Making Men:
Representations of boyhoods in contemporary young adult fictions

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Abstract

From the early 1990s onwards the representations of boyhoods which have been most visible in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the USA have suggested that boys as a group are problematic both to themselves and to the societies in which they live. Images which have been projected from cultural spaces including film, advertising, music, and the popular press produce pictures of danger and conversely, inadequacy. A number of generalist books which have appeared on the market express anxieties about boys' futures, citing with regularity problems with emotional literacy and educational underachievement. Academic literature, in responding to these claims, has largely become framed by the notion of 'crisis', giving priority either to boyhoods which are perceived as problematic or addressing the discourse either to prove or disprove its validity. Far less work has gone into exploring other, more positive aspects of boys' lives and their attendant optimistic, affirmative images with which boys can engage.

This thesis explores a neglected source of cultural images of boyhoods; novels drawn from the genre of young adult fiction with teenage, male protagonists and published in the UK, Australia, and the USA from the 1990s into the new millennium. In doing so it considers ways in which fictional boys are portrayed in these texts and the images which they are projecting about boyhoods to potential readers. My research reveals that this area of publishing offers diverse images of fictional boyhoods, some of which do address questions raised in the course of the 'crisis' debate, some presenting other versions of being young and male. I conclude that as a body of work they represent a positive source for images of boyhoods and, significantly, reinstate the perception of boys as individual, unique and diverse; something which is missing from most of the

representations which arise from the 'crisis' discourse, with its construction of boys as a homogenous group whose members lack individual agency. As such, they offer readers (male and female, juvenile and adult) an alternative source of cultural imagery - more individualistic, more optimistic - about boyhoods, than many of the more visible and debated cultural versions currently in circulation in the UK, Australia and the USA.

Key works discussed (listed alphabetically by author): *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* by Joe Babcock, *Tyrell* by Coe Booth, *Blade: Playing Dead* by Tim Bowler, *Doing It* by Melvin Burgess, *The Heroic Lives of Al Capsella* by Judith Clarke, *My Side of the Story* by Will Davis, *Metro* by Alasdair Duncan, *Sushi Central* by Alasdair Duncan, *48 Shades of Brown* by Nick Earls, *Deadly Unna?* by Philip Gwynne, *Nukkin' Ya* by Philip Gwynne, *By the River* by Steven Herrick, *What We Do Is Secret* by Thorn Kief Hillsbery, *Jack* by A.M. Holmes, *Mahalia* by Joanne Horniman, *Alex Rider* series by Anthony Horowitz, *Slam* by Nick Hornby, *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson, *Harold's End* by JT LeRoy, *Boy meets Boy* by David Levithan, *Indigo's Star* by Hilary McKay, *Boy Soldier* series by Andy McNab, *Cherub Club* series by Robert Muchamore, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, *Sad Boys* by Glyn Parry, *The Crew* by Bali Rai, *Gangsta Rap* by Benjamin Zephaniah.

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Introduction. 'Boys are Beautiful'

It is five months since the trial, almost a year, minus a few days, since the robbery in the drugstore. James King was sentenced to 25 years to life. Osvaldo was arrested for stealing a car and sent to a reformatory. As far as I know, Bobo is still in jail.

My mother doesn't understand what I am doing with the films I am making. I have been taking movies of myself. In the movies I talk and tell the camera who I am, what I think I am about. Sometimes I set the camera up outside and walk up to it from different angles.

Sometimes I set the camera up in front of a mirror and film myself as a reflection. I wear different clothes and sometimes try to change my voice. Jerry likes to use the camera, and I let him film me too. Whatever I do pleases my mother, because I am here with her and not put away in some jail.

After the trial, my father, with tears in his eyes, held me close and said that he was thankful that I did not have to go to jail. He moved away, and the distance between us seemed to grow bigger and bigger. I understand the distance. My father is no longer sure of who I am. He doesn't understand me knowing people like King or Bobo or Osvaldo. He wonders what else he doesn't know.

That is why I take the films of myself. I want to know who I am. I want to know the road to panic that I took. I want to look at myself a thousand times to look for one true image. When Miss O'Brien looked at me, after we had won the case, what did she see that caused her to turn away?

What did she see?
(Myers, 1999: 279-281)

Walter Dean Myers' *Monster* (1999) is a fictional account of one year in the life of Steve Harmon, a sixteen year old, African American boy, resident of Harlem, New York City. However for several months of the year in question he has been incarcerated in the Manhattan Detention Center, on trial for taking part in a drugstore robbery which led to the murder of the shop owner. Steve is the narrator of the story, though Myers chooses to present the narrative through two different forms: a diary in which Steve's private thoughts and feelings are disclosed, and a film script which Steve writes to relive the events in the courtroom. Steve is described in the novel as a promising film student and

his college tutor acts as a character witness for him in court. The interactions of the two narratorial modes suggest that Steve uses the script to distance himself from what is happening, to try and make sense of the chaotic situation. The emotional trauma he is going through becomes evident in the diary entries. In terms of the narrative as a whole, the changes in format raise awareness about perception; without access to Steve's internal thoughts and feelings, how do others - his father, the lawyer, the jurors, other prisoners - make judgments about him? On what are their conclusions based? Is he really a monster? Myers never answers this directly; the outcome is ambivalent, perhaps deliberately so, leaving readers to arrive at their own conclusions.

Myers' narrative raises a number of interesting questions specifically about perceptions and representations of boyhood beyond the plot of the novel; most importantly, it asks when looking at young men, what do we as individuals, as a society, see? From this it goes on to question whether we position them as a homogeneous group and judge them as such? Are we influenced by social status or race? What impact does this have on individual boys? The title of Myers' novel, *Monster*, is a loaded descriptor, and suggests preconceived opinions and value judgments and yet, it is quite appropriate as a precursor to my thesis which is concerned with attitudes and anxieties about boys in Britain, the USA, and Australia. Since the early 1990s all three countries have expressed concerns about their boys, perceiving and representing them as both troubled and troubling. How and why this negative discourse about boys in crisis came into existence, and how it is negotiated and translated by fictional narratives, is the central concern of this thesis. Using evidence gathered from wide reading of novels published for the teenage fiction market (also known as Young Adult or YA) as well as material from

cognate research fields (Men's Studies, Gender, and Boyhood), alongside images of

boyhood in popular culture, I consider whether 'crisis' is a term which can credibly be

applied to boyhood. Further, I question if crisis is a helpful framework or simply serves

to reinforce negative perceptions, encouraging societies to think of boys as a problematic,

indistinguishable group. While the thesis does consider current attitudes towards

boyhood, the main focus is on the period from the mid-1990s to the beginning of the new

millennium, for this is when the idea of 'crisis' was particularly prevalent. The thesis,

therefore, considers the crisis discourse retrospectively while also exploring its impact on

continuing research in the area of boyhood. In addition to the novels published during the

period under discussion I also include a number of more recent works which point to

possible future directions for debates and imagery about boyhood.

In considering 'crisis' in terms of a discourse, I draw in essence on the ideas of

Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*

(1971), in which he explores the relationship between structures of power and

signification. A more contemporary explanation of discourse in the spirit of Foucault is

suggested by Woods (1999) who acknowledges the problematic nature of the term:

> 'Discourse' is a slippery word, but it is often understood as the
> institutionalised practice through which signification and value are imposed,
> sanctioned and exchanged. In other words, discourses are the variety of
> different linguistic structures in which we engage in dynamic interchanges
> of beliefs, attitudes, sentiments and other expressions of consciousness,
> underpinned as they are by specific configurations of historical, social and
> cultural power.
> (14-15)

Woods' description of discourse informs its use in this thesis in that I understand

societies and cultures to be both regulated and constructed by discursive practices which

consequently impact on and constrain the thoughts and behaviour of the individual. Barry

(2009) captures both the diverse yet all encompassing nature of discourse as originally

suggested by Foucault:

> Discourse is not just a way of speaking, or writing, but the whole 'mental
> set' and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given
> society. It is not singular and monolithic – there is always a multiplicity of
> discourses – so that the operation of structures is as significant a factor in
> (say) the family as in layers of government.
> (170)

This is especially pertinent in relation to the concept of 'crisis' and how it has become

increasingly associated with boyhood, a situation largely created through popular cultural

media and academic discussion.

'Boys in crisis'

In 1996 Australian author Glyn Parry addressed the Third National Conference of the

Children's Book Council in Brisbane. While Parry's paper, entitled 'Boys are Beautiful',

ostensibly considered the subject of boys and reading, or their perceived failure to read,

he used the address to raise awareness of what he alleged was the hazardous state of

boys' lives: not just their educational underachievement but also their predilection for

risk-taking behaviour and its consequences:

> I worry when the Australian Broadcasting Authority informs me that boys
> want to see dead bodies and lots of blood. I worry when I am told that boys
> are more likely to be suspended or excluded from school, that boys are more
> likely to commit suicide or be involved in a fatal accident, that the enemy
> they kill is within.
> (Parry, 1996: 57)

Delivered in the aftermath of the Port Arthur Massacre[1] Parry's address was emotional

and as such, unmeasured. Yet since then he has not been alone in suggesting that boys are

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[1] A massacre took place in Port Arthur, Tasmania, on 28 April 1996 when 35 people were killed and
another 21 wounded by 28 year-old Martin Bryant, who went on a shooting spree. See M. Bingham (1996)

in trouble. For example, writing in the USA in 2000, Christina Hoff Sommers highlighted

similar concerns about the ways in which boys are perceived in contemporary society:

> It's a bad time to be a boy in America. As the new millennium begins, the triumphant victory of our women's soccer team has come to symbolize the spirit of American girls. The defining event for boys is the shooting at Columbine High.[2]
> (18)

Sommers, then, suggests that boys have become entwined in and are possibly being

defined by a discourse which equates them with violence and failure. Like Parry, she

goes on to consider their educational underachievement and the inevitable concerns this

raises about their long term future prospects. Although different in many respects, British

author Melvin Burgess, discussing the characters in his novel *Doing It* (2003), suggests

that in contemporary texts, fictional male characters are represented by a very limited

range of types. He further implies that perceptions of young men in society as a whole are

inaccurate and damaging:

> There's no shortage of people willing to sneer at young men for their clumsiness, their shyness, their lack of social skills and to attack them for their attitude to girls. Men, perhaps not in society at large but in fictions, often don't get a good deal these days. There's the action man, the cool dude, the oaf, the wimp; not much else […] I wanted to do some psychological realism and show that young men aren't just blundering buffoons, teetering on the edge of sexual violence all the time, but sensitive as well as coarse, thoughtful as well as lustful, vulnerable as well as crude; and above all, irreverent and funny.
> (Burgess, 2004: 296)

While Burgess seeks to impress on readers the roundedness of the fictional male

character and, by implication, young men on the street, he nevertheless draws a

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Suddenly One Sunday or M. Scott (1996) *Port Arthur: A Story of Strength and Courage* for more details about the events.
[2] The now infamous Columbine High School massacre took place on 20 April 1999. Two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed 12 students and a teacher before committing suicide. For a detailed study of the events and the implications of the killings see, D. Cullen (2009) *Columbine*.

distinction between the fictional landscape and the world at large, where he acknowledges the privileges which being male can potentially bring. In relation to the work of Sommers and Parry, then, Burgess shifts the emphasis; his intention is to highlight the various characteristics of young men, positive and negative, suggesting for example that they can be simultaneously sensitive and 'laddish'. For Parry and Sommers emphasis needs to be given to what they consider 'penalisation', the term they use to describe the way they see boys 1) being castigated for being 'too masculine' and 2) being coerced, through the environments in which they find themselves, to become more feminized. Parry sums up the situation as he perceives it:

> The system sucks, too. Doesn't anyone have a conscience? Can't anyone see what we're doing to our boys when we consign them to the remedial class, the special class, the Time Out room? The feminisation of our schools – the appalling lack of male role models – is screwing up a generation of boys. (58)

The arguments introduced by Parry and Sommers are potentially divisive. Parry's suggestion that there has been a feminization of education which disadvantages boys and Sommers' claim that girls have been privileged to the detriment of boys - that the needs of boys have not been given enough attention in recent years – polarize gendered behaviours, pitting males against females in ways which the majority of theorists have been striving to avoid since the advent of second-wave feminism.

I have begun this study with reference to writings from three individuals working from different ideological positions and living on different continents: what is significant is that all suggest that since the mid 1990s boyhood has become the subject of concerned debate. My aim in doing so is to illustrate that while boyhood has indeed become the subject of much discussion this has generally produced negative images and raised

anxiety around boys. The ideas put forward by Sommers, Parry and Burgess do not exist

in isolation but are influenced by and contribute to cultural images of boyhood which

came into existence from a number of different - often competing - sites. One significant

source of material relating to men and boys is the field of Men's Studies, made up of both

academic research and popularist writings. In examining this diverse range of material it

is also important to recognise the debates which have taken place around the field which

this research has created. In the *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (2005),

Connell, Hearn and Kimmel acknowledge the contradictions and political implications

inherent in classification:

> There is some debate about what to call this field of knowledge. Some
> scholars have called the field "men's studies", and this certainly reflects the
> origins of the field. Other scholars consider the symmetrical nomenclature
> misleading because of the asymmetry of gender relations that made the
> creation of "women's studies" a project of self-knowledge by a subordinated
> group. The editors of this volume fall into this latter camp and consider
> terms such as "studies of men and masculinities" and "critical studies of
> men" to more accurately reflect the nature of contemporary work, which is
> inspired by, but not simply parallel to, feminist research on women.
> (2-3)

While I recognise and am in accord with the stance taken by Connell, Hearn and Kimmel,

I have continued to use the term 'Men's Studies' for the purposes of this thesis as it

consistently highlights the political origins of the field and the often discordant

relationship with both Women's Studies and the concept of feminism from certain

elements working within Men's Studies; I consider this to be particularly significant in

exploring the 'boyhood in crisis' discourse.

Initially perceived as a site through which men's responses to second-wave

feminism could be addressed, the field now also incorporates material which explores

issues affecting the lives of boys and men, addressing in particular the impact of

changing social landscapes and how gendered identities are negotiated and redefined in

light of these changes. The wide range of research material which has come out of the

field will be highlighted later in this introduction, but it is important from the beginning

to acknowledge the potential influences of the diverse material which makes up Men's

Studies on those involved in the lives of young men. For the purpose of this research, I

have also been alert to its influence on authors and others working in the creative

industries, who produce cultural representations of boyhood and in the process,

potentially influence societies' attitudes towards young men in both positive and negative

ways. Writers can reinforce 'crisis' but they can also enrich images of boyhoods;

expanding how they are understood, what they can encompass, and how they can be

revised.

Burgess' stated intention through his fiction is to describe young men as

multidimensional, able to negotiate flexible gender identities, and not welded to

presenting themselves as macho or sensitive, masculine or feminine. While discussing the

Columbine massacre, Sommers acknowledges the possibility for diverse behaviour

among boys and the fact that they are not a homogeneous group,

> Hundreds of boys attend Littleton's Columbine High. Some of them
> behaved heroically during the shooting there […] Later, heartbroken boys
> attended the memorial services […] To take two morbid killers as being
> representative of "the nature of boyhood" is profoundly misguided and
> deeply disrespectful of boys in general.
> (13-14)

However her writing in general makes little distinction between boyhoods and suggests

limited diversity in communities of boys. While it may seem obvious to suggest that boys

are unique individuals, examining material which deals with the idea of 'crisis' in relation

to boys and men's lives suggest this is not always evident.[3] Without considering

difference: different ethnicities; different social status; different sexualities, and

individual agency as expressed through aspirations; ambitions and/or uniqueness, the

idea of boyhood becomes merely a blank canvas onto which society's hopes and fears

about young men are projected. In relation to children's literature, Jacqueline Rose

suggests a similar relationship between adults and children (as opposed specifically to

boys): in *The Case of Peter Pan, or, the impossibility of children's fiction* (1984) she

questions whether it is possible for children's literature to exist at all on the grounds that

it is a medium which represents and addresses an adult fantasy of childhood rather than

real children. Annette Wannamaker makes a similar point in relation to American

boyhood in her study, *Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture: Masculinity,*

Abjection, and the Fictional Child (2008). Wannamaker acknowledges that there are a

number of concerns about boys in contemporary society in the USA, verified in statistical

data, which show boys to be struggling in diverse areas of their lives. However, she also

seeks to stress the difference between perceptions of and opinions about boys as a

category and real boys' lives: "If what we, in the contemporary United States, *think* about

boys matters more than what boys actually *are*, then our boys are in big trouble because

they are, at least within popular discourse, in the midst of a crisis."(1) She goes on to

acknowledge the importance of individual agency and the complex nature of personal

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[3] Various newspaper and magazine articles as well as academic writings have been produced which discuss the 'crisis' facing boys and men. Examples include: 'Tomorrow's Second Sex'. *The Economist.* 340.7985, 1996; L. Tanner. 'Boys struggle with men's lack of status'. *The Australian.* Monday 5 March, 2007; A. Clare. 'On Men: Masculinity in Crisis'. *The Guardian.* Monday 25 September, 2000. (This is an extract from Clare's book of the same title, published in 2000). Much of this material suggests an archetypal boy or man who is usually white and middle-class and becomes representative of all boys and men.

identity formation, but suggests that this may be suppressed in public discourse as boys come to represent simultaneously the hopes and fears of a society.

In his assessment of the American boy, Kenneth Kidd (2004) situates the diverse discourses about boyhood firmly within a political context. He suggests that much of the debate taking place around boys - what he terms 'boyology' - is in fact a reflection of conservative American politics:

> The boys' movement is imagined variously as a pioneering defence of boyhood, as a rejoinder to an exaggerated girl crisis, and as a parallel crisis that also demands attention. The rhetoric of the boy crisis is at once sexist and indebted to feminism; it also echoes the language of civil rights while ignoring racial and class biases of our culture. That the new boyology should function as a referendum on feminism and indeed all of the social reforms of the last thirty-plus years isn't surprising, as boyology is at heart a conservative American ideology of masculine self-making.
> (170)

Kidd highlights the way this ultimately conservative faction draws on the frameworks of other movements which have fought for social justice, namely the Women's and Civil Rights Movements. To these I would add the Gay Rights Movement, significantly, also politically active from the 1960s. All of these groups share a common goal – to redistribute privilege more fairly across the whole of society as opposed to the wealth and power of the nation being retained by one group, namely white, middle and upper-class heterosexual men. While not refuting the fact that real problems exist in relation to some boys' lives, it is imperative to acknowledge that those involved in the debate may well be politically motivated, be they conservative, socialist, liberal, or revisionist. Returning to the work of Sommers, it is evident that her work is rooted in conservative political ideology; she refers specifically to the work of Carol Gilligan, which she attempts to discredit by questioning Gilligan's research methods and, proposing that Gilligan's *In a*

Different Voice (1982) led to educational reforms which privileged girls and resulted in

the current state of boys' education or mis-education. She vitriolically calls Gilligan the

"matron saint of the girl crisis movement" adding:

> Gilligan, more than anyone else, is cited as the academic and scientific
> authority conferring respectability on the claims that American girls are
> being psychologically depleted, socially "silenced", and academically
> "shortchanged".[…] The description of America's teenage girls as silenced,
> tortured, voiceless, and otherwise personally diminished is indeed
> dismaying. But there is little evidence to support it. If the nation's girls are
> in the kind of crisis that Gilligan and her acolytes are describing, it has
> escaped the notice of conventional psychiatry.
> (17-18)

The reference to 'conventional psychiatry' underlines her misunderstanding, deliberate or

otherwise, of Gilligan's work, as this is a subject which Gilligan specifically addresses,

taking issue with its assumptions about normative psychological development in children.

The title of her work – *In a Different Voice* – is indicative of her premise as she seeks to

explore the ways in which we understand reality; "how we know, how we hear, how we

see, how we speak". (xiii) She is specifically concerned that research frameworks based

on men's experiences come to represent the development of all and in this way obscure

and silence women. But Gilligan does not seek to pit women against men – "When I hear

my work being cast in terms of whether women and men are really (essentially) different

or who is better than whom, I know that I have lost my voice, because these are not my

questions." (xiii) However, it has become common practice to understand male and

female in relational terms, particularly in popular culture where the 'Mars and Venus'

dichotomy holds particular power.[4] By understanding gender in this way, 'guidelines' for

the behaviour of male and female individuals are reinforced and cemented, suggesting

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[4] The success of best seller, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) suggests how much
many individuals aspire, or feel pressure to 'fit in' with acceptable social understandings of gendered
behaviour.

paradoxically that gender is at once essentially determined by sex while also revealing the social process that takes place in an attempt to impose gendered identities on individuals.

People's attitude to gender - whether they believe it is formed biologically and therefore is an essential component of the individual, fixed and non-negotiable, or whether they understand gender as separate from biological sex and socially constructed, ever open to change - can potentially indicate where they are positioned in relation to the debate outlined in Kidd's work earlier; the biologically determined approach to gender, frequently equated with a conservative political stance. While the majority of the population do not necessarily think actively about how their gendered identity is formed, a number of men's movements have grown up which actively take up positions in relation to gender formations. Their philosophies are reflected in their public stances and the writings they generate and so are important in any understanding of the debates around boyhood as they have influenced the landscape of Men's Studies and, I contend, contributed to the ongoing polarization of male and female and the range of characteristics deemed socially acceptable for each.

Men in movements

Michael Messner's *Politics of Masculinities* (1997) outlines the key players in men's movements in the USA which grew up through the 1980s and 1990s.[5] In analysing the groups Messner uses a framework which looks at their relationships with and responses to three specific issues: "men's institutionalized privileges, the costs of masculinity, and

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[5] See also K. Clatterbaugh (1990) *Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity*, for a detailed discussion of the history and development of Men's Movements.

the differences and inequalities among men." (3) Messner's motivation for

contextualizing his work in this way arises from his observations of the ways these

movements position themselves in relation to social justice; whether they actively take

part in revisionist politics by engaging with women and other groups of men

disadvantaged by ethnicity, sexuality, or class, or whether they concentrate on themselves

and the perceived cost of dominant versions of masculinity on their lives. Messner

observes:

> Although they are very different in some important ways, many of the men's
> movements that have sprung up in the 1980s and 1990s share a commitment
> to rebuilding and revaluing bonds among men, to overcoming men's fears of
> each other, and to pushing men to be responsible and peaceful fathers and
> husbands. This in itself represents an important and potentially positive
> groundswell among diverse groups of men. But many of these groups also
> share another more troubling characteristic: They clearly believe that for
> men to overcome their fears of other men, they must separate themselves
> from women. And this separation from women is spoken of in terms of
> "empowerment" – to reclaim their "natural" roles as leaders in families and
> communities.
> (xiv)

While Messner acknowledges that there are a number of positive outcomes of male

organizations, he also suggests that some groups can potentially be seen as trying to

reinforce or stabilize men's privileged positions in both private and public spaces. At the

same time, he acknowledges that the 'traditional' masculinity upon which this advantage

is built can damage men and boys. Some groups consequently can be described as

engaging in backlash politics rather than seeking out social justice in spite of their desire

to improve the lives of men and boys. A further subject which Messner addresses is the

unequal relationships which exist among men, something which has been 'written out' of

much literature in men's groups – "Men", he says, "share very unequally in the fruits of

patriarchy; hegemonic (white, middle-and upper-class, and heterosexual) masculinity is

constructed in relation to femininities and to various (racial, sexual, and class)

subordinated masculinities." (8) While Messner describes the term "hegemonic

masculinity" as being representative of white, middle- and upper-class heterosexual men

– and it is frequently used as a 'shorthand' for this group who are generally in a position

of authority – this is not an accurate understanding of 'hegemonic' in relation to

masculinity and in the course of this thesis it will be used in the spirit of Connell (1995)

who recognises its fluidity and transitory nature:

> The concept of 'hegemony', deriving from Antoine Gramsci's analysis of
> class relations, refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and
> sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time one form of
> masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity
> can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the
> currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which
> guarantees (or is taken for granted) the dominant position of men and the
> subordination of women.
> (77)

Connell, like Messner, relates hegemony directly to power relations, an issue I will return

to throughout the course of this thesis. Messner goes on to identify and examine a number

of men's movements; however, for the purposes of this study, two of these, the

Mythopoetic Men's Movement and Profeminist Men's Movements are of particular

significance. As I will show by tracing briefly their origins and focus, both are polarised

in terms of where they position men's and boys' lives in relation to the pursuit of social

justice, and this is reflected in their different priorities; how and why they concentrate on

different areas of male lives. Simply by emphasizing different aspects of men's and boys'

lives they open up the opportunity to examine both public and private spaces including

emotional wellbeing, all of which must be engaged with in seeking ways to create a more

just society, for only by initiating change on all levels can positive and equitable social

transformations take place.[6]

The Mythopoetic Men's Movement was born in the USA in the 1980s as a series

of workshops and retreats attended mainly by white, middle-aged, heterosexual,

professional men. By the 1990s thousands of men were taking part, and from a public

perspective the Mythopoetic Movement came to represent *the* Men's Movement. The

philosophy and beliefs of the movement were popularized in the best selling work of

Robert Bly, *Iron John* (1990). Bly's work uses a mixture of myth, poetry, and Jungian

psychology to guide men on a spiritual journey to reclaim 'the deep masculine' which

Bly contends has been lost in the shift from tribal societies, which used ritual to initiate

boys into manhood, to urban industrial societies which have given up bonds between

generations of men, and replaced them with competitive, hyper-masculinity to secure

status. For Bly and his followers the existence of 'the deep masculine' points to an

understanding of gender as essentialist, something which boys are born with along with

their sex.[7] At the same time, the movement recognizes that living in a highly competitive,

aggressive male world can be damaging to boys and men in relation to emotional

engagement and growth.[8] It is, therefore, revisionist in relation to the individual although

it does not connect these changes to society as a whole or a need for social justice.

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[6] While issues around work and family structures can be discussed within a framework of social justice, other areas such as emotional wellbeing and health need to be considered in ways which move beyond this reference point, although it is important to remain aware that private concerns are always to some degree political.

[7] In Australia the writings of Steve Biddulph which are heavily influenced by Bly's philosophies have been very successful, becoming best sellers in Australia and New Zealand. See, for example, *Manhood* (1994); *Raising Boys* (1997). Other writers influenced by Bly's work include S. Keen (1991) *Fire in the Belly*; R. Moore (1992) *The King Within*, and their works have also sold in large numbers.

[8] How the writings of the Mythopoetic Movement have influenced debates around boyhood will be discussed later in this Introduction.

Messner points out that the social make up of the movement's membership - generally

affluent, middle-class men – tends to lead to a conservative approach to change in

relation to institutional and economic privilege.

Profeminist Men's Movements have sought to redress the balance of power

between men and women and seek ways for them to work together for social change. The

Radical Feminist Men's Movement began in the 1970s and sought to do away with

gender distinction, concentrating on how men gained privilege in patriarchal societies.[9]

The main body of their work came to focus on male sexual violence as central to men's

oppression of women, and while this is undoubtedly an important subject which needed

to be addressed, it meant that the spotlight moved from institutional inequalities in

unhelpful ways. The Socialist Feminist Men's Movement emerged during the mid 1970s

and was a mixture of radical feminist and Marxist philosophies which led to attempts at

anti-sexist initiatives in the workplace. Messner suggests these were more successful in

Australia and the UK than the USA due to differences in government and party systems

in the three nations.[10] Where early socialist-feminist men were particularly successful

was in drawing attention to class inequalities and in the process opening up differences

between men in ways that developed into a significant area of research for the next

generation of profeminist sociologists, including Connell, Segal and Kimmel whose work

is discussed below. Of the Socialist Feminist Men's Movement Messner concludes,

> It is this emphasis on the necessity to change *institutions* such as workplaces
> and the state, rather than simply appealing to individual men to change their

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[9] An influential collection of papers edited by J. Snodgrass (1977) *For Men Against Sexism* offers an insight into the work of radical feminist men.

[10] For one example of work in this area in Australia see, S. Gray (1987) 'Sharing the Shop Floor'. In the UK see, for example, A. Tolson (1977) *The Limits of Masculinity*. In the USA the National Organisation of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) has had more influence in academia forming the Men's Studies Association and publishing the journal *Masculinities*. See, www.nomas.org

sexist attitudes and practices, that socialist feminism makes its most
important contribution.
(59)

Although the Profeminist Men's Movement and the Mythopoetic Men's Movement are at

opposite ends of the spectrum in political terms, the subjects addressed by both must be

engaged with; any framework that seeks equitable yet radical changes in attitudes and

institutional structures with regard to gender justice will only succeed if all avenues are

considered. As a profeminist man and scholar, Michael Kimmel (1995) acknowledges

that initially he rejected the Mythopoetic Men's Movement because he found in it,

> […] everything from antifeminist backlash and patriarchy redux to racist
> appropriation, misleading theology, misguided anthropology, and
> misogynist political ideology. To most of us, the mythopoetic men's work
> reinscribed patriarchy as a political system by asserting men's need for *more*
> power and refusing to move beyond an individual version of empowerment.
> (xi-xii)

Despite his reservation – even condemnation – Kimmel recognizes that many 'good men'

have been drawn to its philosophies; therefore, to dismiss the movement and its message

is misguided and of no benefit. Instead, he engaged with it; his edited work, *The Politics*

of Manhood (1995), begins a conversation between profeminist and mythopoetic men and

is designed "to push the outer limits of our political discourse into new terrain and open

up possibilities for conversation and collaboration in unexpected ways." (xii) In this

thesis I position myself alongside Kimmel and others who support the work of

profeminist men's movements, with their emphasis on gender as socially constructed and

therefore open to change and their concentration on the pursuit of gender equity and

inclusion which means they are more likely to compel positive social change.[11] However,

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[11] The social constructionist approach to gender raises a series of questions, most notably about who is
constructing whom and the power relations this brings into play. However, while remaining alert to such

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despite strong reservations about the way mythopoetic discourses place men and boys in the position of 'victim' in relation to hegemonic masculinity and so divert attention from the ways in which many men are privileged by the status of this discourse, I also accept that Bly and his followers have had a significant impact on the landscape of Men's Studies, and that their influence has been considerable in shaping the way that boyhood is perceived, effectively fuelling the idea of crisis.

Men's Studies: an overview

The impact of second-wave feminism led to the recognition of previously uncontested privilege from which men as a category benefited and while this has been challenged by women and profeminist men, it has also been engaged with by men who are not necessarily disposed to support gender equity.[12] While acknowledging the complexities these responses arouse, Messner contends that debates about manhood are nevertheless impacted by feminism:

> Although these changes by men are not all feminist, the growing concern
> with the "problem of masculinity" takes place within a social context that
> has been partially transformed by feminism.
> (2)

Since the advent of second-wave feminism, gender as a concept has undergone a number of transformations; conceived initially as essential, universal and invisible it was then generally recognized as a social construct which impacted on the individual's gender performance. It is now, in the main, understood as an organizing principle in societies,

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theoretical concerns, they are outside of the remit of this thesis in which I question the motivation of approaches taken by different groups without trying to introduce a new standpoint. The focus is to apply existing material to a body of work which has previously existed outside of it.

[12] This is not to ignore the efforts of women and some men in other periods of history who have fought for gender justice, especially the Suffrage Movement of the early twentieth century.

their infrastructures based on and supported by gendered privilege. While feminism ignited the process by highlighting the impact of patriarchy in relation to women's and girls' lives, research into men and masculinities has continued the work by probing and questioning the role of gender in men's and boys' lives.

The idea of 'masculinities' was in circulation in relation to men's studies in the late 1980s, but it was R.W. Connell's seminal work, *Masculinities* (1995), which cemented the idea of multiple masculinities in existence at all times and in all places. Connell, a pro-feminist sociologist, considered how men share unequally in what she terms the "patriarchal dividend" - the institutional and economic benefits of manhood - and the complexity this brings to light in terms of power relations between men:

> Normative definitions of masculinity […] face the problem that not many men actually meet the normative standards. This point applies to hegemonic masculinity. The number of men rigorously practising the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small. Yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women. (79)

Here Connell not only underlines the implications of a patriarchal society in relation to social justice, but also draws attention to the complex relationships between men and power and how men interact with hegemonic forms of masculinity. Her findings also indicate the potential for flexible gender identities, a subject discussed in more detail later in this Introduction. This opens up the research field to move beyond explorations of the relationship between male gender and institutional power to more personal understandings of gender and how it impacts on the daily lives of individual men. In turn this encourages exploration of gender in relation to other significant variants including

race, class, sexuality, age. Kerry Mallan (2001) considers the possibilities of

understanding masculinity as a multiple, socially constructed concept:

> The apparent security that comes with the notion of 'a central essence to
> being male' has been eroded and masculinity can no longer be fictionalized
> as a stable, coherent and universal attribute of men. Rather, masculinity is
> being re-defined (however provisionally) not as a 'singular', 'given', or
> 'natural' attribute of men, but as a social and political construction that is
> temporally and historically shaped. Furthermore, because of the diversity of
> these historical, social and institutional processes and structures with their
> accompanying discourses on masculinity, it is more useful and accurate to
> acknowledge a plurality of masculinities.
> (57-8)

Since the early 1980s, the body of material which comes under the umbrella of

Men's Studies has grown dramatically and diversely. Along with many monographs there

have been several series and numerous journals addressing various areas of boys and

men's lives.[13] The majority of material has come out of leading social science disciplines

which have all seen significant developments in research. While populist writings which

have been influenced by the philosophies of the Mythopoetic Movement have been in

demand with non-expert readers, the majority of research has come from those working

from the perspective of socialist feminism. Appropriate material will be discussed in

detail in individual chapters in the body of this thesis, but it is important briefly to outline

the depth and range of the field. As already stated, the social sciences make up the

majority of research in the field but Men's Studies is inherently interdisciplinary, which

means that a number of humanities disciplines have also undertaken work in this area

including film, fashion, and literature respectively (Tasker, 1993; Edwards, 1997;

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[13] For details of the scope of international material available, see an extensive bibliography covering
multiple issues relating to men and boys as well as more general gender theory materials at *The Men's
Bibliography:* www.xyonline.net/mensbiblio/ . The journal *XY* was first published by Michael Flood in
Canberra in 1992 and remained in paper format until 1998. It is now in its 19th edition which was published
online in 2008. As well as the extensive bibliography, the website also has numerous articles about areas of
men's and boys' lives.

Sedgwick, 1985; Buchbinder, 1998) as the significance of gender as a key organizing principle in society becomes more prominent.

Much of the early influential material in the field came out of the USA (Pleck, 1981; Brod, 1987; Kaufman, 1987), although significant bodies of research were also carried out in the UK and Australia (Hearn, 1987; Connell, 1987, 1995; Seidler, 1989; Morgan, 1992; Buchbinder, 1994; Pease, 1997; Edgar, 1997). In a number of these early works it is possible to see themes and areas of enquiry emerging as researchers began to build an academic discipline; theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of men and boys occupy much of the early literature, but it also contains historical research and enquiries into men in both public and private spaces, including the workplace, the family, friendships and romance. This work has been developing and expanding as the discipline evolves (Kimmel and Messner, 1995; Connell, 2000; Kimmel, 2000; Whitehead, 2002; Pearce and Muller, 2002; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003, 2007; Edwards, 2006). Research has also been devoted to individual areas of enquiry including men's health, body image, and sport (Messner and Sabo, 1990; Sabo, 1995; Bordo, 1999) as well as more disturbing and controversial subjects including violence and crime (Miedzian, 1991; Archer, 1994; Collier, 1998; Messerschmidt, 1999; Sanders, 2005). The question of sexuality, specifically homosexuality, already a dynamic research field, has increasingly become a part of Men's Studies (Plummer, 1992; Weeks, 1985, 2000, 2001, 2007; Edwards, 1994; 2006). Questions around race and the impact of diverse ethnicities on gender continue to be sites of active enquiry (Hoch, 1979; Staples, 1982; Mac An Ghaill, 1988; Alexander, 2000; Hopkinson and Moore, 2006; Mutua, 2006).

The production of cultural images of men and boys in advertising and style

magazines has become a site of research activity which both reflects and drives the

changing ways in which the male body is perceived. (MacKinnon, 2003; Benwell, 2003)

In discussing transformations which have taken place in the social organization of

contemporary societies, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007) suggest that information

structures have largely replaced social structures as key organizing principles, especially

in relation to "reflexive individualization". (162) With reference to the work of Mort

(1988) they consider how understandings of the male body have changed. Mort predicted

"the current theoretical foregrounding of body surfaces as a primary arena for the display

and enactment of contemporary masculinities" (163) and the impact this would have on

how the male body can be conceived in understandings of masculinity:

> For Mort, of particular importance here are the visual messages transmitted,
> for example, by advertisements, through which the new man imagery
> fractures traditional codes of masculinity. He stresses that male sexuality is
> conjured up through the commodity, with the 'sexy body' produced through
> the product. (2007:163)

Historically viewed only in relation to physical strength, hardness and action – in other

words as a site of agency - the male body is now visible in the same spaces as the female

body, and as such is subject to objectification. While Mort stresses the active role which

young men play in constructing this perception of the male body, it still leads to a loss of

control in relation to its commoditization and consumption. As discussed earlier, cultural

representations, in whatever form, can reproduce, revise, or distort images, ideas, and

discourses. John Beynon (2002), in a study of masculinities and their mediation in culture

explores the ways in which men were presented in broadsheet newspapers and popular

books about masculinity around the millennium. Beynon identifies four themes which he

suggests were highlighted and brought to the attention of the public as *the* issues of

importance surrounding men at this time, drawing the conclusion that interventions shape

cultural landscapes; by highlighting four themes, they become the subjects of public

discourse.[14] Describing the ways in which the four themes were presented discursively by

a number of journalists and authors Beynon concludes,

> The four groups of discourses in this chapter provide an insight into how
> masculinity was being talked about in the public domain in the lead up to
> the millennium and into the twenty-first century. What jumps out is the
> overall negativity: a Martian arriving on Planet Earth and not knowing what
> masculinity was would quickly form the opinion that it was a highly
> damaged and damaging condition with very few, if any, redeeming features.
> In the hands of these writers it is something dangerous to be contained,
> attacked, denigrated or ridiculed, little else. There is none of the optimism
> shown by MacInnes (1998) and others that the proliferation of masculinities
> has opened up new opportunities for men. If masculinity has been
> successfully 'problematized' by academics during the 1980s and 1990s, here
> it is merely reduced to 'a problem' – for women, for men themselves and for
> society in general. If masculinity is not in crisis, then it is not for lack of
> trying by the broadsheet journalists!
> (143)

While examining literature in the field of Men's Studies, I found that much of the

material produced from the beginning of the twenty first century addresses the idea of

'crisis' whether to support its existence or to question its validity. As I suggested earlier

in relation to boys' perceived educational failures, how this is presented is likely to

depend on the political stance of the individual reporting the 'failure'. For example,

men's rights activists (Baumli, 1985; Farrell, 1993) suggest that the problems which men

are facing in their lives are the result of feminism and the eroding of 'traditional' roles for

men; echoes of the discourse they promote can be found in writings about fathers' rights

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[14] See, J. Beynon (2002) *Masculinities and Culture*, chapter 6, for full details of the four discursive themes
identified through his research.

which came to prominence around the beginning of the century and were visible in the

UK in the high-profile pressure group, 'Fathers 4 Justice'.[15] Significantly the

representation of fatherhood was included in one of the themes highlighted by Beynon

and therefore already very much in the public domain.

How areas of men's lives are presented discursively, then, currently tends to

position them as problematic in cultural discourse; the extent to which this accurately

records the lived experiences of men is open to debate, however. One example of how the

'crisis' discourse has invaded the field of Men's Studies can be seen in Lynn Segal's

Slow Motion (1990). The first edition, published in 1990, makes no mention of crisis yet

in the introductions to subsequent editions in 1997 and 2007 Segal suggests that she must

engage with the concept of crisis in new introductions in order to question its validity:

> Indisputably, the main shift that has occurred since I wrote *Slow Motion* has
> been the public perception of crisis in the lives of boys and men, its
> description growing more alarmed year on year throughout the nineties and
> continuing to the present moment. Regular coverage now portrays men's
> ongoing higher incidences of suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, serious
> accidents, cardiovascular disease and significantly lower life expectancies
> when compared with women.
> (2007: xviii)

In looking at what has been blamed for this 'crisis', Segal points out that those

emphasising its impact offer distinctly different explanations from outdated models of

traditional masculinity that are harming men and boys (Pollack, 2000; Clare, 2000) to the

feminization of boys which is said to be harming them by devaluing what it means to be a

man. (Sommers, 2000) While outlining the crisis discourse, Segal does, however, remind

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[15] In an article for TIME Magazine - 'In the Name of the Fathers', 27 September, 2004 - James Geary and Aparisim Ghosh outline the case put forward by 'Fathers 4 Justice' and interview a number of men across Europe who allege they have been denied access to their children following separation or divorce. The article also features an interview with Sir Bob Geldof in support of the fathers' group. While the report raises important issues which still need to be addressed in relation to custody battles, the article takes the stance that men are being disadvantaged institutionally, in this case by the law.

the reader of the institutional power which many men retain in western societies and the contradiction this produces:

> How should we respond to the deluge of information on men's anxieties, and anxieties about men? We hear that boys are failing in school, and from a very early age. Adolescent males are more miserable than adolescent girls. Moving onwards in life, men today have far higher incidences of suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, serious accidents, cardiovascular disease, and significantly lower life expectancies than women […] men appear to be emerging as the threatened sex, even as they remain, everywhere, the threatening sex, as well.
> (1997: ix)

Clearly the field of Men's Studies has become embroiled in the discourse of crisis and questions about how it can be addressed; however, there remains a level of scepticism because in many cases and situations men remain the privileged sex. Looking beyond the suggestion that crisis is the direct result of changes to traditional masculinity – it is now too feminized, or, it is outdated and too rigid – real and rapid changes have taken place in western societies which potentially lead to anxieties for men: de-industrialization has changed the way people work and the skills needed for employment; the traditional family with the 'breadwinner' role has become much less stable as a model for family life; gay rights activists have challenged the taken for granted privileges of heterosexuality and also the validation of what it means to be a man. In this changing landscape boys must work out what becoming a man means, making it important to keep in mind that while rapid change can be destabilizing, it can equally open up possibilities by breaking down boundaries. Change can be interpreted as opportunity or crisis and the literature which addresses boys' lives recognizes both of these discourses.

The literature of boyhood

As with literature written on the subject of men and manhood, the material which has

been produced in relation to boyhood reflects a wide range of opinions and approaches to

the subject. Writings which have been influenced by the philosophies of the Mythopoetic

Movement, in the same way as popular books addressing manhood, have become best-

sellers with readers, bought in vast numbers as parents and carers look to improve the

lives of their boys.[16] The question of whether these books have been popular as a result of

cultural images of boys as troubled and problematic remains pertinent, again

demonstrating the power of dominant cultural images in creating discourses which gain

credence. Steve Biddulph's *Raising Boys* (1997) begins with an overview of what he

describes as the boy crisis:

> Today it's the girls who are more sure of themselves, motivated, hard
> working. Boys are often adrift in life, failing at school, awkward in
> relationships, at risk for violence, alcohol and drugs, and so on. The
> differences start early – visit any pre-school and see for yourself. The girls
> work together happily; the boys 'hoon' around like Indians around a wagon
> train. They annoy the girls and fight with each other.
> (2)

Biddulph's account raises a number of issues; it reaffirms 'essential differences' between

boys and girls, something which Biddulph goes on to discuss in more detail, suggesting

that for several years masculinity has been ignored unsuccessfully – "For thirty years it

has been trendy to deny masculinity and say that boys and girls are really just the same.

But as parents and teachers kept telling us, this approach wasn't working." (3) He goes

on to suggest that boys' masculinity should be understood positively, not suppressed.

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[16] In the general information which introduces Steve Biddulph's (1997) *Raising Boys* it is stated that the book is available in more than eighteen countries and has sold over one million copies worldwide. William Pollack's (1998) *Real Boys* is listed as a *New York Times* bestseller. Other examples of books which address boyhood from the same perspective as Biddulph and Pollack include D. Kindlon and M. Thompson (1999) *Raising Cain* and, M. Gurian (2005) *The Minds of Boys.*

While it is not stated directly, Biddulph's writing implies that boys have been

disadvantaged because their masculine identity has been underdeveloped in favour of

feminization. William Pollack's *Real Boys* (1998) also suggests that boys are

experiencing problems in their lives, but seeks to encourage boys to open up and discuss

their problems in ways Pollack feels have been ignored as a consequence of how boys

have been represented by society:

> Society has somehow become convinced – by the media, by scholars, by
> society at large – that boys are dangerous, aggressive and anti-social, even
> *toxic* to our present-day notions of civilized life […] Instead of giving boys
> a chance to articulate their own pain so that we can share with them the
> struggles of boyhood and adolescence, we have created program after
> educational program to neutralize their "toxic" elements and mould them
> into sterile, plastic prototypes of approved masculinity.
> (xvii-xviii)

Both Pollack and Biddulph work in the field of therapeutic counselling - Pollack is a

clinical psychologist and Biddulph a family therapist - and this informs their approaches

towards boyhood as being in need of repair and healing. I agree that real problems do

exist for some boys, an opinion borne out when statistics are examined in relation to a

number of areas of boys' experiences; a subject which will be explored in greater depth

in the body of this thesis.[17] However, both Pollack and Biddulph suggest that the

problems boys are encountering are due largely to attitudes towards traditional

masculinity, an approach which creates two major difficulties; it pits boys against girls

with a suggestion that girls have been privileged at the expense of boys and consequently

as a group they are flourishing, which is clearly questionable. Further, these texts do not

distinguish between boys: who are the boys Biddulph and Pollack are describing? There

is very little distinction made in regard to race, class, or sexuality, all major factors in

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[17] See, for example, J. Buckingham (2000) *Boy Troubles*, which considers statistical data in relation to boys
and crime, education, and suicide in Australia from the mid to late twentieth century.

boys' constructions of their individual personal identities. Like the work of Bly and his followers, this material appears to take as its subject white, middle-class, heterosexual boyhood. Pollack's work is more nuanced in the differences it recognizes between boys: the inclusion of interviews with 'real' boys supports this in a constructive way. Moreover, he addresses the subject of homosexuality as a positive experience, not a situation which has to be endured or overcome in the way Biddulph's work implies. Nevertheless, both books suggest that boyhood is now a problem, positioning boys as victims, and feeding the current cultural images of boys, focusing on them as indistinguishable, homogeneous.

A number of other manuals which have been published in the field are directed at boys themselves and again reflect a variety of positions within the boyhood debate. Some of this material has been written by authors who are involved in the field of Young Adult fiction and therefore potentially attract male, teenage readers if they are already familiar with the fictional writings. In 1998 Australian author John Marsden, a high profile writer in the teenage fiction market, published *Secret Men's Business*, a manual intended to support boys as they move towards manhood. The title of the book is controversial as it alludes to 'secret women's business', a reference to the sacred lore relating to Australian Aboriginal women. Intentional or not, this represents a crass attempt at 'all boys together' humour, exclusive and excluding. However, according to the blurb on the book cover, "this is the most urgently needed book of our time" and "the most powerful non-fiction work ever made available to young men". This second comment comes after a description of Marsden's fictional work *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (1993) as "the most powerful novel for teenagers ever published in this country". By placing the non-

fiction work alongside a popular, influential novel the publisher no doubt wished to increase sales capacity. However this may also inadvertently lend validity to *Secret Men's Business* and its author's version of manhood in the eyes of young readers. Although not officially credited, Marsden's work is clearly influenced by Bly's *Iron John,* with its emphasis on essentialism and rites of passage discourse. In discussing the role of ritual in the passage to adulthood he continues,

> In the past, in some societies, the outward signs of reaching manhood have been things like having sex with a woman, going to war, killing an animal. These are powerful events which can have a big impact. If you feel that it is important for you to experience them as you move into adulthood, here are some points to consider […]
> The only genuine hunting for land animals is that done with traditional weapons, like a bow and arrow. It is still quite high-tech, because modern bows and arrows are pretty sophisticated. But you will actually have to use your own skills. You will have to stalk the animal. It will be extremely difficult. But if you succeed, your achievement will mean something.
> For further information, try under Archery in the Yellow Pages.
> (11-14)

While some boys may find Marsden's approach helpful, it appears anachronistic, divisive and potentially offensive and of little value at the beginning of the twenty first century in relation to gender equity or social justice. Marsden's work was published at the height of the 'boyhood in crisis' debate in Australia – a subject I return to in discussing the fictional texts to be included in the thesis – and as part of a group of authors working in the YA field, he was influential in shaping perceptions about boyhood at the time. As the 'crisis' receded, so authors turned their attention to other subjects, but at the time Marsden's profile as a successful, established author may have influenced boys' formation of gendered identities as they became aware of Marsden's own understanding of boyhood.

Another example of a boy's 'self-help' manual is by British author Matt Whyman, also an agony uncle for the girls' magazine *Bliss*. *XY: a toolkit for life* was published in 2002 with the tag-line "it will make a man of you". The tone of the book is purposefully 'laddish' and draws on traditional images of young men;

> Living life as a lad has all the makings of one long party, but you know deep down there's a lot more going on – the anxiety that comes with wondering if you're the only one who doesn't know exactly what a blow job is, for example, of the fear that friends might discover you can't sleep at night because you're worried about exams. In short, we're talking about all the things we don't feel able to express, because, well, that's how it is for boys. (1-2)

Nevertheless, this book offers a range of practical help and advice to young men and potentially prevents anxieties about growing up - both physically and emotionally - by including chapters about family relationships, friendship, romance, sex and health. Whyman attempts to 'demystify' girls by including responses from a group of girls who were asked what they find attractive in boys:

> "I like lads who are fun to be with, and who treat me as a friend." Karen, 14
> "A boy doesn't have to be romantic to win me over, or fall head over heels in love. He just has to be interested in me as a person. If we click, that's great!" Sal, 15
> "Any lad who can look me in the eyes, instead of staring at my chest!" Pippa, 17
> (54)

Whyman describes both boys and girls as undergoing a great deal of change and upheaval during adolescence, a time which can be both frightening and exciting. Unlike Marsden he does not suggest that male and female are separate species with different developmental paths aside from obvious anatomical difference. The outcome is a description of boys' development and maturation which is inclusive, and while Whyman

addresses the move from boyhood to manhood as possibly problematic, certainly complex, he does not suggest that being a boy is a problem *per se*.

As with literature relating to men and manhood, the majority of academic material about boyhood has come from social science disciplines (Head, 1999; Connell, 2000; Seidler, 2006; Kimmel, 2008; Nayak and Kehily, 2008). While areas of research have been diverse, those involved have generally used quantitative models of data collection to support their thinking. The very nature of this research method means that the focus is not on recording individual voices but rather on seeking conclusions from large amounts of statistical data. (Feldman and Elliott, 1990; Shulman and Collins, 1997; Furman, Brown and Feiring, 1999) Although this can be useful in terms of establishing trends and behaviour patterns on a large scale, it still raises issues similar to those encountered in the work of Biddulph in that it leaves questions about the images of boyhood which are being projected; in short, who is the boy constructed in this literature? It is, however, more neutral in tone in that it does not set out to position boys as victims but rather to record information without specific or obvious bias.

Although smaller in number, there have been examples of the use of qualitative research methods underpinning writings about areas of boys' lives. (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002; Way and Chu, 2004: Way and Hamm, 2005) These studies all emphasize the importance of diversity in relation to race, class and sexuality in any understanding of boys' lives. The work of Frosh *et al* is based on in-depth interviews carried out with both boys and girls about their experiences of young masculinities, including the ways in which boys construct their gendered identities in relation to hegemonic masculinity. In describing their experiences of the interviews with

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boys, they concede that their negative expectations were confounded; they found the boys

they encountered to be articulate or at least prepared to try and engage with the process:

> Despite this stereotype of the grunting adolescent boy (and, it must be said,
> embarrassingly, against our own expectations), what was striking about
> almost all the interviews was the engagement and fluency of the boys, not
> least when providing illustrative accounts of differences between boys' and
> girls' conversational styles. As will be evidenced throughout this book,
> while they did not necessarily find it easy to express their emotions clearly,
> they nevertheless mostly gave it a good try, became very involved in the
> interviews, and produced accounts of themselves and their experiences
> which were expressive, convincing and richly nuanced.
> (23)

These findings are repeated in other examples of qualitative research, again raising

questions about cultural images of boyhood, the ways in which boys are currently

represented and their positioning as a homogeneous group. These are subjects that Way

and Chu (2004) actively engage with in their study of ethnically diverse boys in the USA;

they suggest that in the vast majority of research the experiences of white, middle-class

boys have come to represent all boys, writing out and making invisible all forms of

diversity; "[…] the findings from these studies are commonly used to generalize all boys

rather than serving as a framework for understanding the specific experiences of white

middle-class boys." (1-2) Way and Chu also point out that when diversity is taken into

consideration, the idea of crisis, which has encouraged research to frame boyhood as

problematic, is magnified because boys who are ethnically diverse or poor, working-class

are already perceived with distrust due to negative cultural representations, a subject

explored in more detail in later chapters. Summarizing the implications of the 'crisis'

framework, they conclude that, " [it] may help us to understand boys' problems but not

boys' strengths, including ways in which boys resist succumbing to negative stereotypes

and actively seek out ways to thrive in the midst of great challenges." (2) These studies

based on qualitative research, then, demonstrate that when boys are allowed to be heard, the picture becomes more complex, highlighting the inadequacy of portraying boys' experiences as uniform. Further, these studies again raise questions about the motivations of those who seek to represent boyhood as problematic without considering diversity or personal autonomy.

