Introduction

The county of Essex and its people - especially its women - have been the butt of the joke for a long time, and the subject of critical scrutiny, not to mention snobbish disdain from the rest of the country, both historically and in our own times.[1] However, there remains in this region a great energy for survival that Tim Burrows notices in *The Invention of Essex*:

> I started to recognise an intrinsic feeling of accentuation when it comes to Essex, between sparseness and density, bucolic abandonment and oncoming modernity, realism and poetry, country and city, rich and poor – buzzing dichotomies that meant that as hard as I tried to pin Essex's story down, it somehow always slipped away… learning the tales of historical extremity that begat the great movement from London into Essex eventually illuminated the county… revealing it as a place built through a stubborn belief in the promise of survival.[2]

[1] The television series 'Benefits by the Sea: Jaywick' brought Jaywick into the spotlight as the most deprived town in the UK; 'From Loadsamoney and 'Basildon man' to Towie and Brexit – 'Essex has long been held up as both the authentic England and the crudest, stupidest symbol of Englishness.' Tim Burrows, *The Invention of Essex: How a County Became a Caricature,* The Guardian, June 2019. (Essex Girl remains in the Oxford English Dictionary: 1991 - A contemptuous term applied (usually *jocular*) to a type of young woman, supposedly to be found in and around Essex, and variously characterized as unintelligent, promiscuous, and materialistic.)

[2] Tim Burrows. *The Invention of Essex* (Profile Books, 2023), 80-81.

Having moved to Southend-on-Sea as a child, Essex is a place I feel I know well. For the last twenty years I have worked in school environments overwhelmingly made up of women in Tendring, particularly the seaside town of Clacton-on-Sea. I wanted *Ida Shakespeer* to celebrate this spirit of survival and the way I saw it manifested in my colleagues' friendships, community and hard work. My novel is the story of a mother and daughter, set in a fictional Essex coastal town, inspired by my work as a primary school teacher in Tendring, and my memories of growing up around Southend. The novel is described as 'an Essex novel', perhaps defiantly, because my goal was to write about this 'joke county', which has been mocked, and dismissed so frequently. In this work of fiction, I aim to examine and depict some of the particular qualities of Essex, of landscape, people, and culture. *Ida Shakespeer* is informed by the iconoclastic and radical work of artists as diverse as Grayson Perry, Tracey Emin and Angela Carter in its exploration of neglected female archetypes and characters. My goal was not to look through rose-tinted spectacles but to paint what I see and have seen in Essex culture – its defiance and free-spiritedness, but also some more negative qualities: rigidity, gender stereotyping, classism, racism, sometimes a narrowness or a provincial small-mindedness about culture or morality. But my depiction of this is as an insider, not an outsider. While there are novels about particular regions of the UK (Hardy's Wessex, W.G. Sebald's Suffolk based *The Rings of Saturn*, many Norfolk based contemporary novels including the work of Rachel Cusk or Ali Smith's *The Accidental*) there are relatively few 'Essex novels' and those that do exist are not concerned with my terrain – a contemporary realist portrayal of the older, working-class woman, living a financially precarious life as a single mother and then grandmother. In this commentary I will contextualize my novel within contemporary feminist literature and position it in

relation to those artistic representations of Essex and marginal coastal communities that have influenced my work - representations that offer a radical counter-narrative to the dominant and accepted denigrating story of Essex and other similarly marginalised places. The originality of my project lies in the hitherto absence of 'Essex novels' in the same vein as *Ida Shakespeer* - an absence which this creative work and critical commentary seeks to redress.

My central character Ida has struggled to make ends meet and to raise her child, and now finds that her adult relationship with her daughter Emily has gone off-track, partly as a result of the gendered and classist expectations and assumptions that seem to hold sway quite powerfully in the context of this Essex small town. The story is set in a marginal space, between towns of wealth (e.g. Frinton) and areas of poverty (e.g. Jaywick). These areas of Tendring include some of the poorest in the UK, but also have a seaside jauntiness and pleasure-seeking quality, like many seaside towns. The town of my novel is a down-at-heel, sometimes edgy setting not wholly dissimilar to Tracey Emin's Margate of the 1970s, a town that despite the presence of the 'Dreamland' funfair, was afflicted with real economic and social problems. The seaside has often drawn people in crisis; the margins of this country attract those who feel marginalised and de-centred. Essex historically has drawn people escaping from the East End of London, and much of the prejudice against Essex stems from this.

Coastal, like rural, communities, have their own sets of problems. In *The Seaside* (2023) Madelaine Bunting writes that 'for over two decades, seaside resorts have been found to have the worst levels of deprivation in the country, while a raft of shocking indicators – from poor health to shortened lives, drug addiction, high debt, low educational achievement to low income demonstrate blighted communities which

cluster along English coastlines.'[3] While Ida Shakespeer is not 'blighted' with the severest of these problems, nonetheless she has struggled to keep going, to pay the bills and provide a decent home for her growing daughter in the face of job insecurity, heartless factory line-managers, below par and faultily wired housing, and a world in which the unmarried single mother draws little sympathy from a respectable class that wishes to distance themselves from a perceived 'underclass' of precarious blue-collar workers, female at that. In this commentary I will place my own creative work within a context of British literary fiction that has infrequently told this story.

The reflective commentary begins with an investigation of representations of mother-daughter relationships in contemporary feminist fiction, examining how these stories have frequently been told through the eyes of the daughter. I consider the recognition of the mother's role through the first-person narrative of *Hot Milk* (2016) by Deborah Levy, the older mother's perspective and her recognition of her own mother in *My Name is Lucy Barton* (2016) by Elizabeth Strout. I describe the use of multivocal narratives in Strout's short story cycle *Anything is Possible* (2017), and novels including the *Poisonwood Bible* (1998) by Barbara Kingsolver, *Girl Woman Other* (2020) by Bernadine Evaristo, and particularly *The Wren, The Wren* (2023) by Anne Enright, which include authentic representations of older female characters, often using form, focalisation or language to represent the different characters they portray. There is a recognition here of arguments raised by theorists of motherhood and mothering including the contributions of community, grandparents, and 'othermothers' who may not have given birth, to the survival of particularly working class or lower income families. In this sense the shape of the multivocal and modal

[3] Madelaine Bunting, *The Seaside* (Granta, 2023), 5.

texts I have considered are formed through the intersectionality of gender and class. This discussion then leads to a consideration of ‘Late Style’, and the authentic older characters increasingly written by the older female writers.

I also explore how the privileging of the mother-daughter relationship, over fathers and daughters, has sometimes resulted in the ‘absent father’ plot, which is a central element of my novel. I examine the significance of Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* and *Wise Children* as a key influence on my own work. *Wise Children* is a novel in which the music-hall dancing twins Nora and Dora Chance question who their true father really is, whether the classical Shakespearean actor Melchior Hazard who has cast off his illegitimate musical-hall daughters, or Uncle Peregrine, who travels the world, and on his return lavishes them with gifts. In *Ida Shakespeer* the question of Emily’s paternity – whether it is David Essex or William Leach the architect – similarly provides both a narrative question, and a thematic thread of how these Essex women, Ida and Emily, are positioned in relation to national and cultural identity. Ultimately the power of the father is seen as less significant than the power of the mother as the sole provider and nurturer.

This aspect of the plot – the absent father figure, the privileging of the mother-daughter relationship – was also influenced by Carter’s short story, ‘The Bloody Chamber’ (1979) – in which she updates and reworks the Bluebeard fairytale. In Carter’s version it is the mother of the heroine who comes to rescue her daughter from a dangerous and violent marriage. My novel takes this archetypal plot and wrestles with it to explore how Ida tries to save her daughter and makes valiant efforts to do so - though ultimately it is Emily who must save herself through her own decision, and efforts, to be free – with her mother as a staunch ally. In this way Angela Carter’s work has multiple strands of influence on Ida Shakespeer and this

debt and feminist conversation with her work is a core factor of my creative work in this dissertation. But it also questions the idea of legitimacy, as Carter does in *Wise Children*. Narrated by a seventy-five-year-old music hall star Dora Chance, it is an intertextual, carnivalesque romp through five acts, interspersed with literary allusions mostly to the works of Shakespeare. One of the key arguments is that Shakespeare, despite the idolatry and snobbery of 'Bardism' – belongs as much to the carnivalesque, popular 'low' culture as it does to 'high', classical theatre. The Hazards and the Chances epitomize this dichotomy, but in the end they are one and the same. After all, as Smith asks, 'what's a Hazard anyway, but a posh word for Chance?'[4] The notion of 'Shakespeare' as a holistic and inclusive embodiment of national identity, embracing both high and low culture, influenced the naming of my character Ida Shakespeer.

Chapter three is an inquiry into Essex. Many of the literary Essex-based books and art I explored responded to Essex stereotypes. I examine artistic depictions and narratives of Essex, stories and characters which have influenced the writing of this novel, including Grayson Perry's *Ballad of Julie Cope* (2015), one everywoman's pilgrimage through the Essex Landscape from Canvey Island to Wrabness. I also consider the work of Keith Albarn, the Essex-based artist and sculptor whose Ekistikit sculptures were the inspiration for the 'pink dome on the beach' featured in my novel. (And incidentally Keith's son, Damon Albarn, lead singer of the band *Blur*, immortalised the Essex seaside town of Walton-on-the-Naze in the lyrics to Tracy Jacks – 'Tracy Jacks got on the first train to Walton…') I consider Tracey Emin's confessional art as a young woman stuck in the East Coast seaside town of Margate, her subsequent journey to London and the art elite, and her recent

[4] Ali Smith, 'Introduction' in *Wise Children* by Angela Carter (Vintage Books, 1991), x.

sculpture *The Mother*. Both Emin and Perry celebrate the older working mother, the everywoman, at a point in their lives when they are mature themselves. Perry's is a homage to his own mother, and a fictionalised account of the lives of many Essex women; Emin is normally renowned for her candid portrayal of herself in art, but this work is her recognition of her mother's story.

In considering the particularities of place I explore theories of place-making in creative non-fiction and fiction including the work of Tim Cresswell, Eudora Welty and bell hooks, as well as techniques of portraying place in the narratives of Alice Munro and Tim Winton. As well as the physical and architectural landscape that inspired some of this work there are considerations of the use of the vernacular, dialect and language in fiction located in Essex.

The final chapter is a reflective commentary, on the writing of my novel, beginning with a discussion of autobiography and point of view. The chapter considers the move away from the first-person voice in fiction and the various reasons I had for writing in the third person, using free indirect speech. One of my choices was the use of two narrators to tell a balanced story, and to share this story between mother and daughter perspectives, giving equal value to the voice of the older mother. From this I explain my use of other focalising choices including a shifting third person point of view, highlighting the coming together of the two characters in part four, and an omniscient objective narration for a scene on the beach, when the whole town is present, and the narrator could be the place that has embraced them itself. I include here my decisions concerning difficult choices about writing dialect, informed by the discussion in Chapter Three on representing place through language. I explain my choices about time and memory: both of my characters look backwards in order to move forward in their predicament.

Finally, I share my thoughts on women's writing, how my own process of writing a novel, or work of length, was impacted by my life as a working single mother, and how other writers have similarly constructed longer work from shorter fiction. This relates as well to age, as discussed and connected to the earlier discussion of Edward W. Said's *On Late Style* (2006). I am able now to write an authentic older character; like the novelists and artists I have discussed here I am now the age of the older mother. And yet I am not a master of my art, this is my first novel, and it took a long time to complete in those circumstances. It may be the case that as an older woman there will be more time in which I can write, and this too might explain the notable increase of new and established older female writers writing older female characters. After decades of child-rearing, the possibility is that older mothers finally arrive at a time in their lives when they have time to write, along with the ability to represent the complexities of mother-daughter relationships from both sides.

Chapter One

Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Feminist Fiction

My novel *Ida Shakespeer* is the depiction of a mother-daughter relationship set in coastal Essex. This chapter is an exploration of recent treatments of mothers and daughters in select British, European and American novels. In particular I examine *Hot Milk* (2016) by Deborah Levy, *My Name is Lucy Barton* (2016) by Elizabeth Strout and *The Wren, The Wren* (2023) by Anne Enright, but I also discuss mother-daughter relationships in a number of other novels which employ multiple or intergenerational narrators to examine the complexity of this relationship including *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, *Girl Woman Other* (2020) by Bernadine Evaristo and *The Poisonwood Bible* (1999) by Barbara Kingsolver.

I explore contemporary theories of motherhood and the study of novelistic treatments of the relationship Adrienne Rich declared to be: 'the cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted, misused - is the great unwritten story."[5] This analysis considers the intersectional influences of age, class and gender on how the mother-daughter relationship has been expressed in fiction, considering the concept of 'matrophobia' and responding to Rich's quotation: 'Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her.'[6] I focus on the point of view of the older mother and the adult daughter and the shift to include and value the older woman's experience.

The multivocal texts I examine show how women novelists are expressing women's lives through language, focalisation and structure in multiple forms, and how this can be a political choice. The use of multiple perspectives as a political idea, as 'invitational rhetoric'[7], is something I was aiming for when writing my novel,

[5] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (Norton, 1976), 226.
[6] Rich, *Of Woman Born,* 237.
[7] I discuss the work of Anne Marie Austenfeld who argues that using multiple narratives is to set up a dialogic structure, the open sharing of multiple ideas or perspectives. She explains that 'invitational rhetoric' comes from the work of bell hooks and JT Woods motivated primarily by 'a commitment to the creation of relationships of

Ida Shakespeer. As well as Ida's point of view, I wanted to balance her story with at least another perspective. But there was also an element of community spirit, friendship and understanding that I was keen to draw on to combat the dangers of isolation for my older character.

Feminists of the 1970s onwards are now older women writers themselves. This has a significant impact on the representation of older women and mothers in fiction. I consider the impact of women's lives on the content and form of their fiction, including this expansion of expression to include authentic representations of older women's lives, and this includes my own writing of this novel.

Daughters and Mothers

In the same period that Angela Carter was 'putting old wine in new bottles' in *The Bloody Chamber*, the 1970s, Adrienne Rich wrote about re-visioning. She called all writing re-vision – 'the act of looking back with fresh eyes' as a generation coming into a new feminist consciousness.[8] In *The Mother Daughter Plot* (1989), Marianne Hirsch argues that Rich was one of a number of feminist authors who revised content, structures and language. Rich, for example, used herself as illustration in her own writing. She wrote more directly about her experience autobiographically, moving from she to I:

> 'I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experiences can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours.'[9]

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equality and the elimination of the dominance and elitism that characterise most human relationships.' Anne Marie Austenfeld, *The Revelatory Narrative Circle in Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible,* Journal of Narrative Theory, Volume 36, Number 2, Summer 2006, 293.

[8] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, *Narrative, Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 126.

[9] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (Norton, 1976) pxviii.

According to Hirsch, Rich stopped trying to aim for the objectivity and detachment of her predecessors including Virginia Woolf and began to 'map the newly emerging psychological geography of feminist consciousness'… and this 'drive to self-knowledge is more than a search for identity: it is part of the refusal of the destructiveness of male dominated society.'[10]

Hirsch argues that the liminal discourse of female modernism gave way to a more passionate embrace of female allegiance in narrative plotting and subject formation. For example, the recognition that, 'The writing of the everyman, the hero's journey, is not the same journey for the everywoman. Reproduction provides a radical arena of difference.'[11] And she explained the impact on form in women's writing:

> Female plots act out frustrations engendered by these limited possibilities and attempt to subvert the constraint of dominant patterns by various emancipatory strategies. The revision of endings, beginning and patterns of progression. Narratives become less linear and more cyclical. This is a feminist act defining a feminist poetics and needs to be identified as such.[12]

As Rich explains writing as 're-vision' she urges women to accept and acknowledge the fundamental role daughterhood and motherhood play in identity and self-determination as women**:**[13]

> On the edge of adolescence, we find ourselves drawing back from our natural mothers… the culture makes it clear (that mothers) aren't worthy of our profoundest love and loyalty. Women are made taboo to women – not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators. In breaking this taboo, we are reuniting with our mothers; in reuniting with our mothers we are breaking this taboo.[14]

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[10] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, 127.
[11] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, 12.
[12] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, 8.
[13] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, 129.
[14] Rich, *Of Woman Born,* 259.

As in life, so in fiction, female protagonists once withdrew from their mothers in bildungsromans, on the route to marriage, or later the world. Hirsch notes in her study *The Mother Daughter Plot*, that while the complexities of mother daughter relationships were well documented in literature toward the end of the last century, the daughter's perspective was still the most dominant point of view. Take for example Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1992), reinforcing the negative role of the overbearing mother who must be escaped for her daughter to come of age, to accept her own sexuality and gain true independence, or Alice Munro's *The Beggar Maid* (1978) where Rose escapes a life of childhood poverty with a violent stepmother and father to become an artist teacher with her own daughter.

At a feminist theory group Hirsch noted that 'much of feminist theory situates itself in the position of daughter and at a distance from the maternal.' So they formed a mother's group – the purpose of which was to formulate a language to discuss the maternal experience.

> We found in retrospect, that when we spoke as mothers, the group members were respectful, awed, helpful in the difficulties of formulating maternal experiences. When we spoke as daughters about our own mother, however the tone changed and we all giggled knowingly, reverting back to the old stereotyped patterns of discussing a shared problem – our 'impossible mothers'.[15]

Matrophobia ('the fear not of one's mother but of becoming one's mother…) is a strong word but certainly older mothers in fiction have often been if not neglected then made the butt of the joke even in feminist fiction (an obvious example being Mrs Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*). Rich stated that 'Matrophobia can be seen as the womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free.'[16] This personal rejection of mothers is also explained by theories of psychoanalysis, including later work in the

[15] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, 25.
[16] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 238.

field of Freudian object-relations theory with a particular focus on the complexity of this relationship for the child;[17] mothers might be finally rejected by daughters because the overwhelming early love of a mother cannot be maintained, or so they can continue their journey towards their own traditional family romance. Yet as Chodorow argues:

> Psychoanalysis assumes that "the family" is nuclear, and that an intense mother-child bond and parenting by the mother alone, possibly aided by one other woman, is natural and even necessary to proper development. There is little recognition of the historical specificity of this family form. Freud assumed a strongly patriarchal family with authority vested in the father, and the theory of the Oedipus complex relies on a family of this description. But even since Freud's time, this authority has declined, and we have no evidence that the turn-of-the-century patriarchal family is universal.[18]

In *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal* (1981) Ann Dally argues that the ideology of motherhood coincided with the institutionalisation of childhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries… as the private sphere was isolated from the public under industrial capitalism, middle and upper class women became identified with and enclosed within the private sphere, elevated to an increased personal status, if decreased social power.[19] In an increasingly technological and impersonal public world motherhood came to represent the conservation of traditional values:

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[17] Freud's conception of Oedipal development, 'prioritized boy child dis-identifies with passivity in successful Oedipal development, and identifies with the active, masculine father instead of the mother. Theorizing the mother (and daughter) as inherently passive meant that the feminine was altogether denied subject status in early psychoanalytic thought.' It was "Rank [who] questioned the centrality of the Oedipus complex. Instead he put the mother at the center of every neurosis," Balsam writes (Balsam, 2013, 462). Later theorists such as Winnecott (1953), Mahler (1975), Tronik (1978), Fraiberg et al (1975), Beebe (2014) begin to recognise the impact of the mother and later consider her functioning for the health of the whole unit. Sidesinger, T. (2024). His-Story Conceiving Mother in Introduction to the Special Issue on Maternal Subjectivity: An Essential Link in Relational-Social Psychoanalysis. *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, *21*(3), 281–305. https://doi.org/10.1080/1551806X.2024.2377936

[18] Chodorow, Nancy. "Psychoanalysis and Sociological Inquiry" in *The Reproduction of Mothering.* University of California Press, updated 1999.

[19] Ann Dally, *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*. (Macmillan, 1981), 17. Cited in Hirsch, 14.

> Theories of child development and education, from Rousseau's work on, contain conflicting notions of the child's 'best interests'… the 'natural' mother-child connection, and on the other, professional, male-devised, educational strategies… The mother became the object of idealisation or that which had to be rejected and surpassed in allegiance with a morally and intellectually superior male world.[20]

Studies such as Adrienne Rich's, *Of Woman Born*: *Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1977), or later, Ann Oakley's *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother* (1981, 2019), showed how the institution of motherhood conflicted with the reality or experience of women's lives.[21] Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* (2001), a work of non-fiction documenting her life as a new mother was both critically acclaimed and vilified for its brutal honesty. Fahlgren and Williams (2023) suggest that Cusk challenged 'cultural scripts' of what the good mother should be. Quoting Tina Millar, they argue:

> …where dominant cultural scripts are underpinned by social structures and practices which serve to reinforce and legitimise them, they become accepted as the 'normal' or 'natural' way to do things and, as a result, may be difficult to resist" (2005, 29).
>
> Additionally, cultural scripts about motherhood are not easily modified. They are closely linked to the idea of the good mother (a figure properly challenged in *A Life's Work*). As Patrice DiQuinzio (1999) has observed, the perception of modern motherhood is divided, immersed as it is in policies for equal opportunities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the focus on woman's exclusive biological relationship with the child.[22]

Contemporary novels about motherhood frequently blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett argues that a current wave, with European influences including Eleanor Ferrante or Annie Erneaux, differ from previous work with their exposure of the physicality of motherhood.[23] Although

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[20] Ann Dally, *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*. (Macmillan, 1981) 17. Cited in Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, 14.

[21] Ann Oakley, *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother* (Policy Press and Bristol University Press, 2018)

[22] Margaretha Fahlgren and Anna Williams, "Contested Motherhood in Autobiographical Writing: Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti" in *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing* Eds Helena Wahlström Henriksson, Anna Williams, Margaretha Fahlgren (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2023)

[23] Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, 'There is joy, and there is rage': the new generation of novelists writing about motherhood.' *The Guardian*, January 20th 2024

motherhood and matrescence is increasingly found depicted with more and more authenticity in contemporary writing, it is only one element of this study.[24] My aim here concerns the inclusion of the older mother, who has already been through this experience herself, and now has adult children of her own.

In her 2005 research, *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*, Zoe Brennan claimed, 'The technique of studying literary representations of women is not new; in fact, it is a trusted part of feminist methodology. However it is rarely used to investigate texts about the senescent, reflecting feminism's failure to include older women in their theories.' She quotes Simone de Beauvoir in *Old Age*, first published in 1970, that humankind evades 'those aspects of it [the human condition] that distress them', and that 'above all they evade old age'. The generalised 'othering' of the older woman in popular culture is of course reflected in fiction, where traditionally the protagonist was male, or exceptionally, if female, then young. The young female protagonist may have experienced her bildungsroman, an internal (intellectual, emotional and sexual) maturation usually towards a goal of marriage, rather than a journey 'on the road', until later in the 20th century when women began to live (and write) more fully in the world.

Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) argue that older women have been invisible, stereotyped or ghettoized in contemporary culture. They claim the depiction of older women is hampered in popular culture by 'double marginalisation, that is, by age as well as gender. A wide range of media studies show that older women, in particular, were under-represented relative to their proportion of the general population and were more negatively stereotyped [in television and film] than were men.'[25] They explain that where represented, older women tend to be either invisible, stereotyped (reinforcing the Madonna/whore, motherhood/sex object dichotomies present throughout womanhood into old age, when fertility and sexuality are lost), ghettoized in stereotypes (e.g. Golden Girls, Calendar Girls), or finally integrated. If they are integrated, this tends to be women with economic and social power; images are of

[24] 'Matrescence': the developmental process of becoming a mother—coined in the 1970s by medical anthropologist Dana Raphael

[25] Lemish and Muhlbauer, Can't Have it All: Representations of Older Women in Popular Culture, (2012) Dafna Lemish Ph.D. dafnalemish@siu.edu & Varda Muhlbauer (2012) "Can't Have it All": Representations of Older Women in Popular Culture, Women & Therapy, 35:3-4, 165-180, DOI: 10.1080/02703149.2012.684541

older women who are white, wealthy and desirable to men, providing older women an endless quest for a youthful appearance that is unobtainable.

One of the early cultural influences of this work was the 1994 film *Muriel's Wedding.*[26] In the film, Betty Heslop, Muriel's defeated, lonely and misunderstood mother, commits suicide after absent-mindedly stealing a pair of comfy shoes in the supermarket. Muriel exchanges her lifelong goal of proving herself through marriage, for friendship and the authentic relationships she previously neglected. Betty has a minor role in the film which successfully interrogated family, marriage and heterosexual romance, with a flawed young female protagonist.

Betty's minor role can be seen as archetypal: an older mother, her function as wife (Bill is having an affair with a younger and more glamourous woman) and mother (her children ignore and abuse her like he does) soon to be if not already redundant. The story is all about her daughter, and it is Muriel's *bildungsroman:*[27] the journey to self-knowledge and authenticity in this stage of her life, achieved only once she recognises her mother's existence, once she has taken her own life.

Feminism has always been alert to the reproduction and the repetition of gendered roles in women's lives. Brennan quotes Audre Lorde's 1983 essay *Age, Race, Class and Sex* where she warns of the dangers of ignoring the experiences of older generations, of our mothers:

> As we move toward creating a society within which we can each flourish, ageism is another distortion of relationship which interferes with our vision. By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes. The 'generation gap' is an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question, 'Why?' This gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread.

[26] P.J.Hogan, writer and director, *Muriel's Wedding* (film) (1994)

[27] 'Bildungsroman': a novel that deals with the formative years of the main character, and in particular, with the character's psychological development and moral education. (Merriam-Webster)

In her recent essay on representations of motherhood in contemporary Swiss writing, Valerie Heffernan contrasts the work of two writers: Zoë Jenny's *Das Blütenstaubzimmer* (1997, translated as *The Pollen Room*, 1998) and Ruth Schweikert's *Augen zu* (1998). The first is a mother-daughter novel from the perspective of the daughter, the second a shifting polyvocal novel which includes both mother and daughter's point of view. As well as an analysis of the daughter's (Aleks) rejection of her mother, Doris, Heffernan explains 'Aleks's fears about becoming a woman revolve around her mother and what she perceives as her weakness and subjection'. Her father tells her: "You're just different… you have the intellect of a man in a body that's slowly developing into a woman's".[28] Heffernan explains that in Hirsch's terms, Aleks expresses the "daughter's anger at the mother who has accepted her powerlessness, who is unable to protect her from a submission to society's gender arrangements" (Hirsch 1989, 165).[29] Doris' point of view, her own frustration with her daughter's struggles in becoming a woman herself is also revealed. She has had a traumatic childhood, her children have left home, and her husband has left her for a younger woman. Her anger is finally exposed when she smashes a gift from her husband and is sent to a psychiatric unit. Aleks finally begins to see life through her mother's eyes, but eventually in a final act of defiance her mother takes her own life.

Heffernan notices the balancing of the perspectives in the polyvocal novel and the recognition by the younger mother of the older woman's experience. This is something I have been aiming for on this work too. But my aim is to portray a positive image of the options for the older woman in this cycle, as well as the self-identity and subjectivity of both.[30]

Rich had argued that only a scrutiny of feminist and maternal discourse could free feminist thinking to define some of the shapes of maternal subjectivity, and study

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[28] "Du bist eben anders, sagte der Vater, du hast den Verstand eines Mannes im langsam sich ausbildenden Körper einer Frau" (Schweikert 1998, 74–75) quoted in Valerie Heffernan, "The (M)other's Voice: Representations of Motherhood in Contemporary Swiss Writing by Women" in *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing,* Eds Helena Wahlström Henriksson, Anna Williams, Margaretha Fahlgren (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2023), 125.

[29] Valerie Heffernan, The (M)other's Voice: Representations of Motherhood in Contemporary Swiss Writing by Women in in *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing* Eds Helena Wahlström Henriksson, Anna Williams, Margaretha Fahlgren (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2023)

[30] Valerie Heffernan, 126.

the articulation of specifically maternal voices.[31] This included not only her own experience as a mother, but her own mother's perspective too. This call to write older female characters and their perspectives, fifty years after Rich's thoughts on motherhood, has increasingly been met by new and established older women authors writing older women as primary characters (and we might also apply this to the arts and culture, citing the works of the artists Tracey Emin, Angela Carter and Grayson Perry, explored in the next chapters). Barbara Frey Waxman explained how novelists in the late 20th century, for example Doris Lessing, began to write older female lives as a response to De Beauvoir's challenge to bring back literary elders. These works, including the novel *Love, Again* (1997), often 'portray heroines forging new identities or reintegrating fragmented old ones and acquiring the self-confidence, self-respect and courage to live the remainder of their lives fully and joyously.' This process she terms the *reifungsroman*: reifung pertains to both ripening and maturing in an emotional and philosophical way, which she states, few young heroines seem completely to achieve.

Brennan's study and Ruth O. Saxton's recent collection, *The Book of Old Ladies: Celebrating Women of a Certain Age* (2022), both include contemporary examples of older female characters in fiction. [32] In her article *Summoning Your Youth at Will* (2013), Susan Watkins argues that older women writers in the later stages of their careers such as Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing or Penelope Lively, challenge notions of writing aging, by writing authentic older female lives, and reflecting age in form.

Of the three contemporary novels I discuss in detail here, Deborah Levy, Elizabeth Strout and Anne Enright all depict the mother-daughter relationship as potentially complicated, difficult and fraught at times, with anger and frustration on both sides. The feminist project is not to sugar-coat or sentimentalise the older woman, or mother of an adult child, but to voice her perspective and experience. In a

[31] Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, 163. It is only then, she claimed, that 'we might envision a feminist family romance of mothers and daughters, both subjects, speaking to each other and living in a familial and communal contexts which enable the subjectivity of each member.'

[32] In her recent publication: *The Book of Old Ladies: Celebrating Women of a Certain Age* (She Writes Press, 2020) Ruth O. Saxton collects too examples of older women in fiction, stories and novels, based on the idea that the older woman as 'deathbed bookends' was a distortion of actual older women's possibilities, and states 'actual old women have infinitely more plots than are found in fiction.' She also argues that the lack of good fictional role models is wrapped up in the larger problem of how we think about old age.

shift in literary mores from a traditional focus on the younger woman and the courtship plot centred on the journey towards marriage/sexual fulfilment of a young nubile daughter away from her mother, these novels show an inclusion and even privileging of the mother/older woman's perspective. There is an equal novelistic interest in her perspective on the mother-daughter relationship, as well as including a broader societal influence and impact on their lives. *My Name is Lucy Barton* (2016) concerns the impact of poverty (and trauma) on mother and daughter; *The Wren The Wren* (2023) wrangles with the revelation of misogynistic behaviour by the father/grandfather and its impact on family, on mother and daughter over time; and the complex close situation of Rose and Sofia in *Hot Milk* (2016), end with daughter Sofia speaking for herself, and the pair finally able to communicate.

Alongside this is a discussion of focalisation and form. Like Heffernan observed, not only are narratives changed or balanced by including more than one perspective, but in a matrilinear or intergenerational texts they might highlight the repetition of situations over time, or the value of this connection between characters. In the multi-focal texts that are discussed here, multiple voices are used to represent the value and necessity of community, possibly of communitarianism over individualism. The role the mother plays and Ruddick's use of the word 'mothering' as a verb includes others who mother which might mean the community in *Beloved* (1987), Grandma Chance in *Wise Children* (1991), or other people who have not given birth but fulfil this role. In this sense this is an exploration of personal relationships that is of course political.[33]

The Daughter and her Bildungsroman: Revisioning the Mother Daughter Plot

In the contemporary bildungsroman, *Hot Milk* (2016) by Deborah Levy, Sofia is the daughter who must disentangle from Rose, her dominating, hypochondriac mother. It is focalised though Sofia in the first person, yet she must find her own voice, and who she is as a person before she can speak out; before she can 'break

[33] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking, Towards a Politics of Peace*, (The Women's Press Limited, 1990)

the old circuits'. [34] In her autobiography *The Cost of Living* (2018), Levy explains that *Hot Milk* is linked to Helene Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975). In the same era in which Rich was writing, Cixous called for women not only to write themselves but she highlighted the necessity of practising speaking in public, where women had been confined to domestic spheres. The ability to speak is to have the confidence and to be able to present and be part of dialogue. (This is why Bakhtin's dialogism is challenged by Cixous, not everyone has equal access to speech, writing or a platform from which to speak.) She explains that in *Hot Milk*, Levy switches to using the first-person point of view from regularly writing in the third person.

Sofia and Rose's daughter/mother relationship is key to the narrative and is told mostly from Sofia's point of view. She has given up her PhD in anthropology (her studying is about seeing and watching) and they have re-mortgaged their small house in London, to travel to Almeria in Spain to find a cure for Rose's ailments: she believes/says she cannot walk. Sofia asks, 'will I still be here in a month? I don't know, it depends on my sick mother who is sleeping in the next room… She will shout 'get me water Sofia, and I will get the water and it will be the wrong sort of water… I am not sure what water means anymore', Sofia cannot find herself in this entanglement, she becomes her mother, even limping with her, and stating 'my mother's words are my mirror'.[35] While Rose is inconsistently lame, Sofia is emotionally paralysed, knowing and yet not acting on her knowledge that she needs to 'break the old circuits'.

Juan, the lifeguard she later seduces, tells her that the jelly fish are called medusas, and in *The Cost of Living* Levy explains – the Medusa was the goddess who was turned into a monster – if men looked at her they would be instantly frozen. The Medusa returns the male gaze and this ends in her cruel beheading, separating the head of the woman (the mind, subjectivity) from the body – as if its potency is too threatening. In *The Laugh of the Medusa* – Cixous writes that the Medusa was retold as a monster in male narratives due to the fear of female desire. The essay is a call to arms for women to reclaim their identity, to write themselves and their sexuality,

[34] Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk* (Penguin Books, 2017), epigraph Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa'
[35] Levy, *Hot Milk,* 66.

because, ‘you only have to look at the medusa straight on to see her… And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.’[36]

Sofia does not want to know, or see, the things she must challenge to become a person in her own right, ‘her special skill is to make her life smaller so her mother’s is bigger.’ She is good at making lists, counting ways of seeing but not using what she sees. Alice Sprawl suggests that Levy’s stories often begin with a failure of language.[37] She is interested in the hesitations; we hesitate when we wish for something. She likes to show hesitation and not conceal it, a hesitation is an attempt to defeat her wish. Her wish is directly connected with Cixous’ work on writing women: the progression is towards language and coming into language, ideas shape the task, to be brave make herself heard in writing and in speech. But silence, as Sofia recognises, can be as powerful as speech.

In a series of stages, she is pushed further towards independence by others. Through Gomez, her mother’s doctor, and Ingrid, her lesbian lover, she realises ‘where had I got to trying to please everyone?’ and recognises her way out, ‘I need to be bolder’.[38] To see more of her father, less of her mother, become brave, as she sees Ingrid, is brave. And eventually she does, she realises that Ingrid has her own reasons for her behaviour, (a perceived ‘beheading’ of her own sister when she pushed her off a swing as a child), and she hears that her mother wants to amputate her own feet. Finally she sees her mother walking across a beach, and expects Rose to tell her this amazing news, but she doesn’t. Sofia believes Rose is keeping her in her state of worry/anxiety. Sophia finally acts to break the circuits; to free herself of her mother, in one of the final chapters, *Matricide*, she deliberately pushes her mother in her wheelchair onto a motorway in front of an approaching lorry. Rose makes it home by herself.

Levy’s experiment in writing in the first person in fiction and using Cixous’ work as a template provides us with a daughter’s perspective, a coming of age, incorporating bisexual longing and fulfilment, and a recognition that she hersemolf

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[36] Hélène Cixous. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” In *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literature Theory and Criticism,* ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (Rutgers University Press, 2009), pp416-431.

[37] Alice Spawls, “List your enemies” Review of Hot Milk by Deborah Levy, London Review of Books, 16 June 2016 Alice Spawls https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n12/alice-spawls/list-your-enemies

[38] Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk*, 74.

needs to act for her independence. Like many bildungsromans, she needs to make that break to become a truly adult woman. But Sofia has not physically left her mother yet, she takes this emotional and psychological journey while they are still together.

What we know about Rose is that she may not have the ailments she says she has; she is reliant on her daughter, and 'she has chosen to keep her daughter in her place, forever suspended between hope and despair.'[39] But when Sofia sees her footprints in the sand she explains Rose in a new way: 'the first daughter in her family to go to university; the first to marry a foreigner and cross the cold, grey channel… to struggle with a new alphabet… to bring a child up on her own…' When we finally discover Rose's diagnosis (oesophageal cancer) we understand why she has asked Sofia for water throughout the book. She almost has the last words in the story:

> 'You have such a blatant stare,' she said, 'but I have watched you as closely as you have watched me. It's what mothers do. We watch our children. We know our gaze is powerful so we pretend not to look.'

Levy explains her Living Autobiographies were a response to George Orwell's *Why I Write*, and in them she found a voice, 'not grander than I am, or not modest or smaller than I am', and aims to write in the first person in her latest novels because, 'writing in the third person is writing other people, society, other subjectivities'. [40] She finds a recognition and understanding of her own mother In *The Cost of Living* (written when Levy is in her fifties) that her mother could only have been herself. In the novel, *Hot Milk*, we understand that the complex emotions, and love, between the two of them have become all encompassing; the daughter needs to act on her own, but the relationship still exists with an element of mutual understanding, as they both move into a new phase of their lives. Life events and ideas infiltrate and thematically link both texts. The autobiography is written in the first person, and she

[39] Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk*, 209.
[40] Deborah Levy, Interview with the Edinburgh International Film Festival, 2022 https://youtu.be/DG8FKr9aTN0?si=Xhz2-Wf5_jmY6LNO

explains that it is close to who Levy is, but still not exactly who she is,[41] whereas *Hot Milk* attempts closeness to character and authenticity through first person focalisation. Where this is a daughter led narrative, she finds herself while she is with her mother, she has not escaped in order to do so. There is a recognition of who her mother is, of how she couldn't be anyone else; art meets life in Levy's living autobiographies and fiction.

Older Mothers as Primary Characters

In the novel *My Name is Lucy Barton* (2016) by Elizabeth Strout, older Lucy narrates the time her estranged mother came to visit her for five days while she was staying in a New York hospital after an appendix operation.[42] Also written as a first person focalised narrative, younger Lucy (but still a mother of young children herself) and her mother cannot directly talk about their experiences of the past but there is a powerful longing to be together nevertheless. They find ways to communicate, her mother telling her stories of the people of their town, in a gushing, breathless way, that Lucy has never heard before. Her mother calls her by her childish name 'Wizzle', they connect through the language of her childhood, her mother making up nicknames for the doctors and nurses. The stories Lucy's mother tells her are of other lives, other difficult marriages, skirting their own experiences. She closes her eyes when she doesn't want to respond. Lucy almost asks her a question about her own marriage to Lucy's father who had had 'a difficult war', but she doesn't. Her mother does reveal remnants of her own experiences though, she only catnaps sitting in the chair next to her daughter saying, 'you learn to, when you don't feel safe'. Lucy at this time is emotionally, as well as physically restricted; she still doesn't feel she can cry in front of her mother.

In alternating chapters older Lucy Barton recalls her early childhood, one spent in extreme poverty, and later experiences after she had won her scholarship, moved to New York and married her first husband William. There are the friends she

[41] Deborah Levy, Interview with the Edinburgh International Film Festival, 2022 https://youtu.be/DG8FKr9aTN0?si=Xhz2-Wf5_jmY6LNO

[42] Elizabeth Strout, *My Name is Lucy Barton* (Penguin Books, 2016)

meets in New York when she is incredibly lonely, including Jeremy who tells her she is an artist, and that she has to be ruthless, and the writer Sarah Payne who inspires and encourages her to write her story, saying to Lucy, 'this is very good and it will be published…This is a story about love and you know that. This is a story about a mother who loves her daughter. Imperfectly. Because we all love imperfectly.'[43] These moments of kindness are incredibly important, she loves the doctor, the teacher, the nurse who saw and understood her situation. She finally writes the things she cannot say, and she understands when her mother dies 'they had had a really unhealthy family, but I saw then too how our roots were twisted so tenaciously around one another's hearts.' Her husband says, 'But you didn't even like them.' Later, Lucy leaves her husband, stating 'I will not stay in a marriage when I do not want to'.[44] Chapters shorten in length as time passes, or when something important is being said, one of them is just: 'The rage of my girls during those years! There are moments I try to forget, but I will never forget. I worry about what it is they will never forget.'[45]

We do not hear her own mother's point of view, other than what she says or what Lucy tries to decipher, but *Anything is Possible* (2017), the short story cycle that was published next in the series, shows us the people of the town where Lucy lived as a child, the residents of which were often the subjects of the mother/daughter conversation.[46] The stories are told from a third person limited point of view of different characters, they sometimes speak of similar events but together they are the story of the people of a place, and the link between them is Lucy Barton. They too have stories about Lucy, after all she is a famous writer who escaped extreme poverty in a small town. This collection begins to give us something else: multiple points of view including comments and reactions to Lucy's escape from poverty. As in *Olive Kitteridge* (2011) we can build a broader idea of a character from others' points of view over time, their stories overlapping, thoughts and ideas and prejudices and experiences of the town and family shedding greater light on the poverty and pain of Lucy's upbringing. In 'The Sign' Tommy believes 'it was the mother' that caused them all pain, but in the later reconciliation at the house, there is a moment

[43] Elizabeth Strout, *My Name is Lucy Barton* (Penguin Books, 2016), 107.
[44] Strout, *My Name is Lucy Barton,* 177.
[45] Strout, *My Name is Lucy Barton*, 185.
[46] Elizabeth Strout, *Anything is Possible* (Viking Books, 2017)

where Lucy's sister Vicky realises that they only heard their father's voice during sex and not their mother's. 'Oh God,' Vicky sighs, 'the poor…'[47] Lucy does not want to hear it and she tells Vicky to stop. In this scene Strout is showing that Lucy cannot really face the truth of their reality, of her own mother's experience. Later, in *Lucy by the Sea*, Bob Burgess says to her about himself and his wife reading her memoir: 'She thought it was about mother-daughter stuff, but I thought it was about being poor,' with the implication that there is more to her memoir than a difficult mother and an escaping daughter, the familiar tropes of the mother/daughter genre a label which others' were keen to apply to the work. 'You are exactly right,' Lucy replies.[48]

This is an example of the subjectivity of an older female character, a complex matrilinear mother-daughter-mother relationship and the impact of poverty (and war) on the lives of the protagonists. And although we see Lucy's perspective as older and independent woman, and glimpses of her relationship with her own adult daughters (expanded as the series progresses), the key relationship is that between her unnamed mother and Lucy, from Lucy's perspective.

Multivocal Novels

I have selected contemporary narratives which include older women/mothers as primary characters and how these texts use focalisation, voice and form. Influenced by Audre Lorde's call to action I was drawn to texts with the recognition by both daughter and mother (or reader) of the cyclical reality of mothers and daughters' experiences or the intersectional connection between class, gender and age. For this I needed at least both points of view, so I explored several multivocal texts before focusing on *The Wren, The Wren* by Anne Enright.

