# Single Motherhood as a Site for Feminist Reimagination in Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* and 'Other People's Children'

**JANE SCERRI**
**UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY**

## Introduction: Helen Garner: Breaking Down Old Structures …

Historically Australian single mothers were vilified as 'fallen' and considered a 'polluting influence' and 'a danger to [their] child[ren]' (Swain 10). Contemporarily, as Emily Wolfinger (2016) observes, the dominant critique of single mothers has shifted from concerns about their morality to their ability to provide economically for their children, suggesting that contemporary conservatism prioritises the financial over the social. Garner's single mothers in *Monkey Grip* (1977) and 'Other People's Children' (1980) existed in a socially experimental milieu; one that denounced historical vilification and preceded the contemporary negative rhetoric of neoliberalism which characterises single mothers as economically irresponsible, non-working and a burden on society. This milieu, viewed retrospectively, provides a fertile space in which to reimagine and reframe contemporary single motherhood, especially if contemporary single mothers are to be again judged according to outdated 'good' mother myths[1] reinforced by economic neoliberalism. In this way, a re-examination of Garner's depiction of single motherhood, with its focus on domestic spaces and female concerns might reorient modern single mothers to a second-wave feminist style presumption of their 'natural' equal rights as women and mothers; bearing in mind that economic constraints, a major factor when contending agency, vary across class and time.

I argue that single mothers, by virtue of their decampment from the nuclear family, debunk the myth of the 'good' mother, either by not adopting, or by abandoning, their traditionally othered position within it, and therefore evade at least some of the mythologised discourse by controlling and managing their own space. In this way, single motherhood can take advantage of its liminality and its potential to re-imagine the mother-child relationship, the mother's ongoing sexual/love relationships, and a family model other than a nuclear/normative one. Kirsten Natalier reimagines Nora's single motherhood in *Monkey Grip* in terms of 'social citizenship' which 'recognises the inter-relationship of people's social and material needs' (406) by exploring 'how Nora's life reorients us to women's active and meaningful contributions to social spaces that are separate from and intersect with family and labour markets' (408). Natalier asks if *Monkey Grip* can assist in the 'reimagining of, and advocacy for, single mother's contributions to their communities?' (408). My argument that follows assumes single mothers' rights to social citizenship, as, I contend, Garner does in these works. By teasing out the negotiation of parental responsibility, maternal and erotic desire, I draw attention to Garner's single mothers' assumption of agency, sense of selfhood, right to an ongoing love, social and creative life—both with and without their children—as they navigate the social and political in non-normative, collective households.

Literary depictions of single motherhood have steadily increased since the 1970s, enhancing the depth and breadth of the representation of single mothers' lived experiences; an enrichment that coincides with the inclusion of women's writing into the Australian literary canon, especially since the early 1980s. Not only was Garner one of the first novelists—followed by

Elizabeth Jolley in the late 1980s—to detail single motherhood in her fiction but *Monkey Grip*, together with Kate Jennings's collection of poetry, *Mother I'm Rooted*, were retrospectively lauded as the first of the second-wave feminist fictions (Simic 141).[2] In *Helen Garner* (1996) Kerryn Goldsworthy notes that Garner was more inclined to acknowledge earlier feminists for making it possible for her to 'write books at all' and details her self-conscious grappling with the precepts of feminism: 'I still have trouble even now with the thought that I'm not as worthy as a man ... It's a kind of female cringe that we recognised in ourselves when feminism gave us a way of looking at ourselves usefully' (22).

To have a child or not; to control the number of children one has; to have a child 'alone' (as a single mother) or to choose single motherhood when a partnered relationship no longer 'works'—historically speaking—are still relatively modern choices for women. Less discussed is a mother's ongoing erotic desire once she has had a child or children. The assumption that her needs have been met by having a child ignores her ongoing agency and choice in terms of her sexuality by conflating maternal and erotic desire, when in fact the two desires are often at odds. Not so in Garner's work, which explores 'the degree to which romantic love is constituted by female desire, the degree to which it is perceived as a cultural construct; and the degree to which by definition, it limits feminine agency' (Goldsworthy 30). The fact that Garner's single mother protagonists have children does not seriously impede their sexual desire or agency. Rather, through their contemplations of love, single parenting and personal relationships in non-nuclear family households they contest the personal as political, often within the context of the limitations and conversely—liberations—of single motherhood. In this way Garner, through her realistic single mother characters, Nora and Ruth, and surrogate single mother Scotty, treats single motherhood as 'natural,' ruminating on aspects of it, *but not* its existence.

