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# Gillian Rubinstein and Her Women

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## Introduction

What is it that computers, jigsaw puzzles and cryptic crosswords have in common? Simply the capacity to intrigue us. To puzzle us and whet our appetite for more — to keep us thinking. There is one facet of Gillian Rubinstein's novels which is similarly intriguing and that is her characterisation of women. Just as cryptic crosswords do, her women behave according to their own internally consistent rules (although their relationship with reality is often erratic) and they draw on a wealth of observations, learning and experiences in (particularly women) readers which might seem disconnected and meaningless to the uninitiated, but which create in the end a coherent whole. The depth and strength in these characters, counterpoised with their often appallingly negative character traits, forms the puzzle. Why do they seem so profoundly important? Are they simply storybook characters, entirely dictated by and subservient to the plot? Or do they speak to the reader directly because they represent a deeper working out of Rubinstein's own experiences and feelings about women, womanhood and motherhood in particular? The answer probably lies somewhere in the middle, but the question niggles away at the back of the mind. Accordingly, this paper concerns the question: where does the story end and the personal pain begin? Let's begin with the author.

(There is an abundance of quotes in

the following two sections; it is important to establish Rubinstein's views using her own words — but the rate of quotation decreases rapidly once this is done.)

## Why does Gillian Rubinstein write?

The most cynical answer to this question is "for the money" — Gillian Rubinstein herself says that:

*My husband . . . was feeling the stress of being the main breadwinner and was starting to make suggestions about finding a job. I was quite alarmed by the prospect . . . The only thing I remotely knew how to do was write. And so I gave myself three months to write a novel . . . Space Demons.<sup>1&2</sup>*

But whilst the need for money may have been the catalyst, the need to write again (after an interval of about ten years) was probably the essential impetus. She says that

*. . . from the earliest I can remember, I was a storyteller<sup>3</sup>,*

but when

*. . . I found myself always writing with a slightly spiteful tone, . . . I stopped — for ever, I thought at the time . . .<sup>4</sup>*

but just prior to writing *Space Demons*

*. . . I found a deep inner source of creativity was tapped and released by the healing effect of dance. I*

*suddenly wrote a series of poems. Writing, which I had more or less given up . . . had come back to me.<sup>5</sup>*

Rubinstein, however, does not see herself as a writer in the grand tradition:

*I have no aspirations really to be a great writer. I just want to turn out readable books, try to be honest, avoid clichés and have fun,<sup>6</sup>*

nor does she see herself as a writer with a mission to change the world; she sees herself as first and foremost a storyteller:

*I'm not trying to write some kind of sociological tract. I write fiction, and part of the function of fiction is to tell someone's story, and that story is only going to be interesting if there is some sort of conflict going on.<sup>7</sup>*

More revealing of her motives for writing are her answers in reply to the question "Why do you write for children?" (as though writing for children is somehow different from writing for anyone else). Like all good storytellers, Rubinstein has produced many different answers to this constant query, and she's quite frank about admitting to her propensity to "fudge up some rational answer"<sup>8</sup>, but there's a ring of truth when she says that

*It is in "Children's Books" that I feel free to ask the basic questions that adults no longer dare ask themselves aloud: Who am I? What is the world? Why are some*

*things (selfishness, greed, hatred) life-destroying and others life-giving? I don't know the answers — like so many of my characters I am lost in the dark, but I have to ask the questions . . .*<sup>9</sup>

Whilst all of Rubinstein's novels are superficially entertaining, there can't be any doubt that she writes primarily because she has things she wants to say (though, as she says, not in the form of a sociological tract):

*If a book has nothing to say, if it does not make a point that sets you thinking, then there is no point in writing it. I feel very strongly that you have to put into words your particular vision of the world. This is your obligation and your right to do that.*<sup>10</sup>

And she has (so far) chosen to write children's books

*because that was the best form for what I wanted to say.*<sup>11</sup>

Rubinstein uses her writing fundamentally as a means of working out and making sense of her own background and experiences, and as a means of expressing her views and understandings about the world. Writing for her is therapeutic:

*I know that Judy Blume says that every time she writes a book, it saves her hours of psychotherapy. It's true. You write all the things down you've ever feared or worried about and then you resolve them*

*and start with something else.*<sup>12</sup>

The question is whether she really does manage to do as she says, and actually resolve some of the fundamental issues about womanhood and the female image in herself which come out so troublesomely in her work. It is addressed later in this paper.

