"You're a failure as a parent, Joe Edwards!": Reconfiguring the Male Parent in Australian Realist Fictions for Children 1966-1986

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Literature for children is generally acknowledged to be socially conservative (for example, Nodelman 1992, p.31-32) because of the extraordinary range of 'gatekeepers' involved in its publication and reception. It is nevertheless evident that certain hallmark fictions are published which both represent and endorse shifts in social attitudes with regard to such contentious issues as gender relations and the social structure of the family. The consensus of literary merit surrounding such texts is often a significant factor in their being approved by publishers and promoted by parents, librarians and teachers. Arguably, in Australian children's fiction, *The Min-Min* (1966) by Mavis Thorpe Clark, and *All We Know* (1986), by Simon French, are examples of such hallmark fictions which are not only germane to the social issues of their respective historical times but are also progressive, possibly even subversive, in their attempts to represent both the desirability and the processes of social change. Specifically these two novels problematise hegemonic masculinity as privileged by Western patriarchy by focusing on the role of the male parent and endorsing the reconfiguration of gendered social relations in the domestic household.

The Min-Min and *All We Know* are part of that post-war 'renaissance in Australian children's books' Brenda Niall identifies when she finds that 'a strong and vital tradition emerged ... the decade from the mid-1950s seems the crucial period, at least for fiction'. Niall argues that the fiction of this time reclaims for Australian children's literature the possibility that Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* had seemed to promise in the 1890s of 'the urban domestic novel with drama based on character rather than on outdoor adventure' (Niall 1988, pp.548-549). From the 1960s onwards, this corpus of post-war fiction discloses a shift away from representing the central father characters positively to representations of them as ranging from solipsistic and irresponsible to menacing and reprehensible (Niall 1984, pp.252-253). This shift is significantly marked when the character of Joe Edwards is deemed to be 'a failure as a parent' in *The Min-Min* (p.185). Edwards' character contrasts markedly with the laudable fathers foregrounded in the novels of the preceding decade by writers such as Joan Phipson in

Good Luck to the Rider (1953), Patricia Wrightson in *The Crooked Snake* (1955) and Nan Chauncy in *Tiger in the Bush* (1957) and *Devil's Hill* (1958). With numerous major ideological shifts in facets of Australian society in the 1960s, particularly those that came from the women's movement, it is not surprising that more novels appeared which problematised hegemonic masculinity and traditional fathering. Notable realist fictions like Lilith Norman's *Climb a Lonely Hill* (1970) and Ivan Southall's *Bread and Honey* (1970) are most significant in this regard, but any list of children's literature titles written since 1966 will readily bring to mind examples of fathers who are physically absent, emotionally unavailable or culpable in some way. Powerful indictments of male parents continue to be produced in 1990s novels such as Gillian Rubenstein's *At Ardilla* (1991), Robin Klein's *The Listmaker* (1997) and Allan Baillie's *The Last Shot* (1997).

There has been less success in producing novels that construct a recomposed adult masculinity and a positive reconfiguration of male parenting than in producing novels which problematise the matrix of patriarchal values and behaviours and its negative impact on the the family. Recuperating male parents remains a difficult task because the traditional gendered configuration of Australian masculinity is antithetical to all that is deemed 'feminine' (White 1981, pp.165-168, Mackay 1993, p.72). It has proved equally difficult to envision new and satisfactory family organisations where both women and men work outside the domestic household in paid employment. It is not until *All We Know* that a realist domestic fiction explicitly rejects the traditional patriarchal nuclear family - married parents, father as breadwinner, mother as homemaker - as the preferred unit of social organisation - and valorises an adult male subject who actively seeks a nurturing role in his *de facto* family despite not being the 'natural' father of the children in the household. Since the publication of *All We Know*, only a few realist domestic novels have attempted to further develop models of reconfigured fathering. So, like *The Min-Min*, *All We Know* remains a most significant Australian children's fiction. Some of the realist novels which have moved towards the challenge of reconfigured male parenting

include Joanne Horniman's *Jasmine* (1995) and Nadia Wheatley's *Lucy in the Leap Year* (1993), both for younger readers, and Joanne Horniman's *Sand Monkeys* (1992) and Libby Gleeson's *Refuge* (1998) for older readers.