Anne Marie Austenfeld explains that authors departed from traditional social views and familiar literary forms over the last century, extending the boundary of the novel to include women's histories, oral historicism, history from below, the history of

[47] Elizabeth Strout, "Sister" in *Anything is Possible* (Viking Books, 2017), 172.
[48] Elizabeth Strout, *Lucy by The Sea* (Viking Books, 2022), 32.

everyday life… and using narrative tools such as several character focalizers to challenge the conventions of the realist novel.[49]

The innovative narrative style of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), is a shifting multivocal narrative, which moves cyclically between characters and through time and memory.[50] Nancy J. Peterson argues that it exposes the multiple forms of violence and sexual exploitation of slavery and its impacts. Peterson cites Barbara Hill Rigney who argues that 'the disintegration of family, the denial of a mother's right to love her daughter… is perhaps the greatest horror of the black experience under slavery.'[51] She cites Mae G. Henderson who suggests that motherlines are at the heart of the novel, which begins with mother and daughter, Sethe and Denver, isolated from community in the home her brothers have fled, and in which substitute grandmother Baby Suggs has died.[52] Peterson explains that Patricia Hill Collins 'synthesized a critical vocabulary to describe the variety of mothering relationships found in African American women's culture and these terms provide valuable insights into the emphasis on mothering in Morrison's novel.'[53] She describes the role of mothering in the black community as shared between 'bloodmothers', 'extended kin networks' 'fictive kin' and 'othermothers' (pp178-9). By extending the act to others she argues some of the damage done to mothering by slavery is healed.[54] Peterson argues that Morrison's novel shares a commitment to extending the practice of mothering beyond biological ties in order to nurture individuals in need and to draw the community together.'[5556] In *Beloved* this includes the mothering actions of Baby Suggs to those who aren't her kin, and although the community do not want to know or remember the impact of slavery and its consequences for Sethe, it is finally this network of othermothers, her community, who save them when Denver goes out into the world/community (for work) and has to reveal that the ghost of her sister Beloved

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[49] Anne Marie Austenfeld, *The Revelatory Narrative Circle in Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible,* Journal of Narrative Theory, Volume 36, Number 2, Summer 2006, pp.293-305, 293.
[50] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1987)
[51] Nancy J. Peterson, *Beloved, Character Studies.* (Continuum, 2008), 31.
[52] Peterson, 28.
[53] Peterson, *Beloved, Character Studies,* 31.
[54] Peterson, *Beloved, Character Studies,* 32.
[55] Peterson, *Beloved, Character Studies,* 32.
[56] 'matrescence', 'the time of mother-becoming' or the process of becoming a mother, explained by anthropologist Dana Raphael. Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick shifted the understanding of the word mother from a noun to a verb, and in doing so, maternal practice may be understood as something anyone can do (not just biological or cis gendered women).

is there with them in the house. Of course, the novel also grapples with Sethe's mother subjectivity, her self-identity as mother is eventually broadened to realising, as Paul D. states at the end of the book, 'You are your best thing, Sethe. You are.'[57]

Austenfeld uses the example of *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) by Barbara Kingsolver, a multivocal novel using first person narratives of a mother and her four daughters, which she calls a 'revelatory narrative circle': a heroless circle - taking turns in primary and secondary roles, moving towards a non-hierarchical shared telling where no narrator dominates.[58] She argues that using multiple narratives is to set up a dialogic structure, the open sharing of multiple ideas or perspectives. She explains that 'invitational rhetoric' comes from the work of bell hooks and JT Woods motivated primarily by 'a commitment to the creation of relationships of equality and the elimination of the dominance and elitism that characterise most human relationships.'[59] She suggests that the form of Kingsolver's work is founded in her desire to achieve a politically and socially effective rhetoric.[60] Not only does this speak of community and a picture of place from the ground rather than above, but the women's voices and the ages of the women are of equal importance.

The front porch, where the women tell their stories, is the centre of Kingsolver's fiction. Austenfeld explains that this use of structure also represents the lives of characters:

> What the women reveal are their own fundamental truths, the subversive currents of personal truth that run underneath the official version, and this truth is the very substance of this novel. That *The Poisonwood Bible* consists of what women say, puts into perspective the social and political conditions under which the characters live.[61]

In this sense the multiple overlapping voices create a social network, a community of shared experiences necessary to share knowledge and support each

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[57] Morrison, *Beloved*, 273.
[58] Austenfeld, *The Revelatory Narrative Circle*, 294-7.
[59] Austenfeld, *The Revelatory Narrative Circle*, 294-7.
[60] Austenfeld, *The Revelatory Narrative Circle*, 297.
[61] Austenfeld, *The Revelatory Narrative Circle*, 298.

other, as opposed to individualistic one or even two points of view. When support is needed, particularly by those who are othered by dominant society (by gender, class, race) sharing voices and support is common, including in literature. The use of multiple perspectives as a political idea is something I was aiming for with *Ida Shakespeer*. As well as Ida, I needed to balance her story with at least another perspective. But there was also an element of community spirit, friendship and understanding that I was keen to draw in to combat the dangers of isolation and a lack of knowledge that the same thing is happening to her, to everyone. I wanted to show how this isolation might allow others in power to manipulate and control, whether in the workplace or in the immediate or extended family.

It was Bernadine Evaristo's intention in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) to create a community of shared voices. The work was created after her experiences writing polyvocal dramatic poem for theatre, and productions which included an experimental mixture of dramatic poetry, minimalist sets, movement and music, and inspired by Ntozake Shange's celebrated choreopoem for coloured girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf.[62] This play consisted of twenty-two poems by women (named by colours of the rainbow), sharing their stories and understanding their lives and the experiences are not isolated, from listening to the others' stories. Evaristo comments on the form she chose for the novel, 'The characters' lives and stories are interlinked through a literary form I've coined 'fusion fiction' – which employs a pro-poetic patterning on the page and non-orthodox punctuation, while fusing the women's stories together.'[63]

This is a multivocal novel, each woman has a dedicated chapter, and they interrelate through x-degrees of separation. There are four main mother-daughter relationships; grandmothers/mothers views and lives share equal space with those of their daughters.[64] Narration is third person limited to the character of the chapter – known through their own dialogue, thoughts, actions and written in a poetic style: lines are broken, capitalisation and punctuation removed. (Interesting how the language of the only male voice is less poetic, written in chunks of prose as he

[62] Bernadine Evaristo, *Manifesto,* (Hamish Hamilton, 2021), 105.
[63] Evaristo, *Manifesto,* 105.
[64] Evaristo, *Manifesto,* 142.

pontificates and explains life to Yazz and others.) Evaristo states: 'I loved writing in this form because it allowed me to flow freely - from interiority to exteriority, from the past to present, from one character's narrative to the next.'[65] The contrast in knowledge that we as readers are privy to expands our understanding and recognition that everyone has a story to tell; while many of the characters won't know or understand particularly their own mother's stories, the reader does.

The two perspectives (of Kingsolver and Evaristo) represent the nature of women's lives, and particularly working-class women's lives, using form as a political decision, or out of necessity. Both adapt focalisation and form for a purpose or sharing more than one voice or point of view, and including in that conversation a valuing of women of all ages. In Anne Enright's *The Wren, The Wren* (2023) mother, daughter and grandfather's voices are written in the style that Enright explains felt came naturally for each character.[66] Nell, Carmel's daughter, is written in the first person; a narrator who is from the start autonomous and vulnerable to the challenges of modern life, including an abusive relationship. Hers is a continuous stream of thought; she says what she thinks. Her mother ('tough, no nonsense') is written in the third person; she is accused of having no imagination, shut down after her father leaves her ailing mother when she is twelve. She is practical, she has things to do, and is not interested in psychology, nor anxiety, for example. Seeking to find control of her life, she had Nell – Nell recognises the loneliness that she has endured until that moment. Nell has to escape the rock of Carmel's love for her.

But in this book, it is Phil's voice that is heard through his poetry and one central prose chapter in the first person in a descriptive and flowery language favoured by the poet. Enright fills the poems with his character – confident, oozing, soothing, charming, and breaks up, or slows down, the prose of the other characters. One of the things Nell takes from his poetry is a love of birds, of nature. But over the course of the novel both mother and daughter find an interview of him on social media, that affect them and their judgement of who he was. It connects their memories (Carmel has to check with her sister) and projections (Nell had taken him

[65] Evaristo, *Manifesto,* 142.
[66] Anne Enright: The Waterstones Interview https://youtu.be/tV36STUG7Qk?si=HwDpDlYUgbBEE89V

for his presentation) and they have to re-adjust their ideas of life based on this new knowledge.

The final chapters are short; they move quickly between Nell and Carmel as they occupy the same space. Nell has returned home with a new partner Dave, with whom she has found a healthy relationship, and re-connects with Carmel in their entangled mother-daughter relationship, which we expect to continue despite partial separation. In this story, both women, mother (and her own mother) and daughter have been impacted by the behaviour of the grandfather, and the behaviour that society allowed from him. In this story both come to a recognition of their relationship that shifts their view of the world.

On Late Style

Rich claimed 'the cathexis between mother and daughter was the great unwritten story, that should become central to the new psychic geography of feminist consciousness'. [6768] And Lorde called us to task:

> Our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change. Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each other's difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles.[69]

These multivocal texts show how women novelists are expressing women's lives through language, focalisation and structure in multiple forms. Feminists of the 1970s onwards are now older women writers themselves. This has a significant impact on the representation of older women and mothers in fiction.

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[67] Cathexis: Investment of emotional or libidinal energy
[68] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 226.
[69] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 122.

Susan Watkins argues that Edward W. Said's *On Late Style* (2007) pays attention to aging and form, discussing the work of great writers, musicians and artists, such as Beethoven, Thomas Mann or Jean Genet, at the end of their lives. Said commented on the work of Adorno, who stated that late style was a:

> …new idiom toward the end of life, which involves challenging a serenity and closure which might be expected in old age… a non-harmonious, non-serene tension, and above all a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness, going against…[70]

He describes a kind of anarchy, against societal norms and particularly expectations of older artists, rife with contradiction and complexity, and yet also works of genius that led the way in what was next within their disciplines. He suggests that possibly the sense that midlife synthesis, the hope for humanity and a better world no longer applies, after all, 'there is no way out of lateness, except deeper lateness':

> At the moment where the artists who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order, and achieves a contradictory alienated relationship with it.[71]

As Watkins notes Said's work did not consider issues of gender.[72] Her own study claims 'aging is capable of generating in fiction a new relationship among time, memory, family history, and form.' Exploring particularly Penelope Lively's *Family Album* (2009), Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and Doris Lessing's

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[70] Edward W. Said, On *Late Style* (Bloomsbury, 2006), 6.
[71] Said, On *Late Style*, 6.
[72] Susan Watkins "Summoning Your Youth at Will": Memory, Time, and Aging in the Work of Penelope Lively, Margaret Atwood, and Doris Lessing, Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2013), pp. 222-244 Published by: University of Nebraska Press.

Love, Again (1996), she argues that their engagement with aging and gender allows them to create their own kind of late style. For example, Lively states:

> In old age, you realise that while you're divided from your youth by decades, you can close your eyes and summon it at will… As a writer it puts one at a distinct advantage. When writing *Moon Tiger* from the point of view of an old woman, I kept worrying: would she really think like this? Now I've experienced every age and can fish back.

This group of older woman writers – masters of their arts – are able to write authentic older lives. Watkins suggests that while Atwood and Lessing, in the texts she has selected focus on an older character and memory, reflecting a past in relation to a present, use only one character, but also revealing the limitations of one point of view. Lively's work in contrast is multiple points of view of family members, told in first person or third person free indirect style or using an omniscient point of view, where the home is the main observer. Lively shows that forms of work involved in maintaining a home and raising a family are indistinct from the work of writing. She uses several techniques that Watkins states disrupt traditional novel writing forms, for example, removal of narrative tension or suspense or unresolved tensions of paternity. She argues that these writers, especially Lively, show what Said suggested were attributes of 'late style', which included the refusal of conventional narratives of maturation and development.

One might argue that the nature of women's/other writing, as discussed in this chapter so far, already challenges convention, of traditional content or form. *On Late Style* implies the anarchy of the male aging master, might fit with an ageist society that does not yet recognise a change in form of the work of the older man, but more importantly, discriminates against the work of women which represents women's lives, in particular older women's lives, in the form and content of art and literature. As mentioned earlier, Said himself doesn't include the work of any women artists in his discussion *On Late Style*. Waxman's reifungsroman might categorise the growing body of work which includes the experience, the subjectivity and authenticity of the aging mother, written by older women writers. Other authors mentioned here show

how women's lives or political ideas impact form, using multiple characters or styles of writing including focalisation to write the truths of women's lives, including the older woman's experience in fiction.

Rich had argued that only a scrutiny of feminist and maternal discourse could free feminist thinking to define some of the shapes of maternal subjectivity and study the articulation of specifically maternal voices. It is only then, she claimed, that 'we might envision a feminist family romance of mothers and daughters, both subjects, speaking to each other and living in a familial and communal contexts which enable the subjectivity of each member.'[73] I have particularly focussed on texts that include the voice of an older mother and adult daughter, the recognition of the older mother, or the cyclical nature of women's lives given the society (British) in which they live. It is a move away from the daughter leaving her family, as primary character, to the recognition that women's/other stories can be shown fully in multi-focal texts. It's a move from a singular point of view, and yet a focus on the individual recognition of the older woman's own authenticity and worth outside of societal norms and expectations. But it also serves to protect the vulnerable from isolation where situations of work, or society are impacting on individual lives, in this case the lives of mothers and their daughters. And this represents a way of living which is not particularly 'British' but is found in many other parts of the world that value and care for community and family.

My novel was conceived and developed in conversation with these contemporary fictional depictions of the mother-daughter relationship in a feminist context. It is about a mother, Ida, who is ignored and ostracised, and a daughter, Emily, leaving for her own journey, her bildungsroman, in this case for romance and marriage, rejecting her mother and the perceived chaos and pinched circumstances she was raised in. Matrophobia is exhibited by both Emily and Luke: Emily supports his ideas and attitudes concerning Ida's lack of respectability, as society does. Her perceived lack of cleanliness of Ida's home, for example, is an excuse, and Emily is complicit by enjoying Luke's perception as she reveals more and more about her childhood:

[73] Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot*, 163.

> Her mum had to work. When Emily got in from school she wasn't there, she'd find herself something to eat and she'd go and watch the birds. There was an aviary attached to the house. Ida didn't know what to do with the birds. One day she opened the door and they all flew out. And died!
>
> 'Eugh,' he had said, smiling with his straight white teeth and raising his hand to the waiter, 'Yes more wine. Died? Go on.'
>
> 'Died! They were all over the garden. And after a while she started going back down to the beach.'
>
> 'You poor thing, bringing yourself up,' he was saying.[74]

And later she is frank with Ida about her ideas:

> There was silence on the other end of the phone. 'I think you need some time to calm down Mum. Have a think about your behaviour. I mean, I remember you shouting a lot too. Luke thinks it wasn't right. And we're agreed that we're not going to bring the kids up like that.'
>
> 'But you're okay!' Ida said.
>
> 'I wasn't. But I've worked on myself.'
>
> 'You worked on y'self?'
>
> 'Yes after I left and met Luke. I've learnt so much, and I'm sorry mum but it was stuff you never taught me. We were talking about it the other day weren't we? Just think about it. I'll call you when I'm ready to see you.'[75]

Of course Ida also fails in her maternal /grandmaternal duty by not taking the correct care of her grandchild in the present day context:

> 'MUM!' Emily is there at the back of the van, standing next to her, searching for Jack. Zara peers from behind her. 'Mum! Where have you been? I had to drive all over town. Jack, are you okay?'
>
> Jack is raising his head, shaking a bit, groaning a little. 'The school said you were sick. Are you okay?' She asks Jack, and staring at Ida, 'What were you thinking Mum?
>
> Ida tries to sound cheerful although she's beginning to feel concerned. 'We thought a spot of fresh air would be good for him, didn't we Jack?'[76]

These examples are intersectional gender and class-based prejudices against Ida. She is lacking in the 'maternal qualities' of keeping things clean and showing the

[74] Emma Kittle-Pey, *Ida Shakespeer*, 94.
[75] Emma Kittle-Pey, *Ida Shakespeer*, 50.
[76] Emma Kittle-Pey, *Ida Shakespeer,* 72.

expected levels of nurturing. And yet she has still managed to keep a roof over their heads and has brought up her daughter while working and providing for them both.

Ida's own journey of self-discovery – to use Barbara Frey Waxman's term - her reifungsroman – is a blossoming of the older woman beyond societal expectations and constraints.[77] In the final part of the novel the estranged mother and daughter come together again in dialogue, with a new understanding of their shared past. It is their understanding of their repeated, cyclical experience that is important as they look towards the future for the next generation – Emily's children, Ida's grandchildren. In this sense the newness of this particular story participates in hooks' invitational rhetoric: the older woman/mother, like other voices traditionally ignored, are part of a conversation, with a varied and non-stereotyped representation of her possibilities in contemporary literature.

[77] Barbara Frey Waxman, *From "bildungsroman" to "reifungsroman": Aging in Doris Lessing's fiction* Soundings: an interdisciplinary journal, vol. 68, no. 3 (fall 1985), pp. 318-334 published by: Penn State University Press, 319.

Chapter Two

Angela Carter's Mothers, Daughters and Absent Fathers

The structure and themes of *Ida Shakespeer* are a response to, and in conversation with the work of Angela Carter, in particular her collection of reimagined fairytales, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), and her last novel, *Wise Children* (1991). My novel concerns a daughter leaving her mother, and realising she is married to a man she doesn't know, or understand. In Carter's story there is a focus on this mother-daughter connection and the absence of a father figure allows the mother the role of saviour (in the original Perrault tale it was her brothers who came to her rescue). In my novel the same dilemma occurs, but my question was, could a mother really save her daughter in contemporary marriage, or contemporary fiction?

In *Wise Children*, the mother's role is again important, not only does Grandma Chance provide a stable home for the older narrator and her twin, but the 'legitimacy' of paternity and marriage are questioned, exposed and solved by an alternative solution, which could be described as a 'feminist family romance': de-emphasising the role of men…and the celebration of female relationships of mutual nurturance.[78] In my own novel there is an absent father, and a 'paternity question' not only represented by the lack of a father in Emily's upbringing, but also in the forced roles expected in her marriage, that she tries to adopt but ultimately cannot. As in *Wise Children*, where Carter argues that Shakespeare has frequently been erroneously co-opted into 'high culture', where actually much of his writing and spirit aligns with popular, low and comedic culture, the male artists in my work encompass both low and high culture (David Essex, popstar) or grapple with an understanding of how they move from high culture to contributing to the voices of those underrepresented in the arts (William Leach, architect). Both are contenders for the absent father role,

[78] Hirsch, 'Feminist Family Romances' in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, 133.

and ultimately the paternity issue isn't solved. Their roles are positive, but only as part of community; their voices have been elevated by the privilege of being male.

The Bloody Chamber

Charles Perrault's *Bluebeard* was re-visioned by Angela Carter as *The Bloody Chamber*.[79] It is the story of a young girl who leaves home, to marry a wealthy and powerful man. In Perrault's story she leaves her family, in Carter's it is her mother that she leaves behind. Marina Warner argues that 'the matter of fairy tale reflects… lived experience with a slant towards the tribulations of women, and especially young women of marriageable age..' and 'offers a case where the very contempt for women opened up an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas…' [80] Perrault himself frequented the literary salons of his niece and other women experimenting with fairy tales and wrote in the defence of women;[81] Carter, of course, went much further to challenge the prescribed social fictions of gender.

The Bloody Chamber is a story of becoming woman, a *bildungsroman*, and in a feminist context, this story includes a recognition of the value of the mother. Once a traditional tale, the narrator, who speaks for herself now in a first-person focalised narrative, leaves her mother as an innocent 17-year-old, (when he puts the ring on, she leaves her mother behind) to marry the Marquis, who was 'as rich as Croesus'.[82] It is not long before her husband leaves her alone with a bunch of keys, and a warning not to use the smallest. In both stories this is the tension/the challenge to set her off on her journey; she is told she must not do something, so she is compelled to do it. From the tone of her voice at the beginning we could guess that she would not be able to leave things alone - after all her 'eagle-featured indomitable' mother had 'outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the

[79] Angela Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber' in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Vintage Books, 1979)
[80] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde, On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (Vintage, 1995), xix.
[81] Zipes, Jack, 'Introduction' in Angela Carter, *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (Penguin Classics, 2008), xiv.
[82] Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 5.

plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand…'[83] Would she really pass up the chance for an adventure? Or listen when she was told she must not?

In *The Bloody Chamber*, her journey to the palace and throughout the story, a sexual awakening (the belief that she has discovered the darkness inside of her), her courage in her darkest moments (reminding herself of her mother), show her transformation from innocence, youth, learning, and gradual understanding about the contrasts of love/death/freedom… 'I'd sold myself…' and bravery as she negotiates the situation she finds herself in when he knows she has discovered his bloody chamber. This is her *bildungsroman*, not the marriage as end result as it once might have been, but how and what she will learn if she can extract herself from it.

In the story opening Carter plants 'the antique service revolver that my mother, grown magnificently eccentric in hardship, kept always in her reticule, in case…'[84] And clues to her mother's concerns, 'are you sure you love him?' She asks three times before her daughter leaves. We should have guessed that this gun-toting mother would use her bravery and weapon to save her daughter, and that the marquis himself would not recognise the power of a single mother whose daughter is in danger, until it was too late.

The narrator remembers her mother when she needs courage in the story, and in the midst of her crisis, when she has found her husband's bloody chamber, it is her mother again she thinks of to call. Who else can she really trust? This understanding and valuing of her mother's qualities which had seemed wild and transgressive at the start but are the ones that will save them both is part of her escape. "Until that moment, this spoiled child did not know that she had inherited nerves and a will from the mother who had defied … outlaws..."[85] This is the moment of recognition, of her mother's qualities, of herself.

At the end the narrator tells us that her mother instinctively knew with the first call, via *maternal telepathy*, that something was up. But it is the image of her at the climax that delights: 'you never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black

[83] Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 2.
[84] Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber', 2.
[85] Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber', 26.

lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked around her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my service revolver… without a moment's hesitation she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head.'[86]

This story is focalised through the daughter, a heroine who has greater agency than in the fairy tale told about her over 200 years before. But it is the mother that makes her grand entrance. Where she was minor to insignificant in the original tale, now she saves her daughter from her death at his hands. The daughter intelligent yet stuck, experiences the internal (intellectual, emotional and sexual) maturation finding her way within the place she is trapped in. The girl recognises the value in her mother, acts of which she recognises in herself.

Writing on fairy tales, Marina Warner comments that 'the qualities these stories recommend for the survival and prosperity of women are never those of passive subordination.'[87] This is certainly not the case in Carter's revisions. But Warner also recognises the times when it is impossible to act or voice an opinion: 'Fairy tales give women a place from which to speak, but they sometimes speak of speechlessness as a weapon of last resort… gossip as a woman's derided instrument of self-assertion, closes with muteness, as another stratagem of influence.' I began with fairy tales, but my exploration of contemporary fiction also raises these concerns: they speak of assertiveness, of acquiring/using voice and action, for women and girls, but sometimes, as in *The Bloody Chambe*r, there is a speechlessness, and warnings to remain strong when movement/escape is not yet possible. These themes are applicable to *Ida Shakespeer*. Emily is in a marriage she cannot escape, because her husband will physically keep the children. So how does she navigate this situation from a place she cannot move away from? Her thoughts will have to be unsaid in that environment. And can Ida actually save her? After they have begun to speak, they work out what is going on, and Ida has a few false starts before there is any change in the situation.

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[86] Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber', 40.

[87] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde, On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (Vintage, 1995), xxi.

And Absent Fathers

Ali Smith argues that as a socialist and feminist, from her first novel to *Wise Children* 'Carter's work goes out of its way to take to pieces the powerful machineries of romanticism, desire, dominant narrative and social codification, as well as the machineries of fiction itself, to lay them bare before a reader and show him or her how those machineries are working.'[88] Smith references Lorna Sage, Carter's friend and critic who understood the publication of *The Bloody Chamber* was the year Angela Carter's interest in transformations as a theme became most accessible to her readers, and that critics felt safer with Carter's final two novels – *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* 'as the worlds of a feathered barmaid and high-kicking hoofers were seen as more benign than anything she'd written before'.[89] But she notes, *Wise Children* was Carter's 'most glorious, most comic, most fulfilled, certainly her most generously and happily orgiastic, fictional performance.' In what turned out to be her last novel before she died at the age of fifty-two, Carter wrote a carnivalesque celebration of what it is to be British, told from the point of view of a septuagenarian twin and music hall dancer, Dora Chance.