There is one last element to the question of why Gillian Rubinstein writes: she is very conscious of the role that storytelling plays (or has played, if one is pessimistic about the influence of television) in our culture. The idea that folk tales and fairy stories are actually a means of transmitting cultural truths through the use of archetypes is one that she has expressed a number of times,<sup>13</sup> which leads to the notion that she believes that as a storyteller she is responsible for passing on not only her own values and understandings, but somehow also the deeper truths of our culture.

*I see myself as a tribal elder of our extraordinarily crazy culture, telling stories based on my own experience and understanding. If I'm successful, the stories pass on a sense of integration to anyone who cares to read them.*<sup>14</sup>

It's an interesting idea, especially when one considers that Rubinstein writes from "a state of belief" (her words)<sup>15</sup> based on Christianity. There are echoes of missionary zeal here that need to be explored, especially in relation (again) to her images of women. Is she portray-

ing a traditional view of women's role to be thus "integrated", or a non-traditional one?

Having developed a view of *why* Rubinstein writes, now let's explore *how* she writes — where do her characters and plots spring from and how does she meld them into a written work?

#### What are the mechanics of Rubinstein's production?

Gillian Rubinstein has said that she has

*. . . always had . . . imagination to the point of visions all [her] life*<sup>16</sup>

and she uses this faculty as the basis for much of her writing. Often she begins

*. . . with one central image which is not an idea, but a visual image — an image of kids in a certain situation. There is a magnetic power to this image which attracts all sorts of other things that cluster around it. It's out of that great cluster that the book gets written.*<sup>17</sup>

Beginning with this initial image and its cluster, Rubinstein progresses in an almost haphazard manner, allowing the book to shape itself through the writing:

*I always start out writing a book without a very clear idea of where it is going . . . and it takes a long time before I suddenly realize how I want the storyline to go. Then I start all over again. It's at that*

stage that I make a very comprehensive plot outline.<sup>18</sup>

Making this "comprehensive plot outline" for *Beyond the Labyrinth*<sup>19</sup> (and also later *Galax-Arena*<sup>20</sup> involved making

*... a chart with all of the themes and all of the characters and all of the events colour-coded with lines going down and lines going across. It was an incredible piece of abstract art.*<sup>21</sup>

It is this complexity or density of themes and ideas which is so attractive in her work. One can almost see the abstract art in operation beneath the surface, in the construction and linking of meanings and images. The sense of emotional movement and changing ideas about the world, together with the strong use of dialogue and action produces a feeling of watching the controlled production of a work of art.

But how consciously does Rubinstein control her characters? Having already argued that she uses her writing to express her views and understandings of the world, how much does she consciously manipulate her plot and characters to produce the views and effects she wants? She has said that

*... I write fairly irrationally and I don't actually decide: "I want to say this, I want to say that"*<sup>22</sup>

but at the same time she admits openly that she consciously

controls her plot development very carefully. For example, her decision to change the ending of *Beyond the Labyrinth* shows her manipulating a plot to coincide with her conscious (rather than subconscious) beliefs:

*When I first wrote the book, the first ending was the real ending, but then I decided that wasn't fair to Vicky and her side of the story and that there should be a more optimistic option so I wrote the second ending.*<sup>23</sup>

The first ending is dramatically pessimistic — Brenton escapes to Cal's (alien) world, leaving his own to self-destruct — whereas the second ending is cautiously optimistic, despite involving a compromise in Brenton's values (Brenton decides to help save the world instead of abandoning it.)<sup>24</sup> It is interesting that it was the first (pessimistic) ending which was her instinctive choice, and the second (optimistic) ending had to be contrived later.

Things are far less consciously manipulated, however, when it comes to the creation of her characters:

*I write about the characters fairly instinctively ... They exist in my head long before I start writing the book and, I suppose, from my everyday observation and experience I select attributes ... et cetera that fit each character.*<sup>25</sup>

With regard to the initial images which prompt her works, too,

*The images are basically primary images and this is their strength. They come up from the subconscious and then I have a feel of the book as a whole.*<sup>26</sup>

This notion that her writing "comes up from the subconscious" is an important one, especially in relation to her portrayal of women and girls, because it indicates that whilst she does have rational, well-developed views about the physical and political state of things, and whilst she also operates from an articulated and nevertheless spiritual "state of belief", still her writing is largely coming from a part of her which is not rational or "worked out". She is expressing a part of herself which is not amenable to reason, or belief, or anything other than her most deeply felt and experienced reality, and it is in her portrayal of characters that this is most evident. Her plot development, as I have shown, is far more controlled by her conscious attitudes and beliefs.