One area of boys' lives which has received much attention and caused a great deal of controversy in the UK, Australia and the USA is boys' educational performance. This is in part due to the opposing positions taken up by a number of academics and populist writers in the education field. [18] It is understandable that boys' experiences of schooling play a central role in any studies about boyhood in that the ages of those under discussion mean that much of their time is spent in education. However, the ways in which boys' educational experiences have been described in both academic literature and the popular press account for its centrality in the crisis rhetoric.[19] As suggested earlier with reference to the works of Parry and Sommers, a central line of argument in relation to boys' educational experiences is that boys are falling behind girls in terms of examination success rates due to the feminization of education, and specifically the ways in which young people are taught, with a suggestion that this has been changed to favour girls' learning styles. Certainly the work of those who are influenced by the philosophy of Bly and men's rights groups maintains that boys are losing out academically. This idea has been taken up in the popular press, which frequently positions boys as victims of the

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[18] See, for example, L. Rowan *et al.* (2002) *Boys, Literacies and Schooling* and, M. Gurian (2009*) Successful Single Sex Classrooms,* which at opposite ends of the spectrum demonstrate precisely the division in opinions about boys and schooling.
[19] See, V. Foster, et al. (2001) 'What about the boys? An overview of the debates'.

school system.[20] Mills and Lingard (1997) suggest that the Mythopoetic discourse, which

positions men as providing the key influences in boys' lives, is driving the education

debate when accusations are made about the feminization of school systems being

responsible for boys' underachievement. The assumption that underpins such claims is

that women are unable to support boys effectively;

> The implications of mother rejection proposed by the mythopoetic
> movement are that women are not competent to assist boys in their 'proper'
> transition into men. Their call for fathers to involve themselves in the
> development of their sons is sure to strike a chord with the right wing
> fathers' rights movement, the advocates of more male teachers for boys, and
> with those who criticise single mothers.
> (285)

Australian academic Peter West, influenced by the work of Robert Bly, suggests that

teaching in schools has become feminized while also identifying the reinforcement of

traditional masculinity in schools as harmful to boys.[21] By this logic, boys should not be

subject to feminization but nor should they be made to follow traditionally masculine

trajectories which West proposes can also be detrimental to their development. West

clearly identifies the two key discourses which inform the Mythopoetic philosophy, but

the boys to whom he is referring remain elusive. As with other material in this area, there

is no distinction made between boys, no sense of any 'real' boys being taken into

consideration, and consequently no thought given to the implications of race, class, or

sexuality on the school experience for boys. This suggests that the debate about boys'

education is actually about a perceived privileging of feminist ideologies and strategies

which seek gender equality for girls in schooling. In short, writings influenced by

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[20] Ibid.

[21] West's ideas are outlined in a paper presented to the Gender Equity Taskforce in Australia in February
1995, entitled, 'Giving Boys a Ray of Hope: masculinity and education'. www.menshealthaustralia.net

Mythopoetic ideology are engaged in a backlash politics rather than a pertinent enquiry into issues relating to boys and education.

At the same time real concerns about some boys in school are being addressed in relation to constructions of masculinity (see, for instance, Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Mills and Lingard, 1997; Epstein et al., 1998; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Mills, 2001; Martino and Meyenn, 2001; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino, and Mills, 2009). These works share a common goal in that they seek to examine boys' experiences of education in relation to their gendered identities, which places them within their various cultural contexts. In doing so, they reveal diverse, complex boyhoods at work in schools, multiple masculinity performances which cannot be addressed in singular terms, and problems for which there is no single solution. This is perhaps most evident in the complex work which has been carried out into relationships between race, masculinity and schooling (Sewell, 1997; Byfield, 2008; Noguera, 2008). In his research into the relationship between black boys and education in the UK, Tony Sewell (1997) highlights the contradictions which are inherent in any examination of black masculinities, positioning black boys in a cultural context which constructs them in such a way as to create barriers to learning. In doing so he makes visible the connections between boyhoods, cultural imagery, and hegemonic masculinities. According to Sewell,

> What drives my thesis is the evidence of how representations of Black masculinity have made African-Caribbean boys in Britain too 'sexy' for school. I use the word 'sexy' as a positive *and* negative force. Negative in its narrow perspective which sees Black males only in the context of sport, music and crime. Positive in their talent as makers of positive identity for both Black youth and White. In too many cases African-Caribbean boys were burdened with a representation that they all had to carry. It was centred on the 'body' and not on the mind. The most important factor was how it became anti-school.
> (ix)

Sewell highlights the complexities in the relationship between African-Caribbean boys and education with its different, often contradictory, discourses with which they must engage in creating individual identities. He demonstrates clearly that any debates about boys in school and education must be much broader in scope than questions about the kinds of books which will engage 'non-reading boys' and improve their literacy levels or pit them against girls in a rhetoric of blame.[22]

Education is part of a much wider debate about the socialization of boys. As with all of the literature which has been published about the lives of boys and men, material relating to education is complex, contradictory, and raises further questions which need to be addressed. Issues around education highlight both the ways in which dominant cultural images impact on discussions about boyhood and the politics at work in creating this imagery; the examination of scholarly and popular writing reveals how such literature influences understandings of boyhood, steering public debate and new research in directions which are not always helpful or productive.

Concept

For the majority of my career I have worked with children and young adults. In the late 1990s I spent a number of years managing a Learning Resources Centre in a Further Education College. Responsible for organizing Information Literacy teaching and other student support services, my colleagues and I got to know many of the students on an informal basis and built up relationships with them over the two-year period during which they studied at the College. Based in West London, the demographic make-up of

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[22] While this question is beyond the scope of my thesis, there have been numerous initiatives which have sought to raise the literacy levels of boys through engagement with fiction. See, for example: www.literacytrust.org.uk ; www.guysread.com

the student body was ethnically diverse, though they generally came from working-class families and were aged between sixteen and nineteen. At the time, I was aware of some of the cultural images about boyhood which were visible in the media, but found much of it frustratingly inaccurate as boys were presented in one-dimensional terms, as potentially violent, emotionally immature and in general, troublesome. We had our share of troublemakers - fighters and young people who would not or could not engage with learning - but this was not exclusive to boys. One afternoon I was approached by a student who wanted help to produce a *curriculum vitae* and personal statement for a university application. I suggested that he asked a member of staff in the Computing Suite, at which point he started to shuffle uneasily and was reluctant to go into the room, finally asking if I could go with him. I realized that he was nervous about approaching another member of staff he didn't know very well. Over six feet tall, of African-Caribbean descent and wearing sports clothes and the then obligatory baseball cap, Steve was an intelligent, funny, respectful young man who went on successfully to complete a degree in Engineering. However in this moment I realized that based on dominant cultural images of young men in the media, Steve might be perceived as dangerous; the kind of young man people crossed the road to avoid. Afterwards I wondered how this made him feel, how it made many young men feel to be judged in this way, with no more justification then an image highlighted in popular discourse which positioned all young black men as dangerous, antisocial. It made me angry.

Since the beginning of the new millennium the numbers of young men in London who have been involved in fatal stabbings with knifes have increased alarmingly.[23] In

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[23] See a report from the Home Affairs Select Committee – Knife Crime (seventh report, 2 June 2009) at www.publications.parliament.uk for a detailed account of the current state of knife crime in the UK.

train stations and other busy public spaces police are often seen with portable metal detectors, stopping young men who fit their demographic and having them walk through the detector in full public view. As knife crime statistics reveal, they have good reason to take such measures. However, the singling out of young, working-class black men – and it *is* young black men who are the principal subjects of this treatment and the rhetoric around it - raises questions about the ways in which all young black men are represented. What implications does this have on their lives when they are consistently positioned as problematic? Does it impact on their future prospects and their attitudes to society in general? I recently ran a reading group in a secure unit for young men who were initially in juvenile detention and then moved to hospital accommodation when mental health problems were uncovered. This experience made me very aware that even when young men do in many ways fit the stereotypes presented in cultural images of troublesome youth, the situation is always far more complex and contradictory than any generalist account can describe.

The term 'boys' is used frequently through the course of this thesis; however, as I have already indicated my intention is to highlight individuality rather than presenting them as an homogenous group, being aware of their differences not only in terms of groupings such as race, class or sexuality, but also their individual experiences which define their understandings of being male, particularly salient in light of the way young black men have been represented in relation to race. Corbett (2009) highlights the test faced by those who document and analyse 'boyhoods':

> The challenge ahead is to capture boyhoods without dropping that –s; to tap the exclamation of masculinity and not overlook that which is cloaked in defense; to appreciate the affection of boys, while duly noting the aggression that may more often characterize their play; to recognize the

femininity in masculinity; to grasp the condition known as boyhood, but at the same time recognize the contingencies (social, racial, historical, economic, religious) that qualify that condition making it plural. (4)

While running the reading group discussed above, it was interesting to see and hear the boys' reactions to the fictional works to which I introduced them. The books and stories we shared, which described landscapes with which they were familiar and characters they felt they could relate to, were received positively and opened up the way for conversations about their own lives. While I do not suggest that bibliotherapy can significantly change the situations in which these young men find themselves, novels did play a part in initiating conversations and debates and as such, the ways in which fictional characters were presented was significant. I relate these incidents in part to outline my impetus and motivation for choosing to examine cultural images of boyhood in YA fiction; would I uncover sites where positive or complex constructions exist? In pursuing this area of enquiry I hope to highlight the impossibility in trying to construct all-embracing representations which by definition cannot encompass the individual experience but can still impact detrimentally on all.

I began this Introduction with reference to *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers. As I suggested, Myers creates a world in which impressions play a significant part in deciding whether a character is innocent or not, but as he also indicates, impressions may not be accurate. His protagonist, Steve, is presented as a young man who has gotten himself into trouble, but it is made apparent that the environment in which he lives makes it likely that this will happen. Does this mean that he will potentially be thought of as guilty simply because of the world he inhabits? Myers' narrative describes a situation in which young men are associated with criminal activity; YA fiction as a whole offers a broad range of

material and images of boyhood both positive and negative. One example is the representation of the teenage father, some-one who has traditionally been vilified in popular culture, but a figure about whom very little tends to be known. A number of authors writing for young adults have produced representations of the teenage father, positioning such characters as first-person narrators with affecting results.[24] While novels cannot be compared with the actual experiences of real boys who find themselves as fathers in their teenage years, they do give readers an opportunity to reconsider and engage with some of the stereotypes which have grown up around the subject and the individuals. Crime, violence and teenage fatherhood are potentially material for the 'crisis' discourse, but these novels show that presentation plays a significant part in how problematic subjects are understood: the fictional boys described in these narratives are not represented as either victims or monsters, the narratives are more complex, more rounded, leaving the reader with unresolved and unanswered questions.

The subjects of boyhood and masculinities have received surprisingly little attention from the academic arena of Children's Literature criticism. As suggested earlier, there have been many attempts at trying to improve boys' reading experiences and abilities, largely by those in the fields of Education and Librarianship. Those working in areas such as Literary and Cultural studies have addressed representations of contemporary masculinities in academic papers (Trites, 1998; Bradford, 1998; Pennell, 2003; McCallum and Stephens, 2000; Mallan, 2001, 2003; Pearce, 2001; Nikolajeva, 2003; Michaels and Gibbs, 2002), the most sustained example being *Ways of Being Male* (2002), a collection of essays edited by John Stephens. *Ways of Being Male* includes

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[24] See, M. Gill (2006) 'Just Telling It Like It Is?' for an account of the ways in which teenage fatherhood has been presented in contemporary young adult fiction.

essays which explore representations of masculinities and maleness in both children's literature and film, but while an important addition to the study of masculinities, it has not stimulated activity in this area of research. With the exceptions of Kidd and Wannamaker, both writing about boyhood in American children's literature, there has been silence in this area of research since Stephens' volume appeared. This means that there is an imbalance in research: much has been written about contemporary boyhoods (resulting in a broadly negative image, as discussed in the course of this Introduction), but discussion of children's and YA fiction has been left largely untouched. Both my research and my professional experience demonstrate the importance of fiction in conveying complex, multidimensional images of boyhoods. What is being read about boyhood matters; the impact of writings by individuals aligned to the Mythopoetic Movement demonstrates this clearly. This thesis seeks to address the lack of research into fictional boyhoods and the images they portray to potential readers.

Fictional boyhoods

In selecting the fictional material to include in my thesis, I chose novels which were published for the Young Adult market, largely in the time-frame from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, and which have teenage, male central characters. Who the implied reader may be is open to speculation, but since my intention is not to enter the debate about boys and reading but to ask whether these novels are examples of literature which present images of boyhood 'suitable' for teenage males, I treat them as being primarily intended for that audience. As with much of the literature produced in this field, I use the terms 'boy' and 'young man' interchangeably, understanding them in relation to the thesis to

represent a period which encompasses early to late teens. The purpose of including a broad range of ages is to present examples of boyhood at different stages of development which show common features as well as changes which take place with maturation. I chose adolescence as a specific criterion as it represents a time in most lives when thoughts begin to crystallize about one's place in the world, who one wants to be, and how one wants to be perceived; this can potentially make for a time of great introspection, when the individual is engrossed in his or her own self development. At the same time, adolescence can also be a period when friendships, both platonic and romantic, are especially influential in the formation of self identity; when peer groups and social spaces take on added significance. Potentially, it can be a very self-indulgent experience before adult responsibilities take centre stage with the resultant shift in focus away from the self. As such, it offers an intense picture of the ways in which life narratives begin to be conceived and validated, and the overwhelming vulnerability they can display in the face of hegemonic social discourses when the two do not match up.

The terms 'boy' and 'man' – used throughout this thesis – are descriptors for the male at different stages in the developmental process, incorporating both physical and emotional maturation in a general way but also containing the diversity which I have emphasised in relation to class, ethnicity and sexuality and as such they signify both a common circumstance as well as the individual condition. There exists between the two a power dynamic in which boys' vulnerability is evident in relation to their lack of authority in the face of established social structures. At the same time, 'boy' also suggests potential, possibility, a 'work in progress' as discussed above and while this is not to suggest that the nature of the mature 'man' is a fixed, inflexible entity, my intention is to

argue that 'boy' is not simply a younger version of 'man' but actually is someone who has the potential to change the way manhood is interpreted and performed at both a general and individual level.

In the course of this Introduction I have focused on the importance of the experiences of actual, individual boys, their uniqueness in the face of cultural images which present boys as a homogeneous group and a collection of populist literature which uses the concept of boyhood in crisis for political purposes, as demonstrated in material influenced by Mythopoetic ideals. It therefore may at times appear contradictory - at odds with the objectives of the research - that in choosing to analyze fictional texts from three different countries I do not address specific cultural differences which exist between the three nations. In deciding to draw on novels from the UK, Australia and the USA, my intention has been to highlight the similarities between the three nations with regard to how each country conceives of what it means to be male, and become a man. In doing so I portray the power of hegemonic discourses with which boys must interact as part of the process of forming their personal gendered identities. All three countries have developed understandings of masculinity in relation to western, industrialized landscapes and now the changes which have and continue to take place in relation to the social frameworks of each country have been met with similar responses, seen in the work of Men's Studies theorists and the growth of men's movements.

In Australia, the idea of 'crisis' had begun to subside by the beginning of the new millennium as employment levels among young, working-class males began to increase with the emergence of an improving economic climate. The Australian novels which are analyzed in this thesis were published in the late 1990s and early years of the new

millennium, which coincided with the period when strong concerns were being expressed about young men, particularly in relation to education. During this time authors including Parry and Marsden politicized the debate, as discussed earlier, but recent publishing in the teenage fiction market has been less vocal, and focused on male characters, although they continue to appear, portrayed in a variety of diverse ways.[25] In the UK and the USA the crisis discourse has now shifted ground; following on from debates about education which still appear sporadically, concerns about boys and violence have grown and engulfed cultural discourse, particularly in relation to working-class boys with African-Caribbean heritage, a subject which will be discussed in more detail in relation to some of the UK and US novels explored in the forthcoming chapters. In this respect my analysis recognizes difference between the three countries but is less discriminating in relation to specific cultural difference within individual analyses of narratives which I concede may result in the loss of some of the richness and subtlety which exists in a number of the novels. While the narratives represent only a small sample of the total output of material for this market, the novels chosen do largely reflect accurately the scope and variety of subjects which are being addressed in relation to teenage male subjects in YA fiction since the 1990s.

For the most part, the texts I have chosen to include can broadly be described as contemporary 'realistic fiction' in that they seek to describe events and experiences which could potentially take place in the lives of real individuals. I chose this genre because the purpose of my thesis is to explore the ways in which authors present boyhoods in fictional narratives in relation to the crisis discourse and therefore 'realistic'

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[25] The debate about boys and reading and books for boys can be traced in the Australian journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* which reviews teenage fiction and includes articles relating to the subject of young adult literature.

portrayals of boys' lives appeared to tune into the comparison most readily. However, other genres of YA fiction could equally engage with the debate at a symbolic level as is evident from the novels included in Chapter One. These texts explore the relationship between adventure stories and current anxieties about boys and violence and conversely, feminization. I describe these narratives as 'fantastic realism' in that they represent boys who have their lives embedded in the everyday world while also being involved in fantastical adventure landscapes. I specifically include this material because its publication in the UK coincided with the moral panic about the feminization of education and the lack of 'suitable' reading material for boys, a problem which many people working for or with young people thought these novels would address. Therefore, the representations of the fictional heroes portrayed in these novels are significant in current debates about constructions of masculinities.

It is also important to acknowledge that by exploring the novels specifically in relation to the portrayals of boyhood which they present, analysed through the material of both Boyhood and Men's Studies, their more generic nature as works of fiction is somewhat relegated; ultimately these narratives are not only descriptions of being young and male but tell stories of lives being lived as part of a bigger world, where the characters' sex or gender is only one part of their make-up, a subject I will return to in concluding my analysis of fictional boyhoods and their significance in relation to and impact on cultural representations of young men.

Method and theory

The methodology I have pursued is intended to bring together cultural images of boyhood which have been constructed from a variety of sources, most significantly YA fiction and academic and populist writings which fall within the Men's Studies remit. My intention is to explore the relationships between different cultural images while considering the motivations of those who are involved in their productions. The theoretical framework I employ seeks to support this analytical model by utilizing the research work of various disciplines within the social sciences through which I explore the fictional works; the novels are discussed in relation to research which has been carried out into the lives of real boys in order to consider the ways in which the texts interact with current discourses about boyhood. Gender makes up a considerable part of any dialogue about boyhood, but this is not a thesis about gender *per se.* Constructions of masculinities and femininities are discussed in relation to the fictional characters in terms of their impact on the lives of the central characters and those around them, and how hegemonic masculinity discourses influence the formation of individual identities and shape relationships between individuals. The terms 'masculinity' or 'masculinities' are frequently used within the literature of Men's Studies to represent the male, and crisis is therefore often spoken of in terms of a 'crisis in masculinity'. However I do not use the terms in this way as I consider masculinity to equate to a series of characteristics which are not necessarily possessed by a male. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999) explores what she refers to as the performative nature of gender, the ways in which individuals take on characteristics described as masculine and feminine and act them out within an acceptable, prescribed range of behaviours. To do so she separates male and masculinities and female and femininities:

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one.
(10)

By positing gender as a socially constructed performance rather than an integral essence of the individual, Butler opens up the possibilities for various gendered identities, an approach I adopt in analyzing the texts under discussion. In a postmodern[26] landscape where universal ideologies have given way to the cult of the individual with its subsequent emphasis on the construction of personal identities and life narratives, (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998) the understanding of gendered identity as created has taken on added significance. While Butler suggests that personal autonomy only exists within a socially constructed set of regulations, Carol Gilligan reinstates the importance of individual autonomy, arguing that describing gender as either essentialist or socially constructed takes away the individual's ability to act; their voice is lost:

I find the question of whether gender differences are biologically determined or socially constructed to be deeply disturbing. This way of posing the question implies that people, women and men alike, are either genetically determined or a product of socialization-that there is no voice-and without voice, there is no possibility for resistance, for creativity, or for a change whose wellsprings are psychological.
(xix)

While I agree with Gilligan's argument that individuals take responsibility for their own gendered identities, Butler's hypothesis that this can only take place within specific social

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[26] Woods (1999) describes postmodernism in relation to modernism: "[…] instead of lamenting the loss of the past, the fragmentation of existence and the collapse of selfhood, postmodernism embraces these characteristics as a new form of social existence. The difference between modernism and postmodernism is therefore best seen as a difference in *mood* or *attitude*, rather than a chronological difference, or a different set of aesthetic practices." (8-9)

boundaries is the position I adopt when analyzing the novels under discussion. I seek

where possible to queer the narratives, in that I raise questions about normative

understandings of gender and their impact on individual subjects, emphasizing the

influence of the societies in which individuals exist. (Sedgwick, 1985; Wilchins, 2004)

In describing Queer Theory and its purpose, Rabinowitz (2004) suggests;

> Queer theory is a descendent of feminism and gay and lesbian theory and a
> recognisable child of deconstruction. It is amazingly malleable, but it has
> clear goals: to seek out instability in traditional paradigms of sex
> (biology/anatomy), gender (social/cultural manifestations of sex), and
> sexuality (sexual orientation and desire) by finding gaps, holes, and
> inconsistencies of meaning. It addresses itself especially to binary systems,
> in which two categories are considered to be opposite and mutually
> exclusive, and also to be the only two categories that could ever possibly
> exist (homosexual/heterosexual, for example, or boy/girl). Rather than
> offering a stable new set of paradigms for sex, gender, and sexuality, queer
> theory looks at traditional categories and gleefully makes trouble for them.
> (19)

By making visible the potential to destabilize narratives with reference to gender, Queer

Theory as a political project also has implications for embodied gender identities; gender

as an entity becomes less stable, understandings based on essentialist beliefs open to

challenge and the individual can potentially create more flexible, nuanced gender

performances. However, as I discuss in relation to the novels explored here, this can be a

complex, hazardous undertaking where much can be lost and gained, especially for boys

in relation to their social standing among peers. Queer Theory, nevertheless, indicates the

scale of change which has taken place in the way that gender is conceived and the impact

this can have on social change.

Content

The thesis is divided into four chapters, each exploring the ways in which a group of fictional narratives portray a specific aspect of boyhood experience. While each chapter examines a different subject, there are a number of themes which recur throughout as they are relevant to all areas of boys' lives and potentially underpin their emerging gendered identities. Specifically, changing social settings which have impacted on understandings of 'how to be a man' is a theme which is present throughout. A similar pattern exists in relation to intimacy; changing expectations of emotional engagement have resulted in an uneasy relationship with the discourses surrounding hegemonic masculinity in which men are presented as self contained, rational, and in control. Ongoing social transformations and shifting expectations impact on all aspects of boys' lives and their influences can be seen in all of the fictional narratives under discussion.

The first chapter explores a number of series of novels which present teenage boys in the role of adventure heroes which have been published in the UK since 2000. I suggest that these books resemble in form the nineteenth century genre of boys' adventure stories and the social context which surrounds the novels' publication in both eras has a number of similarities which are examined in the chapter. Since the advent of second-wave feminism, the adventure hero, with his inexorable association with hegemonic images of masculinity, has been accused of creating outdated, sexist images, presenting the hero as a physically robust, muscular, white man or boy whose purpose is to vanquish the 'other'. While the boys' adventure story which came to prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain has been cited as an example of undesirable gender representations, I show that the novels published since the beginning of the new millennium, while drawing on the form of the earlier novels, depict a wide

array of masculinities and femininities. I consider how the novels - the Alex Rider series (2000-) by Anthony Horowitz, Robert Muchamore's Cherub Club series (2004-), and the Boy Soldier quartet (2005-2008) by Andy McNab – interact with current debates about boyhood, specifically in relation to anxieties about violence and feminization.

Chapter Two considers narratives which describe boys' friendships and relationships with peers: Melvin Burgess' (2003) *Doing It*, Glyn Parry's (1998) *Sad Boys*, Hilary McKay's (2003) *Indigo's Star*, Bali Rai's (2003) *The Crew*, Angela Johnson's (2003) *The First Part Last*, Alasdair Duncan's (2006) *Metro,* Benjamin Zephaniah's (2004) *Gangsta Rap*, and Tim Bowler's (2008) *Blade: Playing Dead*. I examine the ways in which relationships are presented with reference to contemporary understandings of friendship asking how concepts such as 'disclosing intimacy' and 'emotional literacy' interact with hegemonic masculinities and in what ways potentially conflicting discourses impact on young men's relationships. The influence of the peer group in boys' friendship constructions is also explored, considering why boys seek to regulate their own and others' behaviour with the continuous threat of accusations of homosexuality against individuals who behave outside of normative, accepted gender practices. Further, the chapter explores how gangs are presented in a number of the novels; while the gang is associated with negative images in contemporary culture, I consider how the central characters of the narratives negotiate gangs they come into contact with.

The family is recognized as the site in which gendered behaviours are learnt from an early age; however changing family structures mean that the nuclear family with its traditional gender roles has come under pressure and boys are participating in new family structures where emotional engagement has become a key factor. Chapter Three

considers how changing family landscapes impact on the way boys' gender is constructed in Steven Herrick's (2004) *By the River*, A.M. Holmes' (1989) *Jack*, Phillip Gwynne's (1998) *Deadly Unna?,* Judith Clarke's (2000) *The Heroic Lives of Al Capsella*, Hilary McKay's (2003) *Indigo's Star*, Coe Booth's (2007) *Tyrell,* Joanne Horniman's (2001) *Mahalia* and, Angela Johnson's (2003) *The First Part Last*. There has been a great deal of discussion about fatherhood since the beginning of the new millennium, ranging from the 'new father', a man emotionally engaged in the lives of his children, to the 'deadbeat dad', a feckless, often absent individual; the impact of these diverse discourses on the narratives is explored through the images of fatherhood the novels project.

Emotional engagement is a common theme throughout the thesis, as it is central to discussions about representations of hegemonic masculinity and the part associated discourses of masculinity play in creating problematic emotional literacies for boys and men. How boys approach romantic relationships and engage in intimacy more generally, are central concerns of Chapter Four in relation to Nick Earls' (1999) *48 Shades of Brown*, Phillip Gwynne's (2000) *Nukkin Ya*, Melvin Burgess' (2003) *Doing It,* Will Davis' (2007) *My Side of the Story*, Nick Hornby's (2007) *Slam,* Alasdair Duncan's (2003) *Sushi Central*, David Levithan's (2003) *Boy Meets Boy*, Joe Babcock's (2002) *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers,* Thorn Kief Hillsbery's (2005) *What We Do Is Secret*, and, JT LeRoy's (2004) *Harold's End*. Both heterosexual and homosexual relationships are explored, considering whether gender takes precedence over sexuality in the ways that boys go about forming romantic relationships. Also considered is how cultural images which present men as sexually proactive and confident in seeking out romance

impact on boys' understandings of relationships and what happens when this is taken to the limits in the figure of the teenage father.

The collection of YA novels discussed in the course of the thesis represent a significant source of cultural images about contemporary boyhoods. Complex, multidimensional portrayals present and promote individuality and agency, while the influences of hegemonic social discourses are evident in their impact on the lives of the fictional protagonists. Although much of the material which has been written about boyhoods since the 1990s has resulted in troubling images and talk of crisis, the novels collectively offer a different picture. They do not simply attempt to present boyhood as unproblematic, but they do recognize that boys experience youth and adolescence both as a complicated, anxious time and as one which is often joyful, funny, and a big adventure. In this way the novels offer readers different ways to consider boyhoods; as good, bad, and ambivalent. As Corbett (2009) reminds us:

> Culture and cultural symbols, society and social orders, what we might call "backstories," build a boy. But as it turns out, over and over again, there is more than one backstory to tell, and more than one order to order. The traditional Oedipal backstory is grainy at best; we are copies of copies of copies of copies of Oedipus's children. Copies repeat. Copies degrade. Copies transform.
> (11)

Throughout the course of this Introduction I have described the opposing views which have been proposed to explain the claims of boyhood in crisis. One of the key debates which has taken place in both Men's Studies literature and writings about boyhood questions the impact of hegemonic masculinity when independence, agency, and rationality are privileged at the expense of emotional engagement, collaboration, and support. The various series of adventure novels which have been published in the UK

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since the beginning of the new millennium both draw on and modify this version of

hegemonic masculinity, creating complex images and raising intriguing questions about

the place of traditional masculinity in boys' lives. These novels and their relationship

with the 'crisis' discourse are the subject of Chapter One.

Chapter 1. Adventures

> The shark's fins were down. Its back was arched. And it was moving in a strange, jerky pattern. The three textbook signs of an immanent attack. Alex knew that he had only seconds between life and death. Slowly, trying not to make any disturbance in the water, he reached down. The knife was still there, strapped to his leg, and he carefully unfastened it […]
> (Horowitz, 2002: 196)

> His last report had said it all:
> Alex continues to spend more time out of school than in it, and if this carries on, he might as well forget his GCSEs. Although he cannot be blamed for what seems to be a catalogue of medical problems, if he falls any further behind, I fear he may disappear altogether.
> (Horowitz, 2004: 9)

> The end came quickly on Air Force One […] Cray was punching the side of Alex's head again and again. Alex still clung to the gun, but his grip was weakening. He finally fell back, bloody and exhausted. His face was bruised, his eyes half closed […] Cray raised the gun one last time […] And that was when Alex rose up […]
> (Horowitz, 2003: 312-3)

In 2000, Anthony Horowitz published *Stormbreaker*, the first novel in the Alex Rider Series.[27] The novel follows the adventures of Alex, a fourteen-year-old school boy who works for MI6, as he saves the world and defeats the 'bad guys'. The series has been created in a climate where 'crisis' has repeatedly been linked to boyhood, resulting in a profusion of negative cultural images, as discussed in the Introduction. This has been particularly evident in debates surrounding boys' perceived failure in formal educational environments: the supposed feminization of education which has led to an unfair advantage for girls, has also led to a dearth of 'suitable' reading material for boys, it has been suggested. (Parry, 1996) Since their introduction, the Alex Rider novels – and a number of other series of adventure stories which will be discussed later in this chapter –

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[27] Anthony Horowitz has currently published seven novels which feature Alex Rider. A new title will be published in November 2009 with at least one more in 2010.

have been included in lists of recommended books for boys.[28] They have also featured in a BBC4 programme which examined the explosion of literature which was marketed under the banner of 'books for boys'.[29] However the rush to embrace the 'new' adventure genre as a cure for boys' supposed non-reading meant that the content of the novels was overlooked in favour of promoting books which would appeal specifically to boys.[30]

In this chapter I consider what the fictional Alex contributes to contemporary images of boyhood; the implications of his construction in relation to debates about crisis, and the relationship between Horowitz's novels and earlier examples of the adventure story in the nineteenth century and the versions of masculinity which are privileged in these novels. As discussed in the Introduction, hegemonic masculinity which supports hard, competitive versions of being male has been contested fiercely in the crisis discourse. It has simultaneously been blamed for damaging boys while also being defended in an attempt to reassert traditional masculinity, which is perceived as being eroded by the feminization of contemporary society. I also consider in less detail two other successful series – Robert Muchamore's 'Cherub Club', and Andy McNab's 'Boy Soldier' – to provide a broader overview of how boyhood is presented in contemporary adventure stories.

In the character of Alex Rider, Anthony Horowitz has created a body of fictional work which presents the most contemporary of boy heroes while also succeeding in resonating with images of a long established tradition of boys' adventure stories. Viewed within this discourse, by creating the Alex Rider series, a succession of high octane,

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[28] See, www.sla.org.uk/boys-into-books as an example of the books which have been recommended to encourage boys to read.
[29] In 2007, BBC4 screened a programme about the 'new' boys' adventure story – 'Adventure for Boys: Return of the Hero'.
[30] See, M. Gill (2008) 'Alex Rider: Mission Possible: Empowering Boy Readers through Fiction'.

adventure stories in which the boy hero triumphs over adversity, Anthony Horowitz could potentially be 'credited' with reviving the boys' adventure story genre for a twenty first century audience, for in many ways the Alex Rider books hark back to a time when the adventure genre was characterized by certainties about identity, both individual and communal, and hierarchies of power were presented as stable, universal and certain.[31] There is no doubt that the Alex Rider narratives contain imagery from an earlier stage in the development of the adventure genre, a subject which will be addressed later in this chapter: however, because they belong to a post-modern world where identities are fragmented and relative, there are problems in thinking about them in these terms. Rather than representing a return to a literature 'suitable' for boys which re-affirms ways of being male in line with a world order invigorated by the pomp and certainty of Imperial imaginings, I see the Alex Rider novels as bringing into sharp focus both the uncertainties and possibilities around boyhood identity which exist in contemporary culture.

Worlds of adventure

The second half of the nineteenth century in Britain was a period of continued expansion overseas as the project of Empire became more urgent under the banner of Imperialism. A spirit of self-improvement along with anxieties about physical degeneracy and lawlessness in the greatly extended urban, working-class population led to the formation of groups such as The Boys' Brigade (1883) and the Scouting movement, the aspirations of which are crystallized in Robert Baden-Powell's influential *Scouting for Boys*,

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[31] See, R. Dixon (1996) *Writing the Colonial Adventure*. Dixon explores the ways in which ideology was made to look secure and unchanging in this period.

published in 1908. The expanding Empire required men fit to serve their country in all corners of the globe; as well as physical prowess, these Empire men were required to maintain a strong moral code, be independent, self-sufficient, and respond rationally to all of the challenges they faced. Empire masculinity, to which boys were encouraged to aspire, was visible not only in the social institutions of the day, but also in diverse cultural forms from music hall entertainment to art and literature.

It was in this climate that the genre of adventure stories for boys came to prominence, benefiting from the Elementary Education Act of 1870 which increased the number of children in state education as well as stimulating growth in cheaper book publishing. Both education and book publishing reflected the increasingly gendered nature of society during the Victorian and Edwardian periods.[32] The adventure story offered a medium through which the romance of frontier exploration could be imagined by boys *en masse*. At the same time, the novels exude the ideologically-shaped belief in the white, British male as hero, superior to all others - particularly women and the first populations of the colonized lands through which they stride. Although the experience of frontier adventure was beyond the majority of the novels' readers, in them boy readers are invited to identify with the very specific version of manhood they convey, designed to promote Imperial ideals about men 'fit for Empire'. The literature of the adventure genre affirmed and encouraged a particular model of masculinity, implicitly promising rewards for those who successfully adopted it.[33]

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[32] See, J.S. Bratton (1981) *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*. Bratton explores the gendered nature of literature for boys and girls during the Victorian period.

[33] See, J. Bristow (1991) *Empire Boys*, for a discussion of the society in which the nineteenth century boys' adventure story was conceived.

It would be an oversimplification to suggest that the actual experiences of boys

and men who lived through the era of Imperial expansion were similar to those of the

heroes who inhabited the pages of adventure novels written during this period, or that

potential readers all engaged with the narratives in the same way, accepting the didactic

messages of the works. However, the imperative of the texts was to stabilize ideologies of

Empire and the privileged version of masculinity it encouraged. Robert Dixon continues,

> It was the task of the New Imperialism as an ideology and the adventure
> novel as an ideological form to resolve contradictions in the lived
> experience of imperialism usually by inscribing the male reader in tales of
> regenerative violence on the colonial frontier.
> (1)

It is the characteristics represented in Empire-masculinity - described above - which have

created uncertainty about the promotion of the 'new' version of the boys' adventure

story. However, to understand books such as the Alex Rider series as reviving nineteenth-

century versions of masculinity is an error based on giving precedence to form over

content.

Exploring the Alex Rider narratives with reference to anxieties about the current,

unstable world order offers opportunities to examine the ways in which Horowitz

privileges and subverts discourses in relation to national identities and the creation of

hegemonies within the texts. There has existed an enduring connection between ideals of

dominant masculinity, national identity and power which influences the balance of global

order and consequently the ideologies which rise to dominance. Seeds of this legacy can

be found in Imperial discourse which brings together notions of privileged masculinity

and the relationship with, and ultimate domination of, 'otherness'. Examples of this

ideology can be found most notably in boys' adventure narratives. Speaking of

nineteenth-century adventure stories, Martin Crotty (2001) suggests,

> They constituted an historically important site of contestation between
> contemporary discourses on gender, race, nation and Empire […].They told
> boys the types of men they should seek to become, the enemies they should
> seek to conquer, and the causes to which they should devote themselves.
> (137)

The reassertion of adventure fiction at a time of national and international uncertainty is

therefore significant. In considering the function of the toy brand *Action Man* in relation

to male heroic identification, Jonathan Bignell (2000) suggests that while Action Man

represents a generic Western image of heroic masculinity, at times of national crisis he

comes to signify specific national identities in order to reaffirm the nation's place in the

world:

> A more recent peak in sales occurred in 1982, when Action Man in Special
> Air Service (SAS) uniform again became one of Britain's ten best selling
> toys. It was in 1982 that the film *Who Dares Wins,* an action-adventure
> depicting SAS troops was released, and in 1982 that Britain went to war
> with Argentina over the Falklands/ Malvinas islands. Previously in 1980,
> SAS troops had been shown live on television bursting into the Iranian
> Embassy in London to shoot terrorists who were holding hostages there.
> (232)

The creation and re-enforcement of national identities often occurs in times of anxiety

and quickly becomes visible in the culture, including in the literature of a period.

However, as in the case of masculinity discourses, it is no longer plausible or indeed

acceptable to restate ideologies constructed in the Imperial past. The Alex Rider novels

may echo with images from earlier adventure genres but ultimately cannot assert, with

confidence, the place of the British boy hero in either his own social space or the wider

world.

Horowitz is writing not only at a time of uncertainty in terms of world order and when a monolithic view of masculinity has given way to masculinities but also, at a time when there are effectively no more frontiers to explore and conquer, at least on Planet Earth.[34] The nineteenth century adventure genre began to wane as Imperial expansion slowed and previously exotic and dramatic landscapes gave way to settled, domestic spheres.[35] A number of sub-genres including war literature and detective fiction took its place, reflecting and challenging the societies in which they were produced. The most influential sub-genre recognizable in Horowitz's work is the spy story, specifically Ian Fleming's 'James Bond' narratives with their roots in the Cold War. Horowitz acknowledges the influence of Fleming's work, referring to the fictional character by name in a number of the texts while Alex's use of specially adapted gadgets further references the Bond novels. Horowitz's narratives are filled with humour and pun, other ways in which they again mirror Fleming's work and endow the texts with a playfulness that belies the seriousness of the situations in which Alex finds himself and deflecting any potentially emotional reaction to events, a subject I will return to later in the chapter. A crucial difference, however, is that Fleming's James Bond is a grown man which makes his occupation as Secret Agent 007 plausible, even if his endless infallibility is highly improbable. His character composition – physically robust; brave; honest; resourceful; pragmatic; patriotic – pays homage to earlier adventure heroes and although more playful in tone, James Bond continues to uphold and defend the ideals of Western

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[34] There have been a number of high profile adventure stories in the fantasy genre in recent times, most notably J.K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series (1997 – 2007) and P. Reeve's 'Mortal Engines' quartet (2001 – 2006).

[35] See J. Richards (1989) *Imperialism and Juvenile Fiction* for a discussion of the ways in which fiction and ideology interact in these novels.

civilization against 'otherness'.[36] Alex Rider, on the other hand, is a fourteen-year-old

boy who has suffered bereavement and finds himself in a very uncertain place in the

world.

Empowerment

The reader first meets Alex as he is being told that his uncle has died. In the light of the

bereavement and the uncertain future he faces, it is plausible to suggest that Horowitz's

narratives represent an imaginary landscape of adventure for Alex, and that Alex

constructs this alternative world through his own imagination, drawing on knowledge

from a collective and accumulated Western history of adventure.[37] However, to limit

Alex's adventures to the confines of his own imagination reduces the potential of their

impact; for the reader engaged with Alex's struggles and triumphs the potency of

Horowitz's narratives lies in the possibility of Alex overcoming 'real' fictional foes

within the contexts of the novels; for the child to outwit the adults who threaten him and

take some control over his destiny. Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, a space in

which the established order is reversed, and society's rules are temporarily overturned,

can be applied to Alex's fictional world in that he is constructed within a landscape

where he is able to change the rules to some degree. Maria Nikolajeva (2003) suggests in

relation to carnival theory:

> The child may be placed in a number of extraordinary situations, such as
> war or revolution, exotic, far-away settings, temporary isolation on a desert
> island, extreme danger (common in mystery novels), and so on. All these
> conditions empower the fictional child, and even though the protagonist is
> most frequently brought back to the security of home and parental

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[36] See, J. Chapman (1999) *Licence to Thrill* for a detailed discussion of the key components of the 'James Bond' novels.
[37] In *The Adventurous Male* (1993), Green explores the relationship between adventure and masculinity and how it is inscribed in the male consciousness.

supervision, the narratives have subversive effect, showing that the rules
imposed on the child by the adults are in fact arbitrary.
(129)

Significantly, Alex does not return to the security of his family but is left in the 'care' of

the ambivalent Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones of MI6 who are responsible for placing him in

danger in the first place. By positioning Alex as both dependant on MI6 but also

successful in overcoming the challenges he faces through the assignments his minders

hand him, Horowitz highlights the uneven power relations at work in child/ adult

relationships where adults are given control over a child on the assumption that they will

offer care and support. At the same time he gives hope to the reader through Alex's

repeated triumphs through which he suggests it is possible to take control, to overturn

authority, if only for limited periods of time or in specific environments, as typical of

carnival.

A further example of the subversive nature of power relations and their fluidity

within the texts is the construction of Alex's 'heroic' character. As a teenage boy,

although he is physically strong, Alex recognizes that his teenage body is no match in

one-to-one combat with a number of the deadly assassins he encounters. Horowitz

consistently represents him as using his resourcefulness and quick thinking to get him out

of trouble. Dudley Jones (2000) has suggested that while fictional heroes in twentieth-

century literature usually take on the characteristics of the epic superheroes found in

myth, there are other traditional hero-types, one example being the trickster:

A different group of traditional heroes – the peasant heroes of folklore and
fairytale – could embody a subversive potential. If the peasant boy
embarked on a heroic quest and overcame the various obstacles that lay in
his way, he could claim the hand of the princess, and in due course, become
ruler of the kingdom. Although the revolutionary implications of this
usurpation were undermined by the incorporation of the peasant boy figure

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within that order, the subversive potential of the story signified the utopian
aspirations of the peasant culture from which the story sprang.
(10)

With reference to Alex Rider, I would suggest that he is constructed to represent a

number of the characteristics of the epic hero in terms of his physical strength, courage

and integrity:[38] however, he also portrays elements of the trickster through his continued

outwitting of the adults in his world and this introduces a subversive element into the

narratives by reversing social hegemonies. More than that, triumphing over adults gives

him a sense of personal empowerment, upsetting the status quo. One example of this is an

encounter with a member of a triad gang in *Skeleton Key* (2002). While working as a ball

boy at the Wimbledon Tennis Championships, Alex investigates a suspicious security

guard. Aware that Alex is spying on him, the guard lures him into a storage area where

they face each other in combat. Alex realizes that the man is an expert in martial arts and

therefore he cannot defeat him in a straightforward physical fight so uses his initiative to

trap the man in a fridge:

> Alex took another step forward. This time he swung the cylinder like a
> cricket bat, hitting the man with incredible force in the shoulders and neck.
> The guard never had a chance. He didn't even cry out as he was thrown off
> his feet and sent hurtling forward into the open fridge […] He took one last
> look at the man who had tried to kill him.
> "Out cold," he said.
> Then he reached out and twisted the thermostat control, sending the
> temperature down below zero […]
> He closed the door and limped painfully away.
> (59-60)

Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000) has suggested that a significant function of literature for

adolescents is to consider the deployment of social power and where the individual fits

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[38] See: J. Campbell (1949) *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* for a discussion of the various representations
of the hero figure which Campbell highlights.

into this structure, be that the fictional protagonist or, through him or her, the adolescent reader. She suggests that the literature functions to ask the question 'Do I dare disturb the universe?' explaining,

> […] protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class […]
> (3)

In Horowitz's narratives Alex has already learnt the lesson that to remain alive he needs more than brute force to overcome his enemies. He also realizes that when necessary breaking the rules can also help him. One notable example of this is his involvement with a 'real' version of the Gameslayer computer game in *Eagle Strike* (2003). Alex has already played with the game on a computer screen, a simulated version. He is then forced by the villain Damien Cray to re-enact the game on a life-size set where the trials are real and deadly. At first Alex follows the rules that he used to help the computerized action figure overcome the challenges on screen: however, he soon realizes that the game is programmed in such a way that the player cannot make independent decisions – every seemingly 'free choice' has its consequences:

> Every computer game is a series of programmed events, with nothing random, nothing left to chance […] No matter how much choice you might seem to have, you were always obeying a hidden set of rules […] But Alex had not been programmed. He was a human being and could do what he wanted […] To get out of the world that Cray had built for him, he had to do everything that *wasn't* expected […] In other words he had to cheat.
> (2003: 184-5)

Alex, then, learns a valuable lesson; he does have power – albeit limited – in his environment which he can use to 'disturb the universe' when necessary; moreover, he

realizes that he does not have to always do the expected and conform, that choosing another path is equally valid.

Despite the overpowering message of the plots, the structure of the novels which place Alex under the authority of Alan Blunt at the beginning and end of each assignment re-enforces the balance of power; he moves into the 'carnivalesque' space but must return to his child status at the end of each narrative to maintain the status quo of power relations. Alex is initially blackmailed into working for MI6; Horowitz, here again, highlights the arbitrary and ambivalent nature of power and its uses in the novels. He presents Alex as initially resisting MI6 but powerless against Alan Blunt's recourse to the law:

> "Ian Rider has of course left the house and all his money to you. However, he left it in trust until you are twenty-one. And we control that trust. So there will, I'm afraid, have to be some changes […] We propose to put the house on the market. Unfortunately, you have no relatives to look after you, so I'm afraid that also means you'll have to leave Brookland. You'll be sent to an institution."
> (2000: 60)

Making Alex the focalizer for the narratives means that readers learn of the relationship with MI6 from his perspective and therefore empathize with his predicament, undermining both the authority and integrity of the adults. This creates a further tension in the texts in relation to the 'enemies' Alex faces in that 'good' and 'bad' become blurred. Horowitz crafts a number of occasions when Alex himself has to decide between good and evil – or at least how he understands these concepts. For instance, when he is sent to the Point Blanc Academy in *Point Blanc* (2001) he uncovers a plot, 'The Gemini Project', in which Dr. Hugo Grief is replacing the sons of influential men in the worlds of business and politics with cloned replicas of himself, made to look like the boys, in an

attempt to take over the world. Alex eventually comes face-to-face with the cloned

version of himself and they fight to the death. In presenting this dramatic scene to the

reader, Horowitz symbolically represents Alex as making a choice between good and evil

within himself; he defeats the part of himself that is like Grief, that wants to conquer the

world with the use of force and deception:

> He was looking at a fourteen-year-old boy with fair hair cut very short,
> brown eyes and a slim, pale face. The boy was even dressed identically to
> him. It took Alex what felt like an eternity to accept what he was seeing. He
> was standing in a room looking at himself sitting in a chair. The boy *was*
> him.
> With just one difference. The boy was holding a gun.
> (2001: 274)

The series includes a number of situations in which Alex is in the company of

'attractive' enemies and has to make a decision about his relationship with them. The

enigmatic hired assassin Yassen Gregorovich who features in *Stormbreaker* (2000) and

Eagle Strike (2003) fascinates and repulses him in equal measure. Alex knows that

Yassen is responsible for his uncle's death, but is confused and in some ways attracted to

him because he appears to care about Alex's welfare, in stark contrast to Alan Blunt. In

setting up these oppositions Horowitz problematizes assumptions about right and wrong

and who decides which is which. John Stephens (1998) reminds us that what we interpret

as 'truth' in the west is socially constructed in relation to cultural discourses which

privilege and maintain western ideologies:

> We think it is important to remember that this metaethic has been evolved
> within European-based or derived cultures; so "Western" always has the
> effect of a reminder that despite any implicit or overt assumptions to the
> contrary, the metaethic expresses a culture specific idea of transcendence
> and not a universal.
> (7)

Horowitz, then, introduces a sense of uncertainty about right and wrong, always around the issue of who wields power. The 'villains' who populate the series are represented as flawed in some way which justifies their ultimate defeat. The common theme which runs through their list of crimes is a pursuit of power, a desire to take control: however, both MI6 and the CIA also want to be in control - the only difference between the 'good' and the 'bad' in Alex's world appears to be how power will be used, but as already suggested, this is relative in relation to the positioning of the reader in western discourse. The authority and certainty of Empire which informs nineteenth-century adventure narratives is absent from Horowitz's novels. According to Margery Hourihan (1997),

> […] in our postmodern era, when the old certainties have been undermined by the Darwinian and Freudian revolutions, by the end of empire, by the brute facts of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, and by our awareness of environmental degradation, or, in deconstructive terms, when discourse has become decentred, the meanings of a particular version of the story can become unstable. (108)

The fact that anti-western sentiments are raised at all works to disrupt the dominant ideology of the western metanarrative to some degree: however, because they are voiced by subjects constructed as bordering on insanity, and their plots are foiled by Alex, a British boy, the discourses of Alex's enemies are seriously undermined and discredited.

Through the characters of Alex's adversaries, Horowitz brings the question of Empire and the colonial past to the heart of the narratives; Alex is a British schoolboy working for the British government - and occasionally the American CIA - and the enemies he comes up against are, on the whole, foreigners who want to change the world order. Herod Sayle (*Stormbreaker*, 2000) wants revenge for the way he was treated when sent to an English school. He rants at Alex:

"You *bliddy* snobs with your stuck-up schools and your stinking English
superiority! But I'm going to show you. I'm going to show you all! [...] You'd
be surprised how many countries there are in the world who loathe the English.
Most of Europe, just to begin with."
(184-9)

The former Russian general, Alexei Sarov (*Skeleton Key*, 2002) wants to return Russia to

its former Communist glory and then rid the world of Western culture, which he

perceives as corrupt, suggesting that the majority of the Russian population agree with

him – "I will rebuild the Berlin Wall. There will be new wars. I will not rest until my

kind of government, communist government, is the single dominant power in the world."

(271)

The texts evoke a disquieting image of the colonial past which, while they lack

the authority of earlier iterations of Empire-discourse in boys' adventure fiction, still

continue to inform western discourse in relation to world power structures. It is an

imperative of the genre that Alex must defeat his enemies, but Horowitz's choice of

enemies, in spite of their exaggerated characters which suggest that the reader should not

take them or the narratives too seriously (a subject I will return to later in the chapter)

still produce tensions in the texts. The series as a whole, with regard to its imaginative

landscapes, resonates with images from nineteenth-century adventure narratives[39] and

'Cold War' espionage.[40] As in earlier adventure fiction, Alex is working for his country,

upholding western law and traditions against those who want to destroy them and echoes

of a colonial past are brought to life in an array of villains who are inevitably vanquished.

However, as suggested earlier in the work of Hourihan, post-modern cultural discourse

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[39] See, D. Butts (1992) 'The Adventure Story' for a description of the structure and emblems which are
significant in the identification of the 19th century adventure genre.
[40] In *The British Spy Novel* (1989) Atkins discusses the key components which define the genre and the
ideological positions which underpin it.

creates uncertainty which Horowitz accommodates in his novels in relation to power structures between both nations and men. Alex exists in a male-dominated space where he has to use physical strength and resourcefulness to survive.

The work of R.W. Connell (1995) is helpful in understanding the power structures which exist between men in the Alex Rider stories. While Alan Blunt is constructed as an unsympathetic character, he is also shown to be a powerful man because he is privileged in relation to what Connell terms 'the patriarchal dividend'; that is, he has a high level of institutional resources at his disposal which means he is able to influence and control others. Because the pursuit of power is central to these texts Connell's analysis of relationships between men and the negotiation of status is especially pertinent. She suggests:

> 'Hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.
> (76)

Seen in this light, the narratives represent a space in which masculinities 'play out' or contest power conflicts. By representing both Alex and Alan Blunt as being in possession of hegemonic masculinities, Horowitz highlights the unstable nature of privileged masculinity and the investment necessary to maintain dominant status. The numerous fictional representations of masculinities which people the texts illustrate the ongoing negotiation constantly in motion.

