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'Legends of Power and Weakness'

The construction of relationships between adults and children in *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Dear Nobody*

by Rhona Mayers

'It seems to me that children's literature...is about people who are small and not given all the facts, trying to cope in a world where the power belongs to the big people who have more knowledge. In a way, almost all children's books are legends of power and weakness'. (Anne Schlee, in Harrison and Maguire, *Innocence to Experience*, p.215).

From the moment we begin to consider the two texts *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Dear Nobody* the titles plunge us headlong into the treatise about parental power. The title of the first text foreshadows its content, drawing heavily upon the Biblical legend of Jacob, in which Isaac's patriarchal fiat despatches Esau to his subservient destiny. In *Dear Nobody*, Helen becomes caught up in her own tale of adult power over adolescent weakness. Ironically, she then moves into the adult role and creates her own parental truth which she hands on to her own unborn, unnamed daughter. This becomes a written legend, her unique individual story, her own ideology. As Peter Hollindale states:

What we call 'ideology' is a living thing, and something we need to know as we need to know ourselves. Very much like that, because it is a part of us.¹

The novel *Jacob Have I Loved* revisits the ancient Biblical tradition of adult control of the young. The title itself, an excerpt from the book of Genesis, appears

again in Malachi and Romans, and serves to foreground an ideology, sternness and the fear of God embedded in the text. Louise, like Esau, perceives herself to be unloved by both her parents and by God, and remains in a helpless state of ignorance, while the adults within her world retain power through their self-contained and blinkered attitudes. Rass itself (and its tiny population) 'lived in fear and mercy of the Lord' just as Louise does; God, like a stern parent is omniscient and omnipotent.

As Anne Schlee quite rightly says, the children are not given the facts or the knowledge and are thus denied the power this brings. Louise never knows the true background to Captain Wallace's re-appearance on the island; hints of a doomed relationship with Grandma are never confirmed. Louise's parents and grandmother remain aloof and all-knowing, their power emanating from a 'heavenly nourishment'.

It is only when the Captain's house is destroyed that Louise has some stirring of adult sexuality within her, a new power that is foreign to her and yet comforting:

For all his white beard, he looked like a little boy trying not to cry. I crossed the narrow space between us...and put my arms around him. I went hot all over, and I could hear my heart banging to be let out of my chest. I knew that anything that made a person feel the way I felt at

that moment had to be a deadly sin.²

Louise has momentarily overturned the myth of her own hopelessness and helplessness by becoming the comforting adult to the childlike Captain. Earlier on in this climactic passage, as the eye of the storm approaches, Louise, still the weak child, tries to gain some comfort from her mother's strength:

Momma patted the bed beside her. I went and sat down. I wanted to snuggle up on her lap like a toddler, but I was fourteen, so I sat as close to her body as I dared.³

Paterson's construction of the power relationship between parent and child is clearly delineated here. The reader is positioned to feel a helplessness along with Louise. Moments where Louise may have a growing understanding of life are silenced; the text privileges only one reading, that of the ignorant and fearful child within a cruel and harsh environment.

The character of the grandmother further supports such a reading of the text. The constant 'tongue-lashings' Louise receives, and her submissive acceptance of them, authorize a view of the text as a construct of adult power. The grandmother, unlike her daughter-in-law, is an 'islander' and, as such, assumes a position of superiority over her family. Because she hates the water (and loved the Lord) she is able to command those around her to cater to her whims. Louise is

scolded for not sweetening her coffee. Louise's mother, Susan, is subjected to her demented ravings. Both remain passive and compliant in the face of derision.

When the Captain decides to move into Trudy Braxton's empty house after his is demolished in the storm, the grandmother is able to subdue and control all by withholding information:

(The Captain) looked as though awaiting our judgement. My grandmother was the first to speak 'I knowed it', she muttered darkly without a hint of what it was she knew.⁴

Louise's brave, tentative forays into breaking down the mould of weakness in which she has been cast, indicate a desperate desire to throw aside tradition. She is determined to leave the island and not to follow the negative role-models of her mother and grandmother. While the reader is positioned to applaud this bold step, the dominant reading is that Louise will always be ruled by the views and values of her tradition and culture. When she leaves, it is for a place as remote as Rass that bears her father's name, to do traditional work and further lock herself into the gender-biased ethos of her forbears. She submits to a higher authority, 'the big people who have more knowledge', confirming the practice of medicine to be beyond her grasp. The ending of the novel sees Louise thwarted yet again, unable to grow in

knowledge or understanding. She remains in a 'mountain-locked valley' impeded by adults in authority who reinforce her inadequacy.