After developing this much understanding of Rubinstein's motivations and processes, it is possible to see the connection with her view that

*... before modern notions of a separate period called childhood existed ... folk literature contained society's wisdom, passing on from one generation to the next the values that make the cement of community and without which both community and culture founder.*<sup>27</sup>

What Gillian Rubinstein is writing is actually her own experience of society, her own vision of what it means to live in our modern Western world, with working mothers, broken families, deserted children . . . and computer games. She is creating a picture of the common issues and struggles faced by ordinary people, and through that picture she is interpreting for us *which* values "make the cement of the community", and which will make "both community and culture founder". She is also projecting a value-laden image of women and their place in this world, which is also "culturally transmitted" through her works to all those readers who can absorb and interpret the message. The fact that she believes that

*... the essential process of storytelling is to allow the story to spring almost unobserved, unself-conscious, from the depths of the mind and heart*<sup>28</sup>

means that she accepts that many of her characters, their attributes and implied values, will be the result of the workings of her subconscious mind, rather than of her conscious musings of "state of belief". Her extraordinarily value-laden images of women and girls become therefore doubly significant, because the underlying messages may be largely unacknowledged and unexamined by the author. But what are these images?

Let's take a look at Gillian Rubinstein's women and girls

The first important point about Gillian Rubinstein's representation of "the second sex" is the sharp distinction between her women and her (presumably pre- or just-pubescent) girls. The women are largely stereotyped into traditional moulds: The Earth Mother (for example, Liz from *Answers to Brut*<sup>29</sup>), The Deserting Mother (for example, Elaine's mother from *Space Demons*<sup>30</sup>), The Working Mother (Mrs Hardcastle in *Melanie and the Night Animal*<sup>31</sup>), The Ineffective Woman (Chris Trethewan in *Beyond the Labyrinth*<sup>32</sup> and The Just Plain Awful Female (Pam in *Beyond the Labyrinth*<sup>33</sup>) — which is understandable in so far as they are usually cameo roles, but inexplicable in terms of the consistency and depth of the ugliness she portrays. It is possible to argue and accept that it was necessary in terms of the plot of *Beyond the Labyrinth* to have the character Pam every bit as nasty and abrasive as she is portrayed, and the would-be censors who condemned the book on the basis of this character's foul language had simply lost the plot. But was it necessary for Jasmine Hardcastle's mother (in *Melanie and the Night Animal*<sup>34</sup>) to be quite such a hard-faced bitch? (More on this subject later).

The girls, too, have a certain stereotyping — there are the heroines, who are usually strong but sensitive, gutsy but thinking types, and there are their somewhat more wimpish, giggly girly side-kicks.

Throughout Rubinstein's work this juxtaposition recurs: the strong, sensible, basically difficult but yet salt-of-the-earth teenage girl is often accompanied by a typically appearance obsessive, boy-crazy classically stereotyped teenage girl (who also has problems). Elaine Taylor has Linda Schulz (*Space Demons and Skymaze*<sup>35</sup>), Melanie Wright has Jasmine Hardcastle (*Melanie and the Night Animal*), Jen Gilroy has Sally Fraser (*At Ardilla*<sup>36</sup>) and Victoria Hare has Shelley Trethewan (*Beyond the Labyrinth*), although this last is a little different from the others in that Victoria and Shelley are not age contemporaries. The clear sense of values that emerges is that being sensitive and having problems is OK, but being preoccupied with boyfriends is not, being fascinated by animals is great, but liking "pretty, neat and matching" things, or liking "pink parkas, blouses with frilly collars, and windcheaters adorned with appliqué pictures"<sup>37</sup> is somewhat contemptible. It is hard to imagine any of Rubinstein's girl-heroines playing with dolls or wearing anything but trackpants. Even in the one episode of make-up application portrayed in her novels, it was Linda Schulz's idea, and Elaine Taylor (the heroine) was quite disinterested.<sup>38</sup>

But overall, the girls are generally gutsy, likeable souls, while the women are pretty low on the ladder of humanity. The distinction between the women and the girls is a hefty one, and the clue to

understanding it lies with the giggly girly side-kicks — it's as if they are a half-way house between the strength and innocence of the heroines, and the tortured ugliness and betrayal of the women. So what happened in between to turn the one into the other? That is a thread to be picked up later, but first let's look at where these characters originated — what source did they spring from? Rubinstein says about herself that

*... my own childhood was so traumatic that I was kind of mentally and emotionally arrested at age twelve and I still see the world through the eyes of that suffering child<sup>39</sup> ... so much of me as a writer is me as a twelve year old. That's the self I get in touch with and that I write out of ... that very angry and outraged child. My sense of injustice and unfairness at how horrible everyone was to me is very valuable to me now.<sup>40</sup>*

Here, then, is the source of those angry and outraged heroines, but nowhere in her published interviews does she directly address the issue of her mother's role in creating the anger and outrage in her at this age — which is a likely source of those ghastly women characters. Accordingly, I intend to read between the lines and argue a case about what it is that Rubinstein is expressing and/or working out in relation to women, and in particular her mother and her feelings about motherhood. Because here is the crux of it — the signs are there to indicate that Rubinstein has never

recovered from her sense of having been betrayed as a child by her own mother, and her writings about women to date have reflected her sense of betrayal, without leading to a resolution or positive growth away from that fundamental weakness.