From the perspective of genre, *The Min-Min* and *All We Know* are also apposite choices for comparison. Both employ realist modes of literary construction and show the tendency of this mode to be ideologically aligned with a relativistic view of human experience (Stephens 1992, p.287). Realism has the potential to construct narratives that invite readers to interrogate societal norms and is well able to engage with a world where formerly fixed values have been unsettled by social phenomena like the women's movement. Both novels employ rhetorical features that call attention to the text as literary discourse rather than as 'natural', everyday communication and both use self-reflexive strategies to some extent (Stephens 1997, pp.31-39). Both also consistently imply child readers (Hollindale 1997: 94-95). The novels represent child subjectivities as fully implicated in, and constrained by, their social conditions (Bourdieu 1990, p.15, Stephens 1997, pp.31-39) and there is an open-endedness about the novels that suggests the contingent nature of personal agency. At the primary level of story, both are *bildungsroman* with female protagonists who are in the middle years of schooling. Both narratives have overt omniscient narrators offering a narratorial perspective different from that of focalising characters. The degree of didactic narratorial intervention is less in the later novel although even in *The Min-Min* didacticism is often represented as character focalisation. It is at the secondary level of story that both novels interrogate fathering/male parenting in their respective historical contexts.

In his impressive sociological study, *Masculinities* (1995), R. W. Connell finds that degendering the power structures of patriarchal society has hardly begun. He argues cogently that the great anti-sexism achievement of the past three decades has been the undermining of 'the legitimation of patriarchy' (1995, p.226) with its configuration of hegemonic masculinity. Writing about Western patriarchal society Connell argues that,

definitions of masculinity are deeply enmeshed in

the history of institutions and of economic structures. Masculinity is not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity. It is also extended in the world, merged in organised social relations. To understand masculinity historically we must study changes in social relations.
(p.29)

As cultural artefacts, *The Min-Min* and *All We Know* enable the study of historical changes in gendered social relations as deemed suitable for Australian children to read about. The two novels reveal different stages of 'crisis tendency' (Connell's term from Jurgen Habermas, 1995, p.84) both in the representation of the patriarchal gender order and social relations in the nuclear family. In 1966, Joe Edwards' failure as a parent is symptomatic of a range of social problems represented in *The Min-Min* as devolving from the problems inherent in hegemonic masculinity which legitimates and regulates the behaviours of men and the father. The novel shows the potential fractures in the concept of the nuclear family and the limitations of the concept of 'the Australian Way of Life' (Greer 1991, pp.35, 368-369, White 1981, p.158) constructed by 'rightful patriarchy' (Gilding 1991, p.120). Patriarchy assumes that moral and legal authority derives from the masculine, insists on masculine control of economic and political power and imposes hierarchical structures of social relations. Integral to this social system was the idea of the 'separation of spheres' for males and females with the domestic household being the domain of women and the place where childrearing was deemed properly to occur. In this domain a woman was able to institute her hierarchical control of children and the domestic household. (Connell 1995, p.195, Gilding 1991, p.118). Twenty years later, *All We Know* offered a reconfiguration of the male parent where relationships with family members are based on mutuality and reciprocity rather than on the operations of hierarchical power. Indeed, gender no longer confers economic power or absolute authority to regulate the social autonomy of other members of the household. While traditional patriarchal values and behaviours are still shown to have force in the general social context represented in *All We Know*, the central domestic household subverts these

conventions by representing a family organisation which is vastly different from that offered in *The Min-Min*. The concept of 'separation of spheres' has disappeared to be replaced by an equal division of labour in household work and domestic responsibility. Equally significant and subversive is the representation of childrearing as a degendered practice.

