she herself was very young. She tells Kim that Micky is like my baby (p. 250), and when Micky is finally brought in from the bush, she takes over much of his daily care. She washed him, she taught him to use the toilet, she supervised his eating, even coming into the kitchen to help prepare his food (p. 240); in other words, she performs tasks that are commonsensically regarded as those of a mother. Micky is cuddled up to Leena and wrapped in a blanket when Kim first meets him; she talks to him the same way some children talk to dolls (p. 239), and rocks him as mothers with babies do (p. 240). Some days later, Kim observes that Leena is still spooning Micky’s food into his mouth for him, again as if he were her baby.

In discussions about Micky’s future, Ivan identifies Leena’s relationship with him as a problem that warrants expert intervention:

While Micky stays with her, he won’t develop. I think that might be the trouble with his speech. Maybe he can talk, but because she does everything for him, he doesn’t need to. He just has to look at her and she acts. As if he’s a baby, don’t you see? (p. 247).

Ivan’s own approach to parenting may be problematic for readers, but here his opinion is authorised by his medical expertise, and reinforced by prevailing common sense. The comparison he makes with the mother-baby relationship both relies on and works to reinforce common-sense notions of ‘natural’ and ‘intuitive’ mother-infant bonding, and of healthy child development as ultimately requiring the severing of this bond. Readers are positioned to accept Ivan’s ‘expert’ opinion without question, as Kim evidently does when he suggests to Leena that Micky needs to learn to do things for himself. Leena, however, insists that Micky is different. He’s from out there. Up in the hills and caves. There’s nothing you can teach him if he doesn’t want to learn (p. 251). Here Leena attempts to challenge the truth claims of developmental psychology, but at most she can introduce only a slight element of uncertainty for readers; her reliability remains unproven, and her judgement in relation to Micky has already been called into question by Ivan’s ‘expert’ diagnosis, which is itself reinforced by its ‘obviousness’.

Not only is the story of Leena and Micky pervaded by ideas about what constitutes a ‘good’ mother, with the question of what happened to their own mothers always lurking darkly in the background; it also serves as an analogy to the story of Julia and Kim. As such, it invites readers to consider the possibility that Julia, despite her criticisms of Helen’s over-protective care of Kim, is actually suffocating him herself. In this case, however, it is not that Kim’s development is being impeded because Julia does everything for him, as Leena does for Micky. Instead, the shifting focalisation works to suggest to readers that Julia may be suffocating Kim by feeding his fearfulness, encouraging his dependence on her – for example, by frequently

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defying her father’s rule and allowing him to sleep in her bed when he is scared at night – and maintaining a manipulative control over him. Julia’s departure for boarding school as the narrative closes, and just after the ‘wild’ children have been taken into the care of the welfare authorities, works to reinforce this suggestion; in the final scene, Kim climbs up to his eyrie and lifts his arms to face the wind, and as he recalls Julia asking, Would you fly, Kimmy? Would you? (p. 274), readers can infer that, now that she has gone, he might finally be able to do so.

Taken together, the representations of Helen, Julia and Leena work to represent mothers and female caregivers as impediments to children’s growth, and specifically to the healthy development of boys (cf. Scutter 1999). These negative representations contrast with those of a number of male characters and their relationships with Kim. While his father’s authoritarian style of parenting seems to be less of a problem to Kim than it is to Julia, a number of significant men in Kim’s life effectively compensate for its inadequacies. There is Bobby, who brings Kim fossils, takes him camping, and intervenes on his behalf to Julia: whenever I was with Bobby the world was right. He had that way about him: he was big and strong and, no matter what, he was always happy (p. 10). There is also Pa Cossey, an old man who, every time he visits, brings Kim something special that he has found or made, makes frames for his fossil rubbings, and hugs him as Ivan has never done. Finally there is Mr D’Arcy, Kim’s teacher, whom he describes as a monster, except during craft lessons when, significantly, the girls were absent from the classroom, attending sewing lessons: for one and half hours every Friday, D’Arcy was a boy’s best friend; he taught every one of us how to make something wonderful (p. 101). Taken together, and in opposition to the negative representations of the three central female characters, the representations of these men and their relationships with Kim work to suggest what constitutes suitable parenting for a boy, and to represent the influence of women and girls as inappropriate, even sinister, and ultimately harmful.

Other, minor female characters are portrayed, like Helen, Julia and Leena, as strong, intelligent and capable, and they occupy positions of power and responsibility. The coroner who conducts the inquest is a woman, as is the town librarian, Miss Dunne, who encourages Kim’s interest in local history. Ruby Parsons was a powerful woman and everyone in our house admired her – especially Julia (p. 40), and as Julia stresses to Kim, it is Ruby who runs the local Empire Hotel, not her partner, Hamish. Queenie Geebung, an Aboriginal woman who manages the Paradise Cafe, tells Kim and Helen her people’s stories about the local area; and the welfare officers, a doctor and a social worker, are also women. However, apart from possibly Queenie, it seems that these women are single and/or childless, so they cannot be read as presenting positive alternative versions of motherhood.

Moreover, as with the three main female characters, the narrative invites readers to be sceptical, at best, of these other women, their apparently positive qualities, and the versions of femininity they represent. For example, Queenie’s capability and strength are seen to dissolve into panic when she decides that the ‘wild’ children are an evil spirit from Aboriginal lore, and readers are encouraged to wonder if she is not, after all, just an emotional woman who believes in silly
stories. As welfare officers with responsibilities for children, the doctor and the social worker might reasonably be expected to demonstrate some caring and nurturing qualities, regardless of their sex. However, dressed in suits and carrying brief cases, and too important to have first names (p. 166), they are portrayed as insensitive and lacking genuine concern for the welfare of Leena and Micky; indeed, their very femininity is called into question.

The versions of femininity represented by Ruby and Miss Dunne are also rendered problematic by the narrative. Kim’s parents admire Ruby’s business acumen, but when Julia wants to take a part-time job at the Empire Hotel, they make it very clear that they do not want their own daughter working in such a business. In pointing out to Julia that they, and not Ruby, are responsible for her upbringing, they invoke middle-class social prejudices that construct women in public bars as immoral, even if they are the managers of those bars. After listening to Julia’s admiring description of Ruby’s office, clothes and jewellery, Kim recalls that our mother described Ruby's get-ups as ‘loud’ (p. 132), thus undermining any positive interpretation of Ruby that readers might otherwise construct from Julia’s description. Later, this time expressing admiration for the extent of Ruby’s influence, Julia tells Kim of her job interview with the manager of the Mayfair Hotel, where she and Helen stayed at the coast. Her comment that I’d say he was a very, very good friend of Ruby’s (p. 270) not only connotes an influence that is sexual, but also indicates that Julia recognises and is impressed by this. Thus readers are alerted to yet another possibly dubious aspect of Julia’s character, her desire for sexual power.

Julia takes Ruby’s version of powerful femininity as her model: I want to be like Ruby, to learn how to manage a place, like she does. She’s her own boss – she’s in charge – and she never went to any girls’ school (p. 141). However, a positive reading of Julia’s determination and her managerial aspirations is rendered problematic by the ways in which the descriptions of Ruby work intertextually with prevailing middle-class social prejudices, according to which ‘decent’ women do not manage public hotels, wear ‘loud’ clothes and jewellery, or make overt use of their sexuality for their own gain. In the case of the welfare officers, the notion of a successful and independent career woman is linked in negative terms with a lack of femininity; in Ruby’s case, it is represented as equally undesirable through its link with an overtly sexualised femininity.

With reference to Miss Dunne, Julia advises Kim:

don’t be fooled by that ‘I’m just a Hicksville librarian’ act that she puts on: I’ve heard a few stories about what she gets up to with those boys working up at that dam – and let me tell you, after library hours, she’s not slow to let her hair down (p. 25).

Kim’s friendship with Miss Dunne appears to be unaffected by Julia’s claims, which are not substantiated, and to which no further reference is made. Given Julia’s representation as an accomplished liar, her remarks may be read as simply evidence of the unpleasant aspects of her character; but they also work to alert readers to the possibility that Miss Dunne is not what she seems. Indeed, when read in conjunction with the contradictory ways in which, as illustrated above, the narrative positions readers in relation to not only Julia, but also most of the other
female characters, they work to suggest that the actions and motives of women and girls are not necessarily what they seem to be. All females, readers might reasonably infer, should properly be regarded with suspicion.

Julia’s remarks about Miss Dunne also connote images of uncontrolled and illicit female sexual desire, thus playing on prevailing social anxieties – invoked also in the representations of Ruby and, as discussed below, Julia herself – about the consequences of failure to confine the expression of female sexuality within the patriarchal institutions of marriage and motherhood. In so doing, they work to suggest that Kim’s friendship with Miss Dunne may be tainted with hidden (sexual) dangers.

However, a more specific warning against unregulated female sexuality is contained within Kim’s story about Maureen Peed, an unmarried young woman whose three-month-old baby was found dead in its cot. She herself subsequently disappeared, and is rumoured to have suicided. Kim tells the story as evidence of the unpleasant character of Ben Cullen, who was believed to be the baby’s father, but it serves a dual purpose: as Kim remarks, Helen told Julia the story as a warning, I suppose (p. 34), one that, in effect, is offered to readers as well. The story of Leena and Micky is yet another such warning, less explicit, but no less sinister. No-one, including the children themselves, knows who their mothers were, or what has happened to them, and given that their father is dead, these mysteries must remain unsolved; however, readers can hardly avoid concluding that Leena and Micky are the products – indeed, the victims – of ‘improper’ sexual relationships and ‘abandoning’ mothers.

The issue of unregulated female sexuality effectively pervades the narrative from start to finish, most conspicuously through the representation of Julia. From the first page, where Kim describes waking in the middle of the night to find Julia standing at his window, holding the lace curtains aside, Julia is represented in terms that allude to her sexuality: she looked very beautiful; the moonlight on her face, her dark hair out and spilling down her back, her white night-dress falling in straight folds like marble (p. 1). Kim observes that, at age 15, already she had gone steady with the same boyfriend for over two years (p. 9), and describes how his after-school trips with her to the library regularly lead to ‘chance’ meetings with Bobby, which result in Kim occupying himself in the reading room while Julia disappears with Bobby in his car. Kim’s school friend, Keithy Ferguson, remarks that his mother has told him that Julia has a bad reputation (p. 108), and even if she is not yet sexually active she is certainly very sexually aware, as her remark about Ruby’s relationship with the manager of the Mayfair Hotel indicates (cf. Scutter 1999).

Keithy’s first encounter with Julia occurs on the night Leena is caught raiding his parents’ farm. Keithy accompanies them when Leena is brought to the surgery, and he and Kim are about to have some supper in Kim’s bedroom when Julia appears in the doorway. She is quick to manipulate Keithy into telling what he knows about the ‘wild’ children:
As in the case of Julia’s remark about Miss Dunne, this representation of Julia invokes prevailing social anxieties in regard to the expression of female sexuality, understood as all the more problematic within discourses that, as outlined in Chapter Four, construct the adolescent female body as a particularly dangerous site in need of constant sexual regulation. The narrative thus invites readers to consider whether Ivan’s attempts to limit his daughter’s freedom might be justified; moreover, in conjunction with other aspects of the narrative discussed above, it suggests that girls and boys require different kinds of parenting. Girls, it is implied, require strict regulation, both for their own protection from ‘bad’ men like Ben Cullen and for the protection of ‘innocent’ boys and men, like Kim and Keithy. Boys, however, can be read as requiring less regulation and more contact with other males, to foster their healthy development and protect them from deceitful, manipulative, suffocating females.

From this perspective, the quality of Helen’s parenting of Kim is suspect, but so too is the quality of her parenting of Julia, which is evidently more lenient than Ivan’s preferred approach. It is Helen who supports Julia’s relationship with Bobby, and who buys Julia the sandalwood perfume that smells so delicious, terrific and beautiful (pp. 94, 146, 147) to Kim and Keithy, and, according to Julia, has been worn by women of influence for over four thousand years (p. 94). It is also Helen who helps Julia to choose the controversial dress for the Spring Dance, to which Kim predicts the other local girls will wear jeans or square-dance stuff (p. 79). He describes what he and his father saw when Julia came downstairs in her new outfit:

The first thing we saw were her shoes. They were silver, with high heels and a flash of something sparkling at the side. Then came her legs, bare to well above the knee, then the dress, bright red, shiny and very short. Very, very short. And tight fitted. ‘A sheath,’ she called it later; skin tight across her stomach and cut low, revealing the beginnings of her breasts. And since her dark hair was up, pinned somehow at the back of her head, her neck and shoulders were exposed (p. 81).

At issue here is neither the appropriateness of Julia’s dress or sexual behaviour, nor the appropriateness of Helen’s actions in supporting her bids to express her sexuality, nor even the appropriateness of representations of sexuality in adolescent fiction, although these issues regularly prompt intense public debate. Of most significance to this study are the implications of representing female sexuality in particular ways. Julia may be read as a character who, recognising the power that is available to her as an object of male desire, willingly positions herself as that object, but in a way that allows her to retain a sexual subjectivity that challenges the social conventions that work to regulate her sexuality towards marriage and motherhood. However, her use of her sexuality to manipulate and gain power over males – including ten-year-old boys – works to construct unregulated female sexuality as undesirable; exacerbates readers’ unease about the extent of her influence on Kim; and reinforces other suggestions throughout the narrative that Kim will benefit from Julia’s departure to boarding school. For example, in the light of Julia’s overt sexuality, Kim’s habit of sleeping in her bed when he is fearful cannot simply
be read as babyish, but works intertextually with contemporary public concerns to suggest the possibility of incest, a suggestion echoed in the explicitly stated concerns of the welfare officers in regard to Leena and Micky (cf. Scutter 1999).

Ultimately it is the ways in which Julia is represented that are most relevant to the interpretations of motherhood made available in Angel’s Gate. Generally, Julia is represented in ways that undermine Kim’s otherwise positive portrayals of other female characters, with the result that the various representations of women and girls in this narrative together work to construct an extremely negative image of women and girls. More specifically, unmediated female nurturing of males is represented as an impediment to healthy male development, while the mother-daughter relationship can be read as the means by which, in the absence of strong male authority, this dangerous version of femininity is reproduced. The narrative thus works discursively to justify the continued social regulation of women, particularly in regard to issues of sexuality, such that female identity and sexuality can only legitimately be expressed within the institutions of marriage and motherhood, as constructed within a patriarchal social order.

The case of Change the Locks (French 1991)

Simon French is another writer of contemporary Australian children’s fiction whose work has won considerable critical acclaim. Two of his early novels were short-listed for CBCA awards, and one of these won the 1987 Book of the Year Award: Older Readers. Change the Locks (French 1991) was short-listed for the 1992 CBCA awards in the Older Readers category, and was subsequently named as an Honour Book. This short novel, apparently targeted towards readers in upper primary or lower secondary school, is narrated by 11-year-old Steven Matovic, who is also the sole focalising character. Steven lives with his mother, Lisa, and his baby half-brother, Dylan, near a small rural town, where he has attended primary school for five or six years. However, until the recent period in his life with which his account is concerned, he has been able neither to recall any earlier period in his life nor to persuade Lisa to break her silence about their past. His narrative describes his gradual discovery of where he and Lisa came from and why the past has been shrouded in such mystery.

Although his narration is retrospective, Steven does not appear to use the advantage of hindsight to interpret or reflect on his experiences, or those of others in his story. There is also an interesting inconsistency in the narration when, for one sentence only, Steven switches from past to present tense to state, I don’t know where we came from (p. 21), although at the close of his narrative it is clear that, from his current perspective as narrator, the statement is no longer accurate. As the strikingly short and blunt opening sentence of the novel’s fourth chapter, this inconsistency, together with the absence of any retrospection, serves to emphasise Steven’s distress over Lisa’s silence about their past, and to suggest that this distress is ongoing. It thus also works to reinforce an interpretation of Lisa that, from the very first pages of the novel, is likely to be highly critical.
To begin his account, Steven describes waking in the middle of the night to the sound of Dylan’s restless breathing in the cot beside him, a sound that experience has evidently taught him will quickly become a cry. In turn, Steven expects that the crying will bring a sudden glare of hallway lights and lots of trouble (p. 1) if he does not quickly attend to Dylan. As he hastily does so, with goose bumps and a tight stomach (p. 2), he recalls that there is no reason to panic because Darryl, Dylan’s father, has recently left Lisa. Later, he wakes again to the sounds of Lisa’s car being stolen, apparently by Darryl, and goes to the door to investigate; but this time Lisa wakes too: the lounge room light was switched on behind me and my mum strode to the doorway, ready to be angry about being woken (p. 2). In these scenes, the narrative invites readers’ sympathy for Steven, and encourages them to align themselves closely with him and his perspective on events and characters, by introducing him as a boy who is accustomed to living in fear. At the same time, Lisa is introduced to readers as a woman who is more likely to be angry than concerned when her children wake her at night, raising immediate doubts about the quality of her parenting. As it unfolds, the narrative works to confirm readers’ suspicions by positioning them to interpret Steven as a child with problems, a victim of his mother’s neglect, and to view Lisa herself as a ‘bad’ mother, rather than recognising her as a victim herself.

Steven describes falling asleep in class at school the following day in terms that make it clear that this is a regular event, more related to the fact that his night-time sleep is regularly interrupted by Dylan, or by domestic arguments, than to the specific incidents of the night before. Readers can easily share his teacher, Mrs Cale’s, perspective, when he describes her concerned reaction when he falls asleep in her class: inspecting his face and eyes closely, she asks if he is feeling all right, and her voice wasn’t cranky, although her face frowned a bit (p. 5). Later it becomes evident that others share Mrs Cale’s concerns; his friend Patrick Hetherington recalls Steven’s first overnight visit, when he cried in his sleep: My mum was worried about you, y’know. I think she still is (p. 28). Even as early as page five of the narrative, however, readers have been positioned to view these others in opposition to Lisa: the information that Mrs Cale wasn’t cranky is not idle content, but serves to contrast her with Lisa, who was cranky, and unreasonably so, only the night before.

Arriving home after school the same day, Steven hears Dylan crying and finds Lisa sitting at the kitchen table, a magazine crossword in front of her, talking with the police officers investigating the theft of her car. When he asks about Dylan, she shrugs and tells Steven to leave him, but he ignores her.

My brother was a damp, tiny bundle, wet face and wet bum. He was lying in his cot with a face blotchy from crying and when he saw me, put his arms out to be picked up. ‘How long’ve you been here this time?’ I asked in a quiet voice, and he stopped his hiccupsing cry ... ‘She forgot you again, didn’t she?’ I whispered, and put him into a dry nappy and warmer clothes. ‘Slack old mum.’ (pp. 15-16)

Evidently Steven is used to caring for Dylan, and is closely attached to him, although this has led to some bullying at school. Thus, Steven recalls the taunts of Redmond Hall, who has loudly told his friends how, on Friday night outings to the local hotel with Darryl, Lisa and Dylan, Steven...
nurses his baby and sits with his mummy! Wimp! (p. 33). Redmond’s taunts draw on a discourse that associates the care of babies and young children, and indeed any relational qualities of gentleness or nurturing, with femininity and weakness, in opposition to a conventional form of ‘tough’ masculinity. However, Redmond’s identity as the school bully encourages readers to distance themselves from both him and his view of Steven, a view evidently shared by Darryl, whom readers are similarly invited to dislike as much as Steven does, and not only because he has stolen Lisa’s car. Steven represents Darryl as physically and verbally violent, and as having taken little interest in his child except, when Dylan was newborn, as a signifier of his own masculinity. The narrative thus works to encourage readers to question the conventional versions of masculinity represented by Redmond and Darryl, and to align themselves with Steven in viewing childcare and nurturing as not necessarily or exclusively the work of females.

However, this counter-hegemonic work by the narrative in regard to gender roles is undermined somewhat by evidence that Steven retains some common-sense understandings about appropriate behaviour and interests for males and females. When Mrs Cale arranges for her students to correspond with students from another school, he complains about the letter on fancy coloured paper (p. 9) to which he must respond: Miss, this letter’s from a girl ... I didn’t want to have to write to a girl, Miss (p. 10). The apparent naturalness of this response is reinforced when Elise, the girl in question, later expresses her own disappointment at having to write to a boy.

Furthermore, while the representation of Steven as highly involved in caring for Dylan can be read as a challenge to common-sense notions of childcare as women’s work, the force of this challenge is weakened because, at the same time, readers are invited to understand Steven’s involvement in Dylan’s care as the result of a failure of ‘proper’ parenting. Like Miranda in Seeing Things (Klein 1993), Steven is himself a child in need of care, although whereas Miranda’s absent present mother is idealised, Steven’s mother present but effectively absent mother is targeted for blame. According to prevailing common sense, the care that both Steven and Dylan need should be provided by their mother; Steven’s role in Dylan’s care should, at most, be one of occasional assistant to her. Thus, while the images of Steven dealing capably with Dylan’s physical needs, playing with him and taking him for walks can be read in positive terms, this reading is undermined by the representation of both Steven and Dylan as victims of maternal neglect. In contrast to these images of Steven, readers are presented with images of Lisa still in her dressing gown even though it was after eleven (p. 24), looking as though she’d been napping (p. 24), engrossed in crosswords, magazines and/or television, and inattentive to her children. Steven’s daily life, he observes, involves all the usual things. Like not sleeping in on school mornings. And worrying that Dylan was going to be left in his cot all day, because Patrick’s mum had told me that wasn’t a good thing. When I tried telling that to my mum though, she just got cranky and told me to mind my own business.

‘But it is my business!’ I’d shouted when I came home one afternoon and found Dylan stuck in his cot with another wet nappy and a wet face as well. ‘Don’t you care about him?’ (p. 31).
Even readers with minimal familiarity with childcare practices can hardly avoid condemning Lisa for not knowing or caring to know what they themselves take for granted, namely that babies should not be left in their cots all day. It is not simply a matter of knowledge, however: according to the discourses of popular psychology and contemporary childcare literature, if Lisa was bonded by maternal love to her children, as she ‘naturally’ should be, she would not leave Dylan crying in his cot with a wet nappy; nor could she fail to recognise Steven’s needs, including his need for sleep. Within these discourses, Lisa can only be read as an ‘unnatural’ mother. Thus, although readers are not told how Lisa responds to Steven’s question, above, they do not need to be: they ‘know’ that she does not care about Dylan, or about Steven either.

Lisa is also represented as neglectful of her domestic responsibilities:

> All she seemed to do was sit with her magazines or in front of the TV. And this week, after Katrina had driven mum into town to collect her pension cheque and do the shopping, a new pile of magazines and rented video movies had come home. And even though Katrina tried to help mum out, the house was a mess. There was still the rubbish of cigarette butts and empty cans that Darryl had left behind, and now, a growing pile of smelly washing in the laundry and a sinkload of cups and plates in the kitchen.
>
> ‘Leave it!’ she would tell me whenever I tried to help (p. 31).

Steven’s description evokes images of dirt, rather than the sort of mess created by children at play, and suggests a level of neglect that threatens the children’s physical welfare. Moreover, given that she has no paid employment, and that Steven and her friend Katrina have offered to help her, Lisa appears to have no legitimate excuse for the state of the house; indeed, her rejection of the offered help serves as further evidence that she simply does not care.

This negative reading of Lisa is supported by the narrative’s intertextual relationship with two familiar discourses discussed in Chapter Four. One constructs young unmarried mothers like Lisa as selfish and irresponsible transgressors of social norms, who deliberately have children in order to reap the financial and other benefits available through the social welfare system, and are neglectful of their domestic and childcare responsibilities. The other constructs the ‘good’ mother as one who subordinates her personal needs and interests to those of her children. It follows that mothers who, like Lisa, indulge their own desires – for magazines or video movies, for example – are ‘bad’ mothers, particularly when such self-indulgence means that their children’s needs and interests are not met. In linking the signifiers ‘magazines’, ‘TV’, ‘rented video movies’ and ‘pension cheque’ with images of domestic and child neglect, the narrative invokes these discourses, inviting readers to use them as intertextual resources in the construction of Lisa as a ‘bad’ mother.

When Steven asks Lisa if she will come to his school Open Day, she reminds him that she no longer has a car, and then rejects his proposed solutions to this problem. Steven concludes, *I knew then that I couldn’t depend on her, that she wasn’t really interested in what I was saying* (p. 35). The word ‘knew’ operates powerfully here, presenting belief as fact, and thus working to
ensure that readers remain sceptical of Lisa even when her behaviour begins to change. When she arrives at the Open Day after all, having obtained a lift with Katrina, she says, in response to Steven’s query, *Of course I’m here ... think I’d miss seeing you dancing? Once in a lifetime experience* (p. 37); but readers who have already judged her and, like Steven, ‘know’ her to be unreliable, are positioned to doubt her sincerity.

On the following Saturday morning, Steven wakes to find that Lisa has attended to Dylan herself during the night and taken him into her bed, so that Steven can sleep undisturbed. He joins them, and the three of them sit together in her bed watching music videos. Steven observes that *everything in here was mum again – perfume, incense and half a cup of cold coffee on the floor next to the bed* (p. 42); moreover, it *was like our Saturday mornings used to be, a long time ago* (p. 43); and *she had smiled at me. She was talking to Dylan, she was normal* (p. 45). It seems clear that, whatever has happened recently, this version of Lisa is the one to which Steven is most accustomed; but his earlier comment that he ‘knew’ he could not rely on her maintains its effect, working in conjunction with his expressions of surprise at the change and his comment about *trying to make the most of it* (p. 43) to reinforce readers’ doubts about Lisa, even when she later spends much of the day cleaning, washing and *emptying the house of every last trace of Darryl* (p. 45).

Readers’ scepticism may seem justified, given Lisa’s apparent hostility when, troubled by disjointed early memories, Steven persists in questioning her about the past. Eventually, Katrina’s advice, a trip to the city to recover her car, and her realisation that Steven has reconstructed much of the story himself, together prompt Lisa to answer his questions. At the same time, Steven realises the truth behind his disturbing memories of being, as he had earlier told Patrick, *on our way here to live ... with the car full of our clothes and stuff* (p. 59); of repeatedly asking Lisa where they were going; of finding himself alone in *the middle of nowhere* (p. 59); and finally of being picked up by a woman with a child named Elise. Previously he had assumed that he had somehow become lost, although, as Patrick points out, *It doesn’t make sense ... How come you were lost? You were in the car with your mum* (p. 59). Indeed, Steven had not been lost; Lisa had left him on the roadside. She explains:

*We had nowhere to go ... A car, but no home. Even my own mother wouldn’t have us. And I didn’t know what I was doing. I just drove, as far away from [the city] as I could ... I was nineteen years old, a kid with a kid. And I was scared. You were scared too. And even though you couldn’t help it, you made me so ... angry. I just couldn’t think straight* (p. 95; final ellipsis in original).

Here readers have an opportunity to understand events from Lisa’s perspective. However, Steven remains the focalising character, and the narrative has consistently worked, up to this point, to ensure not only that readers’ sympathies are strongly aligned with him, but also that they remain, at best, sceptical about Lisa’s capacities as a mother, and wary of trusting her recent change of attitude to be genuine and enduring. Moreover, within the terms of contemporary discourses of ‘good’ motherhood, mothers who leave their children, for whatever reason, are constructed as, in effect, social criminals. It follows that readers who take up the

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*Detailed analyses of selected texts*
subject position most ‘obviously’ made available to them by the narrative are unlikely to be able to accept Lisa’s account easily, and thus to construct an alternative, less condemning reading of her.

Steven himself displays no insight into Lisa’s behaviour or empathy for her situation, even from his current perspective as a retrospective narrator. For him, Lisa is simply acting in ways I didn’t understand (p. 31), and evidently he still does not. This is not entirely surprising, given that he is represented as an ‘ordinary’ 11-year-old. However, if his ability to draw on alternative mean-making resources to interpret his mother’s behaviour in less negative ways is indeed typical of his approximate age-group, it seems unlikely that readers from among the narrative’s intended audience (which can reasonably be expected to be roughly the same age), will be any more able to do so, unless they are experienced in critical reading strategies. While the narrative itself does not encourage the use of such strategies, readers who are able to employ them will find that there is considerable evidence available to support an oppositional reading of Lisa and her behaviour.

As Steven describes it, Lisa’s behaviour following the final breakdown of her abusive relationship with Darryl is consistent with severe depression. The loss of her car, which she cannot afford to replace, means that she is effectively stranded without adult company in a house 20 kilometres from town, dependent on her friend Katrina to help with shopping, and on welfare payments to support herself and her children. With no family to whom she can turn, no suitable alternative accommodation available in town, and a high level of unemployment in the area following the closure of local coalmines, Lisa has plenty of reasons to be depressed. Similarly, it is possible to interpret her reluctance to answer Steven’s questions in terms of her own fears and anxieties about confronting the past, which has evidently been difficult and painful. Indeed, although the focalisation through Steven and the bias towards his perspective means that readers have few resources with which to fill in the gaps in Lisa’s sketchy story, there is enough evidence to suggest that she has struggled against considerable odds to care for Steven, and that, notwithstanding his recent distress and confusion, she has done so with remarkable success. She has, after all, been abandoned herself, by the fathers of her two children, by her family, and arguably also by the education system.

However, readers themselves have to struggle against considerable odds to construct this alternative view of Lisa, and its construction is likely to remain precarious; working constantly to undermine it are the common-sense notions of what constitutes a ‘good’ mother that serve as major resources for making sense of the narrative. As discussed in Chapter Four, prevailing discourses of motherhood privilege the needs and interests of children over those of their mothers, and thus consistently fail to acknowledge the contextual aspects of parenting. Moreover, they effectively deny the mother a separate perspective from which to speak; any attempt to claim one, such as Lisa’s account above, immediately constitutes her as a woman whose needs and interests are not identical to those of her child and, by implication, as a ‘bad’ mother. The ideal mother constructed in dominant discourses of motherhood and yearned for in
fantasy remains unaffected by the context in which she undertakes her parenting work, and is able to meet or defer her own needs, should she have any at all, rather than giving them priority over those of her children. By implication, mothers who, like Lisa, succumb to depression, fear and anger can only be read in negative terms.

The narrative’s resolution further lessens the possibilities for constructing a positive view of Lisa. As she and the children are travelling home after recovering their stolen car, a situation arises that echoes that of the earlier journey when Lisa left Steven on the roadside. Lisa wants to stop for a short sleep, but Steven argues with her, complaining that he and Dylan are hungry, and that Dylan has run out of nappies. This time, however, Lisa reasons with him calmly but firmly, and suggests that he take Dylan for a walk while she rests. When they are some distance away, Steven realises that Lisa has started the car. Not realising that she is driving to meet them, Steven panics and runs to intercept the car.

She looked at me for a moment. ‘You thought I’d left you behind?’ Her voice joked when she said that, but then her eyes flickered as though she had suddenly remembered something. ‘Well, I wouldn’t. Not again.’ (pp. 102-103)

At this point, only a few paragraphs from the close of the narrative, a positive resolution seems to have been achieved: if Lisa’s parenting practices have been inadequate in the past, she has recognised this, apologised, and begun to make amends. However, this reading is undermined by her next words: ‘I need you to help me look after Dylan, don’t I?’ she said, and suddenly reached over to ruffle my hair. ‘I need you to look after me’ (p. 103).

It was argued above that the notion of Steven helping Lisa to care for Dylan can be read positively as a challenge to common-sense understandings about the role of males in childcare. However, Lisa’s ‘need’ for Steven’s help is difficult to read positively because, according to common sense, ‘good’ mothers are not children themselves; they do not need to be looked after, least of all by their own children.¹ In this respect, the narrative exemplifies a current trend, noted in Chapter Five, to represent children in adolescent fiction as more adult than their own immature and inadequate parents. However, in contrast to many other examples of this trend, the criticism here is not levelled at the entire parent generation, but specifically at Lisa; hence the opposition constructed between Lisa and ‘adults’ that works to highlight Lisa’s unsuitability for motherhood.

There are a number of direct and indirect references in the narrative to Lisa’s youth and immaturity, in addition to her own description of herself, at 19, as a kid with a kid (p. 95). On the Saturday morning described above, for example, when Lisa tells Dylan that he is a funny kid ... Like your brother, Steven responds with, Like your mother (p. 43), thus implying not just that Lisa is funny, but also that she too is a ‘kid’. His description of a photograph of himself as a baby in Lisa’s arms refers to her as just a kid herself, really (p. 44); and his later description of the newspaper photograph found by Patrick refers a number of times to a ‘girl’ while explaining that the girl was my mum (p. 64) and that the ‘little boy’ with her was himself. When Lisa tells Steven to wait outside the police station while she collects her car, he notices that she looks frightened: /
felt as though I was arguing with the teenage girl in the newspaper picture, not my mother of twenty-six who was old enough to look after everything (p. 79). As a 26-year-old mother, it seems, Lisa ought not to need to be looked after herself, but as the narrative closes, readers are invited to infer that she does. Meanwhile, the narrative neatly constructs a contrast between the teenage Lisa who leaves Steven on the roadside and the unknown but 'obviously' more mature and responsible woman who picks him up: This is the middle of nowhere. Where do you come from? I don’t know. My mum left me here. Well. It was an adult’s voice; organised. Let’s find her then (p. 53).

These features of the narrative work together, not only to make a strong case for the unsuitability of teenagers for motherhood, but also to suggest that those who become teenage mothers may thereby render themselves permanently unsuitable for motherhood, so that even at the age of 26 Lisa is not sufficiently ‘adult’ to qualify as a ‘good’ mother. It should also be clear, in the light of the earlier discussions of this theme in Seeing Things (Klein 1993) and Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993), that the story of Lisa, who has had not one, but two children outside marriage, by two different fathers, can be read as a strong warning to readers about the dangers of unregulated female sexuality.

The narrative also draws a contrast between the versions of motherhood represented by Lisa and Mrs Hetherington, the archetypal ‘earth mother’. On the afternoon after the theft of the car, Steven wishes he could go home with Patrick, who would be met with chocolate milk and his mother’s cake (p. 14); and as he changes Dylan’s nappy, he comments that, at the same time, Patrick would be talking to his mum about school (p. 15). Mrs Hetherington does not appear to have any paid employment, but keeps goats, and cooks fantastic meals (p. 22) with her homegrown produce. She so well typifies the ideal ‘good’ mother that Lisa is apparently unable to find another word to describe her: She reminds me of … a mother (p. 35; ellipsis in original).

Patrick’s father is also described in unequivocally positive terms, and the version of parenting and domesticity that the couple represents is not entirely conventional. There is little evidence of a strongly gendered division of domestic labour in the household: Patrick’s parents appear to be equally involved in the work of renovating their house; and they are often referred to collectively by both Steven and Patrick, as if they are interchangeable in terms of the domestic and parenting work that they do. For example, Steven comments that [Patrick’s] parents were working their way around the house (p. 54) and that she and Mr Hetherington heaved the last of the cupboards away from the wall (p. 55); and Patrick reports that Mum and dad said we could … camp out (p. 54). When the boys set out on their overnight expedition, the two of them started giving out instructions (p. 56) of the kind most commonly associated with mothers; here they are not tagged as coming specifically from one parent or the other.

Nevertheless, it is evidently Patrick’s mother, not his father, who bakes cakes and does most, if not all, of the other cooking, and it is she who worries about Steven, bringing him a drink of water and sitting with him for a while when he cries in his sleep, and noticing that he is nervous.
about riding with Patrick on the trail bike. Moreover, when the boys return wet and cold from
their overnight camp, it is Mrs Hetherington who ordered me into the shower and a set of clean
clothes borrowed from Patrick, fed us a huge breakfast and let us watch videos all morning (p.
62).

Thus, while Change the Locks offers a model of shared parenting that can be read as a
challenge to common-sense discourses that construct motherhood and fatherhood as
qualitatively different forms of parenthood, this challenge may pass unrecognised by readers,
because the positive representation of Mrs Hetherington as a mother remains broadly
conventional, and works most conspicuously to reinforce a negative interpretation of Lisa.
Indeed, for readers who align their subjectivities with Steven’s, the representations of Patrick’s
parents serve less to promote the idea that the roles and responsibilities of mothers and fathers
could be interchangeable than to highlight the inadequacies of families headed by single
mothers. Ultimately, then, the narrative works to uphold the ideal of the two parent,
heterosexual nuclear family, together with idealised notions of what constitutes a ‘good’ mother
within that family.

The case of Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992)

In the 1987 CBCA awards, Gillian Rubinstein’s first novel was named as an Honour Book in the
Older Readers category; and her subsequent novels and picture books have earned similarly
high praise from critics and judges. Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992), apparently targeted at
readers of secondary school age, was judged as an Honour Book in the Older Readers category
in the 1993 CBCA awards, and was also short-listed for two other Australian children’s literature
awards. None of the protagonists is a mother, but the motifs of the ‘abandoning mother’ and the
‘childless woman’ are important in developing a subtext about motherhood.

Galax-Arena tells of three Australian children – 13-year-old Joella, her 14-year-old brother Peter,
and their younger sister Liane – who are kidnapped for use in secret scientific experiments.
They are drugged and tricked into believing that they have been transported to Vexak, a planet
beyond the solar system, on which, they are told, it would be impossible for them to survive
outside an elaborately simulated Earth-like environment. In fact they have not left Australia; but
convinced that resistance is futile, they abandon all hope of returning home and accept that their
fate is to join a number of other children who have been similarly kidnapped, in most cases
apparently from countries in Asia, South America and Africa. These children, the ‘peb’, perform
like circus animals in the Galax-Arena, for what they take to be Vexak’s inhabitants. Their future
is bleak: many are destined to die attempting ever more dangerous gymnastic feats for the
‘Vexa’; alternatively, when they are too old or their performances are too boring or if, like Joella,
they have no gymnastic talent, they are ‘put to sleep’, used for experiments, or kept as pets.

The retrospective narrator is Joella, who begins with the words, We’ve been in this town two
months. That’s quite a record for us. Our father keeps us on the move. He thinks it’s safer (p.
62).
1). Immediately it is clear that the children are living in fear, and Joella later implies that it is dangerous for her to tell their story; however,

*I can't stand the idea of spending the rest of my life like this. The only thing I've ever been any good at is seeing the truth, so the only thing left for me to do is try and write it down* (p. 2).

Joella maintains that she is *trying to tell the truth* (p. 2), and her narrative repeatedly refers to her claimed ability to see the truth more clearly than other people do. For example, she explains how she could tell that their Aunt Jill preferred her to Peter, although he had been a *golden person* (p. 5), liked and admired by everyone who met him:

*I just knew. I'd always known things like that. Peter used to call me the Witch because I'd tell him something and it'd turn out to be true. I had no idea how I did it. Perhaps I've got an extra eye that picks up on the things most people don't notice* (pp. 4-5).

This is important to the discursive work of the narrative, because Joella’s claimed ability to see the truth, her insistence on the importance of telling the truth no matter what the cost, and her suggestion that, in effect, she and the other children have nothing more to gain or lose whether she tells their story or not, all work together to represent her as a reliable narrator, not only scrupulously honest, but someone who can perceive the truth when others perhaps cannot. Readers are thus invited – indeed, virtually obliged – to align their perspectives with Joella’s, in order to gain access to what otherwise may remain unavailable to them, namely ‘the truth’.

The invitation is rendered even more appealing by Joella’s representation of most of the other characters as shallow and self-interested. While readers might wish for the gymnastic skills and grace, and the exotic beauty of the peb, in doing so they actually align themselves with Joella, who is *the wrong shape for gym* and feels *solid and lumpy and clumsy* (p. 27) in comparison with the peb. Moreover, given that the peb *wanted to survive, and to survive they would do anything – and discard anyone that got in the way* (p. 55), readers may be disinclined to identify closely with their values. Instead, they are likely to embrace Joella’s perspective to the extent that even her account of events in the Galax-Arena following her departure to become a pet can be accepted as ‘the truth’, despite her own uncertainty:

*Now my story changes again. What follows is partly what Mariam told me... The rest of the story is made up from what the others told me afterwards and from my own inner eye. I watch it unfold inside my head as if it’s on film. I don’t know if it’s true or not... Sometimes I think it’s too hard... Tell your own stories, I say angrily to the spirits that come to me in the night and don’t let me rest. Why should I put myself into danger for you? But they answer me, they have no voice* (p. 72).

Thus Joella’s narration works to represent the truth as something that she feels obliged, even driven, to tell, and to position readers to accept the accuracy of her perceptions and interpretations.

From Joella’s perspective, the world is a place where some children *have no idea how lucky they are* (p. 2), while many others are homeless and starving; a world where
kids fight away dogs from the garbage so they can eat, where life on the streets is lonely and frightening and dangerous, where children are abused, stolen, murdered and no one ever knows where they have gone. No one misses them (p. 38).

These powerful images gain additional strength by working intertextually with familiar media representations of ‘Third World’ poverty, as well as the dystopic texts that comprise much of the fiction currently produced for Australian adolescents. Similarly, the arguments used by Hythe, the children’s captor and trainer, to persuade them to accept their fate rely for their effect on readers’ familiarity with contemporary discourses of global environmental disaster:

Your planet’s stuffed. You belong to a doomed race ... What’s life on Earth anyway? Nasty, brutish and short ... If the Big Bang doesn’t get you then the Greenhouse effect will, and if the Greenhouse effect doesn’t, then there’s always AIDS. You don’t have to worry about that any more ... You’ll never be hungry or cold or unemployed ... You’re far better off here (pp. 20-21).

Given the subsequent revelation that Hythe is involved in a research project that seeks to indefinitely prolong the lives of old, rich people who wanted to live forever (p. 101) and who evidently do not believe that the Earth and its inhabitants are doomed, the ease with which his arguments can be accepted as reasonable is ironic. However, readers familiar with the discourses invoked here can recognise the apparent truth of Hythe’s claims, and accept, as Joella soon does, that the peb might well be better off in the Galax-Arena. When asked where he came from, Eduardo, a boy of seven or eight, replies in ‘patwa’, the common language of the peb:


‘Don’t you miss your family?’ I said.

‘Wat?’

‘Yo mum and dad? Wat bout dem?’

‘No mama, no papa. No familia. Nada. Jus me in de ciudad [city]. An no food!’

He grinned at me as he said it, and stretched like a puppy (p. 38).

In passages such as these, the narrative overtly employs strategies of attack to present the argument that on a global scale, contemporary children have become the innocent victims of a social order based on selfishness, greed, competition and overly materialistic concerns with science and technology. In the absence of concerns for relationships and the welfare of others, contemporary society can be read here as resembling a deficient parent, one who does not love and protect his or her children from harm, but instead abandons and/or abuses them, both physically and emotionally, and treats them, at best, like pets kept for their owners’ amusement and benefit.

By implication, the narrative works to suggest that such treatment is likely to produce a generation of children with similar values to those of their parents. In a comment quoted above,
Joella describes the peb as being prepared to do anything, and to sacrifice anyone, in order to survive; and she includes her brother and sister in her description. Peter, she observes, seems different, as though he was no longer my brother ... He had acquired the aura of the peb. He had become a survivor (p. 38). Neither he nor Liane appears to care when Joella is taken away to become a pet. Significantly, Joella's description of the peb could equally be applied to the 'Vexa', who are revealed to be human monster[s] (p. 101), prepared to kidnap, enslave and murder children in the hope of extending their own lives indefinitely. The peb, in other words, have come to emulate the values and behaviours of their parents/captors, to the extent that Peter is eventually persuaded by Hythe to become his deputy, and thus to collude in preserving the illusion of Vexak and the Galax-Arena. When Joella learns the truth for herself, and finds a way to escape, Peter agrees to help her and the peb who choose to leave with her; but even as he assures them that they are safe in his hands, his manner, gestures and language so resemble Hythe’s when he first kidnapped the children that readers cannot be greatly surprised to learn that Peter does not intend the escapees to survive.