#### Looking for Rubinstein's mother

I've already said that Rubinstein's women are largely stereotyped into particular roles: the Earth Mother, the Deserting Mother, the Working Mother, the Ineffective Woman and the Just Plain Awful Female. And last, though extremely uncommon, the Perfect New Age Mother. Let's examine them more closely.

#### 1. The Absent Mother, in its two guises of Working Mother and Deserting Mother.

The Working Mother is Rubinstein's modern-day equivalent of the Step-Mother in fairy tales, although perhaps wicked by what she doesn't do rather than by what she does. In *Space Demons* and *Skymaze* Ben Challis's mother is a teacher, and she spends so much time working for the good of others that he is left on his own as "a latch-key kid"; Mario Ferrone's mother works night shift as a nurse, leaving him at the mercy of his bullying father and older brother; and Linda Shulz's mother also leaves her to her own devices while she works. In *Melanie and the Night Animal* Jasmine Hardcastle has a most deliciously ghastly mother, whose job as an Interior Decorator leaves her daughter's life largely undecorated by her mother.

In each case it could be argued that the Working Mother is simply a literary device to provide the kids with the freedom to carry out the plot, but it's a peculiarly and pervasively negative image that is projected. It is obvious that Rubinstein is not in favour of Working Mothers, a fact attested to by her own choice to be "a full time stay-at-home mother",<sup>41</sup> and by her insistence that

*My family comes first, then the animals, then my writing. In that order.<sup>42</sup>*

But if Working Mothers are the Step-Mother of folk tales, then Deserting Mothers are the Wicked Witch — weaving awful spells of self-hatred and guilt amongst the children they leave behind. It may just be a convenience for the author, but it is odd that the two visibly absent (if one can be visibly absent) mothers in her novels — Elaine Taylor's mother in *Space Demons* and *Skymaze*, and Joella's mother in *Galax-Arena* — both left their children in a true Seventies-style Me-Generation quest for their own self-identity. And Vicky Hare's mother, who is in Nigeria while her child is sent to school in Australia, is absent too on the pretext of her own need to "do good works". The children suffer because their mothers are looking after their own interests first — a state of affairs for which Rubinstein has little sympathy.

Her harsh judgement on women who abandon their children is well

illustrated by her description of a holiday job she had once, as "looking after two young children whose mother had bolted"<sup>43</sup> — it hardly offers any sympathy to the mother's plight whatever it may have been.

The harshness of her approach is explainable in terms of her own experience, when she "lived life as a sort of secondhand kid".<sup>44</sup> But whilst the feelings of abandonment, grief and loss are apparent in many of her interviews, the closest she comes to attributing any blame for that pain to others is when she says:

*After my parents divorced . . . my mother and step-father went to Nigeria to live, leaving me and my sister in boarding school in England. It seems reasonable at the time but, looking back on it, it was incredibly difficult to go through the stages of growing up without a mother.*<sup>45</sup>

So here is a clue to understanding Rubinstein's images of absent mothers. Into these images she pours all of the rage and hostility she perhaps ought to have felt towards her own mother for abandoning her — all of it from the point of view of the child, not the adult woman. Interestingly, she says that *Flashback*<sup>46</sup> is her sister's favourite novel, and attributes that to the fact that "she does not detect any echoes of her own childhood in it"<sup>47</sup> — is it mere coincidence that there are no mothers in it at all?