In *Wise Children*, the illegitimate Chances and powerful (and legitimate) Hazards perform together in the burlesque/carnivalesque world of musical theatre, and their 'immersion in Shakespeare's theatre is so complete that events from their lives (as well as in the performances) are presented through parodies of scenes from his plays'.[90] It was Carter's challenge to include a reference to every play in her novel, and Davison argues that Carter 'explores Shakespeare as cultural ideology' challenging the colonialist, patriarchal and 'legitimacy' of Bardism or Shakespeare as 'high art', against the concepts of illegitimacy, burlesque, anti-colonial and feminine, or 'low art', and his roots in popular theatre.

Dora knows, like Carter, 'we carry our history on our tongues'. She is the older female narrator – but what does this wise child know? She begins by giving us a

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[88] Ali Smith, "Introduction" in *Wise Children* by Angela Carter (Vintage Books, 1991), x.
[89] Smith, Introduction to *The Bloody Chamber*, vii-viii.
[90] Sarah Davison, "Intertextual Relations: James Joyce and William Shakespeare in Angela Carter's Wise Children" in Contemporary Women's Writing (Oxford University Press, July 2016)
10:2 July 2016. doi:10.1093/cwwrit/vpv020

picture of herself and her sister Nora, the music hall dancing Chance Twins, and she indicates their place, the social duality that's key to their story, and which side of it she's on, 'we were born on the wrong side of the tracks…'[91] After their mother died and father Melchior Hazard disappears, the twins are cared for by Grandma Chance, the vegan, naturist, whisky drinking landlady of her house in Bard Road, 'who never knew the point of men until that moment'.[92]

Davison argues that the patriarchs of the 'legitimate' Hazard family line are cast as representatives of 'official' culture, whereas the Chances, the maternal line (not held together by biological ties as far as we know) are linked to 'illegitimate social and cultural practices'.[93] She states that Carter sets up her 'interrogation into familial plots that resist the idea that the father has the sole authority to confer biological legitimacy… and questions legitimacy as cultural construct'.[94] Carter challenges this from the very outset noting that the 'it's a wise child that knows its own father' proverb used as epigraph subverts 'it's a wise father that knows his own child' from *The Merchant of Venice* – inserting the primacy of the child over adult in determining true lineage.[95]) This is useful for my novel which also considers issues of 'legitimacy' and marriage, and the condemnation of the maternal line, which my characters fight and survive.

Melchior and Peregrine Hazard are also twins, left behind by Ranulph and Estella (he murders her and then himself). For Melchior the question of biological legitimacy is bound up with cultural legitimacy, he spends his whole life becoming the man he thinks his father was and emulating him as the nation's leading Shakespearean actor. (Melchior is not a wise child as he does not know his own father, and in fact he could have been fathered by Estella's lover.) But it is in their version of *What You Will*, (written by Peregrine, led by Melchior) when Dora and Nora Chance (born out of wedlock, Melchior denies they are his flesh and blood) both biologically and culturally illegitimate, perform a *Hamlet* skit, a highland fling in

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[91] Smith, Introduction to *The Bloody Chamber*, ix.
92 Smith, Introduction to *The Bloody Chamber*, ix.
[93] Davison suggests Carter was also influenced by Joyce as a 'postcolonial writer whose burlesque sensibilities brooks no hierarchies'. Sarah Davison, "Intertextual Relations: James Joyce and William Shakespeare in Angela Carter's Wise Children" in Contemporary Women's Writing (Oxford University Press, July 2016) 10:2 July 2016. doi:10.1093/cwwrit/vpv020, 201
[94] Davison, *Intertextual Relations*, 201.
[95] Davison, *Intertextual Relations*, 201.

homage to *Macbeth*, and 'Oh Mistress Mine' from *Twelfth Night* amongst others that ensure Melchior's show is a success. Carter aims to celebrate Shakespeare's plays as 'universal cultural reference points without taking them seriously'.[96] Davison argues that from start to finish Carter appeals to the burlesque tradition in *Wise Children,* to assert the right of the female, and therefore the illegitimate artist to make free with Shakespeare and his legacy to model a future beyond patriarchy and empire.'[97]

Feminist Family Romances

In Shakespeare's romantic comedies, Rose claims that the lust and desire of young women and young men are conquered by marriage, a legal contract empowering the man over the woman, and enabling society to remain stable.[98] While Carter takes to task the use of Shakespeare as 'high art' and to legitimise power and patriarchy, she inserts the older working woman as narrator, as Grandmother, as community. As Ellen Terry famously stated: 'how many times Shakespeare draws father and daughters, and how little stock he seems to take of mothers!' In Carter's novel, the Chances don't marry, they have lusts and desires, but their safety and security is Grandma Chance, family and Bard Road. Smith states:

> They exist by the thread of chance, by the kindness, imagination, and invention of Grandma Chance… 'Grandma invented this family. She put it together out of whatever came to hand – a stray pair of orphaned babes, a ragamuffin in a flat cap. She created it by sheer force of personality… It is a characteristic of human beings, one I've often noticed, that if they don't have a family of their own, they will invent one.'[99]

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[96] Davison, *Intertextual Relations*, 203.
[97] Davison, *Intertextual Relations,* 205.
[98] Mary Beth Rose, "Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare? Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance" Source: Shakespeare Quarterly , Autumn, 1991, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 291- 314 Published by: Oxford University Press Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2870845
[99] Ali Smith, "Introduction" in *Wise Children* by Angela Carter (Vintage Books, 1991), xi.

The two sisters are a positive duality/mirror for each other, their closeness speaks of the value of community. The girls are very aware that if Grandma hadn't left them the house, they would be walking the streets. But here they are transforming themselves again with one of the multiple costumes they've kept of their lives, with the ghost of Grandma hurling things from the mantlepiece and from beyond the grave. They may be from wrong side of the track, but their opening and closing words are 'what a joy it is to dance and sing'. Although sadness and humiliation of their existence run through this tale, they are survivors, and as Dora warns – don't think Nora didn't want it (the coupling in the alley). As Kate Webb mentions, the sisters are freer than their younger Hazard twin step siblings – born on the right side – to do what they like. But of course, they suffer – particularly in middle age – the humiliation of being girls in musical theatre. The men marry and remarry, new children/twins arrive. Each chapter holds an event, a celebration, a disaster, for example the burning down of Melchior's home during a lavish and vulgar birthday party, or while making the doomed Hollywood movie of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which the ultimate older woman transformation occurs. Genghis Khan's ex-wife, who stalks her ex-husband's new women, including Dora, has her face surgically remodelled into Dora's. Dora puts on Bottom's head and instead of marrying her, Genghis Khan marries his own ex-wife, and they both live reasonably happy ever after.

Webb argues that although the Bakhtian idea of carnival lies at the heart of this novel…(like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the story plays out in a space between the two worlds of the court and the working people) Carter implies that women and carnival might, ultimately be contradictory, because female biology and the fact of motherhood make women a connecting force, whilst carnival is essentially a celebration of transgression of breakdown. While some women in *Wise Children* may possess carnivalesque qualities, it is a man, Peregrine, who embodies it, he is 'not so much a man, more of a travelling carnival'.[100] The men in their absence and lack of acknowledgement of their children go against the stability of family and home, and where they are allowed to claim legitimacy and authority, in reality it is them that have no anchor, who do not know themselves. Webb asserts that 'Peregine is red

[100] Kate Webb, *Shakespeare and Carnival in Angela Carter's Wise Children*, The British Library article, May 2016, 1.

rude, in Rabelaisian (or Falstaffian) manner, a boundary buster, growing bigger all the time….And although Dora fantasises about what it would be like to bring the house down, to fuck it away in some glorious carnival orgy of destruction….she decides this is not something she wants to do because her historical house is somewhere people have tried to eject her, it is also where her history (and her future) lies…[101] She knows what is real and what is fake. Peregrine isn't interested in knowing. In a final magic feat Uncle Perry pulls a baby out of each his pockets as the last of many gifts he has bestowed upon them throughout their lives, and they become the mothers Nora wanted them to be. Dora makes a choice, she will not be part of a tragedy, she chooses family and stability. She is truly a wise child at the end of this performance, but as Webb states she 'chooses not to banish the chaos of carnival – in the carnival world of illusion there are ways of seeing the world differently. It is only carnival that can give us imagined possibilities – which is why the creative things that make it up in life are so precious…laughter, sex and art'.[102] This argument influenced my ideas about *Ida Shakespeer*. It is Ida herself and the places she frequents that may be seen to be 'carnival' – the sensory dome, the Essex concerts, her individuality - all challenged by authorities of various kinds, including the conservative family that her daughter enters. While she tries to conform (whatever this means) when necessary, to see her grandchildren or to save her daughter, she eventually chooses her own way, to live as she pleases within the simple structures of her status as grandmother or mother, and as a working woman.

In *The Mother Daughter Plot* Hirsch explains the feminist family romance developed with feminist theorists of the 1970s, for example Rich, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva who all challenged and revised arguments and representations of female subjectivity, 'de-emphasising the role of men…concentrating on mother-daughter bonding and struggle, and the celebration of female relationships of mutual nurturance…'[103] One could argue that *Wise Children* is a feminist family romance, challenging marriage as legitimacy, particularly the dangers of the contract for women. In the end it focuses on the security of the female relationships – the stability

[101] Webb, *Shakespeare and Carnival in Angela Carter's Wise Children*, 1.
[102] Webb, *Shakespeare and Carnival in Angela Carter's Wise Children*, 1.
[103] Hirsch, *The Mother Daughter Plot,* 133, 163.
'a feminist family romance of mothers and daughters, both subjects, speaking to each other and living in familial and communal contexts which enable the subjectivity of each member', 163.

of having a home, sisters and the ghost of their substitute mother – Grandma Chance. The women survive when they are not wealthy, when they are old, in family, in community, in low culture not high, and they are wise: neither 'high culture', nor marriage, ultimately holds value for them. *Wise Children* is about innocence and wisdom, the revelation, recognition and understanding of a reality that is not a fairy tale. This essential message in her work – which she says is as real to her as 'realist writing' but full of magical tricks and references to a multitude of literary and cultural figures, not least the original author of duality and trickery himself, Shakespeare - is a message and a warning as old as stories themselves: when you know about the wolf what will you do with that knowledge? Dora knows full well their position in the social strata, how they are viewed and how they are nothing on their own but something together. She understands how they look and how they are perceived, and they laugh in the face of societal negativity dressing as they always did. She is the one that has the final understanding at the end, that Melchior's problems, and thus all of their problems, stem from his clinging to the fake cardboard crown of his own unreliable father.

According to Webb, Carter uses the…

> …double faced Hazard/Chance family as a model for Britain and Britishness, obsessively dividing itself up into the upper and working class, high and low culture….as Dora proves these strict lines of demarcation to be false within her own family, so too her story shows the reader how badly they fit the complexity and hybridity of British society and culture.[104]

By revealing Shakespeare at the heart of British culture, as the author of our being, father to the Hazards and the Chances, Carter is arguing that plurality and hybridity are not simply conditions of modernity, products of its wreckage, but have always existed and are characteristic of life itself.[105] She suggests 'a jumbled impure multi-culture, while showing clearly that class, racial and sexual elites seek to exclude otherness are still a powerful and conditioning force...'[106] And yet…we know that Dora is the wise child, she sees everything not in spite of but *because* she is

[104] Webb, *Shakespeare and Carnival in Angela Carter's Wise Children*, 1.
[105] Webb, *Shakespeare and Carnival in Angela Carter's Wise Children*, 1.
[106] Webb, *Shakespeare and Carnival in Angela Carter's Wise Children*, 1.

from the wrong side of the tracks. Poverty and gender, time and place are intertwined in Carter's intertextual carnival of a novel. She exposes the use of Shakespeare to culturally reinforce 'legitimacy' and the powerful institutions in society.

As in *Wise Children*, for Ida Shakespeer a home is security, which becomes more apparent when Emily loses hers. Her daughter Emily, seduced by traditional, conservative, values of marriage, a husband and a new nuclear family, is also on a journey of understanding; she will recognise her mother for who she is. Eventually it is the community, friendships and the mother/parental roles that are most authentic, stable and secure that are key to their survival. The knowledge acquired by both women during their experiences mean they have more empathy for those who have nothing (the lizardman and Ruth) to invite them into the community, even when they themselves have found their own security. Ida learns that romantic love is not the answer to everything, and friendship supersedes it. But she is still up for a trip, a concert, a dance and a song! Like Carter's *Wise Children* she knows laughter is fundamental to their happiness.

Chapter Three

A Sense of Place: Representing Marginalised Places and Voices in Contemporary Culture

Just as Angela Carter, as a socialist and feminist, threads social duality throughout her fiction, I too have considered how gender, class and place are connected in the writing of my novel, *Ida Shakespeer.*

In Carter's version of the fairytale 'Bluebeard', 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979), a daughter leaves her single mother 'grown magnificently eccentric in hardship'[107] in her apartment to travel to the castle of a wealthy man, only to realise that this marital and material adventure isn't all it's cracked up to be. Again, *Wise Children* (1991) immediately locates its central narrators, Dora and Nora Chance, in a very particular place in London, 'the wrong side' of a two-track city,[108] south rather than north of the river, in the shared house of Bard Road with their grandmother rather than any 'legitimate' form of family structure.

My own novel grapples with this concept, the social duality of British culture, and the specific locations of the different characters. Ida lives in fairly pinched circumstances, and her daughter Emily has left her mother to live with the comparative wealth and property owned by her new husband, Luke, and his family. Ida doesn't belong in this world of appearances and apparent traditions, she doesn't have a husband, and her life has been one of precarity, at both work and home. Yet she is rooted in place, and community, and increasingly so as the story develops. Her spirit and resilience have kept her going, surviving, and although Emily supresses her own nature by trying to conform, eventually she sees that her mother is part of her place, of where she too really belongs.

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[107] Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 2.
[108] Ali Smith, 'Introduction' in Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (Vintage, 2006)

In this chapter I refer to theories of place and ideas of place-making including those of bell hooks, Tim Dee and Tim Cresswell, briefly engaging with the theoretical ideas concerning place in fiction of Michael M. Bakhtin, Eudora Welty and Anca-Raluca Radu. I explore the Essex landscape and recent literature including the work of Gillian Darley, Tim Burrows and Madelaine Bunting, and literary representations of place, particularly novels set in Essex, but also including other forms of artistic expression including *The Ballad of Julie Cope*, about Grayson Perry's own Essex everywoman. Finally, I consider the use of language, discussing how novelists such as Tim Winton use accent and lexicon, as well as the form and content of their work to represent people and place.

Contemporary Place-Making

In *Describing Place*, Tim Cresswell defines place as a meaningful location.[109] He quotes Yi-Fu Tuan who makes a distinction between space and place:

> If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is a pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for a location to be transformed into a place.[110]

He explains that the political geographer John Agnew (1987) outlined three fundamental aspects of place as 'meaningful location': location, locale and a sense of place. By 'locale' Agnew means the material setting for social relations, or the actual shape of place within which people conduct their lives as individuals. And as well as being located and having a material visual form, places must have some relationship to humans and the human capacity to produce and consume meaning. By a 'sense of place' Agnew means the subjective and emotional attachment people

[109] Tim Cresswell, 'Defining Place' in *Place an Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 12.
[110] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (University of Minnesota Press, 1977). Quoted by Tim Cresswell, *Place an Introduction*, 15.

have to place. Cresswell states that a sense of place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world:

> When we see the world as attachments and connections between people and place, we see worlds of meaning and experience, it can be an act of resistance against the rationalisation of the world, but at other times… seeing the world through the lens of place leads to a reactionary and exclusionary xenophopia.[111]

A few things that I wanted to consider here. Firstly, the importance of a feeling of belonging in order to cope in the world and additionally the idea that this might lead to xenophobic behaviours. It was important for me to explore what it means and how to create a sense of place or belonging for characters and people, and further how this is impacted by location and locale.

In her text *Belonging: a Culture of Place* (2009) bell hooks highlighted her own search for place and belonging through a series of essays which include life narratives and social commentaries. She begins listing several towns and cities she might choose, 'to establish my presence, as one who is claiming the earth (through walking), creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place'.[112] Her home state of Kentucky was not on the list, although it is where her search ends. Three aspects of life become important in her investigation: a connection to land, agriculture (tobacco) and walking; the people – the family and kin with which she is most familiar; and memory. When her mother Rosa Bell begins to lose hers hooks realises 'we are born and have our being in a place of memory'.[113] When she describes her journey to understanding place and belonging she describes her childhood:

> Nature was the place where one could escape the world of man-made constructions of race and identity…nature was the foundation of our counter hegemonic black sub-culture. Nature was the place of victory… [114]

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[111] Cresswell, *Place an Introduction*, 18.
[112] hooks, bell. "Preface: To Know Where I 'm Going" in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (Routledge: 2009), 2.
[113] hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place,* 5.
[114] hooks, "Kentucky is My Fate" in *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 7.

> The dominator culture (the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) could not wield absolute power. For in that world nature was more powerful… In childhood I experienced a connection with an unspoiled natural world and the human desire for freedom… One might live with less, live in a makeshift shack and yet feel empowered because of the habits informing daily life were made according to one's own values and beliefs…They made their own rules.[115]

When she attended university and named Kentucky as her home state she was greeted with laughter, and as white supremacy took hold in her home town it created a culture of living in fear – a fear of nature and whiteness.[116] hooks questioned the religious upbringing she had, but finds her own version of spirituality and eventually recognised the two objects that she holds onto are a tobacco plait and a quilt made by her mother's mother. She quotes Carol Lee Flanders in her book *Rebalancing the World,* who defines a culture of belonging as one in which there is 'intimate connection with the land to which one belongs, empathic relationship to animals, self-restraint, custodial conservation, deliberateness, balance, expressiveness, generosity, egalitarianism, mutuality, affinity for alternative modes of knowing of playfulness, inclusiveness, non-violent conflict resolution and openness to spirit.'[117] This was useful for the themes of my work. If I was developing a growth or journey for my character with a sense of belonging, returning home after seeing the world and truly understanding the meaning of relationships, I was also creating a story reflecting my own journey of learning.

In a related argument, Tim Dee's *Ground Work* is evidence of how places written about over time have changed as the world has:

> …what has changed is that we are now prepared to consider as meaningful habitat places previously ignored or written off. Modernity has shattered our world like never before, we are more deracinated than ever, but because we feel most places to be *nowhere* we have also learned that *anywhere* can be a *somewhere*. No longer are marginalised places those that might have been ignored. All of our habitat is relevant: not just the pretty bits.[118]

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[115] hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place,* 8.
[116] hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place,* 9.
[117] hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place,* 13.
[118] Tim Dee, *Ground Work: Writings on People and Places* (Jonathan Cape, 2018), 6.

In this sense the ideas of writable locations has changed, and also hints at the lesson that the grass isn't always greener, or simply that for some it is not possible to move. These are the places that are written now – the places of the people – the real lives that people exist in. hooks leaves home to work out her place in the world: 'The experience of exile can change your mind, utterly transform one's perception of the world of home'.[119] This recognition of what home and belonging really is: a freedom from societal or real oppression, recognising the value of nature and of kin wherever that might be, resonated with the themes I was developing in my novel.

Place in Fiction

When considering place in fiction, Mikhail M. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, which he defined as 'literally, "time space"'[120] is useful. Bakhtin wrote 'notes towards a Historical poetics' describing a number of evolving chronotopes in literature from the 'Greek romance', chronotopes of metamorphosis to the Rabelaisian novel, discussing how the human condition has been expressed in literature over time.[121] He argued that as narratives/novels develop to investigate new versions of lived experience, space becomes 'charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history'.[122] The chronotope becomes more specific, more concrete, and 'graphically visible (space) and narratively visible (time)'.[123] When discussing abstract ideas or meaning he notes:

> …in order to enter our experience (which is social experience) they must take on the *form of a sign* that is audible and visible for us (a hieroglyph, a mathematical formula, a verbal or linguistic expression, a sketch, etc.). Without such temporal-spatial expression, even abstract thought is

[119] Dee, *Ground Work: Writings on People and Places,* 13.
[120] Bakhtin M.M., "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination Four Essays* (University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.
[121] This includes the concept of *carnival and* situates Rabelais's work within the cultural and semantic context of the Renaissance when "folk culture and high culture converge" P116 Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman, Marc Davis *Cultural Critique*, No. 11 (Winter, 1988-1989) https://doi.org/10.2307/1354246•https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354246, 116

[122] Bakhtin M.M., "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", 250.
[123] Bakhtin M.M., "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", 234.

> impossible. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope.[124]

This was important for my understanding of my own novel and that my ideas to do with the meaning of the work had to be conveyed in a concrete place and time. But further, how the journeys of my characters, whether internal or physical, are represented. Although I was working on stories written in various locations in Essex, I was also writing memories and dreams located in my childhood spaces in Southend. I decided that the location of my story would be a fictional representation of a seaside town and in a fixed time that also considered history and the movement of residents from London locations to the Essex coast.

Author Eudora Welty also connected time and space in her analysis of place-making in fiction. She describes place as 'the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting and therefore credible, the gathering spot of all that has been felt and is about to be experienced in the novel's progress.'[125] Place is objective, establishing a 'chink-poof world of appearance' for, and here she quotes Faulkner, 'making reality real is art's responsibility.' But if an exact place is a frame for the subjective lives of humans, or characters, 'Place, to the writer at work is seen as a frame. Not an empty one but a brimming one.' In contrast, 'point of view is a sort of burning glass, a product of personal space and time burnished with feelings and sensibilities.' So the questions here are why this particular location? What is the locale? How will I create a sense of place and what meaning does it have? How does it correlate with the lives and perspectives of the female characters?

For writers such as Alice Munro or Elizabeth Strout (who both returned to their hometowns to write) the way society works in terms of gender and class are major constituents of their fictional places. Anca-Raluca Radu argues that place becomes humanised by individual and social relationships, not remaining static but in constant flux as human relationships are rearranged.[126] She states that places can be

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[124] Bakhtin M.M., "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", 256.