The Min-Min seems to be the watershed text in terms of problematising the role of the father in the patriarchal nuclear family. The novel constructs a dialectic about fathering at a time when Australian sociologists were constructing unproblematic reports which continued to find the 'the Australian family' — meaning the patriarchal nuclear family — as 'the basic unit of society' (Gilding 1991, p.121). Superficial re-reading of the realist fiction of the nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties from the perspective of the late nineteen-nineties, can lead to dismissal of these fictions as classist, sexist and racist constructions of sociality. For instance, the implicit gendered assumptions in a decontextualised extract such as the one below might seem to justify such a dismissal:

> '...Did you find what you were looking for, Mrs
> Tucker when you were growing up?"
> Mary Tucker looked contentedly around her very
> full kitchen. 'Yes,' she said; 'I found what I was
> looking for - what I wanted. Now, let's get on with
> this sewing until Clive gives a shout.'
> (p.139)

Even if readers understand the full metonymic burden of 'her very full kitchen' many would no longer feel that this idea of feminine self-fulfilment should go unchallenged. *The Min-Min* certainly risks being castigated for its conservatism if it is inappropriately examined outside its historical context but this study intends to avoid such anachronism (Bourdieu 1990, p.104). To appreciate the progressive stance of the novel in its historical context, the polyphony of its writerly discourse must be examined. To focus only on the *bildungsroman* of the protagonist, thirteen year old Sylvie, is to miss the subversively nuanced representations of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity offered in the secondary level of the story, where two representations of male parenting, Chris Tucker

and Joe Edwards, offer a dialectic about the role of the fathers in the contemporary Australian organisation of the nuclear family. Joe Edwards is a railway fettler on the Trans Australian Railway line, and Chris Tucker, the manager of the Gulla Tank out-station (whose name implies that he is a proper 'breadwinner', unlike Joe Edwards). Sylvie chooses Gulla Tank out-station as the destination for herself and her younger brother Reg, when they run away from their isolated home at the railway settlement. In running away they hope that Reg will at least temporarily escape from trouble with the police and that Sylvie will be able to ask Mrs Tucker for advice (p.42).

Joe Edwards is represented as failing to fulfil those essential duties of the fathering role in the patriarchal nuclear family: he fails as a breadwinner (p.6), as a moral guide and protector of his children (pp.185-186) and in relations of cathexis (that is, his most significant emotional relationship) with his wife (p.196). He is physically violent and verbally abusive and it is his striking of Sylvie that is represented as the most alienating aspect of his behaviour for her (p.198). However from the viewpoint of the narrator, it is Edward's failure to be emotionally available and to communicate with his family that is most problematic. Sylvie is the focaliser here:

> It was strange to be together in this comfortable
> room, talking this way, talking of the past and the
> future. Never before had they discussed either. In
> fact Sylvie couldn't remember a time when they
> had discussed anything before.
> (p.196)

The discourse constructs Joe Edwards' reserve and silence as an exercise of power and a sign of his emotional inadequacy, not as rationality and strength as the discursive practices of hegemonic masculinity might interpret them. He is unable to articulate his feelings about either his wife's departure or the temporary removal of his eldest son to a welfare institution (p.204).

Joe Edwards' poor parenting is complicated by issues of social class and poverty which Connell shows is always the case in everyday social interaction (1995, p.75). However, as a perceptive encoder of the Australian social scene, Clark ensures that her representation of Joe

Edward's failure as a father is not just linked to social and economic disadvantage. The character of the magistrate Edgar Turnbull, who pronounces Joe Edwards a failure, represents those men who have achieved economic and social power within patriarchy. Clark's construction of the magistrate implies inadequacies in the Western patriarchy across all economic and social hierarchies:

> *"You're a failure as a parent, Joe Edwards!" he (the magistrate) thundered from the very bottom of his paunch. "for his own good, we have no alternative - no alternative, I say! - but to commit this boy to an institution!"*
> (p.185)