## 2. Earth Mother and The

### Perfect New Age Mother

Gillian Rubinstein has expressed the view that parents now often worry about the wrong things — they restrict their children's lives in all sorts of basically unimportant ways, but neglect the ones that really matter.<sup>48</sup> She illustrates this in her novels through the use of her Earth Mothers and Perfect New Age Mothers — they are the ones who really understand their kids, who spend time listening to them, who genuinely care about their kids as people, and who generally demonstrate the human qualities which Rubinstein values highly — "things like courage, selflessness and compassion; the kinds of qualities any society needs large doses of, if it is to continue and function."<sup>49</sup> The quality of courage, for example, is demonstrated by Kel's mother Liz in *Answers to Brut*<sup>50</sup> and the opposing quality (cowardice) by the Ferriers. *Answers to Brut* also illustrates Rubinstein's preoccupation with animals; an essential element of Rubinstein's Earth Mothers is that they have an affinity for animals (and usually also plants) — Kel's working-class mother Liz has both, but the Ferriers, despite their education and self-professed New Age values (no meat, no food colouring, no salt, no sugar, no chemicals) have neither. Their dislike of Brut represents a fundamental weakness in their whole value system. Other Earth Mothers include Great Aunt Merle (*Flashback*), whose first selfless impulse when her missing great-nephew appeared

(after kissing him) was to thrust him fiercely behind her and brandish her rolling-pin in his defence; Mrs Peters (*Melanie and the Night Animal*), who uses noise to create the illusion of having "so many children she didn't know what to do" (she actually had three), but whose compassionate inclination is always to feed people first, ask questions (albeit loudly) later; and Aunt Jil (*Galax-Arena*) who wasn't really a mother, but showed all the right attributes — judged everyone by whether animals liked them or not, and liked the right ones herself (that is, she liked Joella and not Peter, because she didn't judge by appearances).

What does the image of the Earth Mother represent? It may well be Rubinstein's reaction to the inadequacies of her own experience of being mothered. When most people become mothers the model they use (consciously or unconsciously, and often to their horror!) is that of their own mother — so how do you set about being a good mother for your own children if you reject your mother's model of (absent) mothering? Rubinstein appears to have created and adopted the model of the Earth Mother, a very strong archetypal image in our culture, and one that had a huge revival in the Sixties and Seventies as part of the hippie "alternative culture". Rubinstein lived for a time during her early motherhood at Byron Bay, around Nimbin, the heart of Australian hippiedom, where she

... threw [her]self into the life of an earth mother, growing vegetables, baking bread, biscuits, cakes, making clothes for the kids and so on.<sup>51</sup>

She thus attempted to resolve the difficulties of her own childhood by creating an ideal mother, the image of what all good mothers should be and do. It is an image born of her wishful dreams, her subconscious desires, rather than of her conscious ideas or beliefs (though doubtless the image conforms to her political and spiritual consciousness too). The Earth Mother may well be the mother she wishes she had had — and the one she hopes she is for her own children.

If the Earth Mother is such a strong personal image for Rubinstein, then it is no wonder that she portrays the Absent Mothers with such venom. They are not just peripheral cameos, they contain the seed of destruction of something integral to Rubinstein's self, her self-created image of herself as a mother. Which explains why the language that Rubinstein uses to describe Mrs Hardcastle, for example, is powerful in its ability to both describe and to denigrate simultaneously:

*Jasmine's mother was ... looking beautiful, elegant and charming ... her clothes were fashionable and expensive. Melanie could understand why her mother was sounding rattled, as she was dressed in her oldest jeans and a tee shirt.*

*She had been planting out seedlings, and she had dirt on her face ... Jasmine's mother waved her beautifully manicured hand and called "Jasmine, darling, I've got some wonderful news for you." ... Mrs Hardcastle smiled at everybody ... "Aren't children sweet?" Mrs Hardcastle said.<sup>52</sup>*

Melanie's mother was sounding rattled in the same way that Rubinstein did at the thought of finding a job, when "all my clothes came from op-shops"<sup>53</sup> and she still "had a huge vegetable garden, and kept chooks".<sup>54</sup> It is easy to imagine Rubinstein getting caught out frequently in her oldest jeans and a tee shirt, too. (The question, of course, is why it should bother her if her Earth Mother persona is genuine?)

The other positive image of motherhood is that of the Perfect New Age Mother though the only representative of this type in Rubinstein's novels is Melanie's mother in *Melanie and the Night Animal*. It is really just an Earth Mother without the physical trappings of animals, plants and cookery. The elements are mainly psychological — the overwhelming importance of the child's view, the ability and desire to listen to the child and to appreciate and act on what is heard. There are more than one or two echoes of the author's public face of her own motherhood in the representation:

*I liked the total immersion in life that living with small children demands. They are so hungry to*

*learn how to grow up, they never take time out from their tasks, and parents never do either! The house was usually one step this side of chaos, but we explored Sydney, rode bikes, trains, buses and ferries (especially ferries), and went on playground crawls, instead of pub crawls ... Life at home was endless creative playtime — playdough, painting, making things out of cardboard boxes, water play — it was like permanently living in kindergarten ...<sup>55</sup>*

*I'm not an awfully good parent because I identify too strongly with the children. I'm a subversant parent ... I have a lovely time with them and we have a great relationship. I can indulge all my childhood dreams through them.<sup>56</sup>*

Sounds idyllic, doesn't it? But is motherhood really that easy? Or are The Earth Mother and The Perfect New Age Mother simply representations of the way Rubinstein would like motherhood to be, not necessarily the way it is?