While Garner does not shy away from depicting women as free to act upon their sexual desires outside the constraints of monogamy and the patriarchal family, nor does she shy away from depicting the limitations and frustrations that acting on desire (having children) can entail. A conflict that Goldsworthy delineates as being 'on a direct collision course with the thing in which it so often results, the family—an inescapable patriarchal institution' (29). This conflict, essentially whether to become a mother or not, was why so many early feminists, de Beauvoir in particular, considered childbirth a trap for women.

Although representations of single motherhood in Australian literature are steadily increasing, few were published before the 1970s. An early example is Catherine Edmonds's *Caddie, A Sydney Barmaid* (1953). Perhaps the most acclaimed work published after Garner's is Elizabeth Jolley's *Cabin Fever* trilogy (1989–93) which is set across four decades from the forties in Britain to the eighties in Australia and details the life of Vera, an 'unmarried' young nurse who has two daughters to two different, older men. Some major works that depict single mothers since Garner's include *The Sugar Mother* (Jolley 1988), *Camille's Bread* (Lohrey 1995), Debra Robertson's *Careless* (2006), Julia Leigh's *Disquiet* (2008), Carrie Tiffany's *Mateship of Birds* (2012) and Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby* (2013).

This analysis of single motherhood in Garner's early fiction concentrates on the ongoing desire and subjectivity of the single mother and the way Garner delineates what in retrospect, can be described as a reimagining of the patriarchal nuclear family, albeit one that was largely taken up by a sub-section of mainly young and middle-class inner-city types. In *Monkey Grip* (1977) and 'Other People's Children' (1980) single motherhood is just one more permutation of the social constructs within collective households in which 'breaking down old structures' ('Other People's Children' 80)—a preoccupation for both the women and the men—infers that the

disassembly of monogamy, and by extension, patriarchy, is a given. Though within these households definitions of masculinity and femininity are still contested by both sexes, it is done more often by Garner's women.

Much of the communal debate in these works is about how to break down old structures and how well—or not—various households and householders within them take up the collective challenge. This challenge prioritised the reimagination of social and political life by rejecting traditional nuclear family models and sharing everything—food, cleaning, caring for children, meals, drugs, music, even money. The reimagination was often depicted as idealistic, fun and optimistic. Viewed more negatively, householders could be petty, critical and judgemental of each other. Concurrent with the political and social concerns epitomised by 'breaking down old structures' was a growing interest in self-sufficiency, contextualised by the hippy movement, the growing anti-nuclear movement, and various styles of Eastern philosophy. This helped define the counterculture and provided new ammunition with which to challenge established patriarchal norms, such as what a family should look like.

As well as prioritising their social lives which centred around music venues, pubs and theatres, within the households there was an emphasis on thriftiness and creativity. The almost cultish enthusiasm on how *best* to live collectively is hilariously and bitchily expressed in 'Other People's Children' when schoolteacher and surrogate mother to Ruth's children, Scotty, sanctimoniously declares to Madigan, a musician who is visiting from 'south of the river,' that the test of a collective household is 'whether (or not) you get looked after when you are sick' (110). Soon after this proclamation Scotty and collective housemate, Alex, drive Madigan home and in the car as they 'fly [back] over' to the north side Alex asserts that the blokes on the south side 'couldn't even get a market roster going' and 'sit up at the table like Lord Muck while the women run round waiting on them' (111), suggesting that feminism is both hierarchical and class dependant. Even more horrifying for Alex is that in this particular ideologically-backward-south-of-the-river household the mother didn't even go out at night!