[125] Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction", South Atlantic Quarterly (1956): 62 https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-55-1-57

[126] Anca-Raluca Radu, '"What Place Is This?" Alice Munro's Fictional Places and Her Place in Fiction', in *Space and Place in Alice Munro's Fiction*, eds Lorre-Johnston Christine and Rao Eleonora, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787442603.006

oppressive for the individual character, particularly if individual and communal identities don't reconcile. In cases of the bildungsroman, such as Alice Munro's *The Beggar Maid* (1978),[127] a literary technique might be to show place unchanged, making evident the progress of the heroine, and less likely for her to be able to return. She identifies that this mobility factor outlines an individual's relationship to place. In *The Beggar Maid* location is also identified in a concrete way immediately, as well as how the locale has evolved in terms of human relationships – a town demarcated in terms of class and separated by a river. The primary character Rose lives with her father and stepmother, and eventually, through scholarship, escapes and can pursue a life that allows her the creativity that people of the town (including her father) are unable to.

In *My Name is Lucy Barton*, Lucy also manages to escape a life of poverty and abuse in a rural location via scholarship and marriage. An early bildungsroman eventually becomes her reifungsroman; she understands who she is to a degree, who her family are during her journey towards becoming a famous writer living in New York. The subsequent story cycle *Anything is Possible,* builds a picture of the community Lucy left behind, from multiple perspectives. Her siblings haven't been as materially successful as Lucy has, Pete still lives in the house they grew up in and Vicky works as a carer. In *The Sister*, Lucy returns home after seventeen years.[128] When Lucy and Vicky arrive, Pete compares them: Lucy is tiny in black, but old! She is famous. But he is surprised by how Lucy sits with ease on the sofa; when Vicky arrives, he suddenly realises that she is fat, and there's something different about her face. She is wearing lipstick. There is an immediate tension between the two sisters. Vicky, who works in the care sector, says:

> '…you left here and have never once come back since Daddy died…'
>
> Lucy said, looking upward, 'I've been very busy.'
>
> 'Busy? Who isn't busy?... Hey, Lucy, is that what's called a truthful sentence?'[129]

[127] Alice Munro, *The Beggar Maid* (First published as *Who Do You Think You Are?),* (Vintage, 2004)
[128] Elizabeth Strout, 'The Sister' in *Anything is Possible* (Viking, 2017), 150-180.
[129] Strout, 'The Sister', 163.

As she brings up her own suffering in the past, Vicky tells her sister to 'Write about that.'[130] During a tortured process of reconciliation, they realise that it is Lucy who cannot cope, who cannot tell the whole truth about their experience. In the end Lucy cannot drive her hire car back to Chicago – Vicky has to do it for her. Vicky and Pete on the way home both understand that it was too hard for her to come back. Pete admires the way Vicky drives with such authority and wants to tell her how great she is. In this case, Lucy who left cannot return, Vicky who stayed had to carry on, to endure, and she has the strength at the end of this story.

This is applicable to my novel: Ida is not interested in or able to move but is able to travel freely to visit her idol, until her van breaks down. Emily has class travelled, but she is stuck, confined in an oppressive setting. Ideas of marriage and legitimacy restrict them both: Ida as a social outcast, restricted from seeing her grandchildren; and Emily in the way she is expected to act in her marriage. But Emily hasn't travelled too far not to able to return. Movement and change occur through the social relationships, within this specific location and locale, giving us a sense of place in which the novel exists.

Radu highlights Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic in her work *Revolution in Poetic Language*. She explains that realistic settings are symbolic, they might represent what the author is saying about class or gender. She describes as semiotic (studying the use of symbolic communication) places that connect space and time so they are only available to individual characters.[131] So for example, in *Royal Beatings*, Rose's father's shed is a space for that character to express himself in another, literary dream-like way, or Rose's perception and narration of a beating by her father, instigated by her stepmother Flo, in the kitchen.[132] The meaning of a sense of place in fiction is bound to its impact on character, and the mobility of character whether this is physical, spiritual or emotional.

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[130] Strout, 'The Sister', 173.

[131] Anca-Raluca Radu, '"What Place Is This?" Alice Munro's Fictional Places and Her Place in Fiction', in *Space and Place in Alice Munro's Fiction*, eds Lorre-Johnston Christine and Rao Eleonora, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787442603.006

[132] Munro, 'Royal Beatings' in *The Beggar Maid*, pp3-23.

The growth of my female characters, their transformation and change within specific locations and important locales, and ultimately their sense of place and belonging build the chronotopes of my work.

About Essex

In Gillian Darley's *Excellent Essex* (2021) she suggests that a 2020 lockdown allowed people to explore their own county to a greater degree.[133] Staying put, and various types of mobility, is something I consider in this chapter. Technology and possibilities for travel have meant a vast change in the way we live, view our lives and share them. A lockdown focused us on the local, along with war and a growing awareness of the costs to the planet of our travel away from home. And yet a cost-of-living crisis in the UK - food banks on school playgrounds - mean immense local hardships, and this is the case in some areas of the county of Essex; coastal regions in particular are known to suffer social and economic challenges associated with peripherality, for example, casualisation, low pay and unemployment.[134]

Darley mentions something I've become aware of recently. She states that the impact of the wars, of helping each other, was a mindset that was still in place when the great flood hit the Essex coast in 1953. Insecurely built holiday homes had become the main residences of people leaving London during and after the war, in plotland coastal communities including Canvey Island and Jaywick. When the flood hit, people had no choice but to help each other. In this current crisis, I have heard people say, 'don't moan, get on with it and help', who feel great pride in the changes

[133] Gillian Darley, *Excellent Essex*, Exeter: Old Street Publishing, 2021. 8.

[134] Geographical characteristics of both rural and coastal locations such as low population densities, sparsity, remoteness and peripherality present social and economic challenges. These can be hidden … but statistics show 'key rural and coastal areas pay substantially lower than the national average. Jobs in rural areas are amongst the lowest paid and casual working, affordability of local housing is an issue for rural workers. Despite rural and coastal areas having a lower prevalence of diagnosed mental health disorders amongst the adult population, both see higher rates of suicide than the national average – as are drug related deaths in coastal communities, especially islands and seaside resorts. Farmers are also particularly high risk… *Rural recognition, recovery, resilience and revitalisation: Strengthening economies and addressing deprivation in rural and coastal communities,* Pragmatix Advisory Limited for Local Government Association, May 2021.

they have managed to push forward as a community, and make happen in places like Jaywick.[135]

But Darley explains, 'Perched on the eastern edge of the nation, Essex people have long felt marginalised; a sense of being out of step that has sometimes led to extremes.' She states that she has 'met Essex born people who admitted shame about their place of birth, others defiantly proud of their home county.' These responses to where we live could be our responses to the old Essex cliches, where Essex Man and Essex Girl are the butt of classist, sexist and 'placist' county jokes, if we actually care about what the others say about us. Others cannot quite grasp what Essex really is. In *The Invention of Essex* Tim Burrows writes that no matter how he tried,

> …to pin Essex's story down, it somehow always slipped away… learning the tales of historical extremity that begat the great movement from London into Essex eventually illuminated the county… revealing it as a place built through a stubborn belief in the promise of survival.[136]

And I was aware of extreme contrasts in terms of place, even in close proximity. Wealthy towns like Frinton sit alongside more economically vulnerable areas such as Clacton-on-Sea and Jaywick. Southend-on-Sea, like many other towns, has obvious areas of wealth and poverty. But this is a simple economic distinction. One might measure wealth in terms of something else: when I ask some Clacton and Jaywick residents about where they live, they talk about the great love of the beach, of the sea, of the places they go to walk, to unwind after work. Alongside, 'Everywhere has difficult areas.' There are many whose families have come from East London, and maybe this means less need to move again, a settling in place, and finding community, particularly in difficult times.

It is in this spirit that I write an Essex novel. It's a novel that celebrates the people, and the seaside landscape that is part of my own Essex experience. I live in Colchester now, but travel to work in Clacton and have done for around twenty

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[135] Anonymous, work chat

[136] Burrows, *The Invention of Essex*, 80-81.

years. I spent a good part of my childhood in Southend-on-Sea and moved a few times there too. I draw on my own experiences in these places, and as such the actual location or 'place' I've written is fictional – a distillation of these Essex locations.

Literary Essex

There are plentiful contemporary explorations of Essex as a county and its history in creative non-fiction and essays that I use have used as research on Essex for this work.[137] For example, James Canton's *Out of Essex* (2013), a work of creative non-fiction, explores the landscapes of Essex literary writers including J.A. Baker, Marjorie Allingham and Daniel Defoe. *Radical Essex* was a project that re-examined and maps the county, 'in relation to radicalism in thought, lifestyle, politics and architecture'.[138]

My search of contemporary literature found many examples of historical or crime fiction and contemporary films and plays written by Essex-based writers.[139] Many of these representations begin by mentioning or purposefully challenging the cliched negative Essex stereotype (Perry, Burrows, Canton, Perry, Darley), and continue to delve more deeply into reflecting another perspective of Essex. They show the particularities of this large county, reaching between East London to the coast.

Researching contemporary (written and set) regional fiction I found *When God was a Rabbit* (2011) by Sarah Winman.[140] This is a contemporary Essex novel, where the county is represented as a place to escape from in the hope of a better life elsewhere. It begins with the nine-year-old narrator telling the story of how she was

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[137] For example: *Beach Hut People* by Nancy Stevenson, *Sea Sagas* by Jules Pretty, *Essex Girls* by Sarah Perry, *Radical Essex* published by Focal Point Gallery, Southend, along with the other texts already mentioned.
[138] https://www.radicalessex.uk/?map
[139] Historical fiction: *The Manningtree Witches* (2021), *The Essex Serpent* (2016), *Foxash* (2023), *Essex Dogs* (2023), Sell us the Rope (2022). I discovered crime fiction by local authors: James Henry (police procedurals set in 1980s Colchester); Laura Purcell (gothic mysteries); and Lauren North (domestic noir). And contemporary films such as *Comte Anglaise* (2019); *Essex Girls* (2023); *Fishtank* (2009) and plays such as *Essex Girl* (2019) set in Essex and marginal seaside towns.
[140] Sarah Winman, *When God was a Rabbit*. (Headline Publishing Group: 2011)

born, ‘just as my mother got off the bus after an unproductive shopping trip to Ilford’. Winman immediately situates us in time and the wider space too, ‘the year Paris took to the streets. The year of the Tet Offensive. The year Martin Luther lost his life for a dream.’ And ‘’What’s Going On’ sang Marvin Gaye…’ Immediately she shares the key relationship that will be important in the book: ‘it was at that moment that my brother took my hand…’ There is humour and playfulness here, and something new: her brother’s gift of a Belgian Hare, whom they name *God*, really is the new friend he promised her as it turns out the giant rabbit speaks (if only she can hear him). And the pain a young life witnessed too, abuse by a neighbour and a father’s despair at his recognition that as a legal professional he had made the wrong decision in defending a man who was guilty, leading to the suicide of the woman he had abused.

The particularities of locale are threaded through the story amongst character experience and sense of place – at school, in the neighbour’s house, in the garden shed, and characters such as her new best friend Jenny Penny ‘living in a temporary world of temporary men; a world that could be broken up and reassembled as easily and as quickly as Lego.’ There are only occasional mentions of place names:

> ‘Have you ever been to the sea before? I asked.
>
> ‘Not really,’ she said, turning away, wiping off a small handprint that had smeared the centre of a mirror.
>
> ‘Not even at Southend?’ I said.
>
> ‘Tide was out,’ she said.
>
> ‘It comes back you know.’
>
> ‘My mum was too bored to wait for it to come back. I could smell it, though. I think I’d like the sea, Elly. Know I would.’[141]

But when their dad wins the pools, the family move out of Essex to start a new life in Cornwall, leaving Jenny Penny and their old neighbourhood behind. Essex is somewhere to leave when there is the possibility to do so.

[141] Winman, *When God was a Rabbit,* 52.

In contemporary multi-generational fiction, Sarah Armstrong's *The Insect Rosary* (2017),[142] is an Essex-based family drama which locates itself immediately in terms of family, memory, and place. The family had originally arrived in Essex (far enough to escape the devil's work they had known in Cornwall), heading for Suffolk but stopping short in Coggeshall. Essex details feature throughout, from her mother going to the pictures at the Regal and Empire to the myths of 'black devil dogs'[143] Greta had been told. Present day life is Colchester in 2011, when daughter Shona's family take trips to Mersea and recall 'Clacton as a bright and busy distraction'. But Armstrong's novel, as well as portraying the mundane and difficult life of a mother after divorce, also intertwines family mysteries, local myths, misfortunes, and superstitions, including the fear of the devil who still haunts them, leaving footprints in the snow. There is an element of the supernatural or even magical real in the novel, which is not present in my own work.

In contrast, the play *Guesthouse* (2018)[144] by Nicola Werenowska is a contemporary intergenerational realistic story of mother, daughter, granddaughter mostly set in a disintegrating guesthouse in Clacton-on-Sea. In her research Werenowska interviewed Essex women and conducted research on local history, as well as using elements of her own family history. Specific times and locations are indicated at the start of each scene, for example: Blue Lagoon, 1963; Colchester Hospital, Sept 2017; Guesthouse, September 2017. The play is about a grand/mother struggling to maintain the guesthouse, due to economic factors including the loss of tourism in seaside towns, but also family difficulties and departures she is coping alone. It is an oppressive setting, a struggle for this character to maintain, and she finally wants to give up. The relationships with her daughter and granddaughter are key to this story and the difficulties they have faced are only fully revealed later in the play. Themes include leaving, of movement away and returning, and the trauma and impact of suicide, of speaking openly about mental health. Location is also referenced by mentioning specific buildings e.g. Cordeys or the pier:

[142] Sarah Armstrong, The Insect Rosary, (Sandstone Press: 2017)
[143] The black dog of folklore, often said to represent the devil, in Essex known as Black Shuck.
[144] Nicola Werenowska, *Guesthouse,* draft playscript, 2018.

> Val: It's good for me the pier. Good for business. People used to say, 'Bring back Butlins!' I'd say, let's start with the pier.

As well as references to particular location names there are indicators of a sense of place, of class and hierarchy including to Jaywick, or Thorpe, for example: 'It's where you live if you're posh but not as posh as Frinton.'[145]

When they know she finally can't cope anymore and may sell up, her daughter wants to return home. But her granddaughter wants to help her sell and her grandmother's freedom from the burden. These issues are not quite resolved at the end, but secrets have been revealed and although there has been anger and tension, the womens' journey and future together once more is hopeful.

Guesthouse connects with my own in terms of being an intergenerational matrilinear narrative, giving equal space to the older mother's voice. Scenes travel between specific times to explain the characters' journeys and reveal key elements of their story. It is also a return and acceptance of place that the daughter has left. Of course, the construction is a play, and my goal for my own work was to write a work of length, in the form of a novel. So the expression of my narrative differs entirely from this work.

Other contemporary art and literature resonated with the themes I was working on, including place and mobility. Similarly, Tracey Emin's autobiographical 'confessional' narratives and art tell stories of a young girl's life in a seaside town that she longed to escape. In her video poem *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995),[146] she narrates a poem over a series of shots of places that had relevance in her past, a story of leaving school at thirteen, going to cafes and having sex with older men. Living in Margate rather than Essex, but a seaside town blighted with some of the same coastal issues and marginality as the place of my writing, she dreamt of winning a dance competition that would enable her to escape. The audience started to clap, then the boys/men she'd slept with started chanting 'Slag! Slag! Slag!'. Emin ran from the stage and vowed she would get out.

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[145] Werenowska, *Guesthouse,* Act 5.

[146] Jerry Saltz Interviews Tracey Emin https://youtu.be/MhCa_71LWhg?si=lqbST2t0DDfkDH5g

Location, locale and a sense of place are particular because the work is auto-biographical. Her escape to London and an increasingly high-brow art world mean that this is a story of real social mobility and class travel, based on her expressing everything she is in her work (criticised for her frankness about sexual assault, rape, abortion, as well as lauded for her exposure of self), contributing an unorthodox portrayal of girlhood in a seaside town and thereby becoming one of the centre of the British art establishment. Although this is not fiction, it is useful for me in considering difficult aspects of place and how they propel a desperation to leave that not everyone can achieve.

Although Grayson Perry's fictional creation Julie May Cope is a 'class-traveller' who moves repeatedly throughout her life, Essex remains her home and she is an 'Essex Everywoman'. This fictional story is told in a 3000-word ballad, *The Ballad of Julie Cope*[147] (as well as woodcuts, two large tapestries and a shrine, *A House for Essex*, built fictionally by her second husband Rob and in reality, by Perry and FAT architects in 2014). Perry challenges what Brennan describes as the cultural decline narrative of ageing for older women by putting Julie in the spotlight; her life is important, and she is the primary character in this story.

This work was produced after Perry's earlier work *A Vanity of Differences* (2012), the story of Tim Rakewell, who crosses the class divide over the course of six tapestries, via three locations selected as an indication of class and taste. Julie Cope is also socially and physically mobile, or as Perry calls it, 'a class-traveller' but her journey is through the large county of Essex, from Canvey Island in the south, via Basildon, South Woodham Ferrers, Maldon, Colchester to Wrabness in the north-east. The building itself, 'a contemporary form of pilgrimage chapel',[148] is Julie's shrine, built by her second husband Rob as a Taj Mahal for his lost love after her death, decorated inside and out with the artefacts and cultural symbols of her life see Figures 1 and 2). For example, of the distinctive decorative faience exterior tiles in green and cream, some resemble sheela ng tiles representing old age and fertility – an older woman's body with her vulva on display, death and birth at the same time –

[147] Grayson Perry, *The Ballad of Julie Cope*, 2015 (copy provided by Living Architecture)
[148] Charles Holland, "The last of Essex: Contemporary architecture and the cultural landscape" in Dale, J. (ed). 2023. *St Peter-on-the-Wall: Landscape and heritage on the Essex coast.* (London: UCL Press, 2023) https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800084353, 334.

as Julie's tale does (see Figure 3). Others display objects representing her role as a mother (nappy pins) and artefacts of her era (cassette tapes) along with the Essex coat of arms bearing the three swords or seaxes. Julie's body is displayed above the main room of the building, exaggerated belly and breasts arms spread wide, and the scooter that killed her hangs before her.

Figures 1, 2, 3

A House for Essex, Wrabness

Her story begins with birth: on the night of the Great Flood, which decimated part of the Essex coast on 1 February 1953, Julie Cope's 'purplish giblet body' slithering free from her mother, June, passed through a hole in the roof before the family escaped Canvey Island in a lifeboat. (Her dad Norman had seen it all done before, her mother June would guffaw and say, 'I very nearly died'.) They escape to 'breathe the modern air of Basildon'…where 'buildings shrieked fair new hopes at old style folks',[149] and where Norman becomes a fitter at Fords, and June 'a lacquered goddess tossing thunderbolts onto their small pastel world.'

Brooke House tower block looms over Julie and her first husband, Dave, in the first tapestry, *A Perfect Match*. Julie is struggling with marriage and parenthood surrounded by images of her past and cultural artefacts of their present. Julie's romantic journey had been secured with friends' comments that they were 'a perfect match'. But Dave 'was heading into Thatcher's arms…' and found them 'a mortgage on a tick-box starter home'… Basildon man was a symbol of Margaret Thatcher's new working class in the 1980s, moving away from working class solidarity and

[149] Perry, *The Ballad of Julie Cope*.

towards the new materialistic individualism that promised a slice of the cake and that anyone could make it. Criticised and feared by the middle class, Basildon Man broke boundaries making 'loadsamoney' in the city, had nothing to lose and everything to gain. In contrast, Essex Girl in her white stilettos, the butt of sexualised jokes, did not aspire to go anywhere at all. Even Germaine Greer (2006) writing in her defence states: 'The Essex Girl is a working-class heroine surviving in a post-proletarian world. She is descended from the mill girls who terrorised their neighbourhoods, raucous, defiant, pleasure-seeking . . . No matter how much cash might be sloshing through her household, she is working-class and means to stay that way.'[150] A. Biressi and H. Nunn wrote, 'Greer's proposal of a historical lineage underlines the hearty working-class core of the Essex Girl who is happy with her lot in life. She suggests that the best of them abjure aspiration and class mobility.[151] She's not only uninterested in social advancement but isn't even aware that this is an option. In contrast Sarah Ivens' praise of the Essex Girl is premised on the fact that she embraces opportunities for social advancement with gusto and that she is a threat to the social order.[152]

In Julie's case, it is Dave's affair with a young teacher which thrusts her into a new life. She realises:

home was never as stable, as wholesome
As the version framed in Woolworth's gold

It takes Dave's infidelity (and maybe reading *The Female Eunuch*), to get her out. Julie must get tough, to discover who she is as a woman on her own with children.

But it's not that easy. 'She was finally free to 'be herself'
Whatever that was? As if she would know

[150] Biressi, A., Nunn, H. "Essex: Class, Aspiration and Social Mobility." In: *Class and Contemporary British Culture,* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314130_2 , 42.
[151] Biressi, Nunn, "Essex: Class, Aspiration and Social Mobility", 42.
[152] Biressi, Nunn, "Essex: Class, Aspiration and Social Mobility", 42.

Newly open minded, she shocks herself
In lonely moments of parental stress
She becomes her livid puce cheeked mother
Swinging wildly from rage to blame and shame
More than any time in her life
Julie takes a deep breath and feels and learns
To lay down laws so little ones feel safe

Because she has children, she has no choice, she has everything to lose. She becomes ‘one more determined mum’. Julie learns here about the repeated role of the mother, how easy it was to become her own mother and chooses, with great difficulty, to do something differently.

She tidies up the takeaways and crisps
Puts on a neat face and new low top

The choices she makes are those that will stop them falling into poverty, Julie has to look the part if she is to survive. Fortunately, she manages to find the energy to bring up the kids, to secure work and do well, move through the Essex landscape to Maldon, to get an education at Essex University, finding herself, and not long afterwards her second husband, Rob. In the second tapestry, *In its Familiarity, Golden,* surrounding the happy couple are images showing a contented split from Dave, they wave him off, Julie wears a CND printed cardi, her mother and father are looking down from above, a home in the more middle class South Woodham Ferrers, Maldon, Essex University and Wrabness feature on the Essex map of her journey, the town hall and Colchester High Street feature Julie in her business wear, a picture of her contentment with Rob, and her broken body after her collision with a learner motorcyclist:

To Julie he was exotic, a gent
To Rob she arrived as a kick-ass spirit

Who took up human form on the third date
When he learned she could drink and argue hard.
She discovered what a man could become
When he's nothing to prove to other men.