Clearly, the subject position that readers are most easily able to take up as they engage with the narrative and align their perspectives on the world with Joella's is that of 'innocent child victim', a position that renders them more susceptible to the discursive power of the motif of the 'abandoning mother'. To explain the significance of this motif to the narrative, it is first necessary to consider how the three Australian children came to be abducted.

Except for Joella, the child characters of Galax-Arena all have outstanding gymnastic talents that attracted the attention of their kidnappers. However, the other critically important characteristic shared by the peb is that their abductions could pass unnoticed; they did not have families who would miss them and report their disappearance. The specific reasons for this vary in each case, and they are not always made explicit, but it is reasonable to assume that most Australian adolescent readers are well equipped to fill in these narrative gaps by drawing on familiar media images of homeless children in 'Third World' countries. These meaning-making resources are less helpful, however, in accounting for the kidnapping of Peter, Joella and Liane; the idea that children such as these, who are white (except for Liane, an adopted orphan refugee), middle-class, and live in a comfortably affluent democracy such as Australia, can simply disappear without anyone noticing or caring cannot be so easily accepted. According to prevailing common sense, such a thing could only occur if there was something seriously deficient about the children’s family, or, more specifically, their mother, given that it is most commonly mothers who are assumed to be ultimately responsible for the welfare of children.

Joella explains that they were travelling to stay with their Aunt Jill, and that people on journeys are easy to make disappear. Accidents are arranged, buses never arrive, children vanish on the road from here to there (pp. 3-4). However, there is more to the children’s vulnerability than this. Joella describes a family life that was in many ways typically suburban, but observes:
all this came to an end when Sylvie, our mother, decided it was stifling her and she needed what she called time out. We were supposed to stay on in the house with Hayden, but he went very strange after she left (p. 3).

This passage is followed by descriptions of family life after Sylvie’s departure, which work together to suggest that ‘very strange’ means, in this context, ‘negligent and irresponsible’. Joella’s explanation for the journey on which she, Peter and Liane are kidnapped supports a reading of Hayden as having been a negligent parent in Sylvie’s absence: our last camping trip with Hayden had ended up with Liane in hospital for two days with serious dehydration and we were being sent ... to stay with our aunt (p. 4).

Thus the children’s vulnerability to kidnappers can be read as attributable to Sylvie’s absence and Hayden’s neglect; according to Joella’s account, he does not always know where they are. They are delivered to the station by their grandmother, and they expect to be met at the end of their journey by their aunt, who lives alone on a small country property. Instead, they are met by Hythe, who knows their names and tells them that our aunt’s car has broken down, and one of the cows is calving early, and she’s asked him to come and pick us up (p. 6). He has already rung Aunt Jill with a story that relies for its plausibility on her knowledge of Hayden and Sylvie as unreliable; so she never gave a second thought as to why our parents had changed their minds again about sending us, except to grumble at their fecklessness and unreliability (p. 8).

Aunt Jill grumbles, but the children’s grandmother is angry about having to take them to the station: her anger was mostly with our parents, but we got the effects of it, not them (p. 4). Joella observes that Peter was furious with them too (p. 4), and that soon after their abduction, as he wondered aloud how they would get home, he stopped in mid-breath and muttered bitterly. ‘Nearly forgot. We don’t have a home to go to, do we’ (p. 15). Readers can hardly fail to share Joella’s view of herself, Peter and Liane as victims, not only of their kidnappers, but also of parental neglect. Even before their abduction, Joella was angry and miserable too, fed up with our parents for making such a mess of our lives, grieving for our animals that we’d had to find other homes for since Hayden would never remember to feed them (p. 4).

Later, she observes that, under the influence of the drug administered by Hythe, they forgot all their parents’ warnings about being wary of strangers: our parents seemed like the most unreasonable and blind of people, whom we should never consider again (p. 9). By this stage in her narrative, however, it seems likely that readers will have constructed an even more negative view of the children’s parents than this, without any assistance from drugs.

Explicitly, the criticism is levelled at both of the children’s parents, rather than specifically at either Sylvie or Hayden, and indeed it seems that, if there is any imbalance, it is Hayden who is targeted for the most overt criticism. However, although Joella comments that her family was never entirely ordinary – the children call their parents by their given names, for example – she makes no criticism of the parenting she and her siblings received before Sylvie left. Indeed, it is clear that the children grieved for what they lost when she left them: I’d thought our grief and
anger could never have been greater (p. 16); and it is to the period before Sylvie left that Joella returns in her fantasies. Thus, during her time as a pet, she dreams

of a sunny day in the garden at home. Sylvie was weeding the herb bed and she turned to speak to me just as I woke up. I was amazed and delighted: she had come home and we were back in our old house again (pp. 67-68).

In this way, the narrative plays on the same unconscious desires for the return of the fantasised lost mother that work, in Seeing Things (Klein 1993), to idealise Miranda’s dead mother. Here, motherhood is idealised, and so too is Sylvie, in so far as her return would, in Joella’s fantasies, restore all that has been lost and heal all wounds. At the same time, however, she also becomes the object of blame. As the woman who deliberately leaves her own children, she signifies the dark side of the fantasy of the perfect mother; that is, all that must be silenced or denied in order to sustain that fantasy.

Given that, according to Joella’s account quoted above, it was Sylvie’s decision that family life was stifling her and she needed what she called time out (p. 3) that led to the reduced quality of care given to the children, it is Sylvie who can ultimately be held accountable for their neglect. As Joella observes, it was when Sylvie left that Hayden went very strange (p. 3), and readers can infer that this was a consequence of her leaving. Thus, while Hayden is not entirely absolved from blame for the children’s neglect, he is represented as suffering, like his children, as a result of Sylvie’s departure. Within the discourse of mainstream psychoanalysis, he can be understood as having lost his substitute mother; and his own inadequacies as a parent can legitimately be excused within the terms of familiar discourses, reinforced constantly in television ‘sit-coms’ and advertisements, and an array of other popular cultural texts, that construct men as inherently incapable of looking after themselves or their children in the absence of their female partners. Hence, without Sylvie, We don’t have a home to go to, do we (p. 15). By contrast, according to contemporary discourses of motherhood that hold women primarily accountable for their children’s problems, Sylvie’s behaviour is that of a ‘bad’ mother. Readers are thus invited to interpret Sylvie’s actions in leaving her family as those of a selfish woman who does not love her children and, concerned only with pursuing her own desires, has abandoned them completely.

Thus it is crucial to the narrative that Sylvie has left her husband and children, because the children’s vulnerability to abduction is ultimately attributable to her ‘abandonment’ of them. However, there are other ways in which the narrative subtly works to strengthen readers’ construction of Sylvie as a ‘bad’ mother. For example, it is worth considering what sense can be made, in the light of common-sense understandings about fathers and mothers, of Joella’s comment that Hayden was too old and too clever to be a typical dad, and our mother was too young and too crazy to act like an average mother (p. 3). As indicated in Chapter Four, there are few requirements to which men must conform in order to be recognised, commonsensically, as ‘good’ fathers, so ‘too old’ or ‘too clever’ need not necessarily be read as negative descriptors; certainly, neither have connotations of irresponsibility in this context. Interestingly, however, the discursive restrictions on what can be understood as an appropriate age for
motherhood mean that ‘too old’ could easily be read as a negative descriptor in regard to a mother, and similarly, a ‘too clever’ mother might well be understood to be one who is too busy with intellectual pursuits to care properly for her children. The descriptions that Joella actually applies to Sylvie, ‘too young’ and ‘too crazy’, both have connotations of irresponsibility within prevailing discourses of motherhood, and Joella’s subsequent comments confirm such a reading by explicitly charging Sylvie with irresponsibility.

The motif of the ‘childless woman’, also important in developing the narrative’s subtext on motherhood, emerges when Joella discovers the truth about Vexak and the Galax-Arena. Having pieced together the clues provided by her sensitivity to her owner’s feelings, her discovery of a fly in the tank in which she is kept, and her recollection of Hayden’s remarks in the past about blinding them with fake science (p. 96), Joella challenges her owner, who reveals herself as a very old woman dressed up as an alien being. Emmeline tells Joella a story that is far stranger and far more horrible than Hythe’s fabrication of the distant planet of Vexak and the Galax-Arena (p. 101). Aged 119, she is one of the youngest participants in, and financial backers of, Project Genesis Five, which is researching the possibility of prolonging life indefinitely by stimulating adrenalin production in old people. This is achieved by having them observe dangerous situations involving children. Emmeline concedes that when the children started dying, I didn’t think that was right (p. 102), and admits she was getting tired of the whole project: I wasn’t sure I wanted to live for ever after all (p. 103). Then, she tells Joella, they said I could have a little child of my own to look after (p. 103), and you made me want to start living again. I had to live to look after you (p. 104). When Mariam, another of the peb who has become a pet, tells her in patwa, Everywan gon die ... De ol gotta die, so de young ken live, Emmeline replies, I would have liked to have children ... Then I would be leaving something behind (p. 107).

It is significant that the only ‘Vexa’ character actually represented in the narrative is a woman who has had no children. As discussed in Chapter Four, it is common for such women to be constructed as ‘unnatural’, too selfish to put the interests of others ahead of their own, and/or as having failed to achieve full maturity as women. The narrative works intertextually with these discursive constructions of the ‘childless woman’ to construct Emmeline’s childlessness as related to her childishness, evidenced by her obsession with her own interests and desires; the naivety of her reasoning over the deaths of the peb; her unquestioning acceptance of what the researchers have told her; her fondness for her ‘pet’/substitute child; and even her little childish voice (p. 105). Emmeline, readers can infer, has failed to grow up, despite her advanced years, the ultimate evidence of this being her failure to fulfil her ‘proper’ and ‘natural’ role in life by becoming a mother. In addition, Emmeline’s conversation with Mariam works to link her ‘unnatural’ desire for immortality with her childlessness: readers can infer that, had she become a mother as she ‘naturally’ should have done, she would have been less fearful of death.

In relation to the subtextual theme of motherhood, it is important that Joella exempts herself from her descriptions of the peb as highly competitive and interested primarily in their own
survival. Early in the narrative, she excludes herself from any claims to being special, and describes having spent her childhood on the fringe of Peter’s story, watching it unfold dazzlingly, watching my unusual, gifted brother excel, without trying, in everything he did (p. 2); and then, since I was seven there was Liane coming up from behind with her newsreel face and her orphan history (p. 3). In contrast to her own claimed ordinariness, Joella describes Peter as a golden person (p. 5) and highly competitive: suggest that there was something he couldn’t do or that someone else could do better and he wouldn’t rest until he’d excelled at it and beaten everyone else along the way (p. 30). In commenting that Peter had become a survivor, she observes, I couldn’t blame him. I would have become one too, if I had been able (p. 38), implying that her lack of special talents, her ordinariness, renders her unable to survive in the competitive world of the Galax-Arena. By the close of the narrative, however, readers have been positioned to understand that Joella has a strength that Peter lacks, and that Joella’s sensitivity and intuitive abilities, and her interest in and concerns for the welfare of others, ultimately have more value than Peter’s gymnastic talents, competitive attitude and determination to excel. The narrative thus valorises the qualities represented by Joella, suggesting that these, and not the more stereotypically ‘masculine’ heroic qualities displayed by Peter, are ultimately of more benefit to the world.

Significantly, Joella’s ‘heroic’ qualities are consistent with those that, as illustrated in Chapter Four, are accepted, commonsensically, as characteristic of ‘good’ motherhood. For example, as the narrator, she represents herself as having no special identity of her own, but her narrative works to position readers such that they perceive her, in contrast to Sylvie – and also in contrast to all the other mothers of the ‘abandoned’ children of the Galax-Arena – as a force that holds her family together through a situation that threatens to tear it apart. That family is effectively expanded in the Galax-Arena, where Joella becomes a mother figure to some of the peb. Thus, Eduardo, as tough and aggressive as the fourteen year olds (p. 37), curls up at night beside her, and every now and then he would inch a little closer. But when I rested my arm gently around him, he froze, and pulled away, only to relax into my side again when he thought I didn’t notice (p. 37). Joella’s concern for her family is such that when she and Mariam have an opportunity to escape on their own, she does not contemplate abandoning the rest of the peb, but takes the extra risk of returning to the practice area and trying to persuade them to escape too. Also, it is Joella’s sensitivity to the feelings of others that enables her to recognise that her owner is actually an old woman disguised as an alien being, and thus to discover the truth about Vexak, the Galax-Arena and Project Genesis Five. It is these qualities of sensitivity and selfless concern for others, understood in common sense as ‘feminine’ and ‘maternal’, that eventually enable Joella to rescue her brother and sister and four of the other peb from the Galax-Arena. By contrast, Peter’s conventionally ‘masculine’ heroic qualities exacerbate their troubles, as he finally acknowledges: Oh God, Joey, I’ve stuffed everything up (p. 137).

Despite Joella’s heroism, however, her narrative concludes bleakly: she and Peter and Liane still live in fear; she has been unable to rescue all of the peb, and does not know the fate of those who escaped; Project Genesis Five is continuing, presumably by using other kidnapped children;
and the world remains the same uncaring place. Readers can infer that Joella’s lone efforts are not enough to effect any significant change, and how such change might be achieved remains uncertain. However, the various narrative features discussed here work together to imply that it is largely due to the failure of women as mothers that the contemporary social world is so negligent of its children’s needs and interests. In the character of Sylvie, this failure is represented by a woman who ‘abandons’ her children to pursue her own ‘selfish’ desires outside the family context; in Emmeline, it is represented in her similarly ‘selfish’ refusal to become a mother at all. Moreover, it is significant that the qualities dominating contemporary society, as represented in this narrative, are those that are commonsensically associated with men, while those that are absent are commonsensically associated with women, particularly mothers. By implication, the state of the contemporary social world can be understood as the result of women’s abandonment of the domestic sphere and their ‘proper’ roles in caring for children and others, and their adoption, instead, of the ‘masculine’ values and roles of the so-called public sphere.

As illustrated in Chapter Four, it is most commonly female parents who are charged with responsibility for their children’s physical and emotional welfare and moral development, and with protecting them from the dangers outside the ‘safe haven’ of the family. When children are physically and/or emotionally neglected, when they come to any harm within or beyond the home, or when they adopt socially undesirable values and behaviours, it is most often their mothers, not their fathers, who are held morally, and even legally, accountable. From this perspective it follows that if contemporary society is failing its children, it is mothers, and those women who fail to fulfil their ‘proper’ role in life as mothers, who must be held most accountable: they are evidently failing in their responsibility to safeguard their homes and families. Ultimately, then, the metaphorical indictment of contemporary society as a ‘bad parent’ in Galax-Arena can be read more specifically as an indictment of contemporary women as ‘bad mothers’.

From the perspective afforded by ‘cultural’ feminism, and given that it valorises ‘feminine’ values as those most crucial to the re-establishment of a more caring and humane social order, it might be argued that Galax-Arena can be read as a ‘feminist’ text. However, this kind of ‘feminist’ reading is not one that is likely to support a more socially just and equitable social order, because it can be achieved only by linking the values supposedly missing from contemporary society with biological femininity, and by casting women who choose not to have children, and mothers who pursue interests and desires of their own outside the home, as social criminals. By promoting as essentially ‘feminine’ the qualities it seeks to affirm, the narrative works to naturalise a further link between biological femininity and motherhood, such that motherhood and fatherhood are constructed as, necessarily, qualitatively different forms of parenthood, and women are limited to a single legitimate identity as mothers. Additionally, the narrative works to reinforce common-sense notions of the ‘good’ mother as one who, having no separate needs or interests of her own, displays ordinary ‘maternal’ heroism by selflessly devoting herself to her children.
The case of *Dougy* (Moloney 1993)

James Moloney’s first novel, published in 1992, won the *Family Award* from the New South Wales and Victoria Family Therapy Associations. *Dougy* (Moloney 1993) won the same award, and was a 1994 *Honour Book* in the *Older Readers* category of the CBCA’s *Book of the Year* awards. Its sequel, *Gracey* (Moloney 1994), and a number of later texts, have also been recognised in the CBCA’s annual awards.

*Dougy* is named after its 13-year-old Aboriginal narrator, but focuses more closely on his 14-year-old sister, Gracey. It is an account of the racial violence that erupts in Dougy’s remote Queensland town following a series of incidents that exacerbate existing tensions between the town’s white and black communities. For example, when Gracey’s travel expenses to run in the State Athletics Championships in Brisbane are funded by the government, and when she then gains a sporting scholarship to an elite Brisbane boarding school after winning a State title, some of the town’s white population see themselves as victims of reverse discrimination; and when a local white girl, Melissa, is found unconscious after an accident, it is assumed that she has been attacked by an Aboriginal man. The novel was praised by the CBCA’s judges for its even-handed treatment of the issues underlying *the tenacious-but-disguised grip of racism on Australian society* (CBCA 1994:6), although the presentation of these issues from an Aboriginal perspective by a white writer prompted some debate (*e.g.*, Moloney 1994; Moloney & Coolwell 1994; Steinberger 1994). The narrative is of particular interest to the present study for its representation of Dougy’s mother, Gracey and Melissa, and for the version of motherhood it privileges in order to fulfil its anti-racist and anti-violence agenda.

Dougy’s early comment, *I’m not real good at reading and writing, eh!* (p. 7), works together with his colloquial language to suggest that this narrative should be understood as an oral account. Dougy himself is merely an observer of most of the events he describes, and his remarks that *sometimes I think I must be invisible* (p. 11) and that *people don’t usually notice me very much and sometimes that can be good* (p. 61) serve to account for his having observed and overheard the events and conversations he describes. He also introduces himself as *nobody much* (p. 6), someone who is still in primary school at age 13 and is *not much good at anything* (p. 7) and, by implication, lacks the wisdom and intelligence required to embellish his account with any interpretation of his own. Although Dougy gradually begins explicitly to offer interpretations from his current perspective – *when I look back on it now* (p. 61) – his representation of himself works as Kim’s does in *Angel’s Gate* (Crew 1993), to persuade readers that he is a naive and neutral observer of events. Readers are encouraged to view themselves as wiser and more sophisticated, and as having a clearer understanding of many of the characters and events in his story than Dougy does, an understanding that ultimately includes the recognition that Dougy is wiser and more capable than he and others around him have assumed. One effect of requiring readers to draw on their own resources to make sense of Dougy’s largely descriptive account is that they are likely to perceive their interpretations as their own, rather than as the meanings...
that, partly in order to fulfil its anti-racist and anti-violence agenda, the narrative positions them to
construct.

Dougy loves and admires both his mother and Gracey, and presents them both as intelligent,
capable, assertive, independent and articulate. However the positive representation of the
principal female characters is not linked to any strongly evident feminist values, but rather to the
anti-racist and anti-violence values that the narrative openly advocates. The effectiveness of
this advocacy rests largely on the representation of Aboriginal family values and aspirations in a
way that can be read as positive by contemporary adolescent readers, who may well subscribe
to many of the racist beliefs that the narrative attempts to dispel. Thus, in many ways Dougy’s
mother is represented in highly conventional, even stereotypical, terms; and there is nothing
about the ways in which she, Gracey and Melissa are represented that can be interpreted as a
significant challenge to contemporary common-sense understandings of motherhood.

For example, Dougy’s mother is never addressed by name, and Dougy refers to her only as
‘Mum’, so that she is represented as a woman who, like the ideal mother of fantasy, has no
separate identity beyond her relationship with her children. Mum does not appear to have any
friends or interests outside her family. Clearly, however, she has not always been a mother; and
readers learn something of her past when Dougy explains how it is that she is familiar with the
world beyond their town:

You see, a long time ago before Raymond and Gracey and me were born, this singer
come to town for the dance at show time. He stayed a few days afterwards, too,
‘cause he’d met Mum, and when he left, Mum went with him and followed him around
from town to town. He was getting lots of work singing in pubs and places, doing real
well, specially on the coast, and they even lived in Brisbane for a while. In the end, the
singer said he didn’t want Mum around any more and she had to come home. But
Mum knows what big towns are like. From the way she talks, I sometimes think she
would like to go back and live in those big places again, instead of living here. Of
course, she couldn’t do that now. There’s Raymond and Gracey and me all here now
(pp. 12-13).

Thus Mum’s life before becoming a mother was quite different, but linked as it was to a man
whom she followed from town to town, her identity was evidently no more independent than in
her present life as ‘Mum’; hence the necessity to return to her home town when the man lost
interest in her. Moreover, Dougy takes it for granted that no alternative or additional identity is
possible for his mother now; and the words ‘of course’ invite readers, too, to perceive this as
‘obvious’, given that she has three children to care for.

Mum, too, assumes herself to be confined to a single identity as mother to Raymond, Gracey
and Dougy; but she is determined that Gracey should take advantage of the offer of a
scholarship to a city boarding school in order to create alternative possibilities for herself:

Gracey, I don’t want you to end up here, all your life. If you stay here, you got to live
one set kind of life same as all the black girls in this town. They’re all like me, aren’t
they. You think about it. They got no choice. They can’t do nothing else and now they
got kids, always lots of kids. And no money. They can’t go nowhere else either, ‘cept
maybe move to some town just the same. Gracey, I want you to escape. I nearly got
away when I was young, but this place sucked me back (p. 52).
While the two issues cannot be separated clearly, Mum’s concern is evidently less to do with the restrictions on women’s life options that typically accompany motherhood than with the limited options available to Aboriginal people, particularly in remote areas, in a society dominated by whites. She argues that kids from those big schools in the city always do much better (p. 45), and acknowledges that the town is therefore a trap for some o’ the whites as well (p. 52), but she maintains that it’s okay if you’re a whitefella who can’t do much. They usually find something for you to do, some place for you. But blackfellas have to be special to get on (p. 46). Gracey’s athletic abilities make her ‘special’, but while the scholarship offers her the opportunity to develop these abilities, from Mum’s perspective it offers a lot more:

if you go to a school like that and you stay in Brisbane for a while, you got a chance to do different things; not just sit around watching the men drink and the women just putting up with it all. You don't have to be the kind of Aborigine the whitefellas want you to be. You don't have to do just what the whitefellas let you do. Look at that little school you used to go to ... Some blacks work there, right, but they're just helping, not teaching, not deciding what the place is gonna do. Gracey, you don’t have to be the teacher’s aide, you can be the teacher. You don’t have to go and ask for things, you can have people come, asking things from you. You don’t have to wait for the gov’ment to give you money, you can get paid properly; have money yourself (pp. 51-52).

It is clear that Mum’s short-term aspirations for Gracey do not include marriage and motherhood, but she does not exclude them in the long term, and so while she takes the role of social activist here in regard to race relations, her arguments cannot be read as serious challenges to common-sense understandings about ‘proper’ life roles for women. From Mum’s perspective, it is not marriage and motherhood per se that presented obstacles for her and must be avoided by Gracey; and neither are readers encouraged to consider these institutions problematic, except in so far as they are relevant to a discussion that is explicitly concerned with issues of race and racism. What is crucial, in Mum’s opinion, is that Gracey should escape from the town because it offers no opportunities to black men except unemployment and alcoholism, and no opportunities for black women except to bear children to unemployed and/or alcoholic men; indeed, Mum points out that the town offers few opportunities for white people either, and cites the example of Ron Kendall, a white footballer who went to Sydney for a while but was ‘sucked back’ to the town, as Mum herself was, because footy was the only thing he could do and the only reason he went there in the first place (p. 52). In order to escape – that is, to take up a less marginalised position than would be available to her as a black woman in her home town – Mum argues that Gracey needs to take advantage of being ‘special’. She must make use of her existing difference from other black girls, her athletic talents, to make herself even more different by gaining the sort of education that will enable her to stay away from the town and do ‘different things’.

Here the narrative invites readers familiar with contemporary problems of Aboriginal unemployment, alcoholism, and low educational achievement to also see ‘escape’, in the form of being different from the other black girls in her town, as the solution for Gracey. However, this argument in favour of escape cannot be read as a proposal that Gracey should take up an
altogether different form of female identity. On the contrary, it reads as an encouragement to
Gracey to develop herself in such a way that she becomes less different from 'normal' white,
middle-class women, by gaining a private school education and becoming (something like) a
teacher. Such a scenario does not rule out the conventional female life choices of marriage and
motherhood, but can instead be seen as a precursor to them. Given that teaching is a highly
feminised profession that involves working with children and taking responsibility for them in loco
parentis, Mum’s suggestion of teaching as a career, rather than, for example, engineering or
science, can hardly be read as a challenge to common-sense beliefs about appropriate life roles
for women.

However, the ‘escape’ argument also proposes the contradictory position: that because she is
black Gracey will have to fight hard, and behave in ways that are in fact different from
conventionally feminine girls and women, in order to achieve her goals. Marriage and
motherhood must be deferred, for example, although they need not necessarily be excluded
entirely; and Gracey must learn to be more tough than a white middle-class girl would have to be
to achieve the same goals. Mr Jenkins, the teacher who first recognises Gracey’s athletic
abilities, gives her some coaching advice that applies equally to other dimensions of her life:

\[
\text{We just have to face it. It’s hard enough for any kid to make it to the State Championships, but for you it’s twice as hard. You can’t just train hard, Gracey, you’ve got to BE hard as well.} \quad (p. 16).
\]

Similarly, when Mum predicts, on the basis of Dougy’s poor educational achievements, that he is
gonna end up like his father, most likely. I can’t think of much to do for him (p. 46), and Gracey
replies that she can take care of him, just as Mum has done, Mum’s response is quite angry:

\[
\text{No … in the end, Dougy’s gonna have to look out for himself. And you, Gracey, you have to look after yourself first} \quad (p. 46).
\]

It is possible to read Mum’s response as a challenge to common-sense ideas that women’s
‘proper’ social roles involve caring for others, particularly children and men, and looking after
themselves last rather than first. However, both in this conversation and throughout the
narrative as a whole, it is anti-racist, rather than feminist, discourses that readers are invited to
utilise as ‘obvious’ meaning-making resources. Thus it is likely that readers will overlook this
opportunity to challenge the discourse of ‘good’ motherhood, and understand Mum’s response
as simply encouragement to Gracey to make a stand on her own behalf in the face of racial
oppression.

Despite her eagerness to send Gracey away to school, Mum is represented as a strong woman
who holds her family together, in contrast to Dougy’s father, who sorta moves around from one
place to another. Comes home about once a year (p. 1). Dad, who is also not named, and
appears only briefly in Dougy’s story, is always drunk (p. 1) and thus exemplifies the
unemployed, alcoholic Aboriginal male commonly constructed within Australian racist
discourses. However, there are also stereotypical aspects to the way Mum is represented as a
formidable black matriarch who ensures her family’s survival in the face of difficulties and in the

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Detailed analyses of selected texts
absence of their father. The implications of the use of this stereotype are discussed further below; here it should be noted that it both draws on and works to promote the common-sense concept of an essentially female, and specifically ‘maternal’, form of strength that renders the emotional work of rearing children ‘naturally’ women’s work.

Mum’s sensitivity and insight, as well as her abilities to nurture and provide emotional support for her children, are illustrated in Dougy’s account of the conversation he overhears on the eve of the final of the State Championship race. Gracey, anxious about the race and her conspicuousness as the only Aboriginal competitor, is unable to sleep, and Dougy can hear the distress in her voice. However, all the time, Mum’s voice was the same, a gentle murmur, like a song, calming Gracey down (p. 34), constantly responding to her with understanding and wisdom:

‘Yes, it makes you angry. I know. But you got to make sure you’re angry at the white blokes who treat you like that. No good being mad ‘cause you’re a black. Just makes you hate yourself in the end. I seen that too.’

There was lots more said after that, and every time Gracey sounded hopeless, Mum found a way to change her mind (p. 35).

Mum’s representation here, and throughout the narrative, as an assertively determined, but reasonable and peaceable woman, rather than a loud and angry activist who might alienate otherwise sympathetic white readers, is crucial to the text’s anti-racist agenda. As suggested above, the success of its advocacy of an anti-racist ideology relies on the representation of Aboriginal values and aspirations in ways that can be understood in positive terms, not only by contemporary readers living in a racist society, but also, and at least as importantly, by the predominantly white middle-class gatekeepers who control the production and circulation of children’s literature. A key narrative strategy in this regard is the representation of Mum as a mother who is loving, understanding, wise and responsive to her children’s needs, and whose values and aspirations, at least in relation to her children, are consistent with those of the idealised white middle-class mother. As such, Mum invites readers’ sympathies on the topic of racial oppression, in the same way that, as discussed later in this analysis, Cooper’s unpleasant character works to alienate readers from his overtly racist views. At the same time, however, this representation of Mum as a ‘good’ mother (notwithstanding her Aboriginality) supports the discursive construction of motherhood as a ‘universal’ and ‘natural’ female identity that transcends cultural and historical differences, thus limiting the possibilities for readers to recognise it as a social concept that has been constructed differently across cultures and time.

At the same time, as noted above, there are elements of the stereotypical black matriarch in the way Mum is represented: she is the head of the household, responsible for her family’s physical and emotional survival, and evidently a public force to be reckoned with. Thus Dougy observes that Raymond is afraid of Mum like we all are, even Dad, even the whites up at the school (pp. 1-2). Raymond is nearly 16, but Mum will always boss him around (p. 2), especially when she sees him with angry and aggressive Aboriginal men like Johnny Warren who, according to Dougy, says you don’t say how far away a place is, or how long it takes to drive it, you say how
many stubbies you drink in the car along the way (p. 6). However, there is a negative side to the stereotype exemplified by Mum: Aboriginal women are sometimes blamed for emasculating Aboriginal men and producing delinquent youths by adopting matriarchal roles and denying men their ‘proper’ places as providers and heads of households, even as Aboriginal men are also blamed for failing to provide for their families. By invoking the stereotype of the black matriarch, which, as explained in Chapter Four, is both sexist and racist, the narrative undermines its own anti-racism agenda; more importantly from the perspective of this study, however, it also invites readers to consider the possibility that Mum may not be an unequivocally positive force in the lives of her sons.

For example, Gracey, despite her uncertainties about whether she can be as ‘hard’ as Mum and Mr Jenkins exhort her to be, is represented as strong, independent and, as Dougy observes, much like her mother. However, Dougy represents himself as lacking confidence and self-esteem, and as highly dependent on Gracey and Mum. When shooting breaks out between the town’s white and black communities, for instance, Dougy is relieved to be with Gracey, because she would tell me what to do, just like Mum. I usually tried to do what Mum told me, ‘cept when I was too dumb (p. 72). Dougy depends on Gracey for company: he mentions no friends of his own, and spends his afternoons after school alone, before meeting her bus and walking home with her; he watches her training, and often sits and listens to her conversations with Mum; and he is anxious about her going to boarding school, telling her, I don’t want you to go away, Gracey. I want you to stay here with me. To help me (p. 130).

Given that the focalisation strategies of the narrative work to position readers such that they sympathise with Dougy while also viewing themselves as more perceptive than he is, Dougy can easily be understood as over-dependent on Gracey and Mum, and perhaps also, like Kim in Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993), over-protected. This reading is reinforced in much the same way that it is in Kim’s case: by the account of a crisis in which Dougy emerges as a hero during the absence and incapacity of the females who dominate his life. Mum is absent on a shopping trip to the larger town of Cunningham, unable to return because of sudden flooding; it is dusk; and Dougy, Gracey and Raymond are trapped in the local hall with the floodwaters rapidly rising. The shooting that had broken out earlier in the day has stopped as the town’s inhabitants attend to saving themselves and their possessions; but Gracey has a broken collar bone and is barely conscious because of the pain, and Raymond is in shock after the shooting of his football hero. It is up to Dougy to get the three of them up through the high ceiling of the dark hall, and then to break through the corrugated iron roof so that they can be seen and rescued by the army helicopter that is evacuating the town. Then, when Gracey is dragged from the roof and into the floodwaters, it is Dougy who persuades the helicopter crew to undertake a seemingly futile search for her in the dark. Gracey later assures Dougy that he no longer needs her to look after him. However, he must still resist his powerful mother who, when the school year begins, tells the principal of Dougy’s new school that he ‘can’t handle’ high school.

But I said straight out, ‘Mum, I’m old enough. And I’m big enough. I want to be in high school.’
Mum stared at me for a long time. I guess she was surprised that I’d said anything, specially in front of the principal. But Gracey had told her everything that happened in the hall when the floodwaters were rising ..., and since then I think Mum had been watching me and treating me a bit different (p. 150).

While Dougy has been dominated by the powerful women in his life, Raymond can be read as illustrating the other negative consequence commonly attributed to the appropriation of the ‘proper’ roles of Aboriginal men by matriarchal women such as Mum and Gracey. While there is nothing in Dougy’s narrative to suggest that Raymond is delinquent, he is represented as ultimately rather weak, and easily influenced by hard-drinking, angry and aggressive young men like Johnny Warren, whom readers are positioned to view, as Mum does, as a bad influence. Thus Raymond is excited when the shooting begins and tells Gracey and Dougy that he wishes he had a gun and could join the fight: We gonna fight back. Now’s our chance to get even. That’s what Johnny Warren says, anyway, and I’m with him (p. 75). This characterisation of Raymond as hostile and aggressive further encourages readers to align their sympathies with the more reasonable and peaceable characters of Gracey, Mum and Dougy, and to distance themselves from Raymond and the violent and aggressive solutions to racial oppression that he endorses. However, it also works intertextually with familiar racial stereotypes, with the representation of Dougy as over-protected and emasculated, and with the contrasting representation of Gracey, to suggest that capable, assertive and independent women like Mum may be negative forces in the lives of their sons.

Nevertheless, Mum’s strength is portrayed as a mainly positive force throughout the narrative, even when she is absent in Cunningham during the afternoon when racial tension finally erupts into a violent battle between the town’s black and white communities. Gracey is certain that, had her mother been in town, things would have been different—She’d sort these blokes out quick enough, both sides (p. 72) – and her own strategy, Dougy observes, is to try to work out what Mum would do if she was here (p. 72). At one point, Gracey tries to persuade Ron Kendall, one of the white men who is holding her, Raymond, Dougy and two of their white friends as prisoners in the local hall, to help stop the fighting:

I bet there are plenty of people like us trying to talk sense into the fellas with the guns just like you’ll be talking to your side. My Mum might even be back by now. And you know my mother. Nobody stands up to her for long (pp. 102-103).

Gracey herself is thus portrayed as a force for peace, as her mother would be if she were present. Throughout the narrative, Gracey constantly argues in favour of peaceful, non-violent solutions and against the use of guns, and twice she physically intervenes to break up fights between some of the boys. During the afternoon in the hall she insists that fighting is not going to do any good (p. 79) and that if someone doesn’t stop this, people are going to get killed. Lots of people (p. 78); and when Raymond manages to disarm Cooper, one of the leaders of the white men, Gracey is furious:

Give Cooper back his gun ... You heard me. Give him his rifle back, now. It’s no use to us. One more Abo with a gun isn’t going to save any lives. Just more people get killed, that’s all (p. 106).
Raymond refuses to comply; Gracey's predictions are soon proved accurate; and the case against violence and guns is reinforced. Also reinforced, however, are common-sense understandings that associate aggression and violence with males, and link peacemaking and concern for others with females. According to such understandings, it is 'obvious' and 'natural' that it should be boys who attempt to resolve their differences in physical fights and girls who drag them apart, and equally 'obvious' and 'natural' that it should be men with rifles who start the fighting in the town and Gracey who makes what appears to be a lone stand against the use of violence and guns. Thus the narrative works to reinforce essentialised notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour, even while it condemns the former and valorises the latter. In so doing it also works, by implication, to naturalise the construction of motherhood and fatherhood as qualitatively different forms of parenthood.

While Dougy is overtly concerned with advocating an anti-racist ideology, with highlighting the ease with which violence can escalate, and with attacking the use of guns, the narrative also contains some more covert warnings in regard to female sexuality. Female desire is marked as a potential problem on the first page of the narrative when, in describing his family, Dougy observes:

Gracey's my sister. I like her. She's not like the rest of the girls in town. She don't chase after all the boys and play that game like. She could catch them all right, don't you worry. Gracey's the fastest girl across the ground you've ever seen (p. 1).

The words 'not like' in this context cannot be taken to mean simply 'different from', but demand to be read as 'better than'; and, in this case, what evidently makes Gracey better than the other girls is that she does not chase boys. Here readers are positioned in such a way that they are virtually obliged to concur with Dougy's judgement of such behaviour as undesirable in order to make sense of his comments. However, to allay any possible doubts about Gracey's sexual attractiveness, Dougy's description of her athletic talents serves the additional purpose of indicating that there is nothing wrong with Gracey; she could have a boyfriend if she wanted one, and presumably will do so at the appropriate time. This representation of Gracey as a model of regulated, indeed self-regulated, female sexuality is reinforced further as Dougy's narrative unfolds, particularly by means of the contrast drawn between her and Melissa, the local publican's daughter.

Fourteen-year-old Melissa is expelled from the same Brisbane boarding school that offers Gracey a sporting scholarship. In the same newspaper that reports Gracey's win in the State Championships, Melissa appears in a front-page photograph:

There were two other girls in the picture as well, all in fancy dresses with short skirts and shoulder pads like footballers. One of the girls had her hand up, shielding her face, but not Melissa. She was staring straight at the camera like she didn't care and her eyes were half-closed, which made her look sleepy, or even a little drunk (p. 42).

All three girls had slipped away from a school dance to meet three young men, and were subsequently detained in a police raid on an illegal casino. Melissa has been expelled from school twice in a year, and no other boarding school will accept her, so she is obliged to return
home and make the long bus journey to and from Cunningham each day with the other secondary school students from the town, a fate that can only, in this context, be read as a punishment. Dougy comments that all the other students had always done this, and that it was not a punishment for them, but, in effect, Melissa has lost the middle-class advantage that might have enabled her to be different from the other girls in the town, in much the same way that Mum hopes Gracey will be different.

As one of the white boys observes, Melissa and Gracey are changing places, and the change involves more than a simple change in location: it has implications in terms of the educational opportunities and life choices available to each girl. However, the reversal of their situations also works in another sense, as a counter to racist beliefs that construct an image of asexual white femininity in opposition to the stereotype of the sexually available black woman. Moreover, the story of Melissa offers yet another warning against the dangers of unregulated female sexuality.

Dougy's narrative encourages readers to distance themselves from Melissa and her sexualised version of femininity by representing her as malicious, and as manipulative in her treatment of the local young men: She could persuade a young man to do anything for her. She just had to smile at him, speak to him, like she wanted to be friends (pp. 56-57). Furthermore, it is Melissa's defiance of her father's rules that triggers the chain of events that culminates in the violent eruption of racial tension. While she cannot be blamed for these events, the clear link between her behaviour and a number of violent deaths works to position readers to indict both Melissa and the sexualised version of femininity she represents. Interestingly, Melissa has much in common with Julia in Angel's Gate (Crew 1993) and, like Julia's, her story works to justify the vigilant regulation and containment of female sexual desire.

A different sort of problem, in relation to Gracey's sexuality, is highlighted when Dougy observes that he is not the only person who watches Gracey as she is training:

A few times, I've seen a red panel van stop in the shade of the trees along one side of the showgrounds. It's that bloke Cooper, whose dad lives in the humpy down near the river. I can just make him out, his white face in the darkness, watching Gracey stretch out her long legs. But he never speaks to Gracey or Mr Jenkins. He never even gets out of his car (pp. 8-9).

This comment, seemingly an incidental aside, actually serves a number of purposes. Most evidently, it works on behalf of the anti-racist and anti-violence agenda of the narrative by building on earlier hints that Cooper is an unpleasant character, and thus encouraging readers to distance themselves from the violently racist attitudes that he comes to represent. However, the comment also works intertextually with familiar discourses that construct girls and women as constantly vulnerable to the threat of male sexual violence, and therefore as always dependent on the protection of 'good' men. In this case, Cooper merely watches, and Gracey's safety is ensured by the presence of Mr Jenkins; but readers are positioned, by their everyday knowledge of the world as a dangerous place for unprotected girls and women, to interpret Cooper's watching as menacing, and to speculate about what might ensue if Gracey were alone.
Dougy’s comment also links to a remark made later by Gracey, when Cooper’s empty van becomes a symbolic target for some angry Aboriginal gunmen: *Serves him right, the stinking mongrel. He’d have liked to get me in the back of that van. But I kept tellin’ him to ping off* (p. 73). Again, the unpleasantness of Cooper’s character is reinforced here, as is the representation of Gracey’s sexuality as successfully self-regulated, at least so far: what is also reinforced is readers’ awareness of the constancy of the threat to women. Thus, while in the case of Melissa, the regulation of female sexuality can be read as necessary for the protection of men, in Gracey’s case it can be understood as necessary for the protection of women from men.

Given that the linked social institutions of marriage and motherhood have long been important means by which women and their sexuality are both regulated and protected, *Dougy* must be recognised as a narrative that works to affirm, rather than to challenge, the value of those institutions, as they are currently constructed in the social order. The characters of Mum, Gracey and Melissa are represented in *Dougy* in ways that may be successful in helping to persuade readers to adopt the anti-racist and anti-violence attitudes the text overtly promotes. It is unlikely, however, that readers will be prompted by these representations to question the prevailing hegemony of common-sense understandings about motherhood.

**The case of *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992)**

Melina Marchetta was still a student when she wrote her first novel, *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), which was selected as the CBCA’s *Book of the Year: Older Readers* in 1993. It has proved so popular that, as noted in Chapter Two, it is now marketed to adult readers as well as adolescents, and a survey of best-selling children’s paperbacks by the Australian Book Publishers Association showed that it ranked fourth, with sales exceeding 50,000 copies (Sheahan 1996). It is likely, however, that this popularity is limited to a predominantly female audience. Anecdotal evidence suggests that secondary schools have purchased the text in class sets, and thus that it has been required reading for many adolescent males, but as a narrative that is largely concerned with female relationships and invites readers to identify with female subjectivity, it is implicitly targeted to a female market.

*Looking for Alibrandi* is narrated by Josephine Alibrandi, an Australian girl of Italian descent who lives with her mother, Christina, and attends a Catholic girls’ school. The search that the title suggests is Josephine’s search for identity, and she describes the year in which she not only completes her school education, but meets and gets to know her father, begins to learn about the lives of her mother and grandmother, has her first serious relationship with a boy, and experiences the loss of a friend through suicide. The narrative is overtly concerned with growing up, and with the relationships between three generations of women, but more specifically it is about growing up female and negotiating the transition from girl to woman. Thus, given that the identities of ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ are often conflated in common sense, it is not surprising that issues related to motherhood are central in this text.
Although not explicitly presented as such, the narrative resembles a journal or diary: Josephine does not give a retrospective account, but relates events as they happen or have happened within the previous few days. Thus, to introduce herself, she writes, *I turned seventeen a few months ago ... I'm in my last year of high school* (pp. 4-5); and as her story ends, her final examinations are over and she observes, *It's my birthday today. I'm not seventeen any more* (p. 260). After the funeral of her friend John, Josephine writes, *Sometimes an hour has gone by and I haven't thought of John. Sometimes two, but then I remember that not a minute will ever go by when his mother won't think of him* (p. 240), a comment that illustrates not only the kind of common-sense assumptions about motherhood that inform Josephine's narrative, but also the confidential and reflective qualities of a journal or diary.

