

On the Narcissism of Parenting: Adoption, Reality-Testing and The Limits of Imagination in
Patrick Flanery's *The Ginger Child* and Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*

By Julie Walsh

Abstract: Via two literary texts, this article explores the tensions between the fantasy-oriented activity of imagining family life, and the modes of reality-testing encountered in processes of adoption. First, I offer a sustained and close reading of Patrick Flanery's memoir of a failed adoption, *The Ginger Child: On Family, Loss and Adoption*. This text offers itself as a case study of sorts, a candid and challenging account of the difficulties of navigating the British adoption system as a queer, immigrant man. Second, to supplement my reading of Flanery's text, and to approach the sites of imaginative life that are foreclosed by the memoir genre, I turn to Doris Lessing's novella *The Fifth Child*. As a twentieth-century gothic tale, Lessing's story dramatizes the impossible "choices" that family-making entails and explores the fantasies and imaginary horrors of an unknowable otherness within the vaunted site of the family.

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The impoverished attention adoption receives in the psychosocial imaginary leaves it under-explored as a possible family form at a historical moment when the ethics and pragmatics of prospective family making are subject to new pressures. Concerns about unsustainable population growth and inhospitable environmental futures; the increased incidence of later life parenthood associated with, among other factors, social or situational infertility (as opposed to bio-medical infertility); and a longer trajectory of legal and cultural changes that have altered the norms of intimate citizenship, especially with respect to LGBTQ+ parenting, are just a few reasons to anticipate the heightened prominence of adoption as an imaginable prospect for those considering

whether and/or *how* to create a family that involves parenting a child today. However, despite the long recognition of adoption's potential to redefine conceptions of kinship and extend traditional practices of familial care, it remains an anomalous choice for contemporary subjects whose projects of life planning cannot be easily extracted from the ideological force of pronatalism which ties the claims of genetics to those of proprietorial social relations and the privatized reproduction of capital. While there are socially trackable explanations that might account for why the incidence of adoption remains low—prominently, that assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) retain adoption as the last resort for many—this article focuses on an exploration of the psychological processes of deliberation and imagination that individuals and couples undergo when consciously engaging with how to imagine the prospect of adoption. More particularly, how such processes inevitably include reckoning with—and failing to reckon with—the unconscious fantasies that surround adoption.

As a psychoanalytic psychotherapist experienced in listening to individuals explore and discover their thoughts and feelings about family-making, I have reflected on the processes of thinking and imagining that can accompany the *idea* of adoption—(simply the *idea*, not yet its pursuit or practice).¹ Adoption exists in abstract, as a thinkable thought, an ideational site that someone might want to imaginatively engage with to further their understanding of their familial prospects—*I could adopt . . . ; we could adopt. . .* But what happens to the lines of flight that follow from such a speculation? The psychoanalyst is privileged in her position of listening for the myriad ways that the unconscious—that which animates experiences of not-knowing, confusion, anxiety, repetition, inhibition—exists in tension with our best efforts at egoic mastery. Such tensions resound prominently on the topics of whether to have a child, or how to conceive a family, where the cultural seductions of rational choice are especially potent and problematic (see Salecl).

It would seem that, just as there may be more reasons to question whether or not to have children today, so too is there a greater imperative to *know* in advance, and then to act accordingly, with conviction toward one's choice: happenstance and the accidental can be difficult to accommodate in the reflexive ordering of self-narratives that characterize the entrepreneurial tenor of contemporary culture (see Groarke). Further, given that an increasing number of routes to parenting involve protracted and often costly procedures that test the resolve of the parent-to-be (IVF is an obvious example here), the risks of acknowledging ambivalent or equivocal feelings can be high. This is already the case in the so-called "natural" course of things, where the parents invest in biological conception (whether technologically facilitated or not) and the birthing of "their" child. Family-making by adoption brings additional layers of complexity to the picture: as well as having their *suitability* to parent inspected, adoptive parents have their *desire* for a child, and their performance of their desire, scrutinized. This can be thought about as a mode of reality-testing that inevitably impacts the fantasy-oriented activity of imagining family life.

To engage with the complexity and opacity of family imaginaries and the site of adoption within them, I will be turning to two literary sources. I will offer a sustained and close reading of Patrick Flanery's memoir of a failed adoption, *The Ginger Child: On Family, Loss and Adoption*.² This text offers itself as a case study of sorts, a candid and challenging account of the difficulties of navigating the British adoption system as a queer, immigrant man. In detailing the process of subjecting a wish to a series of rationalizations and calculations, running through scenarios of compromise, and struggling to imagine how the unknowable facts of a child's early life will influence his parenting experience, Flanery's memoir also exposes the difficulty of responsibly negotiating the gap between the fantasy image of family life and its reality. To supplement my reading of Flanery's text, and to approach the sites of imaginative life that are foreclosed by the

memoir genre, I will turn to Doris Lessing's novella *The Fifth Child*. As a twentieth-century gothic tale, Lessing's story dramatizes the impossible "choices" that family-making entails and explores the fantasies and imaginary horrors of an unknowable otherness within the vaunted site of the family. While the titular child in Lessing's work is not an adopted child, their "outsider status" places them beyond the family in ways that chime with the "bad seed" logic of adoption fantasies (which is also a strand of discourse in adoption studies). Importantly, I will be suggesting that giving voice to this aspect of the imaginary around adoption requires the violence and freedom of fiction writing rather than the memoir genre. In moving between these two texts, I hope to show how different modes of writing (and reading) might differently facilitate something of the reality-testing that thinking about adoption, as with all modes of parenting, requires. Finally, prior to turning to the texts in question, I would like to acknowledge an emotional investment in my topic. I write as someone who has considered the "whether" and "how" of becoming a parent—importantly for me, whether to become a mother³—and who has engaged her own fantasies of family life in so doing. As will become apparent, I have chosen to give space to my personal investments, allowing the affective intensities of my reader-response to be on display.

The Ginger Child

As well as being a profoundly personal account of four years spent trying to adopt a child from within the British social care system, Patrick Flanery's 2019 memoir *The Ginger Child: On Family, Loss and Adoption* is also a disquisition on envy, narcissism, and shame. "I look at you, and you, and you, and you, having one child, two, three, more, sharing photos of them online, expecting us, your friends, to click and like and love and comment with amusement and joy and commiseration when things get difficult, and I think, does it ever occur to you that you have been

given a gift you might have shared? By which I mean not the children, obviously, but the exceptional ease with which you and your partners have them” (4). We are looking at the world through the author’s eyes, and at the same time invited to imagine ourselves as one of the “yous” in question: *am I guilty of complacently displaying my children; am I insufficiently aware of the extent to which others might yearn for what I have; would I be unlikely to consider, with any real seriousness, the prospect of gifting my reproductive capacity and labor to a friend in need?*

Envy and resentment go hand in hand in Flanery’s writing. What is apparently easy for others, facilitated by the luck of biology, is anything but for Flanery and his partner. His story stirred my identifications and sympathies: he writes as a man who wants to become a parent rather than a father; he defends his right as a queer subject not to have to stand for the principle of family abolition; he risks expressing his sense of privation and lack (his “situational infertility”) from a position of clear privilege (white, male, materially secure, with masses of cultural capital); he endeavors to redefine and redeem the emotional register of envy in order, ultimately, to be able to politicize it; and he struggles to give space to his own potential prejudices in among an account of the ways he’s discriminated against by others. What I most appreciated about Flanery’s text though, is how it shows us, often through what it cannot quite show, that the life-plans we make, in accordance with what we tell ourselves we want, will flounder again and again on the obdurate grounds of fantasy.⁴

In detailing how arduous, soul-searching and emotionally exhausting family planning has been for Flanery and his partner, *The Ginger Child* also conveys how many decisions have been negotiated along the way. Once it was apparent that the couple wouldn’t be asking the apparently unaskable of their friends, they faced the following primary decisions: adoption or surrogacy; from home or abroad? The risks are high wherever they look, but ultimately the legal and ethical

considerations, as well as the financial implications, point them towards adopting in Britain.⁵ From here, a myriad of major and minor decisions open-up across the adoption journey that repeatedly betray the idea that agency is synonymous with power, or choice with control. Early in the process, the social worker asks, “What are the red lines? . . . What wouldn’t you be able to cope with?” (9). The list is potentially endless: serious physical or mental disability, chronic disease, deafness, blindness, autism, ADHD—all push at the limits of what the couple are asked to imagine. “But would you take a ginger child?” the social worker enquires, to the puzzlement of Flanery and his partner (8). As the difficulties, sometimes absurdities, of conceiving intellectually what cannot be conceived biologically are narrated, the nature of decision-making is put under the spotlight. There is one decision, however, that stands apart from all the rest. Perhaps it was the only real decision that was made: the decision *not to*. When the couple finally meet the boy who was to become their son, they arrive, devastatingly late, at the decision not to follow through on the plans. In rejecting and returning the child they had so desperately wanted, this final decision will provoke the reader’s judgement, perhaps as it was written to.