She is 'kick-ass' and he is 'exotic' – a man with nothing to prove to other men – a nod to a Britain where gender boundaries are fluid and performed roles not necessary. Julie is at peace with her life and her break-up from Dave. She has found herself in older age, becoming kick-ass after the eye-opening first marriage, a recognition of inauthenticity, a change in values about what is really important for herself, about who she is. And when she is herself, no longer conforming to social fictions of gender and marriage, she meets Rob. This connects with Waxman's *Reifungsroman*, and my own writing of an older woman, Ida Shakespeer, finding herself, away from prescribed societal roles and expectations, although unlike for Julie Cope this doesn't necessarily end in romance.

Perry's research included interviewing Essex women in his search for his own representation of character and place (or what he wishes had happened to his own mother). Julie Warchol argues that 'As a distillation of the shared experiences of Essex women, Julie Cope is more than a fictional character - she is an expression of Essex women's locality. She - and, by extension, the house that is her shrine - mirror their lived experiences.[153] For Perry, the act of representing a place requires an intimate understanding of its people - their life stories, cultural customs, social networks and self-images. Perry's monument to the "trials, tribulations, celebrations and mistakes of an average life,"'[154] *The Ballad of Julie Cope* is at the same time 'a portrait of an individual, a community and late 20th-century Essex. Both the building and its mobile artifacts offer tribute to the popularly disdained residents of Essex and do so through a design language that is at once local and cosmopolitan.'[155] In writing the journey he wishes his mother had experienced, he's not representing the reality of the working-class woman, it's a wish for her, a positive representation of elements

[153] Julie Warchol, "Grayson Perry Maps Essex for Us All" in *Art in Print*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (May – June 2016), pp. 20-24 Published by: Art in Print Review, 20.
[154] Warchol, "Grayson Perry Maps Essex for Us All", 22.
[155] Warchol, "Grayson Perry Maps Essex for Us All", 20.

of Essex woman's story. Essex is a big place and Julie spans the whole of it, including its political leanings.

Essex Influences: Art, Music, Architecture

Threaded through *Ida Shakespeer* is Ida's fandom of popstar David Essex. As well as developing her character, this gave me dates and places to use as a timeline and locations for Ida's story. So from the moment she first sees David Essex in *Godspell* at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm in 1971, his many concerts, films and shows, his career, thread throughout are often key moments in their lives. Not long after her *Godspell* experience, like several coastal residents, Ida's family move from the East End of London to the coast, and, before tragedy strikes, become part of the community there.

David Essex himself had a working-class background and traveller roots (his mother's father was a gypsy), moving from London to Essex with his family as a teen: 'When east Londoners want a quieter, better quality of life, they invariably turn to Essex.'[156] He was named 'Essex' by his manager in a quick decision based on where he lived. Cast as Jesus in the musical *Godspell* (1971-3*)*, a storm brewed in the press at the time as the working-class 'docker's son to play Jesus as a red-nosed clown'.[157] After some controversy it finally opened at the Roundhouse – an old railway building in Chalk Farm, London, to a full house. Protestors outside held banners such as 'SINNERS BURN IN HELL', but the show was a sellout from the first night, and the David Essex soon became a star. His other early work included *That'll be the Day* (1973), *Stardust* (1974), hit songs *Rock On* (1973) and *Hold Me Close* (1975), Che Guevera in the musical *Evita* (1978) *and War of the Worlds* (1978).

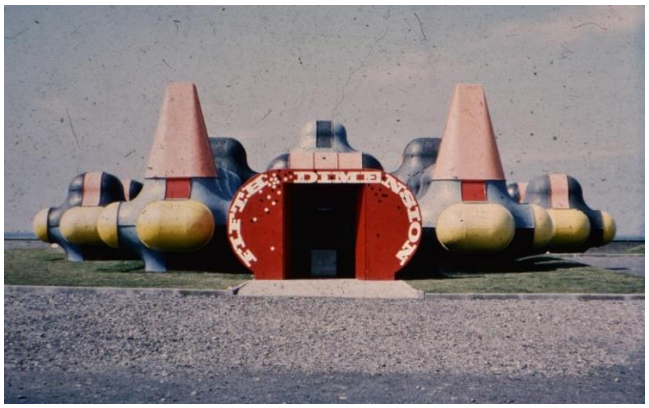
With his gypsy curls and neckties, Essex acquired a huge fanbase, some of whom have followed his career since those early shows. And this is the story of my character. She is a fan, adores Essex like many others, and is also tied up in the

[156] David Essex with Ian Gittins, *Over the Moon My Autobiography* (London: Virgin Books, 2012), 37.
[157] Essex with Gittins, *Over the Moon,* 103.

ideal of romance. By the end of my novel, Ida and David Essex are both just people, equal in stature, and when she meets him at a concert on the beach, she is the one who leaves him to dance with her friends.

Other architectural elements of the location of my novel were inspired by real buildings, artists, architects and designers. The story of the salmon pink bubble was influenced by seeing Keith Albarn's *Pattern and Belief* project and investigating his Erkistikit constructions on Margate beach.[158] Albarn trained as an architect but in the 1960s moved away from formalist models of architecture to create Ekistikit modular system (see Figure 4). Dickens states that 'The flexible capsular form of Albarn's Ekistikit system created interactive, immersive environments within which sensory experiences could be enhanced, altered, or manipulate.' The modular curved connecting cells, with the aim of creating a sensory experience for the inhabitant and moving away from the building of the time which he felt was disconnected with humanity.[159] He and his partner, Hazel, and others installed the designs in London, Scotland (Girvan) and Margate. Albarn continued to research number systems and patterns, and their relationship to belief systems and creativity.[160]

Figure 4



The Fifth Dimension at Girvan, 1969

[158] Keith Albarn, Pattern and Belief Talk, The Minories Galleries, Colchester (2013) https://patternandbelief.com
[159] Luke Dickens and Tim Edensor, "Entering the Fifth Dimension: modular modernities, psychedelic sensibilities, and the architectures of lived experience" Trans Inst Br Geog. 2021;46:659-675. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12440, 663.
[160] Keith Albarn, https://patternandbelief.com

My stories were beginning to be closely linked to the coast in both Southend and Clacton-on-Sea. I included modular architecture and the link with human experience, but also the conflicting views of what it represented in the area in that era. I was also thinking about the different trajectories of lives, and decisions made. Albarn's stories and ideas influenced the sensory salmon pink dome and became fictionally connected with the Essex House, where Emily and Ida are reconciled and eventually Emily resides temporarily.

The *House for Essex* was built in 2016 on the River Stour in Wrabness. Grayson Perry and Charles Holland (FAT Architects), had collaborated to design a house based on a fairytale (Perry) and modernist architecture (Holland). Holland's research mentioned the Essex coastally located chapels including St. Peter on the Wall, small and functional, welcoming pilgrims and visitors by sea; as well as European architecture and churches. The result is a concertina-shaped building, with one large ground floor room and upstairs two bedrooms – each bedroom accessing a balcony overlooking the main ground floor room, and between the balconies is a life-size figure of Julie Cope, overlooking the room like a religious deity. The tapestries representing Julie's two marriages hang in a bedroom each and the ballad of her life is available in the pamphlet for visitors to the house. The tapestry (traditionally a patrician or 'high' art), and the ballad (traditionally a proletarian or 'low' art), both tell/show the heroine's journey.

Angela McShane explains that audiences for ballads had traditionally been ordinary men and women, and themes were usually love songs,[161] although some used the popular form for 'social and political commentary and satire and complaint, giving the ordinary a voice against the oppressions of wealth and power.'[162] Grayson Perry is doing both here – love between ordinary men and women is a key theme, but Julie's life is also a social and political commentary, propelling ordinary Julie's story into the realms of significance, and sharing it in a place of 'high culture': an architecturally designed and built shrine, accessible to those who are able to afford it.

[161] Angela McShane, "The Lady of Essex Faire" in *Julie Cope's Grand Tour* (The Crafts Council, 2017), 32.
[162] Angela McShane, "The Lady of Essex Faire", 29.

Perry is concerned with class and identity, and bridging political gaps using his art, in the form of pottery, or film, or tapestry, conscious of the content and the location in which it appears. In his 2017 film *Divided Britain* he looked at why Britons voted for Brexit, trying to highlight and bring the communication of extreme political views together.[163] Julie's story bridges a gap between right and left, individualism to communitarianism, in which Perry reveals the Essex landscape.

The exterior of the building at a glance reminded me of Albarn's *Pattern and Belief* project. This connection, architecture as an attempt to represent lives, locations and yet encourage playfulness and returning to something that has been overlooked, is included in the fabric of my book. Julie Cope's pilgrimage was influential in my research about Ida's life. Julie's journey through the 70s, 80s and 90s Essex landscape, the tapestry of Essex depicting important landmarks in the towns she lives in, is part of my own mapping of Ida's coastal environment. Albarn's 'fun palaces' constructed in Dreamland, Margate (and other locations) are seaside fairground theatrical, even 'Dionyson',[164] or carnivalesque. In my novel they are used as entertainment for Ida's child, that become a regular part of their everyday existence but become worn down (and no longer doing its job) over time. In my novel, Perry's fairy tale beauty and nature of the *House for Essex* (it becomes Essex House) no longer in their coastal location, apart from it, represents an escape from Ida's reality. But the homes they live in form part of their identity too, the house in 'the bottom jaw', Mr Green's House and the difference between the two places they live in the opening of the novel – Ida in a small rented flat and Emily a grand house by the sea. And the workplace environments: the factory and the two schools, also form part of the landscape. At the end, the architects (this includes Judy) redesign the beach buildings with some of their original ideas, and this too will be accessed by all.

Other scenes and vignettes were inspired by the specifically located domestic art of Essex-based photographer Polly Alderton. For example, Figure 5 inspired the scene between Emily and Luke, where Emily allows Jack to climb into the new bin.

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[163] Grayson Perry, *Divided Britain,* 2017.
[164] Dickens and Edensor, "Entering the Fifth Dimension", 671.

Luke's reaction is over the top. Figure 6 is used in Emily's recollection of when her neighbour Michael hits a smouldering mound and burns his cheek.

Figures 5 & 6

Source: Polly Alderton

Expressing Essex

Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1992) is set in a coastal town, but Perth in Western Australia rather than the UK. Not only is the language vernacular, but it is a multivocal novel, using multiple narrative styles - omniscient as well as first, second- and third-person narration, free indirect discourse, direct speech.[165]

The novel opens in medias res - in the midst of family and community, but the narration is soon fractured after the near-death experience of Fish Lamb, who returns in body but not completely of mind. Two families arrive in Perth, through accident and necessity: the hard-working Lambs rent half the large house the Pickles have recently inherited, who gamble and drink their rent away. Both families are dislocated, they are neither wealthy nor part of the indigenous aboriginal population,

[165] Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet*. (Picador, 1992)

they are working-class families, identified by Morrison as representing work and luck.[166]

Dialogue is often direct speech; it is not identified with speech marks and often it is without tags indicating who is speaking. The language is a non-standard vernacular, it is written the way the characters speak, in terms of phonics and dialect, grammar and vocabulary, and captures a lack of expressiveness in the family which is both emotional and linguistic.

> I won im, Sam said.
> What in, a mugs' lottery?
> Just a bet.
> He's a beaut, said Rose. What does he eat?
> New pennies.
> That'll be cheap, said Dolly.[167]

Morrison argues this brings literary language closer to a lived and spoken language of working people in a particular time and place. She suggests the work has influences in Joyce's *Ulysses* or Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, all challenging and marking 'differential relationships between dominant or hegemonic uses of language or modes of writing', or high culture and cultural prestige.[168]

But there are arguments against attempting representing the vernacular in literature.[169] Writing guidance often advises avoiding trying to imitate dialect. For example, Mullan states that dialect vocabulary should be used 'sparingly' and for psychological effect rather than socio-linguistic accuracy.[170] He explains that in the movement away from the authorial voice, dialogue used to be closer to drama for

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[166] Fiona Morrison. 'Bursting with voice and doubleness': Vernacular presence and visions of Inclusiveness in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet, in* McCredden, L., & O'Reilly, N. (Eds.) *Tim Winton: Critical essays.* UWA Publishing: 2014
[167] Winton, 88.
[168] Fiona Morrison. 'Bursting with voice and doubleness', 22-23.
[169] (One that Morrison put forward is the 'prevailing rhetoric and revival of cultural self-presence rooted in claims about authenticity and obsessed with the aesthetics of embodiment' she highlights the complication of potentially over – romantic investments in identity and place'.[169] (which links to Cresswell's comment concerning xenophobia, p18)
[170] John Mullan. *How Novels Work*. (Oxford University Press, 2006), 132.

reading aloud, but in later novels ‘idiolects’, or forms of speech, became distinctive of the individual, although not ‘realistic’. He argues that fiction smooths speech and is a stylisation of actual speech.

In my novel I initially shied away from writing an Essex accent and lexicon, with only minor references to speech, dialect and phonetic indicators - because of this kind of writing guidance and general criticism. Take for example, Nick Duffy’s Twitter comment, ‘the main thing that struck me about J K Rowling's new novel is that this is how she thinks working-class people talk’.[171] Using accent and dialect in fiction writing can be seen as patronising, parodic, distracting and would need to be accurate. Looking at other contemporary Essex literature, for example Kate Worsley’s *Foxash* (2023), speech is described as a character moves into a new space: ‘It’s a country voice. Deep but soft. And flustered. A woman’s voice.’[172] But uses turns of phrase and vocabulary to show how characters speak: ‘Best get indoors, pet.’[173] Sarah Perry’s *Enlightenment* (2024), set in 1990, doesn’t use Essex dialect for her fifty and seventeen-year-old protagonists. In contrast the play *Essex Girl* by Maria Ferguson does:

> Anyway, I’m hiding up here ’cause Mum’s just got in, she’s in the kitchen, and if I go down there, she’ll probably smell the smoke. She’s got a nose like a flippin’ bloodhound. I know she don’t like smoking because of Nan and that but I’m sixteen now.[174]

But, of course, this is theatre and written to be spoken aloud. I have always written to read aloud, particularly in the form of short fiction, so continued to deliberate over the language used in this novel.

The argument about the use of dialect in literature could be applied to how language is changing over time, and the perception of the ‘Essex Accent’ or Estuary

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[171] @NickMDuffy, X (formerly Twitter) 16 Sept 2020: ‘the main thing that struck me about J K Rowling's new novel is that this is how she thinks working class people talk’

[172] Kate Worsley, *Foxash* (Tinder Press: 2023), 8.

[173] Kate Worsley, *Foxash*, 25.

[174] Maria Ferguson. *Essex Girl* (Oberon Books, 2019) *ProQuest Ebook Central*, 24.

English (EE). David Rosewarne coined the term in the early nineteen eighties, describing it as a variety of modified regional speech: 'it is a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation', in the middle ground between Received Pronunciation (RP), sometimes known as Standard English, and Cockney/London Speech.[175] Originating in North Kent and South Essex, Paul Coggle explains the geographic causes of EE on the movements of population out of London.[176]

He argued that over time there has been a growth and spread of the use of Estuary English, that it is becoming part of speech, being less formal than RF. Although it has often been labelled as lazy, or a stigmatised form of speech, there are other instances in recent years where those who may have spoken RE, for example a politician such as Ed Miliband, adapted his speech according to his audience.[177] The use of Estuary English may now be a way of connecting. In English language teaching (ESOL) there is also a focus on speech which identifies less formal elements of English, including intonation or dropping sounds e.g. fish 'n chips, which contributes to a 'naturalness' or 'intelligibility' for learners of the language.[178]

Amanda Coles has researched the evolving language of the county, influenced by cockney, and notes that even Queen Elizabeth's language adapted over her lifetime in line with patterns of change in southern England.[179] Coles listed the different linguistic elements of cockney or London 20th-century and early 21st-century publications, and then interviewed Essex residents to compare the elements of cockney used in everyday language. While observing that aspects of cockney were alive and well in Essex she also noted how the language was changing over time. For example:

> Not only has people's sense of identity changed in Debden but, as all dialects inevitably do, the cockney dialect has changed on Essex soil.

[175] Paul Coggle, *Do you Speak Estuary?* (Bloomsbury: 1993), 24.
[176] Paul Coggle, *Do you Speak Estuary?* 23.
[177] Paul Coggle, *Do you Speak Estuary?* 85.
[178] Vanessa Steele, British Council, Teaching English, Connected Speech
[179] Amanda Coles, 'The cockney dialect is not dead – it's just called 'Essex' now' in *The Conversation*, Published: February 27, 2023

> Younger people in Essex speak slightly differently to their east London-raised elders.
>
> They are less likely to drop an "h" or say "anyfink". And their vowels are less extreme. "Mouth" is slightly less likely to become "mahf". They also say new things that are much less common among their London-raised parents and grandparents such as "at the end of the day" when introducing the most important point in a discussion or saying "yous" when referring to more than one person.[180]

As well as identifying this evolving language Coles notes that younger generations consider their accent to be 'Essex', whereas in contrast older generations born in East London are more likely to consider their accent to be 'cockney'.[181] In considering accents, perceptions and self-identification of Essex residents as speaking with an 'Essex' accent, it almost seems odd not to use it in representing residents in literature.

Arguments against using accent, dialect or the vernacular in fiction are challenged by texts such as *Cloudstreet*. Winton's expression of people and place in language and form is a disruption of the use of RP or standard English, to express lives not traditionally voiced. As a response, in later drafts of *Ida Shakespeer* I began to insert certain elements of Estuary English, particularly the glottal stop instead of /t/ or g-dropping[182] and to read aloud the dialogue, which helped to edit so it was less formal. I began to think more about the way particular characters speak. For example, Ida has a mix of EE/Cockney, some of her companions and friends veer between EE and strong Cockney. Luke attempts RP which Emily also adopts but when he is speaking to a man who speaks Cockney/EE he immediately switches to

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[180] Amanda Coles, **'**The cockney dialect is not dead – it's just called 'Essex' now' in *The Conversation***,** February 27, 2023 https://theconversation.com/the-cockney-dialect-is-not-dead-its-just-called-essex-now-196447, and Amanda Coles and Bronwen G. Evans **'**Phonetic variation and change in the Cockney Diaspora: The role of place, gender, and identity', *Language in Society* 50, no. 5, (2021): pp. 641 – 665
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404520000640

[181] Amanda Coles, The cockney dialect is not dead – it's just called 'Essex' now

[182] T-glottaling, or using the glottal stop /ʔ/ instead of /t/, Apical (ing), commonly referred to as 'g-dropping' – for example, pronouncing the last syllable of 'walking' as 'kin' rather than 'king'. These are represented phonetically as /kɪn/ and /kɪŋ/ respectively (Rowan Campbell https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2018/03/glottal-stops-and-fluency-in-non-native-english-speakers.html)

imitate him. Emily laughs and later recognises something of his inauthenticity, but also an insecurity.

Essex Landscape: Delivering A Sense of Place

In my own work I am focusing on places and people I know, on working women in coastal communities. Many residents have already travelled from London, towards the coast, possibly becoming 'steadfast' in their attachment to place and creating their own roots. To locate this story in place I consider the impact of economic and social factors on the lives of the characters, how they survive when times are difficult and there is no option to physically move. I consider the fluidity of characters and relationships within sometimes oppressive places. I consider details of the particular - the seaside shopfronts bulging with coloured plastic beach toys, pie and mash or fish and chip shops, coastal walks and aspects of living on the edge of the land. I use personal descriptions of place, 'memories' of residents or images and historical details from the Clacton & District Local History Society.[183] But I also situate this novel within a wider Essex landscape, and broader than that, a negative perception of a county. I locate it within Britishness, and like Angela Carter or Grayson Perry, make my own statement about multiplicities of the UK today.

For Ida Shakespeer, who lives in a seaside town cushioned between towns of both wealth and poverty, there are differences between political thought that she encounters. Where Julie Cope travels from Essex individualism in Basildon to a communitarian existence in Wrabness, Ida stays put. Where she once thought that she was an Essex girl, attending concerts, chaotically working and raising her daughter, keeping their home, yet having fun, when she encounters the prejudices of the new 'legitimate' and wealthy family, as she ages in work and romance, she doesn't recognise the negativity she encounters. Eventually she understands that it is society and not herself that is the issue, but how then does she react to that knowledge?

[183] Historical videos of Clacton online, https://www.tendringdc.gov.uk/sub-content-pages/memory-of-princess-dianas-visit-transcript, images Clacton & District Local History Society (Clacton Library and Facebook Group)

Julie Cope finds herself and then true love; Emin is dancing when she leaves town and later pays tribute to her own mother; Dora Chance reminds us what a joy it is to dance and sing. Ida Shakespeer collapses high and low by ignoring them both, ending up helping her daughter, and the characters othered in her community – Ruth and the lizardman, the unnamed cleaners – and making a guest appearance at the last David Essex concert, as well as frequenting the architect-designed Essex House herself.

Ida's journey is an internalised transformation; an acknowledgement of her own identity and self-acceptance in older age: her reifungsroman. The time and space of her story is this journey and where and how it takes place; a contemporary journey in a coastal town, within the constraints of her social class and economic situation all connected to a history of their lives and location. There are other chronotopes at work – a historical internal journey – her recollections through jobs, homes and relationships inform her contemporary journey. And because this novel is multivocal – there is also Emily's journey to consider. Hers leads from an acknowledgement of the growing discomfort she has about her materially comfortable marriage, having to take action and the form that action takes. An historical chronotope is seen through her childhood recollections, towards what could be seen as a traditional female bildungsroman, an escape from her original family, in this case her mother, to find herself in marriage and a new family.

These journeys both represent my own, as an author, and the characters' sense of place: essentially valuing and taking pride in the Essex location and locale, but ultimately the kin and community in which we have come to belong.

Chapter Four

Writing *Ida Shakespeer*: Narrative Choices

In chapter one I explored writing and writers who represented a mother-daughter relationship in contemporary fiction. I considered confessional art and first-person narratives, challenged by several authors for being limited in their perspectives. I discussed the multiple perspectives and forms that Elizabeth Strout uses to tell the story of Lucy Barton. The series begins with a novel written in the first person in which 'Lucy was her voice'[184] to show us who Lucy Barton is and was in the particular time her own mother visited her in hospital, her memories of childhood, and memories of her life beyond that part of the story. In the subsequent short story cycle *Anything is Possible,* Strout uses multiple narrators with a limited third person or shifting focalisation to expand and broaden the narrative further into Lucy's rural community.