Accordingly, much of the narrative is presented in a confessional style. For example, reflecting on an argument with Christina, Josephine observes:

*I'll be the first to admit that I over-reacted the other night ... I know I shouldn't have said what I did. My life isn't as bad I make out and sometimes I think it's all in my head, but I can't help it. I'm beginning to realise that I can be a little selfish and I'm trying to find the words to apologise* (p. 100).

The focalisation of the narrative through Josephine invites readers to align their own perceptions and understandings with hers, although this does not mean that they are positioned always to view her in a favourable light. In keeping with the diary style, Josephine shares with readers, *in confidence*, her innermost thoughts, including her negative perceptions of herself and her plans for self-improvement. Thus, in the example above, Josephine cannot yet apologise to Christina, but she can confess her belief that she should; she can also confess her recognition of herself as selfish and unfair, and resolve to be less so in the future. If readers have not yet made the same assessment of Josephine, they are invited to agree with her now; moreover, to the extent that they identify with her, they are invited also to make an assessment of themselves in relation to similar issues, and to plan for self-improvement as required.

Thus the confessional narrative style exerts a form of disciplinary power on readers, who are invited to improve themselves by learning the same lessons about growing up and becoming a woman that Josephine represents herself as learning. Moreover, they are positioned to perceive themselves, as Josephine evidently does, as having developed these understandings on their own, through their own (vicarious) experience, rather than recognising themselves and their choices as shaped by social forces external to them. Early in her narrative, Josephine yearns to break free of the *ridiculous rules and regulations* (p. 40) of her Italian family and her social world:

*I'll run one day. Run for my life. To be free and think for myself. Not as an Australian and not as an Italian and not as an in-between. I'll run to be emancipated* (p. 40).

In the closing chapter, Josephine confesses, *My emancipation didn't happen like I expected it to* (p. 258), but she has no doubt that it has been achieved over the course of the year: *I just sat there thinking back on the year and I realised that I was emancipated long ago. It wasn't at one
particular point either, it was at several (p. 258). She then catalogues the things that she has come to understand over the course of the year about who she is and where she belongs. Readers can infer that Josephine has grown up, that she is finally free and can think for herself; and they are invited to perceive this, as she does, as a significant achievement – one worth writing a novel about, perhaps. However, Josephine’s ‘emancipation’ has brought her, apparently of her own free choice, back to the point from which she originally wished to escape:

And tonight I'll be with friends and family, which is what life is all about. I'll sit between two women. The two most influential women in my life, whose relationship was almost destroyed by one man who has been dead for fifteen years.

I will sit between them and be a link and I'll fight with all my might to see that nothing tears my family unit apart (pp. 260-261).

This shift in attitude, which Josephine understands as her emancipation, is represented as having been achieved as a result of Josephine’s experiences through the year. These provide her, and hence also the readers who share them vicariously with her, with a variety of informal lessons in growing up, many of which concern motherhood.

Consistent with the pattern that has emerged in most of the analyses in this chapter, the regulation of female sexuality is a significant theme in Looking for Alibrandi and, as in Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993) and Dougy (Moloney 1993), it is evident as such from the first page. Here Josephine describes her panic in response to a set of multiple choice questions which, given her description of the context, readers are positioned to assume form part of a school examination:

I hated multiple choice. Yet I didn't want to get question three wrong. I didn't want to get any of them wrong. The outcome would be too devastating for my sense of being (p. 1).

Josephine is indeed at school, but the questions that so daunt her are actually part of a Hot Pants magazine quiz that claims to reveal what sort of friend she is; hence their significance for her ‘sense of being’. However, the questions and their possible answers can also be read as symbolising some of the choices that will confront Josephine during the coming year as she makes the transition from girl to woman, and these too have significance for her sense of being. The choices concern her sexuality, as readers discover when her teacher, Sister Gregory, directs Josephine to share her private reading material with the class:

“You are at a party,” I began with a sigh, “and your best friend’s good-looking, wealthy and successful boy-friend tries to make a pass. Do you: A – Smile obligingly and steal away into the night via the back door; B – Throw your cocktail all over his Country Road suit; C — Quietly explain the loyalty you have towards your friend; D – Tell your friend instantly, knowing that she will make a scene.”

You can understand, now, why I found it hard to pick between ‘B’ and ‘C’ (p. 2).

When Sister Gregory asks what relevance the magazine has for her religion class, Josephine offers a quick-witted critique of the magazine’s explicit concern with sexual relationships and its potential for influencing young girls, a response that amuses her friends, although Sister Gregory hadn't been fooled (p. 4). Nevertheless, Josephine’s answer highlights the sharp contrast between the values promoted by Hot Pants magazine and those of the lesson in which she is supposed to be participating. A similar contrast can be recognised between Josephine’s
youthfulness and emerging sexuality and her evidently post-menopausal teacher, whose sexuality has been denied and suppressed by her nun’s habit and her retention of her male saint’s name although the custom went out years ago (p. 3). The question of what constitutes an acceptable version of female sexuality is clearly of central concern in these opening pages, and readers are invited to recognise that the correct answer – ‘B’ or ‘C’ – is to be found somewhere in between the opposing sets of values represented by the magazine and the nun’s habit.

This concern with female sexuality remains central throughout Josephine’s narrative, and is raised again when she describes her three friends, whom she perceives as being quite different from each other. In regard to sexuality, Josephine and her friends represent the same options offered in the Hot Pants quiz. For example Seraphina, in contrast to the celestial purity implied by her name, represents option ‘A’: Sera never wears anything that’s not short and tight except for her school uniform (p. 53); she has black roots and blonde hair teased from here to eternity (p. 19); and she is skinny yet voluptuous (p. 19). Furthermore, since she was fourteen she has never been without a boyfriend for more than a week and she’s the only one of us who’s slept with a guy (p. 19). However, Sera’s parents know nothing of her boyfriends or of the second wardrobe that she keeps under her bed and changes into when she’s out of her parents’ sight (p. 53).

Sera’s representation as a girl whose parents have little control over her behaviour thus works to achieve the same effect as the representations of Julia, in Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993), and Melissa, in Dougy (Moloney 1993): it plays on widespread social anxieties about the possible consequences of the unrestrained expression of female desire, and thus works to justify the stringent containment and regulation of female sexuality. Josephine’s comments that she and her other friends tend to view Sera with disgusted fascination (p. 19) and that sometimes I really don’t like her (p. 20) work to persuade readers to distance themselves further from the version of female sexuality she represents. Moreover, they can hardly fail to perceive that option ‘A’, Sera’s preferred answer to the Hot Pants quiz question, is not the correct answer.

The possible consequences of unregulated female sexuality are highlighted when Josephine reveals that her mother is not married, and that she herself is the product of a brief teenage romance between Christina and Michael Andretti, whose family had lived next door to hers. Josephine’s repeated description of herself as ‘illegitimate’ is surprising, given that the word is no longer commonly used to describe children born outside marriage. It is most effective, however, in highlighting the illegitimacy of the teenage sexual relationship that led to Josephine’s birth.

Christina has evidently been punished for her behaviour. According to Josephine, she was estranged from her family for years after my birth. It was only after my grandfather died that we were welcomed back into the fold (p. 35). Josephine herself has also had to bear the consequences of her mother’s behaviour. She has experienced social isolation in primary
school, when no one was allowed to come and stay at my house (p. 8), the taunts of the local bully who called me a bastard (p. 35), the discomfort of overhearing conversations in which her relatives spat out my mother’s name in disgust (p. 35), and the continuing belief that the girls at her school are talking about me behind my back (p. 8). Such punishments offer a strong warning to readers about the possible effects of sexual desire that is not regulated within, and legitimated by, the institution of marriage.

It is significant, however, that these consequences are not represented as affecting the men involved: Michael, whose family moved to Adelaide shortly after Christina became pregnant, was unaware of Josephine’s existence until his return to Sydney at the time that Josephine’s story begins. As he acknowledges, I wasn’t around ... so I don’t know how hard it was (p. 160). He is now a successful barrister, whereas Christina, who had once planned to study English literature at university, works as a secretary and translator for a few doctors (p. 5). Readers can draw on their own knowledge of the social world to recognise it as ‘obvious’ that it is women who are most vulnerable to the consequences of unregulated sexual desire and, by implication, that it is women who are most in need of protection through the regulation of their sexuality within the social institutions of marriage and motherhood.

Another of Josephine’s friends, Anna, provides a contrast to Sera. She is the most nervous person I have ever known ... she stands like a stunned mullet if guys approach us and still hasn’t been kissed (pp. 18-19). Josephine’s representation of Anna invites readers to like her more than they do Sera, but also to perceive her attitude to boys and sex to be almost as much of a cause for concern as Sera’s. Again, readers are invited to understand that somewhere in between the two extremes represented by Sera and Anna is the correct option.

This reading is reinforced by Josephine’s description of a conversation among her friends at the end of the year, when the fourth member of the group, Lee, reveals that she slept with Matt last night (p. 254), evidently for the first time. In the subsequent discussion, Sera suggests to Josephine, whose first serious boyfriend has just broken off their relationship, that if you’d slept with Jacob you’d still be with him now (p. 255); Anna worries about what happens if I get married and I’m not good in bed (p. 256); Sera recommends ‘experimenting’; and Josephine gives qualified agreement: Yes, but only if you’re in love with them (p. 256). Afterwards, Lee sums up the differences between the four girls, and assures Josephine that she was right in deciding not to sleep with Jacob:

You’re different to me. Different to Sera. You’re the type who’d suit being a virgin until she’s in love, or even until she’s married. You could probably make it look trendy. Anna will probably be a virgin six months after her wedding night from fear of not being good in bed (p. 256).

Josephine’s acceptance of Lee’s advice works as an inducement to readers to do the same. By implication, it invites readers to also be Josephine’s type: to set a trend by being different, resisting peer group pressure and ‘saving themselves’ for love and marriage. Jacob himself has already expressed a similar view:
You were right not to let me make love to you. Because you're you. Out of some misguided thinking you would feel the need to stay with me for the rest of your life, because you probably think that the first man you make love to is the man you have to marry. I've thought of that and it seems pretty freaky, but beautiful (p. 251).

Additional reinforcement to the notion of 'saving yourself' for the 'right' man is provided when Josephine challenges Lee’s remark that losing her virginity was just a page in my life. No big deal (p. 257):

'It is a loss of innocence you know,' she said thinking about it. ‘Just like everyone says it is. I think it’s the only thing you have left that belongs to you and that belongs to that cocoon of childhood.’

'Are you going to see Matt again?' I asked.

Lee shrugged.

'You know what I wish?'

'What?'

'I wish I was a little girl again,' she whispered quietly (p. 257).

Lee's desire to be a little girl again can most easily be understood as regret over the loss of her virginity, and thus as further vindication of Josephine’s view that female sexual desire is only legitimately expressed in the context of love and marriage. It also works in conjunction with Michael's remarks about his teenage affair with Christina, which offer a further disincentive by suggesting, with what is presented as the wisdom of hindsight and mature experience, that teenage girls are unlikely to find sexual relationships emotionally satisfying:

... it was a thing that we couldn't handle. Kids shouldn't play grown-up games. I don't mean having the baby bit either ... I mean the sex bit ... When I think of it now, very few men know how to make teenage girls feel good emotionally as well as physically (p. 160).

The ‘problem’ of unregulated female sexuality is raised yet again when Josephine's grandmother, Katia, reminisces about her life in Italy at Josephine's age. Beautiful, lively and 'boy-crazy' Katia's life was strictly regulated by her parents and later, after an arranged marriage, by her husband, a much older man who brought her unwillingly to Australia and then to an isolated farm in far north Queensland. Katia contrasts her life with that of contemporary Australian teenagers: Oh, Jozzie, tings these days are so bad because you can get away with anyting. But tings those days were so bad because you got away wit nuting (p. 75). Again, it is the middle ground between these two extremes that readers can take to be the preferred option. However, Katia also recalls the fate of some of the other girls in her village whose lives were, apparently, not so strictly regulated as her own, and who came to be regarded as unacceptable as wives. She cites the example of Teresa, who never married because she was ‘taken’ for a night by a boy who did not want her any more and returned her to her family ... No man would have her ... So many times that happened (p. 76). Katia’s stories reinforce common-sense beliefs that women need protection from their own desires and/or from ‘bad’ men, and work both to justify the strict regulation of her sexuality that Katia herself experienced and to suggest the need for stricter regulation of contemporary young women like Josephine.

As evidence of this need, Josephine experiences something of the dangers that await unprotected girls. She and Anna work part-time at a fast food outlet, and are harassed during a
late night shift by a group of youths. The timely arrival of some police officers puts a stop to this, but only temporarily: the youths are waiting in the carpark when Josephine and Anna finish work. This time they attack the girls physically, and only the intervention of two other boys saves them from serious harm. Significantly, and predictably, a romantic element is introduced here: the heroes are Jacob and Anton, whom the girls had previously met at a school dance, and who subsequently become their first steady boyfriends. The message for readers from this sequence of events is that girls and women need more protection than the law alone can provide; the ideal form of protection is secured permanently through a relationship, preferably marriage, with the ‘right’ man.

The discourse of romance so central to the popular series fiction discussed in Chapter Five is also prominent in Looking for Alibrandi, with the problem of finding and keeping the ‘right’ man a significant concern for Josephine and her friends. Jacob may not actually be the ‘right’ man; his relationship with Josephine is stormy from the start, and they eventually separate. The narrative offers no explicit closure on this issue, leaving readers to speculate on Josephine’s comment, in her conclusion, that I do believe in my heart that one day I will be with Jacob Coote again (p. 260). However, as indicated in both Chapters Four and Five, the romantic discourse invoked here is powerful and pervasive; its appeal to readers’ fantasies may well be sufficient to undermine readers’ awareness that a ‘real life’ Josephine would be unlikely to marry her first boyfriend and live with him happily ever after. Indeed, readers presumably know that, fantasies aside, a ‘real life’ Josephine would be unlikely to live ‘happily ever after’ with anyone. Yet, as they seek to construct a satisfying closure, readers are strongly invited, both by the narrative itself and by the familiar romantic discourse it invokes, to view a romantic resolution, one that includes marriage and, eventually, children with the ‘right’ man as the preferred outcome.

The discourse of romance operates similarly in the narrative’s representation of the relationship between Christina and Michael, such that a romantic outcome comes to seem as ‘natural’ and desirable to readers as it is evidently wished for by Josephine. The two have had no contact since Michael’s family left Sydney soon after Christina became pregnant, and he assumed that she had obtained an abortion. His return to Sydney is initially only temporary, but he decides to remain close to his newly discovered daughter and buys a house, where Josephine often stays with him. Josephine comments in the concluding chapter that Christina sometimes joins them for dinner, and observes how tuned in to each other she and Michael are: they talk for hours without embarrassment or awkwardness and I wonder what is stopping them from getting closer. Maybe they’re both terrified of how strong their feelings really are (p. 259). Whenever Josephine shares her hopes about him and Christina with Michael, he appears amused at her romanticism but is otherwise equivocal; thus, both Josephine and readers are encouraged to perceive a romantic outcome as a real possibility. Moreover, such an outcome is also desirable in terms of the values that evidently inform the narrative, according to which motherhood is the ‘proper’ and ‘natural’ role for women, but only within the legitimating institution of marriage. A marriage between Christina and Michael would make good, albeit somewhat belatedly, an inconsistency in regard to Christina’s representation as a ‘good’ mother, while also transforming Michael,
Christina and Josephine into the two-parent family unit that the narrative represents as most desirable.

Whether or not he turns out to be Jacob, Josephine has no doubt that the ‘right’ man exists, and that she will find him eventually. She intends to become a barrister, but her dream for the future also features marriage and motherhood strongly, as she confides to her mother: I dream of being successful and of falling in love with someone with money. Of someone loving me. Of having two children. One boy and one girl (p. 71). Later, when she and Jacob are fantasising about their futures, Josephine’s remark that Jacob would be a lovely husband prompts a reply that clearly illustrates not only that Jacob, like Josephine, takes it for granted that marriage means children, but also that readers are expected to do the same: Bet you’d be good with kids and all (p. 169). Josephine is evidently pleased with this vision: she hugs him and at that moment, that very second, I pictured myself with Jacob Coote for the rest of my life (p. 170).

Josephine’s assumption that motherhood and domesticity will feature prominently in her adult life is typical of contemporary Australian teenage girls, as the discussion in Chapter One indicates. While at times Josephine represents herself as ‘different’, by virtue of her Italian heritage, her representation here as a ‘normal’ teenage girl, with ‘normal’ interests and desires, works to affirm the truth of common-sense assumptions that link femininity ‘naturally’ and ‘normally’ with romance, marriage, motherhood and domesticity; additionally, it restricts the possibilities for readers to construct alternative visions. Thus, as Josephine’s narrative closes, readers are positioned to equate her perception that the place where she belongs is between Christina and Katia, helping to hold her family together, with her achievement of womanhood.

Given that Looking for Alibrandi deals, in part, with the relationships between three generations of women, it is not surprising that mothers play prominent roles in the narrative, and the ways in which Katia and Christina are represented are significant in terms of this study. Josephine loves and admires her mother; they have a pretty good relationship, if a bit erratic (p. 5), although Christina is strict, so not being able to go out a lot is one of my many problems (p. 6). Despite their occasional arguments, Josephine represents Christina in positive terms, and strenuously defends her against criticism. In particular, she defends her to Katia, who never had anything nice to say about Mama (p. 40), but constantly criticises her about the way she’s bringing me up or how she’s disrespectful by not visiting our relatives (p. 34). Indeed, Josephine’s narrative initially constructs a clear contrast between the versions of motherhood represented by Katia and Christina.

Christina is represented as an attractive, intelligent, strong and independent woman who has brought Josephine up with no financial or other support from Michael, and also without the support of her family, at least for the first years of Josephine’s life. In contrast to Lisa, in Change the Locks (French 1991), Christina’s youth and her single status have not prevented her from fulfilling the requirements of a ‘good’ mother. She is always available to support her daughter emotionally: she may look like a delicate soft woman but the strength in her eyes is such a comfort to me when I’m scared. She would never fall to pieces on me (p. 16). Moreover,
Josephine never doubts that her mother’s love is unconditional: *she’s the only person who loves me the way I am* (p. 17). As noted earlier, she has a job, and this means that Josephine either goes to her grandmother’s house after school or comes home to an empty house; however, Christina appears to have no other interests outside the home, and except on one occasion, discussed below, her social life is limited to family gatherings and events. Nevertheless, Christina insists that she likes her life as it is, although Michael reveals that in choosing to have Josephine rather than an abortion, Christina sacrificed her aspirations to study at university.

Christina’s self-sacrifice is not entirely silent, however. When she asks her mother to look after Josephine one evening, Katia’s assumption that she is attending a parent-teacher night provides readers with a clear indication of the extent, up to this point, of Christina’s social life outside her family. However, Christina reveals that she is going out with a man, and Katia accuses her of neglecting Josephine. Christina is furious: *I have devoted my whole life to her and the one day that I want to go out with people my age, you tell me I’m neglecting her?* (p. 95). Katia then argues that people will talk, *and it is always me who suffers because of their talk*; moreover, *How do you think Jozzie will feel that people are talking about her mother gallivanting around the place?* (p. 95). Christina’s response is not to dispute the claims implicit in Katia’s argument, namely that mothers are commonly held to be accountable for their children’s behaviour, even when those children are adults, and that mothers who publicly show themselves to be autonomous, desiring subjects are commonly assumed to be ‘bad’ mothers. Rather, she suggests that social beliefs can be disregarded or challenged, by asking *who cares if they talk about me?* (p. 95), insisting that *I’m not going to run my life by their rules* (p. 96), and pointing out how unjust it is that *everyone’s opinion has always come before mine* (p. 97). Interestingly, at this point she sounds not unlike her daughter, who, as noted above, yearns to be free of the rules and restrictions of the social world in general and her Italian family in particular. As discussed further below, however, it turns out that, as in Josephine’s case, there is scant connection between Christina’s rhetoric and her behaviour.

When Katia departs angrily, Christina is confronted by Josephine, who clearly shares her grandmother’s belief that sexual desire is inappropriate in mothers. She is appalled at Christina’s suggestion that, in the absence of her grandmother, she could spend the evening with the woman next door: *What, and tell her that my mother is on a date?* (p. 98); and she reminds Christina that *he won’t just want to hold your hand* (p. 98). Josephine desires to be the sole object of her mother’s desire: *I never want it to be anything but her and me and I’m angry that she’s even thinking of letting anyone else in* (p. 99).

Here the narrative plays to some extent on readers’ own unconscious fears and desires, but, at the same time, it is Josephine’s conscious recognition that her desire is unreasonable that leads her to acknowledge her selfishness and invites readers to do the same. The invitation is rendered more powerful because the move away from selfishness is represented as a move away from childhood, represented here as undesirable, towards adulthood which, in the context of this narrative about growing up, is the more desirable and socially acceptable state. The
challenge to common-sense notions of the ‘good’ mother, however, is half-hearted: readers can infer that Josephine’s attitude and behaviour are unreasonable, not because the ideal of the totally child-centred mother is unreasonable, but because Josephine is no longer a child.

Similarly, although Christina’s arguments in her exchange with Katia can be read as challenging common-sense ideals of motherhood, her resistance is limited. Thus, while she says she had a good time and enjoyed the fact that for once someone found me interesting, not because I was Josie’s mother or Katia’s daughter but because I was me (p. 99), neither Christina’s night out nor the angry exchanges that preceded it mark a turning point in her life. Rather, the incident appears as a single transgression in a life otherwise devoted to Josephine. Her remarks point to Josephine’s selfishness in not recognising the sacrifices Christina has made for her, but they do not question the common sense that equates ‘motherhood’ with self-sacrifice. This is most clearly evident when, a week after their argument, a repentant Josephine asks her mother:

How do you put up with me when I treat you so bad? ... you spend all your life bringing me up, wasting your youth on a selfish person, yet you never complain ... I wasn’t worth it, Mama (p. 109).

Underpinning both Josephine’s self-recriminations and Christina’s reply that she has never regretted having her is the understanding that self-sacrifice is fundamental to motherhood. Thus, a woman who was not prepared to put up with selfish, self-centred behaviour from her children would contravene the requirements of ‘good’ motherhood, notably the expectation that women love their children, and put their needs and interests first, no matter what. According to the discourse of ‘good’ motherhood, had Christina agreed with Josephine that she ‘wasn’t worth it’ she would have shown herself to be an ‘unnatural’ mother.

At the same time, however, as a ‘good’ mother, Christina must teach Josephine to be less selfish, particularly if she is to eventually become such a mother herself. Hence, Josephine is often told what Christina tells her during their argument: One day you’ll understand (p. 98). In part, what Josephine will understand, as will readers who have aligned their subjectivity with hers, is that growing up requires the abandonment of childish selfishness. However, more specifically, she, and readers too, will understand that growing up female means learning to accept, indeed to value, selflessness and sacrifice as the essence of ‘good’ motherhood. An important lesson on this is provided by Josephine’s grandmother.

Initially, Katia is represented as a woman who constantly criticises her daughter and granddaughter, and interferes in their lives. Christina tells Josephine, When I was young she used to keep me at such a distance that I used to wonder what I could possibly have done wrong (p. 17), and evidently Katia offered Christina no protection from her even more hostile father. According to Michael, it was her unhappiness at home and her confusion over her parents’ rejection of her that led Christina to turn to him for friendship and comfort, which in turn led to her becoming pregnant. Readers are invited to perceive Katia as Josephine does: as an ‘unnatural’ mother who has consistently denied her daughter the love and support she needs and deserves.
This negative reading of Katia is strengthened when Josephine discovers her grandmother’s secret: she had an affair with another man while her husband was working away from home for some months, and Christina is actually that man’s child. Here, then, the issue of unregulated female sexuality emerges yet again, with Katia’s extra-marital affair serving to demonstrate what can happen, even within marriage, when women are given too much freedom. Josephine is furious:

You had the hide seventeen years ago to treat Mama the way you did when all the time you had done worse. You were married. You slept with Marcus Sandford while you were a married woman (p. 217).

Again, readers are invited to perceive Katia as Josephine does, as a dishonest and hypocritical wife and mother, whose selfish desire is the cause of Christina’s unhappy childhood, spent living with a man who detested her for something her mother did (p. 218), and also the cause, ultimately, of Christina’s own illegitimate pregnancy: I hate Marcus Sandford and Nonna Katia for what they did ... They had a baby and that baby had a baby (p. 218).

Josephine’s attribution of blame here is consistent with her differing expectations of mothers and fathers. Early in the narrative, she is far more critical of her grandmother’s treatment of Christina than she is of her grandfather, whose rejection of his daughter was evidently more harshly overt than Katia’s, yet is never explicitly condemned. Here, Josephine glosses over his treatment of Christina, apparently excusing it on the grounds that his wife was unfaithful to him and Christina was not his child. Similarly, Josephine’s judgement of Katia is consistent with her apparent acceptance of the common-sense assumption that mothers are more accountable than fathers for their children’s behaviour – an assumption that other characters do not challenge, and that readers, too, are evidently expected to take for granted. In an argument with her grandmother, for example, Josephine rejects Katia’s criticisms of her, and of Christina’s success as a mother, but not her assertion that a mother is to blame if her daughter behaves badly:

‘It is Christina’s fault that you are speaking to me like this. A daughter’s behaviour always reflects on how good a mother is.’

‘Well, I guess that means you did a pretty hopeless job as a mother because look at the life your daughter ended up with’ (p. 37).

Readers have an opportunity to construct an alternative reading of Katia when Josephine learns more about her grandmother’s unhappy marriage, her relationship with Marcus and her decision to stay with her husband, despite his cruelty and her lack of love for him, because he agreed to bring Christina up as if she were his child. Katia explains that she could not disgrace her husband or her family by leaving him; moreover, she says, In my day, when you marry someone, you marry them for good (p. 224). More importantly, she stayed to protect her baby:

Back then, tink of the way my darling Christina would be treated. It is not like these times, Jozzie. She would have had no one. No Australians, no Italians. People would spit at her and say she was nuting (p. 225).
Katia’s story can be read as illustrative of the relatively powerless position of women in a society that regulates their lives as wives and mothers. While she believes that Christina, her husband and her family would have suffered the consequences had she left her husband for Marcus, the cost of staying was not just that she gave up the man she loved; she could not show love to Christina:

When she got pregnant ... he looked at me with so much hate and I knew if I tried to help her he would ruin her life. So I said “Yes, Francesco. Anyting you say, Francesco.” When she did something while she was growing up that he didn’t like I would say “Yes, Francesco. She is wrong, Francesco”. Oh, Jozzie, for years I had been waiting for God to punish me. Those years without Christina or you when you were a baby were my punishment (pp. 225-226).

It seems that Katia can be read as a strong woman who made considerable personal sacrifices to gain the best for her child in the limited ways available to her. This is Josephine’s own reading, although at first she cannot understand Katia’s choice, and insists that she would have gone with the man she loved:

‘I would have left him, Nonna. I would have been selfish and thought of myself.’

‘No. One day you will understand, Jozzie. One day you will have children and you will understand what sacrifices really are’ (p. 225).

Here it is even more clear that what Josephine will one day understand is that motherhood, apparently more than fatherhood, demands selflessness and self-sacrifice. Significantly, while Josephine disagrees with the choice Katia made, she perceives the alternative course, the one that she herself would have chosen, as selfish and, by implication, less admirable. Together, then, she and Katia construct her ‘selfishness’ as linked to her childishness, something she will grow out of as she grows into ‘proper’ womanhood – motherhood, in other words – and the understandings that come with it.

Katia’s affair with Marcus, and the fact that she had his child, can also be read as an act of defiance against the patriarchal authority of her husband and the institution of marriage that supported that authority. Josephine’s own interpretation, although not expressed in these terms, is similar, and the focalisation of the narrative through her positions readers to accept it: She hadn’t lived life the way I’d thought. She hadn’t stuck to rules and regulations. Hadn’t worried about what other people thought every second of her life (p. 226). In the light of these readings of Katia’s story, it is not surprising that Josephine revises her earlier opinion of her grandmother, and comes to admire her as one of the strongest women I would ever meet in my lifetime (p. 226), a model of emancipated womanhood.

However, Josephine’s reading of Katia is not consistent with Katia’s own belief that she sinned in her affair with Marcus, or with her stated reasons for remaining with her husband and submitting to his authority over her and Christina. It is clear that Katia did not break free of rules and regulations at all, but remains restricted by them; and she also expects Christina and Josephine to conform to them, evidently because, as she reveals in the argument about Christina’s date, she does in fact worry constantly about what other people think. It is also clear that Katia
continues to criticise Christina, although Francesco has been dead for 15 years, and that, for no apparent reason, she refuses to tell Christina her own story.

Readers, however, are positioned by the narrative to adopt Josephine’s perspective. Indeed, unless they do so, little sense can be made of Josephine’s conclusion, in which she manages to equate her ‘emancipation’ with coming to understand her identity solely in terms of her place in her family and her personal relationships. Thus she confesses that she has become a bit less ambitious, and that sometimes I’m not even sure that I want to be a barrister (p. 260); but what matters, she says, is who I feel like I am – and I feel like Michael and Christina’s daughter and Katia’s granddaughter; Sera, Anna and Lee’s friend and Robert’s cousin (p. 261). It seems that what Josephine has learned to do, in making the successful transition from girlhood to womanhood, is to positively embrace selflessness, and this is confirmed by her closing observation that a wonderful thing happened to me when I reflected back on my year. ‘One day’ came. Because finally I understood (p. 261).

In making this transition from girlhood, then, Josephine has embraced an ideology that links womanhood ‘naturally’ and productively with motherhood, and specifically with a version of motherhood that requires women to literally sacrifice their selves for their children. These ideas inform Looking for Alibrandi throughout, despite the rhetorical challenges to them that are offered in Christina’s arguments with Katia and Josephine over her night out. Moreover, while the representation of Christina can be read as a challenge to the discursive construction of young, single mothers as selfish and irresponsible transgressors of social norms, and hence as ‘bad’ mothers, the narrative invites readers to understand motherhood as ideally achieved only within the institution of marriage. Thus it also works to support the ideal of the conventional two-parent family, even as it positively portrays a family unit that does not (yet) conform to that ideal.

Concluding comments

In this chapter, detailed analyses of 6 of the 18 texts in the research corpus have been presented. On the basis of these analyses, it is clear that the ways in which motherhood is represented in contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian adolescent fiction are by no means consistent. Nevertheless, the analyses presented here suggest that such fiction is more likely to be effective in reinforcing the prevailing hegemony of common sense about motherhood than in promoting counter-hegemonic understandings. For example, to varying degrees, all six of the narratives analysed above link concerns with relationships and the interests and welfare of others with femininity, inviting readers to take it for granted that the work of nurturing and caring for children is ‘naturally’ women’s work. In addition, two of them – Seeing Things (Klein 1993) and Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992) – invoke the fantasy of the perfect mother discussed in Chapter Four, thus working to reinforce its power; two of them – Change the Locks (French 1991) and Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992) – are particularly noteworthy for their active engagement in the mother-blaming that represents the dark side of that fantasy and, as the review of research literature in Chapter Five has shown, has often been evident in other recent...
adolescent fiction; and another, Angel's Gate (Crew 1993), extends its ambivalent representation of motherhood such that its representations of girls and women are almost unrelieved in their negativity. Further, none of these narratives presents any serious, overt challenges to idealised notions of the 'good' mother as one who sacrifices herself and her identity for her children and protects them from all possible kinds of harm; nor do they offer their readers more than limited scope for constructing alternative or resistant readings with which to challenge the 'obviousness' of such notions and/or develop fundamentally new understandings.

Similarly, the status of the 'normal', white, middle-class mother as the model against which all mothers can be judged remains largely unchallenged in these narratives. Seeing Things (Klein 1993) and Change the Locks (French 1993) are both set in Australian communities that are apparently composed entirely of white people, most of whom have names that are Anglo-Celtic in origin; these texts thus collude in the marginalisation of racial and ethnic 'others' and any alternative understandings of motherhood they might offer. While Angel's Gate (Crew 1993) acknowledges Indigenous Australian culture through the character of Queenie Geebung, she remains marginal to a narrative that, in any case, presents an overwhelmingly negative view of girls, women and motherhood. Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992) depicts the peb as a multi-ethnic group, but glosses over their differences by focusing on the commonality of their non-specific 'Third World' backgrounds of neglect, abuse and poverty. Among the peb, Joella’s whiteness is marked, and she recognises it as one reason why they might be hostile towards her.

Significantly, however, her whiteness ultimately equates with rightness: not only is she the sole white female among the peb, she is also their mother figure, the only one who sees the 'truth', and thus the only one who can save them. In Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992), the versions of motherhood on which the narrative focuses are Italian-Australian, but they serve more to nurture than to challenge prevailing common-sense understandings of what constitutes a 'good' mother. Even in the case of Dougy (Moloney 1993), the norm of the white, middle-class mother is left unquestioned. The narrative's anti-racist agenda arguably necessitates the inclusion of an Aboriginal mother, but it seems that it has also required her to be represented in a way that can most easily be interpreted as positive by predominantly non-Aboriginal readers living in a society in which white, middle-class values and aspirations are privileged over others.

Additionally, the 'problem' of female sexuality emerges in the above analyses as a significant theme in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, with five of the six narratives offering support for the continued regulation of female sexuality within the patriarchal social institutions of marriage and motherhood. It is noteworthy, too, that the exception, Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992), is not an exception because it represents female sexuality in a way that does not construct it as a 'problem'; rather, it is an exception because it evades the issue of female sexuality entirely. This is a significant silence, given that, at 13 years of age, Joella is presumably pubescent; indeed, this is surely one reason why her body is solid and lumpy and clumsy … the wrong shape for gym (p. 27). One way of interpreting this silence is to view it as an innocent oversight; another is to accept that, in this narrative, adolescent female sexuality does not constitute a 'problem', or even a potential one. However, when this narrative’s silence

220 Detailed analyses of selected texts
on this issue is considered in conjunction with the ways in which female sexuality is represented in the five other texts analysed in this chapter, another possible interpretation emerges: from this perspective, what can be inferred is that female sexuality is so dangerous that it must not be mentioned at all.

Maternal absence is also a significant issue in a number of these texts. In Seeing Things (Klein 1993), Miranda’s dead mother is idealised, the implicit suggestion being that had she lived, the lives of Miranda, Jimmy and Yvette would have been problem-free. At the same time, Yvette’s separation from her own baby is constructed as ‘unnatural’, and a certain cause of future developmental problems if it continues. In Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993), such problems are made evident in the representation of the ‘feral’ children, Leena and Micky, whose mothers have apparently been absent from very early in their lives. However, in this narrative, and to some extent also in Dougy (Moloney 1993) and Seeing Things (Klein 1993), overly present mothers are also constructed as harmful to their children’s healthy development. In the character of Lisa, Change the Locks (French 1991) represents two versions in one of the absent mother, both of them linked to negative consequences: while Lisa is physically present, her emotional absence is shown to constitute a threat to her children’s physical and psychological welfare; at the same time, much of Steven’s current distress is attributed to her temporary abandonment of him in his early childhood. In Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992), the consequences of maternal absence are constructed as even more extreme: the children’s kidnapping is represented as the result of Sylvie’s departure from the family home; and the plight of the peb, and indeed of neglected children all over the world, is linked to women’s absence from the domestic sphere and their abandonment of their ‘proper’ and ‘natural’ roles as mothers.

As explained in Chapter Six, the texts discussed above were selected for detailed individual attention because the preliminary analyses revealed that these six texts are particularly useful for drawing attention to the variety of ways in which motherhood is represented and made relevant to the production of meaning across the whole corpus. However, the remaining 12 texts must also be examined before the implications of the issues that have emerged from these analyses can be considered further. Accordingly, the individual analyses presented above are supplemented in the following chapter with illustrative but less comprehensive analyses of the remaining texts in the corpus, organised on the basis of key themes.

1 However, an alternative reading was offered by the writer when, responding to Ireland’s (1996) criticisms on this issue, he argued that “a sensible reading” of Lisa’s remarks about needing Steven is that she is telling him, “You’re my son and I love you and need you’, and recognising his “capacity to love, nurture and forgive” (French 1996:2).
CHAPTER EIGHT: THEMATIC ANALYSES

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to supplement the analytical work presented so far with thematic analyses of the remaining texts in the research corpus. Accordingly, the analyses that follow focus on some of the discourses about motherhood, or aspects of motherhood, that have emerged most strikingly from the analyses so far. Given the complex and often contradictory interrelationships among these discourses, as illustrated in Chapter Four, the themes on which the following analyses are based are broadly defined and, to some extent, overlapping. However, they serve the purpose of facilitating a structured discussion of the ways in which motherhood is represented across the remainder of the corpus. As noted in Chapter Six, not all of the selected themes are equally relevant, or relevant in the same ways, to all 12 of the texts discussed in this chapter, so some texts are given more analytical attention here than others. As supplements to those presented in the previous chapter, these analyses are intended to be illustrative of a variety of ways in which the discourses of motherhood that evidently underpin the six narratives analysed in that chapter are also inflected throughout the remaining texts in the corpus.

In relation to the first theme, motherhood and subjectivity, five texts are discussed below. As in the remainder of the chapter, each one is introduced with the background information on text, characters and plot necessary to contextualise the analysis.

Motherhood and subjectivity

The literature reviewed in Chapter Four suggests that it is the issue of subjectivity that is at the heart of ideological struggles over competing understandings of motherhood, and of personal struggles over the meaning and value of motherhood, and over what can or should properly be understood as the roles, responsibilities and rights of mothers in a society based on principles of social justice and equity. The significance of the issue of subjectivity, together with the related issues of identity and interests, is similarly evident in the analyses of the first six texts in the research corpus, as presented in Chapter Seven. It will be recalled, for example, that the narrative in Seeing Things (Klein 1993) draws strongly on the discourses of object-relations theories and popular child psychology to nurture and strengthen common-sense understandings that, by virtue of their biology, women are inherently inclined to subordinate their own identities and interests to those of others; that children’s healthy development is more dependent on the quality of the bonds they form with, and the care they receive from, their mothers than it is on their relationships with their fathers; and that, therefore, the ‘natural’ and ‘proper’ place for mothers is in the domestic sphere, attending to the needs and interests of their children, which, ideally, become indistinguishable from their own. These discourses construct the ‘good’ mother.
as one who lacks any subjectivity, and thus any distinctive identity or interests, independent of her relationship with her children. Miranda’s dead mother appears to be the epitome of this ideal: readers are told nothing at all about her, except that she is dead and she is missed. It might be inferred from this that there is, and was, nothing else to know. Certainly the narrative takes it for granted that readers neither need nor want to know more about her as a person. To know that she was the children’s mother is apparently enough, and anything else is assumed to be irrelevant. Lisa’s remark to Steven, in Change the Locks (French 1991), that Patrick’s mother reminds her of … a mother (p. 35), seems particularly apt as a description of Miranda’s mother; ‘mother’ is apparently all that can be said about her.

Readers learn more about the mothers represented in the other five texts analysed in Chapter Seven, but in most cases it still amounts to very little. For example, the mothers of most of the central child or adolescent characters have names, and two of them have careers of a kind: Helen, in Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993), is a nurse; and Christina, in Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992), is a secretary and translator for a group of doctors. However, Helen’s work keeps her within the domestic environment, which she is rarely seen to leave; if she has any friends, any social life, or any needs, interests or desires outside that environment, the silence constructed around them by the narrative works to render them, at best, irrelevant, both to her children and to readers. Much the same applies in Christina’s case: while readers learn a little of her family life before Josephine was born, they learn nothing further about her present life beyond her relationship with her daughter, apart from the isolated example of the dinner date. On the basis of the arguments prompted by that occasion, however, readers can assume that Christina has no social life that does not revolve around her family. They learn that she once dreamed of leading a different kind of life, although she scarcely admits to it now, as if the possibility of another kind of life was so thoroughly displaced when Christina became a mother that it cannot even be acknowledged, let alone entertained. Meanwhile, her own mother, Katia, actively promotes and valorises the notion that ‘good’ motherhood is characterised by selflessness and sacrifice: when she tells Josephine that one day, when she becomes a mother herself, she will understand what sacrifices really are, she is not issuing a warning or making a threat, but promising the revelation of something wonderful.

Dougy certainly does not entertain the possibility of any other kind of life for his seemingly nameless mother, although he knows that she once had one, and suspects that she might still yearn for it occasionally. For him, however, it is a matter of course that her life should now revolve around him and his brother and sister. His mother too, it seems, takes her life of daily sacrifice for granted; to the extent that she rails against her lack of other options, and seeks to promote those options to Gracey, she does so in the belief that it is being a poorly educated Aboriginal woman in a remote community that has limited her opportunities, not her positioning within the patriarchal social institution of motherhood. At issue here is not the question of whether she is right or wrong; the point is that the effectiveness of the text as a social critique is likely to be limited because some aspects of patriarchal society, notably the institution of
motherhood, remain taken for granted by the narrative, and are unlikely to be challenged by readers who rely on common sense to construct meaning.

It is within the context of these kinds of understandings of ‘good’ motherhood that the versions of motherhood modelled by Lisa, in Change the Locks (French 1991), Yvette, in Seeing Things (Klein 1993) and Sylvie, in Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992) come to be understood as reprehensible, in biological terms: ‘unnatural’, ‘abnormal’ and incompatible with ‘true’ femininity; and also in moral terms: ‘irresponsible’, ‘selfish’ and a threat to the welfare of their children. From these perspectives, the behaviour of these mothers is virtually impossible to excuse or justify, even assuming that the narratives provide readers with opportunities to consider the mothers’ points of view. Such opportunities are rare and limited, however, and this is at least partly because no part of the narrative in any of these texts is focalised through the mother. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter Five, given that ‘child-centredness’ is widely taken for granted as a fundamental defining characteristic of a children’s book, it is difficult to imagine a work of children’s fiction that presents any adult perspective, let alone the perspective of an adult who, according to prevailing common sense, is assumed to have neither a perspective of her own nor any moral right to one.

Nonetheless, Yvette is one errant mother who is given an opportunity to account for herself, albeit in the context of a conversation focalised through Miranda. Readers are invited, in aligning themselves with Miranda, to soften their judgement somewhat, and allow Yvette a chance to redeem herself as a mother. They are not, however, invited to question the discourses that underpin her representation as a ‘deficient’ mother. On the contrary, Yvette’s plea for understanding draws on those same discourses, and thus works to support them rather than to challenge them. However, Yvette is able to invite sympathy from readers, whereas Sylvie’s perspective is never considered by Joella. Should resistant readers wish to explore it anyway – for example, by considering what it was about motherhood and family life that she found so stifling – they must do so without the help of the narrative, which offers them no clues at all. In Lisa’s case, the clues to her behaviour are available, but, as illustrated in Chapter Seven, they are unlikely to be clearly evident to readers whose primary meaning-making resources and strategies are those that rely on common sense.