The unequal relationship between adults and children, as expounded by Rose, in her critical work *The Case of Peter Pan*⁵ on children's fiction, is a relationship fraught with tensions. The hierarchy of power is forever held by adults and forever sought by children. The power of the adults in *Jacob Have I Loved* is the control over the environment in which the protagonist finds herself, as she says:

I love Rass Island, although for much of my life, I did not think I did, and it is a pure sorrow to me that, once my mother leaves, there will be no one left there with the name of Bradshaw. But there were only two of us, my sister, Caroline, and me, and neither of us could stay.⁶

This is Louise's heritage, cherished by the adults, the source of their strength and her weakness. She recognizes that, on Rass, her sex is against her as 'sons represented wealth and security', and power, as well as her father's livelihood, could only be handed on to a son. The narrative of *Jacob Have I Loved* is focalised through the character of Louise. The reader is privy to her inmost thoughts and yearnings, positioned as confidant to this unloved, undervalued child. Louise's stream of consciousness further serves to increase the powerful machinations of the adults

in the novel.

Since the day we were born, twins like Jacob and Esau, the younger had ruled the older.... 'Jacob have I loved....' Who was speaking? Was it Isaac, the father of the twins? No, even the Bible said that Isaac had favoured Esau. Rebecca, the mother, perhaps. It was her conniving that helped Jacob steal the blessing from his brother. I knew that these were not her words. I looked up the passage Grandma had cited. Romans, the ninth chapter and the thirteenth verse. The speaker was God.⁷

The Biblical parallel firmly places the events of the Bradshaws within a rigid societal and religious norm. It is possible at this point to offer a resistant reading and not see Louise as 'more sinned against than sinning'.⁸ If the society has created such a ruthless God, determined to subjugate His children, then we, as readers, cease to support religion in this narrow context. We want Louise to turn her back on it all, to strive for equality and empowerment. Reading against the grain enables us to reject the detrimental religious ideology and patriarchal principals rooted in the culture.

Patricia M. Spacks details how...

...the adolescent rejects boundaries, blithely crosses them, refusing to stay put, to remain a child, to accept subservience...⁹

Dear Nobody confirms this view, particularly of Helen as the now

adult mother who has challenged the narrow ideology of her own mother and gained the vital knowledge that empowers her. Early on in the novel, however, Alicia Gorton jealously holds power over Chris through her non-verbal signals that reinforce his inadequacy and vulnerability:

*Mrs Gorton eyed me over the rim of her cup. I felt uncomfortable. It was as if she was trying to probe into my mind. I always felt awkward when I was left on my own with her.*¹⁰

Helen too, is constructed as a character of weakness, a child, not an adult:

*I must have been biting my nails...I do remember Mum leaning forward and slapping my hand away from my mouth. It was an old, familiar gesture from when I was little. It made me feel helpless.*¹¹

Here, the non-verbal communication upholds another kind of power, that of knowledge. The most significant information for both Helen and Chris is deliberately withheld by their parents. It is only when they are both 'catapulted into the world of grown-ups' that they challenge their state of ignorance. Helen's discovery of her mother's own illegitimate birth and Chris' probing into his father's emotional state provide them with the crucial understanding that had kept them powerless. For both, their status is raised; they become adults along with their parents.

*It was as if someone had opened a door and had slammed it shut again, and I'd just caught a glimpse of a secret room on the other side. Parents are such private people.*¹²

The binary opposition implicit in the status of adult and child (or adolescent) is often the cause of so much wrestling for power in the two novels cited. Louise is constantly grappling with a feeling of being ousted; her parents and grandmother retain the power of choice and they have favoured her sister, Caroline, over her. From the moment of her birth, Louise is the powerless infant 'cast aside and forgotten'.