In commenting on the disassembling of patriarchy, this novella also challenged Australian sexist culture, not in an overtly political way, but more through the way the characters address and interpret the counterculture. Housemate Alex, for example, suggests, after Scotty has teased him for becoming a 'lackey of the feminists,' that it was time she got out of Fitzroy because '[n]othing [had] changed, in the outside world' (111). It is not specified whether Garner's early works were set in the Whitlam Labor or Fraser Liberal government eras, but the ennui expressed by many of the characters, which hints that the good times—the peak of change for the better, feminism and rebelliousness—have already passed, suggests that they are at least midway between the two. However, looking back it is hard to not attribute a certain naivety to the era, especially with regard to sexual liberation, and Garner's characters' adamant belief that they were 'breaking down old structures.' This is the most relevant aspect of these works to my discussion of single mothers, for while Garner's single mothers were supported (ideologically) and often encouraged to 'have a life'—to go out at night for example—while other householders took care of their children, as extolled by Alex above, it was ultimately the mothers (or surrogate mother, Scotty) who were left 'holding the baby.' This meant that sexual liberation and 'breaking down old structures' tended to be more advantageous for men, both sexually and in terms of not being held responsible for their own or other people's children, whether they considered themselves patriarchal or not. On balance, however, it is important to note that this period marks an era in which the care of children and how households were run was up for discussion, compared to previous eras in which the assumption was that the care of children automatically fell to the 'actual' mother.

In this way there is as much to be said in this novella about deconstructing patriarchy as there is about the effects of addictive love, the monogamy question, female camaraderie, and the minutiae of a lifestyle pursued by aspiring artists and intellectuals who were at liberty to experiment socially and sexually. This is a point that Garner homes in on in her often-ironic attention to class. Examples include the abovementioned references to *types* of collective householders on either side of the Yarra; as well as how single mother, Ruth, romanticises the ethics, language and lack of aspirations of her working class boyfriend, Dennis; the fact that many of the characters—especially the men—are members of socialist or communist political groups and are vehemently anti-capitalist and anti-individualist; and that Scotty feels so guilty about earning more money than her housemates, especially single mother Ruth, that she offers to collectivise the household income.

The fact that Garner was on the Supporting Mothers' Benefit while writing *Monkey Grip*, which she referred to as 'a kind of grant' (Goldsworthy 12), highlights the changing state of play for single mothers in Australia. That Garner was quick to use this new resource, described as an 'everyday revolution' (Simic 141) to produce such a commercially successful 'feminist fiction,' as it was retrospectively lauded, is equally striking. In writing *Monkey Grip* Garner proved that with a little time, a modest income and not *even* a room of one's own (she wrote at the local library), a single woman and a mother, at a time when Australian women were rarely even being published, could write about the domestic and the private as political and command a massive readership. It was to McPhee Gribble's independent publishing group, founded in 1975 and located in a terrace in Carlton, where Garner also lived at the time, that she delivered her draft manuscript in two folders. In discussion with Jennifer Ellison, Garner claimed that: 'if she'd had to take *Monkey Grip* to a male publishing company, either it would have been thrown out immediately as being too emotional' or [she] would have had to 'hack at it and change it in lots of ways' (144).