Alex himself is presented as ambivalent about his role in MI6. As discussed earlier, he is initially coerced into the organization but Horowitz constructs the relationship as problematic for Alex is both angry at the way he is used and attracted by

the excitement and power his position gives him, something he contemplates in the interlude between his mission with the Stormbreaker computers and being sent to Point Blanc:

> Sometimes he wished that the whole business with MI6 had never happened. But at the same time – he had to admit it – part of him wanted it all to happen again. Sometimes he felt he no longer belonged in the safe, comfortable world of Brookland School. Too much had changed. And at the end of the day, anything was better than double homework.
> (2001: 23)

Through the narratives Horowitz describes Alex as confused about the way he feels when he is able to outwit or overpower an opponent; he becomes more assured about his ability to 'win', but at the same time is aware that the kind of power he is attracted to potentially has a heavy cost for himself and others; something Horowitz highlights through the representations of the many characters who serve the world of espionage. They are constructed as subservient, people who are afraid of the consequences of becoming visible, the suggestion being that stepping out of line could lead to a violent end at the hands of their powerful and corrupt employers:

> He recognized the type: he had met men like them before. The guards at Point Blanc Academy. The technicians at Cray Software. These were people who worked for someone who made them nervous. They were paid to do a job and they never stepped out of line. Were they people with something to hide?
> (2004: 31)

Through the course of the series Horowitz draws attention to the complex relationship between Alex and emblems of power, whether represented by other people or objects from the world of espionage. Alex's relationship with guns is symbolic of his ambivalence to his role as spy; he is intrigued by the power of the lethal weapon and finds it compelling, but at the same time he is repulsed by what it means. Each time he

begins a new assignment he is given a number of gadgets by Smithers, the 'gadget man' in M16, a figure familiar from the *James Bond* novels. For Alex, they are always made from things which a fourteen-year-old boy might own; a key ring with a Michael Owen figurine which can be used as a stun grenade; a Discman that is also an electric saw, used later to convert an ironing board at Point Blanc academy into a makeshift snowboard; a gold stud earring which is an explosive device; chewing gum that can expand and be used to blow things apart, known as BUBBLE 07. All of the gadgets that Alex is given are to help him survive, to protect him: they are not intended to be used in a situation where he is the aggressor. He asks Smithers several times why he isn't allowed to have a gun. The answer is always that he is too young, although as Alex ruefully points out, he isn't too young to die, and M16 show little outward concern about using him in operations. Alex does finally take control of a gun when he has the opportunity to kill the hired assassin Yassen Gregorovich in *Eagle Strike*:

> Alex felt the power of the weapon he was holding. He weighed it in his hand. The gun was a Grach MP-443, black, with a short muzzle and a ribbed stock. It was Russian, of course, new army issue. He allowed his finger to curl around the trigger and smiled grimly. Now he and Yassen were equals. (2003: 47)

Of course this is merely an illusion; holding the gun and using it are entirely different and Alex is unable to shoot Yassen. Horowitz here draws attention to the difference between playing with violence – as boys are often encouraged to do as children through the toys they are given, the TV they watch, the computer games they play, and ironically, the books they read – and the potential consequences of real violence. In a case study carried out in a London secondary school, Stephen Frosh (2002) found that many young men do

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indeed maintain their hegemonic status through proving themselves in situations

involving real or threatened violence:

> […] the complex relationship between managing to be popular and
> successfully performing hegemonic masculinity is demonstrated by the fact
> that many boys wanted other boys to consider that they were really tough,
> but not senselessly violent. Their accounts tended to indicate that they had,
> at some point, 'proved' their toughness and no longer needed to do so.
> (83)

Horowitz positions Alex in a landscape where it is not unusual for masculine

identities to be established and policed through the threat of violence. The fictional world

in which he exists is extreme; physical strength and aggression are common expressions

of power. Alex uses force to protect himself, but the ultimate act of murder is beyond

him. Complementing the way the books hold back from making Alex a killer is the

'playful' tone the narrator adopts. Alex responds to much of the aggression he faces with

'deadpan humour' which at once diminishes the seriousness of the violence and serves as

a reminder of its very nature; that it exists within an imaginative space. Together these

aspects of the writing suggest that Horowitz is alert to the potential damage involved in

using physical aggression as part of a construction of masculinity.

Thomas Newkirk (2000) suggests that there are a number of strategies used in

narratives which 'contain' violence:

> The violence is made "safe" in a number of ways: by removing it from
> human pain, by withholding some of the graphic consequences, by
> interspersing it with humor (the jokiness of James Bond movies reminds us
> not to take things seriously), and by using it in the service of a good cause
> like saving the planet.
> (102-3)

One example of Horowitz's deployment of humour in order to nullify violence comes in

Alex's reaction to the news that Julia Rothman – Alex's adversary in the novel *Scorpia* -

is dead. Mrs. Jones explains to him the events that led up to her death:

> Mrs. Jones took up the story. "The platform underneath the balloon fell on
> her as she was trying to escape," she explained. "She was crushed."
> "I would have been disappointed too," muttered Alex.
> (2004: 337)

A concern that has been expressed in relation to boys and 'crisis' is the centrality of

violence in many boys' lives: the relationship between aggression and media-generated

violence has been blamed in some quarters for the increase in socially unacceptable

behaviour.[41] In commenting on the relationship between the two, Newkirk suggests that

there is no simple correlation, an analysis equally valid in relation to fictional narratives:

> The alarmist claims about the effects of media violence rest on research that
> reduces complex narratives with multiple messages to simple "stimuli" that
> work automatically, like a carcinogen, at an unconscious level. Not only is
> the media narrative reduced; the young viewers too are reduced, to being
> unconscious reactors with no interpretive resources.
> (102-3)

As Newkirk suggests, readers are potentially capable of distinguishing between simulated

violence and 'the real world'. The reader, then, can engage with Alex's physical triumphs

and negotiate the fictional violence, without any actual consequences. Horowitz further

diffuses the potential of 'serious violence' in the texts through his construction of the

enemies Alex faces. They are described in exaggerated terms in relation to their physical

appearance which makes them more laughable then frightening. Mrs. Stellenbosch, the

assistant to Hugo Grief at the Point Blanc Academy is described thus;

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[41] See R. Sabin (1996) *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, for an introduction to
the discussion around the relationship between media generated and 'real' violence.

There was a woman sitting opposite Dr Grief, dressed in tight-fitting Lycra with a sweat band round her head. This was Eva Stellenbosch. She had just finished her morning work-out – two hours of weightlifting and aerobic exercise – and she was still breathing heavily, her huge muscles rising and falling. Mrs. Stellenbosch had a facial structure that wasn't quite human, with   lips curving out far in front of her nose and wisps of bright ginger hair hanging over a high-domed forehead […]
(2001: 91)

A succession of outrageous names further emphasizes the comic and playful nature of the narratives. Alex's 'sort of' girlfriend is, after all, called Sabina Pleasure (*Skeleton Key; Eagle Strike*).

Together the books in the series offer complex statements about masculinity and empowerment. While Horowitz presents Alex as attracted to the authority represented by the masculinity embodied by Alan Blunt or Yassen Gregorovich because of the confidence it brings him, he juxtaposes this with a discourse which raises questions about the outcomes of aggressive, physical masculinity as a means of control. As a result, the reader may feel empowered in relation to Alex's success and his ability to overturn the conventions and regulations of his physical landscape, but at the same time uncertain about the impact of the violence used to secure power. Ultimately, however, Horowitz suggests that these narratives represent imaginary, playful spaces in which the reader can empathize with Alex's triumphs over his adult enemies and at least temporarily turn the world upside down, offering an antidote to the discourse of 'crisis' in which boy readers often find themselves enmeshed.

Intimacy

A seemingly more destabilizing element in the Alex Rider series is the way the books depict Alex's responses to intimacy. The imperative of the adventure story is to action,

leaving little room for contemplation or the articulation of emotional needs. In her work

on the uses of the chronotope in children's literature, Maria Nikolajeva (1996) contends

that the male chronotope is identifiable through a representation of time as linear and

space as open:

> Not only is male time linear, but male space is open, as books for boys take
> place outdoors, sometimes far away from home in the wide world. Male
> narrative time is structured as a series of stations where an adventure is
> experienced, a task is performed, a trial is passed. Time between these
> stations practically does not exist.
> (125)

Adventure narratives in general conform to Nikolajeva's model in that events are played

out in a linear time frame, usually in open spaces which are often composed of exotic

landscapes. However, she goes on to suggest that because of the linear nature of the male

chronotope, maturation in these texts is represented superficially in terms of the subject's

move from birth to death. This line of thought is further developed in Jungian terms by

Margery Hourihan (1997):

> The narrative structure of the hero story is a paradigm of adolescent
> development, and specifically of male adolescent development. In Jungian
> terms it is an image of the outward journey of the ego, the concern of youth,
> as opposed to the later task of individuation, or inward journey in search of
> the Self, of wholeness and harmony.
> (49)

The linear time frame adopted by adventure narratives works to endorse the discourses of

masculinity which the texts privilege with their emphasis on action and physical strength

as opposed to reflection or displays of emotion. However, this does not preclude the

possibility of emotional maturation in relation to both the fictional hero and potential boy

reader which can be achieved through engagement with action-based quests and the

obstacles which must be overcome in the narratives in order to succeed. Bruno

Bettelheim (1975), in relation to fairy-tales, suggests that children can learn to master

their anxieties and fears through the 'lessons' embedded in fairy-tales. He suggests that in

a culture where adults try to shield children from difficult life knowledge, fairy-tales

allow them to face their fears and understand that they can come to terms with them. He

expands,

> The dominant culture wishes to pretend, particularly where children are
> concerned, that the dark side of man does not exist, and professes a belief in
> an optimistic meliorism […] Freud's prescription is that only by struggling
> courageously against what seem like overwhelming odds can man succeed
> in wringing meaning out of his existence […] This is exactly the message
> that fairy-tales get across to the child in manifold form: that a struggle
> against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human
> existence – but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets
> unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the
> end emerges victorious.
> (7-8)

Applying Bettelheim's thesis to the adventure narrative suggests that the child reader can

potentially gain insight into the ups and downs of life, traveling imaginatively with the

boy hero as he faces and overcomes the challenges on his quest. This contradicts the

criticism voiced in Nikolejeva's work leveled at adventure stories which suggests that the

compulsion for action to dictate the narrative means that there is no emotional growth in

the hero who merely moves from one adventure to another, gaining worldly rewards

along the way, and by implication the reader is also unable to 'grow' emotionally through

his or her reading of the novel.

Horowitz constructs Alex as someone who struggles to articulate his emotions.

After Ian Rider's death he is aware that his own situation is precarious but chooses not to

make his anxiety known to anyone:

Alex assumed Jack[42] would have to go back to America. She certainly couldn't stay in London for ever. So who would look after him? By law, he was still too young to look after himself. His whole future looked so uncertain that he preferred not to talk about it. He preferred not to talk at all. (2000: 13)

This is an issue which has been highlighted about boys in relation to the discourse of 'crisis' - that boys have difficulty with emotional literacy which can lead to isolation, depression and in extreme circumstances, suicide - paradoxically, boys' socialization is often aimed at separating them from intimacy at an early age in order to position them successfully in the wider world. Writing about family relations, Adams and Coltrane (2005) suggest:

Taken as a whole, the mandate for boys to be not-feminine, unlike (and in direct opposition to) the mandate for girls *to be* feminine, is a mandate that drives them away from family relations, particularly relations with their mothers. Although assumed to be a baseline requirement for boys' achievement of manhood, this cultural mandate can cause problems for them when they mature into men […] By continuing to follow the dictates of separate spheres, we may be creating manly men, but we are also crippling men emotionally and creating husbands and fathers who are destined to be outsiders or despots in their own families.
(233)

Horowitz's protagonist is not accustomed to intimate relationships and finds it difficult to express how he feels, a pattern of behaviour learnt from his uncle. Ian Rider himself is described as a secretive, emotionally withdrawn individual and after his uncle's death Alex recognizes how little he actually knew about the man who raised him. Ian Rider becomes for Alex a 'blank canvas', a mystery to be solved, a story to be imagined. While his death is frightening because it leaves Alex in a vulnerable position in relation to the adult world, at the same time it is exciting, opening up endless possibilities in Alex's

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[42] Jack Starbright is the housekeeper to Alex and Ian Rider and becomes a friend to Alex as he gradually begins to confide in her as the series progresses.

imagination about his uncle's identity and, at the same time, his own place in the world. This is signified symbolically by Alex gaining access to his uncle's office, a space closed off to him during Ian Rider's life. The empty room while symbolic of their lack of intimacy, also represents for Alex an opportunity to explore his own identity, who he is, who he wants to be, free from the constraints of Ian Rider and the masculinity he represents, "The door of the office which had always, always been locked was unlocked now. Alex opened it and went in." (17) In this way, Alex's quest can be described as not only a series of adventures from which he gains a sense of empowerment in relation to his position in the world, but also as a personal quest, a search for self-identity. Where Hourihan sees the adventure narrative as merely a journey of the ego, concerned only with the conscious world, Alex is, in fact, embarking on an inward journey moving beyond concerns solely of the ego, or conscious world, in search of the self, the process of individuation in which the ego and unconscious can exist in harmony. The reader is able to engage with Alex's journey, then, not only in terms of his physical triumphs but also in relation to 'finding one's place in the world'. Interestingly, although Horowitz describes Alex's physical appearance, both the book covers and website represent him as an outline figure, a blank space, in which the reader can imaginatively place himself. [43]

In his 'ordinary' world Alex is actually an isolated figure, not only in terms of his relationship with his uncle but also at school. Alex's difference from his peers arises from his family's upper-middle class background since his school companions are implicitly working-class:

Brookland was a new comprehensive, red brick and glass, modern and ugly. Alex could have gone to any of the smart private schools around Chelsea,

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[43] See, www.alexrider.com

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Brookland was a new comprehensive, red brick and glass, modern and ugly. Alex could have gone to any of the smart private schools around Chelsea,

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[43] See, www.alexrider.com

but Ian Rider had decided to send him here. He had said it would be more of
a challenge.
(2000: 19)

This not only makes a distinction between Alex and his contemporaries, but also contains

an element of class elitism; while Alex attends the school to become more aware of a

wider range of life experiences, patronizing it itself, the fact that he is never totally

assimilated into the school environment emphasizes his difference. At the same time,

Horowitz gives Alex an awareness of the fragility of his school friendships which leaves

him with conflicting emotions; he wants to be part of his peer group but also 'different'.

This tension runs through the narratives, becoming visible in different situations where

Alex is uncertain or uncomfortable about his place in the world, as discussed earlier in

relation to his experiences with MI6.

In this series academic achievement is not a distinguishing feature between Alex

and other students. The fact that he is constantly absent means that on several occasions

he comes perilously close to failing at school. The school curriculum and the choices it

makes available to students plays a significant role in the way that boys validate their

masculinities, in relation to what is privileged and the polarities this creates between

students. It can be used as a means through which to reaffirm hegemonies in school.

Haywood and Mac An Ghaill (2003) suggest:

> […] the hard scientific version of cleverness that is validated in school
> exists in opposition to supposedly 'soft' subjects, like art, music and
> literature, which are seen as easy options, as essentially frivolous, and
> somehow lacking in due rigour and seriousness. They are in effect girlish
> subjects and not for 'real' boys. Similarly to be 'bad at games' can be read
> as a cultural index, implying a suspect lack of manly vigour and hinted at
> effeminacy […]
> (69)

There is certainly a privileging of sport and physical activity in Alex's environment

which is crystallized in the representation of Tom Harris, one of Alex's few friends at

Brookland. His lack of academic achievement is not registered as problematic:

> Tom wasn't interested in any school subjects and was regularly bottom in
> everything. But the best thing about him was that he didn't care […] And
> what Tom lacked in the classroom, he made up for on the sports field. He
> was captain of the school football team and Alex's main rival on sports day,
> beating him at hurdles, four hundred metres and the pole vault.
> (2004: 13)

By implication Horowitz suggests that Alex also excels at sports both in school and the

other training he has undertaken with his uncle – skiing; snowboarding; diving, karate;

parachuting. The reader's first description of Alex confirms his strength and agility;

"Alex was fourteen, already well-built, with the body of an athlete". (2000: 7)

Throughout the series he is perpetually in motion, involved in physical combat or trial.

The novels in part conform to gender stereotyped discourses about masculinities and

education in that the narratives privilege physical action over other learning. Importantly,

however, Alex is presented as always able to catch up with his studies and remains on

course to pass his exams. While Horowitz does not privilege academic learning, neither

does he dismiss it as unimportant. For Alex it is something which is necessary but

uninspiring; it takes place in the background and keeps him attached to the 'normal life'

he often craves. The discourse, therefore, is unresolved and does not leave the reader with

any clear indication as to the merits or otherwise of academic learning. In fact Alex's

entry into the world of espionage means that he is frequently absent from school which

makes him as much of a mystery to his peers and teachers as Ian Rider was to him:

> It was rather strange, one of the boys talking to this man in his old-fashioned
> blazer and striped tie. But on the other hand, this was Alex Rider and the
> whole school knew there was something odd about him […] Mr. Wiseman

decided to ignore the situation. Alex could look after himself and he would doubtless turn up later. He hoped.
(2002: 31-32)

Because his life is shrouded in secrecy, those around him are not able to become close to Alex and assume, as in the case of his teacher Mr. Wiseman above, that he can take care of himself which is only partially true. Physically Ian Rider has equipped him well to look after himself. Alex is able to perform in a number of sports, as described earlier, and he is resourceful in terms of adapting his skills to use during assignments. For instance, when he finds himself trapped at the Point Blanc academy, the only way out is to ski down a mountain side. He has no skis but is able to adapt an ironing board which he then uses as a snowboard to take him to safety.

However, Horowitz makes Alex aware of a lack of intimacy in his life, the most obvious being his lack of family. At some moment(s) in each book in the series Alex reflects on his isolation and his desire for a family with the intimacy this brings. While on holiday with Sabina's family, he concedes:

> Why couldn't he have had a family like this? Alex felt an old, familiar sadness creep up on him. His parents had died before he was even a few weeks old. The uncle who had brought him up and who had taught him so much had still been, in many ways, a stranger to him. He had no brothers or sisters. Sometimes he felt as isolated as the plane he had seen from the veranda, making its long journey across the night sky, unnoticed and alone.
> (2002: 69-70)

Ironically, in the course of the novels Alex finds himself with a number of 'surrogate' parents, each one worse than the one before. Potentially Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones of M16 act in place of parents for Alex in that they are responsible for what he is doing and regulate his actions. However, there is no outward warmth attached to the relationship and they actively send him into dangerous situations rather than keeping him safe, the

complete opposite of expectations surrounding parent and child relationships. The CIA

agents, Troy and Turner who 'play' Alex's parents in an undercover operation (*Skeleton

Key*) are dismissive of him, doubting his abilities although it is they who end up dead. He

is then left to face General Sarov on his own. Significantly, the General decides that he

wants to adopt Alex in place of his own son, who died in military action in Afghanistan.

First, however, the General must set off a nuclear explosion in order to take control of

Russia and return it to communist rule! Alex himself recognizes the irony of the situation:

> Only a week ago he had wondered what it would be like to have a father and
> now two of them had turned up at once – first Tom Turner and now Sarov!
> Things were definitely going from bad to worse.
> (2002: 232)

Although much of Alex's longing is masked in humour or irony, by positioning him as

separate Horowitz makes his isolation a real dilemma for Alex. When described at his

most vulnerable, lying on the pavement after being shot and near to death, his longing

and need for his parents is revealed starkly, the jokes are peeled away revealing a young

man who is totally vulnerable:

> And then he saw two people and knew that everything was going to be
> alright after all […] The man was very handsome, dressed in military
> uniform with close-cut hair and a solid, serious face. He looked very much
> like Alex…The woman, standing next to him, was smaller and seemed
> much more vulnerable…He had seen photographs of this woman and he was
> astonished to find her here. He knew that he was looking at his mother […]
> The man and the woman stepped forward out of the crowd. The man said
> nothing; he was trying to hide his emotions. But the woman leant down and
> reached out a hand. Only now did Alex realize that he had been looking for
> her all his life.
> (2004: 358-9)

The very fact that the two people Alex imagines are culturally stereotyped images of a

mother and father further emphasizes what a lack of family means to him in a society

which defines nuclear family structures as normative and places them at the centre of the formation of intimacy although, as suggested earlier, the socialization of boys is often at odds with this. There is a steady suggestion in the series that while the pursuit of power can be deeply attractive, there is also a need for intimacy in Alex's life and by implication, that of boy readers.

Using the landscape of adventure to introduce a discourse in favour of intimacy means that while it is present in the narratives it does not become the overwhelming focus of the stories but is visible to the reader. In his study of boys' fictional writing, Thomas Newkirk suggests that when boys write stories they begin to introduce girl characters into adventure landscapes to acknowledge their interest without referring directly to girls as that would be threatening to their hegemonic status:

> […] the boys are able to bridge two identities: the segregationist male role
> that finds girls officially unappealing – and the young adolescent role that is
> beginning to find girls truly interesting. By keeping to action stories, ones
> *without* girlfriends or real relationships, the boys can avoid territory that
> might threaten their standing as "real boys".
> (129)

Horowitz uses the same method to introduce into the narratives ideas often positioned as traditionally outside of boys' stories or stories for boys. While this could be interpreted as re-enforcing stereotypes about boys' socialization, it can equally be understood as an opportunity to engage readers beyond the boundaries of adventure.

In constructing the relationship between Alex and Sabina, Horowitz represents Sabina as the more confident of the two. Alex's difficulties in expressing himself are represented symbolically in his not being able to tell Sabina about his life as a spy; he is unable to reveal who he truly is and open up to her. When they are captured by Damien Cray he tries to comfort her but ends up feeling awkward and unsure: "He went over to

her. He wanted to put an arm round her but he ended up standing awkwardly in front of her instead". (2003: 271) As with his school work, Alex is distinctly average when it comes to girls yet by allowing him eventually to rescue Sabina within the 'carnivalesque' landscape of his adventure, Horowitz offers hope to Alex, and through him the boy reader. He allows Alex the ultimate schoolboy fantasy when Sabina goes into his room one night:

> The door opened. Somebody had come into his room. It was Sabina. She was leaning over him. He felt her hair fall against his cheek and smelled her faint perfume; flowers and white musk. Her lips brushed gently against his. "You're much cuter than James Bond," she said […]
> (2002: 70)

As suggested earlier, the landscape which Horowitz creates for Alex's adventures is potentially problematic in relation to the construction of his enemies and the parallels this draws with Empire discourses of British superiority. The positioning of girls and women, and the treatment of traditionally 'feminine' characteristics in the texts is equally uncomfortable. Alex exists in a male-dominated environment where women and girls are largely marginalized and given domestic and supportive roles. Jack Starbright acts as Alex's guardian and housekeeper although she does gradually move from the margins to take a more central role in his life. Sabina Pleasure literally plays a more active role in the narratives with her attack on Damien Cray and her pursuit of Alex; she is the more forceful in the development of their relationship. This is, however, undermined by her passive role when her father is blown up and Damien Cray initially kidnaps her; in fact because Alex actually cares about her he then also becomes vulnerable. He reacts to her kidnapping emotionally rather than dispassionately, not a characteristic advocated in adventure narratives, and his plan fails:

> "You're very brave. You would do almost anything to have the girl released. But I will do anything to keep her. And I wonder how much you'll be prepared to watch, how far I'll have to go, before you decide that you might as well give me the flash drive anyway. A finger maybe? Two fingers?"
> Yassen opened the scissors. Sabina had suddenly gone very quiet and still. Her eyes pleaded with Alex.
> "No!" Alex yelled. With a wave of despair he knew that Cray had won.
> (2003: 252)

Mrs. Jones's concern for Alex is perceived as a weakness on her otherwise impeccably emotionless character. It is suggested that it is a fault determined by her biological status as Alan Blunt shows no such qualms when using Alex for assignments. Again the narratives fall back on stereotyped images of the masculine and feminine:

> She was a woman and he was fourteen years old. If Mrs. Jones had a son, he could well be the same age as Alex. That made a difference – one that she wasn't quite able to ignore.
> (2002: 85)

Although Horowitz challenges the ideologies from which the adventure genre has grown, he is less successful in avoiding the stereotypical images which inhabit narratives of adventure.

In exploring western understandings of the Hero, Jill Golden (1994) suggests that when engaging with stories of heroes, boys are able to empathize both physically and emotionally:

> The idea of masculinity in Western culture is profoundly linked with the overcoming of fear, demonstrated through physical daring (taking risks) and proved by winning. This version of courage is often celebrated in the stories children hear and tell. Boys who want and are able to take up this position of masculine hegemony gain a lot of bodily experience and practice of overcoming fear.
> (45)

However, as Golden indicates here, empathy with the hero of the texts implies an engagement with specific masculinity discourses; the hero who acts as focalizer in the

texts is necessarily a boy or young man, usually belonging ideologically to the white middle-classes. She goes on to state that the idea of the hero in western ideology is also intrinsically linked with agency and maleness, problematizing the concept of active agency for girls who must position themselves as 'other' when engaging with these narratives:

> But the concept of agency for girls (or women) is necessarily troublesome and contradictory in Western culture; the dualism of Western thought constitutes males, not females, as active agents. To the extent that girls take up their own sense of agency, they are potentially positioning themselves as non-female.
> (44)

This problematizing of agency can be further extended to masculinities which do not identify with the hegemonic discourse of adventure narratives in relation to race or sexuality. They must either subvert their own identity into the proscribed masculinity of the text or remain as 'other' and therefore without agency.

I would suggest, then, that these narratives represent examples of adventure fiction but do not conform in all respects to the traditional operation of the genre. While the heroes of nineteenth-century narratives are assimilated into an Imperialist discourse which rewards them for their successful performance of Empire-masculinity, there are no such certainties in Alex's post-modern landscape. The boy reader travels on a journey of self discovery with Alex, which potentially empowers him while also illuminating the complexities inherent in making life choices. Ultimately Horowitz leaves the reader without a final resolution. He introduces problematic discourses around masculinity configurations which are emphasized in such a traditionally male genre. He leaves a series of narratives, awash with humour and pastiche, but which at the same time are replete with tensions, indicative of a society with more questions than answers about

identities, both personal and national. Nonetheless, as a source of empowering images for potential boy readers, Alex Rider does indeed fulfill his mission.

More adventure

While this chapter concentrates on Horowitz's construction of Alex Rider, it is interesting to note that a number of other authors have at much the same time been working in the same area as Horowitz. This activity has contributed to the suggestion that the adventure genre for boy readers has been resurrected. Perhaps the highest profiles among these authors have been Robert Muchamore and Andy McNab respectively.[44] The changing landscape of adventure is evidenced in the novels of Robert Muchamore, represented by his CHERUB Club series.[45]

The first CHERUB novel, *The Recruit,* (2004) describes the recruitment of James Adams[46] to CHERUB, a network of intelligence agents all aged seventeen or under who are trained and live on the secret CHERUB Campus. James, who becomes the central character of the series, is recruited by CHERUB after the death of his mother while he is living in care. His younger sister Lauren subsequently becomes an agent also. James, however, is not in the mould of previous adventure heroes: he is a troubled, spoilt, working-class boy from an inner city estate whose mother ran a criminal gang of shop-lifters;

> Some kids were happy to have one games console. James Choke had every console, game and accessory going. He had a PC, an MP3 player, Nokia

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[44] Charlie Higson has also published a series of novels about the life and adventures of the young James Bond. The 'Young Bond' novels began publication in 2005.
[45] For more information about the world of CHERUB, see, www.cherubcampus.com
[46] James is told to change his surname to protect his identity and chooses Adams, the name of the iconic, former Arsenal football captain Tony Adams, the team James supports, and significantly himself a flawed hero to the Arsenal faithful.

mobile, widescreen TV and DVD recorder in his room. He never looked
after any of it […] James had all this because Gwen Choke was a thief. She
ran a shoplifting empire from her armchair while she watched daytime soaps
and stuffed chocolates and pizza.
(2004: 7)

James, in fact, is representative of one of the central images of the crisis discourse – the
working-class boy, living on a rundown estate, disinterested in school, and on the
periphery of petty crime. He even comes from a fractured family with a single mother!
This representation is very challenging with regard to the construction of earlier
adventure heroes who embody honour and courage and who, when they set off on their
adventures, leave behind them loving parents (usually mothers) and dependent siblings.
When the reader first meets James he is described as physically unfit, perhaps indicative
of his moral standing. This is re-enforced through his dislike of bathing. His behaviour is
also chauvinist; however he is shown the error of his ways by the girls in CHERUB who
can physically overpower him and tactically outmanoeuvre him:

James liked the idea he was learning karate. He'd always wanted to do it but
had been too lazy to stick at it. He was doing five lessons a week now which
meant he was learning fast, but he couldn't stand being partners with Kerry
[…] He always ended up on the ground in pain, while Kerry hardly took a
hit. James was too proud to admit he was getting hurt. Kerry was smaller,
younger and a girl. How could he whimper that she was beating him up?
(2004: 151-2)

As his body hardens and he begins to learn self control so he becomes a successful agent,
emphasizing the fact that James is intrinsically resourceful, loyal, and willing to accept
the importance of teamwork, a throw-back to nineteenth-century adventure narratives in
which self-control is embodied in the honed, muscular torso. James, however, never
becomes an entirely exemplary figure – he continues to try and avoid his schoolwork, and
retains a love of chocolate which means that he has to work hard to maintain his toned

body. His relationships with girls cause many problems, but Muchamore suggests that he

is to blame; while dating Kerry he cheats on her with another girl, Dana. This leads to a

huge fight and he is ostracised by his friends and sister. Although he is eventually sorry

for the trouble he has caused, there is still a part of James which remains very politically

incorrect:

> Girls were screaming. Kerry had Dana pinned to a table, Rat was trying to
> pull Lauren and Bethany apart and a bunch of staff were yelling dire threats
> as they shielded themselves behind wooden trays. Every so often, James
> ducked when a particularly large piece of food came his way, but mostly he
> just watched in awe as total mayhem exploded around him.
> He was living through a moment that people would talk about at CHERUB
> for years to come and it had all happened because two girls were fighting
> over him.
> This was going to make him a legend.
> (2007: 324)

Muchamore's protagonist is ambivalently portrayed but this makes him more 'human'

and as such, he does represent for the boy reader a flawed but recognisable hero;

someone average in school, makes mistakes in his relationships, has doubts and fears, but

ultimately can be relied on to save the day.

Although James is recognized as the hero of the series, he shares his adventures

with other CHERUB agents, boys and girls alike. Muchamore emphasizes the need for

community and co operation; the isolated hero has given way to group negotiation and

recognition of the need for shared action. Gender equity is paramount in the CHERUB

world with male and female characters represented through a flexible array of both

masculine and feminine qualities. James' sister Lauren is described as particularly

capable and this is recognized when long before many of the older students, including

James, she is rewarded with a black tee-shirt for a successful mission[47]:

> However, the chairman singled out our youngest agent for the strongest
> praise of all. Despite being just eleven years of age, Lauren behaved almost
> immaculately over the space of two months under extremely difficult
> circumstances. Not only that, but when the mission reached its climax, she
> not only kept her cool, but instigated the rescue of five young children who
> would almost certainly have perished in the explosion.
> Lauren Adams, I'm absolutely delighted to say that you have been awarded
> a black shirt.
> (2006: 355)

As well as challenging the portrayal of the flawless male hero, Muchamore also

renegotiates the hero's position as permanently centre stage, erasing all evidence of the

feminine or 'other', through banishment to the margins. This is contested strongly in the

character of Kyle, James' best friend, who is gay. Within the narratives this is represented

as unproblematic and it is James' initial hostile reaction which is signalled as

reprehensible through Kerry's reaction to him:

> 'You think being gay is disgusting?' Kerry tutted. 'I thought Kyle was your
> friend.'
> 'He is,' said James. 'But…I'm not comfortable with the whole gay thing,'
> […]
> 'You know, James,' she said, 'it must have been hard for Kyle to admit
> something like that to you. Especially when you're always calling people
> faggots and queers.'
> (2004: 105)

Muchamore's novels at one level exemplify narratives which expose the discourses

underpinning the genre of nineteenth century adventure stories yet remain hidden within

them through their commitment to expelling 'otherness' in all of its forms – femininity,

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[47] The tee-shirts worn by the young CHERUB agents indicate their level of performance in the line of duty, with black the highest accolade, apart from white, which is worn by staff.

ethnicity, homosexuality. What sets them apart is that these others now become visible

and equal, highlighting the cultural shifts which continue to take place.

The landscapes of Muchamore's novels are also a long way from the exotic

locations of Empire narratives, for most take place in deprived, inner-city streets rife with

drug and gang culture where moral ambiguity comes to the fore and the impact of crime

is made visible to the reader. On an undercover operation, soon after he joins CHERUB,

James ends up back in the world he came from, a rundown estate, to infiltrate a drugs

gang. He comes across addicts, and people with guns who are prepared to use them. He

also meets other people who are desperate to get out and risk their lives selling drugs to

make money. Such actions are not presented as a simple choice between good and evil

however: the CHERUB series conveys the message that life is more complex and

difficult than it is depicted in earlier adventure novels with their clear demarcations

between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. James concedes that he may have ended

up in prison if his life had taken a different path:

> 'You've no idea how badly I need CHERUB,' James said. 'Sometimes all
> the work and training does my head in, but my life was a nightmare before I
> came here. I was in some crummy council home and I kept getting in
> trouble. If CHERUB hadn't picked me, I probably would have ended up in
> prison.'
> (2004: 197)

The dangers which go along with life as a secret agent are also described starkly

by Muchamore: when an operation goes wrong agent Gabrielle is left fighting for her life

after she is stabbed by a gang member in a drugs war:

> Gabrielle could see the light reflecting off the blade, but the knock on the
> head had drained all her strength. Everything was blurred and she thought
> about her training. But she was stranded on the edge of consciousness and
> could only watch as the youth plunged the knife deep into her stomach.
> (2007: 39)

The cost of life as a traditional action hero and the violence inherent in this world is explored in the Boy Soldier series of Andy McNab. The first novel of the series, *Boy Soldier*, was published in 2005, with co-writer Robert Rigby. The series follows the life of seventeen-year-old Danny Watts whose application to join the army has far-reaching and sometimes catastrophic consequences for him and those close to him. Living in care with no known family, Danny is described as well-adjusted, conscientious, and with plans for his future:

> As Danny jogged away towards the changing rooms he could see the next few years panning out exactly the way he'd planned. University, then Sandhurst and then a commission as an officer in the infantry. And on top of that, they might even pay him to run. It couldn't get any better.
> (2005: 9)

McNab suggests that his circumstances make it difficult for Danny to follow his dreams – arriving at the military training camp, he is aware that his lack of family may affect his chances as he looks around at the other candidates, "[t]hey were a mixed bunch: a few, like Danny, comprehensive kids, but the majority public school, Officer Training Corps and Army Cadet Corps." (9)

The situation rapidly deteriorates for Danny as, ironically, he discovers that he does have living family in the form of a grandfather, Fergus, a former SAS officer. The revelation comes when he is rejected by the army as his grandfather is believed to be a traitor to his country and the army are still actively trying to track him down. When Danny sets out to find his grandfather, he becomes a fugitive himself, on the run with a grandfather he does not know. In nineteenth century adventure stories, the hero usually sets out on a journey full of promise, with the hope of a better future. However, McNab suggests that Danny's agency is taken from him; other people are controlling his life

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which runs counter to the masculinity privileged in earlier versions of the adventure story. This makes Danny's position problematic within the novel; he is the main character and the reader travels with him although he is rarely in control of what happens around him.

In order to stay alive Danny becomes an expert in surveillance and covert operations, physically honed and mentally alert but the impact of this lifestyle is also clear: the need for secrecy and an itinerant lifestyle lead to both social and emotional isolation. Fergus Watts is a solitary figure, a trained killer who keeps his feelings closed down and is able to offer Danny very little intimacy or emotional engagement although McNab does not suggest that he is indifferent towards Danny, simply that his lifestyle has made him into someone who is unable to show his feelings easily. Their first meeting sets the tone for their future relationship; Fergus in control and protecting Danny, but without much regard for Danny's feelings:

> 'Listen to me, boy,' Fergus had said as he drove. 'There are people looking for me, and thanks to you, they're probably very close. If they find me I'm dead, and so are you!'
> 'Me?' said Danny in amazement. 'It's *you* they want. As soon as you stop this car I'm going to the police-'
> 'The police can't help you now! No one can, no one but me. So just shut the fuck up and do what I say!'
> Danny did shut up, stunned into silence.
> (2005: 89)

Unlike Horowitz's narratives, which use humour to temper the potentially horrific consequences of Alex's dangerous lifestyle, McNab and Rigby allow readers to witness the full impact of Danny's journey. The most shocking event is the murder of Danny's friend Elena, introduced in the first novel of the series. Elena, who lives in the same group home as Danny, is described as "confident, clever and sharp. No-one intimidated

her, and she knew how to handle people." (2005: 16-17): however, after becoming

embroiled in the violent, underground world which Danny and his grandfather inhabit,

she ends up terrified, devoid of confidence and full of hate after her father is murdered.

She is shot dead, much to Danny's horror, as he tries to reach out to her,

> […] before he could take another step or say another word, there was a dull
> thud and Elena was hurled backwards with shattering force and went
> crashing to the ground at the base of a tree. Danny's mouth gaped open. He
> tasted the blood, Elena's blood, as it ran down his face and over his lips into
> his mouth.
> (2006: 279)

While Danny survives and goes on to join the security services at eighteen, what

he goes through to achieve this goal lays bare the costs. Certainly McNab suggests that

Danny will be successful in his chosen career which can be interpreted as an empowering

message, but it is the succession of loss he experiences in the process which remain at the

heart of the narratives. While earlier adventure narratives emphasize the triumph of the

hero, these novels present ambiguous, uncertain landscapes which highlight the cost. At

the moment the narrative ends, Danny is setting off for MI5 and his future career but he is

simultaneously closing down another part of his life, acknowledging another loss:

> He knew he would never see her again; it was time to make the new start
> complete. He pressed the delete button […]
> And then the car turned right and pulled swiftly away, towards Thames
> House, the headquarters of MI5.
> (2007: 292)

The three authors discussed here offer new versions of the adventure story which

explore what it means to be an adventure hero in the twenty-first century when

confidence in shared cultural beliefs has given way to individualism; when the

privileging of the white, middle-class male has come under sustained pressure and

hegemonic versions of masculinities which support action over intimate engagement have

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been attacked as detrimental to the growth of emotional literacy. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the novels is to reinstate the adventure hero into young people's reading, to make action acceptable once again, while at the same time reconfiguring the hero to incorporate the complexities of being a boy in the new millennium.

The action hero can act as a potent image in the empowerment of young men, but relationships between boys are also central to boys' personal identity formations; their status in peer groups and ability to form individual friendships impact on boys' gendered identities. In societies where changing ideas about friendship have had implications for hegemonic versions of masculinity, a complex, contradictory landscape exists and offers a rich arena for exploration in relation to fictional narratives, a subject to which I now turn.

Chapter 2. Friendship

> Robert Wentworth and Jack Armstrong were chums in the truest sense of
> the word. They had been attracted to each other from their first day of
> meeting, when Armstrong, whose father had just died leaving him an
> orphan, homeless and well-nigh penniless, arrived at the Clyde Engineering
> works […] After that Wentworth and Armstrong were always together; a
> bond of sympathy had sprung up between them, and before long they were
> sharing the same room, and were known as David and Jonathan by their
> engineering associates.
> (MacDonald, *The Lost Explorers*, 1907: 13-15)

In *The Lost Explorers*, MacDonald presents a friendship between two young men which

is loyal, intense, passionate and mutually supportive. Although, as discussed in the

previous chapter, the adventure genre of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is

not renowned as a site of overt emotional expression, many books in this mode are built

on homosocial bonds between boys and men who protect and support each other in

hostile landscapes, and who are in fact emotionally engaged whether or not this is

acknowledged by them or in other ways in the texts.

The ways of friendship

The Lost Explorers suggests the existence of different versions of friendship between

boys and this chapter is concerned with fictional representations of a variety of

adolescent male friendships in contemporary texts. It focuses on the ways in which the

authors of these novels have responded to recent debates about male friendships which

are currently strongly implicated in the 'crisis' discourse because in them boys are

characterized as relationally impoverished, lacking intimacy and emotional literacy. The

literature which informs the idea of crisis suggests that actual boys' friendships have been

diminished as a consequence of their socialization into traditional, normative versions of

masculinity which involves a separation from what is considered feminine. This rejection

of all things feminine is perceived as affecting the ability to engage emotionally and to

form intimate relationships as these involve trust and dependence.

Referring to the difficulties which males can potentially face in the formation of

relationships generally, psychoanalyst Victor Seidler (1992) continues,

> Chodorow's (1979) work helps us to think about the ways boys learn their
> masculinity in separating from their mothers and in learning a negative
> definition of masculinity. Emotions and feelings tend to be identified with
> the mother and so with the feminine, and we learn our masculinity in
> making a break with these qualities. At some level we learn that to be a man
> means to be able to live an independent and self-sufficient life, and so to live
> without relationships. Where we are ready to acknowledge the importance
> of relationships, it becomes difficult to acknowledge the emotions and
> feelings that go along with them, particularly the dependency that we can
> feel.
> (20)

As suggested in the Introduction, one of the positions taken up by those who suggest that

boyhood is in crisis is the damage caused by a hegemonic masculinity which ignores the

emotional needs and vulnerabilities of men and boys. However, as the fictional friendship

portrayed in *The Lost Explorers* suggests – and also those described in the novels

discussed in Chapter One – to think of friendships between boys only in relation to their

ability to disclose their emotions, is to ignore key components of these relationships, not

least, the non-verbal elements they may contain. The majority of the novels which are

discussed in this chapter present accounts of fictional central characters who recognize

the need for disclosure and trust if relationships with their closest friends are to develop.

While this is clearly a desired outcome, not only within the contexts of the fictional

narratives but also with respect to real boys' friendships, making the novels' positive

representation of successful relationships potentially valuable for boy readers,

relationships which do not operate in this way cannot simply be dismissed. Social

scientist Judy Chu (2005) highlights research findings which suggest that boys'

friendship formations have been influenced negatively by hegemonic masculinity:

> Developmental research on adolescent friendships has consistently shown boys to have fewer close friendships and to experience lower levels of intimacy within these relationships as compared with girls. Some researchers have suggested that pressures for boys to conform to masculine norms that emphasize, for instance, physical toughness, emotional stoicism, projected self-sufficiency, and heterosexual dominance diminish boys' sensitivities to people's feelings, including their own, and undermine boys' abilities to achieve intimacy in their relationships.
> (7)

Chu challenges the principle underpinning this research, suggesting that it is built on a

premise that there is something wrong with boys - they have become problematic - and

therefore the research is framed by an imperative to find an explanation for this and

becomes a debate about the likely consequences of boys' current condition. She suggests

that the main focus of research into friendship has been based on a quantitative model

"grounded in the contention that children and adolescents seek particular social

provisions in their friendships, including intimacy, affection, companionship, alliance,

and satisfaction." (8) While this may measure friendships against the stated criteria, it

does not explain alternative friendship models which can only be examined for their

significance through qualitative research. Nor does it question the universality of these

criteria and their relevance to all adolescents. Further, in proposing possible contributory

reasons for boys' lack of friendships which conform to the normative model and citing

socialization towards hegemonic masculinity as a cause, the research model ignores boys'

agency and their ability to re-negotiate gender discourses through their own behaviours

and actions. Chu does not dispute the importance of disclosing intimacy in boys'

friendships, but problematizes its position as the only desirable outcome for all boys. The

complexity of the concept of disclosure is highlighted further by Swain (1992) who

suggests that it will not necessarily lead to intimacy, which can be achieved in other

ways:

> Self-disclosure is one possible format for intimacy. However, a high level of
> self-disclosure does not guarantee intimacy. A mutuality of give-and-take
> must exist for self-disclosure to be an effective way to express intimacy.
> Intimacy is defined as interaction between friends that connates a mutual
> sense of closeness and interdependence.
> (156)

While as in other chapters my concern here is primarily with contemporary

fiction, it is important to see recent fiction about boys as part of a long history of writing

about boys and their friendships, so it is helpful to consider how they have been

represented in different times and landscapes. Currently disclosure of private, inner,

feelings and information through conversation tends to be privileged in definitions of

intimacy, but earlier texts show valued friendships being forged without this confessional

dimension. Often, however, characters are shown to be alert to the way even the most

subtle expression, gesture or action may reveal aspects of a friend's feelings and inner

self. In Nineteenth-century adventure novels the hero is often positioned as separate in

order to highlight his special qualities: however, there are also examples of novels where

groups of boys and men support each other in often dangerous but exciting environments,

as in the case of *The Lost Explorers*. MacDonald portrays committed male friendships not

only between Jack and Bob, but also among their companions on a journey into outback

Australia where they face hazardous terrain and hostile inhabitants. Small gestures such

as preparing a meal for each other act as expressions of their commitment although no

words are spoken:

> Jack was an expert at boiling the billy and making tea, and Mackay had a
> wonderful knowledge of the art of bush cookery, so that between them they
> always contrived to make a fairly palatable repast, notwithstanding the
> unvaried nature of their stores.
> (137)

However difficult things become for the group, MacDonald describes them as always

coming together to eat at the camp fire, which represents not only physical but also

emotional sustenance.

In this earlier fiction it is frequently the case that forms of friendship other than

those based on intimacy are considered valuable, suggesting that at different points in

history understanding of male friendship has varied; it does not remain static or universal,

as evidenced in literature written in different periods. In charting the history of

friendships between males, Nardi (1992) goes back as far as antiquity to identify the

formations of male relationships which he suggests present a complex array of male

bonds:

> […] in ancient Greece and medieval Europe, chivalry, comradeship, virtue,
> patriotism, and heroism were all associated with close male friendship.
> Manly love, as it was often called, was a central part of the definition of
> masculinity.
> (2)

Whether all of these expressions of friendship involved verbal disclosures is open to

debate, however, the multiple manifestations suggest a rich variety of bonds and

intimacies. Writing on friendship, Aristotle proposes three different formations – "friends

of utility, friends of pleasure, and friends of virtue".[48] He singles out the last of these as

the highest form of friendship, one which can truly bring together and join two

individuals. Conceptualized in a patriarchal society, Aristotle's hypothesis refers to male

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[48] See R. Pahl, (2000) *On Friendship*. 20-24.

friendships by default. It is unsurprising that in this environment, the friendships of women and girls were not considered of enough consequence to be recorded in detail. What is significant however, is that the version of friendship privileged by Aristotle is currently associated with the feminine in western societies as it encourages disclosing intimacy.

In another example highlighting a different period in history, Rotundo (1989) examined friendships between young men in the nineteenth century and found evidence to suggest high levels of intimacy and romance in relationships described as "based on intimacy, on a sharing of innermost thoughts and secret emotions […] a friend was a partner in sentiment as well as action."(1) This again points to the existence of various male friendship formations in different historical periods. Related to this is the research of Jeffery Dennis (2007) whose work examines the representation of adolescent boyhoods in a variety of media from the end of the nineteenth century to the commencement of WWII in the United States. Dennis shows that unlike contemporary societies in which "hetero-mania" (1) is everywhere and virtually mandatory for boys, in this earlier period, adolescent boys of a certain age who showed interest in girls were considered deviant, even effeminate; 'real boys' only spent time in each other's company. These emotionally and sometimes physically intense friendships between boys are widely available - most notably in film and comic strips, entertainments then favoured by boys in adolescence. Even so, intense relationships between boys were sometimes construed as dubious, in the same way that attraction to girls called boyhood masculinity into question:

> Real, red-blooded masculine boys must be tough, stoic, aggressive, and independent. When they swoon over each other, link arms, and gaze into each other's eyes, surely they are displaying just as much unmanly tenderness as the dandies who swoon over girls.

(19)

Here Dennis raises important issues about how gender is performanced, how its parameters are set, and the censorious nature of societies in relation to gender and sexuality in juveniles. The examples in Dennis' work also highlight the changing expectations of societies in relation to gendered identities; what may appear as fixed and universal is in fact ever evolving and open to interpretation so where once boys' attraction to girls was considered deviant, now it tends to be regarded as on a spectrum of 'normal' behaviours.

The potential for multiple representations of male friendship, not only at different points in time but also in diverse environments, is exemplified by the uniquely Australian tradition of 'mateship' and its significance in the history of Australian male relationships. Don Edgar (1997) highlights the complexities and challenges involved in attempting to define this elusive term:

> Its essential elements are that mates are exclusively male, not female; they share a jocular, sceptical camaraderie in doing things together, preferably in venues not open to women; there is a lack of any emotional expressiveness other than sharing jokes and a thump on the arm, and little spoken communication of their friendship with one another. But mateship implies a deep and unspoken understanding that a mate will always stick by you in times of need or adversity.
> (79)

Although mateship may lack 'emotional expressiveness' Edgar suggests that emotional bonds do still exist between males. It is therefore a misconception to assume that a lack of verbal intimacy means that emotional engagement is missing in such friendships. This is significant in terms of the way contemporary friendships are presented and interpreted and will be considered further in relation to fictional texts in the course of the chapter. To

provide a context for my readings of the novels discussed in this chapter, I will also enquire further into the reasons why some boys currently feel inhibited in forming close emotional or intimate friendships in the creation of their personal identities, and attempt to identify which cultural discourses about being male prohibit such intimacies and why. Race and class are also explored in the course of the chapter as factors which impact on the formation of male friendships and so serve to disrupt the impression of a universal and unchanging form of male friendship. The way the peer group is characterized is also significant due to its ability to manipulate relationships between boys through the policing of what is deemed 'acceptable' forms of masculinity. While these potentially negative aspects of male-to-male relationships have been studied, the role of the peer group as a support system has been recognized less but is equally fundamental to boys' emotional well being. For this reason the way texts present both relationships between individual boys and groups of boys will be discussed.

One of the key reasons why male friendships have reached a point at which deep emotional intimacy is viewed as problematic can perhaps be found in the initial reaction to the first extract from *The Lost Explorers*. In a contemporary context the relationship between Bob and Jack is coloured by the spectre of homosexuality. Despite considerable change in attitudes to same-sex relationships, they continue to be positioned as potentially problematic and in some quarters, deviant. Nardi points to the fact that it was during the late Victorian period that same sex relationships were classified, medicalized, and ultimately stigmatized as being 'other', outside of the mainstream. Prior to the invention of homosexuality as a classification, any understanding of a relationship as sexual was predicted on the ability to reproduce, and therefore discounted same-sex

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intimacies. In contemporary western societies, however, the threat of association with homosexuality impacts on virtually all areas of boys' lives, as will be discussed throughout the course of this thesis, and is particularly significant in relation to male friendships. In discussing 'hetero-mania' in American society, Dennis recognizes that the insistence on its reality is as much about what it negates as what it represents in its own right:

> Teenage hetero-mania is an ideological construct, the hetero dream of a queer-free future revised as a queer-free past, the assertion that whatever might have happened later, in the first garden of pubescence we were all straight. It is the axiom, "No one here is gay", distilled, exaggerated, and repeated so often that one wonders what is being silenced.
> (1-2)

In relation to male adolescent friendships, I understand this view to be a crucial factor in how boys present their friendships to the wider world, affecting displays of emotion, leading to misunderstandings when a need for intimacy arises, and having the potential to limit boys at a variety of levels. The impact on boys who actually present as homosexual is particularly significant in that they at once embody what is most feared but at the same time are male and therefore subject to the same constraints as other boys in relation to their friendship formations, a subject discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The best of friends

> Ben and Jon, they can go on a bit sometimes, but they're good mates. One thing I've learnt from all this shit, all that stuff about who's It and who's not and all that, that's for kids. Look at Jonathan – he's got about as much cred as a pair of y-fronts but he's been a much better mate than Stu and Snoops and the rest of them. And Ben – he still hasn't got a girlfriend, he hardly seems to be interested anymore. I wonder if maybe he's even gay. See? None of that stuff matters when it comes down to who your friends are. They're my mates – they showed that. And the rest of 'em are just so much crud.

(Burgess, 2003: 322)

Dino, one of the three young, male narrators of Melvin Burgess' *Doing It*, reflects on the importance of his two friends, Ben and Jonathon, after his confidence is shaken following a series of torrid life events. While other boys within the wider peer group have withdrawn from him because his credibility has been challenged, Ben and Jon have stood by him and tried to offer support, a fact he acknowledges and is grateful for. However, through Dino, Burgess highlights a number of factors which require attention in any deliberation on friendships between boys. Dino is depicted as aware of the significance of his own status in the wider peer group and the importance he attaches to this through his positioning of Jonathon; he is aware of a hierarchical structure within the group and that Jon's performances of masculinity are perceived as 'less' than the more privileged masculinity which dictates and regulates the social behaviour of the boys. Dino is torn between his more intimate relationships with Ben and Jon and how these potentially affect his position more generally. Burgess, then, highlights the importance of the peer group in the formation of friendships: peers are central to all of the characters in ways that underline their significance and pervasiveness in the majority of male relationships.