Here the narrating voice represents economic and institutional power in the unflattering descriptor 'paunch' which works metonymically to connote the pleasures/pitfalls of his economically privileged lifestyle . The verbal aggression suggested by the speech reporting tag 'thundered' marks violence as the basis of power exercised by institutional patriarchy. Violence maintains fear and hence control (Greer 1991, pp.369, Connell 1995, pp.98-102). The magistrate's repetition of 'no alternative' and the shift in pronoun from the bureaucratic 'we' to 'I' suggest his doubt about the decision he has reached, and undermine the apparent certainty about the efficacy of the sentence he metes out to Reg. This implied uncertainty is later confirmed:

> *Mr Edgar Turnbull gathered up his papers, straightened the harassed collar and lapels of his coat, and stood up, followed by his colleague. Judgement had been pronounced and there was nothing more to be said. And no one knew that he would return to his sheep station to have an acute attack of indigestion, wondering whether he had damned or promoted a boy's future.*
> (p.188)

Here, acting outside his role in the drama of the law, Clark uses the transferred epithet 'harassed' and the magistrate's focalised thoughts to confirm his disquietude about the official pronouncements made in the courtroom. The episode clearly interrogates the assumptions that hierarchical social relations are a guarantee of a benevolent

or wise social ordering. The discourse here is open-ended, offering a gap which invites the reader into an active engagement with the issues raised by the text.

The Min-Min works out from the dominant social values of its times in that the concept of the nuclear family remains the 'natural' family organisation: a household of married heterosexual parents with children where father is 'head of the house'. Nevertheless the novel problematises this concept because while Joe Edwards is clearly a reprobate he is represented as having to accept some changes that are imposed upon him by members of his family and as instigating other changes in his social relations with his family: he accepts responsibility for his failure as a father; accepts the necessity of his wife's leaving to regain her health; he requests that Sylvie return to assist him in caring for the family:

> *Suddenly, like a hammer, the thought struck her. He had sought her willingness to help keep the family together; whereas, being her father, he could have just commanded her. She held out her hand then, for just one brief moment. And his touch was warm and grateful and strong.*
> (p.196)

Sylvie exhibits the traditional understanding of patriarchy when she acknowledges that since she is still a minor under the law, her father could in fact order her to undertake domestic work and childrearing. Clark shows that patriarchy's assumption of absolute power is not a satisfactory model for successful social relations in the family. Sylvie responds to Edwards' request with new found confidence as she realises that a reciprocal relationship is replacing a hierarchical one. She negotiates the conditions which allow her to be genuinely committed to assisting him in keeping his family together (p.197).

Unlike Joe Edwards, the novel's representation of Chris Tucker is, on one level, as an ideal father under patriarchy. Edwards with his tearaway son Reg, is contrasted with Chris Tucker who has obedient sons of whom he can be proud. The Tucker boys defer to their father who has taught them many practical skills. They have been carefully educated in their outback home by their mother, 'But Chris made sure that Mary did have the backing of his

discipline' (p.109). For all these traditionally positive achievements in his parenting, Clark consistently undermines Chris Tucker as a model of fathering by the discoursal strategies of the text. Tucker's adherence to the letter of the law, his belief in his own moral authority, his posture of superiority in the world of work and his belief in the importance of hierarchical authority are all problematised as not being in the best interests of those with whom he lives. While all of these characteristics are irritating, it is his inability to hear any point of view apart from his own and his inability to empathise with others that distance him most from the reader. The narrator's discourse shows him unquestioningly committed to the operation of hierarchical social structures but the overt moment of rejection of Chris's fathering is when, in dialogue between Mary and Sylvie, Mary pronounces him as 'self righteous' in his attempts to return Sylvie and Reg to their home (p.141).

The discoursal strategy of having the hearth as a symbolic site for Chris's enactment of territorial control within the family is used a number of times:

Mary turned then to busy herself with the pots on the stove, and Chris took up his position on the hearth. She had constantly to go round him as she prepared to serve the dinner, but he had stood in that spot for so many years that she didn't notice.
(p.155)

Clark repeatedly undermines Chris Tucker's assumptions of authority by displacing domestic power plays and communication problems onto the cats. In the following extract, Mary and Chris have just disagreed about the necessity of immediately returning Sylvie and Reg to the authorities:

He shifted a bit sideways so that another marmalade cat complained as he caught the tip of its tail. It, too, sprang from hearth to chair, from chair to dresser and from dresser shelf to the top of the cupboard, so that there were two cats glowering balefully down on Mr Tucker who had usurped their position on the hearth.
There was a frown above Mr Tucker's hazel eyes. He felt that Mary was being most unrealistic

about the whole situation. But then, perhaps a woman who could tie back her dark curls with a red ribbon when she had a son as big as Jeff was unrealistic about some things.
The fire was warm on his back but he didn't move away from it. The hearth belonged to him, not to the cats.
(p.136)

In the first paragraph the cats are used to describe the operations of power and the word 'usurp' is the most significant marker of this imperialist drama. In the second paragraph, Mary's behaviour, as focalised by Tucker, is constructed as that of the female 'other': within the traditional masculine/feminine oppositions, the feminine is irrational and emotional as the word 'unrealistic' signifies. Consequently she need not to be heeded. His misogyny is confirmed, and a complete dismissal of her point of view becomes possible, as he casts her into the role of object for the male gaze and as such, finds that she is no longer quite satisfactory as she is middle-aged with her childbearing function completed (Greer 1991, p.36). The wearing of the ribbon can only seen as inappropriate to someone who believes that there is a 'natural order' to be obeyed. Mary's wearing of the red ribbon is a coded message of resistance and Chris Tucker is correct to read it as a sign of subversion.

Ultimately, the novel shows social relations in the Tucker family to be quite as problematic as those in Joe Edwards' family. However Chris Tucker, unlike Joe Edwards, remains unenlightened about the communication problems in his domestic household. The reader remains effectively distanced from Tucker's point of view because, just as he did not consider the pain he caused the cats by his imperiousness, neither has he listened properly to the children's story, shown any sympathy for the plight of Sylvie and Reg, nor considered the likely adverse consequences of their being returned to the railway settlement.

In the extract above the reader again sees that the novel is working out of the gendered sociality dominant in its historical context: it is Mary, the female, who is represented as the patient listener, who is caring and intuitive (Stephens

1996, pp.18-19); the extract offers a conventionally gendered domestic setting where there is a clear 'separation of spheres'. Yet the discourse demonstrates very strongly the tendency in hegemonic masculinity to mark difference as inferiority which then legitimises domination. Connell writes that,

> *The defence of injustice in gender relations constantly appeals to difference, to a masculine/ feminine opposition defining one place for female bodies and another place for male...The social organisation of these practices in a patriarchal gender order constitutes difference as domination, as unavoidably hierarchical.*
> (p.231)

It is because of this aspect of hegemonic masculinity, where difference legitimates domination, that Connell argues that 'feminism of difference', which has largely replaced 'feminism of equality', finds serious problems in undermining the everyday practices of a gendered society where masculine privilege remains entrenched at all levels of significant power (1997, pp.231-232). Connell argues that the advocacy of difference and the process of degendering must proceed hand in hand: 'the idea is to recompose, rather than to delete, the cultural elements of gender' (p.234) so that the positive human attributes formerly cast as binary opposites, as either masculine or feminine, become potentialities for everyone. This social revolution is by no means envisioned in *The Min-Min*. However the novel offers readers a significant commentary on the issue of fathering under patriarchy and clearly marks points of 'crisis tendency' in gender relations and in the configuration of fathering endorsed by hegemonic masculinity in the patriarchal nuclear family.

When we leap forward two decades to a literary representation of the Australian domestic scene in 1986 we have moved to new stages of 'crisis tendency' in patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. Moving away from 1966 means leaving the era of 'The Australian Way of life' (White 1981, pp.158-171) which promulgated the idea of nuclear family with its separate gendered spheres for men and women, social and cultural homogeneity and advocacy of conformity and consumersim, to the era that

Hugh Mackay has termed the 'Age of Redefinition' in Australian society because

> *Since the early 1970s, there is hardly an institution, or a convention of Australian life which has not been subject either to serious challenge or radical change. The social, cultural, political and economic landmarks which we have traditionally used as reference points for defining the Australian way of life have either vanished, been eroded or shifted.*
> (1993, p.17)