Forty-two years ago Peter Corris criticised *Monkey Grip*, claiming Garner had 'published her private journal rather than written a novel' (12), to which, years later, Garner responded, 'I did publish my diary. That's exactly what I did. I left out what I thought were the boring bits, wrote bridging passages, and changed all the names' (Daylight 18). In the same way that Garner was criticised for using her own, and particularly her friends' 'real' lives as material she should also have been applauded for her ability to so quickly transcribe onto the page what was emerging as a reimagined way of life for so many. The collective households that Garner went on to detail depicted sites in and from which single mothers could reimagine their love and sex lives, supported by fellow householders and, if necessary, distanced from the fathers of their children. Garner *did* eventually publish her notorious diaries titled the *Yellow Notebook Diaries Volume One 1978–1987*. Reflecting in ten chapters—one for each year between 1978 and 1987—on the decade following the publication of *Monkey Grip*, it was not, however, published until decades later in 2019. Considering that *Monkey Grip* made such a shrewd assessment of the sexual and social mores of the '70s as, 'I blushed in shame for us women whose guns are too big these days, who learned ten years ago to conduct great sexual campaigns with permanency in mind, while today it is a matter of skirmishes, fast and deft' (Garner 13), *and* captured the new-found freedom of single mothers, it begs the question—why ever should she not have published her diaries? Garner has always been an astute reporter on the Australian zeitgeist, and according to the above passage, it seems that even as early as 1977 she felt that the sexual agency feminism aspired to was on the wane. Yet she also famously credits feminism and the 'whole ethos of collective households' with getting her 'out of a big mess at a certain point in [her] life' (Simic 149), and acknowledges that it was 'the advent of women's liberation that gave her the confidence to start writing in the first place' (Simic 159). Garner's attention to

authenticity and the fact that her lived experience is integral to her style of writing—a style often referred to as 'life writing'—is why I consider her depictions of single motherhood 'naturalistic.' And while she abhors the idea of writing *as a feminist* (Simic 159) she is the first to admit that her writing, and her opportunity to write, relied on the gains made by feminism. In this way, Garner's single mother characters who unapologetically get on with the business of life, despite their lamentations (especially Ruth's) embody the feminist sense of becoming, potentiality and reimagination[3] seen in the work of Luce Irigaray, Simone de Beauvoir and Rosi Braidotti.

**Desire, Garner Style**

The fact that Garner's single mother protagonists have children doesn't overly impede their sexual desire or agency, and although they discuss the politics of parenting and the dilemmas of love, sex and relationships, their positionality, behaviour and subjectivity depict an aware, if not a determined, demonstration of the personal as political. Goldsworthy observes:

> [by] illuminating such fault lines in feminist theory—the places where, in actually trying to manage their lives and language, women must choose among conflicting theories and strategies: how to interpret; how (and whether, and what) to utter; how to act. Victim or agent? Separatism or cooperation? (6)

Garner's examination of the fault lines that exist in the 'gap between theory and practice' ('Other People's Children' 53) is as much about the contestation between the theoretical desire for sexual freedom and the 'painful realities of jealousy, competition and rejection' (Goldsworthy 39)—an examination that could also be described as an interrogation of how female desire interacts with current social norms, which in the case of these works is expressly Australian feminism and the dissolution of patriarchy, a patriarchy that Garner signals is on the wane.[4] Single mothers have historically oscillated between victimhood and agency and been forced into 'separation' by being 'Othered,' excluded socially, and thereby denied opportunities and agency. Until recently—and arguably still—many, especially Aboriginal women, have been forced to give up their children for adoption. However, in Garner's collective households, cooperation—at least cooperation as an ideal—becomes the norm, as Garner's female protagonists 'attempt … to make new patterns—to resist the weight of centuries and forge alternative ways of dealing with romantic love, with sex, with domesticity, with other women' (Goldsworthy 30).

Garner's single mothers ruminate on aspects of their single motherhood, but not their right to it—it is very much a given—which is radical when compared with the lack of agency that single mothers had less than a decade earlier. Single mother Ruth, in 'Other People's Children' (1980), which is set post-1973, enjoys starting sentences with '"us deserted wives," and "us single mums," invoking with a sniff and a twisted grin the sisterhood of adversity' (101) but by 1980 can moan about single motherhood with the assurance that her pension cheque will arrive (it was delivered by post then) and her children will not be removed. In this way, single motherhood in Garner's novels is portrayed as an aspect of sexual politics—specifically of the fought-for 'sisterhood'—meaning that Garner's single mothers are neither the victims of historical moral nor modern economic vilification. While their sex and love lives are often a source of frustration, Garner's single mothers express a concrete sense of their subjectivity and their right to sex and love, even if they don't always get what they want. They lament the inequalities that still exist in heterosexual relationships but know—courtesy of the gains of feminism—that their bodies, their choices, and their children are their own. Also, as they are