In *Dear Nobody* the tussle for power is between the dominant value system stridently upheld by Mrs Gorton and the incursions on it made by Helen. The old order is knowledgeable and experienced; the new order has much to learn. Sexuality threatens the adult in power, who regards the childlike innocence of her progeny as inviolable. That her teenage schoolgirl daughter is not only sexually active, but pregnant to boot, horrifies her mother:

*And you've never heard of decency? Did you have to do it? After all I've taught you?*¹³

When Helen challenges her mother, desperately needing to know whether she, herself, had been born out of wedlock, Mrs Gorton reveals

her ideology regarding sex before marriage:

*'Do you imagine that I'd do a thing like that?' she said then, her voice gone cold and shaking. 'A dirty thing like that?'*¹⁴

Perhaps the ultimate threat to Mrs Gorton's power in this relationship can be summed up in the words of Jacqueline Rose:

*The child is sexual, but its sexuality threatens our own at its very roots. Setting up the child as innocent is not, therefore, repressing its sexuality - it is above all holding off any possible challenge to our own.*¹⁵

The text *Dear Nobody* focalises the narrative through the consciousness of both Chris and Helen. Point of view flows effortlessly between the two, so as to position the reader to identify strongly with their cause. We are intimate sharers of their secret lives, and we support them throughout their ordeal. The fact that the discourse marginalises much of the adults' thoughts and feelings ensures that our subject positioning is at one with the adolescents' ideology and their perception of the truth.

The Gathering by Isobelle Carmody provides an apposite intertextual example of a nihilistic environment in which the adults have been rendered powerless in a disquieting way. Fantasy is the ideal genre for the author's implicit ideology which valorises child-

centredness, 'child-power', as opposed to the traditional hierarchy of power. In it, adolescents live separate, independent lives with little or no parental control. Evil lurks around every corner, as the gang of spirited youths, galvanised by their new-found strength, eradicate the *daemon*, that of the adult-controlled Gathering:

Mr. Karle walked forward out of the shadows, his eyes as cold as a shark's. 'The game is over. Welcome to the Gathering at last.'¹⁶

To this challenge, the teenage Nissa 'laughed with fearless scorn'. In a violent climax, the Kraken (who is also the Deputy Principal of the local high school!) is assailed, and Nathaniel, through whom the narrative is focalised, is at last, given the 'truth' of his absent father. The allegory is, however, one that perpetuates adult knowledge and adolescent ignorance by authorising a unitary meaning for 'truth'.

Carmody positions her readers to identify totally with the youths as principal focalisers in the novel; they will be encouraged to emulate such actions and seek to confront patriarchal structures in society as occurs in the novel. But, as John Stephens cautions:

The present habit of stressing reader-focused approaches to text in combination with advocacy of identification with focalisers,.... is a dangerous ideological tool and pedagogically irresponsible.¹⁷

The legend of adult control and child weakness, the legend that affiliates knowledge with truth, is replicated in

terms of the single subject position that teenage readers will adopt. From this position 'the reader's own selfhood is effaced....'¹⁸ along with that of both Nathaniel and Carmody's implied reader.

Western history cannot be dissociated from the way 'truth' is produced and inscribes its effects. We live in a society which to a large extent marches in time with truth - what I mean by that is ours is a society which produces and circulates discourse with a truth function, discourse which passes for the truth and holds specific powers.¹⁹

The social worlds in the novels cited above can be seen as composed of a wide range of discourses arising from and functioning around the institutions of which they are a part; discourses which function in alliance or in opposition to each other. Discourses have operated throughout Western history in ways that privilege certain groups and normalise the inferiority of others. In many ways, the discourse in *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Dear Nobody* often serves as an example of the construction of adult empowerment and child powerlessness.

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Biographical Note

Rhona Mayers is Head of English at Siena College, Camberwell, Victoria, where she teaches English and Literature up to Year 12. Prior to her appointment at Siena, she taught English Method in the Diploma of Education course at Monash University's School of Graduate Studies, in the Faculty of Education.