In adoption memoirs, images and mirror metaphors—e.g. photographs and artworks—are often understood as a means through which the narrator figures the search for lost origins (see Deans). Importantly, while Flanery’s text does not map directly onto the classic search narrative, given that he writes from the perspective of the adoptive parent rather than the adoptee, there is nonetheless an active sense of searching that pervades his text.⁶ From the opening pages of *The Ginger Child*, the text’s focus on images is striking. Whereas, in the quotation above (“I look at you, and you, and you, and you”), the images on social media spark envy, other images embolden the couple in their decision to adopt, providing evidence of “success stories” (“I look at their pictures on social media. The boys are healthy. Everyone is smiling” [14]). The prominence of

visual registers and the hankering after picture-perfect scenes of family life forewarns the reader that there may be a difficult transition to make from fantasy (where images are given free rein), to the realities of the world of adoption.

Flanery readily admits to his “problematic” desire to turn himself and his partner into “that camera-ready middle-class same-sex couple with a toddling baby crawling across the lawn we don’t have in front of the house we don’t own” (10). Being sensitive and intelligent around some of the contradictions and blind spots created by one’s desire, as Flanery often is, is not always a protection against them. Whether, in the end, you become a parent or not, it’s the lot of all prospective parents to be seduced by the child who does not yet exist; the fantasy child that calls out to the parent’s self-image with all its transformative promise. For Flanery, this seduction is expressed through a repertoire of curated and rather clichéd images: the child, the lawn, the house, the smiles, and all the imagined moments of parental acculturation such as outings to galleries and public spaces of culture and learning. Such would be the photographs for social media accounts.

As will be painfully obvious to anyone who knows what they want (or thinks they know what they want), images matter. If you don’t have something, you can only *imagine* it. And in the process of imagining the future you wish for yourself—a form for your desire to settle in, an image of your desired family shape—childhood and parental relationships will be available in the background, unavoidably so, as material with which to furnish the fantasy. The “ideal child” who inhabits Flanery’s mind is “taken for walks to the park and trips to museums, held up to paintings and works of art to look closely at the details, treated in all the ways [his] mother treated [him] as a child” (14).⁷ This speaks to something Freud had in mind when he wrote of the narcissism of parents: “Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents’ narcissism born again” (91). The possibility of reliving or rewriting one’s own childhood through

becoming a parent is an inevitable, albeit regularly unchecked, part of this fantasy structure. But the existence of Flanery's "ideal child," a version of Flanery himself, is threatened by the adoption process. This is partly because as an adoptive parent Flanery would become "the end point of [his] own hereditary line" (Flanery 46). For someone who feels that life's futural dimension is made "bearable" by "a sense of direct biological connection to other people," this "end point" would test the very limits of a meaningful life (Flanery 22).

More generally, though, and beyond the resolute belief in the power of biological bonds, the image of the ideal child (ideal self, ideal future) is threatened by adoption's ubiquitous reality-testing. As a process, reality-testing refers to the individual's growing capacity to discern the difference between perception and imagination, which is often associated with shedding the magical thinking of infancy. Here, however, it is the adult who must get on board with the disappointments of the factual world. This is key to what Flanery finds so unfair. His envy at what he imagines to be the "exceptional ease" of acquisition granted to biological parents is complex, no doubt, but one of the points of resentment must be that the image of the ideal child that biological parents harbor is allowed to stay alive for longer. After all, they have had minimal involvement with the bureaucratic actors and agencies whose job it is to help the adopting couple confront a host of realities that, from the get-go, will close the gap on the fantasy.⁸

The starkest reality to face is that of trauma: the adopted child who enters your life will do so only because of a need to exit another's. As Flanery writes, "any child we might adopt in Britain *will* have suffered abuse or neglect, almost without question. This is what we've been told" (43). This backdrop of trauma necessarily compromises the idea that you can re-run the movie of your childhood for the child you come to parent, or the idea that the child you come to parent will present you with a blank slate upon which you can re-script that movie altogether. But Flanery's

most difficult thought is somewhere to the side of this, namely that adoption means that the child he might come to parent would never really be “his.” Ultimately, Flanery fears that the adopted child he and his partner have imagined together and fought for wouldn’t satisfy his desire to be a parent. He writes: “My wish for a child is as much the consequence of a biological impulse to reproduce as a psychological and emotional urge to raise and educate someone with whom I hope to have a permanent bond, someone who will be present at the end of my own life, someone who might have grandchildren in whose faces I can see the inscription of my genetic legacy” (181). This line of thinking, so readily fostered in pronatalist contexts, is common, and Flanery is hardly alone in wanting to see something of his (and/or his partner’s?) genes in the future he is trying to create for himself. Critically though, within the framework of an adoption memoir, it strikes a painful note. Suffice it to say, not all *likenesses* are genetically coded—the faces you pull, your physical gestures, or vocal inflections, are often more picked-up than genetically set-down. One of the unspoken fantasies about genes is that genetic *likeness* will ensure familial *liking*—liking the child who shares your genes; liking the child *because* they share your genes—as if the very worst prospect would be to have a child you don’t in fact like, so to safeguard against that you try to ensure your child is like you (with the risk of confronting, at some point down the line, all the complexities of your dislike for yourself!).⁹ Adoption, in this line of thought, risks a degree of difference that unsettles the (false) security of the fantasy. And herein lies its radical potential to reconceive conventional norms and forms of family and kinship (Berebitsky; Modell). As Shelley Park offers, the potential of adoption is that it can “give meaning to our lives through the challenge of difference, rather than the familiarity of replication” (219).¹⁰ However, it is precisely adoption’s challenge to the normative paradigms of family (especially around the proprietorial discourse of genetic inheritance) that Flanery resists.

Further, Flanery's confession, quoted above, appears to come more easily on the page than in real life; he tells his reader that he feels so "shameful" and "outrageously selfish" in acknowledging this that he conceals it from his partner. The adoption process can be, without doubt, tremendously testing of one's desire and resolve. Coping with all the intrusions into their private life, the prospective parents perform their best selves, audition their home, and are understandably reluctant to admit to their assessors any ambivalence or "ugly feelings" they may have about adopting a child.¹¹ But Flanery's ambivalence isn't just hidden from the social workers, it's also denied a place in his conversation with his partner and therefore, we might venture, somewhat out of sight in his own mind. Flanery's creeping sense, perhaps secured only through the process of writing and in the aftermath of the failed adoption, is that his wanting is insufficient to the task. No one is in a position to doubt that he wanted to adopt a child, but he also wanted to want it; he wanted to want the adopted child as much as he would want the child who shared his genetic legacy. To want to want involves a special kind of reflexive suffering, which activates the shame of possessing and being possessed by a politically incorrect fantasy; the shame of not being able to bend your desire to your will.

When the couple finally meet the boy named O- with whom they have been "matched" for adoption, Flanery catches a glimpse of something or someone he recognizes on the child's face; not himself or his partner obviously, but "the face of [O-'s] mother," whose image he is familiar with from social media. A stranger's face "superimposed" on the child's, as if a "duplicate" lying in wait (222-23). As Betty Jean Lifton has observed in her important work on the hauntings (or ghost lives) of the adoptive family, adoptive parents "may try to ignore the ghosts of the birth mother of the child they are raising, but she has a way of materializing" (72). The advice Lifton gives, including to therapists working with members of the adoption triad, is to be able to make

space for such ghosts in order that, when the timing is right, they may be approached in reality. But we might note that Flanery is not yet raising his child and his conjuring of the birthmother's face is not, at this stage, in the service of preparing for an encounter. So when Flanery later writes his most exposing sentence, the confession gives me pause: "[A]lthough it is not the point of having children, at least not the only one, I could not trust that when I needed him at the end of my own life, he would be there to look after me" (252). Indeed, how could Flanery imagine coming to trust the child whose face would contain the trace of a mother associated with neglect and/or abandonment? But is that really the right question to ask, or might a better line of questioning focus on *why* he conjured up and superimposed the specter of the mother's face onto the child in the first place? What was he hoping to achieve by looking for information about her on social media, other than setting off a host of anxious fantasies about the ongoing threat of the (m)other's incursion into his secure home?¹² And perhaps those are still not the right questions to ask, and we should ask only: how dare he ask so much?