Dino is uncertain about Ben's status and so too is the reader, for throughout the novel Burgess employs both masculine and feminine discourses to describe him. In this way he both challenges tendencies to privilege a hard, competitive masculinity, while also making visible the fluid, changing nature of gendered individuals. He further problematizes the illusion of a fixed masculine identity through the introduction of a number of other masculinities which are neither subordinated nor stigmatized – except in Dino's imagination. Since Dino is required to change and mature in the course of the

novel, his views are largely discredited. Moreover, Ben and Jon are as scathing about

Dino's obsession with popularity as he is about their status:

> Dino always was a wanker. You have to be a bit of a tosser to be that cool.
> How important is it to be admired? All that effort. And overnight he's
> turned into just some idiot with more problems than he can cope with, trying
> to look good and failing. You'd have thought he was the most popular guy
> in school last week and now all he's got is Jon and me. Bang! Gone, the lot
> of them.
> (245)

By structuring the narrative of *Doing It* through a number of first-person narrators

who tell their own stories and comment on each other, Burgess is able to highlight the

tensions which test the boys' friendships when conflicting obligations and desires come

into play. The urge to confide and disclose problems and anxieties is weighed against

questions around trust and independence. While Dino is able to tell both Ben and Jon

about his family and relationship problems, Ben confides only in Jon about his illicit

affair with his drama teacher, and Jon feels unable to speak to anyone about the fear he

experiences after finding a 'lump' on his penis. Reflecting on Ben's revelation, Jon is

presented as being aware of the irony in the advice he gives:

> The funny thing about it was, all the stuff I was saying to him, all the advice,
> could have been applied to me. Like, 'You need help.' I said that to him.
> 'You have to tell someone who can do something about it.' See? If I'd had
> the courage to tell him what I was suffering from, he'd have said just the
> same back.
> But I didn't. He can, I can't.
> (200-301)

The suggestion is not that Jon finds Ben untrustworthy; simply that he finds

acknowledging intimacy difficult. As experienced by many boys and rendered here as a

source of anxiety for Jon, emotional engagement can lead to vulnerability. These

complex and contradictory tensions can create uncertainty for boys as they go through the

process of forming individual personal identities while still wanting to be accepted as part

of the larger male community. In his comprehensive study of friendship, Ray Pahl

emphasizes the importance of trust in modern friendships:

> The inevitable uncertainties of interpersonal interactions have to be
> overcome through trust. This implies that trust must lie at the heart of true
> communicative friendship in the contemporary world. There are no rules
> and contracts to bind us to our closest friends: we simply have to trust them.
> (63)

This again, demonstrates the potential hazards faced by boys in the formations of their

personal friendships, and indicates the changing nature of societies in which rigid

structures of authority have given way to more flexible, personal interactions. Nardi

suggests that as male friendships have "moved into the house", (8) their nature has

changed in that they are no longer about accomplishing something but are an end in

themselves. He correlates the shifting structure of society with the changing nature of

male friendships and suggests,

> To see friendship in terms of openness and companionship, rather than
> about the comradely virtues of skills at doing things, is a result of the
> growing dominance of the service sector in the economy over the
> manipulation of material goods […] In short, there is a strong relationship
> between structural changes in society and various forms of friendships for
> men.
> (8)

Privileged discourses about male friendships nevertheless continue to impact on changing

social views about what constitutes friendships in the way they seek to restrict disclosure,

and uphold notions of male strength and independence. In general boys are encouraged to

understand friendship as more about 'doing' than 'saying'. This is certainly how Burgess

presents his trio of friends at the beginning of *Doing It*: however, the experiences the

boys go through in the course of the novel lead them to reconsider their understandings of

friendship, and as a consequence they become more flexible, less concerned about how

other boys perceive them. There is a sense throughout *Doing It*, and also in the other

novels discussed in this chapter, that youth is a key factor in the ways the boys

understand friendship; in particular the importance placed on the peer group, something

which begins to dissipate with age as boys begin to spend less time in groups and invest

more time in individual relationships, often romantic.

Each of the three boys is described by Burgess as having a secret which he needs

to share, but none find it easy to risk disclosure through fear of ridicule or betrayal, as

well as a sense that they should be independent and able to cope. Only when situations

reach crisis point and need is greater than risk are they able to trust each other. For Dino

everything becomes too much and Ben and Jonathon offer him a place of safety:

> I cracked open some beers, we sat down at the kitchen table […] and out it
> all came. The lot. His parents. There'd been rumours going around about
> that one, started by Jackie I suppose, but it was the first time he'd talked to
> us about it. That explained a lot. Siobhan, him, Jackie, everything, from
> beginning to end. It was awesome. Boy, he really was going through it. And
> halfway through it, he began to cry – really properly cry, big sobs. You
> don't see that very often. We just sat on either side of him with our arms
> around him. He'd have broken your heart.
> (248)

In a significant but unstated revelation, Burgess shows the boys' views of friendship to

have been faulty; both Ben and Jon support Dino unreservedly although they also see the

humour of the situation. Ben's comment "He'd have broken your heart" suggests a level

of playfulness in the larger context of sympathetic and constructive engagement. In what

might be considered a male way, Burgess acknowledges that this is a significant moment,

without commenting on the fact for Dino to cry in front of his friends is both a measure

of his distress and testifies his trust in them as it potentially leaves him exposed to

ridicule. According to Pahl, "modern accounts of people's 'best friend' emphasize the importance of being accepted simply for what you are" (22): however to achieve this state implies the need for a level of disclosure, a revelation about who one is but, as discussed earlier, this is counter to hegemonic masculinity discourses which privilege independence and competition.

Through his characterizations of Dino, Ben and Jon, Burgess shows that intimacy and disclosure are potentially difficult between boys because of the regulatory nature of dominant forms of masculinity and the competition and suspicion this creates. However, through the interactions which take place between them, he implies that these relationships are valuable to each of them in terms of their personal development and confidence. This does not mean, however, that they are immune to the behaviour of the larger peer group and although Ben and Jon are influenced less than Dino by peer interactions, all three regularly become involved in behaviour that is intended to impress rather than reveal what they actually think. In relation to girlfriends, they all act with a lack of respect when in a group, belying what they really feel as that would reveal vulnerability and uncertainty:

> 'Here […] here, what's this!' Jonathon jumped up, stretched himself in a cup shape as if he was spread over the back of an elephant and began humping.
> 'What's this? What's this?' he hissed.
> 'What?'
> 'This is me shagging Deborah.'
> They were in fits. Dino developed a stitch from too much laughing.
> 'Shut up!'
> 'Sssh! Someone'll hear!'
> 'Shit, that's so funny!'
> 'Here – what's this?' Dino jumped up, put one hand behind his head and did more pelvic thrusts. 'This is me doing Jackie standing up!'
> Howls of laughter. Dino collapsed onto his haunches and hands.

‘What’s this? What’s this?’ Ben jumped up and lay flat on the ground, hands rigid by his sides in the dark. ‘This is me lying down staring up Miss Young’s minge while she gives me a blow job.’
‘You filthy bastard! That’s sooooo filthy, you bastard!’
(190)

In presenting the boys in this way, Burgess suggests that all of their relationships are complex, contradictory, and powerfully affected by circumstance. They move between boorish, ‘laddish’ behaviour, as represented in the exchange above, to being vulnerable, uncertain individuals when they seek each other out with more honest interactions as in Ben’s disclosure of his relationship with Miss Young. Burgess, then, suggests that disclosing friendships can be problematic but are rewarding and important in individual emotional growth. Ultimately, the boys’ friendships have the potential to be supportive and rewarding if they are able to take risks and trust friends, while accepting each other, faults and all. The three boys certainly are presented as not always liking each others’ behaviour: nevertheless, they share a bond which creates loyalty between them and they know that they can depend on each other to varying degrees, beyond the more public sphere of the peer group, as suggested by their varying levels of disclosure discussed earlier.

The worst of friends

Glyn Parry’s *Sad Boys* (1998) presents a less optimistic portrayal of male friendship than *Doing It* in relation to disclosing intimacy. The fact that one of the key issues referred to in any discussion of ‘crisis’ in relation to contemporary boyhood highlights anxieties around boys’ perceived failure in successfully achieving emotional literacy suggests that a move towards disclosing intimacy in relationships between individuals has become the

normative discourse in terms of individual, emotional development. In relation to this study, I consider disclosing intimacy to be the most positive outcome for friendships between boys although other forms of friendship should not be dismissed as insignificant. Nevertheless, to have a relationship which is not based on an affirmation of disclosure, is to be positioned as problematic which posits the question; is being a 'traditional' male a problem if disclosing intimacy and emotional literacy are associated with the feminine?

In *Sad Boys*, Rabbit, Jacko and Ozone set off on a camping trip to Rottnest Island, off the coast of Perth in Western Australia, in search of adventure and girls. The boys' use of nicknames is indicative of the lack of disclosure which exists between them; they do not seek to reveal their intimate thoughts to each other. The conversations between the trio are combative and competitive, usually instigated by Jacko, the most aggressively constructed of the three characters:

> 'Superviruses are the real threat.' Ozone shifted tack. 'One Ebola sneeze and Perth's history.'
> 'So are you if we miss the ferry. Or were you planning a swim-thru?' Jacko faked an asthma attack and laughed.
> Low blow. Last spring Ozone had nearly died twice.
> 'Love you, too. *Mate*.'
> (6)

Parry, however, does not signal these relationships as necessarily problematic. Rather than drawing comparisons with friendships between girls, traditionally constructed as intimate and supportive, Parry introduces into the narrative three girls who mirror each of the boys in their behaviour. Their relationships are presented as equally querulous and they do not necessarily listen to each other or act in a supportive manner. In terms of their attitude to the world at large, and to some extent each other, it is possible to suggest that Parry considers their age and the point at which they have arrived in their lives – they are

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full of energy and excitement - the reason for their 'bad' behaviour. He describes them as

'in a hurry' to get on with life; action has overtaken reflection in much of their behaviour.

However, the text goes on to challenge the position of disclosing intimacy as the form of

friendship to which individuals should strive. For the purposes of this discussion it is

particularly interesting that *Sad Boys* sets out to show that females do not have the

prerogative when it comes to forming meaningful friendships. For instance, at one point

Sharron tries to speak to Donna about her concerns over Wendy who is displaying signs

of an eating disorder:

> 'She worries me. I mean, is it my imagination? Tell me it's my
> imagination.'
> 'It's your imagination, Sharron.'
> 'But the Halloween sleepover she had…'
> 'The one I didn't get an invite to.'
> 'Donna, you were in Bali. Anyway, she threw up in the toilet.'
> 'Big deal. It wouldn't be a party if you didn't.'
> 'Donna! On purpose.'
> 'Maybe it's the only part of her pathetic existence she can control.'
> Sharron couldn't believe Donna's attitude.
> (43)

Parry presents Donna as similar in character to Jacko, and perhaps unsurprisingly given

the structure and aims of the text, the pair find each other mutually attractive. Both

Donna and Jacko are shown as more confident and self-assured than the others in their

groups; at the same time there is crassness in each of them which Sharron and Rabbit in

particular are aware of. While out looking around the island, Sharron, Donna and Jacko

end up in the graveyard where a large proportion of the graves belong to small children:

> 'Look around you, Donna. Look how small the plots are. Life on this island
> must have been suicidal. Even simple things like –'
> 'Jacko! Hun! You'll hurt yourself.'
> He played hopscotch on the headstones up the far end.
> 'God, Donna. Look at him.'
> 'Yeah, I know. Isn't he cute?'

      'I meant as in what he's doing.'
      (83)

Rather than making the two girls 'caring' and 'compassionate', Parry positions Donna

alongside Jacko: both are insensitive to their surroundings. In this way he develops his

critique of the tendency to dichotomize boys and girls, with boys being perceived as

lacking social skills, compassion and other emotional attributes.

      Parry's representation of boyhood friendships, while potentially provoking

dismay in those who subscribe to a more flexible or feminized vision of masculinity, does

serve to re-affirm agency for individual boys. *Sad Boys* suggests that disclosing intimacy

is not a precondition for meaningful male friendships. Rabbit and Jacko's initial meeting

and the forming of their friendship, for instance, is a rather brutal affair but it suits them

both:

> The first time they met, way back in year five, Rabbit had foolishly asked
> what the purple marks on his cheeks were. After school that day he found
> out – the hard way. Jacko waited for him with a small army. Todd tripped
> him up. Brock pushed him over […]
> Idiot features did the rest.
> But after that – after Jacko had jumped off him swearing every swear word
> he knew – after that they went home best mates forever.
> (65)

While it can be argued that Parry simply supports a normative version of masculinity in

his representation of male friendships, the fact that he does not perceive this as

problematic disrupts the causal relationship between the 'crisis' in boyhood debate and

hegemonic constructions of masculinity. In *Sad Boys*, friendships not based on intimate

disclosure are not regarded as necessarily dysfunctional, which means that the novel asks

readers to acknowledge that the behaviour of adolescent boys is not always understood

by outsiders, or can be misinterpreted. Rabbit, in particular, is revealed to be a complex

individual. Like Burgess' Ben, he displays both masculine and feminine characteristics

and can be boorish, sensitive and vulnerable by turn. The equipment he carries with him

to the island is symbolic of his more flexible masculinity as well as suggesting that he is

still in the 'process of development', not yet sure who he wants to be:

> A hoist on board the ferry deposited the aluminium mesh cage with their
> stuff onto the jetty. Dad's army surplus backpack and Mum's pink carnation
> sleeping bag sat squished on the bottom.
> (44)

 The other characters also demonstrate a combination of positive and negative

behaviours, and while Sharron and Rabbit are both aware of what they consider to be the

shortcomings of their friends, they ultimately maintain the friendships, feeling relaxed in

the knowledge that their own differences are also accepted and supported, a reciprocal

recognition. In discussing the formation of relationships in adolescence, Hartup (1993)

suggests that both social and anti-social friends can potentially support socialization:

> The company one keeps (who one's friends are) contributes to adolescent
> socialization, too, but mainly to the kinds of norms that one internalizes, not
> to self-esteem or capacities for forming and maintaining relationships.
> Antisocial friends are likely to be antisocial influences, prosocial friends are
> likely to be prosocial influences. Both antisocial and prosocial friends can
> thus contribute positively to social adaptation […]
> (12)

Parry, however, complicates this situation by destabilizing the understanding of

'antisocial'; when the three boys travel to the island, their behaviour on the ferry attracts

attention from the other passengers. It is implied that they are viewed as potential

troublemakers, best avoided, but this view is offset by other 'versions' of the boys to

which the reader is party; Rabbit dreams of becoming a student at Perth University,

Ozone has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of his people, aboriginal

Australians, and the wrongs committed against them. Neither is constructed as a thug. In

this way Parry continues to challenge contemporary representations of boyhood that work

to treat all boys as a homogeneous group of louts and 'hoodies'.

Sad Boys is equally concerned to validate adolescent models of friendship even

though they may appear dysfunctional to those outside of the group. The narratives lines

associated with Rabbit and Sharron further re-enforce this view as they are constructed as

the more sensitive, reasonable characters but still need their friends. Parry indicates that

each of the individuals feels comfortable within this particular group and when they all

meet up again after returning to Perth, Rabbit acknowledges this:

> 'You're stuffed, Rabbit.' Jacko spoke for everyone. 'No kidding, mate, ya
> need professional help.'
> 'Yep, totally.'
> 'Doesn't it even bother ya?'
> 'Nah. Not one bit.'
> Cos that was what he'd needed to feel all his life. This feeling you get when
> you're no longer an alien. Sun on your skin, wind in your hair, best mates all
> around. And the sky. That big Katuna sky that lets you hide and lets you be
> who you want to be.
> (217)

Although Burgess and Parry offer different versions of boys' friendships and their

levels of emotional literacy, both have developed narratives which celebrate diverse

boyhoods as opposed to pathologizing them. Burgess' use of multiple narrators allows

him to present not only the perspectives of the individual boys and how they feel about

each other, but the use of the third person narrator means it is also possible to include

observations about their actions from what is offered as a more 'objective' viewpoint.

Added to this variety of perspectives are the reported views of the girls who periodically

offer their opinions on the boys. This frequently results in humorous situations when the

boys' observations of themselves or the situations they face diverge from those of another

narrator. Dino may think that all girls find him irresistible but Jackie's friend Sue has

other ideas:

> Dino was unfazed. Jackie obviously didn't understand something. He had
> right on his side – his good looks, a sudden smile that could charm the
> knickers off a supermodel and a disarming openness that took you by
> surprise over and over again […]
> (9)

> 'You snogged Dino?' repeated Sue incredulously. 'You have a date with
> *Dino*?' […]
> 'Listen to me, dolly,' said Sue. 'Blokes like Dino, they're like some sort of
> horrible addiction' […]
> (13)

This technique enables Burgess to introduce humour into the narrative in ways that

suggest that neither the traumas nor the triumphs which the boys experience should be

taken too seriously. Issues which appear huge to the boys are for the most part the stuff of

adolescent life. Burgess does not ridicule Dino by presenting these different versions of

his narrative; instead, he makes the reader aware of Dino's egocentrism in always

considering himself the centre of the universe while also presenting him as fragile,

continually re-assessing his own identity in relation to those around him. Ultimately he

endorses Dino and celebrates his various flaws. Certainly, the narrative does not treat the

boys or their relationships as problematic. The exception to this is Ben's story, for Ali

Young, the teacher who seduces him, is psychologically damaged, and is using Ben.

Although Ben initially enjoys the novelty of sex and the secrecy the relationship requires,

he soon becomes aware that there is something wrong with the situation:

> As he did as he was told, Ben found himself thinking that this was how
> young girls must feel when they are seduced by an older man. He was so
> bewildered and sexed up he could hardly think. There was no question of
> him having any choice about what was happening.
> (27)

Burgess does not simply perpetuate the 'schoolboy fantasy' of an affair with an older female teacher, he also highlights both the potential perils and the pleasure the situation can bring. Ben's vulnerability is evident when he finds himself out of his depth in terms of the emotional maturity needed to deal with the situation but the narrative does not condemn him for this. Instead, there is an implication that Ben has strayed into a space which is beyond his seventeen years and that emotional maturity will develop more with experience. For now, Burgess allows him to delight in his complex, frustrating, but potentially exciting status as a young man on the cusp. Returning home after freeing himself from Ali Young but finding out that Dino is now dating a girl from school he was considering asking out, Ben finds himself alone in the house and full of raw energy:

> He ran around the house yelling and throwing cushions and kicking walls and trying not to break anything valuable. Finally he flung himself down on the sofa. He felt like weeping or screaming or laughing or all three. He put his teeth into a hideous grimace and grinned like the devil at the ceiling. (330)

In *Doing It*, the friendships between Ben, Dino and Jon are described as moving towards disclosing intimacy, but this remains difficult because it runs counter to their behaviour when in the larger peer group, revealing the potential complexity of male friendships during adolescence. *Sad Boys* describes friendships between boys who do not seek intimacy at a verbal level. In the characters of Rabbit, Jacko and Ozone, Parry portrays relationships which are loyal and significant to each of the boys while appearing aggressive and unsupportive to outsiders. Both of the novels, however, suggest the importance of friendship in boys' lives however it is conceived.

A special friend

While Burgess begins to explore the place of disclosing intimacy through the fictional

characters of Dino, Ben and Jon, Hilary McKay (2003), in *Indigo's Star*, offers a positive

representation of friendship between two boys which is based on trust and disclosure.

Tom, an American boy who comes to live in England with his grandmother for a year

because of problems in the family home, meets Indigo Casson at school. McKay presents

Tom as a boy who is unhappy and withdrawn but who refuses to talk about what is

making him unhappy, a fact he is all too aware of himself:

> Tom's usual method of dealing with stressful situations was to get as far
> away as he could and think about something else. If that was not possible he
> bounced a ball and thought about something else.
> (202)

These traits could lead readers to consider Tom representative of boys described in the

'crisis' discourse – boys who are regarded as struggling with emotional literacy.

However, McKay does not set up a simple polarity between Tom and Indigo, symbolic of

emotionally illiterate / literate boys. Instead Tom is shown as being aware of his

behaviour; he makes a conscious decision to withdraw, initially from his father and then

from everyone else, so that he cannot be hurt anymore. Thinking about his life back in

America, he traces his withdrawal from the family from the arrival of his step-mother,

and subsequently, his half-sister:

> When Tom was ten years old he took to disappearing anti-socially up to his
> bedroom the moment he came home from anywhere.
> Once he overheard a conversation.
> 'Where's Tom?'
> His father had replied in an I-am-at-the-end-of-my-patience kind of voice,
> 'Hiding upstairs!'
> 'I'm not!' Tom yelled furiously (and untruthfully), 'I'm practicing my
> guitar!'…
> In the years that followed it had become the perfect excuse.
> (103)

Because of the way the narrative is constructed, Tom's outer appearance as at once emotionally withdrawn and attention seeking, is contrasted with the knowledge the reader has that he is internally confused, lonely and vulnerable. In this way McKay subtly questions the compartmentalizing of masculinities, suggesting that a boy is not simply emotionally illiterate because he decides to adopt a rule of non-disclosure.

Having constructed an outer persona for himself, Tom initially resists Indigo's friendship as he finds the other boy's honesty disconcerting. Indigo does not play by the rules in that he does not conform to the normative masculinity which regulates the behaviour of the other boys in his school. Indigo's version of masculinity has been forged through the almost entirely female domestic landscape he inhabits; he lives with his mother and three sisters, and the infrequent visits made by his father impact little on his life. Masculine and feminine characteristics are shared between Indigo and his sisters; Saffron beats up the school bully, while Rose regularly has angry outbursts. Indigo acts as comforter to Rose and tries to resist the bullies without resorting to physical retaliation. He shows compassion, a quality that tends to be associated with femininity:

> The gang were his enemies, and had been ever since the first week of term
> at this new school, when he had interrupted them just as they had finally
> succeeded in hanging a fellow classmate from one of the high iron coat pegs
> by his twisted sweatshirt collar […]
> Indigo had criticised the gang, interfered with their business, almost started
> a rebellion in the ranks […] and finally tried to inform on them to a teacher.
> From that time onwards he was in the lonely (and often painful) position of
> gang enemy.
> (25-7)

Indigo challenges the authority of the gang, and through his actions McKay asks the reader to reflect on the positioning of individual boys in normative masculinity discourses, highlighting the power of agency to re-negotiate gendered behaviours. She

further re-enforces this through her portrayal of Tom. Although Tom is equally

challenging in terms of his behaviour, his outward aggression is more recognizable in

relation to the privileged masculinity of the gang who terrorize him. However his refusal

to fall in with them positions him outside of the group in the same way that Indigo is

isolated because of his feminized masculinity. In constructing the two boys as different

but equally determined to resist the regulated masculinity discourse in their school,

McKay shows that in fact multiple masculinities co-exist. The friendship which develops

between Tom and Indigo is one in which trust, support and finally, mutual disclosure are

key elements. After months of concealment Tom eventually talks to Indigo about his

half-sister Frances and his guilt about the way he has treated her:

> 'You'd go home if Frances was Rose and you were me, wouldn't you?'
> 'Yes.'
> 'What if she dies and I've just been horrible to her all her life?'
> 'Your grandmother telephoned the hospital again this afternoon. They said she stabilised.'
> 'What's that mean?'
> 'It's good. She's not getting worse.'
> 'I've got a proper chance then.'
> 'Course you have.'
> (222-3)

In acknowledging the importance of his friendship with Indigo, Tom is able to finally let

go of his defences, trusting Indigo enough to admit he lied about his family, a fact that

Indigo is already well aware of:

> '[…] You know all that stuff I used to tell you. About my dad being an astronaut? And a baseball player? And my mother and the bears? All that stuff?'
> 'Yep.'
> ''Sall true.'
> They both laughed.
> (224)

Gradually Tom realizes that Indigo's feminized masculinity is not a weakness; honesty and trust are represented as strength in McKay's narrative. Before Tom's arrival and again when he leaves, McKay indicates Indigo's isolation outside of the family; he feels bereft following Tom's departure. Similarly, Tom is represented as being alone before he meets Indigo. Even the relationships between members of the gang at school who taunt both Indigo and Tom are not described as being based on friendships. Although to some extent McKay suggests that the gang maintains power as a group because it allows individuals to feel that they have a place, the text implies that this is achieved at a cost; the boys involved do not form real friendships and remain isolated within the group. In this way she subtly calls attention to the potential for loneliness in relationships based on normative versions of masculinity expressed through competition, hardness and power. Even Tony, the gang leader, is not confident of his status but maintains it through a constant vigilance and re-enforcement of his authority which mirrors the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is upheld; through the regulation and policing of male gender performance by boys and men themselves in the public arena:

> One cause of the red-haired gang leader's unhappiness was Tom. Tom's arrogance hurt him like a pain in his heart. Another reason, even worse, was the fact that he had yet to win his long battle with Indigo […] The fact that Indigo, of all fighters the most hopeless, should endure for so long, tormented the red-haired gang leader like a fever.
> (162)

The scene in which Tony is finally vanquished by Indigo is not triumphalist; instead it is suggested that Tony too is a victim of a discourse of masculinity which encourages him to dominate by threat and coercion. In thrall to a version of masculinity which privileges aggression and hardness with the promise of power and respect, Tony can be described as more of a victim than Indigo as he relies on external conditions to maintain his status and

self-worth. While he initially believes he is in control, his defeat by Indigo shows that this power is illusory. The gang he surrounds himself with disperses as his control wanes, relieved that his reign of terror is over.

Gang culture

The gang that Indigo faces generally asserts its authority through verbal bullying - physical intimidation in *Indigo's Star* is confined to the occasional fist fight - and while McKay describes this as making Indigo's life miserable, there is no suggestion that the taunts will escalate into a life-threatening situation. This is not the case in Tim Bowler's *Blade: Playing Dead* (2008) which, by contrast, is extreme. Like Indigo, Blade, the first-person narrator, is isolated. This is where any similarity ends; while Indigo has problems with the gang he is supported by a loving family, but Blade is entirely alone – the lack of a name symbolizing at once his isolation and anonymity. The reader is introduced to Blade as he is being questioned in a police station for anti-social behaviour:

> So he's looking at me with his puggy face, this big jerk of a policeman, and
> I'm thinking, take him out or let him live?
> Big question.
> I don't like questions. Questions are about choices and choices are a pain. I
> like certainties. Got to do this, got to do that, no debate. Take him out, let
> him live. Know what you got to do. Certainty.
> Only I'm not certain here. I'm pretty sure I want to take him out. I hate the
> sight of him and I hate being back at the police station.
> The knife feels good hidden inside my sock.
> (1-2)

This account is retrospective as Blade is describing an incident which took place when he was seven. However, now fourteen years old, things have not improved, by Blade's own admission, "[…] I look back and you know what's weird? It's like nothing's changed. I still don't like the police and I still don't like people getting close." (7) As the reader

meets Blade he is trying to escape the attentions of the police, a vicious girl gang, and shady villains from his past, ducking and diving through a grim, violent and run down city landscape, trying to make himself invisible. The reader is taken on a roller coaster journey as one dangerous situation elides into another, building to a crescendo.

Blade is seemingly without family or friends. He is running away from a past which Bowler describes as both dark and troubled but which is as yet undisclosed to the reader apart from references to a dead girl called Becky and Blade's seeming reluctance to continue carrying or using a knife following her death. This lack of information leaves the reader uncertain about Blade and raises doubts about him as a narrator – is he reliable? Is he a victim or is he being hunted down with just cause? He has committed knife-related crimes in the past, was known to the police at the age of seven, as described in the extract above, and continues to live outside of the law on the edge of society. Can the reader sympathize or even empathize with his situation? By introducing an ambivalent central character, Bowler taps into current anxieties in the UK about male youths living on the fringes of society and involved in violence and crime. As suggested in the previous chapter, male violence has been one of the central discourses in crisis literature, but the individuals involved remain largely anonymous, becoming shady, menacing figures represented through cultural images such as the 'hoodie'. 'Blade' is used as a name, but also functions as a label for this boy, and Bowler uses the uncertainty which surrounds him to challenge readers to consider their reaction and response to the representation of Blade, and by default, cultural images of boyhood on the fringes of society.

Bowler gradually introduces conflicting characteristics to Blade as the fast-paced

chase continues. The bold and aggressive narration through which Blade communicates

with the reader simultaneously reveals a hard, street-wise kid –

> Not that I feel obliged to tell you the truth, mind. Don't get any ideas. I
> mean, I might tell you the truth but I might not. Just so you know.
> I call the shots here. I choose what I say and what I don't. You can choose
> whether to stay or wig it somewhere else. And if you choose to wig it, that's
> fine with me. I don't need you. Remember that.
> I don't need anyone.
> (8)

 - and a boy who isn't as 'in control' or as emotionally 'shut down' as he claims.

He describes a series of 'snugs' across the city where he sleeps, houses from which the

residents are regularly absent. This allows him space and time to wash, sleep and eat and

most importantly, be safe for a few hours. His preferred houses are ones which have lots

of books so that he can spend the night reading; *The Wind in the Willows* is a particular

favourite:

> You know the bit I'm going to read? The bit where Ratty and Mole are in
> the snow and Mole suddenly smells his old home, and they go back and find
> it again. I'm going to find that bit before I fall asleep.
> (67)

While Blade lives in a violent, dangerous environment, Bowler occasionally reminds the

reader that he is still actually a child which makes his situation more disturbing. In these

moments his isolation is poignant, but it also makes him a more complex, problematic

character for the reader.

One of the groups chasing Blade is a girl gang who capture him, beat him up, and

leave him naked beside a canal. Bowler describes these girls as violent and anti-social

and this behaviour continues into the group dynamic as the members of the gang distrust

each other. The world Bowler portrays does not simply comment on male violence; this is a nihilistic landscape torn apart by violence and in which individuals are both victims and perpetrators of crime. Through his contact with the gang, Blade is, against his better judgement, drawn into the life of another Becky. He becomes involved because he wants to protect Jaz, a young girl he believes to be Becky's daughter. In comparison with his behaviour towards the world at large, he is gentle and patient with the child, motivated again by something from his past, but the reader isn't told the whole story. Bowler presents a complex picture of life; Blade himself is morally ambiguous and the gangs chasing him retain power and control through their use of violence. Supporting Blade in his attempts to escape, we, the onlookers, also move into a morally ambiguous space where suddenly good and evil are no longer so simple to separate. When applied to an individual boy's circumstances, this is a timely reminder in relation to the discourse of crisis.

   Blade: Playing Dead does not focus on life in a gang, but rather describes the impact of gang culture which, in the context of the novel, results in a disturbing, fractured picture. There are no friendships here because no one has any trust in any one else. A further example of lives impacted by gang culture is Bali Rai's *The Crew* (2003) which describes life for a group of young people on a large, socially deprived inner-city council estate in England. Rai, however, presents a more positive picture without disregarding or minimizing the dangers which exist. The story is recounted through the narrative of Billy, a mixed-race young man with Punjabi and Jamaican parents. The crew is made up of Billy, Jas, Will and two girls, Della and Ellie, all ethnically diverse, working- class adolescents. Rai highlights the different landscape in which relationships operate for

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young people in this community, suggesting different priorities in the formation of friendships:

> Around here you have to have a crew otherwise you get treated like an outsider and that is not a good position to be in, believe me. You need to have someone to watch your back – someone to go to when shit goes wrong. Most of us can't go to the police or our schoolteachers. Things don't work like that for us. We have to look out for each other.
> (17)

As in *Sad Boys*, Rai uses the narrative to show how the outward appearance of the young people who make up the Crew and the landscape they inhabit lead to assumptions about their lives; the police and other 'authority' figures in the wider community view them with suspicion. When Ellie goes missing and they have to call the police for help, Billy feels as if he is being accused of something himself:

> It went on for another twenty minutes, with Griffin asking me stuff that had nothing to do with Ellie's disappearance. It was as though he was trying to get me to say something that would incriminate me or wind me up. In the end I just gave him yes and no answers. I wanted to punch him but I stayed calm and let him carry on. I wasn't going to let him get the better of me.
> (68-9)

Way found it significant when carrying out her research into urban, male adolescents, that friendships between young men in this group were conflated with gang culture and its negative associations, leading to a supposition that "relationships between male teenagers from the "inner city" are assumed to be problematic, dangerous, and fraught with violence." (167)

In *The Crew,* members of the group are shown to be emotionally engaged with each other and involved in each others lives, including friendships between the boys. No distinction is made between male and female friendships; all are equally supportive of each other. Both Della and Jas are able to tell Billy about their growing relationship and

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the hopes and fears they feel. In presenting the friendships in this way Rai challenges the premise that male friendships are problematic and less intimate and disclosing as those of girls:

> […] But Jas had made me promise not to tell Della and I wasn't about to break a confidence. Thing was, Jas hadn't ever had sex before – not all the way – which bothered him in case he messed up somehow. He was worried about them falling out too. Scared that it would put a huge dent in their friendship.
> (130)

Swain suggests that friendships between males and females can open up new understandings and ways of interacting for both groups. He goes on to suggest that for males, friendships with females can allow them to explore different styles of relationship or engagement:

> Each cross-sex friend has a tutor to translate and explain gender-based styles of intimacy and closeness. Such friendships are an important arena for increased understanding between men and women and offer men the opportunity to explore and build a larger repertoire of expressive styles that may be differentially advantageous, depending on the given circumstances and context of intimacy.
> (169-70)

The context for Swain's comments is that discourses of hegemonic masculinity present a rigid, 'buttoned down' form of masculinity when it comes to relationships. However, in Rai's novel, this is not the case; the boys and girls are described as possessing both masculine and feminine gender attributes. This may in part be in response to the landscape they inhabit both in relation to their ethnic diversity, as suggested by Way, and also their actual physical environment. Through Billy's narrative, Rai emphasizes the need for trust and protection between young people living in a potentially dangerous environment. In the interviews carried out by Way there is an emphasis on loyalty and protection among the boys, although in relation to hegemonic masculinities which

privilege physical strength and courage, the boys in Way's study talked about protection

in relation to being protected *by* friends, being reliant on friends. She suggests of these

friendship formations:

> […] survival for poor and working-class youth of color in poor urban areas
> may be based precisely on boys' ability to depend on each other for both
> emotional and physical protection. Protection may serve as a way to
> maintain relationships as well as a way to cope with the real challenges of
> living in dangerous urban neighborhoods.
> (188)

The Crew presents a positive picture of friendships between young people who live in a

difficult, often dangerous environment. Outside of their friendship group, there is a wider

peer group but they are rarely involved in this group due to issues around trust and the

spectre of gang violence all around them. However the peer group can be influential for

young men in both positive and negative ways.

All mates together

While generally more benign, the peer group can work in the same way as the gang in the

sense that those who are included are influenced and regulated by it and those who are

excluded are socially isolated and often subjected to bullying. The significance of peer

group power in the regulation of adolescent behaviour has been well documented in

research literature (see Hartup, 1993; Bradford Brown, 1990). The interviews conducted

by Chu (2005) revealed that boys acknowledged the peer group as potentially influencing

the ways in which they behaved in individual friendships as their priorities were to

protect their vulnerabilities and prove their masculinity within the group as a whole. This

did not necessarily preclude the formation of close friendships between individual boys

but it did make them wary of showing any difference, behaviour which Chu concludes could eventually affect their ability to create or sustain intimate relationships:

> […] the decision to be selective in their self-expression and guarded in their interactions, which involves withholding parts of themselves from relationships, thereby inhibiting their chances of being truly known by others, can interfere with boys' efforts to develop genuine close friendships. (13)

In *Indigo's Star*, Indigo is shown as finding it difficult and lonely to be situated outside of the peer group: however, he does not need either his behaviour or relationships to be validated by his contemporaries. Many of the problems he encounters are because he refuses to submit to their combined will and take on the attributes of normative masculinity as embodied in the group. Perhaps paradoxically, Indigo ultimately ends up having to demonstrate traditional masculine qualities by fighting and defeating the gang leader. Part of the efficacy of this book's exploration of masculinity comes through Indigo's response to his victory: this is not valorized textually and his foremost feelings are of shame. However, the fact that after this the bullying stops and the gang disbands, suggests that in this situation Indigo's need to demonstrate his inner male was not inappropriate. *Indigo's Star* explores at a number of levels the challenges faced by boys who seek to create a masculine identity in opposition to the hegemonic ideal. In interviews carried out with boys in a number of London secondary schools, Frosh *et al* (2002) highlight the impact of hegemonic masculinity on the formation of alternative versions of being male:

> The versatility of boys' strategies for constructing alternative masculine identities in the face of the power of hegemonic masculinity was quite impressive, albeit that these strategies were largely dependent on being able to recast apparently 'non-hegemonic' attributes as in some way 'genuinely' masculine. This suggests both that there are a variety of ways in which the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity can be expressed, and also that the

power of the hegemonic ideal dwarfs that of truly alternative ways of 'doing boy'.
(98)

The pervasive and persuasive nature of hegemonic masculinity is evident here as well as in McKay's narrative, for while Indigo is generally positioned as possessing a feminized masculinity, he never becomes truly 'other', but still negotiates his masculinity in relation to the hegemonic model of his peer group which, in relation to the reader, is the masculinity widely recognized in western societies as equating to being male.

The boys in *Doing It*, on the other hand, fear ridicule and rejection from their peer group in ways that sway their actions. Burgess embodies this dilemma in the relationship between Jon and Deborah. When Jon's relationship with Deborah begins to change from friendship to something more sexual and intimate, he is confused because physically Deborah does not match his idea of the ideal girlfriend. His anxiety is centred on her weight because he knows that the other boys in his group, with the exception of Ben, will disapprove:

> Fasil was quiet, I knew he disapproved. Well, Ben disapproved too, but he disapproved because he thought I was going to hurt Debs. He was probably right. Fasil disapproved because he thought that going out with a fat girl was morally reprehensible.
> (89)

Through Jon Burgess explores not only fear of disapproval by the wider peer group, but also the deeply embedded understandings of what is considered acceptable within a particular masculine culture, the inference being that Jonathon would similarly regulate the behaviour of other boys in his group if they showed any interest in a 'fat' girl. Frosh's research reveals that in boys such self-regulation through fear of ridicule by being positioned as 'other' is common:

> The semblance of self-contained, self-confident masculinities is
> deconstructed by showing how they are created relationally and how they
> are policed, and by revealing the anxieties and vulnerabilities of boys which
> cause them to police themselves.
> (52)

Certainly Burgess shows Dino and Jon in particular as acutely aware of the need to regulate their behaviour in relation to the expectations of their peers. At the same time, the outcomes of their narratives suggest the impossibility of completely achieving this outcome.

Queering the pitch

Research shows that one of the key factors in the regulation of masculinity is the fear of being labelled as homosexual by other boys, the ultimate 'other'. (Seidler, 1992; Connell, 1995) Chu's interviews revealed a pattern in the boys' conversations in which they distanced themselves from any behaviour which could be viewed as 'gay'. In constructing the relationship between Indigo and the school peer group, McKay introduces a narrative strand which suggests that Indigo's feminine-masculinity is interpreted as gay by his peers. Helping Tom after he is victimized by the gang leader, Indigo is ridiculed by the group:

> Tom groaned. With a face the colour of wet paper he doubled up and
> retched, knocking his forehead against his knees. Indigo dropped beside him
> and grabbed his shaking shoulders. He said urgently, 'Don't try to move!
> Put your head down!'
> Tears of anger and pain streamed down Tom's face.
> 'Kiss him better, Indigo,' said the red-haired gang leader.
> (57-8)

Although Indigo is taunted with gay jibes, this does not necessarily suggest that the other boys think he is a homosexual. Michael Kimmel (2005) concludes that American men

live through a daily fear that other men will unmask their inadequacies in relation to their

gender performances because it is through the eyes of other men that their masculinity is

endorsed and regulated. He suggests that homophobia is not necessarily about labelling a

person as homosexual but as perceiving their masculinity as lacking, or in fact living with

the fear that one's own masculinity will be brought into question:

> Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of
> manhood. Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more
> than the fear that we might be perceived as gay […] Homophobia is the fear
> that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world
> that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let
> other men see that fear.
> (35)

In McKay's narrative, then, bullying Indigo by calling into question his masculinity can

also be understood as the way in which the gang validate their own masculinities, and a

device through which they also regulate each other, as much as drawing attention to

Indigo's 'non-normative' masculinity.

In considering the use of the term 'fag' amongst American adolescent boys

Pascoe (2005), while not diminishing the implications of sexually motivated abuse

against gay men, again suggests that the word is used to describe behaviour that is viewed

as non-traditional in masculinity performances. In summary, "[…] becoming a fag has as

much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and

strength or anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity"

(330). The fact that the tag is transferable between boys, suggests the fluid nature of

masculine characteristics and the performative potential of masculine identities. (Butler,

1999) Ironically, it both regulates masculinity while at the same time opening up the

possibility for multiple masculinities. The boys in Parry's narrative are presented as

using sexualized jibes to reprimand each other's behaviour in their combative exchanges.

Setting out on their journey, Rabbit gets the time of the ferry crossing wrong, much to

Jacko's disgust:

> 'Geeze, Rabbit, can't ya even read?' Jacko threw his gear against the wall,
> found a dry spot and crashed.
> 'Forty minutes is forever.'
> 'So's herpes,' said Ozone.
> 'Yeah, like you'd really know.'
> Ozone sat next to him and blew a kiss.
> 'Nick off, gaylord!'
> (8-9)

Jacko, here, does not suggest that Ozone is homosexual. He draws attention to and

condemns Ozone's 'non-masculine' behaviour. However, like the gang in McKay's

narrative, he is constructed as ultimately unable to stop the appearance of 'other' in

relation to normative masculinity.

The consideration of 'other' takes on a very complex and paradoxical form in

Alasdair Duncan's *Metro* (2006); set in the privileged suburbs of Brisbane, the narrative

follows the lives of a group of friends, a little older than the boys in Burgess' narrative,

and students at Queensland University. The story is told through the first person narration

of Liam, a Business Studies student, and the youngest of three brothers from a wealthy

Queensland family. Liam shares a house with two friends which is owned by his parents

and works part-time in an upmarket clothes store, Metro; he has no need of money but his

parents want to instill in him a work ethic. Duncan describes Liam and his friends as

incredibly egocentric and their insensitivity and inability to empathize results in moments

of much black humour throughout the course of the novel. Spending much of their time

partying and having sex, fuelled by alcohol and drugs, a major disaster for them is a

drugs 'drought'. After a group of people spend the night at their house they discover that

all of their marijuana has gone which results in a panic about where they can acquire

more drugs:

> So it's the three of us sitting on the back deck of the house in the shade of
> that big pine tree – its way too early in the morning for this shit, but we're in
> the middle of what basically amounts to a major crisis.
> (55)

This is the trivial and shallow level at which the group operate most of the time so when a

real crisis does actually befall them – one of their friends, Lachlan, commits suicide –

Duncan presents them as completely bewildered; they don't know how to react or relate

to each other and end up falling back on superficial behaviour patterns;

> 'He picked a good time of year to do himself in,' Chloe says after a while.
> 'It's autumn. Black is the new black, and those suits look hot on you guys.'
> I'm not sure whether or not she's joking and I don't say anything.
> (217)

Liam has in fact already had the same thought about himself in his suit! Like Parry,

Duncan makes very little distinction between the behaviour of girls and boys in relation

to friendships; the landscape which Duncan's characters inhabit is driven by appearances;

wearing the right clothes, being seen with the right people at the right places. This is

summed up precisely by Liam who, on waking with a hangover, comments, "Basically, I

feel like shit but look fantastic, and that's really all that counts." (31) Relationships

appear to remain superficial, devoid of any meaningful disclosure, although Duncan does

not suggest that individuals do not care about each other. While Liam is not described as

outwardly discussing how he feels about Lachlan's death, Duncan implies that his

increasingly risky behaviour is in part a reaction to the shock he feels. The description of

Lachlan's own erratic behaviour prior to his death causes particular consternation, largely

due to a number of overt displays of emotion. He becomes angry and tries to start several

fights and then cuts his hand while trying to compete for attention at a party. His

girlfriend subsequently breaks up with him and he becomes more aggressive and

distraught which culminates in him crying while Liam tries to help but is uncertain how

to respond:

> Seconds after cursing us all out for not standing our ground against 'those
> fucking fags', Lachie's head is in his hands and he is crying – sobbing, like
> a little kid might do, his shoulders moving up and down with every intake of
> breath. I look to Callum and Brad for help but the two of them just stare
> back at me, their incredulous expressions saying, *I don't know, you fucking*
> *deal with it*.
> (158-9)

Although older than the boys in *Doing It* who do eventually attempt to help each other,

the boys in this group lack emotional maturity and so are unable to support their friend.

Because the reader, unlike Lachlan's friends, is aware of the situation, their dereliction is

made more apparent.

Before Lachlan becomes so distressed, Duncan establishes that he feels the

pressure of expectation from his father who wants him to achieve first class honours in

his university examination results. He stops going out with his friends to concentrate on

his studies and this accelerates the tension he feels. When he tries to discuss these

feelings of pressure with the other boys, they brush aside his concerns, falling back on the

pattern and routine that their friendships have previously taken; in short, going out and

having a good time. While the focus of attention for Liam and his friends is on enjoying

themselves, it is clear that they are in fact regulated by an unspoken code of behaviour

beyond which they should not stray. Their partying and all it entails becomes in this sense

a rite of passage, appropriate to the stage of life they are passing through, something their

parents before them have engaged in. The tenor of the novel which Duncan adopts and

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the ennui this evokes, emphasize the sense of a landscape previously travelled, potentially

stifling. When Liam visits his older brother in Melbourne he is described as

acknowledging this, of taking comfort in the boundaries imposed on him, which he thinks

will keep him safe:

> I take a swig of my beer, relaxing somewhat. In a couple of years' time, if I
> don't stuff up, I could be just like Euan, and I guess if I'm honest with
> myself, that doesn't seem like such a bad thing. He's the kind of guy who
> knows what he wants; doors open for guys like Euan.
> (259)

Again, Duncan suggests that outward appearances, in this case 'traditional' roles, are of

primary importance in the world Liam inhabits; they signal successful, achieved

masculinity through material success, confidence, control, and heterosexuality but this is

in contrast with the purposelessness of Liam and his friends' current existence. In a study

of the landscape in which young men live their lives between the ages of sixteen and

twenty six in the United States, a time - space he terms 'Guyland', Kimmel (2008)

describes the feelings of many of the young men he interviewed,

> Guys tell me that they feel they are making up the rules as they go along,
> with neither adequate adult guidance nor appropriate road maps, and, at the
> same time, that they feel they are playing by rules that some one else
> invented and which they don't fully understand.
> (22)

The contradiction which these two states bring into focus is the subject of Kimmel's

work, but it is also significant to note that while young men may feel a sense of

regulation, an invisible pressure, the lack of actual rules does potentially allow for

individual agency. This may provoke anxiety, alternatively it may create a space for

young men less inclined to follow the route of hegemonic masculinity discourses with

whatever 'privileges' this may afford them, as suggested by McKay in *Indigo's Star*. In

Duncan's narrative Liam is presented as outwardly displaying the hegemonic masculinity

which is privileged in his environment, if also going through the motions to some extent;

he wears the right clothes, looks good, goes to the right parties, is relatively successful

academically which he assumes will lead to the prospect of a good job, has a group of

friends with whom he is popular, and has an attractive girlfriend. Continuity, following

traditional male life narratives, then, is the focus and expectation of Liam and his friends.

However, Lachlan's struggles with the expectations placed on him and culminating in his

suicide, suggest the potentially high cost for young men who are unable to perform

successfully in this landscape. That his friends are unable to support him in a meaningful

way raises questions about friendships and their lack of intimacy and disclosure in the

world Liam inhabits; a subject which remains unresolved in Duncan's narrative.

Within the group of male friends there is much regulation of each others'

behaviour as discussed in *Sad Boys* and *Doing It*. Duncan presents Liam as instigating

much of this, a fact which his friends comment on. As Liam and Brad are about to take

cocaine, Brad is described as offering the drug to Liam, using his finger, which evokes an

exaggerated response from Liam:

> Brad puts his finger in the bag again and then holds it out, offering it to me.
> I stare at it.
> 'Dude, I'm not putting your finger in my mouth.'
> Brad looks confused. 'Come on, dude, it's me, it's not like I'm going to tell
> anyone.'
> 'No, it's gay. I'm not doing it.'
> 'Fine.' Brad shakes his head and offers me the baggie. 'Always with the gay
> shit, Liam. I seriously wonder about you, you know that?'
> (21)

What Brad is actually wondering is never made clear. Possibly he is suggesting that Liam

is gay; equally he may be insinuating that Liam is extremely homophobic. The

environment in which the boys live privileges heterosexual masculinity and while there is

no suggestion that the characters have any particular animosity towards individuals who

are gay, there is nevertheless an ongoing discourse, of which the boys are aware, that

homosexuality means being 'less of a man', not 'measuring up'. At Lachlan's funeral, as

the boys consider what might have led to his suicide, someone outside of their circle

indicates that rumours were circulating about Lachlan's sexuality. Liam is described as

vehemently rejecting this possibility while Callum doesn't consider it a 'big deal' leading

to the following exchange,

> 'Let's say he *was* a fag,' says Callum. 'Hypothetically, is that really a reason
> to kill yourself?'
> 'I don't know,' Chris smirks, 'I would.'
> (24)

A level of casual cruelty is employed throughout the narrative in relation to

homosexuality; the characters make derogatory comments - perhaps without even

meaning them or thinking about their implications. Liam is presented as continually

making negative comments about homosexuality, as if in an attempt to distance himself

from any potential suggestion that he may be gay, behaviour cited by Chu in the

interviews she carried out in her study of boy's friendships discussed earlier. In

interactions with his friends and wider community Duncan describes Liam as relentlessly

heterosexual; censoring any behaviour in others which he considers might be perceived

as gay; in essence, trying too hard because he has a very big secret of his own.

The reader is given a number of clues that all is not as it appears in Liam's life; as

he describes his relationship with girlfriend Sara, he indicates that he does not really

enjoy their sexual relationship – "she seems to be into it, and even if I'm not so much, I

suppose it's not that big a deal." (24) His obsession with homosexuality, Duncan

suggests, is because it is continually on his mind because he is in fact gay but unable to

come to terms with it. For Liam, being gay and what that means in terms of being

considered 'other', and by implication 'less', by friends and other members of his

community is impossible; he cannot come to terms with this idea. As suggested earlier,

the landscape in which he lives is superficial, dictated by appearances and being part of

the 'right' crowd; what other people think is paramount. In discussing Lachlan's death,

Brad unknowingly makes a perceptive comment with particular reference to Liam; "Brad

shakes his head. 'You never really know anybody. Not even your friends.' Callum nods

slowly in agreement. I say nothing." (215) The limited level of disclosure between the

individuals in Duncan's narrative means that they know very little about the feelings and

intimacies that make up each others lives. At the same time, it also allows prohibited

behaviour to go on unchallenged.

In the course of the novel Liam is described as having a series of random sexual

encounters with strangers, a pattern of behaviour he indicates has been going on for some

time. However, by avoiding any emotional engagement or longevity with these

individuals, he is able to persuade himself that it is only about sex and he therefore isn't

gay, so great is his fear of being identified as homosexual:

> Okay. So I have been with guys before, but, in the end, it's about the sex –
> you know, they're into it, they seem completely grateful for the chance to
> suck my dick, and really, what's the big deal? I get to come, they get a story
> about going down on a hot straight guy to tell their faggot friends, and
> essentially it's all forgotten about as quickly as it happened. It's not like I'm
> into guys, I mean, I'm not.
> (28)

Liam treats the boys he has sex with contemptuously, presumably because if he believes

he is disengaged emotionally, then what happens is irrelevant; the liaisons are not part of

his 'real' life because he cannot be what he despises and thinks of as 'less' or 'other' in

relation to successful manhood. However, as Kimmel (2005) suggests, "[o]ur fears are

the sources of our silences, and men's silence is what keeps the system running." (35)

While Liam thinks that the landscape in which he lives will protect and privilege him if

he adheres to an accepted way of performing masculinity in public, the very same system

makes him feel guilty and 'less' because of his sexuality.

After Sara leaves for a six-month trip to Europe – significantly Liam intended to

travel with her but cannot make a total commitment and ends up withdrawing – Duncan

introduces two predominant narrative strands which symbolize the struggle which is

taking place within Liam; he continues with the casual sexual encounters all the while

saying that he will stop them. However his relationship to them, how he positions

himself, begins to shift:

> He's…I don't know, nice-looking. I guess if you were a fag you'd say he
> was cute.
> (52)
>
> If I were a fag, this would probably be an interesting development, but I'm
> not, so it isn't.
> (77)
>
> Under the right circumstances, it probably wouldn't be hard to talk him into
> … No, to hell with it, I'm being a faggot.
> (121)
>
> I don't know if it makes me a fag, but […]
> (173)

As time progresses he becomes closer to what is happening and it starts to be more

difficult to separate himself from the idea of 'other'; he eventually takes on this position

during a sexual act. Going to spend a weekend in Melbourne with his brother, he runs

into an acquaintance, Martin, and ends up staying at his apartment. Martin shares Liam's

attitude; he too insists that he isn't gay and treats Liam aggressively when they have sex, a situation which makes Liam realize the impact of his own behaviour on the boys he has slept with. He agrees to anal sex, allowing himself to be penetrated for the first time and enjoying himself although he is disgusted by his actions the following morning.