**3. The Ineffective Woman and The Just Plain Awful Female**  
The last two substantial female types that Rubinstein uses are the Ineffective Woman (for example, Emmeline in *Galax-Arena* and Chris Trethewan in *Beyond the Labyrinth*) and the Just Plain Awful Female (for example, Pam in *Beyond the Labyrinth*). Neither of these types reflect on mothers in particular, but they do reflect on women and their ways of dealing with the world. They largely deal

with the issue of power and self-determination — issues, again, dear to Rubinstein's heart. Reflecting on her childhood she says that

[Powerlessness] was probably my strongest emotion as a kid . . . Being utterly powerless and having everything in my life . . . changed all the time without anyone ever consulting me about it.<sup>57</sup>

The curious thing is that despite this experience, Rubinstein's writing is not sympathetic to people who find themselves in the same position, but instead tends to be hostile — more inclined to blame the victim for their own weakness. Chris Trethewan, for example, (Brenton's mother in *Beyond the Labyrinth*) could equally well have been portrayed as a pathetic woman trying to work out her own problems, but failing in the face of enormous social and husband pressure to conform to traditional expectations of motherhood. Instead, she is portrayed as creating those expectations herself. Emmeline (*Galax-Arena*) is also put in the box of being a victim of her own misguided aspirations, when in our society so often those aspirations are pressed on women in a way that judges them harshly if they refuse to adopt them. In each case the author positions us to blame the women themselves, rather than to see the influence of their circumstances.

The character of Pam (the foul-mouthed tartar in *Beyond the Labyrinth*) is particularly interest-

ing in this regard. Her son was drowned and her part in the book is to be mean and oppressive to the children, using the excuse of protecting them from a similar fate. She is depicted as someone whose humanity has been crippled by her inability to deal appropriately with her grief and who, in turn, affects (or infects) others with her bitterness and strife. Yet she is pictured in an environment where the kind of support she would need to break out of her pain and grief is simply not forthcoming — so whose fault is it? Pam's or her community's fault? There is a sense of hopelessness about the presentation of Pam which ties in strongly with the whole feel of the novel — the pessimism of Rubinstein's instinctive first ending (see above) is reflected as a microcosm in this character's situation; again, the author positions us to blame the individual, but in the context of having no community solution either. It's a hopeless Catch-22 in the way that Brenton's situation is.

The portrayal of these pathetic yet demanding characters gives the lie to any pretence that Rubinstein is pro-women; instead, it raises the question of how much Rubinstein actually does value womanhood?

#### Gillian Rubinstein's ambivalence

Looking again at her comments about her early childhood:

*My childhood was full of make-believe games, which I played with my friends, and with my sister.*

*There was no doubt in our minds that we were heroes — and we were always men! . . . We rarely played with dolls, we did not want to be make-believe mothers . . . We wanted to be men.<sup>58</sup>*

What astute girl-child, aware of the inequities of sexual roles and politics in our culture, wouldn't do the same? Such girls often choose to call themselves "tomboys", thereby hoping to take for themselves some of that mysterious power seemingly reserved for men. For that's what it's all about — for Rubinstein as well as many other women — the powerlessness of being born female. The journey from tomboy/girl-child to active, committed feminist is a long one, involving a transition through anger and impotent frustration at the unfairness of it all, into the light of celebration of womanhood. It's a bit like the stages of grieving really — denial, anger, understanding and celebration — and there are many who don't complete the journey. (It isn't easy to celebrate something to which others ascribe second-rate status.)

Thinking about Rubinstein's novels, one wonders has she been travelling that path, and is she reaching the point of celebration? Her heroines' giggly side-kicks are the key to understanding the transition between her gutsy pre-pubescent heroines, and her ghastly grown-up women. Rubinstein appears to be still struggling with that transition herself. She has said that she writes from the point of



view of a twelve-year-old, but in fact she seems to write from the point of view of an adult who is still resolving the problems she suffered as a twelve-year-old — which is quite a different thing. Each of her heroines deals with a particular issue: Elaine (*Space Demons* and *Skymaze*) with powerlessness and self-confidence, Melanie (*Melanie and the Night Animal*) with fear, Joella (*Galax-Arena*) with courage and the nature of truth, and Jen (*At Ardilla*) with acceptance and betrayal. All are important adolescent issues, but none of them face the ultimate challenge — how to become a woman, how to turn from a pre-pubescent girl into a sexual woman, and how to adapt relationships with boys into that new framework. The giggly side-kicks are Rubinstein's attempt to meet this challenge, but they all fail, because they all betray her ambivalence towards that process of growing up. They all, in one way or another, reflect negative emotions about the adult woman. Growing up means confronting the hard questions about the value of being a woman and a mother — a step she rejects, and recoils from (see her comments about parenthood above).