already mothers and experienced in both the erotic and the maternal aspects of femininity—they are no longer subjected to patriarchal bartering and exchange which Irigaray locates as the source of women's repression: 'Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers … [a] branding that determines their value in sexual commerce' (31), and Braidotti denotes as 'an exchange of women as socio-symbolic merchandise that circulates among men [and] lies at the core of the patriarchal social contract' (199). Rather, Garner's women can concentrate on their sense of self, and who *they* choose, which for the time was also radical, in that women were much more typically depicted as the objects, rather than the subjects of desire. Nora in *Monkey Grip* for example, expends much mental and emotional energy on her complex sex life and fluctuates between being practical, robust and spontaneous, and having sex with several men other than her erstwhile boyfriend Javo in the relatively short narrative space of the novel.

The first is Francis: '… and he talked, as twenty-three-year-olds will, about what love means and where sex fits in and so on. It was years since I'd heard someone going through the basics so painstakingly and seriously' (35). Nora's language is confidential, almost conspiratorial, and we readers easily share her view that Francis is naive and a little tedious, whereas she (and it follows, 'we') are beyond such an elementary discussion on the state of play that existed between women and men at the time. Here, Garner is also representing not only an older woman seducing a younger man but a woman in a lukewarm relationship in which the woman is willing to participate simply for fun and sexual gratification.

Lou is another non-event:

> Lou was going to come and stay with me, but he didn't show up … He walked in at lunchtime when Gracie and I were sitting eating an artichoke. He came straight over and kissed me on the mouth, and hugged me. He said nothing about not coming around the night before. I didn't care at all. There's a warning in there somewhere. (116)

Aside from drawing attention to the often-unreliable nature of the man as a lover, Garner addresses sexual conquest and the power of attraction. This is interesting in that anti-heroine narratives historically tend to be based on marriage plots that pre-suppose steady, breadwinning, patriarchal—typically masculine—men as the ideal conquest. Yet many women anecdotally, and nearly all of Garner's female characters are attracted to 'unreliable' men—often musicians, actors and pseudo-intellectuals who are usually self-absorbed and/or unwilling to commit. For the single mother, 'unreliability' in a male lover might suit her, given her need to juggle her love life with her commitments and children. Nora's wry assessment of desire in the above refrain, her not 'caring,' also homes in on one of the intricacies that many women, including Garner's protagonists, discuss; namely, the power exchange, or lack of it, in relationships.

Monogamy is the other big issue that Garner's householders—again especially the women—have to contend with in what are, in these novels, exclusively heterosexual relationships. In the next quote—in which Nora tentatively asks Bill's sort-of girlfriend, Bonny, if he mentioned sleeping with her after Paddy's party, and if she's alright about it—Garner's Bonny and Nora philosophise about the contingencies of jealousy:

> 'Of *course* it is. It's not a matter of jealousy—not with you, anyway, because I love you. It's just that he's given me the bum's rush.' …

> ‘Why are they like that?’ I said …
> ‘It’s that old thing about “having room to move” she said.
> ‘They’re afraid of being emotionally pressured …you know, the old fears of manipulation, of moral pressure—because of course for centuries women have been the conscience of the world.’ (122–23)

In this instance, Garner’s Bonny alludes to the power of the ‘sisterhood’ to lessen the impact of jealousy: because Bonny *loves* Nora this makes her the *right* kind of woman with whom to share her man. In fact, Bonny is even willing to discuss Bill’s unwillingness to commit to her with Nora, despite the fact that she has just admitted to being one of his recent conquests. Together they lament the status quo of sexual politics, and while liberation and contraception have made ‘free love’ *de rigueur*, the nature of male sexuality still demands that women be the ‘conscience of the world.’ Here, the political overrides the personal, although throughout the novel Nora’s angst more frequently tends to focus on the personal. ‘*Giving it all away*’ (102–03) is one of her repeating refrains—which reflects on both the effects the women’s movement has had on sexual relationships and her private struggle in her relationship with Javo. As befits her age (early 30s), Nora comments on the collision between her sense of self and her addictive love:

> I thought about the patterns I make in my life: loving, loving the wrong person, loving not enough and too much and too long. What’ll I do? How much of myself will be left hanging in tatters when (*if: I don’t want to end it)* I wrench myself away at this time? I have this crazy habit, a habit as damaging as his, of *giving it all away*. (102–03)

More circumspectly, Nora, as narrator, comments on the power struggles that exist in the relationships of others, and again, how female desire and love is managed when the ideal of equality between the sexes dictated that monogamy was out and free love was in. The ‘equality ideal’ was, in part, based on the premise that patriarchy was defunct, but it still worked more in favour of men. Not only did it demand that women ignore or purge themselves of their jealous and possessive feelings for the men they desired, it came on the back of centuries of social conditioning that had dictated marriage and monogamy to be the norm. It is difficult to know how easily the kind of men and women that Garner depicts in these early novels, who had grown up in the ‘50s and ‘60s, adapted to the ‘gap between theory and practice’ (‘Other People’s Children’ 53)—in this case in the sense of not being jealous whilst extolling the desirability of sexual freedom. It is also difficult to consider the ‘new’ non-monogamous ideology in an ungendered way. It is a whole other question as to whether women are ‘innately’ less promiscuous, but given that in the decades before and up until these novels were set many women were still being penalised for promiscuity (single mothers were threatened with having their children removed until as late as the 1970s)[5] it was quite a leap to adopt the principle of free love as a woman, as Angela in *Monkey Grip* articulates:

> Angela wanted from her relationship with Willy something he would not, could not give: something romantic, exclusive, complete: and Willy’s determined constancy in loving both Angela and Paddy, while living with neither, was no less painful to her for being ideologically impeccable. (156)

As Nora waits for Javo, Angela waits for Willy, and while the waiting might be fashionably and ‘ideologically impeccable’ (156), emotionally they are both left wanting. Referring to this rift between the emotional and the theoretical in *Monkey Grip*, Larissa McLean Davies asserts

that when '"endeavouring to make politics material," other "sensory" qualities such as intuition, feeling and perception have been compromised' (65). Davies also argues that the gap is widened when 'individual feeling, perception and desire cannot be accommodated' (65). I, however, consider that it is precisely by delineating the distinctions between theory (feminism), and practice (behaviour), which in this case is sociosexual behaviour, that Garner captures the zeitgeist of how women enacted their desires and conducted their social lives in the period she is portraying. A point of difference that becomes obvious with hindsight is that while these women were partaking in 'free love,' they were doing so based on the premise of equality, which was a false premise, though one that made for feisty discussion and experimentation in the Whitlam era where things were changing and for the better (Whitlam).

Garner, in *Monkey Grip* and other early works, presents women as marooned in their inability to reconcile theory (the politics of free love) with practice (essentially, their feelings). But this makes practical sense in terms of subjectivity, as women's sense of themselves, of their identity as subjects was—and arguably still is—being experimented with, both in life and in fiction. In this way Garner can be seen not only as a pioneer of 'domestic' feminist fiction, but as depicting significant representations of women re-imagining domesticity while simultaneously experimenting with sexual liberation and motherhood. Fictional narratives recognise and help to recreate new identities. As Carla Kaplan states: 'despite the fact that codes and symbols of gender exist within texts, they can be altered' (117). I argue that Garner's novels, in recognising how women challenge the patriarchal status quo, contributed to such alterations, as attested to by the ensuing fall in marriage rates and the increase and acceptability of single mothers in Australian society.