Yet, families do ask a lot. When Flanery was still considering the route of commercial surrogacy at the beginning of the book, he was aware that his father was in a financial position to help to him. And so he asked: "When I raise [my father's financial help] as a possibility, [my father] suggests instead that he might come to live with us in London. And then, he says, I could help. I tell him the British government has made such immigration impossible, but I see that he appreciates the situation with acute clarity: what I am asking for is a huge gift, as great a gift as the private undergraduate education he and my mother paid for. What he asks of me in return is a huge gift: my care of him as he ages, in the moment when I want to focus my attention on a child. For many reasons, it is an exchange I cannot make" (27). I've mentioned already that Flanery's text is likely to provoke judgment, which is one reason it is a good book. So here is my judgement:

don't have children if you expect them to look like you; don't have children if you *require* them to look like you; don't have children if you are not prepared to dislike them; don't have children if you can't challenge the fantasy that biology will bring them to your deathbed and make them look after you; don't have children if you're going to demand that they fulfil obligations that you were not able to fulfil for your own parents; don't have children if you are not willing for them to dislike you; don't have children unless you are prepared for them to symbolically kill you and literally abandon you. I understand that's a lot of red lines. But if I can imagine them, why couldn't he?

When Freud coined the phrase "family romance" he did so to refer to the stories children invent to re-write the wrongs of the Oedipus complex. The (non-adopted) child dreams up a different birth story to attend to the disillusionment and frustrations of their family situation. The flawed authority of parents or the intensity of sibling rivalries can be re-framed with the idea that *one day my real family will come and claim me*, or some variation on the theme. For the adopted child, although the shapes of the stories might differ, the reality of a more complex parentage doesn't change the basic function of the fantasy: it is a site of rescue and release from the real demands of negotiating one's place in, and holding difficult feelings about, one's family.¹³ Further, while a developmental model suggests that the family romance fantasy is abandoned once the child has accepted their ambivalence, there is value to considering how such fantasies wax and wane over time, getting re-worked and elaborated as circumstances change. Beyond childhood, family romances keep open the possibility of commanding an origin myth, the possibility, in other words, of answering, in one's own terms, the enduring questions *where did I come from, how did I get made?*

As self-identifying queer, immigrant men negotiating the British social care system, Flanery and his partner face subtle and not-so-subtle forms of prejudice against their foreignness, sexuality and social class (Flanery is an American; his partner, Andrew, is South African). They are dependent on the judgement of others to realize their family vision. People who don't necessarily share their politics or worldview, who haven't received the same education or imbibed the same cultural idiom, will be forming an assessment of them, sanctioning their progress through the system. This is a galling humiliation that biological progenitors are largely spared. In putting themselves forward to become adoptive parents, the couple is implicitly asking the system to adopt them, to recognize their legitimacy as prospective parents and to perform a duty of care towards them throughout the process. Their offer of a home to O- can be seen as a complex continuation of a rescue narrative in which the question of who's saving whom is not always clear, and in which no one is immune to the difficulties of belonging.

Flanery and his partner's adoption journey comes with a workbook. On page one, the couple are asked to "draw a spider with legs representing [their] expectations and worries" (40). Flanery and his partner are understandably affronted by the infantilizing nature of the task, and the "insultingly reductive" questions that the workbook requires them to answer (58). Nonetheless they endeavor to comply with the process. When the workbook asks them to reflect on what they can offer an adoptive child, Flanery lists a stable home and a network of supportive family and friends; he also writes, without evidence of critical reflection or self-scrutiny, that they will offer the child they come to parent their "unconditional love"—which is surely one of the more perilous statements of Flanery's text (43).

The workbook contains a further significant test in the form of the "identity question": define your identity in terms of "gender, language, ethnicity, disability, class, culture, sexuality,

spirituality.” Flanery, who admits a “perverse kind of fun” to be had in answering this question, makes clear his resistance to its terms. He rejects its categorical logic in favor of a belief in the fluidity of identity and goes on to identify as “queer,” specifying that “for the purposes of this process you might wish simply to identify me as ‘gay’ even though this is not a label I myself choose, for political reasons” (58–59). Here, then, Flanery knows his “red lines.” He expresses his preference for the terminology he feels most at home in, while knowing all the same that it might not make life easy for him (sadly, he’s proved right time and time again¹⁴). The signifier “queer” elicits a range of responses—confusion, curiosity, suspicion—from those authorized to assess the couple’s candidacy as parents.¹⁵

Ultimately, “ginger” becomes a synonym for “queer” in Flanery’s text—the ginger child is out of place, driven to create different modes of kinship, to cultivate a sense of home. Recounting his youthful obsession with John Huston’s film adaptation of the musical *Annie*, Flanery describes how he would sing and dance, imagining himself “both as orphan—the archetypal ginger child in need of adoption—as well as adopter” (89). He writes that although he didn’t have red hair, he “was ginger in the sense of being queer, and ginger also in the sense of being ‘cautious, careful; gentle,’ as well as ‘easily hurt or broken; sensitive, fragile’” (214–15). However, if these “ginger” qualities are exalted in Flanery’s estimation, it only paves the way for his later disappointment with O–, the real ginger child, in whom they are far less discernible. What, then, of the real child, the child who didn’t live up to the ideal? What do we know of him?

O– is four years old, tall for his age, and has been living for the last three years with foster parents and foster siblings in the West Country. He is one of five children that his birth mother has had taken away from her. The birth parents have resisted the proposed adoption but, eventually, the courts rule against them, sanctioning the placement of O– with his new adoptive parents. As a

“reality-child,” by which I mean an actual child that already exists in the world, O– has lived in the minds of Flanery and his partner for an inordinately long time before they have the opportunity to meet in person. As well as its deep frustrations, this extended waiting time has its dangers.

On the advice of friends, Flanery and his partner make a scrapbook for O– filled with images of his new home, and photos of the people who will become important to him.¹⁶ If the idea is that O– can begin to familiarize himself with the changes to come, imaginatively place himself in his new life, the exercise also proves productive for Flanery: “For the scrapbook, we choose photos of us together, our family, our closest friends. We plan page layouts and text and lettering. I buy crafting supplies. We take pictures of our home and O–’s new bedroom and the neighborhood park. As I paste down the photographs and outline them with washi tape, and carefully letter each page, writing first in pencil and then going over the pencil precisely with marker, I find there is something both preparatory and therapeutic about this crafting, as if in telling a story about us and where we have come from, I am also explaining to myself once again why we have chosen this particular way of making a family” (197). We can imagine the scene: a couple enjoys the curation and presentation of their lives, organizing with precision and care the look of their new child’s life with them. It’s not difficult to imagine that the value of this activity might lie more in the doing than in the receiving. It’s also not difficult to imagine that it’s precisely the kind of adult enjoyment in craft-making that, frankly, a child can ruin. So why does Flanery have his reader imagine this scene as closely as he does? What does he want us to see? The level of investment, the reverie? Further evidence of his wanting? It’s another encounter with an exercise book of sorts, not a workbook with a “worry spider” this time, but a scrapbook (albeit one that doesn’t sound too scrappy). When he’s back in the realm of images, “telling a story about us,” things go well for Flanery: he finds himself “falling in love with the *idea* of this child, and the prospect of the three

of [them] as a family” (197, emphasis added). The idea of the child, the ideal image again. At this point in the book, the narrative has never been closer to the much-anticipated encounter with O—. We are all on the cusp on a more direct engagement with him as a reality-child, but we’re still not seeing him; he keeps slipping away.

The couple’s first visual encounter with O— is via the phone, in a video-clip the social worker shares with them following her visit to the foster parents. Her pronouncement that he’s so “full of energy . . . I hope you’re ready for this,” is one of many cues the reader is given to anticipate that the type of preparations Flanery has been making (the scrapbook, the decorated room, the spotless apartment) will fall short of the type of preparedness required (198). As part of the process, the prospective parents travel to O—’s hometown where they can get to know the environment O— has been used to, to visit his school, speak with his teacher, spend time in his home and, critically, meet the foster parents. This visit occurs in advance of the official “Introductions” phase, at which point they will at last get to meet O— in person, and in advance also of the adoption’s formal approval from the Agency Decision Maker. Everyone is proceeding with realistic hope that the final decision will be affirmatory and O— will soon begin a new life chapter.