At the same time as he is undergoing these changes, Duncan introduces a situation which is potentially more dangerous to Liam's construction of his masculine identity: he finds himself powerfully attracted to best friend Brad's younger brother Kristian. This is very high risk for him because he could possibly be found out, and, more disturbing for him, Duncan describes him as developing feelings for Kristian. In general, Liam is constructed as an unpleasant, obnoxious individual who lies and treats other people with contempt. However, in describing the beginnings of the relationship with Kristian, a tentative, less sure individual is revealed, which hints at the cost to himself of his dishonest behaviour:

> I don't know, I guess I think about Kristian sometimes.
> (53)

> For a second it crosses my mind that Kristian really is all right – his face is nice-looking, innocent or something – and for a second the feeling gets the better of me […]
> (129)

For Liam, however, there is no happy ending. He is unable to accept his homosexuality and with the imminent return of Sara tries, literally, to beat his self loathing away through the unfortunate Kristian:

> I can think of nothing through the anger, I just want to make Kristian hurt, to punish him, to make the little faggot suffer, and all I'm really certain of as I hit him again, this time in the cheek, is that it's not just about what he said, this is not just about Kristian, this is about everything. This is everything since Sara left and everything before. It's not just Kristian I'm doing this to. I'm doing this to myself.

(275-6)

Duncan, here, presents Liam as being honest, perhaps for the first time: his palpable

anger at himself, for being in his own eyes 'other' than he thinks he should be; his anger

at Kristian for reminding him of whom he really is and what is at stake; and his anger at

the hopelessness he feels.

Through his presentation of Liam, then, Duncan suggests a lonely, complex

situation which arises when the expectations of community along with one's own hopes

in relation to personal identity do not correspond with the reality of the situation. Liam's

insecurity is magnified because the landscape he inhabits is not especially homophobic

but nevertheless retains a relentless discourse in relation to homosexuality which Liam

interprets as representing failure, the ultimate site of abjection. To benefit from the

privileges of hegemonic masculinity and shore up his own personal identity, Duncan

presents him as believing he must be seen as 'straight', with a girlfriend, rather than

taking a risk and possibly developing a meaningful relationship with another boy. For

Liam, his homosocial friendships take precedence and this impacts on his sexuality

which, if revealed, would position him as 'other' within the hegemonic masculinity of his

social world, something he cannot allow himself to contemplate.

Brothers and beyond

Not only sexuality influences and is influenced by male friendship bonds, however.

Nardi's work on the impact of social and cultural variables on the formation of male

friendships is particularly significant in considering the implications of interactions

between race, class and gender. In discussing the fictional boys in the narratives of

Burgess, McKay and Duncan, the masculinities they represent, although diverse in

nature, have their origins in a white, middle-class, hegemonic model. Parry's boys belong to a white, working-class masculinity; Ozone's ethnicity is not positioned as a defining factor in his friendships with Rabbit and Jacko within the narrative. Again, a white, western framework informs the hegemonic masculinity through which they position themselves. While this model of masculinity may hold a position of dominance in western, capitalist societies in general, this does not mean that various cultures will not reconfigure ideas of 'normative' masculinity. In relation to hegemony Connell (1995) points out – "Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable." (76) - as discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Although it is imperative to recognize the formations of multiple masculinities in relation to ethnicity and class, the existence of power relations between various versions of masculinities must not be ignored. While white, middle-class masculinity is positioned as hegemonic in relation to the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995: 82), ethnically diverse men and boys along with women, and gay men and boys remain positioned as 'other' without equal access to the resources and privileges of society.

This situation and its implications are recognized in the work of Niobe Way (2004). In carrying out qualitative research with a group of ethnically diverse, low-income American young men with reference to their experiences of friendship formation, Way contests the suggestion that all boys seek to adhere to privileged representations of masculinity which are potentially detrimental to their emotional lives, as is often suggested in the research literature. As she highlights, ethnically diverse young men often

have less to gain from hegemonic discourses which privilege a white, middle-class

masculinity:

> Do these arguments have relevance for diverse populations of boys who
> have not necessarily experienced the benefits of accepting, whether
> unconsciously or explicitly, a conventional stance of autonomous
> masculinity? Do boys from urban, low-income families also cover over their
> emotions, thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities in their relationships with
> other boys? Do they forego intimate relationships with other boys for the
> sake of maintaining a masculine pose?
> (170)

In carrying out the interviews, Way found that expectations changed within different

ethnic groups, highlighting the significance of ethnic diversity among the young men not

only in relation to their friendship formations but more fundamentally, in the ways in

which they constructed their masculine identities. Frosh *et al* highlight the point:

> There is not some global essence of 'whiteness' or 'blackness' giving rise to
> particular forms of masculinity; rather, racialised differences are taken up in
> many different ways to inform and generate a highly variegated structure of
> identity.
> (147)

In *The First Part Last* (2003), Angela Johnson describes a group of friends who

constantly look out for each other, physically and emotionally. Through the first person

narrative of Billy, a black, African American youth, Johnson tells his story from the time

he finds out he is to become a father at the young age of sixteen , through the pregnancy,

the decision to have the baby adopted, his girlfriend Nia's slide into an irreversible coma,

and Billy's decision to keep his daughter, Feather. Throughout the narrative Billy is

supported with 'tough love' by his mother and two best friends, K-Boy and J.L. In this

instance, the use of 'nick-names' is not intended as a device through which to withhold

intimacy as the three boys reveal their inner thoughts and emotions to each other, even

when what they are saying isn't necessarily what the others want to hear. On finding out

about Nia's pregnancy, J.L. reacts angrily to what he perceives as Bobby's stupidity:

> J.L. leans back against the Center again.
> "Hey, Bro, I was just going to make a call for you to 1-800-ISTUPID."
> K-Boy looks sorry for me and starts shaking his head. I don't know what I
> expected. I would have probably said the same thing. We all talked about
> this. We said only stupid people would let it get to this.
> (37)

However, Johnson has J.L. and K-Boy help Bobby throughout the pregnancy and

Feather's birth. When Nia falls into the coma at the hospital, they support him

unconditionally. In her hypothesis that ethnically diverse youths have less to gain from

white, middle-class, hegemonic constructions of masculinity and are therefore less likely

to adhere to its codes, Way suggests that this opens up the way for them to express their

emotions and desire for intimacy not just in terms of protection but also as a support

mechanism. The boys are described as having been friends since childhood and this has

created a bond between them which does not always need to be expressed in words in

terms of their care for each other. At the hospital, seeing his two friends with their backs

to him, reminds Bobby of a time at the beach when the three of them were chasing Nia

into the water:

> J.L.'s sister has the next picture of us running back to the water. It doesn't
> show our faces, only our backs while we chase her into the water.
> I guess I think of it when I turn around in the waiting room and see the
> backs of both my buddies talking to my dad. But I know they won't be
> laughing like we did, or yelling "Get her" like we did.
> But they're here, and she won't ever be running away from any of us again.
> In a few minutes, though, they're beside me and in the white light of the
> waiting room […]
> (122-3)

By depicting their shared history and memories, Johnson suggests an intimate bond

which endures without necessarily needing expression. Although she draws attention to

the closeness of the three boys and challenges the discourse of emotional illiteracy

amongst boys, Johnson also asks the reader to consider the nature of intimacy in all its

forms. The boys both disclose and draw on a shared history to maintain their closeness.

Johnson further suggests that the neighbourhood in Brooklyn in which they live

also acts as a support mechanism in spite of its potential dangers, in the same way that the

Crew seek support from extended 'family' networks on their estate. The boys in Rai and

Johnson's works are represented as seeking more help from family and community and

being less inclined to stand alone which may relate to Way's thesis that boys in

dangerous neighbourhoods need to seek more support to ensure their survival. Certainly,

Rai represents the boys in the Crew as seeking guidance from family. After they find a

bag of money both Billy and Jas speak to their mothers about it:

> 'Well, no argument then,' Mum said firmly. 'They'll have missed it by now
> for sure, so you'd better get your Crew together and get your sorry arses
> down the station. *Now!*'
> She was right. I rang Jas and told him what was going to happen He had just
> had the same conversation with his own mother. He told me that he realized
> that they were right, his mum and mine.
> (48)

Potentially the relationships with family members which include disclosure in these

narratives lead to emotional literacy being more easily attained in other relationships. In

Indigo's Star, Indigo is represented as having close ties with his family which he takes

out into the wider community, as represented in his relationship with Tom: however, the

boys in Burgess' narrative also show an inclination towards intimate disclosure and with

the exception of Dino, little is revealed about the boys' relationships with their parents.

Ultimately each of the narratives discussed represents a different version of adolescent, male friendship; with the exception of *Metro*, none is shown to be problematic. All of the authors challenge assumptions about poor levels of emotional literacy and intimacy in male friendships, whether to suggest that self disclosure does not need to be present to form satisfying friendships, as in Parry's narrative, or that boys are in fact engaged in disclosing friendships but are highly private in how, when and where they do so. Each of these novels challenges the normative discourse which positions male relationships as unsatisfactory and emotionally inhibiting and encourages the reader to look beyond external landscapes: together they serve as a corrective to many assumptions about adolescent male relationships. As Way found in the course of her research,

> The language of yearning for intimacy is used by boys looking hip hop, cool, laid back, and macho in their low riding pants, Walkmen around their necks, baseball caps drawn low over their brows, sneakers untied. Boys who have been portrayed in popular culture as more interested in shooting each other than in sharing their thoughts and feelings spoke to us about male friendships that "you feel lost without," and about "deep depth" friendships, and about wanting friends with whom you "share your secrets," "tell everything," and "get inside."
> (182)

In highlighting research which makes visible the multiplicity of friendships which exist among boys in relation to class and ethnicity, Way re-enforces the need to think about masculinity constructions in relation to cultural diversity and change. Further, while much research suggests that hegemonic masculinities do play a significant part in regulating boys' friendships and masculinity performances, specifically in relation to intimacy and behaviours positioned as 'other', boys do not necessarily conform without question.

Another novel which explores friendships between ethnically diverse boys is Benjamin Zephaniah's *Gangsta Rap* (2004) which describes the experiences of Ray and his two best friends, Tyrone and Prem. All three boys are excluded from school and Ray in particular is portrayed as an angry young man. Unlike the boys in *The Crew*, Ray does not have a supportive family: he lives in a family where there is constant friction between his parents and Ray and his father frequently end up attacking each other physically. While Zephaniah presents Ray sympathetically, he does not suggest that he is simply a victim of his situation; Ray actively contributes to his own problems with a belligerent attitude and quick temper. However, he does take action to improve his own life; he makes plans for the future and is focused on achieving his goals which see him transforming into X-Ray-X, one third of a hip hop group, Positive Negatives, who become very successful. Zephaniah portrays an environment which has become synonymous with contemporary black youth culture – more generally associated with the USA but now also common in the UK – a world where hip hop and rap music go together with knife and gun crime and gang culture: in the novel Ray's girlfriend is killed in a shooting when the group are caught up in a war between rival gangs. Ray subsequently buys a gun and wants to seek revenge until his friends and fellow group members, Tyrone and Prem, persuade him to throw it away. Through the course of the narrative Zephaniah continually highlights the challenges faced by Ray and his friends because of the environment in which they live. However Ray is ultimately left in a hopeful situation, described as having matured from his experiences, although he remains a feisty, angry, and ambitious individual:

> Ray Wilkie, also known as X-Ray-X from Positive Negatives, told the *Daily Journal*, "We want to show people that this ain't about being a gangster, this

is about being an artist. This ain't about acting up and being fake, this is
about being true and keeping it real."
(333)

The novels of boyhood considered here, represent examples of narratives which explore
diversity in boys' relationships and offer multiple versions of friendship to boy readers
without simply positioning them as problematic. As such, the narratives offer positive
images of boys in relation to agency and choice.

Nevertheless, there remains a contradiction at the heart of discourses which
privilege self-disclosure in the formation of intimate friendship bonds among boys while
heralding hegemonic versions of masculinity which privilege independence and
rationality over emotional engagement which can be considered 'suspect', an issue
expressed succinctly by Nardi:

So men are raised in a culture with a mixed message; strive for healthy,
emotionally intimate friendships, but be careful – if you appear too intimate
with another man you might be negatively labelled homosexual.
(2)

This can potentially cause confusion, uncertainty and anxiety for boys as they consider
their individual identities in the wider society. These contradictory forces not only impact
on boys' friendships but also on other areas of their lives. The home, the site in which
boys' nurturing begins but potentially where they are encouraged to separate from what is
perceived as 'feminine', is particularly significant in the formation of gender identities
and it is with the way home and family are constructed in YA boys' fiction that the
following chapter is concerned.

Chapter 3. Family

Mrs Appleyard
Mrs Appleyard
says us boys
need a mum
because our clothes
look old as rags
and are twice as dirty.
Mrs Appleyard
says we stay up
way too late
and shout like demons
in the backyard,
enough so her hens can't lay.
Mrs Appleyard
says the department should know
and find us a real home,
with a mother there
when we get home from school.
Mrs Appleyard says
a man can't bring up children alone.
Mrs Appleyard.
Mrs Appleyard.
Go and get stuffed.
(Herrick, 2004: 23)

In Steven Herrick's verse novel, *By The River* (2004), readers see a small, rural

Australian town during the 1960s through the eyes of teenage narrator Harry Hodby. In

the course of the novel, Harry records and contemplates the significant events which

affect his life and those of his brother Keith, and their single-parent father. Its all-male

environment makes *By the River* an important text for this chapter, which explores how

contemporary YA fiction represents boys in their family environments. There is a good

body of academic research which examines the ways in which boys are socialized into

masculinity through the family and wider social environments.[49] This reveals a marked

tendency for relationships between boys and their families to come under pressure as

boys start to identify – or at least be seen to be aligning themselves with – hegemonic

models of masculinity. One way this is demonstrated is through a perception of failure to

communicate and inadequate levels of emotional literacy which impact on families' sense

of intimacy with boys and so feed into the discourse of 'crisis'. There is considerably less

material which offers positive images of boys in families, whether in the form of

academic research or in the popular press.[50] While taking account of the research material

which problematizes boys in family life, I also consider how gradually evolving

understandings of both family and masculinities and their interconnections can

potentially offer opportunities for boys to renegotiate their personal relationships in a

move away from rigid gender stereotypes. The fictional texts explored in this chapter

represent positive, if problematic, images of boys in family spaces and therefore

potentially present the boy reader with affirmative discourses about family life.

The changing family

In the verse which begins this chapter, and indeed throughout *By The River*, Herrick

challenges the discourse of the 'normative' nuclear family as the only possible formation

in which successful family life can take place. In discussing 'family' it is necessary to

locate it within the wider social context for, as Stephen Whitehead (2002) suggests,

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[49] See, M. Adams, and S. Coltrane (2005) 'Boys and Men in Families', for an introduction to the literature
which is available in relation to men and boys in family life.
[50] As suggested in the Introduction, much research is framed by the perception of 'crisis'; however, studies
such as those carried out by Way and Chu (2004) demonstrate the possibilities when boys are allowed to
speak for themselves.

> It is neither possible nor wise to disaggregate families from the wider social conditions within which they exist. Changing patterns to women's and men's employment, post-industrialization, women's increased education opportunities, urbanization, class, cultural capital and globalization are all factors that need to be recognized as influencing how women and men will respond to childcare and family responsibilities.
> (153)

While it is not my intention to specifically focus on the ongoing debate about the changing nature of family relationships and how they relate to changing social conditions more generally, it is important to acknowledge that this debate is taking place both in academic and political circles as well as in the popular press (Jagger & Wright, 1999). Also, the impact that changes are having on the everyday lived experiences of people participating in family life, as divorce rates soar, co-habitation increases, same-sex and single parent families become more visible, and grandparents take on more responsibility in the upbringing of their children's children must be acknowledged because these changes influence the family experiences of teenage boys. (Stacey, 1996) The fictional texts discussed in this chapter both reflect and add to current debates about family.[51] In a somewhat ironic statement Delia Ephron succeeds in summing up some of the consequences of the changes currently taking place in western understandings of family:

> The extended family is in our lives again. This should make all the people happy who were complaining back in the sixties and seventies that the reason family life was so hard, especially on mothers, was that the nuclear family had replaced the extended family […] Your basic extended family today includes your ex-husband or ex-wife, your ex's new mate, your new mate, possibly your new mate's ex, and any new mate that your new mate's ex has acquired. It consists entirely of people who are not related by blood, many of whom can't stand each other. This return of the extended family reminds me of the favorite saying of my friend's extremely pessimistic mother: Be careful what you wish for, you might get it.

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[51] See, A. Alston (2008) *The Family in English Children's Literature* for an in depth discussion of how the representation of family life has developed through time and continues to evolve in fictional narratives impacted by changing social landscapes.

(Ephron, 1996: 17)[52]

While clearly laced with sarcastic humour, Ephron's summary highlights a number of

issues which remain problematic in western understandings of family: the place of the

nuclear family in western discourse, which I return to later in the chapter, and changing

understandings about what constitutes family in relation to blood ties and social

connections. Ephron draws attention to the challenges children and adolescents may face

as they work to form new family bonds in re-structured families. A.M. Homes' novel

Jack (1998) sees the male, teenage central character of the title trying to come to terms

with his father's revelation of his homosexuality and the resulting formation of new

relationships for each of his parents. Jack moves through a series of different emotions

and reactions before finally being able to reconcile himself with the changes. However,

when his mother suggests a 'family' dinner for his sixteenth birthday, he still finds the

idea of all of the disparate people involved together in one room very challenging:

> Seeing my dad and mom together for things like busting my leg and Mrs.
> Burka getting beaten up was one thing; they were what you could call
> emergency situations. But the idea of my dad, Mom, Michael, Bob, and
> everyone else sitting at our dining-room table – well, that was something I
> needed one of my mom's Valiums just to think about.
> (186)

The evening subsequently passes without incident, but by positioning Jack as the narrator

of the novel, Homes makes the reader aware of the potential pitfalls and tensions of the

'new' extended family, specifically for children involved.

Hilary McKay's *Indigo's Star* (2003) also situates an adolescent boy in a

changing family environment. Indigo Casson lives with his mother Eve, older sister

Caddy, step-sister Saffron, and younger sister Rose, in an unspecified English town. His

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[52] Cited in, J.Stacey (1996) *In the Name of the Family.* 17.

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father Bill lives in London where he has his own artist's studio. Bill has drifted away

from his family and only returns home in emergencies. His disappearance has been

gradual and is only acknowledged by Indigo when talking to a friend about his family:

> Tom gave him one of his quick, considering glances and asked, 'Doesn't he
> live with you?'
> 'No,' said Indigo, finally saying out loud whet he had known now for a
> long, long time. 'Not really. Not any more.'
> 'Do you mind?'
> 'It happened so slowly,' said Indigo, 'I suppose I got used to it without
> noticing too much' […]
> (90)

McKay presents Indigo as not being overly concerned about his father's absence and

portrays him as comfortable with this changing family environment. The introduction of

Derek, Eve's potential new partner, does not disturb him, unlike Jack who struggles to

accept the new situation in which he finds himself. Living in a largely female household

since his father's move to London, Indigo is represented as fitting easily into the family

alongside his sisters; the fact that he is male does not give rise to any special or different

treatment. Because Eve is portrayed as an 'absent-minded artist' who prefers to spend

time in the shed at the bottom of the garden – a direct challenge to the myth of men

hiding out in sheds to avoid family life – the children are often left to fend for themselves

in domestic matters, and Indigo is as competent as his sisters when it comes to taking on

domestic duties:

> Indigo made everyone a late lunch. It was an afternoon of revelations for
> Tom, and the first of them was Indigo making lunch. He made bacon rolls
> and maple syrup pancakes, flipping the pancakes ceiling-high, as Caddy had
> taught him to do the week before, and catching them perfectly in the frying
> pan each time.
> (150)

In the novel Indigo is not the sole narrator: he shares the task with other family members, allowing readers to view family interactions from a variety of perspectives. The shared narration allows McKay to show a young male taking part in family life on an equal platform with other family members. The fact that Indigo is presented as quiet, capable, and unobtrusive, challenges assumptions about the difficulties adolescent boys potentially have in 'doing' family.

A scene which shows both how thoroughly Indigo is integrated in his family and how far he is from the typical image of the teenage boy comes when he is discussing his friend Tom's guitar playing with his sister Rose and they think about the instruments that family members and friends would like to play:

> '[…] Playing guitars on roofs…Or bagpipes…Or drum kits…Sarah would like that, and Saffy could have the bagpipes! Caddy could have a harp…What about Mum?'
> 'One of those gourds filled with beans!' said Rose at once. 'And Daddy could have a grand piano. On a flat roof. With a balcony, and pink flowers in pots round the edge! And I'll have a very loud trumpet! What about you?'
> 'I'll just listen,' said Indigo.
> (71)

The image of Indigo as listener, symbolizes his position in the family; Indigo is the quietest, least flamboyant of the Casson children and is usually very gentle, particularly with Rose. Although this way of being makes him a target for bullies at school, Indigo is not a victim; he chooses not to be aggressive and fight with his tormentors but he regularly stands up to them, as discussed in Chapter Two. His strength lies, in fact, in his honesty about his weaknesses. Unlike Tom, he is portrayed as 'without bravado'. When they climb to the top of the library roof Indigo begins to feel ill because he is afraid of heights but rather than hide how he feels he admits his fear when Tom challenges him. This actually ends with Tom's respect for him increasing:

'Scared!' said Tom for the third time, and this time Indigo looked up with
dark, unfocussed eyes and said, 'Yep. Don't go near the edge any more, will
you?'
If any other person (except perhaps Rose) had said that to Tom it would
have been the signal for him to begin balancing tricks along the edge of the
parapet. There was no need though, to pretend with Indigo. Indigo did not
pretend with him.
So Tom said (amazing himself), 'I won't go near the edge any more, Don't
worry. You'll be okay.'
(142)

In this scene McKay turns around ideas about 'strength' which exist in some hegemonic

masculinity discourses, privileging honesty over bravado in interactions between boys.

Through Indigo, McKay offers readers a fictional teenage boy who is able to interact

positively in a family environment and take the qualities he has built up through these

relationships into the wider community without becoming a victim or submitting to the

mob. Indigo's quiet self-assurance offers a powerful message to young boy readers about

their place in family environments, for Indigo moves between and is associated with both

masculine and feminine spaces without loosing respect: "Indigo, Tom was beginning to

realize, was no fool, even if he was afraid of high places and the red-haired gang leader

and his rabble." (162)

McKay, then, presents a positive example of a family undergoing change with the

members renegotiating their places and relationships. This represents a movement from a

'traditional' nuclear family environment to one of extended bonds. In both Homes' and

McKay's texts, as well as Herrick's *By The River,* however, there is a sense in which

these new family formations are used to question the efficacy of the traditional nuclear

structure: the male teenage characters experience problems due to their family ties,

whether the issues are of their own making or brought about by expectations from the

wider communities in which they live. Harry is considered a problem by neighbours

because there is no mother at home; Jack is ridiculed at school because of his father's

sexuality; Indigo is bullied because of his feminine qualities. Together these books raise

questions about the privileged position of the nuclear family in western discourse and

why this privilege continues, bringing into play the question of gender in the family;

changing family landscapes challenge male privilege which has significant implications

for the adolescent boy as he looks at ways of performing masculinity both inside the

family space and in the wider world. As Adams and Coltrane (2005) explain,

> The end of the 20th century witnessed a remarkable increase in family
> diversity as families took on more and different forms and functions. Along
> with the proliferation of diverse types of families, we have been introduced
> to new ways of "doing family", with the older traditional ways becoming
> harder to sustain, both physically and psychologically.
> (243)

The gendered family

In *Jack*, Jack is presented as longing to return to a time before his father left the family

home. He idealizes the family of his best friend, Max Burka, which consists of a father,

mother and two children - the normative nuclear version of family. Jack considers this the

ideal family make-up:

> I've always liked Mrs. Burka, the whole Burka family, Max included. I
> mean, they were sort of my ideal family – you know, mom, dad, two kids,
> and all. I used to want a little brother and stuff like that.
> (98)

Later he learns that appearances can be deceptive – a theme Holmes develops steadily

with regard to ideas about family. *Jack* constantly asks what it means to be a family: who

can be involved, and how these individuals interact to make themselves into a family. For

example, Jack's image of the Burkas as an ideal unit has to be thoroughly revised when it

is revealed that Mr. Burka has been beating up his wife throughout their married life. The strange behaviour of Max, their son and Jack's best friend, signals that a problem exists; Jack discovers him re-creating scenes of violence from the Vietnam War using a miniature village he has reconstructed. Max is torn between wanting to emulate his father, who was a soldier, and admitting to the family violence, at this point unknown to Jack. Instead he indulges in anti-social behaviour, trying to ignore the situation:

> 'Empty supply station,' Max said. 'I knew it all along.'
> He dumped a cup of water onto the whole mess and watched as it fizzled and smoked. He poked at the ruins with a pencil.
> 'Never leave a campsite until you're sure the fire's completely out. Stirring the coals,' he said, 'is an old Boy Scout routine.'
> 'You weren't a Scout,' I said.
> 'No, but my dad was.'
> 'That doesn't make you one.'
> (58)

The expectation for Jack is that the Burkas are a happy family because they represent a 'traditional' version of family; what, in Jack's understanding, a family should be. However, the revelations about the Burkas make Jack reconsider what family means. By using Jack, an adolescent boy with limited life experience, as the first-person narrator, Homes makes visible how pervasive the discourse of the normative nuclear family is in western societies and how difference is conceived as problematic. The narrative begins with a scene which is considered a traditional rite of passage moment in some western cultures; a father teaching his child to drive. Homes constructs a scene in which Paul, Jack's father, is giving him instructions in how to park, followed by the anticipated frustration on both sides when Jack gets it wrong:

> 'Be careful,' my father said before I'd even taken my foot off the brake.
> 'We don't have to do this,' I said. 'I can wait to get my license when I'm thirty – no problem […]'
> 'This time, cut the wheel the other way before you ease up on the pedal.'

> I turned the steering wheel as far as I could. The old blue Volvo didn't
> believe in power steering.
> 'More,' my father said.
> I thought I might die. I thought I might have a heart attack. I thought if I
> ever had to drive that car, I'd end up looking like Arnold Schwarzenegger.
> 'I think I'm having a heart attack,' I said.
> (9)

Homes establishes this 'normative' family landscape with the reader before Jack

retrospectively recounts his family story and reveals his father's homosexuality. The

structure allows her to come full-circle and re-assert the important meaning of this picture

of a father teaching his son to drive; only the context changes. In this way Homes

challenges normative understandings about family ties; what is privileged, what is

positioned as 'other'.

In his study of the American family, Michael Kimmel (2004) suggests that the

nuclear family formation was actually brought about by a particular set of circumstances

following WWII and began to crumble almost immediately under its own weight of

expectation.[53] It may have been eroded, but the influence of this family structure has

remained, not least through its privileged status in relation to social institutions and the

law. It offers men an ideological privilege with regard to 'head of household' status - the

'breadwinner' role which allows them to participate in the wider world while assigning

women and children to the domestic sphere due to their dependence on men for financial

security. However, this scenario is now more difficult to justify because of women's

changing expectations and de-industrialization which has transformed employment

opportunities. Debates about family which privilege the nuclear model suggest that

changes which have taken place in family structures have led to a sense of 'crisis' about

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[53] See: M. Kimmell (2004) *The Gendered Society*, 121-127, for a more detailed account of the evolution of
the nuclear family in American society.

the family although there is nothing to suggest that those opting out of the nuclear

structure are any less committed to family life[54].

In *Masculinities* (1995), R.W. Connell explores the socially constructed nature of

male power and the ways in which this is preserved through institutional structures

including the family. She suggests that the reluctance of many men to follow a path

towards social justice lies in their desire to maintain their stake in 'the patriarchal

dividend'. While she acknowledges that men share unequally in power and its privileges,

she is emphatic about the gendered nature of society and its implications in the

renegotiation of power. In relation to the current discussion, the traditional nuclear

family, with its clearly defined sex roles, both re-enforces male power and regulates

gendered behaviour which has implications for the formation of masculinities and

femininities. Discussing what he terms 'the traditional family', Michael Kimmel (2004)

suggests,

> It represents the last outpost of traditional gender relations – gender
> differences created through gender inequality – that are being challenged in
> every observable arena. Families are gendered institutions; they reproduce
> gender differences and gender inequalities among adults and children alike.
> Families raise children as gendered actors, and remind parents to perform
> appropriate gender behaviours.
> (127)

The nuclear family with its gendered spaces remains ideologically resilient in western

societies despite being constantly contested by new family formations and the pursuit of

equality and social justice between men and women. For the young male taking part in

family this can create a potentially problematic landscape in which to form his

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[54] See, S. Whitehead (2002) *Men and Masculinities*, chapter 5.

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understanding of self, not least his gendered self and how he wants to signal this. Adams and Coltrane, discussing the socialization of boys in family spaces, suggest:

> The family typically is considered the main institution for both production and reproduction of polarized gender values. Although individuals are socialized in many different contexts throughout their lives (school, neighbourhood, community, peer group, workplace, church, polity), family tends to be the primary initial socialization agent, acting as a microcosm of society and providing a child's first exposure to interaction with others. (233)

While Indigo Casson and Harry Hodby experience difficulties in the wider community because of their 'new' family environments and the ways in which these affect the kind of masculinity they choose to adopt and perform, polarized gender roles in a traditional nuclear family can be equally problematic for young male protagonists who are not in tune with hegemonic masculinity.

Phillip Gwynne's *Deadly Unna?* (1998) is a text in which nuclear family and community are in accord in relation to polarized gender stereotypes. The book is set in a poor, working-class, country town; the nearest city, Adelaide, is many miles away, and the residents have very little contact with it. In the town the Aboriginal population live at the mission, the Point, while the white population inhabits the Port, with the two communities only ever coming together for 'the footy'. The pub, one of the focal points of the town, is symbolic of the divisions and power relations which exist in the town; the men drink in the front bar, the 'ladies' in the lounge, and the aboriginals 'out the back'.

We meet the young male narrator, Gary "Blacky" Black, when he is preparing for a football match. Gary/Blacky is replacing an ex-team mate who has been disqualified for lying about his age in the grand final of the Peninsula Junior Colts Premiership. The problem is that, by his own admission, Blacky is hopeless at football:

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> I was the worst kick in our side, probably on the whole peninsula. I knew all
> the theory – weight evenly balanced, eyes on the ball, leg straight, toe
> pointed, follow right through. If they had an exam, sat you in a classroom
> and asked you a whole lot of questions about how to kick a footy, then I'd
> come top.
> (16)

Blacky's lack of athleticism is one of a number of ways in which he is shown to be different from his male contemporaries in the Port. Unlike the other boys, Blacky enjoys school; Gwynne presents him as an intelligent, inquisitive young man with a satirical turn of phrase when describing his family and local community. This, however, is represented as problematic in a town where traditional gender discourses regulate behaviour:

> A gutless wonder is about the worst thing you can be in our town. If you're
> a boy that is. If you're a girl then it's a slack moll. Slack boy, gutless girl –
> nobody cares. Once you've been labelled a gutless wonder, then that's it, the
> label sticks.
> (9)

Privileged masculinity is defined in terms of brute force, hardness, 'few words', and Blacky possesses none of these 'qualities'.

In making Blacky the first-person narrator of the novel, Gwynne offers the reader a distinctive voice – this is ironic as all of the Black children are referred to as 'Blacky' by the rest of the town, who cannot remember their individual names. Using this device Gwynne establishes a dynamic juxtaposition between Blacky's uniqueness and the expectations of the community, suggesting that he will eventually have to confront or be consumed by the normative gender discourses which surround him in the form of his father and the other 'influential' men in the town. While he does try to assimilate as male – he plays football, goes fishing with his father, and sets up a date with an attractive young female tourist – he is uncomfortable in all of these environments. The reader,

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seeing events unfold from Blacky's perspective, empathizes with him, endorsing his

decisions as he begins to challenge and renegotiate the traditional discourses of his

environment. Blacky is intermittently gauche and misguided: for instance, when he

agrees with those who express opposing opinions simply because he is expected to

respond this way, rather than challenging racist or sexist comments. In representing him

as ambivalent on a number of occasions, Gwynne is able to demonstrate effectively the

struggle Blacky faces in wanting to belong to his community while recognizing the

inherent problems which place him outside:

> 'Hey, Blacky, that's your girlfriend, isn't it?' said Pickles, loudly. 'What's-her-name?'
> I don't know if Clarence heard. She didn't stop or say anything. She kept walking.
> 'That Abo wasn't really your girlfriend?' asked Cathy when they'd gone.
> 'No way. It's Pickles' idea of a joke. Pathetic as usual.'
> 'But you know her?'
> I hesitated.
> 'No, of course not. How would I know her?'
> I screwed the lid back on the Tropical Island Deep Tanning Oil.
> 'Here you go,' I said, handing it back to Cathy.
> 'Thanks,' she said. 'You've got nice hands, you know. Gentle.'
> 'Thanks,' I said, but somehow the most perfect morning of my life wasn't so perfect any more.
> (192)

The outmoded gender stereotypes represented by the white male inhabitants of the Port

equate in the novel with outdated imperialist discourses about race, both of which, the

book suggests, continue to influence and direct lives. Within this climate Blacky becomes

friends with Clarence's brother, Dumby Red, a charismatic aboriginal boy, who he meets

on the football team. When Dumby is subsequently shot and killed during a robbery at

the pub, Blacky makes the decision to go to his funeral against the advice of family and

friends. His crossing between the Port and the Point symbolizes a change, a movement

away from what he knows towards who or what he wants to be, though this is as yet

unresolved. While he receives a somewhat hostile reception from some at the Point –

Gwynne never sets up a simple good versus bad dichotomy but constructs a complex

array of experiences and possibilities – Blacky realizes that he has to learn about life

himself and make his own decisions, however difficult:

> In the distance I could see the jetty – a blurry line floating above the water.
> Maybe Pickles and Dazza were sitting at the anchor right now, looking
> towards the Point, at exactly where I was sitting, telling each other stories
> they'd heard in the front bar. Wild Nungas with spears, boomerangs that
> come from nowhere and knock you senseless. What would they say if they
> knew I was there, looking right back at them? Not much probably. What had
> Dazza said? Play with fire and ya gunna get burnt. Maybe, Dazza, but not
> burnt to death.
> (228)

Deadly, Unna? is a complex narrative which positions readers alongside Blacky as he

takes faltering steps along the road to self-discovery, more aware at this point of what he

doesn't want than where he wants to go. His journey is made more difficult in a

community where he is at odds with discourses privileging traditional gender stereotypes,

ideals which extend to his family environment and therefore provide a seamless extension

between the two, effectively positioning him as an outsider.

The Black family consists of mother and father and eight children. Mrs. Black

spends her time cleaning, washing, and cooking for the family while Bob Black, the

'head of household', takes his boat out to fish, earning a precarious living to support his

family. Gwynne represents Mrs. Black as an intelligent woman, restricted by gender

expectations in the community she inhabits. Her ability and the way she is constrained

are conveyed through such things as her knowledge and tactical ability in relation to

football and the fact that because she is female, any involvement is denied her. Blacky understands why she cannot be involved:

> My mum loved the footy. She came to every match, and there wasn't much she didn't know about the game, especially tactics. I'm sure she would have been a better coach than Arks […] Everybody thought that to be a great coach you had to have been a great player. And a bloke, of course.
> (31-2)

In allowing Mrs. Black to pass on tactics to Blacky, which ultimately help the team to win the final, Gwynne further undermines the white, male privilege which defines the town. However, while Gwynne portrays Blacky as aware of the inequalities which exist between his parents - he even wonders why his mother chose to marry his father - he does not actively take part in trying to bring about change. When Mrs. Black has to go to Adelaide to look after her sick father it is left to Sharon, the eldest of the girls in the family, to prepare meals and generally take over her role in the family:

> You'd think, wouldn't you, that with their parents away the Black tribe would run wild? But we didn't. Dinner was just like normal, maybe even quieter than normal. And it was delicious. The mashed spud was a triumph (well done, sis). The peas were okay. And the snags only tasted a little bit like mettwurst.
> (255)

Gwynne suggests that gender stereotypes, even when acknowledged, prove difficult to dislodge in daily practice because of the often 'taken for granted' actions of men and women. This can impact on adolescent males, still in the process of forming tentative gender identities and often unaware of the already considerable gender expectations which they have accrued or, conversely, assuming gendered living practices as their right without fully understanding the implications. Lynne Segal (1990) suggests:

> […] 'masculinity' gains its meanings, its force and appeal, not just from internalised psychological components or roles, but from all the wider social relations in which men and women participate which simply take for granted

men's authority and privileges in relation to women. Men inevitably see themselves and are seen in the light of this seemingly 'natural' authority […]
(284)

Gwynne portrays Blacky as a 'work in progress'; like Indigo Casson, he moves towards a femininized form of masculinity although, unlike Indigo, some of his ideas still need to be transferred into his everyday life.

The limited extent to which Blacky adjusts his behaviour is in part explained by the rigid gender stereotypes which surround him; particularly in the form of his father, an issue I return to later in the chapter. Fittingly, Blacky's final act of defiance against the town, and his father, is expressed through words. Blacky's love of reading and new, unusual words is one of the ways in which Gwynne signals his difference throughout the novel. He is represented as understanding the power of words to define and restrict as well as to enable; he finds racist graffiti, daubed on a wall at the Port, which insults the Aboriginal community - 'BOONGS PISS OFF' – and decides that it has to be removed. His actions are symbolic of his confrontation with the town and his father; that he steals and uses his father's paint and brush to get rid of the graffiti further adds to the significance; "I dipped the brush deep into the Black Gloss. Three swipes and it was gone. Not forever, but for tonight anyway." (271)

Deadly Unna? does not present such acts of defiance as easy; Gary Black succeeds in removing the graffiti but must face his father the following day, while Dumby Red, confronting the 'natural' privilege of white, male power by attempting to rob the pub, the symbol of this power, is shot dead. This particular environment, the traditional nuclear family with its reflection in the construction of the local community, is fraught with tensions around masculinity and its regulation. By using the first person

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narration of Blacky, Gwynne at once suggests the problematic nature of this landscape, making visible its discontents and shortcomings.

The community and family

Even in the kind of nuclear family where traditional gender stereotypes are not necessarily policed, the community or peer group can act as a regulator for the male teenage character. Judith Clarke's *The Heroic Lives of Al Capsella* (2000) offers a humorous account of teenage narrator Al's attempts to work out his relationships with parents, friends and community while trying to understand his own place in the world. Set in middle-class, suburban Melbourne, Al, an only child, lives with his university teacher father, and his mother, a writer of romantic fiction novels. While seemingly an example of a normative nuclear family, Al worries constantly about fitting in with his peers and local community. His anxiety is focused largely on his parents' behaviour, specifically, his wish that they appear to be exactly like the parents of everyone else he knows and therefore 'normal':

> The Capsellas are a real liability. Not Mr. Capsella – he's so vague and quiet no one notices him much – but Mrs. Capsella does one thing a parent should never do: she stands out.
> (6)

Al initially believes that there is such as thing as a 'normal' family in which everyone is allotted their roles, although he is still uncertain of his particular position within this landscape. His expectations are based on understandings of the traditional nuclear family with its stereotyped gendered spaces and therefore Mrs. Capsella's crimes revolve around her not performing a 'normal' feminine role: her unusual wardrobe makes her look different from other mothers and her seeming lack of domestic skills such as cleaning and

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cooking introduce discord. Significantly, Al is aware that his pretensions to the 'perfect'

family are sexist:

> "This place is a mess," I sighed. "You should clean it up." Even as I spoke I
> realized I'd made a mistake in the pronoun. It should have been "we" or
> even "someone"; "you" was definitely wrong. Mrs. Capsella prickled all
> over when she heard it. I knew that if this scene had featured in one of the
> psychodramas Ms Rock makes us act out in Human Relations, my part
> would have been that of the chauvinist porker.
> (14)

Through her use of humour in constructing Al's musings about his life, Clarke mocks

'traditional' stereotypes about gender roles within the family, destabilizing notions of

'normality'. She uses the age of her narrator - a teenage boy who is trying to work out his

own ideas about family – to highlight the contradictions which have to be negotiated as

the adolescent male tries to form his own opinions about family life. One example of this

comes in the form of a university colleague of Mr. Capsella's, known as "The Shadow"

because he follows the Capsellas around and is difficult to shake off. Al muses on The

Shadow's opinions about women:

> He had a thing about the "True Woman". A True Woman was a lady who
> stayed home and cooked meals and looked after the children and waited at
> the window for her husband to come home at night […] True Women loved
> cooking and kiddies and keeping house; it was natural to them […] You
> could see that he's never done Human Relations at school just as you could
> see he didn't really know much about girls. I couldn't imagine any of the
> girls in our class waiting for hours at windows and enjoying it. I mean,
> nobody really would, unless there was something a little bit wrong with
> them.
> (35)

Clarke's use of mockery draws attention to the 'traditional wife and mother' discourses in

an exaggerated way, and makes visible the gender inequality inherent in preserving this

myth. The ridiculousness is further highlighted because The Shadow's ideal is viewed by

the reader through the eyes of Al - a somewhat naïve, young male narrator who tries to

explain logically why the idea of 'the true woman' is untenable. In doing so, he

completely shatters the myth. Ironically, in trying to make his family appear 'normal' Al

himself frequently takes on the traditionally feminine role in the family. He worries about

cleanliness, cooking meals and the state of the garden, forcing his parents to take part in

'domestic' activities. However, he slowly begins to realize that 'normal' can have

implications that are not necessarily good - something that becomes very clear after he

has to spend an extended period of time with his maternal grandmother Pearly Blount,

who holds very traditional views about family life:

> The word "normal" bothered me now. Pearly Blount used it a lot, and every
> time she did, I felt faintly embarrassed. After all, it was a word I used rather
> frequently myself and I was beginning to think it wasn't a very good one. It
> didn't seem to mean anything; it was just a word people used to say what
> *they* liked was right, and what other people liked was wrong.
> (85)

Al learns that 'normal' is a relative term, and that the family can be flexible and ever-

changing in relation to gender roles. By positioning Al in what appears to be a traditional

nuclear family and then disrupting the 'normative' understandings of gender this evokes,

Clarke allows the young male reader, alongside Al, to reconsider attitudes towards

masculinities and femininities in family spaces while also acknowledging the uncertainty

these renegotiations can create. Al eventually begins to appreciate that his mother does

not need to look like every other mother – her sense of 'style' is her own – and, while he

still finds this embarrassing, he acknowledges her uniqueness both as his mother and as

an individual. For instance, Al asks Mrs. Capsella to wear something 'normal' to his

parents' evening at school but when he sees the results he is confused by his reaction:

> I thought I hated the bikie gear and the op shop models, but there was no
> doubt about it, somehow those things suited her. They were normal for her. I
> couldn't think how to tell her this. She'd gone to such a lot of trouble […]

(51-2)

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Capsella is presented as holding rigid notions about gendered identities or trying to re-enforce them within the family and this leaves Al relatively free of traditional polarized gender stereotypes in his home. However, both he and his friends are acutely aware of the influences of hegemonic masculinity and the penalties which can befall those who do not appear to conform. This is why he is initially so concerned about 'normality' which can be translated to mean 'fitting in', not upsetting the status quo:

> Since I've gone to High School, being normal has become a matter of importance: all of us are secretly worried that we might not be normal, that there might be something a bit queer about us, something that *shows,* that other kids can point to and laugh about.
> (5)

Humour allows Clarke to explore Al's fears, which are likely to be shared by many boy readers, without making them appear too frightening. At the same time, she portrays the acute pressure which young males face in trying to 'fit in'; they exist in a number of different settings which, while related, may require different responses in relation to gendered behaviours. *The Heroic Lives of Al Capsella* shows that changing expectations of family life, even within the nuclear family, necessitate more nuanced and flexible behaviours – the polarized gender stereotypes on which the nuclear family was based are no longer adequate and this potentially conflicts with hegemonic masculinities which position femininity as 'other'.

As the above extract suggests, school is one of the key places where Al and his friends most fear being exposed as 'unmasculine' or inadequate. In interviews with adolescent boys in a London secondary school, Stephen Frosh (2000) asked the boys

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about their relationships with each other in relation to 'peer pressure' and the need to conform to hegemonic masculinities:

> We found that the boys we interviewed provided support for the existence of 'hegemonic' masculinity as a powerful idea that regulates boys' behaviour and for the notion that different masculinities are produced through performances that draw on the cultural resources available.
> (76)

Although Frosh found that hegemonic masculinity did not always mean the same thing to all boys, depending on factors such as class and race, one of the common denominators in any definition was to be different from girls, that is, what is perceived as not feminine. Because the home or family is traditionally considered a feminine space, this is potentially problematic if boys continue to construct their masculinities through discourses which position them in opposition to the feminine, privileging hegemonic masculinities which do not allow feminine-masculine positions to be taken up.

Following the death of his mother, Harry, the adolescent narrator of *By the River*, lives in an all-male household. Lack of women is presented as unproblematic within the family space itself. Harry and his brother Keith take on domestic duties taught to them by their father. These are duties which are traditionally considered feminine, something Harry is aware of, although Herrick portrays him as interpreting the work almost as a legacy from his mother, something passed on to her sons, blurring traditional gender expectations in the process:

> **Six years old**
> I could cook
> at the age of seven.
> My dad taught me –
> eggs,
> steak,
> vegetables,
> rice,

and roast chicken –
in our old oven
with the door so heavy
and hot
it burnt my fingers
four times
before I learnt
how to push and turn
holding the tea towel tight.
My brother Keith
could sweep
the cottage in ten minutes flat,
and he kept the bathroom
shining like a medal.
Keith and me joked
about our neat
clean home
that looked dirt-poor
from the street
but smelt of chicken roast
and disinfectant inside.
Where my brother
and me shared
the duties
our mother left us.
She died
when I was seven
and Keith was
six years old.
(2-13)

Throughout the narrative Herrick juxtaposes the lived family experiences of Harry, Keith

and their father with the traditional views of the wider community. Their house becomes

symbolic of the differences; from the outside its unpainted finish makes it look "brown,

shabby and mean" (10) in the same way as the boys' clothes are often dirty and their hair

unkempt, but inside the house smells of roast chicken and is a place of care and support.

The pictures of family life which Herrick portrays challenge the idea that it is problematic

for men and boys to exist alone in what is traditionally considered a feminine space.

Representing the Hodby home as a site where both physical and emotional needs are met, he suggests that it is expectations from society which restrict the gendered behaviours available to men and boys in relation to family. This is demonstrated in the challenges Harry faces from the wider community. He is aware of the difficulties that appearing 'different' can bring and he is sometimes confused about his own behaviour:

> **Oil for Paint**
> […] I once got into a fight
> with Craig Randall
> over
> the Hodby house
> and what he said,
> even though
> I agreed with every word.
> I ended up
> with a bloody nose
> and a swollen lip
> defending
> the house
> that stains my fingers
> and my heart.
> (10-11)

In spite of the difficulties he faces, however, Harry continues to take his understandings about being a man, learned at home, into the community, which suggests to potential readers the possibility for a more feminine or inclusive form of masculinity.

Homes' Jack finds his father's homosexuality difficult to accept, in part because of his own 'normative' understanding of masculinity as heterosexual. His initial reaction is one of hegemonic, masculine outrage; "'It makes me sick, seriously. My father's a fucking faggot.'" (36) Homes tempers this anger and rejection by portraying Jack as frightened of the reaction of his peer group, with just cause. Max, his 'best friend', tells some-one at school and Jack arrives to find his locker daubed with the slogan "Faggot" (69), exactly the same insult he hurled at his father. This incident functions as a turning

point in Jack's understanding; gradually he starts to realize the implications of being

labelled as 'other' and the impact this potentially has for his father:

> I wondered if people did or said horrible things to him on account of being
> gay. I mean, whoever wrote faggot on my locker had gone out of their way
> to rub my wrong side, but what if it was true? What if I was a faggot, then
> how would I feel? I nearly started crying and had to put my head down on
> the desk just to get a grip.
> (72)

Here Homes sets up a conflict between Jack's love for his father and his relationship

with, and position in, the wider community, a dilemma which he faces on many

occasions in the course of the narrative. While Homes does not offer a straightforward

resolution, she does, like Clarke, McKay, and Herrick, make visible the problematic

nature of masculine identity for adolescent boys when they are aware of the different,

potentially conflicting discourses which exist between the family and the community.

However, rigid understandings of gender can be equally problematic when the young

male character is unable or unwilling to conform and comes into conflict with community

or family as in the case of Gary Black whose father is an intimidating, violent presence in

his life.

Fathers and the family

Much of what has been written about the family, in both academic literature and the

popular press, focuses on the idea that it is in 'crisis'. Particular attention is given to the

role of fathers, symptomatic of the bigger changes and expectations relating to

masculinities in a post-industrial, post-modern landscape.[55] Images of fatherhood range

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[55] See, S. Whitehead (2002) *Men and Masculinities*, chapters 2 and 5 where he discusses the idea of 'crisis'
and how this has impacted on different areas of men's lives. Chapter 5 specifically addresses the question
of men's private lives and their position within the family.

from the 'new' father - the man who is emotionally engaged with his children and

involved in their physical care - to those which pathologize the father. This includes the

'bad' father, a physically violent man, or, one who is simply unable or unwilling to

interact with his children - the 'deadbeat' dad. However, Lupton and Barclay (1997)

sound a note of caution in categorizing men in this way:

> When subcultural groups are singled out for attention in relation to the
> fatherhood debate, they are often positioned as negative counterparts to the
> bourgeois ideal of the 'new' father, as 'absent' fathers, 'dangerous' fathers
> or 'deadbeat' dads. The diversity, richness and constantly changing nature
> of the fatherhood experience for individual men is lost in the use of these
> categories.
> (15)

The 'absent' father, defined either in terms of his withdrawal of financial support to his

children, or in terms of his lack of commitment, depending on who is constructing the

discourse and to what purpose, has been taken up by the Mythopoetic Movement. In *Iron

John,* Robert Bly describes the lack of a father to a growing boy as a 'hunger' (95) and

blames the absence of fathers or father figures for youth male delinquency, gang culture,

and social deprivation. In relation to Bly and the New Masculinists in the United States,

John Beynon (2002) states;

> Boys, they argue, are more susceptible to adolescent criminality without a
> paternal role model to emulate. In this conception of fatherhood masculinity
> is something to be passed on to sons through example and homosocial
> companionship.
> (129)

While this rhetoric can easily become a complaint against mothers and their ability to

raise sons, it does move discussions about fatherhood beyond purely financial concerns,

and raises questions about what fathering is, or could be, and whether it is different from

mothering. The nuclear family of the 1950s with its polarized gender roles re-enforced

the traditional manly ideal of the male breadwinner but was less successful in its attempts to instate the family as the place in which members had all of their emotional as well as physical needs met, often because of long working hours away from home for men, sometimes necessary, sometimes chosen.[56] However, as discussed earlier, the period from the end of the twentieth century into the new millennium saw an increased visibility in 'new' family landscapes which, along with negotiations taking place in gender relations, are challenging men to reconsider the ways in which they father in the wider context of family relationships: financial provision alone is no longer enough to make a man an approved father. The novels discussed in this section offer various versions of fatherhood, some of which move towards redefined understandings between fathers and sons; the 'new' father. Others present more traditional versions of fatherhood, as well as examples of 'absent' and 'bad' fathers.

The concept of 'father hunger', as described by Bly, takes on a sinister meaning in Phillip Gwynne's dystopic vision of fatherhood. Bob Black is nominally the patriarch of the Black family. However, as Blacky's narrative unfolds, the reader is faced with a father who is portrayed as absent, brutish, and disinterested by turn: the rest of the family sit down to dinner together – the family table where everyone eats together is often emblematic of 'the heart of the family' in fiction – but Bob Black is in the pub with his mates; he is outside of the family both physically and symbolically:

> I walked into the kitchen. The whole tribe was there, sitting around the
> kitchen table, waiting for dinner to be served. Except for the old man, of
> course. As usual, he was down the pub. He only sat down to eat with us
> when the pub was closed – Sundays and Christmas Day.
> (31)

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[56] See, M. Kimmel (2004) *The Gendered Society*, chapter 6, in which he explores the history of the American family and its relationship with changing understandings of gender, looking specifically at the problematic nature of the nuclear family with its continued influence in the national consciousness.