In *Skymaze*, for example, Elaine begins to explore these new feelings, but at a very superficial level, and in the end the author positions us to see them as peripheral rather than central to her development — in the end her problems are resolved first by Andrew's leadership, then by her

father's return. The irony of this is clear from Rubinstein's explanation of her intentions:

*The computer is the enchanted forest, or the dark world of the unconscious, and though the external action demands giving up the gun to terminate the game, the internal action demands the joining of the male and female qualities to become whole. I wanted to write a strong anima figure in this book — the girls in the so-called boys books my son was reading seemed to be rapid or invisible — hence the character of Elaine. Both Andrew and Elaine learn new ways of seeing the world from each other: Andrew gives Elaine self-confidence and she gives him self-knowledge.<sup>99</sup>*

Unfortunately, as Alice Mills points out, that intention is not realised:

*Elaine's special abilities, and the potential sexual implications of her presence in the game, are given no attention in the text. Instead, she dwindles into a conventional passive stereotype and the book is vulnerable to a charge of sexism.<sup>100</sup>*

By contrast, in *At Ardilla* something about the female image begins to come right — Rubinstein is at last dealing with the young female identity, although still through the issues of acceptance and betrayal (that mother of hers again), but there is more fullness (forgive the pun) to Jen's personality. She also introduces the idea of adult sexuality (rather than

parenthood) for the first time — and we suddenly have the Damned Whore appearing, in the guise of Jen's mother, flirting with a family friend, and then we have Jen trying to deal with her father's consequent jealousy and pain. It may not be a more positive image of womanhood, (the Damned Whore being just another negative stereotype) but at least it's a step towards a more complete picture of womanhood.

Going back to the earlier question, then, whether Rubinstein values womanhood or not, she is not very convincing in her attempts to portray a positive image of the teenage girl. By leaving out the early growth of sexuality, or downplaying its importance, she engenders dissatisfaction and suspicion that in fact she's deliberately avoiding something. Outgrowing that teenage rejection of the powerless female role in order to create a meaningful self-identity in womanhood is a traumatic task, often involving a wholesale reassessment of a woman's relationship with her mother. Perhaps Rubinstein is still working on it, still unsure of the true value of being a woman, so that the images of women she projects are incomplete and unwholesome.

#### Concluding the saga

Gillian Rubinstein's writing is highly enjoyable, its density of themes and ideas provides a rewarding reading experience, yet her images of women are often startling, provoking the question —

what is behind all the negativity? all those imperfect (or absent) mothers? and why do the girls, so conscientiously drawn as active (rather than the more typically reactive) characters seem somehow not quite right?

Alice Mills' article,<sup>61</sup> which criticises *Beyond the Labyrinth* from a psychoanalytic point of view, provides some clues. The fundamental problem with Gillian Rubinstein's heroines is that they may as well be heroes — they are not specifically female at all. Despite her explicit intention to create strong female role models in her characters, by discounting the basic issue of sexuality, by not addressing the realities faced by girls of that age, she builds her house on the sand. The closest she comes to really exploring the depths of teenage femaleness is in *At Ardilla* — and it's a pity that the book came out after Mills wrote her article as a psychoanalytic interpretation of this later work would be worth having. The conclusion Mills reached about the earlier ones was that Rubinstein's works are deeply pessimistic, and "the sexual implications are . . . bleak"<sup>62</sup>. It is difficult to refute that conclusion.

Nevertheless, Rubinstein's work remains deeply provocative. Knowing her views about the role of storytelling in the transmission of culture, it is to be hoped that at some point she will have a lot to say to us about women's future, in the way that her writings to date have had a lot to say about her

experience of the past.

*I don't think there can be any argument that the heroes of the everyday — of the struggles to keep families together, to protect children, just to go on living — in every city, slum or refugee camp of the world — are the heroines — the women. I am having to learn myself how to write from this point of view, seeing the heroism in ordinary lives.*<sup>63</sup>

And part of the heroism of women's ordinary lives is that they can be women, and mothers, without conforming to any fantasy, stereotype or archetypal image at all. I eagerly await Rubinstein's ordinary heroines.