I considered multivocal novels, and various explanations for this form: a more balanced understanding of narrative, the inclusion of more than one point of view to tell a story, increasingly sharing underrepresented voices in fiction, and themes of support and survival. As writers grapple with the representation of reality now in the content and forms of fiction, including women's lives as they exist: busy, fractious, often including work and domestic tasks, forms of fiction have changed too.

As Tim Dee suggests this is also the case in the representation of places: alternative or traditionally marginalised places, political comments on place and social duality are shared in contemporary literature. I explored bell hooks' work on a sense of place and belonging, and how characters might be expressed through lexicon, dialect and the vernacular.

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[184] Elena Ferrante and Elizabeth Strout, "'I felt different as a child. I was nearly mute': Elena Ferrante in conversation with Elizabeth Strout", *The Guardian*, March 5th, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/05/i-felt-different-as-a-child-i-was-nearly-mute-elena-ferrante-in-conversation-with-elizabeth-strout

In this chapter I discuss the narrative choices I made influenced by this analysis. This includes reflecting content in form and choices on point of view, time, and tenses. Finally, I discuss the impact of life on writing or vice versa, and my own position from which this story is told.

Point of View

The question of expressing subjectivity in literature is one that includes decisions of narrative perspective and focalisation. My own decisions were based on ideas regarding autobiographical and confessional art and literature, and the voices I wanted to share in my work. Mullan notes this connection between autobiography, fiction and point of view:

> It is no accident that the two novels in which Dickens most obviously uses memories from his own life, David Copperfield and Great Expectations (1860-1861), are also the only two who are told throughout in the first person. Yet there are novelists whose very scope seemed to forbid this way of narrating. George Eliot's range of sympathies and her generosity to her characters preclude the partiality…of the first-person narrator.[185]

My own work, like many writers, often begins with life, and moves into autofiction. To make a piece work, to have any form of sense of reality I begin in reality. Sometimes this takes careful thinking about the ethics of sharing even your own perception when others are involved. It is also easier for me not to use, 'I', so I have explored point of view in fiction considering this choice.

[185] John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 41.

Autobiography and First-Person Narratives

In an interview for Frieze magazine (1997) Tracey Emin was asked if she would ever stop returning to her own experiences again and again in her work. Emin replies:

> No. When people ask 'How much of herself can she keep digging out?', I say 'You've only seen the tip of the iceberg, mate'. The more confident I get, the more will rise to the surface. I've started writing love poetry, but I don't want to write fiction; I want to take from life. What travels through me is what I make. Something comes into me, spirals out, and as it spirals I pull it in, create something, then throw it back into the world. I want to move quickly; I need the confidence it gives. People think my work is about pain, but it isn't; that's just the part people hook onto. The part they choose to remember.[186]

Feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich had stated 'I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours'.[187] Helene Cixous encouraged the purest form of self-expression (often poetic), using I, as a way of showing women's lives and challenging traditional narrative structures.[188] In *Hot Milk*, discussed in Part One, Levy writes a novel in the first person as a response to Cixous' essay *The Laugh of the Medusa.* In her Living Autobiographies, which she states are the closest to the I (and still not quite the I) she discusses the move from third person narration to first, as a move towards closeness to the subjectivity of a character and their voice. In a discussion of focalisation in their own contemporary fiction both Elizabeth Strout and Eleanor Ferrante discuss their use of the first person, as a search for truth through expression of a character:

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[186] Stuart Morgan, An interview with Tracey Emin, Freize (https://www.frieze.com/article/story-i), May 97
[187] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, xviii.
[188] Helene Cixious, "The Laugh of The Medusa", In *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literature Theory and Criticism,* ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (Rutgers University Press, 2009), 416-431.

> Strout: What is it that you have found to be so liberating about writing in the first person that has allowed you "to tell the most unspeakable truth with absolute faithfulness"? For me, Lucy was her voice. And in your work, the protagonists are their voice.
>
> Ferrante: In reality there is no story of the other that is not filtered through an "I". And a third-person narrative whose narrator is not explicitly present began to seem to me… very unconvincing. No matter how love for others and language as an act of love try continuously, insistently, desperately to get outside the margins of the suffocating first-person singular, we remain bodies organically enclosed in our isolation. Once I recognised this, I was convinced that the other can be truthfully described only through an "I" that is colliding and in the collision unravels. For me, telling stories is colliding with a passerby – I quote Baudelaire – but refusing to pass by.[189]

These authors refer to a closeness to character, or 'other', searching for honesty and truth in their expression of the lives of their characters. Other authors have purposefully moved away from using the first person. Some contemporary writers consider that personal exposure, or criticism of work as autobiographical, could be problematic. Eleanor Ferrante herself creates character in the first person but remains anonymous herself, and Rachel Cusk, who claims she was vilified for confessional autobiographical writing, has moved away from singular character perspectives. In her recent *Outline* trilogy (2014-18) she uses a distanced first person narrator who listens and overhears others' stories, through which Cusk can speak about marriage and motherhood.[190]

Rich realised that hers was not a unique story, but like Tracey Emin, these artists paved the way for other voices to be heard, and to understand that there were many experiences like their own:

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[189] Elena Ferrante and Elizabeth Strout, "'I felt different as a child. I was nearly mute': Elena Ferrante in conversation with Elizabeth Strout", *The Guardian*, March 5th, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/05/i-felt-different-as-a-child-i-was-nearly-mute-elena-ferrante-in-conversation-with-elizabeth-strout

[190] Mary K Holland, Rachel Cusk's New Realism: Gender, Power, Voice, and Genre in the *Outline* Trilogy, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, Volume 17, Issue 1, March 2023, Pages 57–75, https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpad017

> Slowly I came to understand the paradox contained in 'my' experience of motherhood; that, although different from many other women's experiences it was not unique; and that only in shedding the illusion of my uniqueness could I cope, as a woman, to have any authentic life at all.[191]

My initial decision on focalisation for this novel was to move away from using the first person, which I often wrote in naturally as an expression of the autobiographical, towards third person limited (or free indirect speech) as an aid to fictionalising my experiences or at least moving away from autobiography. Secondly, this is a mother daughter relationship, my aim was to have a multi-voiced novel, elevating or at least making equal the view of the older mother/grandmother. To have a multi-focal text, one might decide to use multiple first person perspectives, like the *Poisonwood Bible*, with a clear distinction between character voices. This was not my choice for multiple characters, and although Ida and Emily are obviously very different people, the distinction with the use of the first-person voice was not something I wanted to develop at this time.

Ida had to be given time and weight within this piece, and she has more or at least an equal perspective to Emily's. Focalised in the first chapter through Ida's point of view, we see her actions in the present, know her thoughts and memories and we hear her speak. There is no authorial voice or narrator, the novel is written closely revealing the perspective and language of the Ida. In *After Bakhtin,* Lodge explains that where there was a movement away from authorial voice in modernist literature, from diegesis (authorial voice) to mimesis (voices of character), from telling to showing, the author/narrator was brought back in post-modern writing whether purposefully acknowledged or as a non-character able to closely show us the speech, thoughts and actions of the focal character.[192] He also quotes Bakhtin, that the novelist, over the poet, 'has the gift of indirect speech'.[193]

There are questions raised by a point of view limited to hers, for Ida Shakespeer the reader might ask: Why is her daughter acting in the way she has/is?

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[191] Rich, *Of Woman Born,* 22.
[192] David Lodge, *After Bakhtin* (Routledge, 1990)
[193] Lodge, *After Bakhtin*, 7.

Why can't Ida see her grandchildren? What is going on with whom? What can she do about it if anything at all? Is she really the one who is responsible for this division? So to introduce another perspective builds our understanding of her predicament and counterbalances her story. Emily's point of view is introduced in part two.

Ida Shakespeer the novel, begins as an intergenerational miscommunication and misunderstanding based on stereotypes of old age, marriage and mothers. Emily begins to understand this as she deals with a situation in which she learns more about her husband Luke and his own biases and behaviours. Ida's point of view is then used for a climactic moment; she is left standing on the edge of the motorway by her son-in-law, and Emily realises the extent of his lack of care for her family. Something has to change.

The remainder of the book is shifting third person limited to both Ida and Emily's points of view. The narrative moves between the two of them as they are reconciled, immersed in a dialogue in which they learn more about each other, a fuller knowledge of their situation and what they will do next. It reflects their new-found closeness.

> 'Yes but, it wasn't just that. It was him, he didn't want any of it. So it was hard. But I shouldn't have gone along with it. And I'm sorry about the wedding. I'm sorry about everything.'
>
> 'I never knew that he was like that. I couldn't tell. Why did you? Go along with it then?'
>
> 'It was just, I felt like he was right. I listened. I followed. We were in this bubble. And his mum would always back him up, always calling her always telling her, about me…. about you….. I felt watched, exposed. Inside out.'
>
> 'Oh! I didn't know it was like that!'
>
> 'And I began to realise that maybe it wasn't just those things. Maybe it was more than that. And I started thinking about when we first met, and I started feeling guilty about the things I said, about you, about us.'[194]

Shifting perspective between characters or 'mind hopping' is often criticised as confusing for the reader, the impact can distract from the story, or there can be a loss of depth. Mullan states that it is hard to do 'while maintaining the reader's faith.

[194] Emma Kittle-Pey, *Ida Shakespeer*, 213.

The more characters known…viewpoints represented… the more difficult it becomes to maintain narrative coherence.'[195] But he also gives the example of Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* (2002), where the narrative slips easily into the minds of many characters. He suggests that the novel can do this because almost nothing is happening, if a plot were being unfolded, shifting point of view might make us suspicious. He states that we notice a narrative point of view most when it shifts, but when delicately managed the effect can be memorable, and gives the example of *Pride and Prejudice.*[196] Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and her other novels also delicately shift point of view within scenes. In Lively's *Family Album*, mentioned earlier, the focalisation shifts between characters for the purpose of, for example, showing contrasting points of view, or to describe a place in a new way (the family home), another's reaction. Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* shifts between characters, between fragments, but where the sometimes-distant narrator, Fish Lamb, reveals his own thoughts too within a fragment, particularly as the novel progresses. I have purposefully chosen to use this method of focalisation in Parts Four and Five, to show a new closeness between the characters, an emotional reconnection of mother and daughter in which they flit easily in conversation in their restored relationship, and this is replicated in the narration of the novel. Originally placing their names as part of the title of each fragment, after exploring work I decided that titles without names, where the focal character could be easily identified would be suitable.

An example of use of this shift in perspective can be seen in Strout's *Mississippi Mary*,[197] where the story opens with Mary asking her daughter to *'tell your father I miss him',* but quickly we hear Angelina's perspective: 'Angelina could not stop thinking how old her mother seemed, and small.*'*[198] The story is then mostly dialogue between them, and initially lots of stage setting, which objectively describes what they are doing:

> 'I do miss him honey. I imagine there are days when he misses me too.' Mary's elbow rested on the arm of the chair; her hand waved the tissue listlessly.

[195] Mullan, *How Novels Work*, 68.
[196] Mullan, *How Novels Work*, 69.
[197] Elizabeth Strout, 'Mississippi Mary' in *Anything is Possible* (Viking, 2017), pp115-149.
[198] Strout, 'Mississippi Mary', 115.

But it soon switches between the two in thought:

> 'You're my mother!' Angelina burst out, and this caused Mary to almost weep again, because she had a searing glimpse then of all the damage she must have done, and she, Mary Mumford, had never in her life planned on doing, or wanted to do, any damage to anyone.[199]

This shift again shows the emotionally charged nature of this situation (including location and place) and the relationship between adult daughter and adult mother. If a short story were only to include one of these perspectives, we as readers wouldn't feel the emotional charge between them or understand fully the complexities of this relationship.

For the David Essex concert on the beach, I chose an omniscient objectivity not present elsewhere. This is a gathering of people, a community, that I wanted to show as a whole, so there is no viewpoint character. Instead the narrative observes the behaviour and speech of all involved. In Lively's *Family Album*, narration shifts to looking at the whole family at a distance at some points, for example in the chapter *Scissors*, almost the point of view of the house, the place, that frames their narrative. This could be the case in *Ida Shakespeer:* it is a more distant view of character, a better view of the place they call home, and it too could be a perception of this place.[200]

Reflecting content in form

Ida Shakespeer moves from a third person limited to Ida or Emily, to a shifting close third person perspective between them, to an objective omniscient point of view to show the size and the community nature of the celebratory event. The final chapters are back to the new status quo – a shift between mother and daughter, but

[199] Strout, 'Mississippi Mary', 118.

this time more spaced and with less intensity. I wrote each differently, more in tune with the focal character's concerns and situation. In *The Wren, The Wren*, Anne Enright states that she wrote each chapter according to the style she felt was natural for each character, which I discussed in an analysis of her mother-daughter relationship in Chapter One.[201] This is something I attempted in *Ida Shakespeer*. While Ida's first chapter is full of adrenaline, excitement and then surprise, Emily's is a moment of anxiety, anger and contemplation. I went with a feeling of narration that connected with content, and my goals to show isolation, communication and connection. This is experimental and I am aware of the criticisms of this choice. But I have always been interested in the way for example Jennifer Egan,[202] or Elizabeth Strout use multiple forms and perspectives to tell stories according to content.

Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* is a multivocal novel that uses multiple modes of storytelling. Not only are the often very short scenes/chapters from different points of view (broken with titles) but they reflect the internal and external dialogue in dialect (as discussed in Chapter Three). The families that are drawn together in *Cloudstreet* are working class and the dialect, fragmentation and multiple voices reflect the household of which they have become a part. Over time the families become closer, and finally form one family with the wedding of Rose Pickles and Quick Lamb, and their decision to move back home with both sets of parents. This disruption of traditional modes of expression (one character, one point of view, a linear journey) became influential on my presentation of this work.[203]

Time

The selection of a period of time in which this novel takes place made the writing more focused. The timing of the whole story begins (from my interest and writing perspective) from the moment Ida attends her first David Essex concert: this is also an exact location - the Roundhouse in London. So a date and her age was

[201] Anne Enright: The Waterstones Interview, The Waterstones Podcast, 5 September 2023.
[202] For example: *A Visit From The Good Squad* (2010), Twitter story: 'Black Box' (2012) or the short story, 'To Do' (2011)
[203] I intend to explore this further with an adaption of this work into a spoken word performance or play with multiple local voices expressed and discussed in local community workshops.

fixed there. The concerts and shows that he performed, and she attended give another timeline for this story. In parallel, Ida having a baby and bringing Emily up alone casts the roles and nature of their predicament. Some of the stories of Emily's childhood were inspired by memories of my own childhood in Southend. Incidents are based on the precarious nature of their existence and the character of Ida who has a joy in life and music that sometimes means she is oblivious to the dangers that Emily could have been exposed to.

In *Aspects of a Novel* (1927) E. M. Forster famously explains that the first concern of the author telling a story is to make the audience want to know what happens next.[204] Part of the development of my plot, and order in which the story has been told was to create suspense and questions. Forster explains that where story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence, a plot is the same but with an emphasis on causality, which overshadows time sequence.[205] Where the audience of a story can only apply curiosity or be kept awake by the story, 'and then…and then...', the 'plot demands intelligence and memory also'. Not only does the reader do more work to try to answer the question Why? They must remember what happened earlier, 'rearrange and reconsider, new chains of cause and effect and the final sense…of something aesthetically compact'[206] (which might have been shown straight away but it would never have become beautiful).

Deciding when and how to present the narrative in order to create suspense took some experimentation, but I decided that it would be told in the present tense in 2009, based on the ages of all the characters, and showing how Ida had survived but something was still not quite right in her life. The year begins with her picking up her grandson Jack from school, not realising he has had a bump to the head, and disrupting the family's newly found and yet obviously fragile status quo. The rest of the events and scenes are played out within that one year, during which Ida is also planning to see David Essex on his *Secret Tour* which (fictionally) finally takes place where they live, on the beach. Throughout 2009, each character's present experiences lead in time chronologically from one to the next: Part One ends when

[204] E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (Penguin Books, 2005), 42.
[205] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 87.
[206] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 89.

Emily picks up Jack and leaves Ida standing on the prom; Part Two begins when Emily and the children leave the scene.

Exploring other writers' accounts of time and memory, I found, for example, in *The Cost of Living* (2018) Deborah Levy charts a time in her life when she has recently divorced and is living in a new flat with her daughters. She was working out in writing how to drop the past into the present in her fiction (she was writing *Hot Milk*) and at the same time small objects that pop up in the present, real-life story, are direct portals to the past – jolts of memory brought by a small bag of rosemary, or flowers or a train journey an emerald ring.

When she finally looks back and sees the things she did not want to see - her mother, her marriage - she realises her own part in those relationships. On her marriage she explains that they had decided to know less about each other rather than more – that was the fatal flaw. They saw what they wanted to see, the masks had slipped and what they saw 'was too human to bear'.[207] She mentions Adrienne Rich on the art of lying: when we stop lying we create the possibility for more truth. Levy realises that her mum never could have been anything other than who she was. 'Life must be understood backward but lived forwards...' says her friend Clara – 'the seeds of the future are always planted in the past.'[208]

These reflections on writing not only gave me an idea about how to use memory in my work, but also some thoughts on characters and the relationships in my novel. I have inserted memories into chapters, and their backstory is revealed through firstly Ida questioning, looking back to try and understand now why she initially hadn't been able to see the grandkids as much as she wanted to when they were young. In Part Two, Emily begins to recognise the part she has played in isolating her mother; her memories are non-chronological moments of life that pop up and which she tries to piece together to gain some clarity on their present situation. I introduced the characters' memories to build a rounded picture of their lives and who they are, but they also, like Levy discovered, needed to think

[207] Deborah Levy, *The Cost of Living*, (Penguin Books, 2019), 184-185.
[208] Levy, *The Cost of Living*, 108, 145.

backwards to move forwards. Both Ida and Emily have to understand their own contributions to the situation they are in in order to change it.

The chronotopes of the novel include the two characters' personal journeys of understanding within the year, in this marginalised place with sometimes oppressing political, social or xenophobic ideas, which has contributed to their stories, and in the end contributes to their resolution. Motifs such as the road are used, in this case Ida travels but always returns, until she is stuck on the motorway. The homes that Ida and Emily live in represent who they are and their journeys to where they are at this particular time. They indicate class difference and associated objects or lifestyle. The meeting places e.g. Atlanta Café or the Garage Waiting Room at the end of the story are places of dialogue and are possibilities for shared ideas and action.

Tense

With some thought about how to write the past and present, I looked at other examples of structuring time and memory, but also language. Many novels begin with a problem in the present time of the story and return to a time in the past when the chronological story began, possibly an explanation of how the character ended up in their current predicament. To choose the tenses for my story I researched how others' used them in fiction. For example, *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides (present tense and the past is told as a story, by the character in the past tense),[209] or *The Glutton* by A.K. Blakemore (present and past are both told in present tense),[210] *Lucy Barton* mentioned previously is present (and briefly present tense at the end) but mostly a story of the past told in the past tense. For my novel I decided to keep the problems and action of the present in present tense. When the characters are recalling (and this is not necessarily always chronological) although the passages are separate they are memories, revealing how the characters arrived in the situation they find themselves in now. These sections are written in the past tense. In Part

[209] Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex (*Bloomsbury, 2023)
[210] A.K Blakemore, *The Glutton* (Granta, 2023)

Four, when the scenes shift between perspective, the characters are immersed in their restoring relationship and are more ‘present’.

On Writing and Life

The form of this novel developed further after these considerations of point of view, time and plot. But the initial work began as stories and scenes. My goal was to write a full-length novel. The development of Ida’s story went through several stages before the final structure emerged. One reason for this that I was avoiding writing a traditional novel; it felt like an impossible task.

The development of the character Ida Shakespeer and the other characters in this novel began with autobiographical and auto-fictionalised episodes and vignettes, inspired by my experiences working in a school in Clacton, or living as a single parent. There are also stories of memories of my childhood in Southend, which form part of the memories of the characters. For example, Ida’s experience in the factory, *Leaving,* is a story written from my experience working at the Trebor factory in Colchester in the summers of my youth and explores themes of power and inequality at work. That Ida is a huge David Essex fan is introduced in this story. This was influenced by a schoolwork colleague who plastered the cupboards and cloakrooms of our school with David Essex posters. As well as the characters, themes developed including the precariousness of work for the vulnerable, but also the value of humour, friendship and community. In the passage below, Ida is being reprimanded by a younger manager who has held a grudge against her since she was Ida’s trainee.

> ‘I have to give you a formal and final warning.’
> ‘Why?’
> ‘Because here, in your records, it says that you’ve had a warning before.’
> ‘When?’
> ‘1979, when you were warned several times about the new blue plaster rule and you failed to observe it. Also, there’s something here, open-ended, about a dubious attitude to management, overheard, when there was a factory closure in 1985.’

> ‘But that was 15 years ago. That’s when you first started.’
> ‘I know,’ Rhona smiles. ‘I’m sorry, I have to follow the rules. And, like I said we’re looking for people to go voluntarily anyway. Why don’t you make that choice, because you don’t really want to leave under a black cloud do you Ida? I mean you’ll be needing to find another job, and you’ll need a good *reference*…’[211]

So begins the precariousness of Ida’s working life. Other initial stories included episodes in the novel that I originally conceived as stand-alone short stories and named ‘The Animal Team’ and ‘The Washing Machine Man’. My concern in these stories was to show the desperation I had felt during my time as a single parent, when things break, when you’re doing it all, and it seemed like the men that enter your home make a judgement about what they can get away with. This story represents that aloneness, a lack of power in everyday situations, influenced by firstly gender, and secondly the desperation experienced without a stable income or network and knowledge of those that will help. In this extract from *The Animal Team,* the men don’t care, are doing as little as they can get away with and make comments that make the situation worse. Ida at this point is still trusting, of experts, of her son-in-law, but this changes throughout this story.

> But Friday it is, and they come, in their van. The Animal Team. One beams over a rotund belly and a shiny bald head; the other, leaning over him, yellow-skinned and wrinkled, remains solemn. She takes them into her kitchen, shows them her traps, the blue poison she left in the place the pests had discovered her potatoes.
> ‘Not much we can do,’ he said. ‘We’ll put down more poison, but looks like you’ve already done the right thing,’ tapping one of the plastic traps she’d put down with the side of his trainer, noticing the wedge of black hair caught in the lock. ‘Must be bigguns,’ he laughs. ‘To get away from that.’[212]

Other stories came from prompts, including the photography of Essex-based artist Polly Alderton. *In the Bin* and *The New Shoes* (see figures 5 & 6) were written from her images. *The New Shoes* is about the freedom of childhood, along with certain restraints Emily puts on herself including trying to take care of the new shoes.