When Flanery and his partner travel out of London they confront aspects of Britain that they don’t like, don’t understand, or simply don’t know. It’s a complicated picture, and some of the frictions felt by Flanery are to do with his “foreignness,” like when he can’t understand the foster dad’s accent and their attempts to talk leave each other “mystified”: will his efforts at dialogue, asking questions, showing interest be read as intended, as American friendliness? Or can they be received only as intrusive, American, aggression (201)? But enfolded within any consideration of cultural difference and the layers of translation that persist within a shared language are questions of social class.

In Flanery's text, the conflicts and anxieties of class find direct expression when he defends himself in his mind's eye against what he takes to be the resentments and suspicions of the foster family. For example, when O-'s foster mother comments that the sandwich lunch she's preparing for them won't be like "whatever posh London food you're used to," Flanery wishes a different narrative could emerge: "Would it surprise her to know that my father grew up in acute poverty often half-starving, moving between motel rooms and apartments above garages and short-term rentals before his family bought a house that was then lost to foreclosure, or that my mother survived a semi-itinerant childhood, living in seven states by the age of seven, or that her father had grown up in a sod house and migrated West, one of the numberless 'Oakies,' a man who might as well have been Tom Joad in the flesh? Would she still think us posh if our histories were more legible upon our faces or audible in our voices? . . . It seems impossible to tell her that Andrew and I come from families not so different from her own, that my parents were the first in their families to go to university, that poverty and precarity are proximate to my and to Andrew's life in ways that may not be apparent. But none of this can be said, not now, not least because I can find no way of expressing it that would not sound patronizing" (222-23).

Perhaps, in making sure that his readers know something of his family background, Flanery compensates for the impossibility of sharing it with the foster family. This question of difference and privilege is a difficult one for Flanery: he wants to acknowledge what seems to be a gulf between his and his partner's lives and lifestyles and those of O-'s foster family, but he also wants to diminish the appearance of difference by evoking "proximate" struggles. Here though, Flanery risks undermining the strength of his own ambivalence by expressing a desire to close the gap between the disparate familial worlds that are colliding in the adoption process. His desire to signal something like, *we're not so different, we've known suffering (or our parents have)*, runs precisely

counter to another, more difficult tendency to mark out the difference between the households and the lives they contain in order to hold on to his own distinction.

So often a signifier of ambivalence, *posh* is used to mark attitudes and fantasies of social class more than financial realities. The brute facts of economic positioning or histories of educational opportunity that, if the circumstances permitted it, Flanery could tell otherwise do not encompass the full complexities of the psychic landscape of social class. To speak of social class's psychic landscape is to acknowledge the affective dimensions of class such as "feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority, visceral aversions, recognition, abjection and the markings of taste" (Reay 911). Of particular interest to me in Flanery's writing, more so than the direct reflections on class antagonisms that he was able to express, were the indirect expressions, the subtle slights and judgements scattered throughout the text, often under the guise of taste.

Visiting O-'s foster home, Flanery's impressions are carefully detailed. As he describes what he sees and senses, he conveys the extent of the divide between the environments O- has come from and grown up in, and the environments he will be inhabiting with his new parents. It isn't articulated directly (how could it be?), but there is a sense that the encroachment of a classed other—the smells, bodies, crude excesses—threatens to overturn the order and security of Flanery's middle-class lifestyle. As he surveys the space, we imagine him to be registering all the adaptations that O- will need to make to accommodate himself to a radically different home, but also, possibly, gathering evidence that Flanery will later return to when he needs to understand why he and his partner couldn't go forward with the adoption.

Small details of O-'s appetites and preferences are clues to a mismatch, but whether it's O-'s "boyish" proclivities, his lack of interest in books and reading, his conviction that pink is for girls, or his limited food pallet (a thirst for sugary drinks and ham sandwiches on white bread), this

range of observations inevitably tells us more about Flanery than his soon-to-be son. Flanery recounts a table scene in which the foster father sets about heating up O–’s dinner of choice: “Tomato soup. Out of a tin” (224). It is a simple statement of fact but the writer’s use of two sentences to make one point is telling. Why does the reader need to know it’s tinned soup (and what can Flanery safely assume about his readership that makes the qualification, *tinned*, necessary?)? The home of the foster family itself has an “artificial, floral” aroma, the smell of “fabric softener and air-freshener” that Flanery finds almost intolerable. His son’s bedroom is “sparsely decorated” with nothing on the walls: “No art. No posters. No calendars.” Neither are there any “stuffed animals, nothing soft or cuddly or cute.” Instead, the toys are plastic and noisy, incompatibly so: “these will have to go, I think to myself, quickly processed out of use, replaced with natural, quiet things to fit our quiet lives...” (202). It becomes increasingly clear that O–’s current life and the life Flanery wants to create for his son are worlds apart.

At the end of the first visit, during which the adoptive parents still haven’t been allowed to meet O– in person, some of the child’s belongings, including a collection of books that his foster mother has put together, travel back with Flanery and his partner to London to await their son’s eventual arrival. But this assortment of possessions that might offer O– continuity as he transitions between his foster and adoptive families poses a challenge for Flanery, both in terms of the optics, haptics, and smells of O–’s former life, and the values and worldviews they encompass. When Flanery conducts an “audit” of O–’s books he is troubled by the images of family life they contain. Predictably, there’s no representation of same-sex parenting, and an almost “fetishistic” investment in “the unsurpassable love of mothers.” He acts accordingly: “every book I judge either inappropriate or bad I pack away in a box. He won’t miss them, I tell myself” (206). And who could blame him? This is all part of the work of “good parenting”: to make choices about what

cultural messages and notes of influence a child is exposed to, to create a home that cultivates the political values the parents hope to transmit to their child. This is all the more critical for queer families fighting for their right to exist and be recognized in an oppressively heteronormative culture. However, at the same time, packing away the unwelcome objects from O–’s short history, whether for reasons of “good parenting” or “good taste” speaks to a desire to edit or even erase a past in which Flanery was not present, and, as *The Ginger Child* slowly reveals, such a project of re-writing is beyond Flanery’s talents.

On the first day of the “Introductions,” Flanery and his partner finally meet their son-to-be. As the couple are spending time with O– and his foster family in their home, the foster mother, K–, initiates the following exchange:

“I hope you took a good long look at your lovely home before you left,” K– says.

“Why’s that,” I ask her, laughing nervously.

“Because it won’t look like that for long with him in it.” She nods at O–, who is sitting on the couch mesmerized by a chat show.

I laugh again, even more nervously, then suggest we try again to read a book.

“Mostly interested in his catalogues,” K– says. “He’ll look at them for hours.”

“Catalogues?”

“Show your new daddies,” she says. (223)

Flanery doesn’t direct us to it, but I think this scene can return us to the scrapbook, the gift for O–. In carefully preparing images of the life waiting for O– (his room, their apartment, the neighborhood, the soon-to-be-familiar faces) perhaps the scrapbook had also been Flanery’s “gift” to O–’s foster parents. When K– quips that Flanery’s “lovely home” will be forever changed, it’s her, rather than O–, who we imagine studying the photographs with a curiosity worthy of their

meticulous curation. Her comment, which can be read as wry and knowing (“I hope you took a good long look at your lovely home before you left”), elicits nervous laughter from Flanery. Yet another ominous sign. No doubt we can hear in K–’s words a passive-aggression that discharges some of the ugly feelings she has to negotiate in saying goodbye to her foster child; her words might be infused with an envy or ambivalence all of their own. In a prior conversation, when the two couples had been planning with the social worker the details for the final stages of O–’s adoption, the question was raised: would the foster parents accompany O– to London, would they help settle him into his new life? K– had been adamant, “she couldn’t, no, not possibly.” Her red lines: she’d be happy to maintain contact and visits with O–, “just so long as [she doesn’t] have to see him in his new home. That’s what’s hard” (205). But with the gift of the scrapbook, O–’s new home came to her.