Although Bob Black is physically absent from the home, Gwynne represents his presence as perpetually 'hanging over' the family ominously, the threat of violence ever present. Blacky recounts the story of how his father bought their house at an auction, cut it in two to transport it to the Port where he then stuck the two halves back together, leaving an ugly scar. This is symbolic of his attempts to put together a family; to outsiders the Blacks appear to be a typical nuclear family but they are wounded by Bob Black as surely as the house has been. Blacky's relationship with his father is fraught but although he recognizes his father's brutishness, his unwillingness to make any connection with his children other then on his own terms, Blacky remains in need of his father's approval which is always withheld. For instance, on a fishing trip in dangerous waters Blacky panics, thinking they will be killed. Rather than relieving his son's anxieties, Bob Black calls him "a gutless wonder" (76) and tells him never to go onto the boat again. Reflecting on the incident, Gwynne portrays Blacky as thinking it was his fault; that he wasn't brave enough and is left feeling ashamed of the event. Adams and Coltrane suggest that it is the father who most rigidly re-enforces gender differences between children:

> Fathers tend to enforce gender stereotypes more than mothers, especially in sons. This tendency extends across activities and domains, including toy preferences, play styles, chores, discipline, interaction, and personality assessments […] Although both boys and girls receive gender messages from their parents, boys are encouraged to conform to culturally valued masculine ideals more than girls are encouraged to conform to lower-status feminine ideals.
> (234)

Gwynne certainly represents Bob Black as re-enforcing gender stereotypes in his family, specifically a hard, uncompromising masculinity which he rigidly polices in relation to his sons. After the Port win the football match through Blacky's last minute saving tackle

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– only he knows it was a fluke – Bob 'rewards' his son by suggesting he will take him fishing again. In other words, Blacky has restored what Bob perceives as his hegemonic masculinity status through his performance on the sport's field:

> 'Let me shake your hand, son,' he said […]
> My old man believed in a firm handshake. According to him, if a handshake
> wasn't firm you were probably dealing with a bludger, or a no-hoper, or
> maybe even a poofter.
> 'It was a gutsy effort,' he said, looking me in the eye, squeezing harder.
> 'Thanks,' I said.
> Little bones in my hand were crunching.
> 'We'll get you out fishing soon,' he said.
> 'Great,' I said.
> He squeezed even harder […]
> (131)

For Bob Black even a handshake is a test of 'how good a man you are', defined by his own understanding of what a man should be, without exception. Although Gwynne describes the Port as a patriarchal society, he does suggest that Bob Black is an extreme example of the hegemonic masculinity which the men support; both 'Arks', the football coach, and 'the Chalkie', the local schoolteacher, are described as less rigid in relation to their gender – they are both portrayed are being prepared to show vulnerability, and Blacky finds them both less intimidating and more supportive than his father. Gwynne suggests that how hegemonic masculinity is understood and interpreted is key to the individual's gender performance.

After Dumby's death and Blacky's visit to the Point, Blacky begins openly to defy his father; instead of going fishing as he is ordered to do, and fully aware of the consequences, he chooses to go to Dumby's funeral. He then steals the keys to his father's shed – another symbol of Bob's separation from his family – and takes a tin of paint and a brush to remove the graffiti, ruefully considering his father's priorities in life:

> Actually the old man treated his Carruther's camel hairs [paint brushes] better than he treated us […]
> He'd spiflicate me if he knew I took one of his brushes. What the hell. He was going to spiflicate me anyway. I took his favourite, the eight-inch.
> (262-3)

On this occasion he enters his father's territory defiantly; he is no longer seeking approval for his actions. The final confrontation comes when Bob finds him in the shed, orders him to return the paint and brush, and Blacky refuses. Faced with this defiance, Gwynne represents Bob as seeking refuge in his own understanding of fatherhood and 'being a man'; he resorts to violence:

> I got up. I was trembling. I took a couple of steps towards the door. The old man brought his arm back. I went to step past him.
> Whack!
> I went down. Like a sack of spuds. The brush flew out of my hand, the tin bounced off the concrete […]
> (265-6)

Blacky is saved by his elder brother Tim who steals the car. Bob chases him, runs into a post and as Blacky neatly explains, "He collected it between his legs" (267), leaving him 'out cold'. That Gwynne chooses to end the narrative in this way, with two young men defying and outwitting their father, the tyrannical patriarch, almost emasculating him in the process, indicates potential change to the power structure. There is a suggestion throughout the narrative that the Port is a town in decay, a place becoming redundant in the post-industrial landscape, in much the same way that the gendered identities of Bob and some of the other men in the town are obsolete, although still able to inflict misery on those around them with an ever present threat of violence. Ultimately Gwynne does not offer any simple solution to the situations he fictionalizes, suggesting that Blacky will continue to face challenges as he defines himself in opposition to the men and boys around him.

The father-son relationship at the centre of *Deadly Unna?* is one of lost

opportunity; in Blacky, Gwynne portrays an intelligent, humorous, articulate young man

who is unknown to his father. At the same time, Bob Black's unwillingness or inability to

interact with his son means that Blacky is effectively left without a father. Responding to

Bly's call for sons to forgive their fathers and reconcile with them, Bob Pease (2000)

concludes:

> In some situations, it may be more appropriate to discourage identification
> with the father and to reject some aspects of his behaviour. Consciously
> sorting out those lessons from our fathers that reinforce patriarchal manhood
> from those that encourage justice is a difficult process but an uncritical
> reconciliation between father and son, that does not address the father's
> controlling or abusive behaviour should be challenged.
> (66)

In drawing a brutal, bleak vision of fatherhood, Gwynne suggests that Blacky would fare

better without his father's presence in his life but at a cost to his fledgling 'self'.

Coe Booth's *Tyrell* (2007) portrays a family in crisis in which the father, Tyrone,

is physically absent because he is in jail for the third time. As a consequence the family is

homeless and penniless, and living in a seedy hotel waiting for the city social service

department to re-house them into semi-permanent accommodation. Tyrell, fifteen, his

younger brother Troy, seven, and their mother are all living in one room:

> Our room ain't got no bullet holes or nothing like that, but the paint is all
> dirty and peeling and the rug is all worn out and shit. They got two double
> beds in this room with blankets but no sheets, and the mattresses is tore up.
> Bennett is the worst. So far. (21)

The family comes from 'the projects' in the Bronx, New York[57] and the world they

inhabit is surrounded by poverty and crime. The story is narrated by Tyrell, and through

him, the reader is made aware of the struggle to survive on a daily basis when there is no

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[57] Bronx River Houses is a low income public housing project in the Bronx. It consists of nine, fourteen
story buildings with over one thousand apartments and was completed in 1951.

safety net. Tyrell understands the challenges he faces in relation to crime; he recounts his

father's past as a DJ who was also loosely involved in drugs and pimping. Tyrell's best

friend Cal works in the 'family business', drug dealing, which he knows will lead him to

jail. In this world, every one knows some one surviving through crime; it is common

place:

> We been through a lot, me and him, so we can't never be no less than
> friends, but Cal into some serious shit and I don't wanna go there with him,
> not if I got any other way to handle my business. To be honest, I don't even
> like chillin' with him no more 'cause, my luck, I'ma be 'round him when
> some shit break out and my ass gonna get locked up too. 'Cause Cal the first
> person to tell you, he gonna end up in jail. Soon. That's just how he livin'.
> (59)

The environment in which Tyrell lives is presented as harsh and potentially

dangerous. At the same time, Booth suggests that that it is also a place where the

inhabitants support each other and therefore the situation is not straightforwardly

negative. Ms. Jenkins, the mother of Tyrell's girlfriend Novisha, has very little money yet

she helps him out as often as possible, feeding him and letting him stay at the apartment.

Tyrell wants to be a DJ, having helped out at several of the parties his father hosted;

however, he needs help to organize an event and this involves both friends and his

father's contacts which in turn means relying on money which has come from crime.

Booth highlights how the individual is potentially defined and confined by the society in

which he or she lives. While she describes Tyrell as grateful for the help and support he is

given, he is also acutely aware of what this represents, how easy it is to be drawn into a

web of crime when all of the people able to help are part of the criminal world. Tyrell

exists on the fringes of petty crime but he does not want to follow the path of the men

around him although in the course of the book it becomes clear how precarious his

position is. Part of the problem, she suggests, arises from his relationship with the community he lives in; he feels at home in the projects and does not want to escape his life there.

Along with the potential criminal pitfalls, Tyrell is also portrayed as living in an entrenched patriarchal society which is mirrored in his family situation. His relationship with his father is complex; he is angry with his father for being in prison and leaving him to take care of the family; "And why my pops ain't plan to take care of his family? What kinda man do that to his wife and kids?" (51) And yet he is shown to be very emotionally attached to his father, having spent a lot of time with him between jail terms:

> "When me and him wasn't talking trash we used to talk 'bout all kinds of shit, everything from music to females. And we used to make plans too. Like he was gonna show me how to drive, so I would be ready to get my permit the minute I turned sixteen."
> (222-223)

As Tyrell ruefully points out, he is about to turn sixteen but his father is absent and so not going to teach him to drive or anything else. The ambivalence is always present and Booth suggests that this arises in part from Tyrell's expectations about family; what it should mean for individuals and their roles within it. This understanding has been learnt from his father and is evident, for instance, in Tyrone's attitude towards women. Booth describes Tyrell as being attracted to intelligent, independent girls but his father tells him this is a mistake, explaining his reasons in relation to Tyrell's first girlfriend,

> You need to listen to your father. Listen, what I'm saying is, I know the kinda man you gonna grow up to be 'cause you gonna be like me, and me and you is strong men. We need women we can take care of. Now Lynette, she a nice girl, but smart girls like that ain't gonna let a man take care of them. They independent. They wanna take care of theyself.
> (146)

For Tyrone, 'taking care of ' means controlling; as Tyrell reveals details of their earlier family life he describes several instances of domestic abuse during which his father punched his mother in the face because she didn't do things the way he wanted them to be done, something which profoundly shocks Tyrell. However, his own attitudes to romantic relationships are shaped by his father's opinions; he continually tries to take care of Novisha, wanting to know everything she is doing, who she is spending time with. Adams and Coltrane propose that it is particularly difficult to change gendered behaviours because they are reinforced from an early age, making them seem natural, and Booth suggests that Tyrell struggles although he doesn't approve of his father's behaviour towards his mother;

> Accordingly, children develop gender schemata without even realizing that the culture in which they live is stereotyped according to gender. Developing networks of associations that guide their perceptions, children come to see the world in gender-polarized ways and live out the gender polarization that they have learned to make their own. (235)

Tyrell's relationship with his mother is fractious and difficult; he is frustrated by her inability to take control of the situation they are in, instead expecting him to be responsible for the family, in effect taking his father's place. However, the text makes it clear that Tyrell's mother is suffering from the family structure set up by his father on whom she was completely dependent because he wanted it to be that way:

> "You don't go to school and you don't even work. You damn near sixteen. What kinda man you gonna be? Some lazy-ass nigga?
> I get right in her face now. "What you want? You want me to go out and sell weed? That what you want?"
> She don't back down none. "We wouldn't be at Bennett if you *was* out there, would we?"
> (22)

Tyrell's mother is on probation for fraud, won't get a job, and has Troy in special education, not because he has learning problems but because she is able to claim additional money if he is out of mainstream education. This is characteristic of her conviction that she doesn't have to take responsibility for anything, that some one else should always look after her whether this is her husband, another man, or her son. Despite these undoubted failings, it is evident from the text that this dynamic was set up by Tyrone and his demands for a very traditional, but in this case dysfunctional, nuclear family with him in the breadwinner role and his wife as homemaker. Neither parent is ultimately able to fulfill their part in this scenario, and the consequences of their failures are serious for their children.

While Tyrell is holding the party, which ironically is successful and makes him a substantial amount of money, his mother goes out overnight leaving Troy alone and he is subsequently taken into care. Both boys are described as having been in this situation on a previous occasion when Tyrone was in jail and their mother was unable to look after them. Booth suggests that a major motivation for Tyrell in organizing the party was to avoid a repetition of this situation, and he is therefore understandably angry and upset when he finds out what has happened in his absence. His mother is unrepentant, still unable or unwilling to take responsibility, further infuriating him:

> "I gotta be at court by nine thirty tomorrow," she say, "and I want you to come. You can tell the judge that I left you to babysit Troy, and you was the one that left him alone. Then they can't blame me, and we can get Troy back."
> No matter how many times it happen, she still surprise me sometimes. 'Cause I can't believe what she saying to me. She want me to take the blame and cover her ass again. But if I did that, what's gonna happen the next time she fuck up? How I know the next time she do something like this, Troy ain't gonna end up hurt, or kidnapped, or killed? Fact is, she ain't in no

condition to take care of a child by herself. She can't do it. Simple as that
[…]
I slam the door behind me when I leave.
(300-301)

Both parents are presented as inadequate, but Tyrell in many ways succeeds in his efforts to parent Troy, making sure he goes to school, helping with his homework, and playing with him. Ironically it is by playing with Troy that the reader is reminded that Tyrell is still a boy himself, not a grown man; he should not have responsibility for the welfare of his family. However, it is his status as a young man that means he is still in the process of developing his personal identity, working out the man he wants to be and as such, full of potential although as discussed earlier, learnt behaviours from childhood can be difficult to change.

Booth describes Tyrell as finally taking the decision to walk away from the situation, put himself first, and try to take control of his own life. He has the possibility to go back to school and organize more music parties to support himself; eventually he moves back to the projects to stay with Cal after leaving his mother and is determined to find Troy. His relationship with Novisha breaks down after he finds out that she has been lying to him, but with this goes his attempts to build a relationship based on him trying to 'take care of his woman'. Tyrell's relationship with Jasmine, who he meets at the hotel, is described as more equitable; she is both independent and vulnerable, in much the same way as Tyrell, homeless but trying to make a life for herself.

Perhaps most significantly, Tyrell is portrayed as coming out from under his father's shadow, realizing that he does not want to continue in the same power-based relationship with Tyrone when he is released from jail. Responding to a question from Jasmine, he explains,

"My mistake is pro'ly looking up to my pops so much," I tell her. "Cause, yeah, he cool and everything, but he be messing up so much that sometimes I wish I ain't even care 'bout the man, you know. I mean, he knew he was gonna get hisself locked up agin, but he ain't did nothin' to make sure we was gonna be a'ight while he gone. And now, 'cause of him, I gotta be the man […] And what's s'posed to happen when he gets out in August? I'm s'posed to go back to being a kid again? 'Cause I don't think I could go back, you know what I mean?"
(224)

Tyrell features a dysfunctional family caught up in poverty and crime. Tyrone's influence is continually present even though his physical absence means that he cannot do anything to change the situation which he has created, the people he has shaped. For Tyrell, the relationship with his father is described as complex, troubled; he loves him but doesn't want to become him, neither in relation to his criminality nor, as he comes to recognize, in the ways he forms intimate relationships. How Tyrell's life will develop, Booth leaves open to speculation, recognizing the difficulties he will face but also creating the possibility for change.

Al Capsella's relationship with his father is not riven with tension or confrontation; the humorous tone of the novel signals from the outset that there will be no emotional extremes. Mr. Capsella is presented as a mild-mannered, professional man who, if a little reticent, is concerned about Al's wellbeing which he thinks of in terms of school work and the potential pitfalls of adolescent life:

A year or so back he'd fallen asleep in front of the television and woken up in the middle of a documentary on teenage alcoholism, which at first he'd thought was a late-night horror movie. He'd never been quite the same since. He was always checking the levels of the bottles in the drinks cabinet, and I once caught him, poking around in the back of my wardrobe: he claimed he was looking for a pen.
(147)

Although Clarke portrays Al and his father's relationship as amicable, their conversations are impersonal; they talk about things that happen rather than any subjects which involve intimate or emotional disclosures:

> 'What do snowmen dance at?' he asked.
> 'Rack off, Dad,' I said sharply. 'We're trying to sleep.'
> 'A snow*ball*!'
> (113)

In the interviews with teenage boys at a London secondary school, Stephen Frosh asked them about relationships with parents and found that father-son relationships were often built around 'fun', which could be both good and bad:

> More generally, the very thing that makes fathers sometimes easier to get on with (their jokes and avoidance of serious topics, their mucking about and general playfulness) makes it harder for many boys to confide in them when they have something important to say. Father-son relationships frequently pivot so strongly on the axis of teasing and fun, that when a boy needs help, comfort or emotional release, he cannot trust his father to be able to manage it.
> (237)

The Heroic Lives of Al Capsella is an example of the problematic nature of discussing emotional or difficult issues in a novel which is largely humorous. The narrative offers a safe space in which boy readers can travel imaginatively with Al through the trials and tribulations of being a teenage boy but ultimately the humour which makes the text safe also prohibits a meaningful emotional engagement.

Clarke describes Mr. Capsella as making for the door when any potential family crisis arises. In *Indigo's Star*, Bill Casson has made his way out of the untidy, disorganized family home on a more permanent basis. In comparison, his own accommodation, as seen by Caddy, is an ordered, tidy apartment. By describing the two homes as starkly different, McKay suggests that Bill finds the Casson home difficult to

come to terms with; the messy rooms symbolic of relationships that spill over and cannot be compartmentalized or easily tidied away. Lupton and Barclay suggest:

> While women may well experience these feelings of ambivalence about their children, they are positioned far more as embodied subjects than are men. It may be argued, therefore, that the blurring of body/self boundaries that may be an outcome of parenthood may be experienced as more confronting by men because it challenges specifically dominant ideals of masculinity. These ideals tend to position the male body/self as far more separate and autonomous than the female/body self.
> (32)

McKay portrays Bill as being more involved in wider society; his art career is more successful and taken more seriously than Eve's, but this also takes him away from his family. He does return in 'emergency' situations, but is reluctant to become involved in the everyday messy life of the family. Indigo, however, like Al, remains engaged in the family and there is a suggestion in both narratives that the young men are constructing their gendered identities from within the family. While neither McKay nor Clarke present 'bad' father-son relationships in the sense that they are abusive or damaging, they do not represent emotional, intimate engagements; both fathers are to some degree portrayed as 'absent'.

The complexity of fatherhood is perhaps best illustrated in the figure of the teenage father. Represented in popular culture as promiscuous and irresponsible, he becomes a symbol for those who point to fractured families as the cause of broken societies. However, as I suggested in the Introduction, not much is known about the experiences of teenage fathers; their vilification as a group has meant that very little work has been done to examine the lives of boys who find themselves in this position. They have also been given limited opportunity to voice their reactions about the experience of becoming a father when still considered to be children themselves. For all men and boys

fatherhood can potentially be a contradictory experience; 'good' fatherhood practices are described as incorporating both financial and emotional investment in children. However, as capitalist societies prioritize the breadwinner role in order to stabilize and maintain their means of production, this potentially positions men as having to make choices which can impact on their ability to form intimate, supportive relationships with their children as they pursue the rewards and status which a successful career can bring; a dilemma also faced by many working mothers although hegemonic masculinity discourses further pressurize fathers into the role of key financial provider in two parent-families. This problem becomes especially acute for the teenage father who is unlikely to be able to support a child financially and is therefore perceived as failing in this role from the start.

This dilemma is explored is Joanne Horniman's *Mahalia* (2001). Set in a small country town in Australia, *Mahalia* tells the story of Matt, a young, single parent who has opted out of education, leaving school at the first opportunity. He lives on a social security pension which barely pays for basic food and rent, so life for him is a constant struggle simply to survive. He spends his days in a never ending round of caring for Mahalia, his daughter, and trying to find enough to eat. At one point he is forced to pawn his guitar - which represents his only interest outside of Mahalia - simply to survive. He eventually finds a job in a café but doesn't have any structured childcare which means that he has to rely on friends who have other priorities:

> "How was she?" he asked breathlessly, arriving in the kitchen where Eliza
> was setting out food on the tray of her highchair. Mahalia greeted him with a
> squeal and a wave of her arm.
> Eliza gave him a surly look. "Okay. I had to come home from the Con,
> though, and miss a whole day's classes."
> "You could've sat her beside you on the floor."

"Yeah. Right. And you could've sat her on the floor of the café while you worked. She needs attention, Matt, you know that. She kept wanting me to pick her up and talk to her. She wanted food all the time. Her nappy needed changing."
Matt stared at Eliza. "You're angry at me."
"You just didn't think."
"But, hey, I needed this job. I had to take it straight away or someone else would have. I'll get someone else for tomorrow."
 (118)

No consistent child care arrives however and the job falls through. Matt finds it difficult to ask for help, believing that if he is not responsible for Mahalia and taking care of her needs single-handedly he is not living up to his responsibilities as a father.

Horniman focalizes the narrative through Matt, and while he is not a first-person narrator, the reader is privy to Matt's innermost thoughts and comes to empathize with his struggles and frustrations. Matt has no career ambitions so does not face the dilemma of spreading his time between Mahalia and a career. However, he does fear losing his own sense of individuality; contact with friends he was close to before becoming a father have become more tenuous as his time is swallowed up in caring for Mahalia. The focus of his world has changed, something he feels ambivalent about:

He had Mahalia to look after, and the routine of caring for her was his life now. Millstone, he sometimes whispered to her, Ball and chain. He didn't know whether he minded, not yet, for it was all still so new, and difficult, and he knew that he had no choice.
(38)

Fatherhood here is described as more than concerns about practical provision, and Horniman represents Matt as struggling to balance his life. He is committed to Mahalia but also unsure about the cost to himself as an individual. While Matt is sometimes ambivalent about Mahalia's presence in his life, he is also acutely aware of her physical and emotional absence while he is working:

She babbled her baby talk and he replied to her, but in a subdued way, because he was so tired, and sad too, in a way he couldn't fathom. He'd been working so fast and furiously he'd had no time to think of her, but now they were together he was aware that he had missed her. What had she done today?
(119)

Horniman describes the complex relationship between financial considerations and physically / emotionally nurturing a child which do not necessarily compliment each other but create contradictory needs and allegiances. As discussed earlier, the discourse of 'the new man' which contains within it 'the nurturing father' became increasingly visible in popular culture during the 1990s and prioritized the role of father as caregiver, with the expectation that fathers would participate fully in family life. Lupton and Barclay suggest that this offers fathers the opportunity to move beyond the breadwinner role and in so doing embrace both feminine and masculine characteristics:

Both 'expert' and more popular discourses on masculinity have tended to argue that men should take on a more 'feminine' approach in interacting with their family, including revealing their emotions to their partners and children, demonstrating their love and affection openly and participating in embodied caring activities with their young children.
(19)

In *The First Part Last* - discussed in Chapter Two in relation to boys' friendships - Angela Johnson describes Bobby, also a single father, as intensely involved in the physical and emotional wellbeing of his daughter Feather. At the same time, he does not find the role of father easy and is ambivalent about his situation because he feels as if he has lost a part of his individuality, similar to the relationship which Horniman constructs between Matt and Mahalia: "I walk to my room, put Feather in her crib, which pisses her off and makes her scream, and then I look around my room and miss me." (35)

Throughout the narrative there is a sensation of exhaustion emanating from

Bobby because he cannot get enough sleep. However, Johnson's use of humour signals to

the reader that although it is a serious problem, Bobby will somehow cope and persevere:

> I was up all night with Feather, who thinks that two in the morning is
> partytime […]
> It's cool when I talk to her. I could be saying anything. I could be talking
> about basketball or my bad grades in math […]
> As long as my mouth is moving, she's happy. As long as sound is coming
> out of it, the whole world is just fine for my caramel, sweet-faced, big-eyed
> baby; who's killing me, and keeping me so tired I can't keep my eyes open.
> (41-2)

Johnson describes Bobby as someone who keeps trying, finding reserves within, because

of the inexpressible bond and love he feels for his daughter, a bond which keeps him

connected even when things become really hard. The qualities which both Bobby and

Matt possess represent particularly positive images of teenage boys who are able to

engage emotionally and form intimate relationships with their baby daughters. Lupton

and Barclay suggest that parenting involves extra-rational aspects which move beyond

social constructionist theories:

> We would argue that fatherhood is not only constituted through discursive
> and conscious processes, but importantly is also constructed through touch
> and smell and inchoate memories of infancy and early childhood, all of
> which form part of the realm of knowledge and experience.
> (22)

This understanding of parenting allows for the existence of a unique bond which cannot

be expressed through language but which re-enforces the idea of fatherhood as an

individual, lived experience and privileges a discourse of fathering which does not

involve the breadwinner role but validates emotional engagement, thus offering the father

a way into the life of his child through the recognition of a unique, intimate bond between

parent and child. Through Bobby, Johnson makes visible this important emotional

connection existing between father and child; a bond not easily broken and which is not dictated by outside forces regulating ideas about good and bad fathering:

> […] I always kiss her, my baby, and look into her clear eyes that know everything about me, and want me to be her daddy anyway.
> (81)

Both *Mahalia* and *The First Part Last* present young fathers who are actively engaged in parenting their children and suggest that while it is challenging, the development of more flexible versions of masculinity which incorporate femininity can lead to rewarding, fulfilling relationships.

Intimacy and the family

The portrayal of a relationship between a teenage father and his girlfriend is discussed in the following chapter in relation to Nick Hornby's *Slam*, but here both Horniman and Johnson portray Matt and Bobby respectively as single fathers; Bobby's girlfriend goes into an irreversible coma during Feather's birth and Matt's girlfriend leaves, unable to cope with the demands of motherhood. The two boys are described as exhibiting both masculine and feminine characteristics as they parent their daughters. In *By The River*, Harry's father is presented as a sheet metal worker who enjoys a beer at the local pub. However, he also enjoys reading 'classic' novels and takes on his share of domestic duties. Harry's father's way of being male encompasses both masculine and feminine qualities and he encourages his sons to do so too, without regard for whispering neighbours. Herrick constructs him as someone who exists outside of dominant constructions of masculinity while still retaining respect; Harry's father represents the 'new' father, one element of the 'new man' discourse in which, as discussed earlier, men renegotiate their relationships with women and children, revealing their emotional commitment. The fact that Herrick's narrative is a retrospective of Harry's 1960s

childhood is a reminder that fatherhood has always been an individual, lived experience
and by categorizing men into different 'types' of father the unique nature of relationships
is lost, a subject referred to earlier in the chapter.

Harry's relationship with his father is one in which daily rituals represent an
unspoken understanding between them; this makes Harry feel safe and secure in his
family space in spite of his mother's death:

> **The Scrapheap**
> […]Each afternoon
> he'd sit with
> my brother Keith
> and me
> in the backyard,
> down by the chook shed,
> with a watermelon
> and a carving knife.
> He'd slice chunks
> bigger than my face
> and we'd eat,
> spitting the pips
> to the chickens
> and laughing at the pink juice
> dribbling down onto the grass […]
> (7-8)

Nothing is spoken about the emotions which exist between Harry and his father; they are
revealed through actions, seen in the care that is given, in the same way as Johnson
describes the relationship between Bobby and Feather. By portraying Harry's relationship
with his father in this way, Herrick indicates the existence of a deep, indescribable bond,
pre-discursive in nature. In doing so, he also disrupts the discourse of men and boys as
emotionally illiterate, challenging privileged understandings of the concept itself. Lynn
Jamieson (1998) suggests that intimacy can exist in different forms; the non-verbal
relationship represented in Herrick's narrative as well as 'disclosing intimacy'. The

contemporary post-modern world with its emphasis on individuals and their personal life narratives, and the need for active construction of a self-identity, privileges the intimate revelation of the self through disclosure as opposed to the pre-discursive practices represented by Herrick's narrative. However, as Stephen Whitehead (2002) suggests:

> There is a commonly held view in many societies that men 'cannot do' relationships as effectively as women. That is, men are seen to lack the emotional tools, empathy, sensitivity, (self-) understanding, indeed maturity, necessary to enable a committed relationship on equal terms with loved ones and friends.
> (156)

The cause of this inadequacy, it is suggested in some professional literature, rests with a fear of intimacy which can be traced to the boy's separation from his mother/ the feminine, in early childhood. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory this happens when the boy identifies with the father, fearing castration, and turns away from the mother.[58] In sociocultural terms this is theorized as the boy's socialization into masculinity, away from the feminine space. In both analyses separation is necessary for a male identity to be formed; this encourages gender to be understood in opposition, masculinity as other than femininity, rather than complementary and interchangeable. Adams and Coltrane suggest,

> […] Finally, we actively insist on their separation from mothers (in effect, their separation from anything feminine that might sully their budding masculinity). In short, by defining masculinity as "anything not feminine" and by defining femininity in conjunction with the family and domesticity, we are, in effect, defining boys and men away from the family and outside it.
> (237)

While Freud's theory has been contested in feminist discourse in relation to the construction of women and girls, the premise of gender as polarized and oppositional (masculine is what is not feminine and vice versa) has continued to inform social

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[58]See, S. Freud (1899) *The Interpretation of Dreams* for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the separation process which takes place between a boy and his mother as he develops into manhood.

constructions and understandings of gender. However, as Bob Pease (1997) suggests, this

need not be the case:

> Whilst the men and masculinity literature admits that the boy's separation
> from the mother is a wounding experience, one has to ask whether boys
> *need* to separate from their mothers? Do boys need to repress closeness with
> their mothers to become masculine?
> (67-8)

This can be interpreted more generally to explore the idea of the feminine in masculine

gender formation. In Homes' narrative, Paul's attempt to disclose his feelings to his son

initially creates intense anxiety for Jack. As a child he wasn't told what was happening by

either parent and he harbours a sense of injustice against both of them. He is portrayed as

angry and confused when faced with his father's revelation:

> He borrowed my lamp. He moved out, and no-one said a word, not one
> iddly- piddly little word. I'm not allowed to see him, and then I am allowed
> to see   him, and then he rows me out to some damn lake and tells me he's
> queer […]
> (36)

In spite of Jack's hostility, Paul continues to try and stay involved with his son's life. He

keeps talking to him, admitting he should have given Jack some explanation when he

moved out. Jack, in turn, begins to respond to his father and actually discloses his own

feelings although this is a painful process:

> 'They call me fag baby at school.' I blurted it out, without really meaning to
> […]
> 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I haven't been the greatest father and I probably was a
> lousy husband.'
> 'You weren't a lousy father, that's the thing. You were the best […]'
> (90)

Jack begins to transfer this honesty into other relationships; on a date with Maggie, a girl

from school, he begins to tell her about himself, his dreams and aspirations, embarrassing

details about his childhood. While this makes him more vulnerable, he is portrayed as

feeling happier about his honesty. Homes does not suggest that Jack moves seamlessly to a position of 'disclosing intimacy', shown to be a process fraught with difficulties, and Jack remains influenced by the potential responses of the wider community which continues to police and regulate much of his behaviour. When Max, upset about his parents' separation and unable to express how he feels, gets drunk at a party and becomes ill, Jack can only think about the possible impact outside of the family if anyone found out:

> Max started to kind of pass out or something and I got nervous as hell. I could see the headline: TEENAGER DIES AT HOMOSEXUAL COCKTAIL PARTY.
> (191)

Homes uses humour in the narrative which diffuses the anxiety, and suggests that Jack may be over-reacting while also highlighting the potential minefield Jack must negotiate. However, in describing the relationship between Jack and Paul, she challenges the discourse of men and boys as unable to interact effectively in family life.

The majority of family landscapes portrayed in the narratives discussed in this chapter, represent sites of emotional support to the adolescent protagonists, whether as places of pre-discursive intimacy as in Herrick's text, or the disclosing intimacy of *Jack*. Even in Blacky's case, Gwynne portrays his brothers and sisters as a source of support, although this remains unspoken in the dystopic Black family; after the confrontation with Bob all of the children spend the night together outdoors, leaving him alone in his scarred house. They bond together forming a supporting network; "I closed my eyes. Tomorrow there'd be hell to pay, but at this moment, down there at Bum Rock, my brothers and sisters around me, I was happy." (273) While Mrs. Black is not portrayed as challenging her husband's authority, she does represent for Blacky a source of support and love,

someone to whom he can reveal his anxieties. For Tyrell, facing perhaps the most

challenging of futures, Booth suggests that the environment where he lives, while at

times dangerous and dysfunctional, offers him security. His community, with all its

flaws, is his surrogate family and supports him; a fact he recognizes and acknowledges

by returning to the projects;

> Then I open the door and we get outta the cab. I stand out there for a couple
> seconds and looking 'round at them eight buildings and, man, I gotta say, it
> feel good coming back home to the projects. Where I belong.
> (310)

> The protagonists of the narratives are adolescent boys, travelling towards

manhood; they are on the cusp of their respective journeys and still very vulnerable,

whether this is represented physically or emotionally. Indigo, recovering from glandular

fever at the beginning of the text, regains his physical strength and confidence through

the support of his family, spoken and unspoken:

> Eve and Caddy watched as they trudged off together. Eight-year-old Rose
> looked very small beside Indigo's lanky new length.
> 'She's looking after him,' said Caddy, and even as she spoke they saw
> Rose's hand reach out protectively to steer Indigo round a puddle.
> (22)

Clarke represents Al Capsella as looking to his parents, particularly his mother, when he

finds himself out of his depth after naively believing the boasting of another boy at

school about the 'wild' holiday he had the previous summer. Al and his best friend Lou

find themselves in the middle of nowhere, in a cabin, but cannot go home without loosing

face. Mrs. Capsella recognizes their dilemma and offers them an escape route:

> 'I met your friend Macca down at the shopping centre yesterday' […]
> 'Anyway, I said we might be seeing you today and he asked me to tell you
> that he's having a big party tomorrow night' […]
> 'Everyone's going, apparently,' Mrs. Capsella went on. 'Of course he didn't
> really think, seeing as you're having such a good time, that you'd want to

come back just for a party, but he said to let you know on the off chance.'
She smiled' […] Anyway, if you'd like to go, well, you can come back with
us tonight – if you want to, that is.'
(287)

Al recognizes that his mother is protecting his dignity, his shaken confidence, and is grateful for her tact. The intimacy between them may not be disclosing, but there is an understanding, a connection which Al can draw on.

The 'family', then, becomes a space in which vulnerability, naivety, anger and joy, in turn, can be expressed and responded to by a supporting community, regardless of its form. The young male subjects are involved in their own particular life narratives, constructing them from within the family. The novels portray individual family environments which offer the young male reader stories of adolescent boys engaged in family life, exploring traditionally feminine spaces. They present alternatives to traditional gender stereotypes which represent boys as socialized away from family to realize their maleness. While none of the authors suggest that this is an easy option, highlighting the complexities of masculinities - the peer group and wider community play an important role in policing male, gendered identities - they do present positive reconstructions of masculinities in family life which allow for meaningful emotional attachments.

Happiness
I cut the last slice
of watermelon
three ways.
Keith takes bite after bite
without stopping.
The juice tracks
down his chin
in a constant stream.
I start from the middle,
one deliberate bite at a time-

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the tingle of each sugar crunch.
Dad watches Keith,
turns to me,
winks,
remembers the slice
in his good hand
and takes a slow
generous bite.
(232)

The ways in which the fictional boys discussed in this chapter take part in family life and the impact of this on their relationships in the wider community is perhaps most significant when boys begin to engage in romance, as the question of intimacy is particularly important in this context. Just as gendered identities formed within the family can potentially influence the ways that boys behave with girl or boyfriends, so tensions can arise as boys try to balance contradictory demands from partners, friends, and family and boys with non-heterosexual sexualities potentially face difficulties, with social censure a possibility. How these challenging subjects are addressed in YA novels, is the subject to which I now turn.

Chapter 4. Romance

> Then, the Prince galloped off to the palace to rescue the Princess […]
> Suddenly, a huge and terrible black dragon appeared over him […] The
> Prince hurled his magic sword at the dragon. The beast crashed to the
> ground […] Prince Philip raced towards the palace. He quickly found the
> room where the sleeping beauty lay. As he gently kissed her, she opened her
> eyes – the spell was broken!
> (Ladybird, 2003: 37-41)

The fantasy of Prince Charming has long held a central position in the romantic allusions

of western culture. From fairy tales to romantic fiction through Hollywood cinema, the

Prince has influenced the romantic landscapes of generations of girls and boys. Feminist

authors have for a long time sought to revise tales which they consider to be damaging to

girls and young women by re-enforcing disempowering gender stereotypes. (Carter,

1979; Geras, 1990)[59] Academics have also drawn attention to the inequitable and

outdated gender constructions at work in scripts which privilege male agency while

reasserting female passivity. (Zipes, 1986; Seelinger Trites, 1997) Currently subjected to

less scrutiny, however, is the concept that romantic scripts which represent Prince

Charming as forever dynamic, powerful and confident also leave a legacy for boys which

is not necessarily constructive; approaching romance for the first time can be an anxious,

uncertain experience for both boys and girls but the Prince Charming myth does not

acknowledge this and can lead to boys feeling inadequate when they do not match up to

successful cultural images.

     While teenage romance is not a new subject in YA fiction, the idea that

hegemonic masculinity impacts on boys' ability to engage emotionally and to form

intimate relationships – an influential thread in the 'crisis' discourse – makes novels

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[59] See, www.surlalunefairytales.com for further examples of feminist revisions of traditional fairy tales.

published since the late 1990s of particular interest in terms of how they negotiate these ideas. The Prince Charming myth, in principle, supports hegemonic masculinity as active, confident, and in control but is silent in relation to emotional engagement; Prince Charming is associated with pursuit and not what happens after the chase – "they lived happily ever after" does not offer a constructive answer about how to form an intimate emotional or sexual relationship.

This chapter explores the ways that the Prince Charming myth is presented in a number of fictional narratives which portray boys on the threshold of, or already involved in, romantic relationships; 'romantic relationships' in this instance refer to both sexual and emotional engagements. The boys in these novels are variously described as uncertain, loving, aggressive, unfaithful, hopeful and totally confused; none of them is infallible, none is sure of the 'script' or their role as Prince Charming and what this requires. However, in their constructions of these boys, the authors show the myth impacting on their attitudes and behaviour if only to the extent that they are portrayed as believing there is a right way to 'do' romance. As Phillip Gwynne has his young protagonist Gary "Blacky" Black point out in a humorous but insightful moment:

> Mum was a really fast reader, she just gobbled up the pages. She was about halfway through *A Circle of Opals*; tomorrow she'd finish and take it back to the library. I'd never get to finish it. This happened all the time, I'd start a M&B but I wouldn't get to finish it. This worried me a bit, because I'd read this article at the barber's, in a *People* magazine, about a kid who committed all these robberies. When he got caught he said that he didn't realize that he'd get into trouble, because his parents made him go to bed at eight on the dot, so he only got to watch half of whatever cop show was on the telly. He never saw the end, with the car chase, where the villain got caught and sent to jail. It got me thinking. Maybe I'd have a similar problem when I got older and started having love affairs. I'd be really good at the first bit, the 'she met his steely gaze' stuff, but I'd be hopeless later on, because I hadn't read those chapters.
> (Gwynne, 1998: 80)

Blacky, as described in the previous chapter, is an intelligent and charismatic young man but his youth inevitably makes him inexperienced in romantic relationships. He therefore must rely, in part, on his own intuition while also drawing on the cultural images which surround him, be that his local community, media representations, film, literature, or music. The Mills & Boon novels read by Mrs Black are in sharp contrast to the lived experience of her own relationship with her emotionally absent, physically abusive husband. Gwynne suggests that Blacky must learn through experience that even if he were able to finish every Mills & Boon novel ever published, they would contain no blueprint for a successful relationship; as I suggested earlier, reality begins the moment after "they lived happily ever after".

Tradition meets the self

The question of drawing on shared cultural knowledge is examined by Matt Mutchler (2000) in his research into young gay sexualities which is influenced by earlier research into 'sexual script theory'. In their 1973 work *Sexual Conduct: the social sources of human sexuality*, Gagnon and Simon discuss sexual behaviour by challenging the view that it is driven by biology alone; instead they introduce the idea that individuals are following a script which is embedded in the ideological landscape of the culture in which they live. They concede that this can be related to all forms of behaviour:

> The term *script* might properly be invoked to describe virtually all human
> behaviour in the sense that there is very little that can in a full measure be
> called spontaneous.
> (19)

Gagnon continued this line of enquiry in his collaboration with Edward Laumann (1995) in *A Sociological Perspective on Sexual Action*, developing the concept that individuals

both absorb and refine the dominant scripts of their cultures which relate to sexual

behaviour. These scripts, they suggest,

> […] assume that individuals acquire, through a process of acculturation that
> lasts from birth to death, patterns of sexual conduct that are appropriate to
> that culture […] they assume that people are not simply mirrors of the
> sexual scenarios provided by their culture and that as they get older they
> make individual adaptations to what is originally provided by the culture.
> (187-8)

Mutchler develops the idea of sexual scripts being adapted by individuals while

examining how young men who identify as gay are at once influenced and inhibited by

dominant heterosexual sexual scripts as they use them to negotiate their own sexual

relationships. He identifies four significant scripts –"romantic love, erotic adventure,

safer sex, and sexual coercion" (13) – and examines how they are employed and revised

in the life narratives of young gay men, a subject which I return to later in this chapter.

Considered more generally, Mutchler's work makes a statement about the potential

impact of dominant sexual scripts and how individuals encounter and change them in the

course of a life narrative. This highlights the constant negotiation taking place between

the individual and the cultural environment which he or she inhabits while

simultaneously emphasizing the importance of the individual as an ongoing project.

Anthony Giddens (1992) proposes that the rapid decline in the role played by tradition in

western societies has led to the individual gaining unprecedented freedom in relation to

the formation of a personal life narrative, a process he terms "the reflexive project of

self" (74). He continues,

> Where large areas of a person's life are no longer set by pre-existing
> patterns and habits, the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-
> style options. Moreover – and this is crucial – such choices are not just
> 'external' or marginal aspects of the individual's attitudes, but define who

the individual 'is'. In other words, life-style choices are constitutive of the
reflexive nature of self.
(74)

Giddens employs the idea of 'the reflexive self' when he comes to examine the make-up

of the contemporary romantic relationship which he refers to as 'the pure relationship'.

This is a relationship based on mutual honesty, trust, and disclosing intimacy which he

suggests has taken on more significance as social changes have swept away reasons

which were previously considered important in the formation of heterosexual

partnerships, such as financial dependency on the part of women or the desire to retain

property through the continuance of a blood line. The emphasis is now on the individual

to negotiate and construct a meaningful relationship, and Giddens suggests that sexuality

and intimacy are interconnected in a way never seen before in the formation of a

relationship which he terms 'confluent love'; a love founded on the fundamental equality

of the participants and therefore only in existence for as long as the needs of both parties

are met.

Responding to Giddens' argument, Lynn Jamieson (1998) points out that the

individual is not immune to the power dynamics which exist in society and therefore the

democracy on which Giddens' theories rest remain elusive. She suggests that gendered

cultural discourses contain within them power structures not easily erased:

> The archetypal masculine man of popular culture exhibits an aggressive
> heterosexuality as if his sexuality were an aspect of general physical
> toughness. Sex is part of the hero's command over his action-packed life;
> the relative weakness of his sexual partner is made clear as the hero rescues
> or protects her and sex is part of her gratitude. This is the hegemonic
> masculinity endlessly celebrated in popular culture from John Wayne
> through Arnold Schwarzenegger and beyond.
> (110)

While this version of masculinity has been strongly contested and its stranglehold loosened, it remains a potent symbol, visible in the Prince Charming myth. Although Giddens clearly identifies the changing nature of western societies and the increase in personal autonomy, it is important to recognize that individuals remain constrained and guided by social narratives, as recognized in the work of Mutchler and Jamieson, and that these narratives impact on lifestyle choices. Applied specifically to the behaviours of young men in romantic relationships I suggest that they remain aware of, and are influenced by, dominant, social narratives and heterosexual sexual scripts while at the same time, trying to form meaningful, individual identities which incorporate ways of doing romance and sex.

The Grand Plan

> Which one of these is not like the others: beer, sex, attitude, calculus? I can only assume I was brought into this household because they needed someone to cover the calculus, since otherwise I don't present with a life of great accomplishment.
> (Earls, 1999: 48)

Nick Earls' *48 Shades of Brown* (1999) explores the complexities of personal identity and first romance through the narrative of sixteen-year-old Dan Bancroft, who is spending a year in Brisbane with his mother's younger sister Jacq, and her housemate Naomi. Dan's parents are living overseas for a year because of his father's work commitments, but Dan needs to finish school. Earls presents him as being comfortable with his former life in an organized, 'traditional', middle-class household where his father goes out to work and his mother stays at home making sure that everything runs smoothly on the domestic front. Jacq, twenty one years younger than Dan's mother, and Naomi are both students living in a ramshackle house with no routines; their lifestyle simultaneously impresses and

intimidates Dan. Used to being looked after, his household skills are minimal, a situation

which fills him with anxiety and makes him question his adequacy more generally, as

suggested in the extract above. Although Earls uses humour to signal that Dan's situation

is not serious and also that his constant self-analysis is somewhat indulgent, he

nevertheless portrays a young man on the verge of entering a more adult world who feels

unprepared and uncertain about who he is, who he wants to be, and how to make the

changes he feels are necessary in his life.

Dan is described as wanting to fit in with the girls' lifestyle but he mistakenly

thinks this means he has to act in a particular way, in part by creating an identity which

he thinks will be acceptable. His general anxieties and unease eventually settle on his

inexperience in relationships with girls as he develops a crush on housemate Naomi.

Dan's first meeting with Naomi is fraught and becomes more awkward in his own

imagination as he overhears her having sex with her boyfriend. This causes him to panic

as it re-enforces for him his own inexperience. He reflects on his lack of contact with

girls, a situation exacerbated because he attends a single sex school:

> Sex: it's amazing how totally aware you can be of the mechanics and how
> little you can still know. Two girls taken outside at school dances, but only
> because they both genuinely wanted fresh air (my dramatic increase in
> heart-rate and level of palm-sweat amounted to nothing). That's not sex, it's
> not close. I know more than enough to know that.
> (48-9)

In juxtaposing Dan's unspoken fears with a rational explanation for his inexperience,

Earls suggests the potential for complex, unexpressed anxieties faced by boys, anxieties

which are completely understandable when dealing with a new and intimidating situation

but which are frequently suppressed in hegemonic masculinity discourses which privilege

confidence and agency. Earls challenges the unproblematic movement to sexual

experience and emphasises the emotional as well as the physical connection in

relationships. Through Dan, he suggests the vulnerability involved in a romantic

engagement between two people. Dan is described as being further disconcerted by the

ordinariness of sexual intercourse; the posing and posturing images which can be seen in

Hollywood cinema or pornographic literature, conceal the real implications of sexual

relationships, the fusion of vulnerability and intimacy. Reading his biology textbook, Dan

becomes aware of the difference between eroticized images of sex and its centrality in

ordinary, every day life:

> The other problem with the biol book, and this took a while to dawn on me,
> is that it made the whole sex thing seem so normal. Its ink outline of two
> really average, naked people so different to porn. So different to some
> bizarre mock-Turkish boudoir, with an over-made up, pumped-up woman
> whose clothes specifically lack the bits you need if you plan to go outside.
> And the next shot, where the same woman blissfully pretends that a foot-
> long penis is just another Paddle Pop. I'm well aware that this will never be
> part of my life. But the sketch in the biol book, which showed very little
> […] said: *regular people do this*.
> (155-6)

Earls questions narratives which ignore the awkward, vulnerable and often fearful

feelings of young men as they face their first sexual encounter and instead, imply that all

boys are confident, knowledgeable, in control, and ready to take the lead; in short,

'normal' boys are versions of Prince Charming. As Earls suggests throughout the novel,

this can make it more difficult for young men to voice and discuss their insecurities and

inexperience and feel pressure to construct informed, secure sexual identities for

themselves.

At the same time, Earls presents Dan as simultaneously terrified and fascinated by

the idea of sex. Although his inexperience creates a justifiable anxiety, it does not stop

him from being inquisitive and feeling excited, and he is described as actively seeking

out girls when the opportunity arises. At the house party which Jacq and Naomi hold he

meets Imogen, a first year university student, or so she leads him to believe. Although

Dan wants to use the party as an opportunity to impress Naomi, he takes the opportunity

with Imogen when it presents itself:

> She puts her hands back on my shoulders, links her fingers behind my neck,
> smiles. In an instant the party's looking better for me. I'm holding a girl
> now. Perhaps not the one I had in mind, but a pretty reasonable girl
> nonetheless. For the first time in my life I've nailed the conversation phase
> and moved on. Contact.
> (191)

Things move quickly - too quickly for Dan - as Imogen becomes drunk and leads him

into a bedroom which unknown to her is his own bedroom. Just as he begins to feel out of

his depth the copious amount of alcohol Imogen has drunk takes effect and she is sick,

ending any possibility of sex. While Earls describes the evening's events in a comical

way, implying that there will be no serious consequences, he also conveys effectively

both Dan's fear and excitement at the situation he finds himself in. Earls suggests that the

problems Dan faces are of his own making because he has lied about who he is, making

up a false identity which he thinks will be attractive to university students but which

suggests a level of knowledge which he does not possess. He cannot therefore be honest

about his inexperience which is the real cause of his anxiety.

Although Dan is presented as understanding that sex, in reality, is different from

many of the images he comes across in his cultural environment, he does not initially

understand how his efforts to reinvent himself as 'the perfect man' are related to this.

Earls structures the narrative by juxtaposing Dan's failed attempts to impress Naomi

through his 'grand plan' with his inner turmoil. The contrast and connection between the

two act as a constant reminder of interior/exterior conflict in the formation of personal

identities. Dan's attempts to invent a 'cool' persona which Naomi will find attractive

suggest that he has taken on board part of a dominant sexual script in relation to male

agency; he feels that he must try to take control of the situation, be confident. Dan

decides that he will try to impress Naomi with his knowledge of some aspect of nature –

earlier, during a picnic, Naomi asks Dan about the trees around them but he does not

know their varieties. Deciding that she will be impressed by knowledge of the natural

world, he decides to learn bird species instead:

> So I'm going to be strategic. I'm not actually going to let her know that I've
> got an interest at any stage, but I'll make myself much more interesting. I'm
> going to cover all the bases, and I'm never going to mention anything from
> school again […] I decide that to go for tree names could be a little obvious,
> since I didn't know them last weekend. Bird names. A few bird names could
> be good.
> (128)

The fact that Earls chooses to present him as trying to learn bird types, the 48 shades of

brown of the title, highlights how ridiculous the scenario is, and significantly

demonstrates how the 'real' person can be hidden by social 'performances'.

While working with a group of men attending counselling sessions following the

breakdown of romantic relationships in their lives, Harvey Hornstein (1991) observed a

common set of characteristics exhibited by the men in their behaviour towards women

with whom they formed relationships. Hornstein goes on to describe this behaviour as

"man-servant syndrome" (19) which he suggests is influenced by social scripts

privileging hegemonic masculinity that emphasise agency, confidence, and success; in

short, the Prince Charming myth. He proposes that one of the outcomes of taking on this

script is that men are unable to disclose who they really are as this may involve revealing

uncertainty, vulnerability, possible failure. The result is an inability to achieve equality

and intimacy in romantic relationships. 'Man-servant syndrome' involves men in actively attempting to meet the perceived needs of the women they pursue through actions or deeds: however, as Hornstein concludes, this is to misunderstand the fundamental basis of a successful relationship:

> In their relationships with women men affected by the syndrome understand *giving* to mean *doing*. *Doing* is what acting as a man means. *Doing* earns what a woman has to give. *Doing* is part of that exchange. Its purpose is instrumental – to get something from women in return – and does not involve selflessly sharing part of oneself.
> (145)

As signalled by his use of humour, Earls is not suggesting that Dan is heading for a dysfunctional adulthood. Further, Dan's youth and inexperience are described as largely responsible for the silly choices he makes. For the purposes of this discussion, what is particularly pleasing about *48 Shades of Brown* is that it acknowledges the potential pressures faced by boys in negotiating romantic relationships. Dan is described as pursuing his strategy to impress Naomi, even after the events at the party. The climax of the narrative strand which portrays him as sculpting 'the perfect man', describes his afternoon with Naomi when he executes his plan to impress her with bird names. It is at this point that he finally realizes that what he is doing is futile; he cannot be the man he thinks he needs to be:

> So it's performance time, time to get the bird words out now, the big bird words. Time to be a casually impressive natural-fibre-type guy. I eat several mouthfuls of food and taste none of it. I am not casual. I am not impressive. I am not even slightly conversational, and my shirt, I'm almost certain, is a polyester blend. Your shorts are one hundred percent cotton, I tell myself. Be that guy. But it doesn't help. That guy is so relaxed, so obviously going to make it, and I'm tied in such a knot. If I wanted her any more, I think I would actually be sick. Would that be good? No, not even if I was sick in forty-eight shades of brown and, all of a sudden, miraculously able to name each one.
> (240)

Later, discussing the afternoon with Jacq, Dan is more honest and his anxieties are finally

revealed to another person rather than remaining internalized. Outlining his bird 'plan',

he makes Jacq aware of why he feels the need to have a strategy and in the process

exposes his vulnerability. Earls describes Jacq as amused by his exertions but also keen

to make him see that he doesn't need to try and create another persona, that in fact his

uncertainty is natural, very common and experienced widely. Discussing her experiences

with boys while she was at school, she explains their nervousness and lack of

imagination, bringing chocolates to impress:

> Okay. But who respects chocolates? That stuff is so […]
> *Obvious, like I said. Obvious, like anxiety and acne damage, which seemed*
> *to be the main features of any approach by a boy when I was finishing*
> *school five years ago.*
> Hey, I can do them too. I can do them without thinking. But I have to get
> beyond the school thing. Remember what I'm aiming for here. Remember
> the kind of guy I need to be.
> *The kind of guy you need to be? What's wrong with the kind of guy you ar*e?
> (251)

Responding to Jacq's question, Dan believes that he is inadequate; he compares himself

to other young men, those he assumes are successful with girls, and thinks that he is a

failure. As suggested in Chapter Two, in relation to boys' friendships, boys themselves

regulate their own and each others' behaviours in terms of masculinity scripts. In order to

protect themselves within the peer group they may be unwilling to disclose any

behaviours or feelings which are considered different or weak. This potentially

encourages boys to build and hide behind facades which they perceive as acceptable.