In his most recent book, *Generations* (1997), Mackay concludes that the process of redefinition is ongoing (p.194). There is agreement among cultural researchers that the women's movement of the nineteen-seventies was the 'crisis tendency' from which the patriarchal social system and its gender order could not recover. Researchers report that the greatest social changes have been recorded in interpersonal relationships, particularly in relations of cathexis and in the social relations within the family or domestic household. Men's lives have in many cases been transformed by the loss of the role of 'breadwinner' that was traditionally both the masculine privilege and burden under patriarchy. With the loss of that symbolic role, the automatic status and authority that derived from economic power also disappeared (White 1981, p.168, Mackay 1993, p.25, Connell 1997, pp.41).

Degendering social relations and recomposing of gender configurations requires a complex restructuring of political and social power, and practice commonly lags behind attitudinal changes (Mackay 1993, pp.36-37; Connell 1997, p.202-203). Connell proposes that any attempt to delete the achievements of either half of the patriarchal gender order diminishes everyone. What he proposes is the degendering of culture, of society's institutions and of interpersonal relationships. He argues for the recomposition of human possibilities being allowed to develop outside constraints of a dichotomised and hierarchical gender order.

All We Know attempts such a project in the representation of social relations in its central domestic household. As in *The Min-Min*, a range of male characters is offered in the

novel so that readers can engage in a debate about various kinds of male parenting and domestic organisations. Unlike *The Min-Min*, *All We Know* privileges one version of masculinity and male parenting: Michael, the character who is superficially the 'SNAG' - the Sensitive New Age Guy' of popular culture. However the novel is not glib in the reconfiguration of masculinity it offers and the representation of masculinity operating in the domestic sphere is painstakingly detailed. There is a complementary reconfiguration of the feminine and 'mother' since traditionally 'Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition.' (Connell 1995, p.44). In *All We Know* gender is recomposed so that positive human attributes and experiences are available equally to Michael and to his partner, Susan.

As the ideal of reconfigured masculinity and male parenting, Michael is contrasted with the other 'fathering' models available in the domestic households of the other children in the novel: Kylie whose father has strictly regulated access to her and who becomes an object of contestation between her parents; Ian whose usually absent mother is his only available parent and whose biological father is unknown; Sean Black's parents where sexual jealousy and patriarchal violence become a terrifying public spectacle; John and his wife, Carol, choosing to raise their baby in retreat from twentieth century urban life on a hobby farm; the Arcana brothers whose 'alternative life-style' is represented by their home in a bus out in a paddock and who are having to adjust to their father's death in a motor cycle accident; Arkie's 'natural' father who lives in another State so far removed physically and so uncommunicative as to be emotionally harmful to the children.

All We Know offers a recuperation of the male parent in the four areas of 'crisis tendency' in the domestic household which are identified by Michael Gilding in his study, *The Making and Breaking of the Australian Family* (1991). These areas are childrearing, the division of labour in the domestic household, economic independence (particularly employment of women outside the home)

and relations of cathexis. All of these incipient areas of crisis in social relations are represented as being lessened in the novel because the concept of the 'separation of spheres' has disappeared. Susan does not link her identity to her 'very full kitchen' as Mary Tucker does but rather to her profession, her musical interests as well as to her relationship with Michael and her children, Arkie and Jo. Both Susan and Michael are 'breadwinners', 'caregivers' and organisers of the domestic household. Susan's identity is not a 'second hand' one derived from her male partner as had been the accepted practice for generations of women before 1975 (Mackay 1993, pp.24-25). In fact, both Michael and Susan are shown as making decisions about childrearing and the domestic arrangements in opposition to their own childhood experiences of the hierarchical rigidity in the dichotomised gender relations of the patriarchal nuclear family. Arkie and Jo experience this kind of traditional family organisation whenever Susan's mother, Nan, comes to stay. She offers the representation of a woman exercising hierarchical power devolved to her in the domestic domain under patriarchy. The children find 'the unspeakable order' of her autocratic rule and inflexible household routines most oppressive (pp.93-99).