“Gift” is an important word in Flanery’s understanding of the limits of family life. It was the coveted “gift” of “easy” reproductive capacity that he was unable to ask of his friends; and it was the possible “gift” of his father’s financial aid that he was unable to reciprocate with a commitment to taking care of him in his old age. Gifts are never free. All the power dynamics of the particular social relation are enfolded in their giving and receiving—aggression, guilt, indebtedness. If the handmade scrapbook was a show of care to the foster parents, perhaps the message was, *it might make it easier for you to let him go if you know what he’s going to be getting*. However, *look at what he’s about to enjoy* is also readable as, *look at what we’ve got*. To be proud of something risks enlivening a shame or resentment elsewhere. Might the scrapbook have been received as a sign of superiority, more “poshness” to behold? The display of Flanery’s cultural capital, which could well be interpreted as “poshness,” is prevalent throughout the story of *The Ginger Child*, in part because the couple’s investments in literary and visual culture are central to

their parental offering. When, in the dialogue above, Flanery makes another attempt at reading with his new son, and K- comments that O- is “mostly interested in his catalogues,” we hear a further indication of the distance between the fantasy and the reality. She might as well have said, *you’ll not get far with books.*

Yet, on reading of O-’s attachment to his catalogues, I was hopeful that there might be a sharing of scopic delights between father and son; Flanery, after all, has demonstrated the visual intensity of his appetites (“I look at you, and you, and you, and you”). But a bonding opportunity fails to be created in this moment because Flanery informs us that the catalogue “is *nothing but* advertisements for cheap toys, colour-coded by gender” (emphasis added). As O- turns the pages at speed through the “pink” sections, Flanery sees the opportunity to encourage different interests: “slow down,” he suggests, “aren’t those interesting?” “No, those are for girls,” O- answers, which is an obvious disappointment for Flanery (224). Perhaps it’s an obvious (and easy) disappointment for the reader too. But it’s not what disappointed me. Rather, I took umbrage with the “nothing but,” wanting to protect O-’s appetite for the cheap stuff. It struck me as important to recognize O-’s catalogue-love as *his own*, an interest of his own. We might even speculate that a catalogue is a good choice of object to try to love and take ownership of because of its very cheapness; its relatively low status in a household in which many hands are coveting more obviously prized objects might make it all the more available and reliable. However, as Flanery persists in trying to peak O-’s curiosity with so-called proper books, the value of the catalogue is overlooked. Quite apart from the gender point, then—O-’s eager indoctrination into of a world of soft/hard, pink/blue, that’s so out of sync with Flanery’s vision of family life—the catalogue offends on the grounds of taste. As a crude inventory of mass-produced and cheaply manufactured toys designed

not to last, a catalogue requires minimal levels of literacy to navigate. One doesn't *read* a catalogue, rather one *eats* it, happy to consume the "advertisements" without discernment.

Across the three-day introductions period the adopting couple keep hearing, from the adults in O-'s life, that their son has "a lot of love to give" (168, 203), and indeed, prior to meeting his son, Flanery had always imagined him to be "*amenable*, ready to be loved and reassured" (200). But the reality child is different to the image Flanery has been living with, and, ultimately, the phrase "a lot of love to give" fails to reassure; it seems to cover over something. Initially however, the new fathers are encouraged by how easily their son, with a lot of love to give, seems to be able to transfer his affections (O- moves happily between them and the foster parents, for example, when his day is divided between both). But something changes. There's an enthusiastic encounter with an unknown child in a park, and then a more disconcerting incident when the couple take O- out for the day to a family-friendly museum. It seems that O- has no sense of risk or danger; he "walks up to a man in the museum and starts talking to him, takes his hand and embraces him" (234). Flanery can see that it doesn't matter to O- whether he is holding the hand of his new parents or that of a complete stranger. O-'s ample love is alarming in its lack of discrimination. It also represents a colossal disappointment. By the end of their day trip, throughout which O- has failed on every imaginable level to show signs of promise in recreating the gallery scenes from Flanery's own childhood, the new parents are exhausted: "This is not what we imagined. There is no pleasure, no sense of connection, no feeling that this little boy enjoys being with us any more than he might enjoy being with the stranger in the museum" (235). There is undeniable heartbreak in the line, "this is not what we imagined." As Flanery is introduced to this other world—the world of O- and his foster family, as well as the unknown world of O-'s mother, always somewhere on

the periphery of Flanery's mind—his encounter with his “reality child” becomes an encounter with the limits of his own imagination.

“We do not require a genius,” Flanery had said at the very start of the process, when he was asked to identify his “red lines,” forced into a consideration of all the permutations and complications that would test his desire to parent, “but we do want someone who will grow to independence” (11). What does the capacity to grow to independence look like in a four-year-old child? Flanery cannot know, none of us can, but after only three days of mediated introductions, his outlook has shifted dramatically: “This is a child who needs things I cannot give him, I begin to think. And even if I somehow manage to provide him with everything he does need, I suspect the effort will destroy me” (235). Flanery is not naïve, he knows that his late decision not to adopt O– isn't solely about the failure he anticipates in fulfilling the child's needs and acknowledges as much.¹⁷ Throughout, he has troubled the language of altruism, recognizing instead how his familial imaginary is motivated by *his* needs and wants, perhaps, albeit belatedly, giving the lie to the idea of “unconditional love.”

Changeling Children

Flanery informs his readers that O– is one of five siblings, all of whom have been taken away from their mother (198). This may be poetic license on the writer's part (he is, after all, obliged to protect the privacy of those who feature in his story), but the implication that O– might be the fifth child brings to the fore a fruitful literary association. *The Fifth Child* is the title of Doris Lessing's gripping 1988 novella, a horror story about a changeling child.

Spanning the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties, Lessing's story follows the family life of Harriet and David, who as a young couple in the swinging sixties, are dancing out of step. They

share a vision of happiness: a big family, a large, secure and sociable home intended to “annul, absolve, cancel out all the deficiencies” of their own upbringings (18). The first house they buy is meant to be their last, there are rooms for six children to grow up and space galore to hold and host the wider family. The contraceptive pill is shunned and the children come quickly, so too do guests. Family members flock for long summers and celebrations at Christmas and Easter—multiple sets of parents, divorcees, siblings, nephews and nieces, neighbors and family friends, all getting along. From the outset the kitchen is filled with the activities and aromas of “happiness, in the old style”—bottling fruit for jam and chutneys, baking bread, and so on; there’s a large wooden table center-stage, with surplus chairs waiting in the wings to accommodate the future arrivals (28).

Lessing evokes nostalgia for a version of family life that, like all idylls, never really existed. It’s clear that for David and Harriet to have “succeeded in this miracle”—to have realized their vision of an expansive, happy family, “despite the criticism and laughter of others”—their own parents have been wholly relied upon to support lifestyle choices that they themselves eschewed (David’s father takes care of the mortgage and offers regular financial assistance, and Harriet’s mother sustains the household practically and emotionally by becoming an exhausted live-in nanny) (26–27). After the first child, then the second that followed on its heels, the couple’s parents voice concern: perhaps they should have a break before the next one, and do they really intend to go to six? David’s father insists, “people are brainwashed into believing family life is best. But that’s the past” (36). Harriet’s mother warns: “The aristocracy—yes, they can have children like rabbits, and expect to, but they have the money for it. And poor people can have children, and half of them die, and expect to. But people like us, in the middle, we have to be careful about the children we have so we can look after them. It seems to me you haven’t thought it out” (23).

Amongst the maelstrom of cultural change and generational conflict, the cracks begin to show in Harriet's and David's familial life. Then along comes Ben, the fifth child.

Though none of Harriet's pregnancies were plain sailing, the fifth was of a different order. From the beginning Harriet was embattled by a fetus which was "trying to tear its way out of her stomach," its strength affirmed by anyone brave enough to put their hand to the mother's belly (49). Harriet's attempts to keep her "enemy" sedated offer little respite, "the only thing that helped was to keep moving" (51): "As she walked, strode, ran along the country lanes she fantasized that she took the big kitchen knife, cut open her own stomach, lifted out the child—and when they actually set eyes on each other, after this long blind struggle, what would she see?" (59). What would she see? The question resounds when birth brings no relief: what is Ben? "Neanderthal baby" Harriet laments when, at only five weeks, all agreed that he must be weaned to relieve her of his hunger (65). Oversized, stiff and strong, Ben was not held for long by any visitors to the house; they'd return him politely to his mother who'd place him back in his cot, as one might an animal in a cage, everyone hiding their discomfort or fear at the "angry, hostile little troll" (69). In all Harriet's attempts to bond with and soften Ben, making time for just her and him, for intimacy and play, not once did he yield. He would not be made ordinary. On one occasion when Ben finds his mother's thumb with his mouth and closes his jaws over it, Harriet feels "her bone bend" and sees his "cold triumphant grin" (69). Later when Ben's brother Paul, closest in age, puts his hand through the bars of the cot, Ben grabs it and "pulls Paul hard against the bars, bending the arm deliberately backwards"—as Paul is screaming in pain, Ben is "crowing with pleasure and achievement" (71). Later still, a visitor brings a dog to the house, a small terrier that Ben follows everywhere, without ever attempting to pet or stroke it. When Harriet finds the dog dead on the kitchen floor early one morning, her thoughts immediately turn to her one-year-old son (75–76).