While Earls describes Dan as wrestling with his own insecurities he also suggests

that Dan is not above making himself feel better at someone else's expense. He compares

himself to Chris Burns, a friend from school, and decides that he is in a much better

position. Inviting Burns to the house party makes him feel immediately better which he realizes is completely selfish but…

> Burns arrives, an hour before the party's due to start, and right away I feel better. I feel better in a totally selfish way. He's far worse off than I am. My afternoon may not have been perfect, but I haven't turned up at a uni party with dabs of something not-quite-flesh-coloured on my more pulsating zits, an air mattress, a monogrammed sheet-bag, pyjamas and a cling-wrapped platter of cakes. Burns is aware that he has lost any association with cool. (170)

Earls presents Burns as 'uncool' in Dan's eyes, though significantly he also (albeit to a limited extent) reveals Burns' own unease. While the reader is given no direct access to Burns' thoughts or feelings much can be deduced from the disjunction between his behaviour and the way it registers with the reader through Dan's account. Externally Burns creates an impression of bravado, presenting himself as 'worldly' and confident but what exists beyond this façade is unknown. Using this narrative device, Earls highlights and questions the way that individuals, in this case teenage boys, are judged by their behaviours in social contexts when the internal, personal identity may be quite different. This is significant in relation to images of boyhood which describe groups of boys as predatory, only interested in sex, when it comes to romantic relationships , a subject I return to later in this chapter. In carrying out interviews with a group of adolescent boys in which they were asked about their expectations of romantic relationships, Tolman (2004) and colleagues found that when speaking to boys on a one-to-one basis many of them were prepared to discuss their hopes for intimacy but were reluctant to engage in such conversations in group interviews with their peers. This led interviewers to question the implications for personal growth for the boys involved, their 'reflexive project of self':

> We were struck by the intensely private quality of boys' search for
> emotional connection. Questions or knowledge about this part of their lives
> was not willingly shared or displayed in view of their male friends. At the
> same time, their narration of the pressure that they felt to produce and
> visibly practice hegemonic masculinity in the public world of their male
> peers was as unequivocal as it was poignant. Given what they told us about
> their actual experiences, we are unsure how to relate these public
> performances to boys' actual identity development.
> (250)

48 Shades of Brown is more optimistic in tone and outcome than the conclusions of

Tolman's team. While Earls portrays the potential pressures faced by young men on the

cusp of sexual and romantic encounters, his continued use of humour suggests that the

problems are not insurmountable and that experience will eventually reap rewards. His

representation of those around Dan re-enforces this, and once Dan is less absorbed in his

'project' he begins to see this; Jacq comes out to him and admits she too has feelings for

Naomi but has no idea how to deal with them. He realizes that Naomi herself is not

entirely perfect;

> I've been so caught up with the idea of Naomi, so busy interpreting
> everything about her as being good in some way that I haven't been
> prepared to admit that there are ways in which she's pretty odd. And how do
> I feel about them? There are potentially serious capability issues, and I've
> been blind to them, driven crazy by the perfect Naomi I've had in my head.
> (270)

Phil Borthwick, the landlord, older than Dan and by assumption more mature, likes Jacq

but is unable to tell her this until he becomes drunk at the party and makes a fool of

himself doing a striptease. He is so embarrassed by his behaviour that he subsequently

employs a management agency to look after the property. Boys reading this novel are

invited to understand that when it comes to romance no-one is likely to move

unproblematically through the terrain. While individuals may appear in control through

their ability to produce a successful life narrative, inner turmoil and uncertainty are largely kept hidden.

Throughout the course of the novel Dan is working on a school assignment called 'text'. He is asked to analyse a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* but chooses to write about the fish tank scene from Baz Luhmann's (1996) film adaptation, not part of the original Shakespeare play. At one level this suggests that romantic scripts are constantly rewritten as cultures change; since Dan is making choices about what to work on, it also signals the freedom of individuals to adapt their own life scripts. Earls leaves Dan in a situation where he recognizes that a level of honesty is necessary if he is going to have a meaningful relationship with a girl, although he isn't prepared entirely to give up his 'project', acknowledging that absolute candour is very daunting. While he is thinking about the fish tank scene in preparation for writing his essay, Dan reveals the inherent difficulties in trying to get close to another person, understanding that what an individual chooses to reveal about him or herself may not be the whole picture. The problematic nature of hegemonic masculinity discourses which privilege the Prince Charming myth in relation to boys' romantic scripts, further compounds the potential difficulties and confusions faced by young men embarking on relationships in that they are encouraged to hide insecurities and therefore not reveal their feelings honestly:

> But did you notice, with the tank, how, through magnification, it brings their virtual selves closer together, while it separates their real selves completely? (157-8)

Not Being Romeo

> Even though I'll never have Romeo's impetuous streak. I sat there, knowing they were going to die and hating the idea. And thinking it was so unfair, since what they wanted seemed like such a reasonable thing to want. And just wishing they could be a little more cautious. I'm lucky, really, facing

> nothing worse than major embarrassment […] This year, a year that I've
> now talked into quite a tangle, could never get that bad.
> (131)

While Earls describes Dan as recognizing that his situation is far from serious - if still a cause of major anxiety to him personally - Phillip Gwynne's Blacky (*Nukkin' Ya,* 2000) is given no such luxury. Blacky is attracted to and then emotionally involved with Clarence, the sister of his Aboriginal friend Dumby Red, first encountered in the earlier novel *Deadly Unna?*. For Blacky, this will become a source of much turmoil, on both a personal and public level. He is aware of the similarities with the 'Romeo and Juliet' story because of the environment in which he and Clarence live; this time, not two families at war but two communities divided by racial tensions:

> I tell you what, you're in big trouble when your life starts to resemble
> Shakespeare. Especially if it's *Romeo and Juliet*, because we all know how
> those two end up (dead, in case you don't). All that 'pair of star-cross'd
> lovers' stuff, it was happening to me.
> (105)

The narrative resonates with illusions to Shakespeare's play, with the Port and the Point presented as polarized communities which only come together for the sake of the football team and even this is suspended after Dumby's shooting by Big Mac in the pub robbery. Blacky is beaten up by Lovely, Clarence's cousin, aka Tybalt, who is filled with hatred and anger towards the white inhabitants of the Port. However, after drawing on Shakespeare's divided world with its tragic outcome, Gwynne revises the script; tragedy comes not from the relationship between Blacky and Clarence, but in the disclosure of the 'relationship' between the two communities and the fallout from these revelations. Common knowledge to most of the people in town, Blacky and his friend Pickles find out that men from the Port, including both of their fathers, visit women at the Point for sex.

This leads to an attempted suicide by Shirl, Pickles' mum. Seeking revenge, Pickles sets

fire to a ketch which the men in the Port have worked to restore in an attempt to attract

tourists to their dying town. It therefore acts as a symbol of hope for better times ahead in

the community and Pickles destroys this. Blacky subsequently takes the blame for the fire

and leaves the Port although Pickles offers to come clean,

> […] 'It's not too late, you know. We could go back and tell 'em all the
> truth.'
> 'Forget it, Pickles. You've gotta live in the Port. You're gunna be the best
> fisherman there ever was, remember? I was always gunna leave. Now's as
> good time as any for me.'
> (333)

Through his representation of the two communities and the relations between them,

Gwynne revisits Australia's colonial past with its inherently disproportionate power

relations between the first population and white settlers and between men and women.

Lovely's anger at Blacky when he finds him waiting for Clarence with a necklace for her

birthday is focused on this injustice, which he perceives as still continuing. Later

revelations justify his words:

> 'Just like the old days, eh? Youse mob with your…you know…all that
> cheap shit you used to give us Nungas. Come on, Blacky, you're the big
> fella with the words. What they call that cheap shit?'
> 'Trinkets.'
> 'Yeah, that's it – trinkets. A few of them trinkets and you could 'ave all the
> gins you wanted, eh?'
> (216)

Ironically, Gwynne has previously shown Blacky desperately trying to get together

enough money to buy a present and then agonizing over what to give, not the actions of

someone cynically trying to buy sex. Gwynne suggests that this is what makes life so

complex for Blacky; he cares for Clarence and comes to respect her as a friend as well as

a girlfriend, and this is in conflict with the relations not only between the two communities but also between the men and women of the Port.

As discussed earlier with reference to the work of Matt Mutchler, dominant heterosexual sexual scripts influence young men as they begin to engage in romantic relationships. Gwynne describes Blacky's development from his first interest in girls to an engaged emotional and sexual relationship and the changes in his attitudes towards girls as his relationship with Clarence develops. Initially Blacky has ambivalent attitudes towards the Aboriginal community, similar to those of the other men in the Port. However his friendship with Dumby Red makes him reconsider the attitudes of those around him and most importantly his own beliefs. As discussed in Chapter Three, this brings him into conflict with his father and some of the other men, a pattern which is repeated as his relationship with Clarence develops. In the first novel, Blacky is not romantically interested in Clarence, his focus being on football and his complex, disturbing relationship with his father. He does, however, show some interest in one of the summer campers, a situation which fills him with excitement, anxiety and frustration in equal measures. When he first sees Cathy, Gwynne has him employ clichés from his reading material to describe his feelings; "My heart skipped a beat, my legs turned to jelly, my insides went icy-cold – all that stuff in M&Bs that I didn't really believe, well, it happened to me […]" (163-4) However, when he finds himself unable to speak to her because he is too nervous, a raw, real feeling of being inadequate overtakes him. Retreating to his bedroom he berates himself: "The old man's right, I said to myself, I'm gutless. A gutless fucking wonder. Tears were sliding down my face. They were salty, like the sea." (174)

Like Dan, Blacky is portrayed as being burdened with the belief that he must be proactive, must take control of the situation. However his shyness and lack of confidence make this difficult, leaving him feeling inadequate, and as if he somehow doesn't live up to his own expectations of being a man. Cathy eventually takes the lead by inviting him to a barbeque, a pattern which will be repeated in his relationship with Clarence. The potential romance with Cathy never happens as he decides to go to Dumby Red's funeral which is taking place on the same day. Surrounded by Clarence and the other members of Dumby's family, Blacky finds himself in a situation where genuine grief and raw emotion are evident. In comparison, his feelings towards Cathy are without foundation, built on an image he has constructed for himself which does not involve the real person:

> But it didn't really matter what she said, or what she did – it was perfect.
> She was perfect, absolute perfection. By the end of that week I was more
> smitten than ever, smitten to the power of two. I couldn't stop thinking
> about her.
> (165)

Just as Earls presents Dan as having to recognize the need for honesty about himself and Naomi if any romantic relationship is going to succeed, so Gwynne suggests that Blacky has to recognize the reality of Clarence, that she is a person with her own thoughts and feelings and will act on them; her behaviour is not based on formulaic models found in the pages of a Mills & Boon romance or any other such reading material which positions women and girls as passive. Blacky slowly begins to recognize the difference between wanting a girlfriend so that he can be seen to have a girlfriend, and having a relationship. He begins to acknowledge this when he considers the different relationships with girls which are possible:

> I wasn't good at chatting up girls. Hopeless, actually. 'Chatting Up Girls' it
> said on my report card: F-minus. 'Gary needs to apply himself more:

Problem is, when you're hopeless at Chatting Up Girls you also think you're
hopeless at Chatting To Girls. Chatting To Girls and Chatting Up Girls
aren't the same thing.
(49)

This is a theme which is central to the novel; the difference between relationships based

on real friendship, trust and compassion, and the objectification of a female partner into a

stereotyped image. In the course of the two novels this is shown symbolically when

Blacky is presented as seeing both girls in a bikini:

[…] And next to them Cathy, in a bikini. It was yellow with white around
the edges […]
(*Deadly Unna?,* 163)

[…] Clarence wriggled out of her shorts and peeled off her Tee-shirt. She
was wearing a bikini. Yellow with white edges. I could hardly believe my
eyes. A bikini!
(*Nukkin Ya,* 149)

The fact that the girls are seemingly wearing the same bikini initially suggests a similarity

between the two situations; certainly Blacky is overcome by feelings of lust on both

occasions. However, the scene with Clarence takes place after they have entered into a

relationship and have become friends and this fundamentally alters the way it registers.

Gwynne highlights different attitudes to girls as Blacky begins to mature; his relationship

with Clarence is not one dimensional and he invests more of himself in it as a

consequence. In a study which examines the relationship between gendered identities and

romantic relationships during adolescence, Candice Feiring (1999) suggests that as

individuals invest more deeply in committed, loving relationships, not only do they bring

expectations and behaviour from learned gender practices, but the relationship in turn

becomes important in shaping their own gendered behaviour. She proposes:

Part of constructing a mutual relationship involves sharing personal feelings
and thoughts. Such self-disclosure creates the opportunity for self-

exploration and self-clarification involved in defining an individual's sense
of the relationship, and the self in the relationship, thus making it an
important process for the development of configured gender identity.
(221)

Certainly, as Blacky comes to know Clarence as a friend, he is shown as more willing to

challenge the objectification of women and girls by the men around him. However, when

his older brother Tim "Team Man" questions why Blacky isn't having sex with Clarence,

insulting and objectifying her because of her race, Blacky is unable to stand up to him

and feels ashamed:

> 'Not rooting her? What's wrong with you? A bloody Nunga, for chrissakes.
> They're the biggest root-rats on the planet. Bang like a dunny door they do.'
> I said nothing, looked down at the floor. And I felt guilty – I should've stood
> up for Clarence, stood up for my friendship with her.
> (162)

Although Tim has offensive views about women, especially Aboriginal women whom he

talks about in animalistic terms, Blacky still cares about Tim's opinion, just as he craves

his father's affection. Through Blacky's ambivalence Gwynne suggests that 'doing the

right thing' isn't always easy; acting outside of the cultural norms of the community in

which individuals live and have their roots, can cause anxiety and complex emotional

responses. Blacky is eventually shown to put his personal integrity ahead of his need to

belong to the Port community. When long-time friend Dazza talks about Clarence,

treating her as a sex object, Gwynne describes Blacky as filled with anger and prepared to

demonstrate his feelings publicly:

> 'Fair set of hooters on it,' said Dazza, fondling a pair of invisible breasts. 'If
> it wasn't a dirty boong, I'd slip it a length meself.'
> I grabbed Dazza by the front of his T-shirt and pushed him against the
> institute wall…
> 'Shut your filthy mouth.' I spat the words right into his face.
> (261)

At this moment Blacky embodies difference; his actions separate him from the other boys and men in the Port both literally, through the fight with Dazza, and symbolically, through his 'speaking out', breaking the silence on the code through which the men and boys of the Port carry on their lives. As suggested by Tolman's research, disclosure of personal feelings can be potentially hazardous in all-male environments as it can leave boys vulnerable to ridicule or exclusion by peers. She goes on to suggest that displays of 'traditional' masculinity are frequently drawn on to combat potential areas of vulnerability in relation to romantic relationships:

> […] the pressure that these boys felt to enact hegemonic masculinity for other boys was evident. The most frequently narrated route was through public displays of stereotypic male heterosexuality: the male who needs/wants sex and not relationships, commodifies and acquires sexual experience, dominates and objectifies girls in the service of his sexual interests and needs, and has no emotional vulnerabilities.
> (244-5)

Gwynne portrays Pickles, Dazza and Tim as drawing on learned stereotypes in their descriptions of girls and their bragging about sexual encounters when it seems likely that both Pickles and Dazza are still virgins. The older generation of men in the Port are described as treating their wives and the Aboriginal women at the Point as possessions, there for convenience. These attitudes are never discussed and initially go unchallenged. However, behind this 'wall of silence', the novel implies changes are taking place; Pickles burns the ketch in revenge for his mother after her attempted suicide, attributed to her unhappiness at husband Mick's visits to the Point. Blacky sees his teacher and leader of the ketch restoration committee, the Chalkie, with an Aboriginal woman in the Port who he recognizes as part of the group he saw at the Point:

> The Chalkie stopped when he reached her. The two of them talked for a while and then they continued walking together, side by side. By the old

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bank, the Chalkie took her hand but she shook it off, looking over her shoulder. I smiled at her. She smiled back.
(322)

These actions indicate the possibility for change; they are glimmers of hope for something different in the future in relation to gender equity. As for Blacky himself, in the course of the two novels Gwynne describes his journey of personal development, generally in conflict with the world around him. His relationship with Clarence is a first tentative step on the path to romantic relationships, but one which will potentially shape his attitudes towards girls in the future. He develops from an understanding of romance based on clichéd images to recognition of Clarence as an equal and individual person, in the process rejecting the attitudes of the majority of the men in his community. He is aware of what he is discarding in favour of honesty and potential intimacy when he and Clarence finally begin a sexual relationship:

> We lay there after, on the rug, her black body against my freckly white.
> 'Funny. I don't feel like a ciggie,' I said.
> 'Eh?'
> 'In the movies, after they've done it, they always have a ciggie. Every time.'
> 'But you don't smoke Blacky.'
> 'I thought this might start me off.'
> Clarence giggled. 'You're weird.'
> 'Interesting, you mean?'
> 'No, weird. Big mobs.'
> 'You know what they say in the front bar?'
> 'I can guess.'
> 'The first's the worst, the second's the best and from then on it's a habit.'
> 'You believe those whitefellas?'
> 'Nah, course I don't.'
> (319)

The potentially tragic consequences of their relationship are avoided because both Clarence and Blacky are described as pragmatic about their relationship and operate outside of the stereotypes around romantic relationships which regulate their

communities. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, they have no intention of dying for love. Instead, Clarence goes to Adelaide to take up a scholarship at an art college. Blacky always knew that he was going to leave, and at the point of his departure Gwynne portrays him as full of possibilities; he has taken on board what he has learnt from his life in the Port, but has developed a flexible identity which incorporates a range of both feminine and masculine qualities, and these characteristics combine to produce a unique person. His difference from the other men in the Port is best summarized symbolically by the objects of importance he takes with him as he embarks on his journey; Clarence's necklace and his mum's sunglasses. Recognizing his own individuality in the wider world, he is able finally to introduce himself as Gary, not just one of an indistinguishable family known as 'Blacky':

> 'I'm Gary, but everybody calls me …' I hesitated. The radio came on, Rusty Nails and his smooth country listening. 'Gary,' I said.
> 'Cool, Gary,' said Paul.
> The bus pulled away, to the east, towards the sun. I reached into my pocket, took out Clarence's Rasta necklace and clipped it around my neck. Then I put on my Jackie O sunglasses and settled into the seat.
> (336)

The 'Boy about Town'

> 'What about you, Darcy? Have you ever, you know?'
> 'Me? Jesus, no, I steer clear of the sheilas, black, white or brindle.'
> Darcy scratched his ear. 'They're strange cattle, young 'un, strange cattle.'
> (59)

Seeking advice about romantic relationships, Blacky approaches Darcy, a trusted, older, authority figure whom Blacky respects. Blacky's admiration for Darcy adds significance to the older man's words. While Darcy is never described as behaving with disrespect towards women or girls in his daily life, the fact that he holds this attitude further re-enforces the problematic nature of the environment in which Blacky lives. The

relationships between men and women are unequal, with women being objectified, viewed as 'other' and of less significance. This attitude has been absorbed by Blacky's generation, as demonstrated earlier in the behaviour of his friends. While Gwynne invests his narrative with some degree of poignancy through the relationship between Blacky's parents, suggesting a world of lost opportunities and ruined lives, the behaviour of both men and boys in the Port can potentially be described as predatory; Blacky's brother Tim and his friends certainly discuss girls as sex objects. However their behaviour is juxtaposed with the revelation that neither Pickles nor Dazza has any success with girls, and that Tim is in fact involved in a committed, long-term relationship. This undermines their behaviour and suggests that their bravado may be for the benefit of the other boys, as discussed earlier in relation to Tolman's research; nevertheless their conduct and attitudes can still be interpreted as threatening. The Prince Charming myth, which privileges confidence and agency in the pursuit of romance, can simultaneously be perceived as domineering, intimidating or overbearing, and this interpretation is found in current cultural discourses which describe the sexual behaviour of teenage boys. Further, as Tolman suggests, "[t]he assumption that pubertal changes drive adolescent boys to be single-minded in their sexual aggressiveness prevails as a given principle of adolescent life." (235) The suggestion of a biological imperative driving behaviour and attitudes adds weight to the idea of boys as predatory, suggesting that they are 'hard-wired' to behave this way. As they approach their first romantic relationships, boys must engage with these contradictory discourses and feelings in deciding which paths to follow.

The boys in Melvin Burgess' *Doing It* initially seem to fall into the category of predatory males in their attitudes towards women and girls. The first time readers

encounter them as a group, they are 'debating' the merits of girls and women they know through a game of 'either, or':

> 'Ok,' said Jonathon. 'The choice is this. You either have to shag Jenny Gibson – or else that homeless woman who begs spare change outside of Cramner's bakers.'
> Dino and Ben recoiled in disgust. Jenny was known as the ugliest girl in the school but the beggar woman was filthy. Her teeth!
> (1)

In the course of this exchange, Burgess introduces narrative strands which will become central to understanding what motivates each of the boys – Jon's interest in Deborah; Ben's illicit affair with his teacher; Dino's desperation to loose his virginity in order to validate himself as a man. However, at this point the relevance of the comments made in jest is not disclosed. This resonates with the research carried out by Tolman which found that boys conceal things which they think will make them vulnerable in the context of the peer group. When objectifying girls and women, boys do not have to engage emotionally: however, in the same way as Gwynne describes Blacky gradually coming to realize that in Clarence he is involved with another person, an individual who has her own thoughts and feelings, so Burgess describes the journey of each boy as he comes to recognize the 'actuality' of the other person with whom he is involved. This leads in each case to situations which are simultaneously humorous and frightening. In this way *Doing It* suggests that the external appearance of predatory, aggressive attitudes in teenage boys is more complex than it appears and doesn't necessarily reflect either their internal feelings or their behaviour in individual romantic relationships. Further, in a similar way to Gwynne, who describes Blacky as thinking he must be proactive in moving forward his relationships but is in reality 'directed' by both Cathy and then Clarence, so Burgess describes Ben, Jon and Dino as organized by the girls they become involved with.

Perhaps for Ben this is inevitable, as Ali Young is older and sexually more experienced than he is,

> 'Sorry, but I've been wanting to do this for a long time. Ever since I showed you my knickers,' she said. Then she leaned down to him and gave him a dirty big snog.
> (26)

For Ben, what initially seems like a dream situation, illicit sex with an experienced, older woman who happens to be his teacher, turns into a nightmare scenario as she begins to demand more and more from him, wanting in fact to turn their affair into an adult, committed relationship. Ben knows that he isn't mature enough for this and abdicates responsibility, ironically demonstrating his maturity in the process. In the relationship between Jon and Deborah, she is described as the one who takes control of the situation, asking Jon out and telling him exactly what she wants from him!

> 'You make me so horny,' she was saying.
> 'What?'
> 'I want to be your lover. I want to do it with you – I want to do everything,' she said again. Then she let him go. She walked away, glancing over her shoulder at him without smiling.
> (156)

By using multiple narrators, Burgess is able to give the reader access to both the interior and exterior worlds of his characters, showing not only the difference between private hopes and public expectations but also what he perceives are the similarities between male and female attitudes and behaviour in relation to sex. While the boys may initially be presented as predatory, Burgess suggests that girls can be equally active in seeking out sexual relationships. In a discussion of contemporary sexual behaviour, Kimmel (2005) suggests that male and female sexual behaviour has become less distinct;

while intimate relationships have become more feminized, as in the concept of confluent

love proposed by Giddens, sexual behaviour has become more masculinized:

> Despite the persistence of gender differences in sexual attitudes and
> behaviours, the sexual gender gap has been closing in recent years, as
> women's and men's sexual experiences come to more closely resemble one
> another's. Or rather, women's experiences have come to resemble men's. As
> I argued earlier, our experience of love has been feminized and our sexuality
> has been increasingly "masculinized". While men's sexual behaviour has
> hardly changed, women's sexuality has changed dramatically, moving
> increasingly closer to the behaviour of men.
> (11)

Certainly Burgess' novel shows both male and female characters as interested in sex.

Jackie's friend Sue is incredulous that Dino could be of any use other than for sexual

pleasure! "Shagging him is the single possible reason for going out with Dino. If you

don't shag him, why bother?" (56) Here, Dino is objectified in the same way as the girls

are in the opening scene although the girls' behaviour may also be an example of

bravado, masking other, more personal feelings. Nevertheless, through Sue's eyes Dino is

seen as merely a sexualized body, albeit an attractive one, which can be negotiated

without any emotional engagement. While Burgess destabilizes the idea that only boys

are proactive in seeking out sexual relationships at the cost of deeper, more emotional,

committed relationships, the tone throughout is playful, humorous, non-judgmental. In

his analysis of contemporary sexualities Kimmel too discusses the medical and social

changes which have taken place and which he suggests have transformed sexual

behaviour:

> The "masculinization of sex" – including the pursuit of pleasure for its own
> sake, the increased attention to orgasm, the multiplication of sexual partners,
> the universal interest in sexual experimentation, and the separation of sexual
> behavior from love – is partly a result of the technological transformation of
> sexuality (from birth control to the Internet) and partly a result of the sexual

revolution's promise of greater sexual freedom with fewer emotional and physical consequences.
(3)

The 'loosening' of social and sexual mores described here by Kimmel are evident in Burgess' narrative; he at once emphasizes the self indulgence of his fictional narrators, who appear to luxuriate in their self made dramas, but unlike earlier novels in which teenage sexual encounters frequently end badly, acting as morality tales and dire warnings for their readers, he also celebrates their exuberance.[60] This is not to suggest that Burgess' narrative does not contain elements of conservatism, however. The resolution of each of the narrative strands suggests that successful romantic relationships involve both emotional and sexual intimacy. The relationship which is presented as most likely to endure is the one which evolves between Jon and Deborah, who are friends as well as sexual partners. Observing them together, Ben is described as recognizing the intimacy which exists between them, their physical closeness symbolic of the whole relationship:

> He turned back to look at them through the window and saw that they'd leaned close together already, noses almost touching across the little wooden table. Sweet. He'd never seen Jon look so happy.
> (329)

Burgess, however, devotes the closing scenes of the narrative to Ben, whom he describes as simultaneously happy, sad, confused, and luxuriating in his new found freedom; free from the burdens of his first intimate relationship he is brimming over with life and ready to move forward with the knowledge and experience he has gained.

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[60] See R. Seelinger Trites (2000) *Disturbing the Universe*. Chapter 4, in which she explores the ways in which novels intended for the YA market describe teenage sex, usually presenting relationships in such a way that they are intended to act as a warning for potential readers and therefore do not describe the enjoyment which young people may experience from sexual relationships.

In leaving the reader with this image Burgess re-enforces the youth of his

protagonists, the individual journeys they are embarking on, and their relative

inexperience. The backdrop which he weaves throughout the narrative signals potential

hazards - difficulties which must be faced in the future which will impact on their

individual maturation, their 'reflexive project of self'. One example of this is seen in

Dino's family situation. As the novel progresses, Burgess portrays Dino as trying to deal

with the breakdown in his parents' relationship and the anger he feels towards them

because of their behaviour; his mother's infidelity, which he witnesses first hand, and his

father's perceived weakness in not standing up to her. This impacts on Dino's self-

confidence; Burgess suggests he is at a point in his life when he is still partly a child,

needing the reassurance of a 'safe place' while experimenting in a more adult landscape:

> It was shit; but there's more than one sort of heartache, and out of all his
> troubles the thing that was causing him the most pain wasn't Jackie. It was
> what was happening with his parents. Their relationship was like some vast
> giant asleep under the land. What he had thought of as hills and valleys,
> slopes and plains turned out to be the muscle and bones of the sleeping
> giant. Now it was stirring and all the little buildings and roads he'd built
> over the years were crumbling like ash. He'd had no idea how much he
> relied on them. Like his skeleton, he'd taken them for granted.
> (262-3)

This sense of vulnerability, hidden in hegemonic masculinity scripts generally and

especially in the Prince Charming narrative, consumes the protagonist of Will Davis's *My*

Side of the Story (2007)*,* though he tries to conceal it through his attitude to the outside

world. Sixteen-year-old Jarold, or Jaz as he is known because, "it is a damn sight cooler I

think you'll agree" (1), creates a shield around himself by being 'cool'. His reasons for

doing this, or feeling the need for this, are disclosed as the narrative unfolds. A first-

person narrator, Jaz addresses the reader defiantly, a pattern repeated in his interactions

with those he comes into contact with as he recounts his story. He describes his attitude as 'LIC GAS'; "like I could give a shit" (1). Unfortunately for Jaz, as he describes the tumultuous events which take place during a period of several weeks in his life, it becomes apparent that he does care about other people's opinions and behaviour towards him, and the external persona he presents to the world at large is only one part of a far more complex make up. Like Dan in *48 Shades of Brown*, he is described as attempting to create a persona which is acceptable in his own eyes. However, for Jaz, this poses a greater challenge because of his sexuality. While he accepts his homosexuality, he is aware that other people's reactions will have implications for him. In a study carried out into the significance of sexual relationships between boys in the formation of their sexualities, Savin-Williams (2004) considers the implications of negative reactions to homosexuality in western cultures, suggesting that its representation overlooks an important aspect of boy and boy relationships:

> Absent from this discussion is the perspective that these boy-on-boy activities represent the expression of an enduring same-sex orientation that brings happiness, pleasurable gratification, and identity consolidation – an affirmation of a very important aspect of life.
> (271)

Savin-Williams highlights the positive, pleasurable aspects of relationships between boys but these are frequently overlooked in discussions about homosexuality which emphasize either the problems which boys will face, positioning them as victims, or describing them as deviant, 'unnatural'. In *My Side of the Story*, Davis suggests that the behaviour and attitudes of those around him cause much of the pain which Jaz goes through. Certainly Jaz himself is described as not being distressed about his homosexuality. His anxiety

arises from other people's negative reactions. Things begin to unravel for Jaz when his

parents find out how he has been spending his time:

> We know where you've been going! cries Dad, still operating under the
> delusion that someone cares what he thinks. You've been frequenting some
> gay bar and picking up…men!
> He whispers this last word like it's some kind of mortal sin or something,
> rather than the logical thing you'd expect somebody to do in a gay bar.
> (4)

Jaz is aware that this is a 'big issue' for his parents, but rather than discuss it with them,

he continues to show them a contemptuous 'blank' exterior which acts as a form of self

protection, particularly when he realizes that they aren't comfortable with this revelation

although they try to reassure him otherwise. Jaz tries to position himself as 'mainstream',

unproblematic, by describing those around him as disturbed, particularly his mother, but

he is aware that the world in which he lives actually perceives him as different, 'other',

and not in a positive way. His attitude acts as a weapon for what he knows will come,

forming a 'hard shell' as a defense; unfortunately his behaviour also alienates those who

try to help, a fact he is conscious of but seems unable or unwilling to change:

> I don't know if it's the same all schools over, or if some schools are more
> liberal than others and ours just happens to have a higher percentage of sad
> rejects, but at St. Matthew's it's like the eighties never happened. No one
> ever says they're gay, even if they're like, the definition of it. You always
> say you're confused. Once you go public not only do you end up forced
> into endless counseling sessions where some daft humanitarian tries to like,
> kill you with their empathy, but you also become like, target practice for the
> rest of the population (particularly the sports sect).
> (12)

Jaz's unwillingness to accept help when it is offered suggests his outrage at being

positioned as 'problematic' by society because of his sexuality, but also emphasizes his

need to create a protective shield to try and stop himself from being hurt. This complex

reaction is revealed in Davis' description of Jaz's behaviour at school. He is ruthlessly

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pursued by bullies who taunt him about his sexuality. His reaction is to give them his

'LIC GAS' attitude. However his internal vulnerability is also visible when he is isolated,

literally, after rumours spread about him:

> The way I know isn't because people are all sniggers and smirks, or calling
> me names. It doesn't work like that. It's more like everyone just avoids me,
> pretends not to notice me or catch my eye. I don't know why I even care,
> but I do […] And as the class fills up it gets more and more embarrassing.
> You'd think I had scabies or something the way people pretend not to see
> the seats […]
> (141)

Along with the aggravation he faces at school every day, Jaz also has to deal with

difficulties in the family home; his parents' disintegrating relationship, the tensions

between his mother and grandmother, and his own aggressive and fractious relationships,

particularly with his sister and mother. Like Dino in Burgess' *Doing It*, Jaz is portrayed

as feeling overwhelmed by what is going on, which serves to remind the reader that

behind the often obnoxious façade is a vulnerable sixteen-year-old boy. In the course of

the narrative Davis offers brief insights into Jaz's state of mind by removing the hard

shell of cynicism and revealing a turbulent state of mind. For instance, during a family

therapy session Jaz reports,

> Next thing I know is everyone's looking at me again. I realize I've started
> laughing – like, big time. It's obviously totally inappropriate, but it's like
> some kind of hysterical reaction or something. And then it turns into crying.
> Don't ask me why, because crying is not my style.
> (88)

Jaz stubbornly refuses to connect these outbursts with the situation he finds himself in as

this would lead to an acknowledgement that he is not entirely in control of his situation

and the outward appearance he presents is important to him, reassuring him about his

identity, or the facade he thinks he wants to project to the world. This attitude is also

apparent in his approach to romance. At the same time as he is dealing with the fallout

both at school and home, Jaz is seeking out excitement and adventure in potential

romantic encounters. Although readers know that his sexual experience is limited, Jaz

tries to present himself as confident, 'a player' in a similar fashion to Dino. In his

exploration of gendered sexual behaviour Kimmel suggests that gender rather than

sexuality influences the way individuals approach relationships. He continues,

> But our own gender – the collections of behaviors, attitudes, attributes and
> assumptions about what it means to be a man or a woman – is far more
> important than the gender of the people with whom we interact, sexually or
> otherwise. Sexual behavior, gay or straight, confirms gender identity.
> (16)

In this sense, Jaz's status as a young man holds more influence in his pursuit of romance

than his sexuality: however, this creates what Mutchler describes as 'masculinity

tensions'; "sites at which gay men experience conflicts, contradictions, ambiguities, and

struggles in and between their experiences of gendered sexual scripts". (13) Although Jaz

pursues romantic encounters in much the same way as the boys in *Doing It*, the object of

his desire excludes him from hegemonic masculinity and his behaviour is censured by

much of society, the cause of much of the anxiety he experiences. In relation to

Mutchler's work, Jaz can be described as pursuing the sexual script of 'erotic adventure',

at least superficially. In his relationship with Jon, he is described as attempting to create

an image of 'cool', similar to the persona he constructs in other interactions, suggesting

again a fear of being hurt or rejected if he reveals himself at a deeper level. He tries to

suggest that he is only interested in a physical relationship but after he runs away to

Brighton and ends up staying at Jon's flat, he is disappointed to discover that Jon has met

some one and is going on a date:

> I'm still kind of peeved that Jon went out on this date. I mean, I know I've got no right to be or anything, I'm not a complete idiot. But still, I'm like, here, wide and open, so it's like what's the deal? I don't care about feelings or anything though, don't get me wrong. I've just got a massive hard-on for him is all.
> (182)

As in the case of Blacky's brother and his friends (*Nukkin Ya*), whose behaviour towards girls is both disrespectful and predatory, so Jaz is described as trying to construct a persona which is detached, emotionally disengaged, and whose actions suggest to the wider world that he is looking for fun with no strings attached. The suggestion that the paradigms associated with hegemonic masculinity lead to a lack of emotional engagement becomes an accusation of promiscuity when two men or boys are involved, making the assumption that both parties will be disinclined to intimacy. In exploring the history and inherent complexities of gay masculinities, Tim Edwards (2005) suggests that while the 'gay clone' – the hyper-masculine homosexual - of the 1980s represented a political protest, it also reinforced the idea of male promiscuity in sexual relationships and as such, further entrenched hegemonic discourses around gender and relationships. He concludes,

> What these studies also illustrated, however, was the connection of gay men's sexual practices with questions of masculinity, not only in reinforcing the stereotype that men are simply more promiscuous than women but the sense in which the clone donned a stereotypically masculine appearance and practiced a stereotypically masculine sexuality that was divorced from emotional commitment, a form of sexual expression so minimal that even conversation could destroy it.
> (57)

In *My Side of the Story*, Jaz is shown as pursuing precisely this course of action - fun without emotional engagement - and while the text does not overtly censure his behaviour, ultimately Jaz has to accept that he isn't ready for this kind of lifestyle and is

uncertain what he wants in the future. Like Burgess' resolution in *Doing It*, Davis opts

for an outcome which can be interpreted as both traditional and affirmative if judged

within a liberal humanist framework, something which is common to both children's and

YA fiction, as I discuss in the Conclusion of this thesis. The culmination comes during

the stay in Brighton with Jaz out of control from too much alcohol and cocaine. He ends

up in bed with Buddy, Jon's flat mate, and completely out of his depth. It is at this point

Jaz is finally honest with himself - although the reader only has his word for this as the

narrator of the story:

> Then he does that thing to me which gays are, like, famous for doing. I'm
> not even expecting it or anything, and I don't even remember him turning
> me over or whether or not he even puts on a condom. But I remember the
> pain, because it's like a firecracker's gone off up there […] All these
> horrible feelings are swelling up inside me and I feel really frightened all of
> a sudden, like I'm a little kid who's lost in this big dark city, or something
> equally tacky like that.
> (186)

Physically and emotionally in pain, Jaz finally realizes that he needs to go home, to allow

other people to help him, perhaps that he isn't as grown up and self sufficient as he had

thought.

       While the narrative focuses on Jaz's story, Davis suggests other possible romantic

scripts for homosexual relationships in the characters of Jon and Mr. Fellows - Jaz's

teacher - who both search for committed romantic relationships, highlighting that just as

heterosexual male gender is multiple and various, so there are homosexualities, an issue

which Peter Nardi (2000) draws attention to:

> […] to automatically assume that all gay men contest, modify, or challenge
> heterosexual masculinity – or for that matter, that they all enact the same
> masculinity roles – does not take us beyond monolithic concepts of gender.

It does not adequately reflect the reality that gay men are as diverse as all other groups of humans and do not act, think, believe, and feel alike. (7)

In *My Side of the Story*, Davis encourages readers to think about similarities between young male heterosexualities and homosexualities in relation to the search for romance, while also highlighting multiple possibilities for gay relationships. However, through his description of Jaz he also emphasizes the negative impact which social stigmatization can have on young gay men who are in the process of trying to form positive self identities.

'They lived happily ever after'

Published in 2003, David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* is another novel which describes the romantic aspirations of a young gay man: however, the world which Levithan creates appears to be very different from the complex, emotionally arduous picture which Davis presents. From the outset, Levithan sets up an ideal – and idealized – world where homosexuality is generally accepted, along with other sexualities and genders:

> There isn't really a gay scene or a straight scene in our town. They got all mixed up a while back, which I think is for the best […] Most of the straight guys try to sneak into the Queer Beer bar. Boys who love boys flirt with girls who love girls. And whether your heart is strictly ballroom or bluegrass punk, the dance floors are open to whatever you have to offer. (9-10)

In this world, the only people who are out of tune with tolerance and equity are those with religious convictions who view this liberal attitude as sinful. The narrator of the story is Paul, a young gay man who has a supportive family and is popular with his friends and peers. He suffers none of the bullying or trauma which Davis describes in Jaz's world. Paul's best friend Tony who is also gay, has a more difficult time but

Levithan suggests this is because of his religious parents who censure his sexuality and force him to lead a double life – Tony's family live in a different town and it is only when Tony enters Paul's world, physically and symbolically, that he can be himself. Levithan describes Tony as literally moving from the margins – the position of outsider – to the centre, where he is accepted for who he is:

> Tony is from the next town over and he needs to get out. His parents are extremely religious. It doesn't even matter which religion – they're all the same at a certain point and few of them want a gay boy cruising around with his friends on a Saturday night.
> (9)

Levithan position Tony's parents, and a few individuals who are described as disapproving, as 'other'; they are on the margins in this world. However, while Levithan constructs an equitable, tolerant environment within Paul's world, he does signal that this is a utopian creation: he portrays a carnivalesque space in the same way as Anthony Horowitz positions Alex Rider's adventures by describing Alex as powerful and in control but also constrained by MI6, a subject discussed in Chapter One. In this instance, Levithan's stylistic choices are used to signal the implausibility of the world he creates. Reynolds (2007) suggests, "[p]erhaps to balance the conceit of a world in which sexuality is not an issue, Levithan resorts to stereotypical and hackneyed writing." (128) I would go further and say that he chooses to write in this way to draw attention to how unlikely the scenario he portrays actually is outside of the pages of the novel. In discussing the narrative choices made by Levithan, Thomas Crisp (2009) discusses the way the novel has been categorised and the implications this has beyond the text:

> In the case of *Boy Meets Boy*, homophobia is not the foil which motivates so much of the action, and some readers have referred to the book as a "fantasy" because they believe there is an absence of homophobia in the text. Even if there were no homophobia in the text, one must question the

political and marketing implications of classifying a book that does not center on acts of homophobic abuse as a "fantasy".
(342)

Here Crisp highlights how the portrayal of homosexuality in YA fiction remains an especially problematic subject; either characters are positioned as 'other' and have to resist homophobia, as in the case of Jaz (*My Side of the Story*), or the context of the novel is categorized as unrealistic, suggesting that homophobia is still the central experience for young, fictional male characters who identify as homosexual with the implication that young men face similar discrimination in society. Nevertheless, the existence of *Boy Meets Boy* suggests possibility and allows readers to consider other gendered identities from a more positive perspective and as such challenges heteronormativity.

Within the context of the novel, Levithan describes the beginnings of a romance between two young men in a very positive light. In fact, when the anxieties about 'coming out' and the potentially negative responses this can provoke are removed, the pattern of the relationship becomes very much like several of the other heterosexual teenage romances discussed in this chapter, with the usual upsets and misunderstandings generated by the individuals involved. In relation to Mutchler's work, discussed earlier, the young men described here pursue romance through the scripts which accompany heterosexual sexual scripts. The relationship between Paul and Noah - the boy he meets and is instantly attracted to - follows the script of romance from their first meeting:

> I grasp on the ground and come face to face with a cool pair of sneakers.
> "This yours?" a voice above the sneakers asks.
> I look up. And there he is.
> His hair points in ten different directions. His eyes are a little close together, but man, are they green. There's a little birthmark on his neck, the shape of a comma.
> I think he's wonderful.

(11-12)

Following a dilemma of his own making – Paul kisses his ex-boyfriend and Noah finds

out – Paul is advised to fight for Noah by showing him how important he is, how much

he means to him. Paul is described as embarking on a course of action to woo Noah, to

prove his commitment; the series of actions which he undertakes allude to the literature

of Medieval Romance, in which knights are portrayed as undergoing a number of trials to

win the hand of a Lady.[61] By structuring the narrative so that the comparison is possible,

Levithan 1) highlights the enduring power of hegemonic masculinity discourses in

relation to romance and the Prince Charming myth, 2) draws attention, once again, to the

improbability of the events he describes although this is done in a playful, mischievous

tone by drawing comparisons with such a staple of the heterosexual romance tradition:

> On the first day, I give him flowers and time […] On the second day, I give
> him words and definitions […] On the third day, I give him space […] On
> the fourth day, I give him a song […] On the fifth day, I give him film […]
> On the sixth day, I give him letters […] On the seventh day, I give him me.
> (194-206)

While Levithan's style of writing and unrelenting upbeat tenor mean that difficult

subjects are not tackled realistically within the text, the novel's very existence challenges

the normative presentation of gay characters as problematic, while its utopian landscape

continues to remind readers that finding such a world where they are not positioned as

'other' is still a huge challenge for young gay men. Can the world which Levithan

portrays ever exist? As the novel ends, Paul is described as musing over the scene and his

relationship with Noah - with more than a passing allusion to Louis Armstrong's

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[61] See, D.H. Green (2002) *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance* which explores the concept of 'courtly love' and what it encompasses in relation to permissible behaviour.

Wonderful World. [62] Within the context of the novel, and as the narrator, Paul creates his

own world, he is in control and can shape it as he pleases, a powerful and empowering

statement:

> I see candles in the darkness and a bird against the sky. I see Noah walking
> over to me, care in his eyes, a blessed smile on his lips.
> And I think to myself, *What a wonderful world*.
> (223)

Levithan offers a very positive description of gender equity within the context of the

novel but as I suggested earlier, this is tempered by the stylistic choices he makes which

raise doubts about the world he creates. In *My Side of the Story*, Davis also employs a

variety of stylistic devices but in this case humour is used both to alleviate Jaz's

complicated, sometimes depressing situation as well as to highlight his frequent 'drama

queen' reactions. Although describing serious, complex subjects, *My Side of the Story* is

packed with humorous incidents and while the text does not make light of Jaz's situation,

he is not sentimentalized. Indeed, Jaz is frequently revealed as obnoxious, self obsessed,

dramatic, and he is also very amusing; ultimately 'a work in progress'. *My Side of the

Story*, with the other novels discussed, form a group of texts that present young male

protagonists as they embark on a search for romance; each is inexperienced, but full of

possibility. They are shown as making individual choices but are simultaneously

influenced by social discourses which privilege hegemonic masculinity and its associated

scripts which give credence to actions that may appear – and may be – aggressive and

predatory. As Mutchler highlights, young men are in fact encouraged simultaneously to

form relationships based on intimacy, demonstrating emotional literacy, while also

proving their manhood in the public arena;

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[62] Written by Bob Thiele and George David Weiss, *What A Wonderful World* was released by ABC
Records in 1968 with Louis Armstrong as vocalist.

The traditional script for men is referred to as the adventure script. Men are expected to play the active role, seeking sex for adventure. Young males and females are also exposed to multiple, contradictory sexual scripts during their socialization experiences, however. For example, young men are simultaneously expected to settle down in a monogamous marriage and to prove their manhood by "sowing their oats".
(16)

I'm the Daddy

The consequences of these contradictory scripts are most visible in reactions to the figure of the teenage father who is vilified in popular culture, as discussed in the previous chapter. One of the four themes identified by John Beynon - 'Men Running Wild' (123-4) - includes young men behaving irresponsibly. Beynon suggests that one area of this irresponsibility is projected through an image of young men as being unwilling to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. Included, here, is the subject of fatherhood, specifically bad fathers, and teenage fathers. He suggests,

This group of discourses expresses a fear of rampant, untamed masculinity, of men running wild, and either behaving in an irresponsible way sexually and therefore, failing to take seriously their responsibilities as fathers, or literally being out of control.
(128-9)

However, as discussed throughout this chapter, boys are encouraged to be proactive in relation to romance. One outcome of this is that they often find themselves blamed for teenage pregnancies, the perception being that they are unable to control themselves and pressure girls into sexual relationships. In an ethnographic study which explored the ways in which the masculinities of boys are both socially constructed and policed in a British state school, Mac An Ghaill (1994) found that young males adhere to 'compulsory

heterosexuality' with reference to other males in order to validate their gender

performances. Specifically, in relation to sexual relationships:

> Their sexual narratives carried the predictable misogynous boasting and
> exaggeration of past heterosexual conquests and male heroic fantasies, in
> which women were represented as passive objects of male sexual urges,
> needs and desires. These male 'fictions' appeared to be crucial elements in
> setting the parameters of the prescriptive and proscriptive sex/gender
> boundaries that served to police schoolboys' performance by making them
> act like men.
> (92)

However, as Mac An Ghaill goes on to suggest, and as already seen in the research

findings of Tolman, how boys respond in groups as opposed to individually can be

significantly different as they protect themselves from the possible censure which arises

if they are perceived to transgress hegemonic masculinity discourses. If boys are only

considered as a homogeneous group, we are potentially left with silences, unspoken

wishes or anxieties, which can be interpreted in a number of ways. This is visible in

discourses which problematize boys based on group or public displays only. In relation to

teenage fathers, Kiselica and Sturmer (1993) suggest that negative social perceptions

have led to a lack of research into their experiences, leaving them without a voice which

compounds misunderstanding and misrepresentation;

> Until the 1980s, scant positive attention was devoted toward teenage fathers
> in the social sciences literature. Robinson (1988) suggested that such
> treatment reflected societal stereotypes that depicted teenage fathers as
> psychologically maladjusted youths who first sexually exploited adolescent
> girls and then abandoned them and their children.
> (487)

Teenage fathers are widely perceived as being at the opposite end of the spectrum

to Prince Charming, yet their reputation arises from behaviours closely associated with

those which are privileged in the Prince Charming myth; agency and confidence in the

pursuit of romance. The problem appears to arise from the outcome of 'the chase', with no-one living "happily ever after". Nick Hornby's *Slam* (2007) tells the story of teenage father Sam. The narrative is organized retrospectively, as Sam recounts the events which lead up to his becoming a father: meeting Alicia who becomes his girlfriend; their subsequent break up; finding out that she is pregnant; the birth of their son, 'Roof' (Rufus). In many ways, if only considered in terms of the sequence of events which occur, Hornby's novel appears to support dominant but negative understandings of teenage fatherhood. However, by making Sam a first-person narrator, Hornby is able to describe the internal turmoil which Sam goes through and in this way, suggests to readers that his actions may not be the best indicator as to how he feels about the events that unfold.

Sam is introduced as sexually inexperienced and, unlike Jaz (*My Side of the Story*) or Dino (*Doing It*), he doesn't even attempt to present himself as confident or knowledgeable in relation to romance. The product of a teenage pregnancy himself, he is aware of the sacrifices his mother has made - something she reminds him about frequently - and doesn't want to repeat this pattern. He spends most of his time skateboarding with friends, and hasn't seriously considered sex before meeting Alicia:

> I never go out thinking, Tonight I'm going to shag someone I don't know,
> so I'd better take a condom with me. I'd always hoped it would be a bit
> more planned than that. I'd always hoped that we might have talked about it
> beforehand, so that when it happened we were both prepared for it, and it
> would be relaxed, and special.
> (39)

However, Sam is not presented as completely naïve - he is interested in having sex and does subsequently enjoy the sexual relationship that he and Alicia share. Nevertheless

Hornby's character does not entirely conform to cultural perceptions about teenage

fathers as irresponsible sexual predators.

In terms of the relationship with Alicia, it is she who is presented as moving

things forward, and while Sam is initially very interested, he eventually becomes bored

with spending all of his time with her; he misses his friends, skating, and his mother,

which surprises him. Hornby does not censure this behaviour, suggesting that at sixteen

Sam's reaction isn't unusual and that the relationship has run its natural course.

Reflecting on his feelings towards Alicia, Sam realizes that he let his interest in their

physical relationship override any other considerations and at this point in his life he isn't

ready to make such a commitment to one person:

> What it seemed like was that I'd been so desperate to sleep with someone
> that I'd swapped too much for it. OK, I'd said to Alicia, if you'll let me have
> sex, I'll give you skating, mates, schoolwork and my mum (because I was
> sort of missing her, in a funny sort of way).
> (68)

Hornby never describes Sam as an innocent party in the events which follow: however,

his sympathetic presentation of Sam to some extent vindicates his behaviour in that it

suggests his reaction is not irrational and that being frightened at the prospect of

becoming a father at sixteen is not unreasonable. His resentment towards Alicia is bound

up in this response as he feels trapped in a situation with someone he no longer wants to

be with; they try to make the relationship work again after Roof is born at which time

Sam is described as feeling that he should 'do the right thing'. It is his own father, having

been in the same situation himself, who points out to him that doing the right thing

doesn't mean staying in a relationship that doesn't work:

> 'All I'm saying is that nobody is expecting you to stick at it. Stick at being a
> dad, or you'll have me to answer to […] But the other thing […] Don't let it

> kill you. Relationships don't last five minutes anyway at your age. When you've got a kid as well, that should cut it down to three minutes. Don't try and make it last the rest of your life if you can't even see how you're going to get through till teatime.'
> (260)

It could be suggested that as Sam's parents did not stay together when they found themselves teenage parents, Sam is simply repeating a pattern; that he is part of a culture. His working-class upbringing is in contrast to Alicia's middle-class home and her parents are described as patronizing towards him and his mother. However, it is Sam who has aspirations to go to college, not Alicia, and the initial picture of an ideal, stable middle-class family home is later undermined by the fractious relationship between Alicia's parents. Hornby introduces contrasting versions of the teen father, suggesting different possibilities and outcomes from the image currently in general circulation. Perhaps it is in the relationship between Sam and his son that Hornby projects the most positive picture. He describes Sam as realizing that even if he moves home again to live with his mother, the very existence of his son means that things can never be the same again;

> The first night back was sad. I couldn't get to sleep, because it was too quiet in my bedroom. I needed Roof's breathing noises. And it didn't seem right, him not being there, which meant that my own bedroom, the bedroom I'd slept in just about every night of my life, didn't seem right either. I was home, and I wanted to be home. But home was somewhere else now too, and I couldn't be in both of the places at once. I was with my mum, but I couldn't be with my son. That makes you feel weird. It's felt weird ever since.
> (263)

Accusations of emotional illiteracy and lack of engagement which have been levelled at both men and boys in the enactment of hegemonic masculinity are dispelled in Hornby's description of Sam and his son. Although a part of him resents Roof's existence – in the same way that both Matt (*Mahalia*) and Bobby (*The First Part Last*) are described as

feeling ambivalent about their roles as fathers - because of its impact on his life, he is

terrified of loosing Roof, aware of the strong possibility that this could happen from the

information he has read about teenage fathers on the internet. In introducing 'fact' into

the fictional narrative Hornby emphasizes the power of interpretation, a reminder of the

perception of teenage fathers and the potential impact of this image.