In the light of this brief review of the findings, so far, in relation to motherhood and subjectivity, and given the centrality, as illustrated in Chapter Four, of subjectivity, identity and interests to contemporary hegemonic struggles over competing understandings about motherhood, it is important to give some attention in this chapter to considering how the relationship between motherhood and subjectivity is represented in the remainder of the research corpus. In what follows, a selection of the remaining 12 texts is used to supplement the analyses presented in the previous chapter.

The first example, Letters from the Inside (Marsden 1991), offers no variation on the broad pattern established by the first six texts in the corpus. Short-listed by the CBCA for the Book of
the Year: Older Readers award in 1992, the novel is presented in the form of letters between two 15-year-old girls, Mandy and Tracey. Clearly, this narrative form severely limits the possibilities for presenting any perspective other than those of these two characters. Thus, whatever readers learn about the girls’ mothers, and this amounts to very little, they learn through the girls themselves, and to the extent that the mothers can ‘speak’, their ‘voices’ are mediated through the girls, who are the only focalising characters.

However, readers are not positioned to adopt either girl’s perspective unequivocally. The letter format means that the focalisation shifts backwards and forwards between Mandy and Tracey, allowing a dual perspective on each girl’s life as it unfolds in the letters. This enables readers to maintain a slight distance from both girls, and thus encourages them also to draw on a wider range of meaning-making resources than those that can be found immediately in the text itself; indeed, readers are often given opportunities to use these additional discursive resources and thus to recognise themselves as wiser and more insightful than the girls themselves. The extensive use of narrative gaps is also important in this process; in many cases, the gaps are such that readers are virtually obliged to draw heavily on their common sense – what they ‘know’ about the contemporary social world – to construct a coherent meaning on the basis of hints and allusions in the narrative. Thus, readers may passively accept the ‘truth’ of common-sense beliefs and fantasies about how the social world, including families, should be organised, rather than questioning them.

The protagonists in Letters from the Inside have never met. Their relationship begins when Mandy responds to Tracey’s magazine advertisement for a pen-pal, and grows into a friendship as each learns more about the other, and develops a level of trust in her. Each also becomes increasingly reliant on the process of exchanging written confidences in order to cope with her own personal problems, the nature and extent of which are gradually revealed as the letters continue. Thus, readers learn, with Mandy, that the apparently perfect family life that Tracey describes in her early letters is a complete fabrication; she is actually an inmate of a maximum security detention centre, and although she refuses to tell Mandy why she is there, there are sufficient clues to indicate that she has been involved in violent crime. Eventually it emerges that Tracey’s father had been a violent man, and had killed her mother when she was about eight years old. She went to live with her grandmother, who simply told her that my Mum had died and my Dad had gone away and that her brother was being looked after by some other people (p. 129). It was only after her grandmother also died that Tracey learned what had really happened to her family.

This is all that readers ever learn about Tracey’s mother, however, so the representation and its effects are likely to be much the same as they are in the case of Miranda’s mother in Seeing Things (Klein 1993): readers are invited to fill in the gaps for themselves, and their most obvious and appealing resource for doing so is the fantasy of the perfect mother. Certainly it is not the most logical resource; given the history of domestic violence that Tracey briefly summarises for Mandy, it is hardly likely that her life would have been trouble-free, even assuming that her
mother had lived. However, the fantasy of the perfect mother is likely to be the most emotionally appealing resource for making meaning of a narrative that plays extensively on readers’ unconscious desires and fears of loss (not to mention their fears of powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of contemporary social problems: mentioned at various points in the narrative are drug and alcohol abuse, AIDS, crime, pornography, gun ownership, racial and sexual violence, illiteracy, unemployment and environmental problems). The fantasy of the perfect mother enables readers to ‘know’ that Tracey’s life would have been better had her mother lived, even without them knowing anything about her. Indeed, readers’ certainty on this issue arguably depends on them being told as little as possible about the actual person – the all-too-human subject with desires and needs and interests of her own – who is behind the image, the object, of ‘mother’. As Kertzer (1993-94) observed, it is only through objectification of the mother that the fantasy of the perfect mother can remain intact.

It also emerges that Mandy, whose appeal as a pen-pal for Tracey lay in the perceived ordinariness of her life compared with Tracey’s own, has a brother whom she initially describes as ‘creepy’. Later she confesses to being scared of him: Steve is a violent guy. I mean really violent, seriously violent (p. 25); even later, in her final letter, she tells Tracey that he spends most of his time in his room reading gun magazines … What really scares me is that he’s got this .22 and a shotgun that Grandpa left him … he spends a lot of time cleaning the guns and taking them apart (p. 135).

Mandy tells Tracey that her family is sort of normal … every family has to have one creep (p. 61). However, readers may well disagree with that assessment, particularly in the light of some of Mandy’s other comments. For example, she mentions her parents working day and night, night and day (p. 8); they work hard, so they’re not home as much as some parents. They get in late quite often (p. 22). Also, when she still believes Tracey’s early stories of her own family life, she tells her not to throw away what you’ve got … ‘cos it’s worth a rainforest, having a family like yours (p. 27); later, she comments that I used to envy you so much. You sounded like you had it all … [including] a family who cared (p. 69). Viewed as a whole, the family life that Mandy describes is easily recognisable to readers as one of neglect, particularly given that Tracey also expresses increasing concern about Mandy’s welfare and safety. As indicated above, Mandy’s parents, a reference librarian and a hospital wardsman, are rarely home; her brother terrorises her psychologically and has beaten me up sometimes … always when no-one’s around (p. 26), to the extent that she looks forward to the end of school holidays; but when I’ve tried to talk to my parents they brush it off. It’s like they don’t want to face it (p. 26). Given that the alternative, as Scutter (1999) observed, is to interpret Mandy’s parents as so incompetent as to be beyond the limits of credibility, even in the context of fiction, readers might indeed conclude that they simply do not want to know:

What I can’t work out is how Mum and Dad keep ignoring his reports from school, because the school’s complained about him a few times, and he got suspended last year for bullying. All his reports say he’s got a terrible temper and he has to learn to control it (p. 27).
However, the evidence in Mandy’s letters also suggests that her parents are absent from home too often, and that, when they are at home, they are too tired, and too caught up in their own concerns, to take much notice of Steve’s or Mandy’s problems.

Mum and Dad are both working their lives away still … They both say they enjoy their jobs but if you saw them when they get home you wouldn’t think so … When they get home you wonder why they don’t go back to Dad’s hospital and have themselves admitted (p. 100).

Contrasting with the realities of the everyday lives of Mandy and Tracey are the fantasies of both girls, which readers are invited to share and elaborate on, and occasional references to a past in which life was better. Tracey’s fantasies of the perfect family are initially offered to Mandy as actual accounts of her everyday life, and, as noted above, Mandy clearly shares those fantasies, envying what she thinks Tracey has: loving parents who spend lots of time with her, a mother who cooks wonderful meals, plenty of money, designer clothes, a horse, expensive holidays, a devoted boyfriend. Later, when Mandy asks Tracey to describe how she would spend a perfect day, Tracey replies:

You know what my perfect day would be, you didn’t have to ask. To have a mum who you could sit down and talk to about school and boys and stuff, and then you’d muck around with your sister for a while and try on all her clothes, and then you’d give your brother some advice about his girlfriend, then you’d go out and play with your cat in the sun (p. 118).

In both girls’ dreams of perfect family life, mothers feature more strongly than fathers, as people whose most defining characteristic is that they are available to their children, unlike the actual mothers of both girls. Mandy writes:

I’ve tried to talk to Mum and Dad again, not just about Steve, about everything. Well it was Mum I tried to talk to mainly. And she tried, she really did, but she was tired and the things she said weren’t much help (p. 54).

On one occasion, however, Mandy does get a response from her mother, in a conversation about friendships. Significantly, the ‘help’ that her mother offers is a vision of a past that she perceives to have been simple and untroubled:

Mum was saying that it wasn’t that complicated when she was at school. She said everyone was friendly and because it was a small school and in the country, everyone had to get on or there’d be no-one to talk to. She said life was simple – they’d go for a swim or sit round in the milk bar after school. Going to the movies was a real rage. And she was saying how it didn’t seem like a simple life to them then… (pp. 69-70).

Again, then, the narrative works to invoke readers’ fantasies and desires, this time for a return to a past that seems to have been more simple, more pure and untroubled than the present. The role of mothers in that past is not mentioned, but a nostalgic vision of a ‘lost’, pre-feminist version of motherhood, in which mothers remained in the domestic sphere, supposedly content in their lack of subjectivity and selflessly gaining complete fulfilment through the satisfaction of their families’ needs and desires, is nonetheless implicit.

As noted in Chapter Five, Scutter (1999) has found that Letters from the Inside exemplified an ‘overly real' version of social realism that presents a relentlessly negative view of the
contemporary adult world, and she argued similarly in regard to *The Gathering* (Carmody 1993), which was joint winner, with *Angel's Gate* (Crew 1993), of the CBCA’s award for *Book of the Year: Older Readers* in 1994. It will be recalled from the discussion of her analysis of *The Gathering* in Chapter Five that Scutter (1999:234) argued that this narrative describes a world in which almost all adults are “empty vessels waiting to be filled with predatory evil”, while also working to idealise the version of motherhood represented by Mrs Heathcote, the elderly and childless former schoolteacher. Certainly it seems that Mrs Heathcote’s subjectivity is sufficiently child-centred to fit the requirements of ‘good’ motherhood; she tells Nathaniel, the teenage protagonist, that she decided not to have children because she loved teaching and

felt that if I had my own children I wouldn’t give as much of myself to it … It seemed to me the most important thing a person could do was to help shape the minds that would some day direct the future (p. 160).

Now retired, widowed and, significantly, somewhat lonely without grandchildren to fill the empty spaces in her life – I never thought of that when I decided against having my own children (p. 160) – Mrs Heathcote makes blackberry jam, sweet and tangy and a long way from the jam you buy at the supermarket, serving it to Nathaniel and his friend, Indian, on freshly baked bread at a neatly scrubbed wooden kitchen table surrounded by gleaming pots and bottled herbs, with the delicious rich, sweet smell of another batch of jam curling into the air (pp. 159-160). Nathaniel feels himself to be in another world – the same romanticised ‘lost’ world to which *Letters from the Inside* (Marsden 1991) harks back – far removed from the evil-ridden society in which he lives.

However, for the purposes of this discussion of motherhood and subjectivity in *The Gathering*, it is the representation of Nathaniel’s mother, described by Scutter (1999) as a present absent mother and a target for blame, that is of most interest. From the opening (‘prelude’) scene of this narrative, readers are invited to join Nathaniel, the narrator and sole focalising character, in viewing his mother in a negative light. The two are entering the outskirts of Cheshunt, the town to which they are moving, and during the journey, Nathaniel has been reading through a pile of comics that were among his father’s belongings when he died. Although he has just admitted that he himself prefers *National Geographic* to stories about superheroes from Krypton or talking ducks and dogs (p. xi), his first reference to his mother, on the first page of the text, invokes notions of coldness and detachment by commenting that she thinks comics are rubbishy and reads only factual books and medical journals (p. xi). He then explains that he had not known his father, and that the comics had prompted him to ask his mother about him:

but as usual she said she couldn’t remember what he used to read, and that it was A Long Time Ago. She drives me crazy the way she acts so secretive about him (p. xi).

Thus readers are alerted to the possibility that there is some mystery surrounding Nathaniel’s father, and the suggestion of mystery is subsequently enhanced by Nathaniel’s accounts of disturbing nightmares that may or may not have anything to do with his father, but often involve a monster chasing him. In the meantime, readers learn nothing positive about Nathaniel’s mother, but they know by the end of the first chapter that she has a habit of coughing in a dry fussy way (p. xii) to gain his attention before speaking; that she stops listening the minute you raise your
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...
previous evening. Given that she is new to the town, has no friends or relatives to call for help, knows that Nathaniel has not yet made any friends, and also knows that there is a curfew in effect, it does not seem unreasonable that, by the time Nathaniel arrives home at sunrise, she has called the police. Nathaniel, during his overnight adventures, has just learned that the police are part of the problem in Cheshunt, but he apparently expects his mother somehow to know this already. Thus, he immediately construes his mother’s action in calling the police as one motivated by hostility, rather than concern, and invites readers to do the same:

‘How could you call the police on me like I was some kind of criminal!’
She gave me a shocked look. ‘Nathanial, don’t talk like that. When I came home early and you weren’t here, I was worried so I called the police. You think I liked doing that? I did it for you.’
I shook my head and the words just burst out of me. ‘You did it for yourself, the same way you do everything’ (p. 59).

As these examples illustrate, readers who identify with Nathaniel’s victim subjectivity, as the narrative exhorts them to do, can have no difficulty in rejecting from the outset the version of motherhood represented by his mother. She is portrayed as a woman who is, as Scutter (1999) suggested, physically present but emotionally absent; indeed, as a ‘working mother’ who frequently works at night and/or does double shifts – she is a nurse at a nursing home for the elderly – she is also physically absent more often than not. Clearly, she is not a mother whose subjectivity, like that of the ‘good’ mother, is merged with her son’s; far from giving priority to Nathaniel’s needs and interests, she seems, from the perspective from which readers are invited to view her, not to consider them at all. She is evidently not child-centred, sensitive or intuitive; and she displays few of the ‘relational’ qualities that are commonsensically accepted as fundamental to ‘good’ motherhood, at least not until readers have already been positioned by the narrative to align themselves with Nathaniel in viewing with suspicion any signs of such qualities.

At one point, for example, she expresses a wish for more time to talk with her son, perhaps to take a holiday with him and clear the misunderstandings between them.

I stared at her wonderingly, because, for a minute, she sounded like she wanted us to spend time together (p. 69) – clearly expresses his doubts that this could possibly be true, and invites readers to share them.

However, while it might seem clear to readers that Nathaniel’s mother does not have his best interests at heart, it is less clear whose interests actually do motivate her. They do not appear to be her own, despite Nathaniel’s accusation that everything she does is done for herself. His mother, significantly nameless, appears to have no self. She is represented as somewhat colourless and characterless; she evidently has no friends or social life, and no interests of any kind, either at home or elsewhere, not even in the job that, Nathaniel says, brought them to Cheshunt. A former research nurse, she did not work while married, and thus had got behind on the latest techniques which meant taking whatever position she could get (p. 68). She tells Nathaniel that it’s harder than I expected working shifts again, and looks forward to obtaining a permanent day position later in the year, so that I’ll be home every night. We can watch television together, go to the movies… (p. 114). As it is, she often arranges for him to go to the nursing home for evening meals, so that they can eat together. It thus seems that, like the
‘good’ mother, Nathanial’s mother has no separate subjectivity outside her relationship with her son; at the same time, her apparent lack of genuine interest in or concern for him suggests that what is ‘wrong’ with her is that she is somehow so lacking that she has no identity at all. There is a difference, it seems, between a mother who lacks identity entirely and one whose subjectivity is completely merged with her children’s: only the latter can be a positive force in her children’s lives.

Here it is interesting to recall Scutter’s (1999) comment to the effect that, in The Gathering, adults are represented in terms of lack; caught up in rationality and logic, they are ‘empty vessels’, devoid of belief, and thus vulnerable to the evil that is represented in this narrative as an independent entity that moves to fill the empty spaces of Cheshunt. In this context, Nathanial’s mother’s lack of subjectivity, far from being a badge of ‘good’ motherhood, leaves her particularly susceptible to the power of evil. Thus, at the close of the narrative, after his mother has told him about his father’s violent jealousy and rages, and his attempt to strangle Nathanial; and after she has acknowledged she was wrong to remain silent when it appeared that Nathanial had no memory of these things; and after she has apologised for doubting Nathanial to the extent that she believed that he, not the violent thugs from the Gathering, had killed his beloved dog, he tells her, ‘It’s all right’, and hugs her, because I knew it hadn’t been her. It had been Cheshunt, working on the darkness in her (p. 265).

It is not possible, in this study to do more than speculate on whether readers recognise, or are troubled by, the lack of internal logic to this narrative (cf. Scutter 1999). For example, why the people of Cheshunt, in particular, are any more susceptible to evil than those in nearby neighbourhoods; or why so many children and adolescents, as well as adults, are vulnerable to this evil, given that they are supposedly so much better at believing; or why Nathanial and his fellow members of the Chain (the group who fight the evil), all of whom evidently have just as much ‘darkness’ within them as Nathanial’s mother, are able, even without being aware that they are doing so, to answer ‘the Call’ to fight for good instead of being vulnerable to takeover by evil: these are only some of many of puzzles and contradictions on which closure is never satisfactorily achieved. For the purposes of this analysis, the ‘resolution’ between Nathanial and his mother is particularly problematic because it requires readers to overlook 260-odd pages of intensive narrative work that represents his mother as having been a negative force in his life long before they came to Cheshunt. In the end, she remains a deficient mother and unable to escape blame: her lack of the qualities of a ‘good’ mother means that she not only failed to protect Nathanial from his father when he was young, she has also failed to recognise his needs and interests ever since. Moreover, she failed to protect him from Mr Karle and the Gathering; indeed, she effectively sided with them against him and, ultimately, needed to be rescued by him from the grip of evil.

What is also interesting about the representation of Nathanial’s mother is that it highlights the complex and contradictory nature of the issues surrounding motherhood and subjectivity, particularly within the field of children’s literature. Nathanial complains from the first page of the
narrative about his mother’s silence, particularly in relation to his father. At times he seems aware that there might be a history behind this silence; for example, he mentions that sometimes I felt there was a kind of pain barrier in my mother that I kept coming up against (p. 34), and after a conversation with the school counsellor, in which she hints at concerns about his past relationship with his father, he is prompted to speculate:

Had there been some reason for us moving around, other than my mother’s restlessness? And why had he never answered any of my letters or contacted me? Was it possible my mother had told Mrs Vellan something she had kept from me? I shrugged because that was one mystery too many right now, and pushed the whole thing to the back of my mind (p. 109).

As the shrug illustrates, Nathanial makes no attempt to consider his mother’s perspective, focusing only on her failure to understand his own. Readers who draw on common-sense understandings about motherhood and subjectivity to interpret this narrative will be inclined to accept Nathanial’s attitude as utterly reasonable: a ‘good’ mother has no perspective that is not compatible with her child’s, so there should be no need for her child to consider the possibility that she has another perspective, let alone attempt to understand it. Moreover, common-sense understandings of ‘good’ motherhood, as illustrated in Chapter Four, are typically blind to the contexts in which mothering takes place, constructing ‘good’ mothers as all-powerful and able to overcome even their own past histories in protecting their children from harm. As a result, Nathanial’s mother is caught in a ‘no-win’ situation, in much the same way that Lisa, in Change the Locks (French 1991) is caught: Nathanial blames her for her silence, but she would equally expose herself to blame if she sought to explain herself.

Moreover, the possibilities for Nathanial’s mother to explain herself, or for readers to consider her perspective independently of Nathanial, are severely limited, because, as is almost always the case in children’s literature, the narrative is focalised exclusively through the child. Thus, it provides Nathanial’s mother with no subject position from which to speak; her speech is always represented to readers by Nathanial as narrator and focaliser, and inflected with his own, typically negative, interpretation. Neither the prevailing child-centred discourses of motherhood, which require the ‘good’ mother to merge her subjectivity with her children’s and permit her no separate subject position from which to speak, nor the (apparently) child-centred discourses of children’s literature, which work to marginalise the subjectivity of adult characters in general, make any provision for the possibility that responsibility for the problems between Nathanial and his mother, or for the difficulties against which he struggles, lies anywhere other than with her.

Interestingly, the view of contemporary adult society offered in both Letters from the Inside (Marsden 1991) and The Gathering (Carmody 1993) is markedly more bleak than that offered in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993), while the idealised version of motherhood that is implicitly promoted in the former two texts is not radically different from the highly domesticated version that is represented as normal in the latter. Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993), short-listed by the CBCA for the Book of the Year: Older Readers award in 1994, is presented as nine separate but linked short narratives. They are focalised through ten different 13 to 14-year-
old characters, five boys and five girls, who form a loose network of friends in a Year 8 class at an inner suburban Sydney secondary school. All appear intermittently throughout the text as a whole, but each narrative tells a story independently of the others, focusing on one or, in the case of the final narrative, two characters in particular. Significantly, the mothers in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993) are not represented as dysfunctional in any way, or as negative influences in their children’s lives; on the contrary, they are consistently represented as ‘good’, caring, supportive mothers whose interests and desires are never at odds with those of their children. However, this is largely because they are represented in ways that invite readers to conclude that they do not actually have any interests or desires of their own. Except in regard to their relationships with their children, the silence around the lives of these mothers is almost complete.

Admittedly that silence is not as absolute as Baker and Freebody (1989) found it to be in their corpus of early school readers. For example, there are references to mothers having paid employment outside the home: Thomas tells his new classmates that his family moved to Sydney because his mother got a job there; Maria’s mother catches the same bus home from work as the woman next door; Pete’s mother is annoyed to come home from work to find that he has not done the shopping she asked him to do; and Rodney mentions that Dad and Mum both went to work early (p. 151). However, readers learn nothing more than this about the lives of these four women beyond their roles as mothers, and even less about the lives of the mothers of Cass, Troy and Rebecca. Only Fran’s mother has a name, together with a friend who uses it; and only in the cases of Cathy’s and Andrew’s mothers are readers offered any specific information about the nature of their paid work.

In Cathy and Rodney, there is a concession to the possibility that mothers might have concerns that are independent of their roles as mothers, when, in one of her turns at narrating, Cathy explains her decision not to share her unhappiness about a misunderstanding between her and Rodney with her mother: She’d had some meeting at work and she was pretty tired (p. 148). She then describes how, over dinner, her mother

\[ \text{talked on and on about this problem she was having. She runs this lab and she’s not getting on with one of her technicians and she’s trying to solve it by sitting down and talking and talking to him. All this stuff about working problems through and not getting to the point where you yell at each other and walk away. Most appropriate. Ha ha. If she only knew (p. 149).} \]

Here readers are invited to recognise that mothers have their own lives and problems, independent of their children’s lives and problems, but they are not invited to interpret that independence, and the subjectivity it implies, as necessarily legitimate. The phrases ‘talked on and on’, ‘talking and talking’ and ‘all this stuff’, with their connotations of boredom and condescension, suggest that Cathy has no genuine interest in her mother’s problem except in so far as it relates to her own, and the focalisation of this part of the narrative through Cathy works as an invitation to readers to understand her perspective as natural and reasonable. Indeed, Cathy’s belief that her mother’s problem is inconsequential in comparison with her own is
effectively vindicated when her mother notices her quietness and asks her what is wrong. Cathy forgets her earlier resolve not to burden her mother: *it all just came out* (p. 149); and afterwards her mother

*pulled her chair up close to mine and she said how sorry she was that I was unhappy… and she rubbed my back and my neck just like she used to when I’d fallen down and hurt myself when I was a little girl* (p. 149).

If Cathy’s mother has begun to step outside the boundaries of ‘good’ motherhood, she redeems herself quickly, by immediately giving priority to her daughter’s problems and needs, and showing genuine interest in them. Readers can take it for granted that she cannot reasonably or legitimately expect to gain reciprocal interest from Cathy when it comes to her own problems. In coping with these, it seems, she must be silent and self-sufficient.

The subjectivity of Andrew’s mother is accorded considerably more legitimacy. Indeed, among the nine separate narratives in *Love Me, Love Me Not* (Gleeson 1993), Andrew offers the strongest challenge to common-sense understandings about motherhood and subjectivity. Admittedly, Andrew’s mother remains ‘Andrew’s mother’ throughout the narrative, and is never given a name of her own; nor is the narrative focalised through her at any stage; and if she has problems, she does not share them with Andrew. Nevertheless, she is represented as a woman with an identity and interests that are independent of her relationships with her children, and often take her outside the domestic sphere. Moreover, Andrew, through whom the third-person narrative is focalised, recognises her separate subjectivity as no less legitimate than his father’s, his sister’s or, most importantly, his own. Readers are given no reason to believe that he feels abandoned or neglected when his father *plays blues in the pub on Friday nights while Mum sings and plays sax* (p. 126). Nor does Andrew question his mother’s right to join his father, their visitors and his sister in an impromptu trip to the pub to listen to the band, leaving him to take care of the visitors’ children; he simply gives them some ice-cream and a video to watch, and gets on with his own interests, as the other members of his family get on with theirs.

This does not mean that Andrew’s mother takes no interest in his life. On the contrary, the two clearly have a comfortable relationship, and when he consults her with a problem, she gives thoughtful advice that he puts to good use. She does not, however, attempt to solve the problem for him, or make it her own, and Andrew evidently appreciates having the physical and emotional space to solve his own problems, and pursue his own concerns, that are afforded him as a result of her separate subjectivity. Moreover, it seems that he respects and finds value in her pursuit of a separate identity and interests: on the night when, at home alone, he is savouring his success in establishing a friendship with a girl and receiving an invitation to a party, it is, significantly, one of his mother’s favourite blues records that he chooses to sing and dance to, enjoying what his mother has described as music that makes *your flesh crawl and your guts turn over* (p. 126).

In many respects, Andrew’s mother is an ‘absent mother’, but she is represented in a way that provides a stark contrast with *Galax-Arena* (Rubinstein 1992), analysed in detail in Chapter Seven. In that case, Sylvie, the mother who pursues her own interests beyond the domestic

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sphere, is represented as unnatural, selfish, irresponsible and ultimately to blame for the kidnapping of her children, and the narrative, focalised entirely through Joella, offers readers no opportunity to understand her perspective, or even to accept it as legitimate. Andrew is similarly focalised entirely through its adolescent protagonist, but it nonetheless recognises the legitimacy of Andrew’s mother’s separate subjectivity, and hence her perspective, and even offers readers, through their identification with Andrew, the opportunity to share and understand that perspective, if only in relation to a piece of music.

Andrew is atypical of the narratives in Love Me, Love Me Not, in terms of its representation of motherhood and subjectivity, and it is also unusual when considered in relation to the rest of the research corpus. So, too, is A Cage of Butterflies (Caswell 1992), although for a different reason. This novel, which was short-listed for the CBCA’s Book of the Year: Older Readers award in 1993, emulates the narrative style of film and television by taking the form of a series of short sections, typically two to five pages long, each one marked by a change of narrator. The sections alternate between third- and first-person narratives. The former are themselves made up of a number of brief ‘scenes’, sometimes only a few paragraphs long; each is marked with the time and the date, and is focalised through a different character. The latter present the perspectives of the four key characters, Greg, Mikki, Susan and Erik, but only Greg and Mikki are adolescents; Susan and Erik are adults, albeit young adults in their mid-20s. As well, two of the characters through whom the third-person sections of narrative are focalised are also adults. What makes the novel unusual, then, apart from its unconventional format, is that it appears to break with the convention that has become virtually a defining characteristic of children’s literature, by not exclusively offering a child’s or adolescent’s perspective on the events and characters it represents.

Nonetheless, the CBCA’s judges accepted the novel as a children’s book, and there are a number of possible reasons for this. Child and adolescent characters remain the primary focalisers in both the first- and third-person narrative sections; and the story concerns a community of children under threat, with children and adolescents emerging as the heroes and rescuers. Furthermore, Susan and Erik, who play what are effectively helping and facilitating roles, are a couple, with a shared perspective on the central problem, one that is essentially identical to those of the child and adolescent characters. As Erik comments, we both preferred the company of the kids (p. 52) and Susan acknowledges that, because she feels so close to them, I began to see a lot of things from their point of view (p. 24). The singular point of view is apt, too, given that, despite the differences among them, the adolescents have what Susan describes as this incredible group identity (p. 25); Erik similarly remarks that together they were a unit; they had their differences in common and it gave them an identity (p. 52). Susan observes, also, that Greg and Mikki were the natural leaders ... it was just accepted; as if they knew instinctively what was good for the group as a whole (p. 25); moreover, Greg and Mikki were a team. As incompatible as they appeared at first glance, they complemented each other as perfectly as any couple I’ve ever met (p. 26). In other words, it does not matter greatly who is narrating, or whether readers align their own subjectivities with that of Greg, Mikki, Susan or Erik: the effect on the construction of meaning is likely to be much the same. Meanwhile, Larsen and MacIntyre, the other two adults through whom some of the third-person

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sections of narrative are focalised, are readily recognisable as villains, so readers can be expected
to distance themselves from them and the values they represent, even as they remain curious
about what the two are thinking and planning, and what motivates them.

As it turns out, then, the apparent inclusion of adult perspectives is not such a radical move after
all; and certainly the text conforms to another convention of children’s literature in its failure to
present the perspectives of mothers. At one level, this failure seems entirely reasonable: none of
the significant characters in the narrative is a mother; indeed, as has typically been the case in the
history of children’s literature, particularly in mystery and adventure genres, there are few adult
characters at all. However, given the context of the events described in the narrative, the
consistency of the silence about mothers and motherhood is particularly striking. The setting for A
Cage of Butterflies is an ‘advanced learning facility’, or ‘the farm’, as it is known to most of the
characters. Susan, a researcher, and Erik, an orderly, live and work there; and Greg, Mikki, and
another three girls and two boys also live there as part of the ‘Adolescent Advanced Learning
Project’. Greg and Mikki, both aged 15 years, are apparently the oldest members of this group,
while the youngest, Katie, is 10 years old. Greg describes them as

  a mismatched bunch of post- (most of us) pubescent misfits, with super-high IQs and
  sub-zero social skills, locked away in this cozy coastal retreat, partly because they
don’t understand us any more than we understand them, but mainly because someone
  (though I’ve yet to meet anyone who knows exactly who) thought we might prove
  useful. Apparently ‘think-tanks’ are really big overseas (p. 9).

There is a second project under way at the farm, however, one that is both secret and sinister. The
subjects are a group of eight-year-olds, the ‘Babies’, who have been diagnosed as severely autistic,
but have displayed extraordinary intelligence and abilities that cast doubt on that diagnosis. The
research team’s interest in them centres on the fact that all were born in the same hospital at
around the same time; all their mothers had spent some time in the same hospital early in their
pregnancies; and all the mothers had taken the same drug to combat morning sickness. On the
one hand, the pharmaceutical company involved is keen to protect itself from a damages claim,
although the drug has been safely used elsewhere in the world; on the other hand, the company
recognises the possibility that the drug could be used to produce highly intelligent people ‘to order’.
It is the Babies, then, who are at risk, as the researchers attempt to discover their capabilities, their
potential uses, and the precise link between the drug, the hospital and the extra tissue that has
developed on their brains; and it is the adolescents involved in the Advanced Learning Project who
discover the nature of the second project, recognise its sinister implications and the risks to the
Babies themselves, and find a way to rescue them. Meanwhile, issues of motherhood lie as
‘sleepers’ at the margins, never entirely irrelevant to the narrative and the meanings that readers
can construct from it, but never directly addressed.

Greg points out that most of us don’t mind it here. It’s a place where we don’t have to pretend to be
anything but what we are (p. 9). At the same time, while everyone in the tank thought of the farm
as ‘home’… there wasn’t one of us who didn’t look forward to family visits and holidays (p. 106).
Indeed, Greg goes on a holiday with his family during the period the narrative describes, and it is
interesting, from an analytical perspective, to consider what narrative purpose this holiday fulfils, because it has no bearing at all on other events. Readers learn nothing about it except that Greg goes to the Gold Coast, enjoys it, and comes back with a sun-tan; and events at the farm during his absence, and also afterwards, are in no way affected by that absence. It seems that the sole purpose of the holiday, in narrative terms, is to let readers know that family relationships are not to be understood as problematic in this text. That is, Greg has not been abandoned or rejected by his parents and the rest of his family; he is not a victim of neglect; and nor is he unloved, even if his presence at the farm might seem to suggest otherwise to readers who are familiar with the themes that characterise much contemporary adolescent fiction. Such literature, as illustrated in Chapters Two and Five, and also in the analyses presented so far, often focuses on the failings of parents, particularly mothers, and the abandonment, neglect and abuse of children. In *A Cage of Butterflies*, however, the mention of Greg’s holiday works to deter readers from understanding his situation in these terms; by implication, the deterrent extends to the other adolescent characters at the farm, particularly in the light of Greg’s remark about the value they place on family contacts. That it should be necessary for the narrative to make this point is interesting in itself, but it is also interesting that it does so without introducing readers to any of the family members in question: readers do not meet any of Greg's family, and there are no specific references to the families of the other adolescents at the farm. Thus, while readers learn, through Greg’s comments, why the adolescents involved in the project are content to live at the farm, the narrative skirts around the question of how it happens that their families are content for them to be there, despite the vague nature of the Adolescent Advanced Learning Project. Moreover, it also completely avoids addressing the question of what happens to these adolescents between the time when the project is suddenly abandoned, as the main body of the narrative closes, and the time, six years later, that is described in the epilogue. Significantly, these are questions that must be avoided if the fantasy of the perfect mother is to remain intact.

Clearly it is not only mothers who are silenced in this narrative; fathers and families in general are also marginalised. What is particularly interesting about the silence constructed around issues of motherhood, however, is the evident difficulty with which it has been achieved, and the ways in which it is constantly under threat of disruption as a result of the contradictions and unanswered questions that have had to be pushed aside. For example, as the discussion in Chapter Four has illustrated, readers can reasonably be expected to be familiar with at least the common-sense versions of discourses that construct children as at risk of irreparable psychological damage, as well as physical harm, if they are separated from their mothers. It is on the basis of this common-sense ‘knowledge’ that mothers like Lisa, in *Change the Locks* (French 1991), and Sylvie, in *Galax-Arena* (Rubinstein 1992), can so easily be recognised as having failed their children, and that Grandma’s argument about the importance of Regan bonding with his biological mother, in *Seeing Things* (1993), can make such ‘obvious’ sense. Yet, in *A Cage of Butterflies*, readers are expected to take it for granted that it is all right for ten-year-old Katie to be away from her mother, even though it is clear that, from time to time, Mikki has to comfort her when she is distressed by the events unfolding at the farm.
Another example is the contradiction between what Greg indicates about the group’s relationships with their families, together with the narrative’s apparent attempt to reassure readers in this regard, and what readers ‘know’ about ‘good’ mothers. On the one hand, readers are asked to accept that there is nothing problematic about the relationships between these adolescents and their families. On the other hand, as argued in Chapter Four, readers ‘know’ at the level of common sense that a ‘good’ mother could not willingly hand her child over to the care of a group of scientists, particularly for an indefinitely long research project that seems so vaguely defined, and when there appears to be no-one at the farm whose responsibility it is to ensure the group’s day-to-day care, as, for example, the boarding school housemistress does in So Much to Tell You… (Marsden 1987) and Take My Word For It (Marsden 1992). According to Greg, most of the researchers treated them like experimental white mice, running around in their wheels, following their mazes, performing meaningless party tricks of their design (p. 35). It might be argued that their mothers are not aware of all this, but the next question must be: why not? According to prevailing common sense – the same common sense on which readers are invited to draw in order to make sense of so much other adolescent fiction – a ‘good’ mother would know, and would not let it happen.

The narrative apparently recognises this contradiction, at least in relation to the Babies, and attempts to smooth it over as it also accounts for their presence at the farm. In one of the earliest sections of third-person narrative, and the only part of the text in which a mother appears, Larsen tries to persuade Mrs Matheson, the mother of two of the Babies, to part with them. The scene opens with him assuring her that I know how you must feel, and that we both want what’s best for the children, and then arguing:

‘Few families can take the strain of one autistic child, but twins… Even if your husband were still alive, I would advise the same course; if only for the sake of your other children.’

‘Would I be allowed to see them?’ She was weakening, as he knew she must. A good mother, loving, caring – searching for a solution to the hopeless situation she was facing.

He smiled reassurance. ‘Of course. The Institute is not a prison, Mrs Matheson. Visits can easily be arranged. But, to be blunt, in cases this severe they can be quite depressing … I can promise the best of care and expert attention.’ He smiled again, reaching across to touch the woman’s arm. ‘It is all for the best.’

‘I know, but…’ She faltered. He had won. ‘It’s just so hard to cope, sometimes … I want to do what’s right. For all of us.’

Larsen nodded and drew the paper from the inside pocket of his jacket… (p. 11).

At this point the scene changes. Readers have been explicitly told here that Mrs Matheson is a ‘good’ mother, but it may be a considerable struggle for them to accept this assessment. The difficulty is one that they might experience in attempting to reach an unequivocal resolution to any moral dilemma, but at the heart of the dilemma in this case are competing understandings about what it means to be a mother, including understandings about the legitimacy of a mother’s needs, wishes, interests and rights. Larsen’s reference to the other children, and the hint that they will be better off if the twins are removed to the Institute, is something of a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it can be used to help explain and justify Mrs Matheson’s decision, and protect her from possible charges of selfishness or lack of ‘maternal instinct’; on the other, it
raises the disquieting possibility that she does not love all her children equally, and is prepared to ‘abandon’ two of them in the interests of the others. Moreover, it is Larsen who is the focalising agent in this section of the narrative, and clearly he is manipulating Mrs Matheson for self-interested purposes that have nothing to do with what is best for any of the children. Everything that he says to her is recognisable to readers as a deliberate distortion of the truth, and given this, there must be some doubts about whether his unspoken assessment – a good mother, loving, caring – can be accepted as sincere.

Exacerbating the difficulty still further for readers is the pervasiveness of a discourse that casts a permanent shadow of doubt over any mother who is prepared to give up her children for any reason; the possibility that she has been motivated, even partly, out of a self-interest that is incompatible with ‘good’ motherhood cannot easily be dismissed. The shadow is marked by the word ‘but’, with the ellipsis that follows it serving as a marker of all that must remain unspoken within a discourse that denies mothers a legitimate subject position from which to speak. What Mrs Matheson cannot be allowed to articulate are her own needs, her own distress, and her own wish for an easier life. Were Mrs Matheson to be permitted to speak, or if the narrative were to be focalised through her, her words would undoubtedly constitute a significant threat to the fantasy of the perfect mother, who necessarily lacks subjectivity. Accordingly, she remains silent (silenced); Larsen produces the papers, and the scene changes. Readers learn nothing more of Mrs Matheson and, not surprisingly, the narrative does not risk an attempt to account for the presence at the farm of the remaining three Babies; readers are expected to accept that the circumstances in those other cases are much the same, and thus avoid any further forays into dangerous territory. Nor should it be surprising, in the light of the above, that the narrative so carefully avoids giving any specific account of how the subjects in the Adolescent Advanced Learning Project have come to be at the farm. Arguably, this is even more dangerous territory, because without the autism diagnosis, the ‘good’ mother’s decision about what constitutes ‘what’s right for all of us’ may well be perceived by readers as more straightforward.

The issue does arise again later, however, again in relation to the Babies, when Mikki reflects on Katie’s claim that Larsen is holding the Babies prisoner:

> Perhaps ‘prisoner’ was a little strong. I mean, the records show that Larsen had obtained the parents’ permission to keep the Babies at the Institute. But he’d conned them into it. He hadn’t told them how special their kids were … and he certainly hadn’t told them how experimental his treatment – his study – of them would be. They thought he was simply running some sort of advanced autistic centre, where their problem children could be properly cared for. I wonder if they’d have signed the papers so readily if they’d known half of what we found out later (p. 45).

Mikki’s question is never answered; readers are left to speculate on it, should they wish to do so, but they may prefer to follow the narrative’s lead and move on, because again such speculation leads into dangerous territory. Mikki is offering a retrospective account here, one that suggests that although the Babies have been rescued and Larsen’s records have been obtained, Mrs Matheson and the other Babies’ parents have been bypassed in the process. Evidently they have never been told even half of what we found out later; instead it seems that they have

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effectively been relegated, along with Larsen and MacIntyre, to the audience that witnesses the staged ‘deaths’ of the Babies. It is not only Mikki’s question that remains unanswered, then, but also the question of why Mrs Matheson (together with the other parents) has been marginalised again, kept ignorant of her children’s fate and again denied a subject position from which to speak or have any further say in the future care of the twins. Again these are questions that threaten to disrupt common-sense understandings about ‘good’ motherhood, by highlighting the contradictions within them. Readers who explore such questions might have to conclude, as it seems that Mikki and her fellow rescuers may have done (notwithstanding Mikki’s speculations above), that Mrs Matheson does not, in fact, care about the fate of her twins; she is not, after all, to be judged as a ‘good’ mother, and having proved her inadequacy by giving up her children in the first place, she has no further rights as a mother.

On the basis of the above examples and discussion, it might be argued that, rather than working to preserve the prevailing hegemony of common sense that accords ‘trump card’ salience to the identity of ‘mother’, the narrative in *A Cage of Butterflies* works instead to draw readers’ attention to the contradictions and inconsistencies in that common sense, and to encourage the development of counter-hegemonic understandings of motherhood. For example, it might be argued that the representation of Katie as a child who is separated from her mother without suffering any dire consequences constitutes a challenge to object-relations theories of motherhood and the common-sense understandings that have developed under the influence of the childcare literature based on those theories. Certainly it is possible, as the above discussion suggests, to make use of the silences and gaps in the narrative to construct a reading of *A Cage of Butterflies* that draws on counter-hegemonic discourses, but the available evidence suggests that if such a reading is achieved, it is in spite of the narrative’s work to preclude it, not because the narrative actively encourages it. The ideals of ‘good’ motherhood are implicitly promoted in various ways throughout the text, not the least of them being the constant reference to the eight-year-old children as ‘the Babies’. That the implied pair of ‘babies’ should be understood as ‘mothers’, and not the (theoretically) equally possible alternatives of ‘parents’ or ‘adults’, is confirmed through the ways in which Susan and Mikki are represented. As illustrated below, these central female characters are represented as substitute mothers to both the Babies and the adolescents in the Advanced Learning Project.

Both Erik and Greg are gentle and caring males, in contrast to Larsen and MacIntyre, whom both Greg and Mikki agree are definitely not gentle, caring individuals. They’re selfish, detached, clinical and just plain mean (p. 116). However, it is Susan and Mikki who are represented as the most empathic and intuitive of the protagonists, and as having the greatest understanding of the needs of the Babies and the importance of protecting them; it is Susan who explains these things to Erik, and Mikki who explains them to Greg. Moreover, both Susan and Mikki explicitly acknowledge their maternal roles and inclinations, and are implicitly acknowledged in these roles by the others. Thus, as noted above, Katie turns to Mikki for comfort and advice when she is distressed; and in one of Mikki’s sections of narrative, she notes the group’s reaction to a question from Greg that is addressed to no-one in particular:

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Everyone looked at me. Why the hell did they always do that? If Susan wasn’t around, it was always me. Anyone would think I was their den-mother or something. I suppose in a sense I had taken on that role (p. 114).

Similarly, when Susan describes the group in her first section of narrative, she remarks that I loved them all (p. 26); later she says the same thing of the Babies: I loved them all … I felt like a mother to them all (p. 82); and she also expresses concern about the possibility of losing her job at the farm: Who’s going to help the kids then? Who’s going to protect the Babies? (p. 85).