The guests and visitors slowly stop coming to the house. The door to Ben's nursery is fitted with a lock on the outside and in time the other children's rooms are fitted with locks on the inside. David's and Harriet's utopia is over.

What is Ben? A "troll," a "hobgoblin," an "alien"? A creature from a different time and place? As the incidents escalate it seems clear that he is beyond the accommodation of family life, and, questionably, beyond the accommodation of society. An institution is found and Ben is sent away. Of all the family members involved in the discussion—e.g. David and Harriet's parents and adult siblings—Harriet is the last to succumb.

"It's either him or us," said David to Harriet. He added, his voice full of cold dislike for Ben, "He's probably just dropped in from Mars. He's going back to report on what he's found down here." He laughed—cruelly, it seemed to Harriet, who was silently taking in the fact—which of course she had half known already—that Ben was not expected to live long in this institution, whatever it was.

"He's a little child," she said, "*He's our child.*"

"No, he's not," said David, finally. "Well, he certainly isn't mine." (90)

"He certainly isn't mine": David articulates the limits of the possessive pronoun with conviction. Ben's siblings understand his exclusion in similar terms, as the eldest brother explains that "[t]hey are sending Ben away because he isn't really one of us" (93). But Ben does not remain incarcerated for long. Harriet discovers the location of the institution and confronts its horrors: wards filled with children "in whom the human template had been wrenched out of pattern, sometimes horribly, sometimes slightly" (98). Admonished for her visit by the staff member in charge—"[w]hen people dump their kids here, they don't come and see them after"—Harriet finds Ben unconscious and sedated, straightjacketed and lying in a pool of urine and excrement (97). She signs the release

forms and returns home. In rescuing Ben, bringing him back from the brink of a certain death, Harriet knows what she has done: “if I had let him die, then all of us, so many people, would have been happy, but I could not do it, and therefore ...” (157). In the eyes of many, the destruction of the family sits squarely with the mother: she produced Ben, and then chose to keep him alive, sacrificing other family relationships in so doing. The older children write to their grandparents for help: fees for boarding schools are forthcoming and arrangements are made so they can escape Ben, escape the big house that was intended to be their haven for life.

Again, what is Ben? The ultimate test of a mother’s love? Harriet too wonders whether somehow, somewhere Ben might find “his own kind”: “Ben’s people were at home under the earth, she was sure, deep underground in black caverns lit by torches” (139, 146). As a comment on the so-called maternal bond, *The Fifth Child* is suitably ambiguous. That Harriet has never doubted that Ben is from elsewhere does not proscribe her sense of responsibility for him (whether we call it maternal, parental, or simply human). More forcefully, Lessing’s work raises the social question of what *we* do to *our* children. Does the positioning of a child beyond the parameters of the family itself signify the edge of human belonging? Read for its social commentary as well as its notes of horror, *The Fifth Child* shows us the figure of the “deviant” child, outcast to the margins of society as a scapegoat for social dis-ease. Children hidden away in institutions, corrective facilities, treatment centers, in cages in immigration holding bays, children detained or discarded as lost—or rather, unclaimable—property.

Over the years, as Harriet’s life is given over to the daily management of Ben, she remains on the lookout for someone in a position of authority to confirm what she, as his mother, knows: not simply that Ben is not normal, but that he is not human. She has to be careful, however, for those she consults will be more likely see and judge the monstrosity of the mother than the child.

Following a violent incident in the playground, Harriet secures an appointment for Ben, now six years old, with a specialist—Dr Gilley, who reiterates the message that Harriet has heard since Ben was born: “The problem is not with Ben, but with you. You don’t like him very much.” She goes onto explain that not liking your child is not uncommon, and that having a child you dislike is not your fault. Most importantly she stresses that “we can’t choose what will turn up in the lottery—and that is what having a baby is. Luckily or unluckily, we can’t choose” (125).

It’s correct, of course, that in having a baby David and Harriet played the “lottery”: once the decision is made to throw the dice, you cannot choose which numbers turn up (at least, according to the reproductive era of Lessing’s depiction). But “choice” still operates in advance; in the very decision to act, the decision to have *another* baby, a fifth child, the parents actively chose to play the lottery again. Lessing stages the philosophical debate around limits of choice and the consolations of fate in heated terms between Harriet and David. The husband cannot tolerate his wife’s fatalistic thought that they’re being “punished”—punished for what, demands David:

“For presuming. For thinking we could be happy. Happy because *we* decided we would be.”

“Rubbish,” he said. Angry: this Harriet made him angry, “It was chance. Anyone could have got Ben. It was a chance gene that’s all.”

“I don’t think so,” she stubbornly held on. “We were going to be happy! No one else is, or I never seem to meet them, but we were going to be. And so down came the thunderbolt.”

“Stop it, Harriet! Don’t you know where that thought leads? Prognostics and punishments, witch-burnings and angry gods—!” He was shouting at her. . . .

“But who were *we* to decide we were going to be this or that?”

“Who? *We* did. Harriet and David. *We* took the responsibility for what we believed in, and we did it. Then—bad luck. That’s all. We could easily have succeeded. We could have had just what we planned” (141).

Since Ben’s birth, Harriet has bemoaned that she’s been treated as a criminal rather than as someone who’s “suffered a misfortune,” but by the end of the novella she is ready to re-evaluate her crime (94). As their argument continues, with David and Harriet split on whether Ben is the sign of a family held hostage to fortune, the self-deceptions of a successful marriage are exposed. Did she and David “want to be better than everyone else,” to demonstrate to their parents that they could achieve an outmoded version of happiness; did they fail to keep a check on the parameters of their selfishness? (142). Lessing invites these conclusions, and others besides. But *The Fifth Child* is more than a portrait of a ruined family. The changeling child is always society’s child, an interloper intended to animate the anxieties of the day. Described as a genetic throwback, Ben stands as a portent of darker days to come, a “part-social being” fit for the “barbarous” 1980s with its “[w]ars and riots; killings and hijackings; murders and thefts and kidnappings” (117, 129).

As representatives of the social order, the family GP, the school headmistress, the so-called “expert” all repeatedly disappoint Harriet’s need for confirmation of her child’s radical difference, insisting instead on the breadth of “normal,” and Ben’s place within it. With Dr Gilley, Harriet pushes the point: she summons Ben into the room so that the psychiatrist cannot deny what she knows to be the truth: “I want it *said*, I want it recognized, I just can’t stand it never being said”: “[Ben] stood with his shoulders hunched forward and his knees bent, as if about to spring off somewhere. He was a squat, burly little figure, with a big head, the yellow stubble of his coarse hair growing from the double crown of his head into the point low on his heavy narrow forehead. He had a flattish flaring nose that turned up. His mouth was fleshy and curly. His eyes were like

lumps of dull stone. . . . You could almost take him for a little man, not a child at all” (126). Harriet sees Dr Gilley’s initial horror and distress at Ben’s presence, but it’s soon covered over, the moment of truth “repudiated” so the meeting can close on conventional terms. What would it mean for the expert witness to meet the mother’s plea (“I want it *said*, I want it recognised”)? A brief reprieve for Harriet no doubt, but what then? Dr Gilley elaborates: “Do you want me to give you a letter to the zoo, ‘Put this child in a cage’? Or hand him over to science?” (127).¹⁸

We are asked to imagine an abject physicality, a body from which others recoil on sight. Paradoxically, perhaps, when Ben is drawn in such terms—via the familiar folkloric imagery of fantastical creatures (goblins, hobbits, dwarfs, etc.)—the reader is brought closer to the possibility of his status as a reality child, a human child. Critics of Lessing’s text have observed that reading Ben in exclusively allegorical or fantastical terms overlooks the opportunity to ask questions about the perception, treatment and representation of different bodies in the here and now. Most obviously, this is an invitation to consider how Ben’s otherness might be thought about in relation to disability.¹⁹ It is a moot point whether focusing on disability would be to read Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* against her intentions or merely extends the implications of her work. But I would want to stress that there can be no space of reading (or living) that’s safely out of reach from the problems of fantasy and its contagion. To push for a social-realist appreciation of the text, then, would not keep us secured in the so-called real for very long: not only is Lessing committed to working up the notes of horror in order that *The Fifth Child* reads as a twentieth century Gothic tale, but all the attention on bodies in the story—Harriet’s maternal-sexual body, intermittently nourishing and depleted; Ben’s peculiar body with its inordinate power and strength—means that we are always in the imaginary. Alongside Harriet (and Ben), there’s Harriet’s sister Sarah, with her “mongol child,” Amy, who is sweet and adorable despite being “afflicted” (80). The

juxtaposition of Ben and Amy features prominently in the minds of Harriet and the other characters who ask secretly, which sister is worse-off, which “afflicted” child would be the weightier cross to bear? If you had to, whose fate would you choose? Which child, or more problematically, *what kind of child*, would bring you, as a parent, to the limits of your own humanity? Dramatizing the impossible “choices” that family-making entails, it is the *imaginary horrors of difference* that Lessing’s text plays with.