The question of what is true is further blurred in the narrative as Hornby employs

a 'time shift' device which sees Sam projected into his own future life. He is present in

snippets of time when he sees his future relationships taking shape. Because Sam is

presented as confused, unsure how to behave or how he fits in, these shifts can be

interpreted as dreams in which Sam plays out his anxieties about the future, particularly

how he will cope as a father;

> I picked him up just under his armpits, and his head went flying backwards,
> as if he had no neck. He was crying even harder now.
> 'What are you doing?' said Alicia.
> 'I don't know,' I said. And I really didn't know. I didn't have a clue.
> 'Have you gone mad?'
> 'A bit.'
> 'Hold him properly.'
> I didn't know what that meant, obviously, but I had a guess. I put one hand
> against his back, and I put him against my chest, and jiggled him up and
> down. After a little while he stopped crying.
> (89)

Throughout these incidents, which are disjointed in relation to the chronological

progression of the narrative, there is a sense that Sam is both literally and symbolically

'out of time'; what is happening to him is coming too soon, he is trying to catch up with

his life, perhaps a commentary on his impending fatherhood. However, when the final

time shift arrives, although the situation is not one of "happily ever after", some order has

been restored. Hornby describes both Sam and Alicia as having moved on with their

lives; both are in new relationships and Sam is in college. He is also shown to be coping

in his role as a father and although it isn't easy for him he knows that he can get by. In

assessing how his life is progressing, Hornby describes Sam as being realistic about it

and reconciled to the situation:

> First, the mark for how I'm getting on with what I've got to do every day –
> college, Roof, all that. I'll give myself eight out of ten for that. I could do
> better, but mostly I'm all right. There's nothing Alicia does with Roof that I
> can't do. I can cook for him, and I can put him to bed, read him stories, give
> him a bath. I work hard, I'm not late, I do as much college work as I can,
> and so on […] But if you're asking me to give my life marks out of ten […]
> I'm afraid I couldn't go any higher than a three. This isn't what I had in
> mind. How could it be?
> (288)

Hornby, then, offers a fictional account of life as a teenage father which does not suggest

that this is a desirable situation but which challenges many of the perceptions around

teenage fathers, specifically relating to emotional engagement and sexual promiscuity.

Hornby's novel will not change attitudes towards actual teenage fathers but his narrative

offers an alternative vision, another picture to consider, suggesting that there are other

possibilities.

The novels discussed so far in this chapter all present different images of

relationships between boyhood and romance. Each author describes the experiences of

fictional young men on the cusp of first love; the overriding imperative in each of the

narratives is the potential, the future possibilities for each of the protagonists, dictated by

their youth. As such, the authors capture a moment in personal time. At the same time,

the influences and impacts of dominant heterosexual discourses in relation to romance

need to be negotiated in each of the narratives. In discussing the implications of the

Prince Charming myth, which can be both positive and negative, it is imperative to

understand the influence this still holds in popular culture, the investment which is made

in societies in positioning boys and girls as polarized. The international bestseller *Men

Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (1992), described as 'the definitive guide to

relationships' in its cover publicity, perhaps best encapsulates how popular culture wants

to convey the landscape of romance:

> Deep inside every man there is a hero or a knight in shining armour. More
> than anything, he wants to succeed in serving and protecting the woman he
> loves. When he feels trusted, he is able to tap into this noble part of himself.
> He becomes more caring. When he doesn't feel trusted he loses some of his
> aliveness and energy, and after a while he can stop caring.
> (146-7)

Shades of Hornstein's 'man servant syndrome' abound in this description as the secure,

proactive version of male romance comes to the fore. This serves as a reminder of the

problematic nature of 'doing romance' for all individuals bound up in social expectations,

but in particular suggests the ongoing perils for those labelled as 'other'.

Being 'other', being 'problematic'

Alasdair Duncan's nihilistic novel, *Sushi Central* (2003), explores the concept of

'otherness' although not in the way reader expectations may initially anticipate.

Published before *Metro,* discussed in Chapter Two, *Sushi Central* is also set in the

affluent suburbs of Brisbane and shares the same sense of 'ennui' and world weariness

although at sixteen Calvin, the novel's narrator, is younger than the boys portrayed in

Metro. The reader first encounters Calvin in school where he radiates a sense of boredom

and detachment from what is happening around him,

> Yet another afternoon at school and it's a case of hormones and anxiety
> running wild, and it's all very teenage and suburban and kind of, you know.
> Blah. I'm sure you've heard it all before […] Afternoons like this I really

don't know what to do with myself. I don't even feel human. After class I
walked around for a while in kind of a daze […]
(7)

The novels are connected in that readers first encounter Liam, the protagonist of *Metro*,
when Calvin has a one night stand with him. In a preview of what will become the central
issue in *Metro*, Liam takes Calvin home, has sex with him, but insists that he isn't gay:

Liam: I'm not a faggot, okay? I'm just doing this because…I don't know. I
think you're pretty hot. You know what I mean.
(49)

However homosexuality as problematic is not the focus of *Sushi Central*. Duncan
portrays Calvin as unconcerned about being gay and the group he socializes with are a
mix of gay and straight, boys and girls; all very 'metrosexual' with their love of
fashionable clothes and focus on being seen in the right places with the right people.

Calvin, on the other hand, is a very problematic, disturbed character. The
disengagement he displays towards school is his general response to most of what
happens around him and his general lack of purpose and direction further emphasize this.
As I suggested in relation to the boys in *Metro*, Duncan creates characters who are
entirely egocentric, and their 'crises' are therefore observed by readers with cynicism and
humour in equal measure. While Calvin is also portrayed as self-indulgent in that he
spends a lot of time alone thinking about himself – generally a stereotyped image of the
teenager in western culture - there is another deeply troubling aspect to his character
which makes him neither funny nor egoistic.

As the narrator, Calvin offers the reader information about his life – opinions
about people he meets, descriptions of evenings out, his musings on life in his 'private'
notebook, and occasionally glimpses into a past he doesn't want to think about. Duncan

structures the narrative through a number of different formats – emails, diary entries,

reporting of conversations, and general descriptions of every day events which move the

narrative forward – in much the same way as Myers (*Monster*) and with similar results

because these structural practices create a sense of distance between Calvin and his

world. This is particularly evident when he describes conversations which have taken

place – he refers to himself in the third person as if he were reporting on his life but not

really taking part in it - which Duncan suggests is Calvin's intention;

> **Something I wrote in my notebook during chemistry:** Some of the time,
> when the events occurring in real life become too difficult to deal with, you
> can reduce them to other things, make them seem less significant. If you
> remove 'yourself', if you can take a step back and see life as a movie, see
> you and others around you as characters in that movie, difficult situations
> become less difficult, painful memories don't hurt you any more because,
> after all, you're not really there.
> (9-10)

The narrative structure, with its constant changes in form, draws attention to the selective

nature of what readers are being told. In an environment which the text suggests relies on

appearances - how things look is more important than how they really are - is it possible

to see the whole picture of what is going on? Based on appearance alone, Calvin can be

described as a middle-class boy with affluent, successful parents, attending a good school

with good prospects, and with an active life. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes

apparent that this is not the whole picture, that the seemingly affirmative exterior

disguises a world of problems.

As already suggested, the environment in which Calvin lives is all about

appearances; individuals preoccupied with image which takes priority over everything

else – "Clothes are important. The way you dress is the best way for projecting the person

you are, or the person you want to be." (32) It is not unusual for young people to be

particularly focused on appearance and the opinions of their peers; for instance, in the

novels included in this thesis, Dino (*Doing It*) and Jaz (*My Side of the Story*) are

especially concerned about how they look and the impression they make on other people.

However, in Calvin's case, it is an obsession as he tries to shut down all of his emotions,

to be nothing more than a body that is desired. He thinks this makes him powerful, and

gives him control over what is happening:

> […] I'm young. That's the ultimate attraction. In this particular world, that's
> the ultimate power, and you can say whatever you want and make whatever
> excuses you want, but it's true. Being young and pretty means having
> power. And it's the kind of power that we have to exploit while we can.
> (165)

As the story unfolds, however, the question of who is being exploited becomes more

pertinent as the reader begins to see the chaotic nature of Calvin's life, his actual lack of

control.

Calvin spends much of his time surfing the internet and using social networking

sites which again adds to the sense of his disengagement. The nature of online

'relationships' means that he can choose who he wants to be and, significantly, he does

not have to engage emotionally with the people he meets. Calvin is described as being on

the fringes of pornography and is sent via email photographs of boys and men having sex.

Like Liam, Calvin is sexually promiscuous, drifting into meaningless sexual liaisons

which briefly make him feel better because they make him feel wanted. With reference to

the work of Edwards (1994), Calvin's behaviour can be interpreted as the stereotyped

image of homosexual men and boys, an exaggerated version of male heterosexual sexual

practice, which values sex over intimacy. However, while this may have represented a

political statement in the 1970s and 1980s, in the environment which Duncan creates it

merely adds to the sense of futility, the lack of purpose in these boys' lives; casual sexual

relationships give the semblance of meaning and excitement. Calvin becomes obsessed

with the image of a boy he sees taking part in group sex in some photographs which are

sent to him. He concedes that his interest is 'safe' because the boy isn't real so when he

suddenly sees Anthony in person at a party, he is shocked:

> The thing is, on the net he was basically just a series of pixels on a screen.
> Yeah, he was beautiful, yeah, he was the kind of boy I'd willingly obsess
> over, but he wasn't real. He was…safe […]
> In a sense he'd become a fictional character. He was beautiful and fucked up
> but you'd never have to get close enough to actually deal with or experience
> any of those things for yourself. But now he's a flesh and blood person
> standing across a party from me, it's way too much to deal with.
> (75)

In spite of Calvin's misgivings about Anthony's activities, the two boys embark on a

relationship. However this is based solely on sex and Calvin gradually begins to realize

that Anthony is either unable or unwilling to form any kind of intimate relationship with

him. Duncan describes Anthony as a damaged individual, but externally he is able to

mask this because the people he is surrounded by are also sexually promiscuous and

engage in meaningless relationships; his inability to form emotional attachments is

irrelevant in the world he lives in and perhaps this is the reason why Calvin finds him;

they are both attracted to a dysfunctional group of people although for different reasons.

While Anthony appears to be unable to engage on an emotional level –

> In those few seconds I'm looking at him as he was in the photos. I realize
> that throughout tonight, throughout this conversation, and before that, last
> night, when we were at his house, and the club before that – the whole time
> Anthony has been like a blank page. He hasn't told me anything about
> himself. Hasn't even let anything slip. Hasn't showed me any emotion at all
> […]
> (130)

- Calvin is trying to find a way to detach himself from what he is feeling. Anthony therefore becomes even more attractive as Calvin tries to work out and replicate Anthony's behaviour. Unfortunately, this leads him into a very dark and dangerous place. He agrees to be photographed by an older man he doesn't know and ends up having sex with him and in his confusion thinks that he has achieved his goal of ceasing to feel. Duncan describes him as detaching himself from what is happening but what this actually means for him is uncertain:

> […] and I try not to feel anything when he's inside me, and after a while I
> don't, I'm somewhere else.
> I'm gone.
> (257)

While not referred to specifically in the narrative, Duncan suggests that Calvin is suffering from depression: he experiences panic attacks, doesn't want to think about his future, and occasionally has suicidal thoughts:

> It's late at night. I stare at the television, half interested, spacing out. […]
> Suddenly a gaping void opens before me and I wonder what it would be like
> to die, if it would be painless, and how I'd do it, but I ignore those thoughts
> and keep watching the movie instead.
> (59)

The key to his condition lies in his family situation. The novel begins some time in the past with a conversation between Calvin and his younger brother and they are fighting over a computer game. Calvin punches his brother, Jonathan, who loses control of the avatar which promptly dies, at which point he shouts, "Calvin! You made me die!"(3) This is the only evidence of Jonathan who is absent when the narrative resumes several years later: his presence is, however, overwhelming and impacts on the family because they are unable to come to terms with his death and each withdraws into their own world. When Calvin is at home he is usually alone; his father is always absent, working, but

Calvin occasionally meets his mother in the kitchen where neither of them eats anything.

Nor do they communicate properly, signified in the fact that Calvin hasn't told her that he

is gay. The sense of disconnection is palpable…

> Mum asks me again if I have a girlfriend and I tell her no […] but she's
> slurring her words so I think she's probably taken a tranquilliser already this
> morning. She picks up her orange juice but doesn't drink any of it. I decide
> to leave her to it.
> (136)

While Duncan portrays Calvin as seeking oblivion through his choice of lifestyle, he

simultaneously wants to love and be loved, to make a connection, whether this is being

chastised by his parents for bad behaviour, or meeting 'Mr.Right'. However, as the novel

ends Calvin is still following his destructive path, searching for a state of 'nothingness'

and in the process repeatedly harming himself.

Reflecting on the increase in self-harm among adolescents since the 1970s,

Hawton and Rodham (2006) suggest that the numbers involved is much greater than

indicated in hospital statistics which only account for individuals who receive 'official'

treatment. They went on to carry out a study in schools across the UK with sixteen and

seventeen year olds to identify self-harming behaviours and their frequency among

adolescents. In the research findings they identified differences in attitudes between self-

harming and non self-harming individuals:

> We found important differences between the adolescents in our study who
> had engaged in deliberate self-harm or had thoughts of self-harm compared
> with other adolescents in their reported use of coping strategies. Thus, they
> tended more often to indicate that they used emotion-focused coping
> strategies, such as getting angry or having an alcoholic drink, when faced
> with problems. In addition, they were less likely to employ strategies that
> actively focused on their problems, such as talking to someone or trying to
> sort things out […] Depression is a specific factor that seems to undermine
> problem-solving and increases the risk of repetition of self-harm.
> (185)

While self-harming is usually classified as literally injuring oneself physically, the behaviour which Duncan presents in *Sushi Central* raises serious concerns within the context of the novel. Unlike the majority of the novels discussed in this thesis, Duncan provides no resolution, as he leaves Calvin spiralling out of control with no obvious support.

Sushi Central brings together the themes which have been the focus of this thesis – family, friendship, romance, and the idea of adventure – but here they are all dysfunctional. Calvin's family is fractured, his friendships are superficial and unsupportive, and his romance with Anthony has no substance, all of which leave him isolated and struggling with his feelings of loss. The sense of adventure, which in the majority of novels in Chapter One leads to excitement and empowerment for the fictional boys, takes on a sinister appearance in *Sushi Central* in images of anonymous sexual encounters which offer no positive outcomes. Although this results in a particularly nihilistic vision, it ultimately represents the portrait of an individual boy – not boyhood in its entirety – in crisis. Moreover, this crisis is shown as arising not in response to forces such as hegemonic masculinity or sexuality but as growing out of an inability to cope with grief.

The theme of loss and its ramifications is also taken up in Joe Babcock's *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* (2002) which describes the life of Erick Taylor – sixteen, gay, and aspiring drag-queen. Erick, in a similar fashion to Jaz, (*My Side of the Story*) faces hostility both at school and at home although his family environment is more complex as both he and his parents are trying to come to terms with the death of Erick's younger brother, Tommy, who was killed in a car accident several years earlier. Unlike

Calvin's family who try to act as if nothing has happened, the tension which exists in

Erick's home results in numerous confrontations between Erick and his mother, in

particular. Although the family have adopted another child and tried to re-group as a unit,

the sense of dysfunction is palpable. Erick considers the change in his mother following

Tommy's death:

> I called that first year her Tommy Trance, because the look in her eyes was always so distant. […] Finally, she got sent to a mental institution, where she was "cured", and three years later we adopted Tim, my new little brother. Although I love Tim, and feel sorry for Mom, I miss her Tommy Trance days. Now she's a crazy Bible-banging Christian, who constantly preaches the Good Word to anyone who will listen.
> (10)

Erick's answer to the challenges he faces, at school and in the family, is eventually to

walk away from both. Spending time in a local shopping mall he meets Chloe, the

manager of 'Shades', a boutique which sells sunglasses. Chloe offers Erick a job and the

two become good friends: Erick credits Chloe - a cross-dressing drag-queen - as the

person who helps him to change his life for the better. Having recognized from an early

age that he was different to other children around him – "Every time I made a wish, it

was always the same: "I wish I was a girl with long blond curls and a pink dress with

flowers on it." Naturally, I kept this fantasy to myself." (19) – he explains how he soon

became the target for bullies at school but suggests that meeting Chloe changed

everything for him:

> All that bullshit lasted until I met Chloe, who tore the "kick me" sign off my back, replacing it with another sign that said "fabulous!" in big rainbow letters.
> (21)

Babcock does not set up a simple good versus bad dynamic: he suggests that

Erick is equally responsible for the breakdown in the relationship with his parents as he

does not give them a chance to support him, choosing not to tell them that he is gay or about the bullying at school and while his relationship with Chloe allows him to move into an environment where he feels more at home, this is not without problems: although good friends, Erick has deeper feelings for Chloe and wants more from their relationship which eventually leads Chloe to admit that he has Aids. Devastated by this news, Erick spirals out of control: he gives up school, moves out of the family home, and becomes addicted to speed and cocaine; possible anorexia only adds to his mounting problems. At the core of his implosion is the sense that everything is wrong and it is his fault – Chloe's illness, Tommy's death, the family breakdown, being gay. While Babcock suggests that there is a level of self-indulgence involved, he describes Erick as feeling like he doesn't fit into the world; he can be Erick – the young man – and he can be Geneva Flowers – his drag-queen alter ego – but it is difficult for him to incorporate both his male and female selves into everyday life. Although he wears girls' clothes, he does not want to be mistaken for a girl: he wants to remain a boy in girls' clothing and the inability to classify him makes him problematic to society. He internalizes this and thinks that he is the problem:

> I don't know why being who I am makes me such a bad person, but it does. Society says that teenage, drug-addicted, anorexic drag queens are bad. And it's like that old expression: "If you tell a lie a hundred times, it becomes the truth."
> (278)

While Erick's use of drugs and his battle with anorexia are portrayed as being dangerous to his own well-being, and he realizes that he must try to overcome these addictions, there is no suggestion that they make him a 'bad person': instead, the problems he faces are presented as the result of society's stigmatization and the negative impact this has on

Erick as he is overwhelmed by everything that has happened to him, and seeks solace in oblivion.

Unlike *Sushi Central*, the novel does reach a degree of resolution: following Chloe's death Erick slowly begins to sort out his life which includes allowing his parents back in. He finally tells them that he is gay, terrified that they will reject him:

> In a single breath I told them that I was gay. For about a thousand years, no one said anything. Then my dad spoke up: "Your mom and I had suspected this for a long time."
> "I've been this way all my life."
> Mom seemed to be fading. "Please love me," I said, shocking even myself. (341)

Erick is reassured that he is loved and begins to move forward with his life. However, through the sequence of events which unfold - even when Erick's own behaviour contributes to the problems which overwhelm him - Babcock reveals how incredibly difficult and overwhelming it can be for a young man who discovers that he is 'different' as he is growing up.

Being 'other' in a way considered problematic by society does not relate only to sexuality but can also be connected to lifestyle choices and challenging situations that young men find themselves in, as Duncan's narrative suggests. In *Sushi Central* Anthony tells Calvin about his first sexual experience which was with an older man who took him to a hotel and afterwards gave him money, again highlighting the perilous and tenuous nature of the boys' lives. The subject of male, teenage prostitution is largely 'written out' of YA fiction; as with the novels discussed earlier which describe experiences of teenage fatherhood and which offer different perspectives on the subject, so fictional narratives which portray teenage males involved in prostitution are able to give a voice to young,

male sex workers who are usually invisible not only in fiction but in society at large; this allows the reader to consider the subject in different ways.

Thorn Kief Hillsbery's (2005) *What We Do Is Secret* describes the life of Rockets, a young, homeless boy on the fringe of street prostitution and drug addiction. The story is told through Rocket's first person narrator and recounts retrospectively 24 hours in his life leading up to his birthday. The story is situated in LA in the early 1980s in the aftermath of the heroin induced suicide of Darby Crash, lead singer with punk rock band The Germs and 'mentor' to Rockets. *What We Do Is Secret* is the title of a Germs song but also indicative of the lives of the young people in the narrative who are homeless and drift on the borders of society, visible only to clients who seek them out or the police with whom they constantly clash.

As suggested earlier, young male sex workers are largely invisible to society in general, either through a process of censure or erasure, therefore it is ironic that the world they inhabit relies on visual impact as their appearance can determine their ability to survive. As such, their existence can be decided by their abilities to perform, to act out the fantasies of their clients, from the moment of engagement to the sexual transaction itself. Hillsbery represents Rockets as aware that it is his body and his ability to sell it successfully which will allow him to buy the food and clothes which sustain him and, as such, allow him to carry on with this life; a cruel paradox. He knows where to go and how to 'strike a pose' to interest clients:

> Broke as usual and even hungrier than. So I walk down the chop chop
> chopping block to Arthur J's on the corner of Highland and Santa Monica
> and stand holding up the windowless wall facing Highland, same ways I
> always stand: one leg knee-bent, Monkey Boot sole planted flush on the
> sun-heated metal door […]
> (11)

In a study carried out with male sex workers in Montreal and Quebec, Michel Dorais

(2005) found that there were a number of visual factors involved in identifying and

engaging with a sex worker on the street through strategies the workers themselves

employed:

> They are easily identifiable with practice by the way they lope along the
> sidewalk trying to entice potential clients. "It's all in the body, the attitude,
> the posture, especially the look in the eye," said one youth, and several of
> his peers concurred. For others, the clothing and what it suggests count for a
> great deal. Clothes advertise a personality type likely to please certain types
> of clients- ideally, the largest possible number.
> (28)

Although the concept of the young male body as sexualised object is generally

condemned, Barbara Gibson (1995) suggests that it can be viewed through an alternative

script which reconsiders the censure. While working as a health consultant for the charity

Streetwise Youth in London, Gibson conducted a number of interviews with boys who

had, or continued to work in prostitution. She suggests that the young men, usually

without family or other support networks use whatever resources are available to them to

get by and therefore should not be pilloried. While not suggesting that prostitution should

be a viable career choice, she attempts to remove the judgemental discourse which it

incurs by presenting it as a means of survival at a time when few possible alternatives

seem to be available:

> They were quite alone. They coped with feeling scared, lonely, depressed
> and suicidal. They had great initiative in finding places to sleep, and they
> learned to deal with exploitative people. They had no legal entitlement to
> money, yet they found money to live […] They lived in an environment
> where there was no protection; only hostility and condemnation of their
> presence. In spite of this they needed to survive, to carry on and make lives
> for themselves […]
> (172)

A lack of family or support networks is a common theme in the interviews carried out by both Gibson and Dorais. Many of the young men have left home to escape abuse or violence and find themselves on the streets looking for alternative communities. In Hillsbery's narrative he presents Rockets and his friends as identifying as punk rockers, forming themselves into a community which provides a centre and gives meaning to their lives. In the course of his research, Dorais (2003) identified four life patterns which many of the young men he interviewed adhered to: 'Outcasts' – those living in dire poverty with serious addictions; 'Part-Timers' – those who opt for sporadic sex work to make ends meet; 'Insiders' – young men who have grown up around the sex trade and view it as their social circle or family; 'Liberationists' – those for whom prostitution is a way of living out fantasies. The characters of Hillsbery's narrative can be positioned as both outcasts and insiders, essentially homeless and living in groups in abandoned buildings. Rockets recounts one of his early 'homes' after running away from a care centre:

> Then we'd bail for home street home, not exactly the Apartment of Water and Power with both H2O and AC-go juice cut completely, and since none of us could A and Q how to run the hellevators off D for Duracells we climbed the fire stairs past where any street trash squatters ever had the guts or glory for, and just for insurance against any dirtbags or elderqueers who maybe might we built booby traps […]
> (8)

The narrative constantly emphasises a landscape of extreme poverty and the potential for violence at every turn. The young people try to protect each other but are always at risk.

The socialisation of boys into dominant versions of masculinity which privilege characteristics such as strength, control, success and rationality over emotional engagement, empathy and care - all positioned as feminine - still assume that boys will receive nurture and protection as they grow and take on normative masculinity scripts.

However the boys in the fictional narrative of Hillsbery and the life histories told to

Gibson are devoid of this nurture from both parents, and so look for emotional

engagement in unsafe places which leaves them vulnerable to abuse. In Paul's life

history, he recounts how he started out looking for love but through experience became

disillusioned:

> When I met this man, I was looking at him as a father, which I wanted more
> than anything. I thought that sex was love and that he was showing me love.
> I wanted it and enjoyed it in a way […] Very recently I seen this guy's face
> on Crimewatch, I got the shock of my life! He was wanted in connection
> with a series of rapes.
> (68-9)

Madser, another of the boys in Gibson's study, describes in detail his relationship with

his mother which is both physically and emotionally abusive and tries to justify her

behaviour:

> I was living on me nerves watching me ma and waiting for her to start on
> me. She would find an excuse to take it out on me; it could happen just by
> saying anything, making a comment about helping with the dishes. I'm sure
> she didn't know what she was doing, she needed a scapegoat and what was
> happening to her, she was repeating on me nearly every day. I was beaten up
> black and blue.
> (1-2)
>
> I believed me ma thought I was evil: as I was getting me head punched in,
> she would shriek, 'I'll make you regret the day you were born you evil
> bastard.' She said that throughout me life.
> (3)

Reflecting on his lack of self-respect and perception of himself as worthless, Madser

finally accepts that these feelings originate from his family relationships. It is only when

he meets his long term partner and feels secure in their intimate relationship that he is

able to care about himself. A search for love and security is a common theme throughout

the life histories and is also central to Hillsbery's fictional narrative. When Rockets is

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tricked into a car by a client, he is rescued by Blitzer, another street boy who becomes his boyfriend and wants them to leave LA together, dreaming of a better life for them both in Idaho. As the night progresses, Rockets describes the initial attraction and growing intimacy between them and their 'coming out' as a couple to their friends.

Although ongoing concerns about the emotional literacy of boys and men has led to challenges about their socialisation, as discussed earlier, hegemonic masculinity scripts continue to privilege independence and strength over intimacy. The urge for disclosure which informs the life stories told to Gibson contests the normative discourse and resists attempts to silence the young men. Hillsbery's fictional narrative offers another version of young men engaged in a disclosing, intimate relationship.

Neither Hillsbery nor Gibson, however, suggest that the boyhoods they reveal are solely examples of young men as victims; as the narrative progresses, the reader learns that Blitzer intends to scam two 'out-of-towners' to finance the trip and Rockets is aware of this. Also, Blitzer may or may not be responsible for the death of another boy, Rory. Hillsbery's prose is dense, lyrical and packed with inter-textual illusions, challenging the reader to create meaning. In imposing this narrative style onto the reader he illustrates symbolically the chaotic world that his fictional characters inhabit. The result for both parties is a morally, ambiguous landscape in which meaning is created but without any certainty as to its truthfulness. The reader eventually learns that the birthday Rockets is celebrating is his thirteenth but Blitzer is an older teenager; is he then a protector or an abuser or is either label valid to describe their situation. In structuring the narrative this way, Hillsbery does not allow the reader the satisfaction of making moral judgments but

suggests that ambiguous landscapes call for a less straightforward, more studied, response.

In the life histories collected by Gibson, some of the boys interviewed saw prostitution initially as a way of taking control, being important and having fun. Not all initially positioned themselves as victims which creates a challenge to a society which can accept the discourse of the young as vulnerable or victims and therefore perceived as blameless in their sexualization. However any form of collusion immediately creates moral ambiguity. In Adam's narrative, he tells of a past in which he enjoyed the thrill of his life as a prostitute:

> I enjoyed the life, the adventure. You never knew what was going to happen. Going off with a stranger, closing your eyes and 'jump', see what happens. You risked your life every time you stepped out there […] I was very rebellious. It was something that was totally taboo. I love doing things that are dangerous. I liked the money and the drinks.
> (147-8)

Another boy describes a drug fuelled trip across Europe working in brothels as an under age prostitute in the same terms that a student might describe a gap year experience. However, reflecting on their experiences at a later date, all of the boys recognised that their bodies had been used and abused both by themselves and their clients often leaving them with serious drug addictions, mental health problems and HIV infections.

In Hillsbery's narrative, he leaves the reader uncertain about Rockets fate; the question of whether he should stay or go, again, is more ambiguous than it initially appears. It is not a decision about the trip to Idaho but whether he should commit suicide, a shocking revelation at the end of the narrative. Instead, however, he takes up the offer

to become an assistant to Phranc, an old friend from Darby days, who picks him up on his

way to the pier where he is contemplating throwing himself into the water:

> She says speaking of checking out, she's up to something way more punk
> than that. She's planning on making a living hosting Tupperware parties for
> Westside JAPs, no not Asians, I get it now, Jewish American Princesses,
> and yes with her flat-top, and yes in her combat boots.
> And how punk is that?
> She says the only thing more punk would be me signing on as her assistant.
> (339-40)

The random and bizarre nature of this career change for Rockets again highlights the

ambiguousness inherent in the landscape Hillsbery portrays but does also emphasise the

vulnerability of Rockets. In one final irony, Hillsbery reveals bluntly Rockets' blindness,

a fact that has been alluded to earlier in the narrative but without direct confirmation. The

boy through whom Hillsbery takes the reader on a roller coaster assault on the senses

cannot see but can only imagine the world which he describes.

Rockets' knowingness in relation to his sex work and involvement in petty crime

do not mean that he is not also vulnerable to the dangers that life on the streets brings.

This is a theme which is also taken up in JT LeRoy's (2004) novella *Harold's End*. The

physical appearance of the book suggests a short novel for younger children, complete

with illustrations. Harold of the title is actually a snail given to the boy narrator as a pet

by an older man who befriends him. Reader expectations are challenged when the

narrative immediately hits a discordant note. Mention of vice cops, outreach workers and

gay bars suggest a landscape at odds with the original expectations created by the

appearance of the novella. The boy's portrait and those of his friends stress their youth

but at the same time LeRoy describes their dependency on heroin and their work in

prostitution to feed their habit. In juxtaposing expectations of innocence and experience

within one character LeRoy creates a complex individual who cannot be contained easily in moral discourse. Larry, the man who befriends Oliver, and eventually invites him to live in his house initially appears harmless but becomes more ambiguous as the narrative progresses both to Oliver and the reader:

> At night, Larry and Harold and I watch movies, my head in Larry's lap while he softly strokes my cheek. Before bed I climb into the pyjamas he got me, even though they're covered in dancing penguins, and I let him watch me do my balloon. And then I talk. I tell him what I tell no one until I fall asleep against him.
> (46)

Larry's intentions are finally revealed in a shocking scene in which he has Oliver carry out a sex act on him and then feels shame and embarrassment and as a consequence asks Oliver to move out of the house. Any security which Oliver has built up is dashed as are reader expectations. From previous experiences, Oliver is presented as expecting pain to follow, made worse by the unexpectedness of the event:

> I felt an icy slit along my side and remember this is how pain always comes on, from a vague distance before revealing its detailed facts. I lie there and wait to know how bad it will be.
> (54)

Oliver is initially represented as an aggressive, emotionally withdrawn boy but after he is given Harold he begins to allow himself to care about his pet and then feels some security in the situation with Larry. However, LeRoy signals through the unfolding of events in the narrative that this emotional attachment is very precarious for Oliver as it reveals his vulnerability. Gibson suggests that the boys she interviewed understood the script of masculinity as hard and in control and attempted to mask their needs:

> I was surprised that behind their veneer of bravado, the boys were very needy and demanded a lot of attention, often in a provocative, confrontational manner. Many were both physically and emotionally

underdeveloped for their age, yet many had an 'old head on young
shoulders'.
(vii-viii)

Censured, then, by a culture which in some quarters still discourages boys and men from

expressing emotional pain or searching for intimacy, the boys in these narratives are

further disempowered by their social status.

As discussed throughout this thesis, Connell's (1995) work draws attention not

only to the social disparity between men and women but also the power differences

which exist among men. Both Oliver and Rockets are presented as coming into contact

with older men which demonstrates their powerlessness in terms of age and social status.

Gibson points to the disparity between the boys and their clients, reflecting that some of

these men are in powerful positions and that it serves their interests to censure and

criminalise the boys' activities. Perversely, social discourse in relation to prostitution

ensures a level of protection for the clients not available to young sex workers.

A further social script which potentially disempowers young male sex workers is

the perception of them as homosexual. The majority of clients seeking their services are

male and while many of the young men identify as gay this is not uniform. However

cultural understandings of prostitution focus initially on the sexual encounter rather than

perceiving the act as a financial transaction and therefore position the young men

involved as homosexual which, as discussed earlier, can still evoke an adverse and

judgmental response in western societies. For the young men, not only trying to survive

on the streets, but also at a point in their lives where they are trying to come to terms with

their own sexuality, this censure is yet another hurdle which has to be overcome. Savin-

Williams (2004) suggests:

> To the extent that alternatives to heterosexuality are misrepresented, myths flourish, stigma abounds, and those who by their very nature are sexually unconventional are condemned. Few individuals concerned with the well-being of youths would advocate that being thus marginalized, especially during the vulnerable years of childhood and adolescence, is desirable. (291)

And yet, because of an accumulation of discourses around childhood and masculinity which work to position the young male sex worker as 'other', censure rather than understanding is meted out. When Wilkie-Stibbs (2008) suggests that 'outsiderness' as a category needs to be deconstructed she alludes to the question of empathy:

> It is commonplace that we care for others unequally, in proportion to how much we think we know about them, how easily we can imagine ourselves to be in their plight, or how likely we judge it that we should find ourselves in their situation. It is hard to empathize with people who seem Other, and it is hard to sympathize with those we cannot empathize with. (21)

Therefore, while authors of fictional narratives such as *What We Do Is Secret* and *Harold's End* continue to face possible censure for their creation of texts which give voice to sex workers without condemnation of the young, male protagonists, their making visible of such landscapes no longer allows for a response which simply evokes a 'good-bad' polarisation but instead challenges social perceptions and asks the reader to think again.

The narratives of Babcock and Duncan, Hillsbery and LeRoy, all include a number of the subjects which have been raised in relation to boyhood crisis – emotional illiteracy and dysfunctional relationships, homosexuality, sexual promiscuity, peer pressure – but these authors all suggest that a personal catalyst is necessary to spark an actual crisis; in the cases of Calvin and Erick, both boys have suffered bereavement, Rockets is homeless and without family, as is Oliver who also contends with drug

addiction. Ultimately these novels challenge readers to recognize crisis, but not in the way many commentators have presented it – ephemeral; impersonal; the condition of a homogeneous boyhood.

This summation raises important issues about the framework through which the texts in this thesis have been analysed: the purpose has been to consider representations of boyhoods in the selected novels, with gender consequently the defining element in each interpretation. However, this has implications for the more generic nature of the texts as works of fiction and what this means in relation to how the novels are structured, what they are able to express and how they do this, a subject I address in the Conclusion. Further, by focusing the analysis specifically on representations of boyhoods, the narrative as a whole commands less attention: each of the male characters analysed in relation to the 'boyhood in crisis' discourse is also part of a larger fictional landscape which explores more than gender and its impact on the lives of the male characters. The boys are also portrayed as engaged – positively and negatively – with the world at large, a theme which I return to in evaluating the ultimate significance of YA fiction in relation to cultural representations of boyhoods.

Conclusion. Making Men

I began this thesis with a discussion of *Monster* (Walter Dean Myers, 1999), a novel which asks readers to consider how they think about young men: specifically, the young narrator of *Monster*, on trial for his alleged part in a drug store robbery which ends in murder. Myers does not offer readers a straightforward resolution: instead, he ends with a morally ambiguous situation where Steve is cleared of any part in the crime but is still considered guilty in a non-specific, indefinable way. Readers must decide if they think he is implicated in the crime, and this potentially reveals how they have taken onboard and understood images of boyhood which are currently visible in western societies. Steve is presented as a young, black, working-class boy who lives in a neighbourhood with high levels of crime and violence and, as such, is representative of what has come to be understood as problematic with regard to boyhood.

The Introduction examined the origins of 'boyhood in crisis' in the writings of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, and while Bly and his followers positioned men and boys as victims of a hegemonic masculinity which privileges a hard, competitive, and independent image of manhood, this has evolved into a general anxiety about the way that boys are socialized: specifically, that this version of masculinity encourages boys to ignore their emotional development and can lead to aggressive, and even violent behaviour. Simultaneously, another strand of the crisis discourse suggests that boys' lives have been feminized to the point that they can no longer be 'real boys'. However, all this general angst fails to acknowledge the unique experiences of individual boys and especially ignores the possibility for agency by disregarding boys' ability to negotiate hegemonic masculinity discourses and to form flexible, gendered identities. While not

dismissing the pressure which normative gender expectations can impose on individual boys, it is important to understand that they do not respond homogeneously, or indeed consistently, as has been demonstrated by much of the qualitative research material discussed in this thesis. A further example can be seen in the outcome of research carried out by Barker (2005) in which he examines the impact of gang culture on the lives of young men and their families in an impoverished environment. He goes on to question why many more boys are able to resist this lifestyle -

> […] What is known about the young men in these settings who are not involved in gang-related and other forms of violence? Indeed, how do we explain how even in low-income, violent settings, the majority of young men generally do not become involved in gang-related violence? (3)

- a subject introduced in relation to ethnically diverse young men by Way and Chu (2005) and discussed in Chapter Two. Barker ultimately suggests that in looking for solutions to problematic boyhoods the majority of young men are ignored by research and receive less attention in terms of cultural representation. This concurs with current images of boyhood which highlight the negative aspects of boys' lives, and suggest that the problems which exist apply equally to all boys. Positive images of successful, thriving young men – and even examples of those who are engaged in the process of facing up to, and taking on problems or challenges – are largely invisible in cultural discourse which presents a distorted and often inaccurate picture of boyhood.

The fiction of boyhoods

Examining the novels which make up the body of this work in relation to the theoretical work from Men's and Boyhood Studies has uncovered a diverse range of representations

and experiences while also revealing a number of issues common to the narratives, most significantly the impact of normative gender scripts and their potential impact on boys' lives. Whether humorous (*48 Shades of Brown; The Heroic Lives of Al Capsella; My Side of the Story*), or disturbing and ambivalent (*Blade: Playing Dead; Tyrell; Sushi Central*), all of the novels portray central characters who possess agency to varying degrees, which is a powerful image for potential boy readers in the process of exploring and developing their own personal identities. The idea of self-determination is exemplified in Billy, the narrator of *The Crew*: as a young, black boy who has opted out of education, is without employment, and lives on a run-down housing estate, Billy potentially evokes negative images of violence and gang culture. However, Rai challenges this assumption by portraying Billy as taking control of his own life in a positive way:

> As for me, I know that the easiest thing for me to do would be to just go with the flow and end up selling 't'ings' or robbing and that. But I ain't no sheep and no one round here is leading me. I'm going to lead myself. (18)

By presenting characters who are invested with agency, the group of novels discussed suggest a more positive approach to boyhood than many of the cultural images currently in circulation: novels which portray difficult, complex situations – for instance, the teenage father narratives (*The First Part Last; Mahalia; Slam*) – allow readers to reflect on how they view groups of boys who have been negatively stereotyped, while in novels which explore homosexuality (*Metro; Boy Meets Boy; My Side of the Story*), readers have the opportunity to consider the implications of being positioned as 'other', and an outsider.

The novels reveal the complexity of being a young man in a post-modern world where significant emphasis is placed on the individual and the development of a personal

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life narrative: while this has opened up the possibility to explore gender identities and consider more flexible and nuanced performances than traditional versions of masculinity allow, the desire to belong, to be part of a social group, still remains, and this can involve conformity and regulation and these novels explore how boys balance what can be conflicting needs and desires, sometimes with a positive outcome (*Nukkin' Ya; Doing It*), sometimes unsuccessfully (*My Side of the Story; Metro*). The youth of the central characters in the novels means that they are at the beginning of a journey, and although they are generally portrayed as being quite egocentric in that they spend a lot of time thinking about their own lives, they are also especially influenced by and vulnerable to the opinions of friends and peers.

While representing only a small selection of the novels published for the YA market since the 1990s which feature a teenage male central character, the books contain key themes which are being explored in relation to contemporary boyhoods. The novels present images which are both positive and negative, funny and disturbing, and suggest the possibilities and the hazards of being a young man. They portray a variety of ways of being male and in relation to the boyhood in crisis discourse they offer readers a different set of images to consider when thinking about the future men we are making for the twenty-first century. In drawing together academic research and popular writings on boyhood as well as fictional accounts of being young and male, the thesis seeks to reveal the scope of material through which boyhood is being portrayed and discussed and to suggest that future research in the field of Boyhood and Men's Studies should consider the images presented in YA fiction as they are pertinent and widely available to readers who are involved in shaping future cultural understandings of being male.

The fiction of fictions

In making the decision to frame the discussion of the fictional texts through the field of Men's Studies, I considered the work that theorists have produced – and continue to produce - the most accurate in presenting how boyhood is currently understood in contemporary culture and addressed in academic research. However, as I have indicated this is not without disadvantage; most notably the limitations it creates in exploring the novels as works of fiction. I have suggested throughout that research into boys' lives has been influenced by the concept of crisis and consequently significant time and resources have been spent in examining key issues which arise out of 'crisis', potentially ignoring how other versions of being young and male take place in contemporary culture. Placing the novels in this landscape means that the focus of their analysis is driven by the issues raised in the crisis discourse rather than considering primarily the unique and potentially transformative nature of the novels *per se*. In her study, *Radical Children's Literature,* Reynolds (2007) puts forward the argument that fiction written for young people can be viewed as a site where innovative, creative work is taking place. Discussing the key themes of *Radical Children's Literature*, she continues,

> […] it is about changing the way children's literature is perceived in culture by recognizing the way books – and increasingly other narrative forms – for children have fostered and embedded social, intellectual and aesthetic change, and about identifying the changes that are currently taking place – and those that are being resisted – in writing for the young.
> (23)

Applying this to the novels explored throughout this thesis, there is evidence of texts which can be described as transformative; for instance, *Boy Meets Boy*, which in its positive portrayal of a homosexual romance - in spite of the reservations I raised in

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Chapter Four – can be considered exceptional in the YA market where homosexuality is still deeply associated with 'problematic'. Similarly, *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* explores subjects which have traditionally been silent in literature for the intended audience of the novel. While the descriptions of Erick's life can be considered adequately through the lens of Men's Studies, highlighting the challenges he faces in relation to his sexuality and gender, this interpretation alone does not capture the originality of the novel in the YA genre, nor can it effectively encapsulate the blending of genders: in the context of the novel Erick is unhappy because existing categorizations do not adequately explain where he belongs in the current gender order. On his quest to find a place that he can call home, he experiments with his gender and settles on a persona which is male and female, inclusive of a broad spectrum of masculinities and femininities. By initially trying to 'fit' into existing gender categorizations, Erick looses sight of who he is; his individuality, his uniqueness.

The relationship between Erick and the society in which he lives potentially acts as a metaphor for the relationship between the novels which have been discussed in this thesis and Men's Studies theories in general in that the texts have been discussed in relation to an established framework and do not always 'fit': a more proactive approach may be to consider the possibilities for gender performance which the novels encompass and where this could potentially lead, effectively placing the novels and their unique depictions of boyhoods at the centre of the process. In considering how we approach and discuss texts which present 'queer' spaces, Kerry Mallan (2009) highlights the challenges faced in breaking down binary understandings of gender and the potential consequences of a new narrative:

> Maybe if 'all the world is queer' without exception, then at least we could consider the possibility of liberating identity from the constraints and limitations imposed by binaries and hierarchies. Or would a new queer order mean a new orthodoxy would emerge: one that refuses to question its own grand narrative?
> (155)

Mallan recognizes the potential which Queer Theory brings to textual analysis with its ability to break down existing gender binaries and established discourses while also acknowledging that this could lead to another form of didacticism, another way of regulating. However, as a framework through which to discuss fiction, Queer Theory does open up possibilities which Men's Studies prohibits in terms of potential gender performances.

Equally significant when discussing the way boyhoods are represented in this body of work is to recognize that the novels belong to the genre of YA fiction and the tradition this encompasses which raises questions about the subjects that are included and how they are presented in the narratives. As I have suggested, the majority of the texts have a positive resolution or outcome which is in keeping with the traditions of literature intended for young people, albeit in a more ambivalent form than in earlier periods. Mallan discusses the 'ending' in YA fiction: "Narrative closure in young adult (YA) novels, in particular, typically provides a point where the individual has arrived; a moment of self-realisation or self-actualisation, whereby the struggles of finding one's 'true' identity have been overcome." (7) She goes on to consider the tradition on which this is built: "Such a narrative resolution provides readers with a reassurance that things will work out for the best in the end, which is an enduring feature of the genre and part of liberal-humanism's project of harmonious individuality." (7) Mallan disputes this view of the individual which she understands as essentialist, suggesting instead that identities are

constructed within discourse and therefore fluid and open to change, the position I have

adopted throughout with reference to gender. Nevertheless, the concept developed

through liberal humanism remains influential in children's and YA fiction and therefore

impacts on the outcome of narratives and their ultimate portrayals of boyhoods which is

significant when discussing the influence of fictional portrayals of boyhoods on cultural

representations of young men. The novels by Duncan (*Sushi Central*; *Metro*), Bowler

(*Blade: Playing Dead*) and LeRoy (*Harold's End*) perhaps represent the greatest

challenges in this context as they have no resolution, raising controversial subjects with

no answers to the complex and difficult situations the young men find themselves in and

in doing so perhaps best illustrate the wider concerns of the narratives which exist beyond

gender, a subject I return to later in this Conclusion.

Children's, and to a lesser extent YA fiction, are also impacted in terms of their

content, by what is considered 'suitable' for young people, which has long been a

controversial and contentious subject (Tucker, 1976) and relates to how childhood is

understood in society at any given point in time. Mills and Mills (2000) highlight the

implications of protectionist attitudes to young people and the reasons why adult

'gatekeepers' take up such positions:

> Perhaps in protecting children from adult secrets, we are in effect trying to
> protect ourselves also; to keep at bay unpalatable truths; to escape
> vicariously into a more secure world than the one we know and we inhabit.
> The psychology of repression is full of such dark secrets, especially in the
> area of sexuality, and it is here that the maintenance of childhood innocence
> is seen by some to be paramount.
> (13)

Again, as with a form which privileges positive outcomes, so the 'policing' of content is

significant in relation to representations of boyhoods; there are potentially subjects which

are 'written out' of YA fiction or are marginalized due to what is considered their lack of 'suitability'. One example of this is the subject of male, teenage prostitution, discussed in Chapter Four, where a small number of novels have been written but remain outside of mainstream publishing because of their contentious content. Like the teenage father, not a lot is known about the male, teenage sex worker and again, while this is not a lifestyle choice which would be encouraged, it is important to consider this complex and often dangerous world from the viewpoint of the young men involved and although fictional texts cannot portray the 'reality' of these experiences, they allow the reader a perspective from which to consider the subject.

Protecting children, childhood innocence, children as vulnerable, are all themes in current western, cultural scripts surrounding childhood. While debates provoke various responses to the nature of childhood, the subject of childhood sexualization cites almost universal condemnation. However, as Mills and Mills (2000) suggest, in trying to protect young people from what is considered 'unsuitable' knowledge, adults may erase what is disturbing and problematic in some childhoods from mainstream discourse. Paradoxically this has the potential to create a landscape in which vulnerable young people are made invisible, taking away their voices and invalidating their experiences.

The bigger picture

In considering male, teenage prostitution and its potential unsuitability as a subject for YA fiction, gender is not the central consideration but only one aspect of a complex and controversial landscape and this is significant with reference to the parameters through which the novels discussed in this thesis have been analysed: with the emphasis on

representations of boyhoods, the broader contexts in which the fictional boys exist become secondary. However, I suggest that ultimately it is by moving beyond gender as the most significant factor in defining the individual that boys can ultimately be disassociated from the discourse of crisis and instead viewed as active individuals within the landscapes they inhabit. Therefore, while I have sought to explore the origins and impacts of the 'boyhood in crisis' discourse and how fictional narratives interact with this cultural version of young men, I end with a discussion of a novel which portrays young people engaged in the wider world. This conveys a sense of young men as complex, multi-dimensional individuals, who cannot be defined or contained by gender alone and therefore problems which exist for some young men must be explored in a much broader context including family, social environment, global landscape.

I began by discussing *Monster* and how perceptions of boyhood are central to the narrative and its interpretation but I end with David Levithan's (2009) *Love is the Higher Law* which describes the relationships between three young people following the impact of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. Claire and Peter are at the end of their final year in high school. Jasper, soon to begin his second year in college, meets Peter at Mitchell's party – a common acquaintance of the three – and they arrange a date for 11 September. The novel portrays the events of the day from the perspectives of all three characters and the impact on their lives in the weeks and months that follow as they try to make sense of what happened.

On the day of the attacks Claire is in class but makes her way to the lower school to find younger brother Sammy. As pupils and teachers make their way out of the school to safety, news that one of the towers has fallen reaches them:

One of the towers has fallen. When it's our turn to leave its like something
in me is finally willing to listen, and suddenly I understand what it means.
The tower doesn't exist anymore. Something I've seen my entire life –
something so much larger than my entire life – is gone.
(13)

At the same time Peter has skipped school, waiting outside Tower Records to buy a new

Bob Dylan album. As he walks towards Washington Square Park with the swelling crowd

he sees the hole in one tower followed by flames shooting out of the second construction:

That tower is our history, our lives, all the minutiae and security and hope.
And that black hole is what I'm feeling. It is what has happened. It will
affect me in ways I can't even begin to get my mind around. This day is a
dark crater. There is no room for songs. The songs are wrong. Every song is
wrong. And I don't know what to do without music.
(39)

Jasper is sleeping, woken by a phone call from his parents on a family visit to Korea and

ringing to make sure that he is safe. Leaving the house in Brooklyn to survey the scene,

Jasper finds himself surrounded by pieces of paper which have been blown out of the

destruction of the towers and scattered around the city:

A stock report and a human resources memorandum. Picking them up and
reading them, I felt a sadness so deep that it will never really be gone. It was
a sobering moment – sobering not because I was drunk, but because it felt
like I was shifting into this new state of naked clarity. It was a higher state
of sobriety, a painful state of sobriety, because the truth was suddenly
unvarnished, making me feel unvarnished.
(24)

In the weeks that follow the young people try to come to terms with what has happened

and to find some normality in their lives: while Claire searches for answers, walking the

streets at night unable to sleep, Peter reaches out to those around him as Jasper withdraws

into himself. Peter and Jasper finally reschedule their date which ends rather disastrously

as Jasper is unable to make any connection and cannot express how he feels:

> I had no idea what had just happened, and I knew he didn't, either. I had
> never felt so much like my life was not my own, that I was just a vessel for
> things I would never understand. I didn't want him…but if I didn't want
> him, what did I want? I didn't want to be alone…but if I didn't want to be
> alone, then why didn't I want to be with anyone?
> Limbo is the state where there are only questions.
> That was as far as I'd gotten.
> (66)

However, as the narrative progresses, Levithan describes each of them beginning to heal and the relationships between them become closer; Claire and Jasper meet by chance and strike up a friendship which eventually leads Jasper back to Peter and one year after the tragedy in New York they embark on a second date which starts out by mirroring the first but has a much more positive outcome:

> He leans into the table and presses his knees against mine again. […]
> And I say, "Hey, do you want to come back to my dorm room and watch
> Cabaret?"
> This time, the TV stays off.
> This time, we sleep in the same bed.
> (159)

Levithan's novel is in essence a riposte to the tragedy in New York and a statement against the subsequent war in Iraq, and is therefore intended to portray the triumph of 'love' over 'hate' which means that the impetus is for the characters to reach positive resolutions. Nevertheless, Levithan presents young males and females engaged proactively with world events at both personal and social levels; they are all challenged by the tragedy in different ways but there is no suggestion that the young men, Peter and Jasper, are less well equipped to cope than Claire. They all struggle and Levithan indicates that this is a natural response to an event that is beyond comprehension. *Love is the Higher Law* represents a positive image of young men where their gender is not the defining feature in how they engage with the world. While this analysis could be accused

of the liberal humanist discourse which Mallan discusses, it can also be interpreted as a way of portraying boyhood positively simply by not highlighting it as a distinguishing factor. As I indicated earlier, the novels discussed in this thesis can together act as an antidote to the negative cultural images which exist around young men; however, they can equally be described in terms of young people actively engaged in life which also represents a positive cultural image for boyhoods. Attending a concert by the group 'Travis' following the disaster, Peter feels a sense of community with those around him and realizes that the world is wide…

> In the best concerts, the band is as moved as the audience, and this is the case tonight. We all realize that this gathering is about much more than the music, and what we're getting from it is much more than sounds. "I want to live in a world where I belong," Fran Healy sings in "Turn." Then, later on, "I want to live in a world where I'll be strong." Before when I listened to this, I would think about being gay, or about needing to be there for my friends, or even about more general things like being the main character in my own life. But now I realize it's even more general than that – it's about life itself.
> (88)

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