It is also significant that in the epilogue, which is dated nearly six years after the events described in the main body of the text, Susan, now married to Erik, is represented as heavily pregnant and highly conscious of being both an expectant mother in biological terms and, effectively, a mother already. She, Erik, the Babies and the seven young people from the now-defunct Adolescent Advanced Learning Project evidently all live together in an old farmhouse, and the occasion is what Greg explicitly describes as a family meal. At this point, the third-person narrative is focalised through Susan.

Susan, at the end nearest the stove, sat for a moment and looked down the length of the table at her ‘family.’
Sixteen young people. Sixteen brilliant young people.
The baby moved inside her, and she placed a hand gently on her stomach.
Yes, kid, you’ve got quite a family to look forward to (p. 162).

Voicing her thoughts to the others, she explains that after first her parents and then her twin brother had died, ‘I felt so alone … so empty. Now, I’m complete.’ She wiped her eye with a tissue. ‘With my family’ (p. 162).

Mikki’s role and destiny as a mother are also confirmed in this closing scene. She and Greg have just arrived home from their honeymoon, and, as the focalisation of the narrative shifts briefly to her, she too recognises that they are part of a very special family (p. 163). However, as the members of that family are discussing what to do with the profits generated by Think-Tank Incorporated, the business they have established to support themselves, she also acknowledges that:
‘there’s going to be a certain … distancing, as we all make our own lives.’ She caught Greg’s eye and smiled. ‘Some of us have already started along that track; and we’ll all need to take a share of the profits, enough to make a good life for ourselves and our own children’ (pp. 163-164).

It is not until the closing pages of the text, then, that mothers even come close to gaining a subject position from which to speak, as a result of the focalisation of the narrative through Susan, the expectant mother, and then Mikki, the future mother. Yet it is significant that when they speak, their central concern is with their family, and they speak as women who understand themselves as, most importantly, wives and mothers, despite the fact that Susan has a doctorate in behavioural psychology and Mikki, like the other young people present, has a genius-level IQ and unlimited possibilities for using it in her role as part of Think-Tank Incorporated. Moreover, it is also significant that they are not yet mothers: the idea of the mother as speaking subject is one towards which the narrative gestures as a future possibility.
but never represents to readers within the time-frame of the novel. Indeed, even as it makes this gesture, it works to marginalise the biological mothers of the Babies yet again: at the dinner table are four more ‘autistic’ children like the first five Babies, but the narrative remains silent about how, in the months after the ‘deaths’ of the Babies, they had tracked them down and taken them into their rapidly expanding family (p. 162).

As the final example in this discussion of the representation of motherhood and subjectivity, The House Guest (Nilsson 1991), which won the CBCA’s award for Book of the Year: Older Readers in 1992, is interesting for the variety of different ways in which Gunno’s nameless mother is silenced and her subjectivity marginalised. As noted in Chapter Six, 12-year-old Gunno, the protagonist and focalising character in this third-person narrative, lives with his father and belongs to an adolescent house-breaking gang. The reasons for his mother’s absence emerge only gradually as the narrative proceeds; in the meantime, frequent allusions to her throughout the narrative suggest that she constitutes a significant presence in Gunno’s life, despite – or perhaps because of – her absence. For example, she is first mentioned in the opening paragraph of the second chapter, quoted previously in Chapter Six: Sometimes Gunno was troubled by what he feared were obsessions ... It worried him because of his mother (p. 12). However, the connection between Gunno’s ‘obsessions’ and his mother remains unclear. Later in the same chapter, Gunno re-visits the house that has become the focus of his ‘obsessions’, feeling that there was something dreamlike about the whole thing ... it was like some dreams he had where the sound track seemed to be switched off, where there was action and apparent conversation yet no sound. Dreams of his mother were often like this (p. 18).

In this second example, it becomes clear that Gunno’s mother is not only an absent presence in his life (cf. Scutter); she is also a silent presence. The image of conversation without sound is echoed later in the narrative, when Gunno’s father announces:

‘I’ve had a letter from your mother ... She wants you to write to her, son.’
‘I do. I have.’
‘Yes, but she’s disappointed in your letters. She says they’re ... Now, what was the word she used?’ He searched through the letter. ‘“Perfunctory”, that was it. She means...’
‘I know what she means.’
‘She means that you never really tell her anything, not anything important’ (p. 34).

Between Gunno and his mother, there is not only the literal silence caused by her absence in another city, but also the effective silence of his letters, which amount to conversation without sound; evidently Gunno’s mother is not the only one who is silent. Nonetheless, she is silent, and also silenced, in ways that Gunno himself is not.

First, and most obviously, Gunno is an active, speaking subject, at least within the framework of the narrative. The focalisation through him invites readers to align their subjectivities with his, and in so doing, to share his thoughts, feelings and motivations; participate (vicariously) in his activities and experiences; and understand him as a ‘person’ rather than a representation. In effect, readers can enter into a social relationship with him, and the narrative encourages them
to do so as they enter into the fictive world it represents. However, they cannot do this with Gunno's mother, because even within the framework of the narrative, she is only ever a representation, a passive object who is spoken for, or spoken about, and even spoken to, but can never speak for herself. Thus, her disappointment with Gunno's perfunctory letters is not expressed directly but relayed through his father. Similarly, when his father visits him in hospital, he tells Gunno that I rang your mother. She said she'd like to come over (p. 147). Furthermore, readers know what Gunno writes, begins to write, or even thinks about writing, to his mother, because the narrative is focalised through him and the text of his letters is included as part of that narrative. However, no letter of hers is included in this way, and readers can never know what she might want to write or say to Gunno, because the narrative is never focalised through her.

Gunno's mother is also silenced by Gunno himself; at least, he attempts to silence her by blocking her out of his thoughts. Thus, he recalls her reading to him:

*It had been the old sagas she had read to him mainly – especially one: that one she had read to him over and over. But because she had, that was the one he had tried to block completely from his mind* (p. 37).

He also remembers that she is one of the few people who knows and uses his real name, but he pulled the curtains of his mind across it, across her, as he always did (p. 47). Readers are positioned to recognise from these and earlier references to his mother that Gunno wants to protect himself from feeling the pain of her absence, just as Miranda, in Seeing Things (Klein 1993) seeks to block out the pain of her mother’s death by refusing to think about her. However, it is also possible to interpret Gunno’s attempts to block his mother from his mind as a refusal to acknowledge her separate subjectivity and thus her right to a speaking position from which to account for herself. The focalisation of the narrative through Gunno works here, in conjunction with objectifying discourses of motherhood, to render this refusal ‘natural’ and ‘reasonable’, in much the same way as Cathy’s boredom with her mother’s work problems in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993).

However, without necessarily rejecting either of these understandings, readers can also draw together the various clues provided by the narrative to recognise that there is something more to Gunno’s attempts to silence his mother. Gunno fears that he is like his mother in experiencing ‘obsessions’, as evidenced by his feeling of rapport with a house that he and his fellow house-breakers have previously broken into. He is drawn back to this house on an almost daily basis, not to steal, but to read, play with the dog, tend a pot-plant or just lie in the hammock. He feels as if it is his house and his dog, and the dog seems to sense this too. Moreover, Gunno has a strong sense that he needs to write about this to his mother. However,

*He didn’t want to tell her – not really, for it would be to admit at last what he had always suspected, had always avoided. He was like her: at least in one respect he was like her* (p. 82).

It is clear that another reason why Gunno tries to block his mother from his mind is because he wants to block out something in himself that he perceives to be unacceptable. Although he
recognises that his mother is the one person he knows who would accept it – *there was no one else he could tell* (p. 82) – he also knows that, in his mother, it has been deemed unacceptable by others. The first clue to this comes at the end of the conversation about Gunno’s perfunctory letters, when his father says, *You know how fanciful she is* (p. 35). Readers can infer that his mother’s ‘fanciful’ ideas are common ‘knowledge’ between Gunno and his father and that, in effect, his father is suggesting that her concerns need not be taken too seriously.

In other words, Gunno’s father also tries to silence his mother, by marginalising her subjectivity on the grounds of her ‘fanciful’ ideas. The extent of this third way of silencing her becomes clear when, in the light of his own experiences of having what his father might call ‘fanciful’ ideas, Gunno begins to reconsider her position. Although his father says *I’ve told you about it all before* (p. 106), Gunno quizzes him about why he had said his mother was crazy and sent her to *one of those places* (p. 106). The following is an abbreviated version of the rest of the conversation:

‘You said she was crazy: you sent her there. She didn’t want to go. She was crying.’
‘The doctor thought it was a good idea; she was tired, she needed a rest … She’d get upset about nothing… And, of course, she always said she could predict things – and see into the past, that sort of thing. And then… she started seeing things… She said she could see people … people who weren’t there. People who were dead, Gunno. Like old Mr Watchman who lived next door. She saw him in the street with his old dog six months after he died.’
‘You mean Mum got locked up for seeing Mr Watchman trying to look after his dog?’
‘No one ever locked your mother up, Gunno. And he was dead. Haven’t you been listening? Your mother’s just one of those people who can’t cope with ordinary life and invents things, maybe, to make it bearable. It hurt her to think of that old dog… She was fanciful, Gunno. Remember how she’d be reading all the time. Remember how much she used to read to you.’
‘That doesn’t make her crazy.’
‘No one’s saying crazy. Unbalanced, perhaps’ (pp. 106-108).

By the time this conversation occurs, Gunno’s own experiences are such that he has begun to recognise the possibility that his mother is not crazy at all. Moreover, he has just been caught in ‘his’ house by Anne, the woman who lives there, and he now realises the consequences, for her, of his visits. She has been aware of them – *You’ve been tidying up, watering the cyclamen … brushing the dog. Do you think I haven’t noticed?* (p. 96) – and has even caught glimpses of him. *‘Do you realise’, she said, and now she sounded furious, ‘do you realise that I thought I was going mad?’* (p. 96). Her son, Hugh, who was the same age as Gunno and resembled him a little, had disappeared nearly two years previously. *‘Hallucinating” my husband called it. He said that because Hugh hadn’t come back I was hallucinating, imagining that he had’* (p. 96). Anne asks Gunno to stay until her husband comes home, and Gunno realises the importance to her of having her husband see him for himself, and having him acknowledge the legitimacy of her subject position, so that she cannot, after all, be written off by him, or indeed by herself, as just a neurotic, grieving mother.

Soon afterwards, Gunno has what is best described as a psychic experience: he ‘meets’ Hugh on the day he died in an accident in a disused mine, and spends the last hours of his life with
him. Initially, he thinks he has saved Hugh and changed the past, by dragging him away from a dangerous mine passage just before it collapses and then persuading him back to the outside world. Even as this is happening, he recognises the possible implications for his mother: *He wondered what his mother would think, what she would say: if it would change things for her* (p. 130). He has not saved Hugh, however, because he goes back into the mine to rescue a dog; the result is that Gunno and Hugh are caught in another rock fall, and Hugh soon dies. Gunno, however, is rescued; at the same time, Hugh’s remains are found and the mystery of his disappearance is solved. When Anne later visits Gunno in hospital, he relates the story of Hugh’s last few hours and, as impossible as it seems to her, she accepts its truth and is grateful to Gunno for being there with Hugh when he died. In turn, as Gunno explains afterwards to a friend, he recognises that Anne has *done a lot for me ... She believed in me* (p. 57); moreover, he has realised the importance, for both his mother and himself, of acknowledging his mother as a person by writing to her about things that are important to him.

By the end of the novel, one of the ways in which Gunno’s mother has been silenced has been undone: readers can infer that Gunno is now prepared to listen to her and acknowledge the legitimacy of her ‘fanciful’ ideas, as Anne has done for him and her husband has been obliged to do for her. Moreover, the possibility is now open for him to move further towards recognising his mother as a separate speaking subject, with interests, desires and rights that are independent of her identity as ‘mother’. Most importantly, the focalisation of the narrative through Gunno actively encourages readers to recognise, as he has, the way in which his mother’s perspective has been marginalised by her husband and her doctors, and to understand the consequences of this in terms of her rights and interests. Thus, *The House Guest* (Nilsson 1991) can be recognised as offering a challenge to prevailing common-sense understandings of ‘good’ motherhood that, in according ‘trump card’ salience to the identity of ‘mother’, effectively objectify women who have children and deny the legitimacy of any subject position, and hence any separate interests and desires, outside of their relationships with those children. In conjunction with those presented in Chapter Seven, the analyses in this section reveal that it is these understandings, rather than alternative, counter-hegemonic notions of motherhood, that are more typically affirmed, if not actively promoted, by the texts in the research corpus.

It must be noted, however, that the power of the challenge in *The House Guest* is undermined to some extent by the ways in which the narrative represents motherhood in relation to fatherhood, an issue that is explored later in this chapter. Furthermore, the challenge in terms of motherhood and subjectivity might have been considerably more powerful had a speaking position been provided for Gunno’s mother, for example, by focalising part of the narrative through her. As it is, her emergence as an active speaking subject is deferred to a point beyond the time frame of the narrative, and readers are never given an opportunity to hear what she might have to say, or to consider issues from her perspective. Instead, they are required to fill in what is effectively a gap – another kind of silence – in the narrative, using their own discursive resources, which may well be limited among adolescent readers whose everyday reality, as
illustrated in Chapter Four, is one in which the voices of mothers as separate subjects must still struggle to be heard.

To summarise the findings set out above, it is evident that, like the first six texts in the research corpus, those analysed in this section work to support, rather than to challenge, discourses of motherhood that deny mothers any legitimate subjectivity beyond that which is constructed in relation to their children. They do so in a variety of ways, the most obvious being that mothers are never used as focalising characters. Even allowing for the fact that all fictional characters are not ‘people’ but representations, the mothers in these narratives are always passive objects rather than active subjects; always spoken about, rather than speaking for themselves. Their ‘voices’ are always mediated through other focalisers, usually their children, with the overwhelming result that, except in so far as they coincide with those of their children, their own needs, interests and desires are subordinated, constructed as illegitimate or, more commonly, denied completely. Indeed, it might be inferred from the silence around the lives of these women that they do not actually have any lives outside their relationships with their children. Readers rarely learn much about them, often not even their names: many of these women are identified in the narratives only in relation to their children, the implication being that their only recognised and legitimate identity is that of ‘mother’. Except in the case of Andrew’s mother, in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993), mothers who do have other needs, interests and desires are represented as selfish and uncaring; they are ‘bad’ mothers within the discourses of ‘good’ motherhood that these narratives work to promote.

As explained in Chapter Four, one characteristic of the ‘good’ mother that follows from her lack of subjectivity is her lack of sexual desire. Moreover, the evidently problematic issue of motherhood and sexuality figures strongly in the analyses presented in the previous chapter. Accordingly, in the next section of this chapter, the analytical focus is on motherhood and sexuality.

**Motherhood and sexuality**

In various ways, five of the six texts analysed in Chapter Seven orient to prevailing social anxieties about the ‘proper’ expression of female sexuality, and motherhood is never irrelevant to this discursive work. In a number of cases, for example, unmarried motherhood, which is commonsensically understood as the consequence of a failure to regulate the expression of female sexuality, is represented in negative terms. In particular, both Yvette, in Seeing Things (Klein 1993), and Lisa, in Change the Locks (French 1991), are represented as irresponsible young single mothers whose children are at risk because of their lack of ‘proper’ concern for them; and in Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992), while Katia and Christina are portrayed more positively as mothers, their ‘illegitimate’ sexual behaviour is shown to have had damaging consequences for both themselves and their children. In Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993), the story of the ill-fated Maureen Peed and her baby, told to Julia by her mother as a warning, serves also as a warning to readers. Readers familiar with the common sense that underpins such warnings...
are likely to perceive Melissa, in *Dougy* (Moloney 1993), Josephine’s friend Sera, in *Looking for Alibrandi*, and indeed Julia herself (despite her mother’s warning) as girls who are at risk of getting themselves ‘into trouble’. Readers are invited instead to model themselves on Josephine, who, supported by family, friends and even her boyfriend, believes in ‘saving herself’ for the ‘right’ man; or on Dougy’s sister Gracey, who, unlike the rest of the girls in her town who chase boys and play ‘that game’, is a model of self-regulated adolescent sexuality.

However, the ‘problem’ of female sexuality, as it is constructed in these narratives, is not just that adolescent girls are likely to get themselves into trouble if their activities are not strictly controlled, they are also likely to cause trouble for others. Most obviously, in these examples, those others are their children or other family members such as Grandma, in *Seeing Things* (Klein 1993), who is burdened with additional responsibilities as a result of Yvette’s ‘irresponsible’ sexual involvement with the ‘wrong’ man. In the case of *Angel’s Gate* (Crew 1993), however, Julia’s blatant use of her sexuality to manipulate Kim and Keithy, and her admiration for Ruby’s sexual power, connote other kinds of trouble, specifically for men, when the expression of female sexuality is not tightly regulated. Similarly, in *Dougy* (Moloney 1993), Melissa’s manipulative sexuality is represented as a negative influence on the young men who are drawn to it; and while she cannot fairly be blamed for the outbreak of racial violence in her town, it may be difficult for readers to resist making an attributive link between that violence and her defiance of her father’s authority. Such representations of the supposed negative social consequences of unregulated female sexuality work to justify the continued existence of a fundamentally patriarchal social order, manifested most forcefully through patriarchal versions of social institutions such as family, marriage and motherhood.

If the expression of female sexuality in adolescence and outside the institution of marriage is represented as a problem in these five narratives, it is also the case that girls and women, even those whose sexual desire is ‘properly’ regulated, are represented as being more or less constantly at risk. Evidently as a consequence of their femininity, they are shown to be vulnerable to the sexual desires of ‘bad’ men. Maureen Peed’s vulnerability to the predatory Ben Cullen in *Angel’s Gate* (1993) is one example; the implicit threat to Gracey from the lurking Cooper in *Dougy* (Moloney 1993) is another; and the late-night attack on Josephine and Anna in the carpark of their workplace is yet another. The unprotected Maureen evidently came to grief; Gracey is perceived to be safe while in the company of Mr Jenkins, but Cooper’s harassment has evidently been ongoing and she has had to tell him to ‘ping off’ more than once; the protection of the police only defers, rather than prevents the attack on Josephine and Anna, and it is up to their (future) boyfriends to rescue them. In these narratives, then, readers are invited to recognise what they already ‘know’ as common sense: that male sexual violence is an ongoing risk for women and girls; that the solution to that problem is the protection of a ‘good’ man; and that, while that protection is initially provided by the father, it is ideally gained on an ongoing basis through a romantic relationship, preferably marriage, with the ‘right’ man. Again, then, these representations work to promote patriarchal versions of family and marriage as essential for the protection of women’s vulnerable sexuality.
The link, through marriage, to motherhood is not always made explicit in these narratives. Although it is clear that they work in support of ideologies that effectively marginalise unmarried mothers as models of a less than ideal version of motherhood, it is less clear that, in these narratives, motherhood should be understood as necessarily following from marriage. Arguably, however, the link does not need to be made explicit, because it is already largely taken for granted, embedded within the common-sense meaning-making resources available to readers as they engage with these and other written texts. It will be recalled from Chapter Four, for example, that the discourse of romantic love is inextricably bound up with discourses that work to regulate female sexuality within the patriarchal institutions of marriage and motherhood. Moreover, as illustrated in Chapter Four, the long-accepted link between the social institutions of marriage and motherhood continues to dominate contemporary common sense, such that married women who choose not to become mothers are typically understood as ‘unnatural’ and ‘selfish’, and often experience ongoing social pressures to justify themselves in moral terms, and/or to change their minds and fulfil their ‘proper’ and ‘natural’ roles in life through motherhood. Readers are therefore likely to perceive it as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ that, for women, motherhood follows marriage, and these narratives offer them no encouragement to question that understanding.

Nor are readers of any of the six texts analysed in Chapter Seven given any strong invitations to challenge common-sense ideas about the legitimacy of sexual desire within motherhood. In five cases, the silences on this issue effectively collude in the construction of the ‘good’ mother in opposition to the sexual mother, and position readers to do the same. Only in Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992) are the issues of a mother’s sexual desire and the logical impossibility of the asexual ‘good’ mother raised at all, and then only briefly. In that instance, Josephine’s and Katia’s reactions to Christina’s dinner date are explicitly constructed as selfish, unreasonable and unfair, both by Christina herself during the argument and by Josephine in retrospect. Nonetheless, the occasion can be interpreted by readers only as an isolated incident in Christina’s otherwise cloistered life; they are offered no further opportunities to develop an alternative understanding of ‘good’ motherhood, one that does not preclude the possibility of legitimate female sexual desire.

In this context, the silence of Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992) on the issue of adolescent female sexuality takes on additional significance. It was argued in Chapter Seven that, in the light of the analyses of the other five texts, this silence cannot easily be taken to mean that this issue is irrelevant to this narrative; nor can it easily be accepted as providing support for a more positive view of the legitimacy of adolescent female sexual desire. Rather, its implication is that female sexuality is so dangerous that it must be excluded entirely. In other words, the regulation of female sexuality in Galax-Arena is effectively achieved through the denial of its existence. In support of this argument, it should be noted that, just as Christina’s claim of a right to a life independent of her role as Josephine’s mother is incompatible with Josephine’s and Katia’s, and perhaps also readers’, understandings about what constitutes a ‘good’ mother, so too would the
representation of Joella as a sexual being, complete with sexual interests and desires, have been incompatible with her representation as a model of ‘good’ motherhood. Indeed, it would have threatened to expose the logical impossibility of the ideal of the totally self-less mother that the narrative otherwise works so strongly to support.

It is clear, then, from both the review of literature in Chapter Four and the analyses presented in Chapter Seven that representations of motherhood cannot be considered independently of representations of female sexuality, because the latter have significant implications in terms of the (re)production of ideologies of motherhood. Moreover, in the light of this brief review of some of the findings so far, it seems that, in various ways, the ‘problem’ of female sexuality may be a significant theme in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction. Given this, one aspect of the remaining texts in the research corpus that merits consideration in this chapter is the representation of female sexuality and its relationship to motherhood. Analyses of these 12 texts reveal support for a variety of understandings of female sexuality, examples of which are illustrated in the remainder of this section.

The first example is a text that, like *Dougy* (Moloney 1993) and *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992), presents readers with clear models of acceptable and unacceptable versions of adolescent feminine sexuality. As noted in Chapter Six, *Peter* (Walker 1991), which was judged by the CBCA panel as an Honour Book in the Older Readers category in 1992, is focalised entirely through Peter, the 15-year-old narrator; readers are thus invited to view the world, and other characters in his story, from his perspective. His narrative encompasses just over two weeks of his summer school holidays, and has the colloquial style and confessional tone of a confidential conversation. Issues of male, not female, sexuality, and of what counts as an appropriate version of masculinity, are of central interest to Peter, who is confused and anxious about his own sexual preferences.

Nonetheless, female sexuality is also a matter of more than passing interest, as evidenced in the contrasting representations of two of the girls at Peter’s school, Gloria and Sophie. The former is one of our Year 9 tartlets – chicks who hang around the older boys and act sexy (p. 54), and her appearance and manner are described by Peter in considerable detail each time she appears in his narrative. For example, she has a good figure, but she’s always flashing it. She’s the kind of chick who has no secrets left, if you know what I mean (p. 56). She is a scatterbrain (p. 56), whose eyelids just about creaked under the mass of eye-shadow, and her lipstick was a solid bank of purple (p. 56). She wears jeans so tight she had to ease the wrinkles down them with her hands when she stood up … [and] a skimpy pink top with no bra (p. 91); and the word was, she expected sex from the blokes she went out with (p. 96). From the perspective of Peter’s ‘sex-mad’ friend, Tony, who spies on his neighbour when she sunbakes nude, and is described by his own sister as a disgusting pervert (p. 49), anyone who doesn’t want a date with Gloria Jansen needs his head read. Or his hormones counted (p. 49). Readers are left in no doubt about Peter’s opinion, however: she’s gross, and a sleaze-bag, and I hate her (p. 141).
In stark contrast to Gloria, Tony’s sister, Sophie, is definitely not a tartlet (p. 54). She is nice, pretty and quiet; does well at school; is low-key and sensible; wears big, loose clothes and no make-up; doesn’t do weird things to her hair (pp. 54-56); and is interesting to talk to (p. 148). Most tellingly, she looks like the round-faced angels and Madonnas with flowing hair in Renaissance paintings (p. 55). It is Sophie, not Gloria, who most closely resembles the girl of Peter’s dreams:

Sex has got to be the ultimate in revealing yourself and I don’t want to reveal myself to just anyone. I’d like to get to know a girl first ... I’m choosy...
We’d get to know each other slowly. We wouldn’t always be holding hands or making out. This girl wouldn’t get offended or think there was anything wrong with me just because I wasn’t always groping for her tits.
We’d do it eventually, of course, my girl and me. It wouldn’t happen because we got drunk or carried away. It’d be special…
… she’d love me … I’d love her too (p. 99).

Here, the explicit message for readers recalls that of Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992), except that in this case it is targeted at both male and female readers. Thus, it is not only girls who are encouraged to ‘save themselves’ for the ‘right’ partner; boys, too, in modelling themselves on Peter, rather than Tony (whose values Peter increasingly rejects; by the close of the narrative, they are no longer friends), are encouraged to view sexual intercourse as properly experienced within a loving and lasting relationship. However, the message is not as even-handed as it initially appears to be. Boys, understood as the more active, desiring partners, are encouraged to be more ‘choosy’, more discriminating. For them, the goal is to find the ‘right’ girl, the demure virgin angel or Madonna, and to resist the temptations offered by the ‘wrong’ girls, the Glorias. Such girls are a constant source of trouble, obstacles to the achievement of the kind of (heterosexual) masculinity promoted here; indeed, readers might reasonably infer that boys cannot be held fully responsible for its non-achievement:

… when you’ve got to talk to a girl dressed like that, it doesn’t give you many places to rest your eyes. And you’re never sure how your body’s going to react, if you know what I mean, and that’s a worry (p. 91).

Girls, on the other hand, are understood as desired rather than desiring, and are encouraged to view the ‘right’ boy as the discriminating boy – Peter, for example, rather than Tony – and to become the kind of girl that such a boy would choose. The version of ideal femininity they are invited to emulate is, implicitly, also an idealised version of motherhood; specifically, it is that of the woman without desire, the impossible virgin mother.

Interestingly, it is Sophie herself who offers the only challenge to this discourse when, in defence of Gloria, she tells Peter: A girl's got a right to do what she wants ... Boys do! Why shouldn't a girl? (p. 147). He admits that threw me. ‘I suppose you’re right,’ I said. ‘I’ve never thought about it’ (p. 147); and readers who have aligned themselves with Peter, or alternatively with Sophie, are invited to think about it too. They are given no further support in doing so, however, and placed as it is shortly before the narrative closes, the challenge lacks sufficient power to undo the discursive work of the previous 146 pages. The task of re-thinking the issue is not made any
easier for readers by the unequivocally negative way in which Gloria is represented throughout the narrative, which acts as a strong deterrent from identifying with her or endorsing her values.

_Take My Word For It_ (Marsden 1992), which was included in the CBCA’s 1993 short list for _Book of the Year: Older Readers_, is presented in the form of a personal and reflective journal written over a period of six months by Lisa, a Year Nine student at a girls’ boarding school. One noteworthy feature of her narrative is that Lisa makes a number of seemingly casual references to the harassment and/or more serious dangers that await unprotected females in the world beyond the school gates. Here, for example, she mentions going for a run:

_I ran the 8k course tonight. These creeps in a car were following me along the road section – three or four of them, real losers, making smart comments. It’s happened before, but I never know what to do about it. If I dob on them I won’t be allowed to run again, not on my own anyway. I have to run to live. I breathe through my feet (p. 16)._ 

On another occasion, she writes:

_Ran so many laps today. I’d normally do a crossie but there’s been the odd car-load of drop-kicks around again and Dr Whiteley has banned crossies unless you’re in a group of three and tell a teacher you’re going. I like to run alone (p. 40)._

With no bearing at all on the story, and apparently inserted as casual asides, such remarks have the air of idle discourse, and they may well escape the conscious notice of readers familiar with a social world in which it is widely accepted that women and girls on their own are vulnerable to male sexual harassment and/or violence. However, Lisa’s remarks serve an important discursive function in effectively confirming, for all readers, the reality – indeed the naturalness – of such a world. In addition, they serve to remind female readers, who, given the narrative’s focus on female subjectivity in a predominantly female social setting, are likely to be in the majority, of their need for protection in that world.

In this case, readers are not explicitly invited to understand that protection as ideally coming in the form of ‘Mr Right’. In the context of the girls’ boarding school, protection is achieved in a group, under adult surveillance, or by remaining within the school grounds, although clearly such measures cannot be understood as permanent solutions. However, while not explicit, the more satisfactory permanent answer in the form of a life ‘happy ever after’ with the ‘right’ man – complete with all that ‘happy ever after’ commonsensically entails – is easily available to readers, partly because of its ‘obviousness’, and partly because the discourse of romance underpins much of Lisa’s narrative and is a key factor in its resolution. Thus, Lisa concludes her journal feeling distinctly more positive about her future, and about her relationships with family and friends, than she has previously, and readers are positioned to understand that this is due largely to her developing relationship with Rhys: _I felt so contented and happy with him_.

_Everyone kept saying how much I’d changed_ (p. 89). That Rhys should be recognised by readers as the ‘right’ man, despite the fact that Lisa is still only in Year Nine at school, is evidenced not only by this change, but also by the hitherto very private Lisa’s comment that _I feel I can talk to him about anything_ (p. 89), and her subsequent disclosure to him of her _biggest darkest most wicked secret_ (p. 89), which she has never before shared with anyone. The lurking dangers symbolised by the ‘creeps’ in the car are never represented as major problems.
for Lisa, but neither can they be considered insignificant, and readers are positioned to accept
the proposition that they, along with Lisa’s other problems, have been solved permanently as a
result of Rhys’s arrival in her life. Here the narrative makes a particularly appealing invitation to
female readers, playing on their vulnerability to the power of romantic discourse, which, as
illustrated in Chapter Four, cannot be considered as independent of other discourses that work
to regulate female sexuality within the linked patriarchal institutions of marriage and motherhood.
For female readers, in particular, the special appeal of that discourse lies in its promise to fulfil,
least in fantasy, their desires for a ‘happy ever after’ solution to the problems and
contradictions of being female.

*Take My Word For It* (Marsden 1992) is also interesting, and somewhat unusual in this corpus,
for its representation of a sexualised version of motherhood. As explained in Chapter Six, the
novel is a companion volume to the earlier *So Much to Tell You*… (Marsden 1987), which won
the CBCA’s *Book of the Year: Older Readers* award in 1988, and it is reasonable to assume that
many, perhaps most, readers of the later text will also have read the earlier one. Thus, when
Lisa describes a visit to the boarding school dormitory by the mother of Marina, the narrator of
*So Much to Tell You*…, it is likely that readers will use the earlier text as a meaning-making
resource to interpret Lisa’s account. Marina’s mother, Lisa tells readers, was tall, with red hair,
and dressed in a black leather coat and tight black pants. Stunning stuff … she had that bright
lipstick on (pp. 24-25). As a stand-alone physical description this might seem positive enough,
suggesting that Marina’s mother is smartly dressed, wealthy and attractive. However,
particularly in the context of what readers already ‘know’ about this woman from the earlier
novel, the connotations of black leather, tight pants and bright lipstick are likely to be far less
positive. The extensive criticism of *So Much to Tell You*…, discussed in Chapter Five, has
focused most closely on the unequivocally negative way in which Marina’s mother is represented
as a selfish woman whose decision to leave her husband and her involvement in a new
relationship justify his attempt to throw acid at her; and also on the way Marina, whose face was
severely disfigured when the acid missed its intended victim, eventually forgives her father,
blaming her mother instead for provoking him:

> I found myself wishing (I’m ashamed to say this) that my father’s aim had been better
> after all, and that he’d got her instead of me, like he’d planned. I tried imagining how
> she would have screamed and staggered away and how her expensive face would
> look now (p. 72).

In the fictive world constructed by the two narratives, Lisa knows little, if anything, about Marina’s
mother. She does not know what Marina thinks of her, or what Marina has written about her in
her journal, and she has never before met or even seen her. Nor, clearly, can she know of the
distinct contrast constructed in *So Much to Tell You*… between Marina’s mother and Mrs Lindell,
the English teacher’s wife, who epitomises the ideal of selflessly devoted domestic motherhood.
Moreover, Marina’s history is peripheral to Lisa’s narrative. However, Lisa’s account of the brief
dormitory visit and the conversation between Marina, her mother and the dormitory
housemistress concludes with a remark that invites readers to form a negative opinion: *Mrs
Marina just talked to her daughter like she was a girl in shop* (p. 25). Interestingly, however, on
its own, Lisa’s account of the visit offers readers no sound reason to accept this invitation, although the conversation is evidently, and not surprisingly, strained: Marina, an elective mute, does not answer any of her mother’s questions.

It seems, then, that what is particularly important in positioning readers to accept Lisa’s negative summation of Marina’s mother is not so much Lisa’s account in Take My Word For It, but the intertextual evidence that precedes it in So Much to Tell You… Without this, Lisa’s comment makes little sense. However, by drawing on the combined resources of this evidence and their common-sense awareness of the incompatibility between ‘good’ motherhood and the unregulated expression of female sexuality, readers can fill in the narrative gaps in Lisa’s account in a way that makes sense of her comment without ever stalling the meaning-making process. In other words, they can unhesitatingly interpret Marina’s mother’s appearance in sexualised, and hence, in this context, negative terms: she becomes the wicked wife and mother whose unregulated sexual desire has caused the break-up of her family. Similarly, the strained conversation comes to be understood in terms of her selfishness, with readers positioned to infer that she is too preoccupied with pursuing her own desires with her new partner to take any ‘proper’ maternal interest in Marina.

Interestingly, the focus on domestic violence in So Much to Tell You…, and also the other text in this corpus by the same writer, Letters from the Inside (Marsden 1991), rather than on sexual violence in the public sphere (more typical in this corpus), threatens to disrupt the fantasy of safety and security invoked by the romantic discourse that pervades Take My Word For It (Marsden 1992) and a number of the other texts discussed in this section. The representations, in So Much to Tell You… and Letters from the Inside, of an extraordinarily violent world in which women are almost invariably victims – that is, when they are not idealised or culpable – can conceivably have at least four possible effects, depending on how readers have learned to understand the concept of representation. One is to increase the power of the discourse of romance by, in effect, reminding readers of the importance, in such a world, of choosing the ‘right’ partner; another is to foster acceptance of women’s supposedly inherent vulnerability and powerlessness, and thus to naturalise a world in which their options are always limited, whether or not they involve motherhood; a third is to provoke critique of the contemporary social world, based on emotive ‘backlash’ claims about the perceived negative social consequences of feminist movements that have ‘gone too far’; while a fourth is to provoke a different kind of critique of contemporary society, one based on a recognition that fictional representations of the social world are not passive and innocent reflections, but are actively involved in the ideological work of shaping that world and the ways in which readers perceive it. The first three of these possibly outcomes are not mutually exclusive. Only the last of them, however, could feasibly lead to the production of new and counter-hegemonic understandings about motherhood and sexuality; arguably, it is also the least likely outcome for readers whose meaning-making strategies have primarily been shaped by conventional approaches to reading education, a point that is discussed further in Chapter Nine.
As in a number of the texts discussed so far, warnings about the vulnerability of women on their own are evident in *Mandragora* (McRobbie 1992), which was short-listed by the CBCA in 1993 for the award of *Book of the Year: Older Readers*. However, in this text, the solutions to this problem are not shown to lie, necessarily, in the protection provided by the ‘right’ man. For example, the third-person narrative opens with Adam, the teenage male protagonist and sole focalising character, walking on a cliff path above a beach. Knowing that she goes beachcombing most afternoons, he is hoping ‘accidentally’ to meet Catriona, a girl in his class at school. However, before he catches up with her, he comes across

*two boys with their backs to him, crouched behind a large rock which stood on the seaward edge of the cliff path. They were like a pair of hunters who’d tracked their quarry, seeing without being seen. Now they were looking down on Catriona where she walked on the beach* (p. 5).

Even without the words ‘hunters’ and ‘quarry’, readers can draw on common-sense resources to recognise that Catriona is at some risk; the metaphor simply confirms it, and so too does Adam’s reaction, when he recognises the boys as bullies from his school and tries to back away before they notice him. They do see him, however, and after a brief exchange and a scuffle that leads to an accident and the collapse of part of the cliff, it is Catriona who rescues Adam from suffocation under a fall of sand. The confrontation is not yet over, however, and within a few minutes Catriona is again under threat, this time more explicitly. The four teenagers are now in an historic cave that has been exposed as a result of the landfall, when one of the bullies produces a pocket knife and demands that Adam leaves while Catriona stays behind.

*In the edgy silence, it was Catriona who acted. She suddenly dropped to one knee and scooped up two handfuls of sand and threw one straight into Richard’s face and with the other, she doused his candle then pushed Adam towards the low entrance. ‘Come on, let’s move,’ she said* (p. 17).

Evidently, Catriona is quite capable of protecting herself from ‘bad’ men, at least on these occasions. Readers are invited to endorse Adam’s admiration for her cool and capable independence, and can infer that, while women are vulnerable to ‘bad’ men, so too are other men, albeit perhaps in different ways; moreover, women need not, indeed cannot, rely on men to protect them. In this sense, then, the narrative resists constructing marriage to the ‘right’ man as the ideal solution to the problem of women’s vulnerability. It should be noted, however, that the narrative does utilise other aspects of romantic discourse. Most obviously, these include a standard happy ending for Adam and Catriona that, despite the couple’s youth, positions readers to draw on their familiarity with the romance genre, together with their own desires and fantasies, to construct an equally standard vision of what ‘happy ever after’ entails.

The narrative’s resistance to the notion of (sexually) vulnerable femininity is also evident in the positive representation of Barbara, Catriona’s mother. The owner of the local souvenir shop, she is single, capable and independent, and has apparently always been so without any serious consequences befalling her or her daughter. She has a blossoming relationship with the local police sergeant, but the narrative offers no support for the idea that this relationship is based on any need, on her part, for protection. In the representation of Barbara, *Mandragora*, like *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), also offers a challenge to discourses that construct unmarried
mothers as immoral and irresponsible; further, it challenges the notion that 'good' men are vulnerable to the unregulated sexuality of the kind of women who become unmarried mothers. Adam overhears a conversation between his parents, in which his mother, Jean, who is the doctor who delivered Catriona, remarks that

Barbara Chisholm never married, you know ... Just took herself off to Melbourne, quite deliberately I believe, and came back pregnant. She never named the father and I don't think she ever told him she was expecting his baby. She brought Catriona up on her own (p. 23).

Evidently, Jean has no problem with this: she likes both mother and daughter, and when she comments that Catriona, like her mother, has grown up a bit wild ... You know, independent (p. 23), there is no suggestion that she disapproves. However, Adam's father, Gordon, is evidently alarmed by Jean's information: An unwed mother and now our boy's mixed up with the daughter (p. 23); further, he claims that Catriona is a bit too free and easy ... a wild one, so I've heard, with a bit of a reputation already. I suppose that comes from not having a father's influence (p. 23). Here Gordon articulates a discourse that, as discussed in Chapter Four, is unequivocally patriarchal: female sexuality requires tight regulation, initially by the authority of a girl's father within the patriarchal family, and subsequently by her husband, whose authority is supported by the patriarchal social institution of marriage. In the absence of such male authority women grow 'wild', gain 'a reputation', and constitute a threat to the moral safety of young men like Adam, in the same way that Peter sees Gloria as a threat in Peter (Walker 1991), discussed above. Moreover, unregulated female sexuality is like an hereditary disease; thus, for Gordon, the fact that Barbara is a single mother somehow means that Catriona, too, represents 'trouble', and is a likely candidate for single motherhood herself.

The explicitness of Gordon's position provides readers with an opportunity to challenge his views and the discourses that underpin them, and they are further encouraged to do so by the focalisation of the narrative through Adam. As a consequence of that focalisation, readers are likely to share Adam's positive view of Catriona, particularly as, unlike Gordon, they have (effectively) met her and know enough about her to question his judgement; in much the same way, they are also likely to view Barbara in positive terms. In any case, again because of the focalisation, readers are likely to want to distance themselves from Gordon and the views he represents, at least where they conflict with Adam's, because there is considerable tension in the relationship between father and son. In relation to Jean, the opposite is likely, because she and Adam are evidently close; thus, when she responds to Gordon's comments about Catriona by telling him, mildly, that he is a sexist pig (p. 23), it is likely that readers will endorse her opinion.

Complicating the effects of the narrative's challenge to the discourses that underpin Gordon's views, however, is an additional factor that also works to encourage readers' rejection of those views, at least in so far as they apply to Barbara and Catriona. Like Christina in Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992), and for much the same reasons, Barbara can be understood by readers as a 'good' mother, despite her unmarried status. She has raised her daughter well, at least in the eyes of Jean, who remarks that Adam could do a lot worse than Catriona Chisholm.
and readers can infer that in the 17 years since Catriona's birth she has led a life devoid of sexual relationships, because the absence of information to the contrary works in conjunction with common-sense understandings that mothers are not sexual beings. Moreover, while Catriona's hostile attitude towards Barbara's new relationship is more subdued than Josephine's angry outburst over Christina's solitary date, it suggests that she, like Josephine, has never before experienced any competition for her mother's attention. Each of these 17-year-old daughters, in other words, is used to being the sole object of her mother's desire; and, in the case of each of these mothers, the expression of a desire that is not entirely compatible with her daughter's desires is apparently the exception rather than the norm.

Arguably, it is largely on the basis of this evidence of a long and unbroken history of maternal selflessness, aided by sympathetic focalisation, that readers can easily interpret both of these unmarried mothers as 'good' mothers, and both Josephine's and Catriona's attitudes as selfish and unreasonable. Given the discursive meaning-making resources most obviously available to contemporary readers, and without the strategies made available through critical reading pedagogies, it seems unlikely that readers could so easily come to the same positive understandings of these two mothers if they had been represented as having had a number of relationships with men during their daughters' lifetimes. What complicates the effectiveness of the challenge to Gordon's 'sexist' views, then, is its ultimate reliance on the same sets of understandings, about what constitutes a 'good' mother and about the 'proper' expression of female sexuality, as those that underpin Gordon's views in the first place, and also underpin the representation of Marina's mother in So Much to Tell You... (Marsden 1987) and Take My Word For It (Marsden 1992). Because the challenge becomes one based on the 'facts' about Barbara and Catriona that enable them to be recognised as exceptions to common-sense 'rules', it does not offer readers a platform for a reconsideration of those rules on the basis of social justice and equity principles.