The Limit of Imagination

There is a stand-alone chapter in Flanery’s text entitled “Interior: Monkeyboy,” a republication of a short story inspired by a painting of the same name by the artist Kate Gottgens whose exhibition Flanery and his partner had visited on a trip to South Africa. Gottgens’ painting “depicts a red-headed boy wearing a tail and standing in a mid-century modern living room. Red stripes flow along his bare arms and body, as if he has been caught in the light of a sunset—or even, I begin to imagine, as if he has painted himself, made himself into a work of art housed within a work of art” (135). The short story itself needs only a brief introduction here because, both tonally and thematically, it reads as a fictionalized condensation of the broader memoir, mildly menacing, with scenes of normative domesticity repeatedly unsettled by the presence of an intimate stranger. The protagonist-narrator is an American art-lover and painter, married to an Englishman, Edward, and coming to terms with their newly adopted six-year-old son, Romeo, a name he can barely bring himself to utter, and so privately renames the child “Will.” Over the course of the story, various incidents, including several hospital visits, secure the prospect of a violent, unruly, and untameable child, one who will always require the intervention of the state in one form or another, and who threatens to drive a rift through the adult relationship (should the

couple lock their bedroom door on the first night the child stays with them, or must they let him see that they trust him?). Gottgens' titular artwork is the centerpiece of the story. It is the prize possession of the narrator, which he wants to protect from the child's grubby fingers. However, Romeo/Will is inexplicably fascinated with the image; he takes his place in front of it, looking in at the child with the tail and the streaks of red standing in that living room, who is in turn looking out to an un-knowable beyond. Flanery positions the narrator standing behind the child, also looking on, just as we, his readers, are invited to do so—this *mise en abyme* draws our attention to the multiple frames that are supposed to help distinguish art from life.²⁰ As the child in the story morphs into the Monkeyboy of the image, fashioning himself a tail and painting his skin red, we ask which child will, finally, emerge: a teachable Will, amenable to the “transformative power of art,” or an unredeemable Romeo, fusing with his Monkeyboy self and bringing unhuman terror into his new home.

Writing in conventional, fiction mode, Flanery is freer to elaborate on some of the scenes of parenting that he's demonstrated such attachment to across *The Ginger Child*: teaching his child new skills, cultivating his appreciation for art, inducting him into different worlds, and being able to answer all the “whys” along the way. He is also freer to furnish with a little more detail some of the frustrations and fears that are present in the memoir proper, whether that's through condescension towards the system that presides over him, or a superior attitude towards key elements of the child's hinterland.²¹ Most apparent, though, is the freedom that fiction-writing gives Flanery to develop those anxious fantasies that skirt around the edges of the nonfictional account of O—. The child in “Interior: Monkeyboy” is readily described as “beastly” and “feral,” and his questionable likeability is not dealt with so gingerly.²² The Monkeyboy will need “retraining,” “unmonkeying”; and the narrator will spend the rest of his life in “a mode of constant

adjustment” (155). Set within the particular context of the memoir, the flights of fantasy that the figure of the Monkeyboy helps to launch in this short story are challenging: the child as beast, undomesticated, a representative of a classed and raced otherness that terrifies the narrator.²³

As is his right as a writer, Flanery establishes for himself and his readers a hopeful ending to his short story: art does have a “transformative power,” a civilizing function even.²⁴ The beginning of a relationship between Will and his new father is secured via the painting they both prize. The image binds them in an enigmatic identification; it is an object over which they are at first in conflict but, ultimately, it promises to bring them closer, physically and imaginatively. O— however, the real ginger child, has no such luck. As we saw in the episode with the glossy toy catalogue, that according to his foster mother, O— could look at for hours, an experience of shared, imagistic rapture was not possible. Neither did O—’s prospects improve on the trip to the “family-friendly museum” where, according to Flanery, “anything immobile, anything requiring a moment to understand or think about or appreciate, fail[ed] to capture his interest” (233). Cruelly overburdened with expectations, Flanery shows us how the museum trip exposed the distance between the memory scenes from his childhood and the impossibility of their reproduction with O—.

Needless to say, O— was never the true subject of *The Ginger Child*, and so, in an important sense, Flanery’s readers were never going to get a good look at him. Not simply for reasons of anonymity or confidentiality, but because of his *written* status: Flanery’s imagining, fantasizing and writing of O— are the primary means through which the child exists. This is brought home in a late, short chapter of the book entitled “You.” These one and a half pages written directly to O— (“you”) are not an apology as such, but an expression of “sorrow” alongside the couple’s “hope” that “in time you may understand how, in making the decision we did, we were doing the best for

you because we were not equipped to look after you in the way we believed you needed” (253). Does Flanery really believe that O– will one day read his pages? I don’t think so, but it’s a worthy thought experiment regardless. Were O– to pick up the book, might he recognize something of himself in it, like a boy held up to an artwork as a mirror, invited to make sense of the image that’s making a claim on him? If this is the fantasy, I’m left wondering what exactly O– would be able to see, beyond Flanery himself. By the end of *The Ginger Child*, while O– is denied the experience of art’s transformative potential, Flanery is not: from among the trauma of the adoption experience, his book will emerge.

Was O– ever to be more than a written response to his author’s quest for belonging, a lens to refract a self-image, an imaginary solution to the impossibility of commanding an origin myth? Very early on, Flanery writes that the reality-testing of the adoption process “kills the joy of *imagining* a family” (11, emphasis added). There must be a lesson in this. If there is a broad cultural responsibility to try to get to know the difference between the fantasies and realities of family-making, no doubt it weighs heavily on those for whom the ambivalence of having children is deeply felt (whether associated with disposition or circumstance, as both can cause painful and protracted decision-making processes). We might say that the responsibility of the writer, however, is slightly different: their job is to imagine the lines between fantasy and reality anew, to allow the distinction to collapse and reform, and grant oneself infractions on the page that would be denied elsewhere. Reading Flanery’s work, I have wondered whether he did a good enough job at holding the line between imagining his family fantasy and acting it out, and, if not, whether this would be a parental failing or a writerly one.

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¹ I emphasize the *idea* rather than the *pursuit* to nuance my point from another, regular observation regarding the gulf between those who *consider* adoption, and those who then go on to *choose* it. Sociologist Allen Fisher has surmised in his 2003 article some of the reasons that adoption is "often considered, but seldom chosen" emphasizing the ongoing role that stigma may play in maintaining this discrepancy (353). My interest lies in how such factors are imaginatively engaged with—or not—in the "consideration" phase.

² While I am not concerned in this article to establish a comparative reading of Flanery's text, or to explore its representative qualities within the genre of adoptive parent memoirs, we should note that it sits within a context of mainstream LGBTQ+ parenting memoirs that focus on the experience of the male protagonist/(adoptive) father (see, for example, Savage; and Green).

³ As I have engaged with Flanery's text, I have tried to be alert to blind spots in my own political imagination, as well the limitations of the disciplines I think with. This is especially important given the formidable set of cultural expectations and prejudices around an idealized conception of "mother love" which can intersect with different lines of anti-gay hostility and an oppressively heteronormative/heterosexist paradigm of the family. When it comes to politicizing its disciplinary imagination, psychoanalysis, especially its institutional and practice histories, has a checkered report card. As Michael Warner once noted, with reference to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's classic 1991 essay "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay," "any imagination of desirable queerness is conspicuously absent in the psychoanalytic and psychiatric literature about child-rearing" (Warner 8).