Successful communication with all members of the household is foregrounded as a key to harmony in the domestic scene. Here *All We Know* addresses that area of contention in family relations highlighted so powerfully by the narratorial voice in *The Min-Min*. Negotiation without power games is repeatedly endorsed in the dialogues in *All We Know*, which is quite unlike the communication sleight of hand and deceitful behaviours required by Mary Tucker with her husband, or the complete lack of communication as in Joe Edwards' case. The novel subverts patriarchy as it shows Michael enjoying parenting and family life with his equal participation in the organisation of childcare and his enjoyment of communicating with the children (Connell 1997, p.85). Michael's enjoyment of the physicality of nurturing is represented in many ways in the novel: hugging (pp.20-21), tickling (p. 73), reading bed-time stories (pp.71-72).

The character shows a commitment to the welfare of

women and girls and the mutuality of his relationship with Susan is clearly based on 'reciprocity not hierarchy' (Connell 1997, p. 230) which is very different to that represented in *The Min-Min* by either Joe Edwards or Chris Tucker. It is Michael who realises that Arkie is right to want 'a room of her own' and that Susan needs to be involved in performing live music once again. In the extract from the novel that follows, many of these aspects of a reconfigured masculinity and male parenting are represented. The spatial organisation of this scene presents a significant contrast to the vignette of Chris Tucker insisting on his symbolic position in front of the hearth (see above p. 10). Arkie's focalised thoughts appear below in the alternate font.

> *Michael was sitting at one end of the couch beside*
> *a couple of mum's music students, and Arkie*
> *wandered over and sat on the armrest next to him.*
> *They glanced at one another, exchanging crooked*
> *smiles. Mum was at her piano, listening to the*
> *first bars of a steady blues song and nodding her*
> *head slightly to the beat. Her fingers settled on*
> *the piano keys...*
> *Jo climbed into Michael's lap as the music*
> *changed beat and became more frenzied...*
> It wouldn't be like this if mum was still with dad
> and we were in that home unit we used to live in.
> Dad wouldn't have let it happen...
> *the music continued loudly for several songs*
> *more and then concluded amid applause and*
> *congratulations. The band members set their*
> *instruments down and drifted into conversations*
> *around the loungeroom. A tape on the stereo*
> *began playing again, and mum jammed herself*
> *into a space on the couch next to Michael. They*
> *exchanged murmurs, laughed and kissed.*
> (pp.217-218, my ellipses)

The spatial arrangement of the scene indicates the centrality of Susan in this episode. Michael is on the 'end' of the couch and Arkie on the 'armrest' suggests their acceptance of a background position in this scene where Susan is centre stage and the 'star'. The ironic look Arkie and Michael exchange, Jo sitting on Michael's lap and Susan squashing in near them and kissing Michael when

she has finished playing, suggest the extent of the democratic emotional bonds between these people and the mutuality of their respect for one another, as well as the pleasure they feel in one another's company. Mutuality and reciprocity of relationships are clearly valorised. Arkie's focalised thoughts, 'Dad wouldn't have let it happen...' draw the contrasting picture of a traditional patriarchal home where the father assumes the authority to regulate behaviour and limit the autonomy of women and children. This reminds us again of the patriarchal model of fathering exposed in *The Min-Min* .

It is in the process of giving Arkie 'a room of her own' that Michael must finally deal with his negative childhood experiences. The emotional pain is shown by the gradual process of facing the contents of each of the drawers in the roll top desk that has been stuffed with his mementoes and memorabilia. His willingness to learn to communicate about emotionally painful issues like his own unsatisfactory family experiences is shown. Just as Sylvie in *The Min-Min* most resents the physical violence her father metes out, so too Michael's ambivalence about discussing his childhood has to do with physical punishment he suffered as a child.