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[211] Emma Kittle-Pey, *Ida Shakespeer,* 49.
[212] Emma Kittle-Pey, *Ida Shakespeer,* 16.

In the Bin allowed me to show what I wanted to express about not getting things right, not knowing the rules. Like stories such as *Bluebeard* or Atwood's more contemporary response 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1987),[213] it hints at not be quite sure about the new world the character has entered, or, for example, the expectations of marriage, or even who her husband really is. Emily follows her child's lead and gets what she is supposed to be doing - parenting in a certain way - so wrong. From this I built a story around the idea that ways of being, rituals, gender roles, particularly after having children, are dictated, copied, and not necessarily natural or known.

> 'Mummy!!!'
> 'What are you doing in there?'
> 'Waiting to surprise daddy!'
> And her heart skipped a little beat as she wondered, and she thought, this is okay, it's a new bin after all, I think it will be fine. She peered up at the clock and said, 'He'll be back soon, not much longer.'…
> 'Where's the boy?' he said. 'Where is he? Where's my little soldier?' She saw his tiny finger poke from the bin and she lowered her eyes to show Luke. He followed her gaze.
> 'What? What the hell? What, hell? What are you doing in there?' He ripped up the lid, catching a hair, she gasped as Jack screeched.[214]

The writing of these scenes directly influenced the development of characters, themes and final story. I still had a problem with creating a work of length. And it wasn't just that I didn't know how to do it, it was that my working and family life as a single parent, would not allow the time required to write something at length. This is because to write something of length and depth it is necessary to remain within it. To keep leaving and coming back means remembering, rethinking, starting again. So reading short fiction and writing it fit with a busy working life.

Other writers have acknowledged the impact of working lives on artists work. For example, in *Age, Race, Sex and Class*, Audre Lorde writes:

> …even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which

[213] Margaret Atwood. 'Bluebeard's Egg' in *Bluebeard's Egg*. Virago Press, 1988.
[214] Emma Kittle-Pey, *Ida Shakespeer*, 121-122.

> requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper.
>
> Over the last few years, writing a novel on tight finances, I came to appreciate the enormous differences in the material demands between poetry and prose. As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women. A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time. The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose.[215]

The authors and feminist theorists discussed in the previous chapters have highlighted the impact of women's lives on the form of their writing. Lorde refers to the repetition of gendered roles, continued practical considerations of work, domestic tasks, childcare or the care of the elderly have arguably also affected the narrative and literary forms that women create. On writing the play *My Mother Said I Never Should*, Charlotte Keatley wrote:

> I think most women are taught a different emotional idea of time to men. Firstly, time is always running out for women; there is aways so much to do, women seem to spend so much time looking after other people – often at the expense of themselves. Secondly, a woman's internal clock is ticking throughout her life until she can no longer bear a child. A woman may be able to make time her own before she has a child, but afterwards, time will never be entirely her own. So I think the way I structure the play – juxtaposing different times to create urgency or dramatic tension – comes from my own experience of everyday life.[216]

In her novel the *Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver similarly raises form but also content when the mother character, Oleanna, states:

> Conquest and liberation and democracy and divorce are words that mean squat, basically, when you have hungry children and clothes to get out on the line and it looks like rain…For women like me, it seems, it's not ours to take charge of beginnings and endings. Not the marriage proposal, the summit

[215] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex", 282.
[216] Charlotte Keatley, *My Mother Said I Never Should*, (Methuen Publishing, 2006), xxxv.

> conquered, the first shot fired, not the last one either…Let men write those stories. I can't. I only know the middle ground where we live our lives. We whistle while Rome burns, or we scrub the floor, depending.[217]

So as I experienced and discovered in my own life, not only can women's lives impact content but also form and choices of structure. In the essay 'Shakespeare's Sisters', Rachel Cusk asks if we can identify something that could be called 'women's writing' in the twenty first century.[218] Cusk states that the Brontës never had a room of their own, they worked from a shared kitchen table. They wrote domestic fiction because they were confined mostly to the home, without rooms of their own. She argues feminism in the 21st century has once again diminished and reduced the sharing of the particularity of women's lives, as women appear to be equal and able to speak in a man's world. If they act in a way that fits in a man's world (a book on war by a woman will be lauded, not one on childcare), the silence of the traditional female roles that prevail becomes greater. Female experiences, of the eternal and unvarying, domesticity and motherhood and family life, or 'the book of repetition' are quashed by both men and writing women (here we might be consider her own vilification for honest and raw writing of her life of motherhood in the book, *A Life's Work, On Becoming a Mother* (2009)). Cusk's argument is a call for writing women's lives as they are. Like Penelope Lively's *Family Album* discussed in Chapter One, the representation of domestic lives impacts both content and form in writing, but it is the representation of those lives, the content of the work that is key for Cusk. She cites Virginia Woolf, 'who conceded that a woman writer might have to break everything – the sentence, the sequence, the novel form itself – to create her own literature.'[219] Woolf had considered too the link between women's lives and their work, and 'far from impeding their writing it might actually be necessary to it…' for …'It is a requirement of art that the artist is unified with his or her own material.'[220] She also notes that Woolf guesses that a 'female' literature will be shorter, more fragmentary, interrupted, 'for interruptions there will always be.'

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[217] Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (Faber and Faber, 1999), 435-6.
[218] Rachel Cusk, 'Shakespeare's Sisters' in *Coventry* (Faber & Faber Ltd, 2019), 163.
[219] Cusk, 173.
[220] Cusk, 173.

An example of this message and representation in fiction can be found in the writing of Helen Simpson. *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life* (2001) is a collection of stories about motherhood and the hectic day-to-day whirlpool of women's lives. A continued discrimination against the mother role/older women is acutely described the short story *Lentils and Lilies*. In this story Jade Beaumont, teen literature student, contemplates:

> She would never be like her mother, making rotas and lists and endless arrangements, lost forever in a forest of twitching detail with her tense talk of juggling and her self-importance about her precious job and her joyless 'running the family'.[221]

And while she does so she comes across a working-class mother grappling with a child with a lentil up her nose, and a forgotten baby in the car. Jade, 'did not want to be implicated in the flabby womany-ness of proceedings and stared crossly at this overweight figure ahead of her, ludicrously top-heavy in its bulky stained sweatshirt and sagging leggings.' Closer up Jade observes, 'the graceless way her heels stuck out from the backs of her sandals like hunks of Parmesan…'[222] Later she notices:

> She seemed unable to think beyond the next few minutes or to formulate a plan of action, as though in a terminal state of exhaustion. Jade felt obscurely resentful. If she ever found herself in this sort of situation… Well, he would be responsible for half the childcare and half the housework. At least.[223]

This disorganised mother contrasts with Jade's own professional working mother, who plans everything. Of course, either way, the mother cannot win. In showing this separation from what mothers end up doing, and what daughters

[221] Helen Simpson, 'Lentils and Lilies', in *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*, Helen Simpson (Vintage, 2001), 3.
[222] Simpson, 'Lentils and Lilies', 7.
[223] Simpson, 'Lentils and Lilies', 8.

perceive, Simpson sends a warning, using the daughter's point of view. We see and know what she does not.

My own ability to be able to see and represent the older mother's point of view has developed along with the amount of time it has taken me to develop a work of length. So in the time it has taken, as Lively comments, I am now the age of my older female character. Time and life have directly impacted on the content and form of this work. I explored ways to use my short episodes and vignettes and work them into the longer piece. Aware of the definitions of the traditional novel (Aristotle's unity of action, Jon Gardner's dream that cannot be shattered), I was also looking at women's writing, contemporary works of length and novel forms. I was particularly interested in the idea that form could be fragmentary, collaged or presented as a story cycle, as a disruption of traditional novel forms. In discussions of the short story cycle, traditionally episodic stories often connected by character or place, there is some debate concerning those unified by theme, or a crossover in categorisation between cycles and novels (Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (2011), Alice Munro's *The Beggar Maid* (2004), Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982) or Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From The Goon Squad* (2010) are described as a novels or short story cycles). This is because the thematic linking of stories can be novelistic (Kundera 1988[224]). To answer the question, what is this really about? Is further directed to the mind of the reader, like the challenges of a complex plot. Jennifer J Smith states:

> The cycle is particularly apt for rendering what Paul March Russell calls the 'historical mess of lived experience' (2009: 111), which is why the genre proliferates in moments of communal or national change, such as industrialisation, war, or decolonisation. In these contexts, cycles challenge the 'authenticity of historical narrative' (March-Russell 2009: 115) by embracing multiple points of view, non-linear chronologies, as well as complex kinship structures and communal affiliations.[225]

She argues that while story cycles of the nineteenth century interrogated the meaning of industrialisation and the interplay of community and the individual, in the

[224] Milan Kundera, 'Dialogue on the art of Composition' in *The Art of the Novel* trans. Linda Asher (Faber and Faber Ltd, 1988), 75.
[225] Jennifer J. Smith, Chap 1. Introduction: Forming Provisional Identities in *The American Short Story Cycle*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 5.

early twentieth century Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner were hailed as utterly original inventors of the genre, 'in an era that held Ezra Pound's injunction to 'make it new' as sacrosanct of a modernist commitment to innovation, genre promises one such avenue for invention.'[226] From the mid twentieth century until today it has been a heterogeneous genre. She explains that Elke D'hoker looks to international scholarship, which often treats the cycle as part of much larger shifts in narrative style, as presenting Anglo-American criticism (dominated by formal and reader-oriented approaches) with a 'potentially liberating shift away from problems of definition, terminology and taxonomy' (2013: 156).[227] Smith's own definition 'broadens the scope of the genre by treating volumes that others call sketchbooks, novels, collections, composite novels, and short story sequences, similar to histories of the novel that examine the picaresque, the bildungsroman, the gothic, and even the anti-novel.'[228] It is what they do, over categorisation, that she is concerned with. Even so, she argues that the short story cycle is the best descriptor for a genre with the short story as its formative element.

While key themes and meaning developed I wanted to find the story of my character's life, why it was important to tell her story and the external influences on her life, and I thought I might later show this through episodic stories in a cycle. I thought I would work on form after content. But the only way I could write her story was to write it fully, with a kind of unity of action, so form and content appeared while I was searching for a story and a more traditional novel form developed.

I found other useful discussions of novel construction, for example the first novel of writer and translator Lydia Davis, *The End of the Story* (1995) which included fragments and short stories previously written. In the novel Davis explores gender politics, a relationship between a middle-aged woman and a younger man that has ended, and she, the narrator, is looking backwards to understand what happened. The spatial structuring is not a linear series of events; memories and recollections move around the timescale as a representation of the character's thoughts. Or commenting on her development as a novelist, in *Manifesto*, Bernadine Evaristo discusses her a semi-autobiographical verse novel *Lara* (1997) Her original

[226] Jennifer J. Smith, 1.
[227] Jennifer J. Smith, 4.
[228] Jennifer J. Smith, 4.

intention to write prose and not poetry, but 'my language fell into a coma' and she rewrote the whole thing as poetry:[229] 'I'd been writing in a style that wasn't true to my poetic instincts… because I built the story up through small units of poetry, it became more manageable, whereas the sheer number of words in a prose novel had intimidated and overwhelmed me…'[230] In a similar vein Andrew Cowen writes about building a novel from scenes: 'I think in scenes; I build a narrative by scenes…I write passages. Each passage is a scene. And then I move onto the next scene. And I build a narrative like this…'[231]

David Lodge espouses the work of Mikhail M. Bakhtin, and his concept of dialogism (others are the chronotope and the carnivalesque mentioned in previous chapters), which is applicable here to contemporary definitions of novel. He argues that the novel (as opposed to traditional canonical genres of epic or lyric poetry) is in itself polyphonic – the nature of the modern novel encourages conversation or dialogue with a reader, rather than an authorial 'telling'. It includes conflicting and different points of view, as opposed to one, whether it is multivocal, or suggests more than one perspective.[232] Beyond this argument are vital concerns about whose voices are heard, are given a platform or published. Adrianne Rich also commented, 'I am keenly aware that any writer has a certain false and arbitrary power. It is her version after all, that the reader is reading at this moment, while the accounts of others - including the dead - may go untold'.[233]

My novel seeks to create a conversation that includes the older woman, the mother, as part of the challenge mentioned in Chapter One, to combat a cultural decline narrative, and as part of the growing body of novels by older female authors that put the experience and perspective of older women characters, at the centre rather than the margin of their narratives. It's a response to bell hooks 'invitational rhetoric' (mentioned in Chapter Three) which invites and espouses equality of speech and voice, and taking action in the world in order to change it. It is a comment on Rachel Cusk's contemporary challenge to write women's lives as they

[229] Bernadine Evaristo, *Manifesto* (Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, 2021), 124.
[230] Evaristo, *Manifesto*, 124-127.
[231] Linda Anderson and Derek Neale, 'The Story and The Reader', in *Writing Fiction* (Routledge, 2009), 180.
[232] David Lodge, *After Bakhtin* (Routledge, 1990), 90.
[233] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, xviii.

are, and Virginia Woolf's statement: 'It is a requirement of art that the artist is unified with his or her own material.'[234]

Ida Shakespeer is a multivocal novel, representing the voices of an older mother and adult daughter and considering themes such as matrophobia. The form of the book is based on this relationship: the distance between them and the reconciliation is represented through isolated and sometimes fractional stories of misunderstanding, and later joint dialogue and different modes of story-telling including using a shifting third person or omniscient point of view. Class, gender and age are represented with close attention to intergenerational mother-daughter relationships, and the repetition of women's lives and roles. I have paid attention to the particularities of a coastal location, and the social structures, dualities and cultural stereotypes impacting the everyday life of these Essex women.

[234] Cusk, 173.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, *Ida Shakespeer* concerns the elevation of the marginalised: in this case, a marginalised character - female, older, single mother and grandmother, a blue-collar worker - existing in a marginalised and frequently mocked location - a somewhat impoverished coastal town of Essex. But if Ida is an Essex stereotype, she is a stereotype, like the others, that my novel aims to deconstruct and question. Essex as a backdrop to fiction has received little attention, and so my novel's originality lies in its contribution to the slender field of fictional treatments of Essex and its people. Like Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Clamber' or *Wise Children*, it balances and juxtaposes dichotomies of ideas, social dualities, as well as place – the conservative and the legitimate against the burlesque, or the carnivalesque. In the same way that Grayson Perry or Tracey Emin's working-class art challenged convention and yet is now located in places of 'high culture', *Ida Shakespeer* attempts to show political ideas in conversation.

In my creative writing, I have focused on working women in coastal communities, on the social and economic factors that influence their lives. More broadly, I have situated the novel within a wider Essex landscape and ultimately what has too frequently been a negative perception of a county. This negativity has had classist undertones (Essex is associated with the exodus of working-class families from the East End of London) and overtly misogynist overtones (the 'Essex girl' as shorthand for a promiscuous, unintelligent and materialistic female). This project has taken these stereotypes head-on and sought to use fiction to combat and destroy them. I locate my novel's milieu within Britishness, and like Angela Carter or Grayson Perry, attempt to make my own statement about multiplicities of the UK today.

For Ida Shakespeer, living in a seaside town (cushioned between towns of both wealth and poverty), there are differences between political thought that she encounters. But where Grayson Perry's heroine, the Essex Everywoman Julie Cope,

travels from individualism to a communitarian existence in Wrabness, Ida stays put in her hometown. Within the challenges of her locale, eventually she understands that it is society and not herself that is the issue. Julie Cope finds herself and then true love; Tracey Emin is dancing when she leaves town; Dora Chance reminds us what a joy it is to dance and sing. Ida Shakespeer is a romantic; she adores a star who once came from traveller roots himself. William Leach is a middle-class architect with sensibilities concerning a life he witnessed and left behind. A paternity issue is hinted at, but this is not resolved. Ida is not interested in the end. It doesn't matter who Emily's father is; theirs is a feminist family or community romance, he isn't important to their story now. Essentially, she has a sense of her place: the community in which she resides, and which has provided a safety net during the challenges she has had to overcome.

The idea of carnival, of a challenge to social norms or a release from work and perceived ideas about how life ordinarily is, runs throughout *Ida Shakespeer*: whether it is Ida as a character herself, or the places the people go to dance and sing: the salmon pink dome, the David Essex concerts, Essex House or a party on the beach in the location of a newly designed community fun palace. This spirit of enjoyment, party and release may be criticised by some, but celebrated by those who know the value of challenging the rules and socially constructed 'legitimacy'. Like Dora Chance though, we know that permanent carnival in the end can be as damaging as restriction, but that there are times when it may be the catalyst for paradigmatic shifts in thinking.

Themes of course have an impact on form; form can represent and be intrinsically connected to different political ideas. For example, Anne Enright's choice of style in the voice of character, alternating between I and she, is an example of how writers of contemporary fiction are changing forms to express lives and relationships as closely as they can in whatever form and whichever point of view that takes. For the books I selected this means the authentic inclusion of the older woman's voice, and the breaking of a previously stereotypical mother-daughter plot, told from the daughter's perspective. My project, both creatively and critically, explored matrophobia and has examined how fiction can all too often reinforce intergenerational animus between daughters and mothers; or, alternatively, may offer inclusion and mediation between intergenerational points of view, and may

potentially heal the rift caused by feminism's tendency to privilege the daughter's point of view over the mother's. This interest in the depiction of the older woman's point of view - who may or may not be a literal mother but is a mother in terms of her generational relationship to young women – has been frequently at the heart of the plot and characterisation of *Ida Shakespeer,* and I have contextualised it within a survey of relevant contemporary women's fiction.

The representation of neglected voices and the significance of place brings us to the matter of dialect. Despite misgivings about the over-use of dialect transcribed onto the page – a dilemma which I examine in my reflective commentary - Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* provided another example of using form and language to challenge traditional narratives by using multiple focalisers, modes of narration and fragmentary styles of representing working class characters and their words and worlds. I used these contemporary novels in considering focalisation, language and form of *Ida Shakespeer.*

It was also the aim of this work to explore the shapes of maternal subjectivity, and study the articulation of specifically maternal voices, as Rich called for in the 1970s, and to express them in fiction myself. I found the call to share the responsibilities and repetition of women's lives from contemporary writers like Rachel Cusk compelling. It is the same message and warning from writers such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde in the 1970s or Virginia Woolf in the 1920s. The representation of intergenerational and matrilinear perspectives in the work of artists including the independent subjectivity of the older mother, such as *Girl Woman Other*, or *The Wren, The Wren* show this repetition of roles or experiences (such as family responsibilities, domesticity and childcare). These novels provide an opening to a historical line of shared experience, in a sense like the #metoo movement, where women shared their stories of misogyny, sexual harassment and abuse. The political invitation to share stories, or 'invitational rhetoric' leads to changing form in fiction, and can include multiple voices, fractional structures, and the aim for a more authentic representation of our lives through 'women's writing' in whatever form that takes.

I acknowledged that the authentic older lives represented in the literature discussed were written by women old enough now to have attained a mastery of

their arts, and at the same time may have experienced a form of *reifungsroman* themselves. And yet these women were always unconventional. They were always challenging the male dominated world of the arts: Atwood, Emin, Carter, Smith, Davis and Cusk herself. It is interesting to note how their art or writing changed over time: in maturity Emin creates a statue of *The Mother* and wonders if she really should have been so confessional so young, Carter creates novels that appeal to a more mainstream audience, Davis' form becomes more brief and more confidently experimental.

I have worked in a school with a predominantly female staff (and a male caretaker). The nature of some of the work leaves conscientious women concerned about their own performance when the financial implications of political decisions mean restructuring and redundancy looms. The only way that the women can survive is to share the knowledge of their experiences, and they begin to recognise that it's not them as individuals, but something much bigger than themselves. In that process friendships become strong. I wanted some sense of this idea that without communal knowledge, life can be much harder, and often those in power would prefer it to stay that way. Through their mutual support and friendship, the women in this book all find their own ways to navigate life and come out on top. Ida is the Essex fan that learns DIY and becomes the caretaker. Her friends and colleagues all have their own stories as yet unwritten here: one trains to be a teacher, another walks Essex, a third thrives in her new role as school cook. But what these women also do, is share their tales with honesty, humour, and confidence, while the younger women watch and begin to join in themselves. While the work situations initially show a degree of uncertainty to Ida's life, the women she works with become a community that help her character develop and who share in the celebrations when David Essex visits their seaside resort. Here I aimed to show the value of community in uncertainty (also reflected in novels such as Elizabeth Strout's *Amy and Isabelle* (2011) or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which are concerned with more difficult circumstances). As she becomes more content herself, more capable, she also becomes more compassionate – including towards animals – seen in the instances of the dead birds at the beginning and the care for the gull and bats at the end.

In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner claims that 'there are no rules for real fiction, any more than there are rules for serious visual art or musical composition,' and that 'Art relies on feeling, intuition, taste… It is feeling that tells the abstract painter to put his yellow here and there… that gives the writer the rhythm of his sentences, the pattern of rise and fall in his episodes, the proportions of alternating elements, so that dialogue goes on only so long before a shift to description or narrative summary or some physical action.'[235] But he also describes the essential process of mastery, of developing the art or craft of writing to feel or become intuitive: 'knowledge, drawn from long practise about what will work and what will not.'[236]

The writing women I have discussed here and have been influenced by, are all masters of their arts, able to express themselves as artists, with experience, to move into new and more complex forms of representing human existence, power struggles, relationships and the reality of women's lives, including authentically inserting the voice of the older woman/mother into the dialogue, as I have done with Ida Shakespeer. The craft of my own writing continues to develop, influenced by these experienced writers.

Tim Burrows describes his own experience thus: 'hard as I tried to pin Essex's story down, it somehow always slipped away…'[237] This creative-critical project rejects the possibility of ever pinning down this diverse place and its people, but instead seeks to hold up to the light for readers a place and its people little celebrated thus far in the contemporary English novel: a marginalised Essex coastal location and an often ignored or stereotyped character – the working-class, single, older mother or grandmother and, importantly, her relationship with her daughter and the community in which they belong.

[235] John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (Vintage Books, 1991), 7-8.
[236] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, 9.
[237] Tim Burrows, *The Invention of Essex* (Profile Books, 2023), 80-81.

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Figures

Figures 1 & 2 A House for Essex, Wrabness

Figure 3 A House for Essex, Wrabness tiles

Figure 4 The Fifth Dimension Garvin. Source: Keith and Hazel Albarn, reproduced with permission

Figures 5 & 6 Source: Polly Alderton, reproduced with permission