Further, with respect to the site of adoption specifically, an abundance of cultural prejudice exist. As the psychoanalyst David Schwartz comments in the *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* special issue on adoption, the “cultural devaluation” of adoption is immediately apparent “if we permit ourselves to imagine what an unambiguous cultural celebration of adoption might look like: adoptive parents being paid, instead of the reverse; researchers attempting to verify the likely superiorities of adoptive children; relatives of adoptive parents noting with genuine pleasure how different from them their nieces and nephews look; books being published with titles like *The Advantages of the Chosen Child*. The improbability of these ironic musings reminds us that our culture furrows its brow at adoption much more than it smiles” (139). The failures to bring the desirability of queer parenting and the desirability of adoption into dialogue are left for everyone to reckon with, including the writer of *The Ginger Child* and its readers.

⁴ Notwithstanding this guiding premise, I will be working with a relatively simple conception of “fantasy” across this piece, where the desired objects and scenes that drive the (largely conscious) activity of fantasizing and imagining are known by and narratable by the subject. The complex notions of fantasy (or phantasy) that psychoanalytic thought has developed are inordinately helpful in problematizing a clean bifurcation between fantasy and reality, helpful especially in foregrounding the idea that the very enjoyment of fantasy may be structured around the deferment of its realization: fantasy, in other words, feeds on enjoyable forms of frustration. My reasons for remaining with a more pedestrian working of the fantasy/reality distinction are two-fold: First, this piece is primarily concerned with the difficulties of reality-testing in the adoption scenario where reality-testing involves bringing the pleasure principle—with its proliferation of excitations of the internal world—into reliable dialogue with the reality that confronts the subject “outside” of the mind: this conflict, rather than the operations of fantasy itself, is my main point of interest. The

second reason is more methodological and also ethical: in working with memoir, I make a general commitment to taking the text at its word. While this is not to say that my criticality is suspended, it is to affirm that in my treatment of Flanery's text I will not be subjecting his manifest and written fantasy scripts to any sustained psychoanalytic (or clinical) scrutiny. As I claim across the piece, it is only when we arrive at modes of fictional writing that we can begin to appreciate and analyze fantasy's more disruptive dynamics.

⁵ On the ethics of the choice, Flanery asks how hoping for more children to come into the adoption system (because they're being given up or taken away from their mothers) can be any more ethical than legally managed surrogacy (84).

⁶ The prevalence of social media is often noted for how it has complicated the directionality of "the search," specifically by providing the birth family with the means to make initial contact with the adoptee (see, for example, Skandrani et al.). We will see the relevance of this prospect within Flanery's text.

⁷ We will return to these scenes of acculturation and their formative influence towards the end of the article when considering the relevance of the genre shift from memoir to fiction in Flanery's writing.

⁸ I recognize that the work of adoption services is more complex than I present it here, though the necessary filtering function in the early checking and assessment stages of the application process—what Kristin Wilson (163) describes as the "soul killing bureaucracy" of adoption—is frequently experienced as a source of anxiety.

⁹ The complexities of this dynamic can be challenging as is especially well documented on the topic of maternal ambivalence (see, for example, Parker).

¹⁰ Park focuses on the adoptive maternal body and its queer potentiality (irrespective of sexuality). Referencing Calhoun, Park argues that adoption holds the promise of more critical praxis of parenting (for her, a “critical maternal praxis”) through “destabilizing the still prevalent, although increasingly inaccurate paradigm of the family unit as a ‘nuclear, two-parent, self-sufficient, procreative family’ (Calhoun 147) that *successively regenerates itself in its own image*” (222, emphasis added). See also Warner on “repro-narrativity,” which Park is dialoguing with, as an apposite critical framing to view Flanery’s desire to “have grandchildren in whose faces I can see the inscription of my genetic legacy.”

¹¹ Flanery borrows the phrase from literary theorist Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings*, which guides him towards an account of envy that challenges its *negative* association with the feminine. That Flanery can admit his envy is clear, he writes: ‘Envy is what I feel, and I know it is a bad feeling, an ugly feeling, but it is one I can never seem to escape. To reveal this envy publicly is to open myself to the derision of those people—perhaps friends among them—who may see it as unjustified and, given the queer valence of my envy’s spin, unquestionably effete. Look at that queer man longing for a baby, envious of straight couples, longing as if having children were a fundamental human right, longing in a way that makes it seem as though he is aping the maternal impulse’ (94–95). Compellingly, he goes on to explore within Ngai’s framework, how envy is instructive as an emotion that points to the “unfair distribution of things,” and how, for example, his own his feelings of “womb envy” (or pregnancy envy) are poorly accommodated by the contemporary understandings of envy available from different sites of cultural discourse.

¹² Such fantasies and fears involve never being free to post photos of O— without fear that the Mother will track him down—via face recognition software—and disturb their lives with her chaos (198). As noted above (endnote 6) there is an increase in birth parents’ using social media to

connect with the adopted child which, in this text, Flanery experiences as a real threat. We might also note, though, that in *The Ginger Child*, it is not the birth mother scanning the images or faces of children for physical resemblance and familial likeness, nor is it the adopted child keen to detect a self-sameness elsewhere (see Lifton; and Deans). Rather Flanery searches out an image of a dangerous difference to then overlay onto the child's face.

¹³ For an early discussion of the family romance fantasy in adopted children see Edward Schwartz.

¹⁴ At a critical juncture in the adoption process, Flanery and his partner are dealt a severe blow from the system. Just one day prior to their scheduled first meeting with O-, the Agency Decision Maker refused to sign-off on the match, citing Flanery's self-identification as "queer" rather than "gay," and the ADM's sense that Flanery himself is running away from trauma in his own life. The couple gain their right to appeal, but it takes a further two months for a new ADM to give the go-ahead. Flanery explains that this setback leaves him feeling "once again as though the system has failed to understand us, as if our queerness and foreignness and our professions work in concert to make us terrifyingly other" (209).

¹⁵ Relatedly, *The Ginger Child* demonstrates just how vital the client-social worker relationship is to the ongoing matching (or mismatching) of the adoption family. The book is full of strong examples to drive home this point. To take just one, Flanery recounts an occasion on which the couple's assigned visiting social worker brings a video console to their home to test their capacity to "be fun." He writes that the social worker "asks us to play a dance-off game that has us thrashing around our living room while she sits in the corner, videoing us on her smartphone without asking our permission. . . . Desperate to pass this ridiculous test . . . we throw ourselves into the activity, but feel at the same time a rising sickness and sense of misgiving about the whole situation" (70). It is one among many incidents that make Flanery question the "fit" between the lifestyle, attitudes,

and philosophy of parenting that he and his partner share, and the values of the system and its representatives that may or may not place a child with them. It is also a quietly shocking scene to imagine. Unsurprisingly then, Flanery later feels “strangely violated” by an encounter that has so patently failed to recognize him (70).

¹⁶ The practice of creating and sharing visual materials as a way for adoptive parent(s) to introduce themselves to the child is a common one. See, Blackmore et al. for discussion of this practice.

¹⁷ In addition to the disorienting impact of a personal bereavement in Flanery’s partner’s life, the changing political climate is a significant contextual reason for their decision not to adopt. The election of Donald Trump in 2016, announced on the same day as their fateful trip with O– to the family-friendly museum, counts as another devastating loss, one which drastically undermines their sense of what’s possible regarding the ongoing social and political conditions for queer family-making.

¹⁸ Incidentally cages and scientific testing are precisely the options that await Ben in Lessing’s 2000 sequel to *The Fifth Child*, entitled *Ben, in the World*.

¹⁹ See, for example, Clark.

²⁰ The centrality of the artwork within Flanery’s fictional short story chimes with the emphasis on images throughout the memoir. Importantly the artwork presents itself as framed encounter through which questions of belonging, liking, likeness and resemblance, taste, can all be explored. It is also an important moment of imaginary curation—perhaps akin to the curation of family photographs—through which the construction of narrative and memory can take place (on the broader point of the visual record in the creation of family narrative, see Hirsch).

²¹ For example, the social worker in the fictional story has a “horribly nasal drone” and writes “ungrammatical emails” (142); the child’s foster parents are imagined as “rough in their speech

but tidy in their habits, house proud with net curtains and silk flowers”; and the child himself has an accent that “grates,” needing to be “ironed, flattened, dried out” (148).

²² For example, “He’s not a boy. He’s an animal. We can’t keep him. He has to go back” (154).

²³ Fantasies oriented around social class are easier to discern in this text than those of race, yet we can trust there will be an intersection.

²⁴ Flanery’s short story was written when the adoption process was in hiatus and the couple were reconsidering their options, significantly in advance of O–’s entry as a reality child into his life. Retrospectively, Flanery comes to see its function as a working-through of fantasy material describing the piece as a “strange landmark” and a “portent” in their adoption story (135).