> *"Arkie, that was a bit cruel," he'd said. "I used*
> *to wet the bed too, when I was Jo's age, and it*
> *wasn't much fun. You couldn't stay with friends.*
> *Missed out on school camps, scared the other*
> *kids would find out. My dad used to belt me for it.*
> *I'm trying to help Jo - how about you helping*
> *too?"...*
> My dad used to belt me for it. *When she replayed*
> *that statement to herself, a lot of questions she'd*
> *never before asked came to mind.* I've never met
> Michael's parents. I don't even know where he
> grew up.
> (p.20)

Michael is represented as trying to ensure that both Arkie and Jo have better childhood experiences than he had. He is actively trying to assist Jo's bedwetting and is prepared to discuss Arkie's lack of compassion in a frank manner in terms that will be meaningful for her. The extract specifically rejects hegemonic masculinity's approval of

physical violence. Arkie's focalised thoughts, in 'replaying' Michael's comments about physical violence, allow the reader to make the link between the physical violence and the subsequent lack of contact between Michael and his parents. Michael has erased his parents from his life as effectively as the developers erased all traces of the house in which he grew up.

All We Know is able to offer a representation of a reconfigured male parent and subverts the patriarchal ordering of social relations in the domestic household. This means that the novel addresses some the areas of 'crisis tendency' in patriarchy represented dialogically in *The Min-Min*. *All We Know* shows that attitudinal changes have occurred, as have changes in everyday domestic practices with Michael routinely undertaking tasks that would have been regarded as 'unmanly' in the patriarchal model of masculinity problematised in *The Min-Min*. The affective and communication aspects of the reconfiguration of the male parent are especially marked.

Given that *All We Know* represents a continuation of patriarchal social structures in the broader context, Connell would see Michael's case as an example of the individual male choosing to adopt a reconfigured masculinity. This was the agenda of many of the early 'men's groups' which supported the feminist movement. Connell argues that individual male reform will not sufficiently address the larger political and economic issues of degendering society (p.139). Nevertheless literary representations which show characters displaying reconfigured masculine practice in everyday settings suggest to child readers that there is the capacity in our social system for difference to exist and for change to occur. Mackay has found that despite some clear changes in degendering Australian social practice, the one thing that does not happen is debate about gender issues: 'direct, open, frank and well-intentioned discussion about the subject between men and women still appears to be a relatively rare event' (1993, p.47). This surely increases the worth of children's fictions which are prepared to interrogate social relations in child-rearing contexts and to imagine how such relations and contexts might be changed.

When one re-reads the fictions about family life written

for Australian children, the extent to which one is prepared to allow historical context to be a significant factor in the meanings ascribed to the text affects whether one finds them emancipatory or stultifying. At the very least, the evidence presented here shows that the far-reaching social changes which have arisen from new understandings of gender construction and the need for change in Australian society are reflected in the literary representations of fathers and male caregivers offered in realist children's fictions produced during these decades. As Connell writes,

> *If patriarchy is understood as a historical structure, rather than a timeless dichotomy of men abusing women, then it will be ended by historical process. The strategic problem is to generate pressures that will cumulate towards a transformation of the whole structure; the structural mutation is the end of the process, not the beginning. In earlier stages, any initiative that sets up pressure towards that historical change is worth having.*
> (p.238)

This study of the social changes in male parenting between 1966 and 1986, as represented in *The Min-Min* and *All We Know,* confirms that masculinities are 'inherently historical' rather than fixed and 'natural' and that change is possible (Connell p. 44). It is arguable that children's literature texts have contributed to that process of historical change. *The Min-Min* offers dialogic representations of early 'crisis tendency' in fathering under patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity, while *All We Know* represents reconfigurations of masculinity which reject the gendered concept of the 'separation of spheres' for men and women in domestic life. Connell argues that in gender relations we should strive for 'complex equality that might advance society towards social justice' and envisions the possibility that,

> *in the context of the broad delegitimation of patriarchy, man's relational interests in the welfare of woman and girls can displace the same men's gender-specific interests in supremacy '*(p. 242).

Within the constraints of their historical contexts, both *The Min-Min* and *All We Know* allow us to trace that desired shift in focus of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity from insisting upon dichotomy and domination in gender relations to foregrounding a concern for the best interests and aspirations of girls and women.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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