Support for the view that female sexual desire constitutes a threat to the possibility of 'good' motherhood is also implicit in Victor Kelleher's (1992) novel, Del-Del. Like Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992), Del-Del was short-listed in the CBCA's Older Readers category in 1993, and the two novels have much in common. For example, in both cases the sole focalising character is an adolescent female who stresses the importance of telling the truth. Thus, in the unpaginated introductory section that precedes the main narrative in Del-Del, Beth claims to be telling not a 'story' but the truth: what actually happened to my family four years ago, when I was fourteen and Sam only seven. Moreover, like Joella, she professes altruistic motives, having decided to write it all down out of concern for her brother, Sam: so that when he's older he can read this for himself. So ... he'll never be able to forget who he is inside. Beth does not claim to be able to have any special ability to see the truth, as Joella does, but both her motive of concern and her apparent desire to further her own understanding of the events she describes work as invitations to readers to accept her sincerity as a narrator, even if, as Scutter (1999) observed, her account tests the limits of their willingness to suspend disbelief.
Given that it is a retrospective account, it is not surprising that the narrative offers readers confirmation of the good sense of aligning themselves with Beth by closing in a way that confirms her understandings as more astute than those of other characters. Moreover, like Joella, she is revealed as a specifically maternal hero: it is her supposedly natural ‘maternal’ qualities of sensitivity, intuition, unconditional love, emotional strength and determination that enable her not only to develop those better understandings, but also to save her brother, and hence her family, from a crisis that almost destroys them (cf. Scutter 1999). In the meantime, the rest of her family, who are the only other significant characters in the novel, are represented in ways that work to deter readers from identifying with them, despite Beth’s evident attachment to them: they are variously shown to be incompetent, hysterical, insensitive, prone to tantrums, unreliably eccentric, seriously disturbed or, at best, simply vague and apparently oblivious to the seriousness of events. The possibilities for readers to adopt an alternative subject position by identifying with a character other than Beth are thus severely limited, although it always remains possible for readers with a sufficiently wide range of discursive meaning-making resources and critical reading strategies to take up alternative or oppositional reading positions.

Again like Joella, Beth represents herself as lacking any special qualities: her younger sister, Laura, who died a year before the narrative opens, was the really beautiful one in the family – beautiful in every way (p. 9), while Sam is the brainy member of the family (p. 32), but of herself Beth says, I suppose I’m the quiet one (p. 32). There are many things about Beth that are far from ordinary, one of them being, as Scutter (1999) also noted, her remarkable ability, at the age of 14 and unaided, to ‘kidnap’ Sam. This is part of her rescue operation, and involves gagging and tying him; wrapping him in a blanket; and getting him from his upstairs bedroom to the back seat of the family car, in which she drives him, at night and in driving rain and sometimes snow, from the inner suburbs of Sydney across the mountains to Coonabarabran, a distance of over 400 kilometres. However, in the context of this analysis, it is another aspect of her representation that is most remarkable: her silence in regard to her identity or interests outside her home and family. She goes to school (although when Sam is too sick, or simply refuses to go to school himself, she stays home to look after him), but she walks there and back alone, or in company with Sam, and appears to have no friends, or even acquaintances, either there or anywhere else. When she mentions being at school, it is in the context of skipping classes to spend time in the library investigating what is the matter with Sam; when she mentions going anywhere else, it is always with her family, or alone. She refers to two visits to the house by Sam’s friend, Billy, but no friends of her own come to visit, and she apparently shares her concerns and anxieties with no-one outside the family. This becomes more understandable as Sam’s behaviour deteriorates and family life becomes a matter of ongoing crisis (mis)management, but Beth gives no hint that her friendships or her life beyond her family are being disrupted in any way. Readers might reasonably infer from her silence that they do not exist to be disrupted.

One effect of this silence is that it aids in constructing Beth as the model of the ‘good’ mother who does not just give priority to her children’s needs and interests ahead of her own; she has
no needs or interests that are not perfectly compatible with theirs. A second effect follows from the first, in yet another parallel with Joella: in effacing her self, Beth also effaces her sexuality. At 14 years of age, it is reasonable to assume that she is sexually mature; however, it seems that for the purposes of the narrative her emerging sexuality must be denied, not so much because it is dangerous to men, as represented in the example of Melissa in *Dougy* (Moloney 1993), but because it threatens to undermine the ideal of the ‘good’ mother by highlighting its impossibility. Logically, the ‘good’ mother who has no separate needs or interests of her own is not a sexual being; but logically, sexuality is normally prerequisite to motherhood. In *Del-Del* (Kelleher 1992), this problem is evaded by the narrative’s silence on the issue of female sexuality, and unless readers notice and question this silence, the ideal of the asexual ‘good’ mother that is implicitly promoted by the narrative is likely to remain unchallenged. So, too, is the representation of Beth as a model of that ideal.

The issue of female sexuality and its legitimate expression is addressed more explicitly in *Pagan’s Crusade* (Jinks 1992), an historical novel with postmodern characteristics that was short-listed for the award of *Book of the Year: Older Readers* in 1993. As in the example of the representation of Gordon’s views in *Mandragora* (McRobbie 1991), this direct approach enables readers to challenge the discursive construction of female sexuality as a problem. The narrator and focalising character in this case is 16-year-old Pagan Kidrouk, an Arab-Christian street urchin who becomes a squire to Lord Roland, a Templar Knight, in twelfth-century Jerusalem. Pagan is cheerful and irreverent; his keen sense of humour, while always good-natured, is such that, as Scutter (1999) observed, nothing and no-one is beyond ridicule and satire. Readers are unlikely to hesitate in aligning themselves with Pagan as he begins by describing his encounter with the dauntingly hefty and battle-scarred sergeant who takes his enlistment details and asks where he was born. ‘Bethlehem’. Rockhead looks up. The brain peeps out from behind the brawn. ‘Don’t worry, sir. It didn’t happen in a stable’ (p. 1).

Pagan is not a Saracen sympathiser, and he develops a deep loyalty to the devout Lord Roland, who *looks like something off a stained-glass window* (p. 6), and whom he dubs ‘Saint George’. However, his enlistment is motivated by an urgent need for money and a place to hide from those to whom he owes it, rather than by any sense of calling. The witty and subversive comments and asides that pepper his account of his adventures make it clear that the values of the Templars are not entirely consistent with his own. Thus, as readers learn, through him, that the Templars idealise the Virgin Mary but view most other women with abhorrence, Pagan does not explicitly invite them to reject such ideas, but they are well positioned to do so. In the following example, Pagan describes the way Sergeant Tibald (‘Rockhead’) introduces him and Fulcher, another new recruit, to the rest of the squires. Readers are already positioned to question Rockhead’s views, given that he has already told Pagan that he is ‘rubbish’, only recruited because *we’re very short of squires just now, because squires are dispensable* (p. 3). However, Pagan further encourages such questioning by adding a commentary that highlights the extremity of Rockhead’s views:
‘Kidrouk has been assigned to Lord Roland and Fulcher will be posted to Acre next week to replace Bongratia, who was recently expelled for unmentionable conduct involving a female.’ (Replace the word ‘female’ with ‘pile of dead maggots’. He spits it out like a sour grape.) ‘The Scriptures tell us “by means of a whorish woman a man is brought to a piece of bread”. This is absolutely true and don’t you forget it’ (p. 12).

Readers learn that the Templar Knights are forbidden even to speak to women, apparently as a precaution against the possibility of being led astray from their mission. Pagan’s own view of women cannot be read as unambiguously positive within the terms of late twentieth-century feminisms, but he is clearly amused at Lord Roland’s discomfort when, outside the all-male community of the Templar headquarters, he is confronted by females; and readers are invited to share this amusement. Observing one such encounter after the Templars have lost Jerusalem to the Saracens, Pagan comments, to himself and readers, not Lord Roland: One little woman and he runs for his life. You’ll have to get used to them some time, Roland. The cloistered days are finished (p. 126).

Readers are unlikely to be persuaded by this narrative to support the Templar view that, in order to retain their goodness, ‘good’ men need to be protected from the inherent evil of women; however, Pagan’s own existence is testimony to women’s need for protection from ‘bad’ men. He tells Lord Roland that he has never known either of his parents: his mother was raped by a brigand during a raid on her village, and left him at a monastery when he was two days old. Earlier in the narrative, while undertaking pilgrimage escort duties, Pagan muses:

If I were a brigand, I wouldn’t take on a party like this. I’d rather raid villages. No Templars in villages. Hardly any men either, nowadays. You can do what you like in a place like that. Burn, rape, pillage (p. 40).

Of particular interest here is the nature of the common sense on which this brief comment relies for its logic and its meaning. To make sense of it, readers must recognise it as ‘obvious’ and ‘natural’ that without the protection of either soldiers or the men of their families and communities, twelfth-century Palestinian village women were vulnerable to attack from other men. Such recognition is easily achieved, however, because readers are likely to ‘know’ that contemporary Australian women are also inherently vulnerable to attack from ‘bad’ men unless they are protected, preferably on a permanent basis, by means of marriage to the ‘right’ man. The logic of this is so well embedded in common sense that it is frequently accepted as a universal and natural truth; hence the unproblematic readability of Pagan’s musings on this issue, and hence also their ability, in turn, to provide support for that ‘truth’.

Like most of the other texts discussed in this section, Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993) offers readers mixed messages about motherhood and female sexuality. The ten adolescent protagonists in this series of linked narratives are all represented as being centrally concerned with relationship issues, primarily those involving the opposite sex. Heterosexuality is taken for granted, as is readers’ acceptance that a ‘natural’, ‘normal’, but nonetheless vitally important part of the business of growing up is the development of a permanent heterosexual relationship with the ‘right’ partner.
This view is reflected in the structure of the text. The first narrative, *Fran*, approaches the issue of heterosexual relationships as if from a distance, focusing on Fran’s emerging sexual awareness, independent of the context of a particular relationship, as she moves from ‘childhood’ to ‘adolescence’. The second, *Thomas*, remains on the edges of the issue, concerned primarily with Thomas’s development of non-sexualised relationships as he seeks peer group acceptance among his new classmates following his family’s relocation to Sydney. In the next six narratives – *Maria*, *Cass*, *Pete*, *Rebecca*, *Troy* and *Andrew* – the focus shifts to more specifically heterosexual relationships, although in some cases these relationships exist in the fantasies, rather than the actual lives, of the characters involved. Maria, for example, is infatuated with the married man who moves into the house next door, although she scarcely speaks to him. Pete is equally infatuated with an unknown girl from another school, whom he occasionally sees on his train. Whether they focus on fantasy relationships or actual relationships, however, the narratives work to naturalise and normalise the long-term goal of marriage, or a permanent heterosexual relationship, one that, as illustrated in Chapter Four, can commonsensically be expected to include children as a matter of ‘natural’ destiny.

In this work the narratives operate all the more forcefully through their use of the discourse of romance. Elements of romantic discourse are strongly evident across all nine narratives, including those that are focalised through male characters. However, while the boy characters typically construct themselves as active heroes and rescuers, the girl characters imagine themselves in stereotypically ‘feminine’ passive roles that are consistent with their projected future roles as ‘good’ mothers. For example, Maria, in one of her fantasies, imagines that she is walking home alone when *suddenly these men jump out from behind the bushes and they want money and more*; but the man next door rescues her: *He puts his arm around my shoulders. ‘I’ll take care of you,’ he says as he leads me home* (pp. 44-45). Meanwhile, Rodney imagines *Cathy being really sick and her Mum would ring me and beg me to go over there because only seeing me would make her well again* (p. 150).

In regard to the structure of the text as a whole, then, it is significant that the last of the nine narratives, *Cathy and Rodney*, focuses on a couple rather than a single character, symbolising the achievement of the goal of a steady relationship as the proper culmination of all the doubts, anxieties, fantasies, secret notes, telephone conversations, teenage party games, consultations with older brothers and sisters, and tentative sexual gropings that precede it, both in the text and in the adolescent lives it represents. Unlike the previous narratives, each of which is written in the third person and is consistently focalised through the character with which it is centrally concerned, in *Cathy and Rodney* the focalisation shifts constantly. The first part is written in the third person, with focalisation that shifts quickly between a number of characters as well as an omniscient observer; the remainder is written in the first person, alternating between Rodney and Cathy as narrators and focalising characters until the final half page. The final scene is in a public swimming pool. Both Cathy and Rodney, each depressed because of a perceived break-up of their relationship, have taken the day off school, and each has gone, separately, to the local pool to swim laps. *As Rodney swims, Cathy kept coming into my head and I kept pushing*
her out (p. 152); as Cathy swims, Rodney kept coming in [to her thoughts] … I tried to push them out (p. 153). Each becomes aware of another lap swimmer nearby, without realising who it is. Cathy narrates:

I had this need to catch and pass him…. My breathing got quicker. My face was level with his knees. My chest hurt. He seemed to go faster. Did he feel me there? I was level with his thighs, his waist. Our arms moved together, legs together, bodies together. Slapping the water. Kick. Pull. Breathing in time. We hurled ourselves at the wall (p. 153).

At this point there is a break marked in the text, as there is throughout this narrative to mark a change of narrator and/or focaliser. The narrative resumes on the next page, and logically it is Rodney’s turn to narrate; but perhaps not:

Cathy. Rodney.
Why aren’t you…?‘
What are you…?‘
Laughing. Hands reached across the bobbing yellow cork of the lane-dividing rope.
Fingers touched, slid along arms. We moved towards each other. The rope cut into our skin.
‘I missed you.’
‘Me too.’
Lips wet.
‘I’ll come under.’
‘No, I will.’
We duckdived and met on the bottom. We held each other, rolling and rolling.
Legs entwined. Together. Gently floating to the surface (p. 154).

Here the narrative closes, and as it does so it presents readers with a vision of the ideal relationship, as it is understood within the framework of the discourse of romance: it does not matter whether it is Cathy or Rodney who is narrating, because their thoughts, feelings and even their physical actions are in complete harmony. Readers are invited to interpret this as evidence of the couple’s rightness for each other, and of their achievement of the ultimate romantic goal of ‘true’ love. In other words, the narrative orients to readers’ fantasies of wholeness and the possibility of having their desires fulfilled, if only they, too, could find ‘true’ love.

As these extracts also suggest, the narrative in Cathy and Rodney evokes a strong sense of physical awareness, indeed sensuality; and this is also the case in the other narratives in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993). Here, for example, is Maria’s reaction when the man next door calls out from his garden as she comes home from school:

‘Hi,’ he called.
She looked at his hand holding the long green hose, at the fine spray that fell on the shiny leaves and the tiny white star-shaped flowers and mumbled ‘hello’ and ran inside. The front door banged behind her. She stood in the dark hallway, listening to the sounds of her own heartbeat and breathing. The smell of cat and of a damp, closed-up house stirred in her chest and throat. She held her hand to her mouth and ran to the bedroom. She stood at the window, shaking, not daring to lift the curtain. Her legs felt the way they did before an exam, at the dentist or after a long, long race. She fell back on her bed. Her eye caught the image of Mary, framed in gold over her bed, but she looked quickly away and stared at the white ceiling instead (p. 39).
Throughout *Love Me, Love Me Not* (Gleeson 1993), as these extracts illustrate, the issue of emerging sexuality, for both boys and girls, is never entirely off the agenda. In contrast to many of the other texts discussed so far, adolescent sexuality is not silenced or denied, and nor is its expression represented as a significant social problem. Instead, the highly evocative sensuality evident across all nine of the narratives works to suggest that, for adolescents as much as for adults, sexuality is part of everyday existence, like hair gel and mouthwash, perhaps. Thus, Andrew *smoothed his hair down with water and a scoop of gel from the jar Anna* [his sister] *kept beside the mouthwash and the tampons in the bathroom cupboard* (p. 124); the class teacher hands out permission notes for an AIDS and sexuality program; and Pete stands in a train reading the advertisements above his head: *Safe sex or no sex. If it’s not on, it’s not on* (p. 71). Certainly the latter examples can be recognised as warnings to readers, but readers can also recognise them from their own everyday lives as messages that are targeted to both males and females, and not specifically to adolescents.

There are, however, some subtle warnings and implicit messages about the expression of sexual desire that are evidently addressed to girls more than boys; these concern the importance of choosing the ‘right’ partner, the risks of casual sexual encounters and of ‘going too far too soon’, and appropriate versions of femininity. For example, Cass dreams of Rodney, even though he is involved with Cathy, and when he accepts a dare at a party to *take the closest member of the opposite sex and disappear down the back with him or her for at least ten minutes* (p. 57), she is pleased to go with him: *Kiss me. Like I’ve dreamed* (p. 58), she thinks. The reality, however, is disappointing:

> He ran one hand over her shoulder, down her back to her waist. She felt him fumbling with her T-shirt, pulling at where it tucked into her jeans.
> ‘Come on,’ he whispered. ‘We’ve only got a couple of minutes.’
> He slipped his hand in against her skin and moved it to the catch at the back of her bra. No. Not like this. Cass pressed herself against him. Stopping his hands from reaching her breasts (pp. 58-59).

When they are called back to supper, Rodney’s interest in Cass switches off immediately, and he returns to Cathy. With the narrative focalised through Cass, readers are invited to learn from her experience as, afterwards, she attempts to scrub it away along with her make-up: *She filled the sink with water and bent down with her face below the surface. Then she took a towel and rubbed and rubbed her cheeks till they were pink and sore* (p. 61). The message directed to readers here is a variation on the theme that is evidently common across the entire research corpus: the narrative works to promote the regulation, and in this case the self-regulation, of feminine sexuality outside marriage, in the interests of maintaining the hegemony of patriarchy. As indicated in Chapter Four, that hegemony relies heavily for its survival on the containment of the expression of female sexuality within the patriarchal social institutions of marriage and motherhood.

Meanwhile, in another variation of the same message, one that echoes Michael’s warning to Josephine in *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992), Cathy’s mother warns her against *getting too serious* (p. 139) in her relationship with Rodney:
‘You’re fourteen, Cathy. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you … Look, love. You get serious with one boy too soon and the temptation is to get too involved, too intimate.’
‘You mean sex?’
‘Yes. I do mean sex … But it’s about relationships. It’s more complicated than that and you’re too young for that complication’ (p. 139).

In yet another example of a girl-specific message, the extract quoted earlier shows Maria feeling guilty and uncomfortable when the sight of the image of the virgin mother ‘reminds’ her of the illegitimacy of her desire for her neighbour and her self-perceived failure to emulate Mary’s idealised passivity and asexuality. She turns away, but Mary remains in the background, symbolising the ambivalence that surrounds the issue of female sexuality. On the one hand, readers are invited to understand that Mary should not be taken seriously as a model of appropriate femininity: along with storks, cabbage leaves and the fairies as possible sources of babies, the notion of immaculate conception is later derided by Maria and her friends (p. 140). On the other hand, it is significant that Maria is ‘cured’ of her infatuation with the man next door when she learns that he and his partner are expecting a baby; subsequently it is the baby, a boy, who becomes the focus of Maria’s interest. In a remarkable juxtaposition of conversation topics, the disparaging reference to immaculate conception is followed immediately by Maria telling Cass that she is babysitting for her neighbours that night, and that the baby is just gorgeous. Two months old and smiling already. He’s got all this really cute curly black hair. He takes his bottle from me (p. 141). As if to confirm the classical psychoanalytic view of normal psychosexual development and the (im)possibility of female desire, Maria’s ‘illegitimate’ sexual desire for her next door neighbour, whose curly black hair has been a constant feature of her daydreams, has been displaced by maternal desire. Readers are positioned, within common-sense discourses that conflate femininity with motherhood, to view this maternal desire as not only a safer and more legitimate female desire – perhaps the only legitimate female desire – but also as a ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ expression of femininity. Moreover, the fulfilment of this desire, signified by the baby’s recognition of Maria as a source of satisfaction – he takes his bottle from me (p. 141) – is achieved, at least until she has a child of her own, through Maria’s role as babysitter. This role enables her to conform, after all, to the ideal version of femininity represented by Mary: she is both virgin and mother.

The references to storks and immaculate conception are prompted by the girls’ speculations about their mothers’ lives as adolescents:

‘Do you think they used to do stuff at parties, like, you know, kissing and um, you know…?’
‘Do you think they used to have parties?’
‘I think they were all virgins till they got married.’
‘I think they still are.’
‘Don’t be stupid.’ Rebecca sat up. ‘Where do you think you came from?’ (p. 140).

As Rebecca points out, logic dictates otherwise, but readers could be forgiven for assuming that the mothers represented in these narratives are indeed still virgins. Their apparent lack of sexuality or sexual desire offers a striking contrast to the explicitly sexualised lives and fantasies of their sons and daughters, and works to normalise the model, constructed in classical

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psychoanalytic discourse, of the asexual mother, completely lacking in needs, interests or desires of her own, including sexual desires. As discussed in relation to motherhood and subjectivity, there is an almost complete silence surrounding the lives of these mothers, except in terms of their relationships with their children, and in regard to their sexual lives, the silence is absolute.

Unusually for this corpus and in the context of contemporary adolescent fiction generally, and unrealistically in terms of contemporary Australian society, there is sufficient evidence in each narrative to indicate that at least nine and possibly all ten of the adolescent protagonists in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993) live in two-parent families. Yet rarely are mothers in these families represented as located in the same room as their partners, let alone relating to them, either physically or through conversation. Maria’s mother evidently talks with Maria’s father: Maria, Dad and I have been thinking that you … well, you aren’t sort of yourself lately (p. 42); this remark, however, is the only evidence of any relationship at all between Maria’s parents, so whether they ever talk about anything other than Maria, or do anything else together, remains a mystery to readers. Thomas’s parents, too, evidently live in the same house and exchange information about their children, and both of them talk with Thomas, but the narrative never shows them in the same room as each other. This general pattern is consistent across all of the narratives. In Fran, however, readers encounter the single brief allusion to the possibility of a physical relationship between mother and father: Fran’s mother, Dot, put her hand on their father’s knee. He covered it with his own hand for a moment but then took it away to change gear (p. 3). Readers have little opportunity to make much of this demonstration of affection, however: when the family is in the car together, Dot makes various comments to them generally, and to each of her children specifically, but she never speaks directly to their father; nor are any of his three brief remarks directed to her. Even Andrew’s musician parents, who evidently share a love for the blues, play together at the pub on Friday nights and go to meetings together, are never represented in conversation with each other or demonstrating mutual affection in any way.

Arguably it is not only mothers, but fathers too, who are represented in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993) as asexual and devoid of desire. However, it is important not to overlook the significant role that readers’ common sense plays as they fill in the narrative gaps in fictional texts to construct meaning from them. As revealed in Chapter Four, it is a long-established common-sense ‘truth’ that men are ‘naturally’ and ‘normally’ sexually active and desiring subjects; indeed, it is on the basis of this understanding that women and girls are usually perceived to be placing themselves at risk of rape by venturing into public spaces at night on their own, and that Tony, in Peter (Walker 1991:97), tells Peter, when he rejects Gloria’s advances: Ya must be a poofet. A chick like that – and you push her away. Given the widespread acceptance of this view of ‘normal’ masculinity, readers can take it for granted that the fathers in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993) are active and desiring sexual subjects, and that there would be something ‘wrong’ with them if they were not, even without them being explicitly represented as such. Readers ‘know’ that Maria and her friends would be unlikely to bother speculating about whether their fathers were virgins when they got married; at the level of
common sense, if not of logic, the answer is ‘obvious’. In the case of mothers, however, the common-sense view is markedly different, as illustrated in Chapter Four.

There is one text in the corpus that offers some challenge to the ideal of the asexual mother, and is therefore worth discussing before moving on to examine the representation of motherhood in relation to fatherhood. Selected as an Honour Book in the CBCA’s Older Readers category in 1993, A Long Way to Tipperary (Gough 1992), is best described as a rollicking postmodern yarn. It concerns the unlikely adventures of a motley collection of characters, most of whom are on the run for one reason or another, who pool their collective skills and talents to form a travelling entertainment show, the Ragtime Rovers. Their leader is Mrs Featherstonhaugh-Beauchamp – pronounced “Fanshaw-Beecham” (p. 3) – a poor but enterprising teacher of dancing and manners (p. 4), who, with the battle for Western civilisation ... fought and won ... was fighting to establish civilisation in a Brisbane that, at the end of World War 1, was barely out of short trousers (p. 3). Mrs FB, as she calls herself, did not give a hoot for convention. What she cared about was style (p. 4); secretly she longed to shock Brisbane by introducing the tango (p. 5). Following the loss of her first husband on an expedition to Tierra del Fuego, and her second husband at sea, Mrs FB has developed a talent for predicting just when a demand would turn into a debt collector (p. 5); and a series of sudden departures from hotels in Auckland, the Cook Islands and Montevideo – so sudden that she had not had time to pay the bill (p. 5) – has also obliged her to become adept at recognising debt collectors in disguise.

Thus readers are introduced to Mrs FB, and learn how she and her two children, Darcy and Pearl (one from each marriage), come to be leaving Brisbane in a hurry, and without tickets, on a northbound train; at the same time, they are invited to recognise her as an adventurous, witty and likeable rogue, and the narrative itself as a clever piece of light entertainment that is not to be taken too seriously. This is important in preparing readers to accept the preposterous and the outrageous, as well as the playful intertextuality, snippets of Australian history and culture, and the inclusion of cameo appearances by characters such as a ‘young tearaway’ named Kingsford Smith, who careers around in Mrs FB’s dancing class with his arms outstretched like some ridiculous, rigid-winged bird (p. 3); the young Bobby Menzies, Bobby Helpmann and Don Bradman, all participants in Miss Moynihan’s Summer Camp for Gifted Youth at Charters Towers; and the young Norman Lindsay, on a visit to Tipperary Station to avoid a spot of bother down south (p. 113) over some nude paintings. It is arguable that these playful and humorous aspects of the narrative serve to counter what otherwise might be the effects of focalisation strategies that do not privilege the ‘child’s point of view’; consistent with the postmodern style of this text, the focalisation shifts constantly, so that the narrative is not often focalised through child characters. However, the quality of ‘child appeal’ – one of the CBCA’s judging criteria – is retained through the use of humour, such that, while the perspectives of a variety of adult characters are made available, there are few points at which readers are invited to take those perspectives seriously. At the same time, the playful aspects of the narrative also work to limit the impact of its unconventional ways of representing motherhood, undermining the likelihood of
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As the adventures of the Ragtime Rovers conclude with happy endings all round, Mrs FB discovers that the two supposed debt collectors who have been following her through the Queensland outback are actually her husbands, Major Featherstonhaugh and Colonel Beauchamp, disguised in ridiculous-looking clothes and ... thick glasses, false moustaches and false beards (p. 130) in a collaborative attempt to be discreet and prevent the scandal of a bigamy charge against her. Evidently, each one eventually survived his adventures and began searching for his wife, but when they crossed paths and realised they were looking for the same woman, they joined forces, agreeing that the only right and proper thing (p. 132) would be to let Mrs FB decide which of them she wants. Having loved them both dearly before they ‘died’, Mrs FB cannot choose between them, but has a solution nonetheless:

As I see it, no one is to blame for this dreadful pickle in which we find ourselves ... Why, therefore, should we suffer any more than we have already? Why should I hang my head in shame because I have two husbands? Why not rejoice instead that you have both returned from the grave? ... What could be more natural for a widow in my circumstances than to run a boarding house for military veterans of the officer classes? The fact that my boarding house will cater for only two such gentlemen is neither here nor there.

Of course, we will have to be discreet in public (pp. 132-133).

It is unanimously agreed that this is the best and fairest way of dealing with things. Mrs FB is quite unruffled at the idea of having two husbands; Mrs O’Shaugnessy, whose husband is often away, could understand that a second husband would be a wonderful idea. Miss Allsop said she would settle for one husband, but two would be even better (p. 133). Here the humour relies on readers’ acceptance of Mrs FB’s proposal as ridiculous, at least outside the fictive world of the narrative, and this is easily enough achieved, given that readers have already been positioned to accept most, if not all, of the narrative as a clever joke. This is not to say that they cannot also use the opportunity made available here to ask questions about why Mrs FB’s proposal is so ridiculous, although that opportunity may not be clearly evident to all readers. It involves considering the role of common sense in the construction of the humour at this point, by speculating on whether a proposal for the same domestic arrangement, but with the genders reversed, would be equally amusing. Arguably it would not be, because the idea of a man having two wives simultaneously is familiar, rather than ridiculous, even if it is not conventional or accepted practice in Australia. That idea is also credible from the perspective of what still prevails as common sense (apparently regardless of what happens in practice) and was even more widely taken for granted during the period in which this narrative is set. According to that common sense, it is men, not women, who, as active and desiring sexual subjects, can choose from a range of possible sexual partners, while ‘respectable’ women wait passively to be chosen. Interestingly, it is also possible that a narrative outcome that involved a man with two wives would provoke some outraged protests from adult ‘gatekeepers’ of children’s fiction, who might consider it demeaning to women. There is no question of the outcome of this narrative being considered demeaning to men, however: it is too ridiculous to be taken that seriously.
Whilst there are some humorous elements to a few of the other texts in the research corpus, particularly *Pagan’s Crusade* (Jinks 1992), and indeed there are some serious elements in *It’s a Long Way to Tipperary*, the latter is the only text in the corpus in which humour predominates. It is perhaps coincidental that it is also the only one in which female sexual desire is represented as unproblematically compatible with a positive version of motherhood, but this example does provide further support for previous findings (Kertzer 1993-94; Welch 1994) that positive representations of powerful and unconventional mothers in children’s fiction are heavily reliant on comic fantasy and/or exaggeration.

It is clear from the analyses presented throughout this section, in conjunction with those presented in Chapter Seven, that the texts in the research corpus are remarkably consistent in their tacit acceptance of the common-sense understanding that female sexual desire is somehow incompatible with ‘good’ motherhood. This is most evident in the silence these narratives construct around the issue of mothers as sexual beings, thereby inviting readers to take it for granted that mothers are, or should be, effectively devoid of sexuality. Often, too, the apparent asexuality of mother characters is in striking contrast to the emerging sexuality of adolescent female characters in the same narratives, as if confirming that, as problematic as adolescent female sexuality might be, it is a transitional phase in the development to womanhood, and one that, if ‘properly’ regulated under patriarchal authority, will be displaced by the more asexual version of femininity that characterises the ‘good’ mother. Certainly it is clear that throughout the research corpus understandings about motherhood and what constitutes a ‘good’ mother are never irrelevant to the representation of adolescent female sexuality.

It is not that an absence of sexual desire is sufficient on its own for qualification as a ‘good’ mother; in *The Gathering* (Carmody 1993), for example, Nathanial’s mother’s emotional distance from her son, and her lack of trust in him, prevent her from qualifying as a ‘good’ mother, despite her apparent lack of sexuality. However, as discussed above, in the cases of Christina, in *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992), and Barbara, in *Mandragora* (1991), it is clear that their representation as having lived virtually cloistered lives since their daughters’ births serves to erase the negative image of rampant female sexuality more commonly associated with unmarried mothers, and is significant in gaining readers’ acceptance of them as ‘good’ mothers. In contrast, the representation of Marina’s mother, in *Take My Word For It* (Marsden 1992), as a sexually desiring subject is a key factor in persuading readers to reject the version of motherhood she models as unsatisfactory.

As illustrated in the overview of prevailing discourses of motherhood in Chapter Four, the construction of the ‘good’ mother as a passive, selfless and asexual nurturer is linked to the belief that men and women are essentially different beings. Consistent with this taken-for-granted ‘truth’ is the common-sense understanding that motherhood and fatherhood are ‘naturally’ different forms of parenthood that involve different roles and responsibilities. They are taken to have different influences on children’s development, and therefore entail a ‘natural’
division of parenting and domestic labour on the basis of gender. With this in mind, the analytical focus in the following section is on the ways in which motherhood is represented in relation to fatherhood in the research corpus.

Motherhood and fatherhood

The findings presented in Chapter Seven indicate that, in all six of the texts analysed in that chapter, motherhood is represented as a qualitatively different form of parenthood from fatherhood, the implication being that this difference is linked to ‘natural’ biological differences between males and females. For example, it could be inferred from Seeing Things (Klein 1993) that fathers are redundant to the process of caring for children and rearing them to healthy adulthood. The narrative invites readers to assume that the death of her mother is a more significant loss to Miranda than her father’s death in the same accident; and while Grandma insists that it is crucial for his healthy development that Regan is cared for by Yvette, his biological mother, and bonds with her, there is no suggestion from her or elsewhere in the narrative that Regan will suffer in any way from a failure to bond with Dave, his father. Indeed, Grandma, Miranda and Yvette are at pains to ensure that Dave remains unaware of Regan’s whereabouts. The work of mothering is strongly linked with biological femininity in this narrative, as it is also in Galax-Arena (Rubinstein 1992) and Angel’s Gate (Crew 1993). In the former, Joella’s selflessness, intuitive sensitivity and concern for the welfare of others – all qualities that characterise ‘good’ motherhood – are represented as ‘naturally’ and ‘essentially’ feminine; in the latter, the division of domestic and caring labour in the Marriott household along strictly gendered lines serves to naturalise and reinforce existing common-sense links between the work involved in being a mother and biological femininity.

Fathers also appear to be largely redundant in Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992), Change the Locks (French 1991), and Dougy (Moloney 1993). In the former, Josephine develops a close relationship with her father after she meets him, and he becomes an important person in her life; however, the narrative provides readers with no grounds for believing that his complete absence from the first 17 years of her life has had any negative impact on her development, apart from the embarrassment and hurt she experienced as a result of being publicly recognised as ‘illegitimate’. Steven, in Change the Locks, has no recollection of his father and does not know who he is, but readers are unlikely to perceive this to be a significant disadvantage for him, because his problems are represented as being almost entirely attributable to Lisa’s emotional absence from him and her failure to ensure his physical and emotional well-being. Similarly, readers are invited to assume that Steven’s baby half-brother, Dylan, will suffer no significant ill effects as a result of his father’s departure. It is his mother’s neglect that readers are positioned to perceive as the major impediment to his healthy development.

From the perspective afforded by critical analytical strategies, what is striking about both Looking for Alibrandi and Change the Locks is that their representation of fathers as redundant to the healthy development of children is logically inconsistent with the patriarchal discourses that
underpin them, according to which motherhood outside the institution of marriage is irresponsible, immoral and socially dangerous. However, as explained in Chapter Three, common sense typically comprises a conglomeration of conflicting and competing ideas and fragments of explicit theories, and thus makes both sets of ideas simultaneously available as ad hoc and pre-reflective meaning-making resources for readers. In other words, the underlying contradiction need not necessarily have any interpretive consequences for readers whose meaning-making strategies have been learned through conventional approaches to reading education; again, this issue is addressed further in Chapter Nine. Meanwhile, in Dougy, Mum has evidently brought up Raymond, Gracey and Dougy with little, if any, help from their father, who is always drunk and comes home only about once each year. Again there is no suggestion in the narrative that his absence has had any negative impact on the children’s development; if anything, by invoking the familiar racist stereotype of the alcoholic, unemployed Aboriginal male who is a destructive force in his community, the narrative encourages readers to perceive that Raymond, Gracey and Dougy are better off without their father.

Only two of the six texts analysed in Chapter Seven represent a father as part of the protagonist’s family unit. In Galax-Arena, the unconventional Hayden is represented as actively involved with his children, more so than Ivan, the stereotypically remote and authoritarian patriarch represented in Angel’s Gate. Yet Joella’s brief description of family life before the children’s kidnapping is sufficient to enable readers to understand that the form of parenting Hayden provides is qualitatively different from that provided by Sylvie, the children’s mother, and that the children’s well-being is more dependent on her than on him. Thus, he is represented as being incapable of caring for them adequately in her absence. Readers have no opportunity to discover how well Ivan would care for his children in Helen’s absence, but the division of parenting and domestic labour in the Marriott household is evidently conventionally gendered: Ivan is never represented in the kitchen; his only domestic chore throughout the narrative is the stereotypically ‘masculine’ task of hanging some pictures; and he is emotionally distant in his infrequent interactions with his children. In contrast, Change the Locks challenges at least some of the assumptions about motherhood and fatherhood that inform the other five narratives analysed in Chapter Seven, by representing the parents of Steven’s friend Patrick as, to at least some extent, interchangeable when it comes to parenting and domestic work, and also by representing Steven as a competent and loving caregiver for his baby brother.

Analysis of the remaining 12 texts again indicates that, in terms of the ways in which they represent motherhood in relation to fatherhood, the general pattern that has emerged from the analysis of the first six texts, complete with occasional anomalies and contradictions, is broadly similar across the entire research corpus. For example, in another parallel with Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992), Catriona is represented in Mandragora (McRobbie 1991) as having suffered no ill effects from being brought up without a father, not even the embarrassment and taunts of illegitimacy experienced by Josephine. In the context of prevailing common-sense understandings that fatherhood is an essentially different form of parenthood to motherhood, and one that is less crucial to children’s healthy physical and emotional development, readers
are well positioned to take it for granted that the complete absence of Catriona’s father from her life is of no significant consequence in terms of her well-being.

Common-sense assumptions also underpin the narratives in *Love Me, Love Me Not* (Gleeson 1993), which invite readers’ passive assent to the ‘obviousness’ of conventional divisions of domestic and parenting labour along gendered lines. It was noted in the previous section that at least nine and possibly all ten of the adolescent protagonists in this collection live in two-parent families, yet in most cases fathers are represented as having minimal roles and responsibilities within those families. It is mothers, and never fathers, who are shown to be most closely involved in the lives of these young people. For example, in the first story, *Fran*, the family is travelling to the beach for a camping holiday. It could be inferred that Fran’s father’s only function is to drive the car; otherwise he is redundant to the narrative, and could feasibly be perceived by readers to be equally redundant in his children’s lives. Two of only three remarks he makes during the narrative relate to his role of family chauffeur, with only one being a contribution to the family’s conversation in the car. It is Fran’s mother who is shown relating to the children.

In the second story, Thomas’s father is somewhat more involved with his children and evidently does at least some, possibly all, of the cooking for the family. On one occasion, for example, Thomas and his father make pizza and plan to watch a video together while his mother and sister are out later in the evening; at another time, Thomas and his mother discuss his anxieties about an invitation he has received, while they wash the dishes from a meal his father has cooked. On the other hand, it is Thomas’s mother who does the shopping and spends Sunday afternoon cleaning and tidying the house, although she has a full-time job and Thomas’s father is unemployed. Moreover, when Thomas’s sister, Stacey, wants to go to the local skating rink with some friends from her new school, the conversation is telling. Initially, their mother refuses permission:

*You’re only in primary school, Stacey. I don’t know who is going to be there. I don’t know what sort of place it is. For all I know it could be a hang-out for junkies and ... and types that I don’t want you associating with* (p. 18).

When Thomas joins Stacey in arguing with their mother, she tells him, *I’m the parent round here, Thomas. I’m the one worried sick if she’s late home or gets lost, or worse* (p. 18). The first statement makes logical sense, even though there are two parents in this family, because the children’s father is not present for this conversation, and it is clear that their mother wants to emphasise the difference between herself and them in order to exercise her authority. Yet the second statement does not necessarily refer only to the immediate context; indeed, it is most likely to be understood as a reference to all, or most, of the occasions when Stacey is, or might be in the future, out without parental supervision. As a result of this pairing of the possibly-specific with the probably-general, readers can understand the first statement, too, as having wide applicability beyond this particular context. Such an understanding can be easily achieved, despite the fact that there are two parents in this family, because it is common-sense ‘knowledge’ not only that ‘parent’ typically means ‘mother’, but also that mothers worry more
than fathers do about their children. The ‘truth’ of this is effectively confirmed later, when Thomas is leaving for an outdoor concert with some friends: it is his mother who checks that he had enough money, that he knew not to catch a through-train home, that he would look out for drugs, be sensible and have a good time (p. 28). His father is not present at all. Similarly, it is Maria’s mother, not her father or her parents jointly, who prevents her from watching a television movie: she reckoned there was too much sex and violence (p. 36), Maria tells Cass. It is Cass’s mother who insists that Cass comes home from a party with Maria’s mother; and it is Rebecca’s mother who expresses concern about who else is going [and] what the supervision is (p. 81) when a three-day class trip to Canberra is announced.

None of the nine narratives in Love Me, Love Me Not represents a father as having these kinds of concerns about his children and their activities, or as being involved in the everyday routine work of parenting to the extent that mothers are. Nor, with one exception – Rodney’s father, who offers his views on relationships when Rodney is upset about the misunderstanding between him and Cathy – are fathers represented as engaging in conversations with their children about relationships, although relationship issues are the focus of the protagonists’ concerns throughout this collection of narratives. Such issues are ongoing topics of conversations between the adolescent characters, and also between them and their mothers, their older sisters and, in one case, an older brother; but conversations with fathers are typically superficial, as are Gunno’s conversations with his father in The House Guest (Nilsson 1991) and Adam’s conversations with his father in Mandragora (McRobbie 1991), both of which are discussed below.

Thus, not only does this collection of narratives represent mothers as having more everyday contact with their children than fathers do, and having more immediate involvement in their children’s lives than fathers do; it also represents mothers and fathers as having different kinds of interests in their children, different kinds of concerns about them and different kinds of conversations with them. In doing so, it works to reproduce and reinforce the prevailing hegemony of common sense, according to which motherhood and fatherhood are ‘naturally’ different forms of parenthood that are shaped more by biological differences than by historically and culturally specific discourses on gender.

Earlier in this chapter it was claimed that the force of the challenge to conventional understandings about motherhood and subjectivity offered in The House Guest (Nilsson 1991) is diminished to some extent by the ways in which the narrative represents motherhood in relation to fatherhood. There are only two sets of parents represented in this narrative: Gunno’s absent mother and his father, with whom he lives; and Hugh’s parents, Anne and Geoffrey. Gunno’s father is represented as a man who is not only physically absent much of the time, because he has two jobs, but also emotionally remote from his son, a characteristic that cannot be fully explained by his tiredness when is at home. Even as he relays the complaint from Gunno’s mother about the perfunctoriness of his letters, he also dismisses it as typifying her ‘fanciful’ nature, and seems to feel no need himself for anything more than perfunctory conversation with
his son. Thus, when he wants to ask his father why his mother was sent to a psychiatric hospital, Gunno recalls that it was a long time since he had talked to his father about anything much, let alone anything important. He’d have to watch for his moment (p. 105). During the ensuing conversation between Gunno and his father, the only one of any substance that is represented in the narrative, his father is evidently annoyed by Gunno’s persistence in seeking greater understanding by re-examining the past, and constantly tries to terminate the conversation by turning back to his newspaper. Later, his father’s advice to him after the mine accident, to put it all behind you (p. 153), is based on a rational explanation of his experience that dismisses its significance and complexity from Gunno’s perspective. In many ways, then, Gunno’s father is represented as stereotypically ‘masculine’ in his parenting style: emotionally detached, practical and motivated by reason and logic.

Readers learn little about Gunno’s mother, but it is sufficient for her to be recognised as representative of the binary opposite of his father: sensitive, intuitive, emotionally involved and imaginative (or, as his father puts it, ‘fanciful’); in other words, she is represented as stereotypically ‘feminine’. These ways of representing Gunno’s parents may thus have the effect of naturalising these gender stereotypes, and, in turn, supporting the prevailing common-sense view that a gendered division of parenting and domestic labour is ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’. In this discursive work, they are supported themselves by the representation of Anne and Geoffrey in a broadly similar pairing. Thus, whereas Anne is keen to talk with Gunno, to know what it is about the house and the dog that so appeals to him, and to understand why he feels so strongly drawn to return there, Geoffrey reacts with anger and cynicism. Having previously told Anne that she has been hallucinating as a result of her grief over Hugh’s disappearance, he does concede that Gunno looks very like Hugh at the time he disappeared: it’s no wonder you thought … from the back, Anne, I would have thought so too (p. 104). However, he has no interest in Gunno himself, nor is he prepared to listen to Anne’s defence of him: Sentimental claptrap. The boy’s just a common thief (p. 104). Consistent with this representation of Anne as ‘emotionally involved’ and Geoffrey as ‘emotionally detached’, Anne is also represented as suffering more grief than Geoffrey over Hugh’s loss, as common sense suggests that a mother ‘naturally’ would, in much the same way that Miranda, in Seeing Things (Klein 1993), can be understood as ‘naturally’ feeling the loss of her mother more acutely than the loss of her father.