#### Notes

1. Gillian Rubinstein, *Eating the Apple* in *Toads: Australian Writers: Other Work, Other Lives*, ed. Andrew Sant, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp.146-147.
2. Gillian Rubinstein, *Space Demons*, Omnibus/Puffin, Adelaide, 1986.
3. Rubinstein, *Eating the Apple*, op.cit., p.135.
4. Agnes, Nieuwenhuizen, *No Kidding: Top Writers for Young People Talk about their Work*, Pan Macmillan Australia, Chippendale, 1991, p.234.
5. Rubinstein, *Eating the Apple*, op.cit., p.146.
6. *ibid.*, p.134.
7. Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit., p.238.
8. Rubinstein, Gillian, *The World According to Kids* in *Island Magazine* 40, Spring 1989, p.7.

9. *ibid.*, p.10.
10. Alf Mappin, *Know the Author: Gillian Rubinstein* in *Magpies*, 4 (3), July 1898, p.20.
11. Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit., p.235.
12. Quoted in Katherine Goode, *Gillian's at Home in a Child's World* in *The Advertiser*, 9 January 1988, Magazine, p.6.
13. For example, Gillian Rubinstein, *A Hero is a Man . . . ???* in *Magpies* 8 (2), May 1993, p.7, and Rubinstein, *The World According to Kids*, op.cit., p.10.
14. Quoted in Goode, loc.cit.
15. For example, Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit., p.235.
16. Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit., p.236.
17. *ibid.*
18. *ibid.*, p.251.
19. Gillian Rubinstein, *Beyond the Labyrinth*, Puffin, Ringwood, 1990.
20. Gillian Rubinstein, *Galax-Arena*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1992.
21. Mappin, op.cit., p.19.
22. Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit., p.241.
23. *ibid.*, p.250.
24. For an interesting discussion of these endings from a psychoanalytic perspective see Alice Mills, *Dancing the Labyrinth: Gillian Rubinstein's Game-Players* in *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* 2 (1), April 1991, pp.24-29.
25. Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit., p.253.
26. *ibid.*, p.236.
27. Rubinstein, *The World According to Kids*, op.cit., p.10.
28. Rubinstein, *Eating the Apple*, op.cit. p.146.
29. Gillian Rubinstein, *Answers to Brut*, Omnibus, Adelaide, 1988.

30. Rubinstein, *Space Demons*, op.cit.
31. Gillian Rubinstein, *Melanie and the Night Animal*, Omnibus, Adelaide, 1988.
32. Rubinstein, *Beyond the Labyrinth*, op.cit.
33. *ibid.*
34. Rubinstein, *Melanie and the Night Animal*, op.cit.
35. Gillian Rubinstein, *Skymaze*, Omnibus/Puffin, 1989.
36. Gillian Rubinstein, *At Ardilla*, Omnibus, 1991.
37. Rubinstein, *Space Demons*, op.cit., p.52, speaking of Linda Schulz.
38. Rubinstein, *Skymaze*, op.cit., p.41.
39. Rubinstein, *The World According to Kids*, op.cit., p.7.
40. Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit., p.232.
41. Nieuwenhuizen, *Eating the Apple*, op.cit., p.144.
42. Quoted in Peter Goers, *Coping with those Person Demons in The Advertiser*, 1 April 1989, Magazine, p.8.
43. Rubinstein, *Eating the Apple*, op.cit. p.138.
44. Quotes in Goers, op.cit.
45. Quoted in Goode, loc.cit.
46. Gillian Rubinstein, *Flashback: The Amazing Adventures of a Film Horse*, Puffin, Ringwood, 1990.
47. Rubinstein, *A Hero is a Man . . . ???*, op.cit. p.7.
48. For example Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit. p.246-7
49. *ibid.*, p.249.
50. Rubinstein, *Answers to Brut*, op.cit.
51. Rubinstein, *Eating the Apple*, op.cit., p.145

52. Rubinstein, *Melanie and the Night Animal*, p.43.
53. Rubinstein, *Eating the Apple*, op.cit., p.147.
54. *ibid.*, p.145.
55. *ibid.*, p.144.
56. Quoted in Goers, op.cit.
57. Nieuwenhuizen, op.cit., p.247.
58. Rubinstein, *A Hero is a Man . . . ???*, op.cit.
59. *ibid.*, p.8.
60. Mills, op.cit., p.28.
61. *ibid.*, pp.24-29.
62. *ibid.*, p.28.
63. Rubinstein, *A Hero is a Man . . . ???*, op.cit., p.9.

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