Readers never learn who actually does what in the way of domestic work in Anne and Geoffrey’s household, but Gunno’s assumptions on this issue are interesting. Living in an all-male household, he must be familiar with the idea of men doing domestic work, but he evidently takes it for granted that if there is a woman in the house, the housework is her responsibility. Thus, on one visit to ‘his’ house,

he was feeling annoyed with the woman who lived in the house … She was so untidy. She owned a big house with plenty of cupboards and drawers to store things in yet the place always looked a mess … the dishes were piled up in the sink every day … the bed was unmade (p. 31).

At this stage Gunno assumes that Hugh is away somewhere, but he has spent a lot of time in his bedroom reading his books, and he strongly disapproves of the way the room is kept. Again,
apparently by virtue of her being Hugh’s mother, he takes it for granted that Anne is responsible, and his thoughts make it clear what he thinks her responsibilities as a mother encompass:

*She didn’t even bother to keep her son’s room nice for him coming home. She didn’t dust or even air it. It had the smell of a museum. ‘With all our love, Hugh,’ it said in the books in the sprawling writing he knew now was hers, but she didn’t look after his things* (pp. 32-33).

On another occasion, Gunno sits playing with the dog at the top of the stairs and notes that

*usually Anne just seemed to clean half of them – maybe it was because that was as far as the cord of the vacuum cleaner stretched and she was too lazy to plug it in again from the top* (p. 93).

Evidently it never occurs to Gunno that the housework is not Anne’s responsibility, or not hers alone. Moreover, with the narrative focalised through Gunno, so that their perceptions are aligned with his, it may not occur to readers either, particularly when his assumptions are so clearly based on common-sense understandings that readers are likely to share. Indeed, as indicated in the discussion of the contemporary social context in Chapter One, the gendered division of domestic and parenting labour that Gunno assumes continues to be a reality in most Australian households; moreover, as discussed in Chapter Four, it is so firmly established as common sense that, like Gunno, readers are positioned to accept it unquestioningly in fictional representations such as *The House Guest*, even if it is not fully consistent with the everyday reality of their own particular domestic circumstances.

The pattern evidenced in both *The House Guest* (Nilsson 1991) and *Love Me, Love Me Not* (Gleeson 1993), as well as a number of the texts analysed in Chapter Seven, of representing mothers with relational qualities that distinguish them from fathers, is continued in *Mandragora* (McRobbie 1991) and *Peter* (Walker 1991). Thus both Jean, Adam’s mother, and Lynn, Peter’s mother, take on similar roles to that of Helen in *Angel’s Gate* (Crew 1993), who often serves as a mediator between her children and their father, typically acting on behalf of the former in order to soften the authoritarian and stereotypically ‘masculine’ parenting style of the latter. In *Mandragora*, this mediating role is first evident in the section of the narrative discussed earlier, in which Jean and her husband, Gordon, are discussing Catriona: Gordon disapproves of Adam’s interest in Catriona, while Jean admires her and points out that Adam *could do a lot worse* (p. 23); Gordon, telling Adam that it is *time for a little talk, demands, What were you doing on the beach with the Chisholm girl?* (p. 23), while Jean shakes her head and tries to steer him off the topic. Jean actively encourages Adam’s developing friendship with Catriona, for example, by telling him *she’s got a birthday coming up soon … She’ll be seventeen. Hint, hint* (p. 83), while at the same time working both to foster Gordon’s approval of Catriona and to ease the tensions in the relationship between him and Adam. Thus, when Catriona telephones for Adam one day, Jean takes the opportunity to tell her that Adam has offered to join his father on a forthcoming working bee at the local railway station for the Railway Historical Society, and invites her to join them in helping out. Adam has made no such offer, but Catriona has already accepted by the time his mother hands him the telephone, smiling sweetly as she does so and whispering, *Too late, it’s all arranged* (p. 94). By the time the working bee has finished, Adam has won some approval from his father for his hard work and Catriona has also earned approval, partly
because of her own hard work – ‘Great little worker,’ Adam’s father said (p. 113) – but largely because she shares Jean’s ‘feminine’ relational qualities and has used them to good effect: Adam inwardly shook his head in wonder at her relaxed and easy way of talking with his father (p. 107); Catriona chatted lightly and naturally with his father (p. 112); His father was eating out of her hand, Adam thought (p. 113); ‘She’s very intelligent,’ Adam’s father said. ‘Very natural’ (p. 113). Jean’s mediating role between father and son remains an ongoing one, however, along with her other roles as ‘good’ mother, of sympathetic listener, adviser and supporter for Adam. In these roles, her version of parenthood is consistently represented in distinct contrast to Gordon’s.

For example, when Adam is troubled by not only a coolness between him and Catriona, but also a series of disturbing dreams and the eerie impression that someone was watching him (p. 60), he seeks advice from his mother; however, his father came into the room … and made some throwaway diagnosis that Adam needed to get out and play more sport (p. 60). Later, when the local police suspect Adam of responsibility for two near-disastrous incidents in the town, his father is angry and assumes he is guilty; his mother, on the other hand, is upset, but seeks an alternative explanation for the evidence against him. Here the reactions of Adam’s parents parallel those of Anne and Geoffrey, in The House Guest (Nilsson 1991), to the discovery that Gunno has been a regular and secret visitor to their house; moreover, in another parallel, the explanation for Adam’s role in the two incidents, which is actually one of disaster-prevention, also involves the supernatural:

_He was on the point of telling [his mother] about his dreams and about … the warnings or visions or whatever they were, but with his logical father there glowering at him, he couldn’t bring himself to do it_ (p. 121).

Later, when the police confirm Adam’s innocence to his parents, _his mother hugged him but his father just nodded briefly … still containing himself on the edge of anger_ (p. 136) at Adam’s apparent inability to provide a logical explanation for his activities. As in The House Guest, then, caring and intuitive relational qualities are linked, in Mandragora, with femininity and motherhood, while emotional detachment and logic are linked with masculinity and fatherhood.

However, while the representations of mothers and fathers in both these narratives appear to work in support of prevailing common-sense distinctions between motherhood and fatherhood, it must be acknowledged that they also challenge essentialist understandings of masculinity, through their representations of both Gunno and Adam as more like their mothers than their fathers. In this way, these narratives work as reminders to readers that values and characteristics that are often commonsensically accepted as ‘feminine’ are not exclusively or inevitably so, and that, by implication, girls and women are not biologically incapable of displaying supposedly ‘masculine’ qualities and attributes. Furthermore, the focalisation of both narratives encourages readers to align their subjectivities with the boys and their more conventionally ‘feminine’ values and concerns, and to accept them as role models for an alternative version of masculinity to that represented by their respective fathers and their conventionally ‘masculine’ ways of understanding the world and conducting relationships. As
noted in Chapter Four, some researchers have recently reported signs of the emergence of a new cultural model of fatherhood, one that more closely resembles ‘good’ motherhood, and both *The House Guest* and *Mandragora* can be read as working to promote wider acceptance of such a model. It is possible, however, that the supernatural elements of both narratives may undermine this discursive work, by providing readers with the option of interpreting Gunno and Adam as anomalies, rather than as realistic models of a viable form of everyday masculinity and, potentially, fatherhood. More importantly for the purposes of this study, it is also possible that readers of these texts will be prompted, through their identification with Gunno and Adam, to recognise and reflect on the limitations of conventional versions of fatherhood without also recognising any need to re-think prevailing understandings about what ‘good’ motherhood entails. These latter understandings, already well established as common sense, are not constructed by the narratives as problematic; indeed, as illustrated earlier in this chapter, other aspects of both narratives work to support them. It is arguable, then, that even as these two texts work to promote counter-hegemonic understandings of fatherhood, they are also more likely to reinforce hegemonic understandings of motherhood than to challenge them.

*Peter* (Walker 1991) is a similar case: it is contemporary Australian norms of masculinity and fatherhood that are subjected to most overt critique in this narrative, and that readers are most strongly invited to challenge, while prevailing ideals of ‘good’ motherhood are left to be taken for granted. Like Adam and Gunno, Peter has difficulties in communicating with his father, Bob, although in his case they are not complicated by psychic or magical phenomena. While he thinks his mother, Lynn, is ‘great’, he simply does not like his father: *I’m not all that keen on my father … He and Mum have been divorced for a couple of years and I hope they stay that way* (p. 3). Readers’ first encounter with Bob invites them to recognise him as a stereotypical Australian male, and with the narrative focalised through Peter, they are positioned to distance themselves, with him, from Bob and his bristling, pumped-up and highly competitive version of masculinity:

> He was wearing his latest Le Coq T-shirt and the light above the table cast half-moon shadows under his biceps and pectorals.

> Dad used to be a professional footballer. Now he owns a sports store and works out, runs and generally keeps himself pumped up. But all his ‘chasing his body around the block’ … hasn’t stopped his hair from falling out … all he’s got left is a thin, bristling crewcut over his suntanned skull...

> After bragging about how his fantastic coaching got the Bar Beach Under-Fifteen Life Savers into the State Comps, he finally got around to the reason for his sitting there eating our dinner. It seems one of his Leagues Club cronies had phoned him to let him know that my name was spray-canned all over the Westfield Mall bus shelter, advertising that I was a poof and my services were available at two dollars a hit (p. 100).

Bob *doesn’t want that sort of filth bandied around* (p. 102) about Peter, partly because he views it as a slur against himself and his own masculinity. When he angrily quizzes Peter, insisting that *there has to be a reason for it … They wouldn’t use that name for nothing* (p. 102), Lynn, like Adam’s mother, attempts to mediate. She is less successful than Jean, however, largely because Bob evidently holds her responsible for what he perceives to be wrong with his sons: *He likes to think Mum knows nothing about raising boys. Correction – men!* (p. 103). Thus,
when Peter confirms that his trailbike-riding associates have called him a ‘poof’ to his face, together with every rotten name they can think of (p. 104), his father responds:

‘You should have flattened the first bloke who said anything.’

‘Bob! I won’t have you coming here advising the boys to solve their problems with violence!’

‘That’s one of the reasons he’s got this problem … Because of your bloody airy-fairy nonsense about working things out and talking things over. That’s not the way a man does things. A man acts’ (p. 104).

When Lynn asks him what he would do if one of his sons were homosexual, Bob replies:

Get him away from you for a start. And help him get over it. Tell him what’s what! Tell him exactly what’s expected of him. Get him into sports. Healthy exercise. All the things you haven’t done for these boys … No, a man shouldn’t have to accept that, being made a laughing stock by his own children (p. 126).

Clearly, it is competing versions of parenthood, one represented by Bob and one by Lynn, that are on offer to readers here, and there can be no doubt that readers are expected to reject the discourse articulated by Bob, that constructs boys who are too strongly influenced by their mothers as at risk of becoming emasculated ‘sissies’ or homosexuals. However, in rejecting Bob’s masculinist version of parenthood, readers are implicitly invited to accept the other that is on offer here, together with all the other understandings about ‘good’ motherhood that are inflected throughout this narrative, including those discussed in the previous section in relation to sexuality. The model of motherhood that Lynn represents is by no means unconventional. She works full-time, but in a stereotypically ‘feminine’ occupation as a nurse, and she otherwise appears to have no friends, social life or interests outside the domestic sphere. Readers can reasonably infer that her life revolves around her teenage sons and their needs and desires, in accordance with common-sense understandings that it is ‘natural’ and ‘proper’ that this should be so. Peter evidently subscribes to this view of motherhood, taking it for granted – as readers are invited to do as well – that his mother’s work is something for which she must compensate her sons: On Saturday Mum cooked cakes and biscuits, all the stuff we’ve missed out on with her being a working mum (p. 127). Thus, while Peter encourages readers, even more actively than The House Guest (Nilsson 1991) and Mandragora (McRobbie 1991), to re-think their own and other available understandings of masculinity, and hence their associated beliefs about fatherhood, it cannot easily be read as a text that challenges the prevailing hegemony of common sense about motherhood and what constitutes a ‘good’ mother.

It was argued earlier in this chapter that A Long Way to Tipperary (Gough 1992) does offer such a challenge, but that its effect may be limited by the narrative’s heavy reliance on comedy and farce. There is a serious side to this text as well, however: woven in amongst the predominantly humorous elements of the narrative are a number of sections where the immediate task of storytelling is set aside briefly, and an omniscient third-person narrator or, alternatively, one of the varied assortment of fociing characters reflects on an extensive range of social problems and issues, including war, racial discrimination, environmental degradation, Aboriginal spiritual and cultural links with the land, loneliness and religious intolerance. Not surprisingly, motherhood and fatherhood are also issues to which the narrative pays both serious and not-so-
serious attention. It is into the not-so-serious category that readers are invited, partly on the basis of the narrative’s tone, to allocate ideas about motherhood such as those of the railway ticket collector who discovers that, in a positive epidemic of lawlessness (p. 40), not only Mrs FB, Darcy and Pearl, but also a number of other passengers on the Rockhampton Rocket, are travelling without tickets:

And it was the type of person that particularly shocked him. Well-to-do middle-aged women, with children, who should have been at home taking care of domestic duties. What were their husbands thinking of? And respectable-looking young women who should have been doing their piano practice. What had happened to parental discipline? It made him think that civilisation was about to crumble (p. 40).

Interestingly, although it is clearly expected that readers will unhesitatingly join with the narrator in scoffing at the ticket collector’s old-fashioned ideas about what counts as ‘proper’ behaviour for women, it is evident from the analyses presented so far in this study that those same ideas are often among their primary, common-sense resources for constructing coherent meaning from other examples of contemporary adolescent fiction. A similar use of contradictory elements of common sense is required when, in a somewhat more serious tone, the third-person narrator offers some further reflections on the differences between motherhood and fatherhood, in order to account for Mrs FB’s thoughtlessness in leaving Brisbane without paying the impoverished Miss Allsop, her dancing class pianist, the one pound, seventeen shillings and sixpence owed to her.

Her upbringing was much to blame. Her childhood had been spent almost entirely in the company of men. Her mother had died soon after she was born and her father, a ship’s captain ... took her everywhere he went: Vladivostok to Valparaiso, Bombay to Boston, Cairo to Caracas, Lagos to Limassol. Along the way she learnt how to live for the moment, how to be bold, brave and practical. These somewhat masculine virtues were her greatest strength; it was unfortunate that they had not been tempered with some of the more feminine attributes such as patience and prudence (pp. 37-38).

In order to make unproblematic sense of this passage, readers must accept that, although mothers and fathers are different, and therefore bring different qualities to the task of parenting, with different effects, those differences are not rooted in biology, but in societies and cultures, and are thus subject to change. The narrative invites readers to recognise that the somewhat masculine virtues of boldness, bravery and practicality are not inherent in or exclusive to males; nor are the more feminine attributes of patience and prudence inherent in or exclusive to females. These ideas are so seemingly ‘obvious’ and self-evident that they are unlikely to be disruptive to readers’ meaning-making processes. However, to accept them readers must reject other common-sense understandings, notably the essentialist understandings of masculinity and femininity that, as the analyses presented in this and the previous chapter have illustrated, are virtually mandatory resources in the task of constructing coherent meanings from many of the other texts in the research corpus. Furthermore, they are positioned to recognise it as ‘obvious’ that children’s development into healthy and well-balanced adults requires them to have both a mother and a father. This proposition is hardly controversial in a society in which the two-parent family is accepted as both ideal and norm, and unmarried motherhood is frowned upon. However, it is one that must be set aside or somehow modified, at least temporarily, if readers are also to make what seems to be equally ‘obvious’ sense out of texts such as Seeing Things...
(Klein 1993), Looking for Alibrandi (Marchetta 1992) and Mandragora (McRobbie 1991), which imply that fathers are redundant to children’s healthy development.

It would seem, then, that a logical reading of A Long Way to Tipperary could open up possibilities for challenges to common sense; indeed, this discussion itself suggests how this might be done. However, it is important to remember that common sense is the repository of an extensive range of often contradictory, but nevertheless immediately recognisable ideas, the deployment of which is pre-reflective and ad hoc. Thus, by drawing on common sense, readers are able to utilise contradictory ideas about motherhood for the purpose of making what seem to be ‘obvious’ meanings from fictional texts, without necessarily reflecting on those ideas or their implications. While there are a number of points in A Long Way to Tipperary where the narrative might form a platform for challenging the prevailing hegemony of common sense about motherhood, their potential may not be clearly evident to readers whose primary meaning-making strategies have been developed through conventional reading education practices. This is because, even at these points in the narrative, motherhood continues to be represented in ways that encourage readers to draw on common sense, albeit different aspects of common sense, to construct meaning. In other words, the meaning-making process is unlikely to be interrupted in a way that necessarily requires readers to re-think what they have previously taken for granted about mothers or motherhood.

This pre-reflective and ad hoc use of common sense as a meaning-making resource in reading A Long Way to Tipperary may be made more possible by the ways in which humorous, unconventional representations are encountered in this text virtually side-by-side with serious, conventional ones. Arguably, the switches in tone, in combination with the elements of farce that invite readers not to take the narrative as a whole too seriously, facilitate the deployment of contradictory components of common sense while also reducing the importance for a satisfying reading of the narrative to be consistent and coherent overall. One further extract from this text serves to illustrate this point. Here the narrative adopts a much more seriously poignant and reflective tone than is evident in the above extracts, as readers are first introduced to Smithy, a survivor of both Gallipoli and Pozières, who is on his way home to his parents’ farm with fragments of shrapnel still lodged in his leg (p. 28), horrific memories of the European trenches, and a voice reduced to a faint wheeze by the mustard gas that has left his lungs half-burned away like so much tissue paper (p. 29). At this point the focalisation is through Smithy:

What he wanted to do most of all was reach the comfort of his mother’s arms. If he could kneel at her feet, lay his head on her lap and weep, as he had done when he was a child, he knew he would find a kind of healing. He did not have to tell her the horror of it all, just let the cleansing tears flow … he had hoarded his tears, knowing that only his mother would truly comfort him (p. 29).

Smithy’s mother has not been mentioned previously, except in a reference to ‘parents’. However, the narrative takes it for granted that, even without knowing anything about her, readers will know and understand that it is in her arms alone – not his father’s or anyone else’s, but only hers – that Smithy will find comfort and healing from the horrors of his memories. In

Thematic analyses
other words, readers are virtually required to draw on their familiarity with what is accepted, at the level of common sense, as a universal ‘truth’: that, by virtue of her ‘natural’ and ‘instinctive’ abilities to nurture and care for others, a mother’s comfort is inherently different from and superior to other forms of comfort, including that provided by fathers. At the same time, this meaning-making process works to reinforce readers’ acceptance of that ‘truth’, even as other parts of the narrative, exemplified above, rely for their meaning on readers’ rejection of similarly essentialist ideas.

The notion of maternal comfort invoked in A Long Way to Tipperary makes a brief appearance in another text that has not yet been discussed. For reasons that are explained later in this chapter, The Collectors (Carter 1993), which was short-listed by the CBCA for the award of Book of the Year: Older Readers in 1994, is something of an anomaly in the research corpus. It concerns a group of creatures known as ‘collectors’, which, on the basis of the physical descriptions provided, are likely to be recognised by readers as cockroaches, but which are also equipped with the full complement of human qualities and characteristics. None of the significant characters in this narrative is a mother; and concepts of motherhood are invoked only occasionally, usually in relation to the collectors’ ‘Orijin’ stories. There is one particularly noteworthy exception, however, when Nolan, oldest and closest friend of Edwud, the central character, is coughing, shivering and rambling about the past as he is dying. At this point, motherhood suddenly becomes relevant: Edwud begins gently rocking him like his mother had rocked him when he was too small to remember. Nolan slowly drifted off to sleep again (p. 168). Again it is common-sense understandings of what it means to be comforted by one’s mother, rather than one’s father or anyone else, that constitute readers’ primary meaning-making resources here, allowing the invocation of motherhood to make obvious sense in a context where it might otherwise seem strikingly out of place, and where the invocation of fatherhood would almost certainly disrupt readers’ meaning-making processes.

It is worth mentioning at this point one aspect of human motherhood as it is represented in The Collectors, because human beings, particularly members of the Longley family in whose garden the collectors live, do make brief appearances in the narrative. Their behaviours are observed and interpreted from the perspective of the collectors, but in ways that are likely to be consistent with readers’ taken-for-granted understandings of ‘normal’ domestic life. Of most interest to Edwud is the scream emitted by the ‘Longley female’ whenever she sees a collector; as Edwud eventually realises, it is this scream that brings the ‘male Longley’ running to her rescue, which typically involves smacking at the offending collector with a brick or spraying it with deadly chlordane gas. However this observation is consistent with others that suggest that there is a conventionally gendered division of labour in the Longley household: while it is not clear what the Longley male does, other than defend the ‘Longley female’ from collectors, it is evidently the latter who does the cooking and looks after the baby.

As the examples discussed in this section illustrate, the six texts analysed in Chapter Seven are broadly representative of the entire corpus in terms of the ways in which they represent
motherhood in relation to fatherhood. Although there are anomalies and contradictions among their various representations of motherhood and fatherhood, there are no serious and coherent challenges in these texts to the currently dominant discourses of motherhood that, on the basis of biological differences between males and females, construct motherhood as a ‘naturally’ and inevitably different form of parenthood from fatherhood, involving different kinds of caring relationships with children and different kinds of parenting work, and therefore naturalising and normalising a division of parenting and domestic labour along gendered lines. According to these discourses, children’s healthy physical, emotional and cognitive development is more heavily dependent on their mothers than their fathers, and mothers can thus be held more accountable than fathers for their children’s well-being; indeed, the term ‘parent’ often comes to mean, and can unproblematically be read as meaning, ‘mother’.

In the next section of this chapter, the analytical focus turns to issues of race and ethnicity in the representation of motherhood, issues that, as the literature review in Chapter Five revealed, have typically been overlooked in previous analyses of children’s literature that are otherwise relevant to this study.

Motherhood, race and ethnicity

The review of contemporary western discourses of motherhood in Chapter Four illustrated that the idealised mother throughout the twentieth century has been, by implication, middle-class and white. Discourses of motherhood that construct the ‘good’ mother as one who finds complete fulfilment within the domestic sphere by devoting herself exclusively to the care of her family assume a level of economic security that has been available to few women outside the white middle class; for ‘other’ women – poor and working class women, and women of colour – full-time motherhood has rarely been a possibility. Nonetheless, an idealised image of mothers as full-time domestic carers has gained widespread acceptance as a universal norm, such that the image of the ‘normal’ mother constructed not only in explicit theories of motherhood, but also in popular cultural representations and in common sense, has typically been an implicitly racialised one: the ‘normal’ mother is white.

Given the nature and purposes of children’s literature, and its origins in western European thought, as outlined in Chapter Two, it is not surprising that this racialised understanding of ‘normal’ motherhood has flourished in this field. The review of relevant studies of children’s literature in Chapter Five has shown that it has been white mothers and implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) white versions of motherhood that have typically been represented and valorised in twentieth-century children’s books. Such literature has thus been complicit in the construction and maintenance of a universalist view of the normal mother, and the marginalisation of mothers from ethnic and racial minorities, in particular. Meanwhile, the whiteness of the field of children’s literature has been so taken for granted that many researchers in that field have themselves been complicit in the process of marginalisation, often
failing to remark on the absence of ‘other’ mothers, at least until quite recently, from the overwhelming majority of fictional narratives produced for children and adolescents.

On the basis of the analyses presented in Chapter Seven, it might seem that this absence is less marked in the research corpus selected for this study. Nonetheless, one of the conclusions of that chapter is that the first six texts in the corpus do little to disrupt common-sense understandings about what constitutes ‘good’ motherhood. While the individual analyses of the representation of motherhood in *Seeing Things* (Klein 1993), *Change the Locks* (French 1993), *Angel’s Gate* (Crew 1993) and *Galax-Arena* (Rubinstein 1992) do not focus closely on issues of race and ethnicity, all four of these texts feature predominantly, if not exclusively, white characters and white versions of motherhood, so the reasons for that conclusion should be sufficiently clear in those cases. However, they may be less clear in relation to *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta 1992), which features an Italian-Australian protagonist whose family and ethnic community are important in her life, and *Dougy* (Moloney 1993), which features an Aboriginal family living in a remote Queensland town. Thus it is worth reviewing the ways in which issues of race and ethnicity inflect the representation of motherhood in these two texts.

Although Josephine, in *Looking for Alibrandi*, is occasionally irritated by some of her family’s Italian ways, and sometimes feels herself to be more restricted than many of her peers, issues of ethnicity are not central to her narrative. Her Italian ethnicity is often relevant in her everyday life, but often it is not, and the novel is much more about growing up female than it is about growing up Italian-Australian. All the same, Italian ethnicity is never entirely irrelevant to the ways in which motherhood is represented in this narrative. Thus, Christina’s experiences of single motherhood, and Josephine’s experiences as the child of an unmarried mother, are represented as having been made more difficult than they might otherwise have been, by virtue of Christina’s rejection, at least for the first few years of Josephine’s life, by a family and community who spat out [her] name in disgust (p. 35). Similarly, while Katia’s life as a mother within a rigidly patriarchal Italian community is not represented in great detail, it, too, can be understood by readers to be different from the life of the ‘normal’ mother of twentieth-century children’s literature.

Neither of these mothers is represented as ‘deviant’ or ‘abnormal’, however; Josephine evidently considers her family to be no more or less ‘normal’ than most others in a multicultural city such as Sydney, and in aligning themselves with her as the focalising character, readers are positioned to adopt a similar perspective. At the same time, it is likely that they will recognise Josephine’s views on pre-marital sex and the importance of ‘saving yourself’ for the ‘right’ man as unusually conservative; and they may also perceive those views to have been at least partly influenced by her Italian background. Interestingly, as in acknowledgement that this latter perception might limit readers’ willingness to align themselves with Josephine on this issue, the narrative works to minimise the relevance of ethnicity to her views. Thus Sera, who is also Italian-Australian, is represented as an example of unregulated adolescent sexuality, in direct
contrast to Josephine, while Josephine’s friend, Lee, and her boyfriend, Jacob, both Anglo-Australians, endorse Josephine’s position as ‘right for her’.

Whether or not these narrative strategies are actually successful in shaping readers’ long-term views on this issue, it seems clear that they work in support of discourses on female sexuality that seek to do so. Moreover, while the representations of Christina and Katia serve to disrupt any remaining assumptions among contemporary Australian readers that the ethnicity of ‘normal’ mothers is Anglo-Celtic, they otherwise work in support of common-sense understandings about what constitutes ‘good’ motherhood, particularly those that valorise maternal self-sacrifice and asexuality.

In the case of *Dougy* (Moloney 1993), the analysis presented in Chapter Seven shows how the narrative’s overtly anti-racist agenda results in the representation of an Aboriginal version of motherhood that is strongly consistent, in terms of values and behaviours, with the ideal of the ‘good’ (white) mother. At issue here is not the question of whether or not Dougy’s mother represents an ‘authentic’ version of Aboriginal motherhood; for the purposes of this study, what is of most interest is the narrative’s discursive work in the process of producing and reproducing ideologies of motherhood. While the way in which Dougy’s mother is represented serves to disrupt the assumption, implicit in common-sense understandings, that the ‘good’ mother is necessarily white, it avoids questioning other assumptions that underpin dominant discourses about ‘good’ motherhood, for example, the assumption that women are ‘naturally’ inclined to merge their own needs and interests with those of their children.

Moreover, at the point in *Dougy* where racial issues start to intersect most conspicuously with issues of motherhood – when Mum tells Gracey that the scholarship will allow her to avoid the fate of all other black girls in the town, trapped there with kids, always lots of kids. And no money (p. 52) – the narrative deflects readers’ attention away from the suggestion that the patriarchal institution of motherhood may be a trap towards an understanding of the town itself as a trap:

‘I nearly got away when I was young, but this place sucked me back. It don’t let many get away.’
‘You make it sound like this place is alive, a kind of monster.’
‘Yeah, I s’pose that’s right, really. For blacks anyway, and some o’ the whites as well’ (p. 52).

As argued earlier in this chapter, the key point here, within the terms of this study, is that this narrative move works to minimise the possibility that readers may be prompted to consider the oppressive aspects of motherhood within patriarchy; the social institution of motherhood is effectively removed from the field of critique, and is likely to remain unquestioned.

Before turning to examine the remaining texts in the corpus, it is important to acknowledge that, in many cases, the narratives in the research corpus offer no explicit information to guide readers’ understandings of the race or ethnicity of the various characters. Nonetheless, a range
of clues is usually available. Names, particularly family names, can often suggest ethnic or racial origins, and in children’s literature, book covers are frequently a significant source of information, as they often include illustrations that readers can reasonably assume are visual representations of the main characters; almost all of the texts in the research corpus do this. In the absence of any of these kinds of clues, however, and sometimes in conjunction with them, common sense can be a major resource. It must be remembered that, in a predominantly white society such as the one that has produced and valorised the texts in this corpus, whiteness typically goes unmarked, because it is the taken-for-granted norm. In the absence of information to the contrary, readers (even some readers who are not white themselves but have learned to recognise themselves as ‘others’) are likely to assume that an Australian character, in an Australian novel that is set in Australia, is white.

Leaving aside *Pagan’s Crusade* (Jinks 1992), which is set in twelfth century Jerusalem and includes no characters who are mothers, and *The Collectors* (Carter 1993), which concerns a community of cockroach-like creatures, an examination of the remaining texts in the research corpus produces a similar pattern of findings to that outlined above. Thus most of these texts either fail to acknowledge the existence of racial and ethnic minorities at all, or do so in superficial ways that might challenge the perception that the ‘normal’ mother is white, but are likely to have little or no impact on readers’ other understandings about the qualities and characteristics of ‘good’ mothers. In *The House Guest* (Nilsson 1991) and *Mandragora* (McRobbie 1991), for example, the characters are exclusively white, although, in the former, Gunno (Gunnar) is named after a character in an Icelandic saga, and in the latter, the name of the proprietor of the local milk bar, Dave Riccio, connotes Italian ethnicity. The names of some of the characters in *A Cage of Butterflies* (Caswell 1992) similarly suggest ‘other’ ethnicities – one of the Babies is named Ricardo Munoz, and another, Phetmany, is identified as ‘Asian’ – but these are superficial differences that otherwise have no bearing on a narrative that, as discussed earlier in this chapter, constructs a significant silence around issues of motherhood.

Much the same conclusion applies to *The Gathering* (Carmody 1993): Nathanial and his family are white, while some of the minor characters serve to add a multicultural flavour without getting in the way of the values and understandings the narrative works to promote, in relation either to motherhood or to other social concepts. Similarly, Lisa, in *Take My Word For It* (Marsden 1992) mentions that one of the boarding school dormitories has *got nearly all Asian kids* (pp. 4-5), and sprinkles her journal with the names of students such as Marisa Chan, Kizzy Tan and Liz Chen; and Mandy does much the same thing in her letters to Tracey in *Letters from the Inside* (Marsden 1991), mentioning friends with names like Cheryl Tsang, Maria Kagiasis and Paul Bazzani. However, none of these characters contributes in any way to these narratives – indeed, they are names more than characters – apart from providing an air of authenticity to novels that are apparently set in Melbourne, Australia’s most multicultural city. Their inclusion in these narratives can have no conceivable impact on reader’s understandings about motherhood.
Readers can also assume from her name that Maria, one of the protagonists in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993), is Greek-Australian, and the fact that the shopping she unpacks for her mother consists of calamari, cheeses, oil and olives tends to confirm this. However, as previous discussions of the nine narratives in this collection suggest, these differences do not disrupt the general pattern of understandings about motherhood that are supported in this text. In other words, Maria represents a mother who is ethnically different from the mythical white norm, but is not significantly different, in other respects, from the mothers of most of Maria’s classmates. Thus, while her Greek ethnicity works as, in effect, a reminder to readers that the ethnic background of the ‘typical’ Australian mother is not necessarily Anglo-Celtic, it also works to reproduce universalised understandings about the ‘essential’ nature of motherhood.

Like a number of the other texts mentioned so far, Peter (Walker 1991) also acknowledges that Australian society is multicultural: Peter’s friend Tony and his sister are ethnic Italians. Yet again, however, readers’ common-sense assumptions about motherhood are unlikely to be significantly disrupted by this narrative; indeed, stereotyped perceptions of Italian mothers are likely to be confirmed by the following account of a visit to Tony’s house:

Tony’s mother answered the door.
‘You come! You eat!’ she said.
She’s a nice lady, built like a margarine tub, and I like her even though she’s always trying to feed me up.
‘Thanks, Mrs Martini, but I’ve had breakfast,’ I said.
... ‘What you have for breakfast, eh?’
‘Weet-bix.’ I said.
She shook her head. ‘No good. You tell your mother: stay at home and cook you meals. A big breakfast! Lots of eggs! You too skinny. And your brother, more skinny!’ (pp. 145-146).

Peter rejects the belief that he ascribes to Mrs Martini, that ‘good’ mothers have an obligation to turn their children into jam rolls (p. 146). However, judging by the remark quoted earlier, that on Saturday Mum cooked cakes and biscuits, all the stuff we’ve missed out on with her being a working mum (p. 127), he has no significant dispute with either the ideal of full-time motherhood or the assumption that mothers properly belong in kitchens preparing food for their families. Whilst it is possible that many readers will contest these ideas anyway, drawing on other discursive resources available to them, the narrative does not provide them with a platform from which to do so; instead, it again works to reproduce universalised understandings about what is entailed in ‘good’ motherhood. Indeed, it does so partly through the representation of Sophie, discussed earlier in this chapter; as Tony’s sister, she too is an ethnic Italian.

Del-Del (Kelleher 1991) also relies on a stereotype in its representation of ethnicity, and as in the case of Peter, the character involved is a relatively minor one: Beth’s and Sam’s paternal grandmother, Mimi. Her grandmother, Beth tells readers, comes from Poland originally and still struggles a bit with English (p. 9), thus explaining comments such as the following, at a point when the possibility of Sam seeing a psychiatrist is raised: ‘The family is knowing what for to do,’ Gran insisted, rattling her silver bracelets. ‘Is not necessary, this head doctor’ (p. 19). The silver bracelets, as well as gaudy clothes and lots of make-up (p. 9), blood-red fingernails and
fluttering, heavily-ringed hands, are also features of the stereotype: Mimi is represented as an eccentric, gypsy-like character, extravagantly emotional and strongly inclined to seek solutions to Sam’s problems in religion, spiritualism and exorcism. The narrative’s representation of Mimi is not one that is likely to challenge either stereotyped images of exotic ethnic ‘otherness’ or readers’ common-sense understandings about motherhood.

The one text in the corpus not discussed so far in this section, *A Long Way to Tipperary* (Gough 1992), is also the only one, other than *Dougy* (Moloney 1993), to include a character who is explicitly identified as Aboriginal. Kajabbi is a spiritual healer who, as a young man, had been the sole survivor when his tribe was massacred by white men, and is now so ancient that he had eroded to skin and bone, something like the rockface itself (p. 1). He is one of the many ethnically and racially diverse collection of characters that appear throughout this narrative, including Anna Wong, a Chinese orphan whose uncle runs an opium den and plots to kill her in order to gain control of the fortune left by her gold-mining parents, and her long-lost brother, Chan, who reappears in time to save her; Dava Singh, an Indian camel-driver and self-described *hawker extraordinaire* (p. 95); and Monsieur Gerard Lafitte, a French adventurer and consumer of copious quantities of Bollinger champagne, who is attempting to cross the desert from Alice Springs to Brisbane in a hot-air balloon. None of these characters is a mother, and as these descriptions suggest, they are caricatures more than characters, in keeping with the other comedy elements of the narrative. Although this observation is equally applicable to the white characters, it does mean that the narrative is unlikely to serve as strong encouragement to readers to re-think their common-sense understandings about motherhood.

Thus the power of universalised discourses of motherhood is no more threatened by *A Long Way to Tipperary* than it is by any of the other texts in the research corpus. There is little about the ways in which motherhood is represented across the whole of this corpus of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction that is likely to prompt readers to question the prevailing hegemony of common-sense understandings that construct motherhood in universal terms on the basis of biology, rather than understanding it as a social institution with racial and ethnic dimensions.

**An anomalous case?**

One text, *The Collectors* (Carter 1993), has been discussed only briefly so far, and warrants a separate discussion because, as noted above, it is an anomaly in the research corpus. This is not only because its characters are cockroach-like creatures attributed with human characteristics: as noted in Chapter Five, anthropomorphism is not uncommon in children’s literature, although it is more typically a feature of picture books for young children, rather than full-length novels for adolescent readers. What makes *The Collectors* particularly unusual in this corpus is that, unlike the other 17 texts, it does not display any of the qualities that are most often recognised as defining characteristics of children’s literature. It does not purport to represent a child’s or adolescent’s point of view; nor does it focus on child or adolescent characters: the central character, who is also the one through whom the third-person narrative is...
most frequently focalised, and the one with whom readers are invited to align their subjectivities most closely, is an adult collector named Edwud. Moreover, the ill-assorted group of collectors that accompanies him on his travels includes only one ‘nimf’ (young collector), whose perspective is constructed as no more significant than that of others in the group.

Admittedly, it has been noted elsewhere in this chapter that some aspects of both *A Long Way to Tipperary* (Gough 1992) and *A Cage of Butterflies* (Caswell 1992) might also be interpreted as challenges to the conventional patterns of children’s literature. However, as suggested in the previous discussions of these texts, in both cases the qualities of ‘child appeal’ and/or ‘child-centredness’ are retained. In *A Long Way to Tipperary*, this is achieved through the use of humour and playful intertextuality; in *A Cage of Butterflies*, the illusion of child-centredness is never undermined because the conventional emphasis on the ‘child’s point of view’ is retained, despite the narrative’s intermittent focalisation through adult characters.

*The Collectors* is described on its back cover as “a spiritual allegory for our times”, but it is also a sophisticated political allegory, as the following abbreviated extract indicates. Here Edwud, a rebel within a society of collectors living in a suburban back yard, speaks out at the Remedial Court trial of a collector accused of the serious offence of collecting ‘chumps’ (food scraps) from another family’s ‘circle’ (as one of many footnotes in the first few chapters of the narrative explains, circles are assigned food-collection territories, and are either inherited or allocated to collectors who work in wealthier families’ circles until they have acquired sufficient votes to obtain their own).

*The problem is really hunger. Jon B isn't the first to collect in someone else's circle and perhaps the problem is more to do with the fact that his circle isn't very big and it isn't in a very good place … Not only do meniales have smaller collecting circles, but they are stuck in the poorest areas of the yard. And more often than not, they have more young to divide the circle amongst … The meniales, and even many of the mediocs, have almost no way of improving their collection. It seems to me that they search harder and harder to return with less and less – and as the voting for circle allocation is determined by the amount collected, then they can only watch as someone else with a better and bigger circle becomes more powerful as if they themselves were being eaten (pp. 13-14).*

Given this kind of subject matter, in conjunction with the text’s lack of conformity with the usual conventions of children’s literature, one can only speculate on the publisher’s reasons for specifically labelling this text, on its back cover, as “fiction for older readers”, rather than targeting it to a wider market. Equally puzzling is why the CBCA’s judges agreed with this categorisation and evidently deemed the novel to have considerable ‘child appeal’, as required by the judging criteria. Their judgement in this case appears to have been in error: *The Collectors* is one of only two texts in the research corpus that are no longer in print, despite the marketing advantage of being short-listed by the CBCA.¹

However, the anomalous status of *The Collectors* in the research corpus does not mean that it cannot be analysed within the terms of this study, or that it does not lend itself well to analysis within the four broad thematic categories used to structure this chapter. Indeed, it has been
discussed above in the section on motherhood and fatherhood; also, in relation to motherhood and subjectivity, analysis might productively examine the lack of mothers in this narrative, and the ways in which it represents females, whether mothers or not, as marginal to the political process. Indeed, as well as invoking notions of class, as suggested above, the narrative also invokes notions of race, ethnicity and ‘otherness’ through its representations of mutually hostile communities of collectors that are distinguished on the basis of physical characteristics such as colour; thus, an analysis of the racial and ethnic dimensions of motherhood, to the extent that it is represented in this text, is evidently feasible. Furthermore, although the character of Sera is not a mother, her representation as a personally, politically and sexually fickle creature, willing to betray Edwud to the Reverend Viel for the sake of ensuring herself a comfortably mindless life protected by the latter’s ruthless power, can hardly be interpreted by readers as a challenge to common-sense understandings about female sexuality; nor can Edwud’s representation as a male whose strength and integrity is constantly vulnerable to Sera’s sexual attractions.

However, the concept of motherhood is also invoked in The Collectors in one way that is notably different from the ways in which it is represented in the remainder of the corpus. Despite the ways in which mothers and motherhood are otherwise marginalised in this narrative, motherhood is fundamental to the spiritual belief system of collectors, whose Lord Maker is a female. Edwud tells the oldest of the collectors’ Orijin stories to a group of nimfs, explaining that in the beginning the Lord Maker drew a great circle (p. 20), filling it with smaller circles, and still smaller circles, and she flung the smaller ones out into the reaches of the Great Vault (p. 21). One of these, which she called Ootheca, became the Lord Maker’s favourite, and she filled it as your own mother filled the eggs that would become yourselves (p. 21). From the crust of Ootheca emerged the first living thing, a small collector, who was subsequently taught by the Lord Maker to fill and produce her own circles, to be called eggs, from which more of her kind would emerge (p. 21) in an autonomous reproduction process. Whilst the Lord Maker was initially pleased with her work, she became increasingly less so as she observed the behaviour of the collectors, and so eventually:

> in order to force all the collectors on Ootheca to co-operate and be kind and to share with others, she created ‘love’. She made it impossible for any of them to fill the eggs of life by themselves. From that time on the eggs of each female would require the seed from a male. And both male and female would need to show concern and caring for each other and for their own new young nimfs (p. 23).

According to Edwud’s account, even this intervention proved insufficient to guarantee that the collectors would live in harmony, and finally the Lord Maker, exploding in fury, cast them out of Ootheca – never to return nor hear her voice, until they had redeemed themselves and she had forgiven them (pp. 23-24).

There are clear parallels here with the Christian account of creation, combined with an explicit challenge to the fundamentally patriarchal nature of that account. Interestingly, however, that challenge is not one that will necessarily disrupt readers’ taken-for-granted understandings about motherhood, because it draws on another set of discourses that have also become
embedded in common sense, notwithstanding the evident contradictions involved. These latter discourses are underpinned by mythology and folklore, and work in support of concepts of motherhood that, although not discussed in Chapter Four, are nevertheless widely familiar as meaning-making resources. These include concepts such as the ‘Earth Mother’ and ‘Mother Nature’, which, like the collectors’ Lord Maker, incorporate both creative and destructive elements; as well, they serve to reinforce the common-sense notion of creativity as an essentially ‘feminine’ characteristic. Moreover, traces of these discourses can be found in the mainstream psychoanalytic theories of motherhood discussed in Chapter Four, particularly those that are rooted in biology and conceptualise an all-powerful, life-giving but simultaneously life-threatening mother.

The extract quoted above does, however, incorporate at least one possible departure point for a substantial re-thinking of prevailing understandings about motherhood and fatherhood: the Lord Maker’s desire for both male and female … to show concern and caring for each other and for their own new young nimfs (p. 23), which readers can take to be a prerequisite for the collectors’ return to the ideal world of Ootheca. Nonetheless, such re-thinking on the part of readers is by no means guaranteed, because the desired goal here is not incompatible with prevailing common-sense understandings, according to which both mothers and fathers do love and care for their children, but in different ways that have their basis in ‘nature’ and biology, rather than in historically and culturally specific discourses of motherhood and fatherhood.

**Concluding comments**

The above discussion of *The Collectors* supplements, in informative, distinctive, but related ways, the analyses presented under the four thematic headings in this chapter. These in turn serve to supplement the more detailed text-by-text analyses presented in Chapter Seven. Taken together they clearly demonstrate that, across the entire corpus of contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian adolescent fiction on which this study focuses, common-sense understandings about mothers and motherhood are never irrelevant to the process of meaning-making. On the contrary, they are demonstrably inflected in a variety of ways throughout these narratives, both explicitly and implicitly, and thus constitute major textual, contextual and intertextual resources for readers as they engage with and construct meanings from them.

These understandings of motherhood often contradict one another, and may at times be disrupted or challenged, sometimes by alternative understandings made available by the narratives, and sometimes as a result of readers’ familiarity with alternative discourses of motherhood; moreover, readers who have learned to do so might employ critical reading strategies, such as those used to produce these analyses, to construct alternative or oppositional readings based on counter-hegemonic discourses of motherhood. Nonetheless, it is clear from the analyses presented in this and the preceding chapter that the currently prevailing hegemony of common sense about motherhood is not significantly threatened by the ways in which motherhood is represented in this corpus. Most often, these representations work
to support and extend ideologies based on conflations of ‘woman’ and ‘mother’, such that
motherhood comes to be understood as an essentially feminine form of parenthood, more
critical to children’s healthy development than fatherhood, and distinctively different from it. In
turn, the normative ‘good’ mother becomes a full-time domestic carer who ‘naturally’ and
‘instinctively’ finds complete fulfilment in merging her needs, desires and interests with those of
her children; and for women who have children, the identity of ‘mother’ is accorded ‘trump card’
salience and supreme moral weight. Accordingly, the ideological effects of the discursive work
undertaken by these narratives are likely to be evident in the ongoing justification of a social
order within which, as outlined in Chapter One, and notwithstanding the significant achievements
of recent feminist movements, women’s access to the full range of social goods often continues
to be restricted.

Chapter Nine concludes this study with a summary of its major findings, followed by a discussion
that focuses on their implications in terms of theory development, policy, practice and further
research within the contemporary context of ongoing struggles over ideals of social justice and
gender equity.

1 At least some children’s literature reviewers would not be surprised at this. Julie Corsaro,
writing in the American Library Association’s journal, Booklist, concluded that it is “ultimately, a
book that is recommended for those special few who will read it”, while another reviewer in The
Horn Book, also a major American journal, took the view that “the philosophizing insects will
attract a very limited audience.” Extracts from these reviews have been published on the World
Wide Web at http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ts-reviews/0207178283/102-8246909-
4892818#02071782835093 (retrieved January 15, 2000). The other text in the corpus that is
no longer in print is Peter (Walker 1991); given that this novel was first published two years
before The Collectors, and that its publisher has been taken over by another company, its out-
of-print status is less surprising.
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This study has addressed a significant gap in children’s literature research through an analysis of the representations of motherhood in a corpus of contemporary, critically acclaimed Australian fiction for adolescents. Specifically, the texts were those short-listed for the CBCA’s award of Book of the Year: Older Readers in the years 1992-1994 inclusive. These texts, deemed to be among the best Australian fiction produced for adolescents in recent years, are not only intensively marketed and widely read, but are also often appropriated for educational purposes in Australian schools. The study has documented their discursive role in nurturing ideologies of motherhood, in order to raise questions about whose interests are served by the (re)production of particular ideologies of motherhood and the valorisation of texts that work to promote those ideologies, and whose interests might thus be served when such texts are read and studied in educational settings. In a context of backlash politics and ongoing struggles for social justice, such issues have particular relevance to education in Australia, where national curriculum documents advocate an inclusive school curriculum based on social justice and equity principles.

The main purposes of this concluding chapter are to consider the implications of the study’s findings in terms of these issues, to outline its limitations, and to suggest some directions for further research. First, however, it is necessary to summarise the findings.

Summary of findings

In Chapter One, it was explained that the study was focused on a number of broad and related questions regarding the representation of motherhood in contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, one of these being whether and how such fiction works to support or challenge the persistent common-sense understanding that motherhood is the ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ destiny of all women. In addressing this question, the study documented few cases where women who have no children are represented in strongly negative terms; on the other hand, there are no noteworthy cases of such women being represented in ways that do not somehow imply lack. Neither is there any unequivocal suggestion that the adolescent female protagonists are not destined for marriage and motherhood; most of them are represented in ways that enable readers to accept without question the ‘obvious’ common sense that, whatever else these characters might do with their lives, they will become mothers. In the absence of any significant challenges to that common sense, it is evident that, at the very least, the texts in the research corpus offer passive support to the work of discourses that construct motherhood as the ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ destiny of females.
Another broad question raised in Chapter One concerns whether, and to what extent, the texts in the research corpus represent the identity of ‘mother’ as one that has ‘trump card’ salience, that is, supreme moral weight relative to the range of other possible identities that might be available to women who have children. The analyses presented in Chapters Seven and Eight deal with a number of aspects of this question, and reveal that one of the most powerful ways in which the texts in the research corpus work to naturalise a social order that limits the rights of women with children to pursue interests and desires independent of their roles as mothers is through their relentless silencing of mother characters. Consistent with the ‘child-centredness’ that characterises the vast majority of children’s fiction, the narratives in this corpus are focalised almost exclusively through the adolescent protagonists, and never through their mothers. While this means that other adult characters, not just mothers, are denied any opportunity to offer an alternative perspective to that of the adolescent protagonists, the silencing of mothers has a particularly powerful effect, because it works intertextually with discourses of ‘good’ motherhood to restrict the legitimate needs and interests of human mothers to those that are consistent with the needs and interests of their children. From the perspective made available by these discourses, mothers have no need for, or right to, a separate speaking position, either within or beyond the world of children’s literature, because they are, effectively, extensions of their children.

The discursive work of constraining the possibilities effectively available to human mothers is reinforced in the corpus through representations of ‘good’ mothers, whose lives revolve around the needs and interests of their children, and ‘bad’ mothers, who are physically and/or emotionally absent, most often because they are ‘selfishly’ pursuing their own desires and interests rather than devoting themselves to their ‘proper’ life role. Either explicitly or implicitly, through intertextual relationships with prevailing common sense, the representations of ‘bad’ mothers work to assign them most, if not all, of the blame for their children’s various problems. In doing so, they follow a trend towards mother-blaming that is not only evident in recent children’s fiction, but is also strongly characteristic of dominant contemporary discourses about motherhood. These mothers, in other words, represent the dark side of the fantasy of the perfect mother, and as such they work to preserve the extraordinary discursive power of that fantasy.

By contrast, but also working to maintain the fantasy that mothers and motherhood can be perfected, ‘if only...’, the ‘good’ mothers in the corpus are represented as having no friends, no needs or desires of their own and no interests beyond the domestic sphere. Admittedly some of them have paid employment outside the home; however, as is also the case with the representations of ‘working’ mothers across the rest of the corpus, readers learn little, if anything, about what that employment actually involves, and nothing about what it means to the women in question. It is evidently taken for granted that these questions have no more interest or relevance to readers than they do to the self-absorbed adolescents who live in the child-centred fictive worlds constructed in these texts.
What readers do learn, in contrast to the findings of Tunstall’s (1992) study of picture books, is something of how the paid employment of mothers impacts on their families’ lives. However, most commonly, this is related to the representation of mothers’ employment as contributing to the problems faced by their offspring. Even when this is not the case, the representation of mothers as also workers seems to be more of a concession to the contemporary social reality that many Australian families depend on the incomes of working mothers than an active assertion of the rights of women with children to have needs and interests that are independent of their roles as mothers. At best, then, the combination of motherhood with paid work is represented as a phenomenon to be tolerated, leaving readers to infer that ‘good’ mothers who work outside the home do so because they have to, not because they want to. In only one short example, Andrew’s story in Love Me, Love Me Not (Gleeson 1993), are readers confronted with the possibility that, whether through involvement in paid employment or through the pursuit of other interests, a mother might legitimately – without harming her children – have a life, separate from her role as a mother, from which she gains enjoyment and satisfaction.

In what is perhaps a further concession to contemporary social reality, single motherhood is not represented in the corpus as a significant social problem; nor is it necessarily an impediment to ‘good’ motherhood, particularly if the mothers in question have previously been married or are not sexually active. Moreover, marital breakdown is not typically constructed as having disastrous consequences for children, although it is noteworthy that in the exceptional cases, ‘bad’ mothers who desert their homes and families are targeted for most of the blame.

When single mothers in the corpus are represented in negative terms, the ‘problem’ is not always linked to their marital status. Thus, whereas Hazell (1989) found that Australian adolescent fiction of the 1980s tended to represent single mothers of adolescent boys as over-protective, and hence as impediments to their sons’ healthy development, there is only one ‘over-protective’ single mother in this corpus, and in this case the ‘problem’ is discursively linked – no less problematically – to her Aboriginality rather than to the absence of her husband. There are, however, other narratives in the corpus that also work to suggest that ‘over-protective’ or ‘smothering’ mothers and mother-substitutes, whether single or not, constitute a threat to healthy masculine psychosexual development, although the discourses of motherhood and masculinity that underpin these texts are explicitly challenged in one case. While it can thus be concluded that, across the corpus as a whole, ‘over-protective’ mothers are not constructed as significant problems for boys, it is worth noting that ‘over-protective’ mothers are never represented in the corpus as a problem for their female children.

The analyses further reveal that, from the perspectives made available by the texts in the research corpus, the ‘good’ mother’s lack of any subjectivity separate from her relationships with her children encompasses a lack of sexual subjectivity. Across the corpus, the narratives construct a significant silence around the sexuality of mothers, and also that of adolescent girl
characters who assume significant mothering roles. While it is never made explicit, then, readers can take it for granted, in accordance with common-sense understandings about motherhood and sexuality, that mothers are, or properly should be, asexual beings. Certainly it is only rarely that these narratives actively work to encourage readers’ critical evaluation of these understandings, or their development of alternative models of ‘good’ motherhood that recognise the legitimacy of female sexual desire.

Indeed, across the entire research corpus there is a remarkable consistency to the discursive work of the narratives in addressing the issue of female sexuality. Very few of the 18 texts in the research corpus do not include at least some subtextual reference to this issue and a number of them address it explicitly. In almost all cases, female sexuality is constructed as a problem in need of strict regulation within the linked patriarchal institutions of marriage and motherhood, although the narratives employ a variety of sometimes contradictory themes for this discursive work.

About one third of the texts draw attention to unmarried motherhood as a further dimension of the ‘problem’ of unregulated female sexuality. As noted above, single motherhood per se is not represented as a significant social problem in this corpus. However, when single motherhood is linked with unregulated adolescent female sexuality, as it is in a number of texts, it is represented as highly problematic. This discursive work to justify the strict regulation of female sexuality, particularly during adolescence, is reinforced by a multiplicity of warnings to adolescent protagonists, and hence to readers as well, regarding the risks, often unspecified, associated with ‘getting involved too soon’. From the perspective the narratives most commonly make available to readers, the expression of female sexuality is at its most legitimate when it is deferred until adulthood and occurs in the context of a stable, long-term relationship with ‘Mr Right’: in other words, a relationship that is likely to lead to marriage and motherhood, within which patriarchal institutions female sexuality can ‘best’ be regulated.

Another line of investigation in the study that relates to the salience of the identity of ‘mother’ and the moral significance of motherhood focused on the extent to which the texts in the research corpus work to construct motherhood and fatherhood as essentially and distinctively different forms of parenthood. The findings on this issue are somewhat mixed, which is not surprising, given that popular discourses on this issue are arguably even more riddled with contradictions than might be expected of the conglomeration of ideas that typically comprise common sense. Thus, on the one hand, in regard to constructions of motherhood, much of the discursive work of the corpus is directed towards the reproduction of a social order in which the ‘relational’ work of nurturing and caring for children falls ‘naturally’ to women, on the basis of their supposed biological predisposition to concern themselves, more than men are ‘naturally’ inclined to do, with the interests and welfare of others. Within such a social order, it is both ‘obvious’ and ‘inevitable’ that motherhood and fatherhood should be qualitatively different forms of parenthood, and, furthermore, that it should be mothers, rather than fathers, who are primarily responsible for
rearing children and for ensuring all aspects of their welfare. None of the texts in the research corpus offers any serious challenge to the discourses that underpin this way of ordering the social world, and a number of them actively promote them.

On the other hand, there are a number of narratives in the corpus that can be read as counter-hegemonic in regard to understandings about fatherhood. In some cases, young male protagonists are represented as capable of the caring and nurturing work that is commonsensically assumed to be the province of girls and women, while in others, versions of fatherhood characterised by emotional detachment, authoritarianism, ‘scientific’ rationality and/or homophobic masculinism are constructed as problematic from the perspective of teenage male protagonists who model versions of masculinity more closely aligned to the gentle and caring ‘New Man’ of popular media discourses. These counter-hegemonic representations, however, do not necessarily work to encourage readers to subject dominant discourses of motherhood to critical examination as well; on the contrary, the analyses have clearly demonstrated that, with respect to motherhood, the same narratives are strongly implicated in the reproduction of hegemony. Thus, even as they work to suggest that men and boys are capable of displaying supposedly ‘feminine’ caring, nurturing and relational qualities, these narratives offer no serious challenges to common-sense understandings that link those qualities and capacities ‘naturally’ with biological femininity.

In view of the discursive work of the narratives in reinforcing such understandings, it is again no surprise that, across the entire corpus, it is rare for readers to be challenged to recognise that, as a social institution rather than a biologically determined state, motherhood has racial and ethnic dimensions. In most cases, the inclusion of characters from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds appears to be little more than a further tokenistic concession to contemporary social reality, this time with regard to Australia’s Indigenous peoples and the impact of post-World War Two immigration policies on the nation’s cultural diversity. Thus, while they work at undoing any remaining assumptions among readers that the ‘normal’ mother is white and predominantly Anglo-Celtic in ethnicity, the representations of motherhood across the corpus offer readers no active encouragement to challenge other racialised and ethnocentric understandings about motherhood.

It is clear from this summary of findings that the corpus as a whole works more to nurture than to challenge the prevailing hegemony of ‘truths’ about motherhood. As detailed in the analyses, there are points in some of the narratives where possible alternatives or revisions to those ‘truths’ are easily accessible to readers; however, even in Pagan’s Crusade (Jinks 1992) and A Long Way to Tipperary (Gough 1992), which are arguably the most playfully postmodern texts in the corpus, the narratives never actively and unequivocally encourage readers to resist the discursive power of common sense and develop radically new and counter-hegemonic understandings about motherhood. Instead, their major contribution to contemporary ideological struggles over concepts of motherhood is through representations that invoke dominant, child-
centred discourses of ‘good’ motherhood in ways that work to reinforce their acceptance as commonsensical ‘truths’. These discourses work to construct an idealised model of motherhood based on a fantasy of maternal perfectibility, and thus set all human mothers up for inevitable failure and blame. In so doing, they impose tight moral constraints on the possibilities for women with children to take up alternative subjectivities, independent of their relationships with those children, or to explore and pursue interests linked with alternative identities to that of ‘mother’. Thus, in this corpus of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction, one that can be taken as exemplifying the ‘best’ of such literature, the fantasy of the perfect mother remains not only intact but powerful.

Implications

As indicated in the introductory sections of this study, an extensive body of recent research in literacy and education has consistently emphasised the importance of recognising the potential that even seemingly ‘non-educational’ texts, such as fictional narratives for children and adolescents, have as ‘pedagogies of everyday life’ (cf. Luke 1996b). In this study, a corpus of 18 such texts, deemed by the CBCA’s judges to be among the best contemporary Australian fiction produced for adolescents, has been shown to be implicated in the work of ensuring the continued acceptance of a range of discursively constructed ‘truths’ about motherhood. This work entails justifying a social order in which the lives of women and girls are regulated on the basis of their assumed ‘primary’ identities as, either actually or potentially, ‘mothers’. The evidence documented in this study reveals these texts to be actively engaged in undermining the effectiveness of current struggles to articulate diverse social interests into a collective political will to establish a more just and equitable social order.

The study’s findings therefore have significant implications not only in the field of children’s literature, but also in education, particularly in Australia, where fictional narratives of the kind examined in this study are frequently used as school and classroom resources to support teaching and learning activities that are expected to be consistent with social justice and equity principles. However, the findings are also relevant to the broad social justice and equity concerns of researchers and practitioners in a variety of other fields.

For example, regardless of their particular fields of interest, feminist researchers and practitioners are likely to welcome the way this study sheds further light on the nature and workings of the backlash cultural forces that oppose feminist struggles for gender equity and undermine their successes. Indeed, the study has significant implications, particularly in relation to theory and methodology, for researchers and practitioners working towards other social justice goals. It has highlighted both the pervasive power and the extraordinary durability of common sense, and the extent to which, unless it is actively, explicitly and consistently challenged, it can shape the outcomes of everyday meaning-making processes – not only those employed in reading fictional texts – in ways that seriously threaten the effectiveness of social
justice struggles. Moreover, as this study has comprehensively illustrated, it can do so without seeming to be in operation at all, and this has important implications for counter-hegemonic practice, as discussed later in this section.

Not surprisingly, some of the more significant implications to be drawn from the findings are relevant to the field of children’s literature. The study has added a new perspective to research findings on the acculturational work of such literature, by drawing on analyses of the discursive construction of motherhood. This approach has illustrated that, although they might seem only loosely related, there is a common element linking the discourses of children’s literature with those of ‘good’ motherhood, one that is particularly significant to the role played by children’s fiction in the reproduction of patriarchy.

Central to both sets of discourses is the claim to ‘child-centredness’, which is taken to be what distinguishes children’s literature from all other forms of literature, and ‘good’ mothers from all other women. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, some of the more critical studies of children’s literature in recent years have demonstrated that the apparent child-centredness of children’s literature, together with its ultimately half-hearted gestures towards subversiveness and rebellion against the values of adult society, serves to mask its intensive discursive work to ensure that children and adolescents become adults in ways that are compatible with the socially sanctioned norms of their culture. At the same time, the literature reviewed in Chapter Four has made it clear that the discourses of ‘good’ motherhood are no more child-centred than those of children’s literature. In this case, the illusion of child-centredness serves to divert attention from evidence that the interests that, ultimately, are best served by the highly regulatory discourses of ‘good’ motherhood are not those of children but of patriarchy. By analysing the research corpus from the perspectives made available by both sets of research literature, the study has demonstrated the subtle yet powerfully effective ways in which these two sets of discourses work together to mask not only the orientation of the narratives towards protecting the broad interests of adult society, but also the ways in which they are deeply implicated in the more specific discursive work of regulating the lives of girls and women within the social institutions of patriarchy.

Given the findings of previous children’s literature research, the conclusion that the interests served by the texts in the research corpus are primarily those of patriarchy, rather than either adult society generally or the young people to whom such fiction is targeted, is not, in itself, surprising. Other studies have already provided clear evidence that much of the discursive work of literature for children and adolescents is directed towards the reproduction of a social order in which gender is a significant organising factor in the distribution of social goods. However, little explicit research attention has previously been given to the relevance of narrative representations of motherhood to that discursive work. Thus, the contribution of this study is in revealing that, despite the relatively minor roles that fictional mothers appear to play in children’s fiction – indeed, despite their apparent absence in many cases – representations of motherhood
may be much more significant to the acculturational work of children’s fiction than has previously been assumed. It seems that the purported child-centredness of children’s literature renders that literature a particularly useful vehicle for backlash discourses that construct women’s desires for fulfilment outside their relationships with their families and beyond the domestic sphere as illegitimate. In the fictive world of children’s literature, in which there are no legitimate perspectives except those of children and adolescents, the claims of girls and women for equal rights to the full range of social goods available to other members of society, including rights to pursue interests attached to identities other than that of ‘mother’, can come to seem particularly unreasonable.

It follows that researchers in the field of children’s literature, especially those with concerns about the interests that are served by that literature, cannot afford to allow the illusion of child-centredness to blind them to the significance of narrative representations of motherhood. The findings of this study suggest that discourses of motherhood are rarely, if ever, irrelevant to the production of meaning in children’s literature; accordingly, they can rarely be irrelevant to the acculturational work in which such literature is always actively engaged. It seems that researchers would be rewarded by giving closer and more systematic attention to the representations of motherhood in children’s literature, however marginal to the ‘child-centred’ narratives those representations might initially seem to be.

Also in the field of children’s literature, the findings of the study provide substantial grounds for a reconsideration by the CBCA of the judging criteria for the Book of the Year awards, such that they are more explicitly oriented towards the concerns of educators, particularly in regard to literacy education and social justice and equity issues. It might be argued that the CBCA is not an educational institution, and does not represent itself as one, but neither is it an innocent bystander to the inherently pedagogical work of children’s literature. On the contrary, it is evident from the discussions in Chapters One and Two that the CBCA’s goals and activities cannot be understood in isolation from those of education and schooling. Moreover, the CBCA cannot be unaware of the extent to which its own activities impact on the educational activities of schools, particularly given that many, if not most, of its members work in the field of education, and that much of its promotional work is undertaken in and through educational institutions. It is arguable, then, that the CBCA has a moral imperative to give serious critical attention to the criteria that inform the selection of short lists for its awards and lead to the valorisation of certain texts as examples of the best Australian children’s literature available.

The findings of the study also offer new orders of interest to others who, while not specifically involved in education, have more general interests in young people and the literature that is produced for and marketed to them. Those who might benefit from drawing on the study’s findings in order to develop new ways of thinking about and engaging with children’s literature include writers, editors and publishers of children’s books; reviewers and critics of that literature; librarians; and booksellers. They also include parents and other adults who select and purchase
reading materials for young people and/or otherwise share reading experiences with them. As well as offering them new perspectives on children’s literature, the study’s findings are likely to be of considerable interest to many women and men who find themselves caught up, in varying ways, in everyday struggles over social justice issues. The findings have particular relevance to people’s struggles to reconcile the conflicts and contradictions that result from their positioning within multiple discourses, including not only the highly regulatory discourses of ‘good’ motherhood, but also contemporary discourses of social justice and gender equity. Such discourses not only work to legitimate women’s desires to explore alternative identities to that of ‘mother’, and alternative paths to satisfaction and personal fulfilment beyond the ‘domestic’ sphere; they also work to legitimate men’s desires to explore new and less limiting ways of understanding ‘motherhood’, ‘fatherhood’ and ‘parenthood’, and other as-yet-unexplored possibilities beyond that. As Rothman (1994:156) pointed out, “When women do all the mothering, it’s not just the child care the men are being excused from – it’s all of the intimate care women end up providing for children, for men and for each other.”

In relation to the study’s implications for education, it is arguable that, even if the CBCA were to re-evaluate its selection criteria as suggested above, there remains a need for more careful and considered attention by educators to the policies that guide the selection and purchase of fictional texts for use in schools, whether in Australia or elsewhere. As emphasised in Chapter Two, these kinds of decisions are essentially political, partly because they have consequences in terms of the perceived legitimacy and knowledge status of the texts involved, and partly because children's books are never simply ‘out there’ waiting to be found and read. Thus, at the very least, it seems that in choosing to be guided on these matters by the decisions and advice of children's literature 'experts', whether they are the CBCA's judges or others in the field, educators have a particular responsibility to ensure that the criteria for those 'expert' decisions are compatible with stated educational goals, including those that relate to social justice and equity. This is arguably the case at all levels of decision-making in schools, and regardless of whether the texts in question are to be included in school libraries for student borrowing, used for unstructured classroom literacy activities, or incorporated into structured educational experiences such as secondary school literature studies.

Also within the field of education, the study’s findings should be of considerable interest to classroom teachers, teacher educators, and those involved in curriculum policy and development. As noted above, the study’s findings are particularly problematic in terms of the social justice and equity ideals that are officially endorsed in Australia’s national curriculum documents, and indeed in the mission statements and educational philosophies of Australian schools and education authorities generally. It is clear that the ideologies that are nurtured by the representations of motherhood in the research corpus – and are likely to be similarly nurtured in much, if not all, of the adolescent fiction that is commonly used to support teaching and learning activities in schools – cannot be said to be inclusive of the interests of all students. On the contrary, they are exclusive, in the sense that they evidently do not recognise and value a
broad variety of ways of understanding motherhood, and nor do they actively encourage their readers to do so; thus, they are potentially normative in their effects.

These are significant concerns in the areas of both primary and secondary school literacy and English education, and in teacher education and professional development. It is important to recognise that while the study has focused on examples of contemporary, critically acclaimed fiction for ‘older readers’ that are likely to be used for pedagogical purposes, its findings are relevant to other kinds of children’s literature and their uses, or potential uses, in educational contexts. Certainly it seems that those findings lend further credibility to the broad thesis that there is an increasing intensity to at least some aspects of the socialising work of children’s fiction as the target audience approaches adulthood, such that, in a fundamentally patriarchal society, adolescent fiction is particularly actively involved in shaping the subjectivities and desires of female readers in preparation for their ‘primary’ life roles as ‘mothers’. However, this is not to say that fiction for younger readers is not complicit in such work, only that it may be less actively so. Nor can it reasonably be supposed that the study’s findings are generalisable only to other Australian children’s literature, or only to other children’s literature that has been shortlisted for CBCA awards, or only to other children’s fiction with ‘literary merit’. On the contrary, it should be clear that these findings can open up new ways of thinking about the entire corpus of children’s literature, as well as new perspectives from which to consider the educational value of that literature and how it can best be used to support teaching and learning in schools.

In considering how the problems highlighted above might best be addressed by educators, the first point that must be emphasised is that the ‘solution’ cannot involve simply removing texts of the kind used in this study from classrooms and schools, and replacing them with alternatives that seem more ‘ideologically sound’, or perhaps ‘ideologically neutral’. As suggested above, it seems most unlikely that the findings of this study cannot be generalised beyond the research corpus; moreover, it has been emphasised throughout this study that there can be no such thing as a neutral text. Even if such texts were available, there remains the question of purpose: for what educational purpose might such texts be incorporated into school and classroom teaching and learning activities? Embedded in this question is another: what is the purpose of literacy education? Arguably, these questions lie at the heart of the issues for educators that are highlighted by the findings of this study.

A second and related point, stressed by Pope et al (1990:446), is that “simply exposing the ideological construction of mothering does not necessarily empower one to disrupt it.” This point applies equally to the exposure of other kinds of ideologies at work, and raises the “So what?” question that is crucial not only to studies such as this, but also to the issue of literacy education. Put simply, the point is that it is not enough for teachers to demonstrate the ideological work of texts, or particular texts, to students; a worthwhile literacy education must do more.
It has been argued in this study that many of the reading practices that young people most commonly acquire in schools are more disabling than enabling. Unless classroom pedagogies actively encourage children and adolescents to engage with texts in ways that enable them to recognise and resist the processes by which all texts work to construct meanings, literacy education can leave young people vulnerable to manipulation, not only by fictional texts such as those used in this study, but also by the extensive variety of written, spoken and visual texts that they typically encounter on a daily basis. This is particularly likely in the case of texts, such as most of those used in this study, that implicitly invite readers to rely on common-sense ideologies to supply them with ‘the meaning’, rather than actively encouraging them to recognise and explore a multiplicity of alternative meaning-making possibilities. However, as explained in Chapter Three, even those playful and overtly intertextual narratives for children and adolescents that constantly remind readers – as, for example, *A Long Way to Tipperary* (Gough 1992) often does – that they are not reflections of ‘reality’ or ‘truth’, but social and linguistic constructions, cannot be assumed to be innocent of involvement in the (re)production of ideology. To argue that such texts are more likely to be involved in counter-hegemonic work than in reinforcing common sense is to miss the point. A genuinely enabling literacy education must provide students with a range of meta-level skills and strategies for critique, and it must actively encourage them to use those strategies to resist all kinds of textual manipulation, not just manipulation by fictional narratives, and not just manipulation by texts that work to undermine the successes of feminist and other human rights movements. Ultimately, passive and uncritical acceptance of the goals of social justice and equity may be just as much of a threat to the achievement of those goals as the forces that actively oppose them.

Accordingly, the task for classroom teachers is not so much one of reconsidering what children and adolescents read as it is one of considering how they read, how they might read differently, and what kinds of pedagogical strategies and practices can most usefully be employed to provide them with a literacy education that is worthy of the name. It is beyond the scope of this study to offer specific suggestions about what those strategies and practices might be, although it should be apparent that many of the analytical strategies outlined in Chapter Six could be adapted for use in classroom settings. Moreover, in addition to the research literature from which this study has drawn, particularly in the final section of Chapter Three, there is an expanding body of theoretical and practical literature available to support teachers in developing critical literacy pedagogies.

It must be stressed, however, that teachers should not be obliged to undertake this task on their own; indeed, it is arguable that teachers’ own needs for critical literacy education must be addressed before those of their students. Teachers themselves must know how to draw on a wide range of meta-level literacy skills and strategies in their everyday encounters with texts, and to recognise both the professional and personal benefits of doing so, so that, as well as teaching those skills and strategies explicitly to students, they can model the practices of critical literacy on a daily basis. It follows that the study’s findings have significant implications for
teacher educators and others, including education administrators, who are involved in teachers’ pre-service and continuing professional education, and are charged with responsibilities for ensuring that classroom teachers have the theoretical understandings, as well as the practical skills, resources and support they need to fulfil their roles as critical literacy educators.

Finally, some of the study’s implications in terms of research methodology should briefly be noted. As mentioned earlier in this section, the study drew on research findings, both theoretical and empirical, in the seemingly unrelated areas of children’s literature and motherhood. Moreover, in drawing these two bodies of work together, the study also incorporated a range of theoretical understandings developed in research fields as diverse as social theory, psychoanalysis, critical linguistics, cultural studies and narratology, and used them to develop a set of practical investigative strategies that could productively be applied to a research topic in the field of English literacy education. Thus, the study not only serves to demonstrate the value of an interdisciplinary approach to the development of new knowledge; it also offers a further challenge to conventional demarcations between theory, method and practice. It has been shown here that it is not always possible – it may even be counter-productive – to understand research methods as separable from the theoretical understandings that underpin them, or even from their application in practice.

The utility of the research practices outlined in Chapter Six has also been demonstrated in this study. In particular, the value of attending to the focalising strategies employed in fictional narratives, as advocated by Stephens (1992), has been confirmed. In this study, close attention to focalisation, and how it operates in conjunction with other narrative strategies to position readers in particular power-knowledge relationships with fictional texts, has facilitated a more systematic analytical approach to a substantial corpus than has generally been evident in previous children’s literature research, except in those studies that have adopted content-analytic approaches.

To conclude this discussion, it should be noted that the methodological approach adopted for this study, and the research practices used to tackle the analytical tasks it entailed, could usefully be adapted for the purposes of examining textual representations of a variety of social concepts and categories of person. However, before discussing the possibilities for further research, it is important to acknowledge some of the more significant limitations of the study.

**Limitations of the study**

All research has limitations of some kind, if only in terms of scope. Notwithstanding the arguments above regarding the generalisability of the findings, this study has been limited by its focus on the 18 texts short-listed by the CBCA for the award of *Book of the Year: Older Readers* in the years 1992 to 1994. While it is arguable that these texts are representative of the adolescent fiction valorised by the CBCA and appropriated for use in the education of young
people, it cannot be claimed that they are representative of contemporary Australian adolescent fiction generally, let alone the full range of fiction produced for children and adolescents worldwide.

It was not feasible to do full justice to the analytical possibilities of the corpus. As explained in Chapter Six, it was in recognition of this that the analyses focused more on the narrative features of the texts than on their linguistic features, and that the two chapters of analyses were structured to provide for detailed studies of six texts, backed up by relatively brief thematic analyses of the remainder of the corpus. It was acknowledged in Chapter Six that none of the resulting analyses could be said to be exhaustive, but it is worth re-stating this here: there is undoubtedly more – in some cases, much more – that could usefully be said about the ways in which motherhood is represented, not only in the 12 texts analysed in Chapter Eight, but also in the 6 texts analysed in Chapter Seven.

In particular, dimensions of ‘otherness’ in the representation of motherhood have been insufficiently addressed in this study. While it was demonstrated in Chapter Four that common-sense understandings about motherhood take the ‘normal’ mother to be one who is married, heterosexual, white and middle-class, the analyses attended to issues of race and ethnicity in the representations of motherhood in the research corpus much more than they did to other aspects of ‘otherness’. Issues of class thus received little of the explicit analytical attention that they clearly warrant, particularly given the evidence, discussed in Chapter Two, that children’s literature is implicated in the work of privileging middle-class views of the social world. Indeed, it became clear as the analyses progressed that the texts used for this study are inflected throughout with middle-class values. Even the extracts included in Chapter Six to illustrate some of the research methods employed in the study are sufficient to indicate that close analytical attention to the class dimensions of motherhood, as it is represented in the corpus, would prove most productive. Thus, in The House Guest (Nilsson 1991), the narrative’s early work in representing Gunno as ‘not really the house-breaking type’ also reveals him to readers as ‘a nice middle-class boy’ – one who is subsequently shown to feel completely at ease in Anne and Geoffrey’s substantial house and garden, and whose interest in the range of ‘classic’ children’s literature he finds in that house has been cultivated by a mother who, in ‘good’ middle-class style, has shared with him her own love of ‘good’ literature. In the early pages of Peter (Walker 1991), too, the contrasting versions of motherhood represented by Peter’s ‘good’ mother and the nosey old jelly-roll, Mrs Minslow, are strongly inflected with notions of class; the unpleasant Mrs Minslow is, after all, the ‘cleaning lady’. It was not feasible, however, for the study to explore these issues to any useful extent, and this clearly limits the value of its findings.

A range of other aspects of ‘otherness’ in relation to motherhood also warrant greater attention than they received in this study, although in most cases it seems likely that closer analysis could do little more than highlight the ways in which, in their representations of motherhood, the narratives construct a series of significant silences. For example, while the mothers represented
in the research corpus have a variety of things ‘wrong’ with them as mothers, readers might reasonably infer that they are all, apart from Miranda’s dead mother in Seeing Things (Klein 1993), in excellent physical health, such that none of them appears to suffer from so much as a headache, let alone any of the more disabling physical conditions that one might expect to see in a similarly sized sample of actual mothers. A closer examination of this silence in the representation of motherhood in the research corpus, one that perhaps built on the analyses of the representation of Lisa’s depression in Change the Locks (French 1991) and the marginalisation of Gunno’s ‘unbalanced’ and ‘fanciful’ mother in The House Guest (Nilsson 1991), might well have proved both informative and useful.

Similarly, while Peter (Walker 1991) made a point of addressing the issue of male homosexuality, it is the only text in the corpus that acknowledges even the possibility of homosexual desire, male or female. Given the apparent trend in contemporary adolescent fiction towards ‘over the top’ social realism, and the claim by many children’s literature ‘experts’ that young people need and want to read fiction that supports their supposed enthusiasm for exploring contemporary and controversial social issues, the absence of any homosexual characters in the other 17 texts in the corpus is remarkable in itself, and clearly warrants further investigation. More specifically, it would have enhanced the value of the findings of this study to have explored the silence that has apparently been constructed in the research corpus around the issue of lesbian sexuality and the possibility of lesbian motherhood, as an additional dimension to the discursive work of the narratives towards the regulation of female sexuality within patriarchy.

These limitations of the study suggest only some of the possible directions that further research might usefully take in the light of its findings. Other directions for further research are suggested in the following section.

**Directions for further research**

A number of possibilities for further research have emerged from the discussion so far. For example, in discussing the implications of the study, it was suggested that its methodological approach, including the research practices it employed, could productively be adapted for the purposes of analysing how other social concepts, institutions or categories of person are represented in texts. These need not necessarily be examples of children’s literature, but the same approaches could be used to address some of this study’s limitations, for example, by examining how notions of social class are inflected in representations of motherhood in contemporary adolescent fiction. Other possibilities include a study of representations of fatherhood, the findings of which could usefully complement those of this study, and a study of the ways in which teachers and schooling are represented. Findings from the latter study might have particular value in the light of emerging concerns about declining student interest in the sciences, at least in Australian schools. As noted in Chapter Two, most of the writers of the
texts used for this study are teachers or former teachers, and as the analyses progressed it became apparent that a number of the narratives work to construct a binary opposition that privileges the humanities over the sciences. For example, as noted in Chapter Eight, Nathaniel in *The Gathering* (Carmody 1993) is represented as exemplifying a sensitive and caring version of masculinity, in part through his clashes with his science teachers, in which they are shown to be regimented in their thinking and overly concerned with objective facts rather than feelings; moreover, it seems that the only part of Nathaniel’s school that is untainted by the evil that permeates his community is the library. Similarly, there is some evidence across the research corpus to support Scutter’s (1996, 1999) brief comments on an apparent trend in recent Australian adolescent fiction towards representing English teachers, and English literature, as agents of redemption and healing for students.

The striking intensity with which the texts used for this study engage in the discursive work of regulating female sexuality and sexual desire within an Australian context of (apparently) relaxed sexual mores suggests a need for further, more specific research in this area. While this study gave considerable attention to this aspect of the narratives, it could do so only in relation to the representation of motherhood, and it seems likely that more focused attention to the representation of female sexuality in adolescent fiction, perhaps incorporating an examination of representations of male sexuality, would be both informative and worthwhile.

The study’s findings also suggest at least two useful directions for classroom-based research in literacy education. One involves documenting the actual pedagogical practices currently employed by English teachers when working with texts of the kind used in this study. The findings could assist in identifying teachers’ professional development needs in the area of critical literacy education, and in developing appropriate strategies and resources to meet those needs. Such a study would also enable identification and wider dissemination of examples of ‘best practice’ pedagogical approaches to contemporary adolescent fiction. Moreover, the findings of such a project would complement those of this study. Other classroom-based studies might incorporate a professional development component into the research process, perhaps by using collaborative, action research to assist teachers to develop new ways of thinking about and using children’s literature to support critical literacy education in schools.

Finally, at the level of theory – although, for writers and others involved in the production of children’s literature, this is also a practical problem – there may be value in exploring the possibilities for new forms of children’s literature and new ways of conceptualising the field. This study has added weight to previous arguments by socially critical researchers that the illusion of child-centredness, and the conventional emphasis in narratives for children and adolescents on presenting the social world from what purports to be the perspective of the target audience, are not in the best interests of young people. The study has shown that they serve the interests of girls and women particularly poorly, but it should also be clear that they are not in the best interests of males, either: the life choices of men and boys are also effectively restricted within a
patriarchal social order, albeit in different ways. With this in mind, researchers in the field of children’s literature might want to explore whether, and how, fictional narratives for children and adolescents might represent parents and other adults, particularly mothers, as having identities, interests and desires that are independent of their relationships with their children, but no less legitimate for being so, while still retaining their appeal to their target audience.

The case of *The Collectors* (Carter 1993) suggests that such a project may be a considerable challenge: it seems possible that it is precisely because of this novel’s non-conformity with the conventional characteristics of children’s literature that it has been something of a failure in the marketplace, despite the critical acclaim of the CBCA’s judges. Whether or not the challenge can successfully be addressed, however, may ultimately be irrelevant, because changing children’s literature can never obviate the need for the kind of critical literacy pedagogies advocated earlier in this chapter. Indeed, it seems possible that the long-term consequences of a thorough-going implementation of such pedagogies would include market-driven changes in the literature produced for children and adolescents, as a more critically literate target audience becomes increasingly resistant to colonisation.

**Nurturing ideology**

As suggested in Chapter Three, literature for children and adolescents need not work to reinforce conservative social forces, although it is evident that it most commonly does so. Accordingly, it need not work in the interests of preserving the fantasy of the perfect mother; as one of the many and diverse institutions and practices that work, in conjunction with common sense, to shape everyday social life, children’s literature has the potential to be a counter-hegemonic resource for nurturing radically new ideologies of motherhood in the interests of gender equity. One way in which it might do so is through representations of motherhood that work to challenge the justice of a social order that, on the basis of their actual or potential motherhood, effectively limits the range of social goods available to girls and women, while also constraining, albeit in different ways, the range of social goods accessible to boys and men. Alternatively, children’s literature might serve as a resource for change by means of the domestic and official pedagogies within which it is read.

In other words, it is not necessary to wait for children’s literature to change, or even to agitate for such change, in order to change its ideological effects. This study has found that the representations of motherhood in a corpus of contemporary, critically acclaimed adolescent fiction are relentlessly directed towards nurturing the prevailing hegemony of common-sense understandings about motherhood. However, it has also been argued here – indeed, it has been demonstrated in Chapters Seven and Eight – that just as this discursive work can undermine struggles for social justice and gender equity, so, too, can this work itself be undermined by critical reading strategies.
It follows that through their appropriation into school and classroom settings as educational resources, texts such as those on which this study has focused can be used to nurture ideology in two radically different ways. One way relies on conventional approaches to reading fiction, and involves accepting the judgement of children’s literature ‘experts’ that these texts have both ‘literary merit’ and ‘child appeal’, and are hence not only ‘good’ children’s books, but also books that will be, in and of themselves, ‘good’ for their child or adolescent readers. The ideologies that are most likely to be nurtured, albeit passively, through this approach are those that the texts themselves work to support, and, as this study has demonstrated, these are unlikely to be counter-hegemonic. Accordingly, whether or not it is explicitly stated, the educational goal in this case is one of acculturating students into the prevailing social order.

Alternatively, these texts could be recognised, as they are in this study, as being fundamentally implicated in the (re)production of ideology. As such, they are potentially valuable resources in an educational project that gives explicit support to social justice and equity goals through the deployment of critical literacy pedagogies. In this case, the educational goal is one of equipping students with a set of genuinely enabling literacy skills and strategies, such that they can recognise the ideological implications, for all members of society, of the various ways in which fictional narratives represent the social world. From that recognition can begin the tasks of actively challenging ideologies, including ideologies of motherhood, that help to create, maintain and justify inequitable ways of distributing social goods, and working to develop a new collective will towards the achievement of social justice and equity goals.

This study is informed by, and has contributed to, a growing tradition of research in the field of critical literacy. Through its focus on something that appears, commonsensically, to be innocent and straightforward – representations of motherhood in ‘good’ literature for adolescents – it serves to reinforce the central claims of critical literacy advocates, that literacy education is a fundamentally moral and political issue, and that there is no neutral ground.
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