**Ruth's Harness of Gloom … Scotty the Surrogate's Maternal Dilemma**

In 'Other People's Children' Ruth and Scotty are friends who have, until their relationship becomes conflicted, shared everything, most specifically, a home and the care of Ruth's daughter, Laurel. When Ruth retrieves her younger son, Wally, from his father's neglectful care, Scotty also helps care for him. Despite being one of the least agentic of Garner's women Ruth had decided not to 'settle' for her partner, Jim, when she recovered from (what is not actually named as) post-natal depression:

> When Jim woke up it was too late. She didn't love him anymore … She had the other child and breastfed him in a dream; she weaned him and washed the milk off the front of her clothes and lost two stone and sat all day in one of the downstairs rooms reading pamphlets. Now it was her turn to be out all the time ... She said, 'If you're not here to take the kids on the dot of ten tomorrow you won't be seeing them again.' … If there was one thing Ruth understood, it was the power of absence. (70)

Jim's stint at fatherhood doesn't last long, however, and when he gets busted for dope, after allowing his son to become '[sun] burnt to a crust' (73), Ruth resumes caring for Wally. Like Nora in *Monkey Grip*, Ruth assumes her right to the Supporting Mothers' Benefit. When the postman arrives with her cheque, she declares 'Whacko! Pension day' (76). But the similarity between Nora and Ruth stops there. Bernadette Brennan describes Ruth as a single mother weighed down by a 'harness of gloom' (62), which is apt given how quickly she takes umbrage and tends to play the victim. Scotty, on the other hand, is straightforward and agentic, and when it comes to Ruth, can't win a trick. As Ruth is 'scanning the cheque for deductions' Scotty jokes, 'Money for nothing … I should have had a kid after all. Given up teaching' (76). To

which, Ruth snaps 'You call that nothin'? Being a mother in this society?' (76). The narrator then informs the reader that 'Scotty, who didn't like being corrected,' muses 'in her wry voice':

> Hmmm … Just the same. It would have been different for me if I'd had a kid now. It's a different kind of decision these days from what it was before the women's movement, when you had yours. If you had kids before the penny dropped, you're in the clear, aren't you. Proved yourself both ways. (77)

In the passage quoted above Scotty locates the effect that feminism, with its new set of moral obligations, has had on single motherhood. By assuming the freedoms contingent with feminism, Scotty cannot fall back on victimhood and dependency. She is now obliged to make it a political act rather than blundering through as she, albeit somewhat obliquely, infers Ruth does. This passage speaks to both the ignorance of bliss (Ruth's), and the 'weight' or responsibility to feminist correctness young women felt during and just after the second wave of feminism. This was a time when rules were being made up as they went along, when having sex with whoever one felt like was considered a liberation, and when the worst that could happen—with syphilis all but eradicated and AIDS not yet on the horizon—was treatable STIs and perhaps a few broken marriages, or more typically, de facto relationships.

For Scotty, having been inculcated into feminism, her new 'position' means she can no longer 'bullshit' and trade 'fragility' for the 'tainted goodies' of patriarchal compliance. Rather, it is as if when she gazes out to the horizon of freedoms gained, she sees uncharted terrain. We learn very early in the story that Scotty is sensitive to the needs of Ruth's children, especially her daughter, Laurel, who was 'too big to be cuddled' and 'stood around wretchedly in doorways' (73). This 'ideological' conflict between Scotty and Ruth—one of many—comes just after Ruth has fetched Wally from Perth. Despite the fact that Ruth had been 'too numb' to bond with Wally when he was born, upon their re-union they 'took one look at each other and fell in love' (73). As a co-parent in a collective household, Scotty is not afforded the luxury of such unconditional, maternal love, and Ruth drives this home loud and clear. After Ruth states that she is sick of taking handouts, and Scotty suggests setting up a roster to look after her kids so she can get a job, completely reneging on the collective, matriarchal order, she says that 'when it comes to the crunch the only people you can trust with your kids are other people with kids' (78). This is a low point in the narrative in terms of the sisterhood, and one that emphasises Ruth's propensity to don what Brennan describes as a 'harness of gloom.'

Brennan also comments on the fragility of loving other people's children and the collective responsibility of parenting in share houses, and Scotty's sometimes brittle character: 'Scotty embraces that responsibility with Laurel, Ruth's daughter. She has had two abortions and a tubal litigation. She is bossy and short-tempered, but she loves Laurel' (62), in, as Garner writes, 'the tentative way in which we love other people's children, fearful of rejection, even of mockery, loving without rights, thanklessly' ('Other People's Children' 73). After a lengthy conversation with Laurel, in which Scotty reassures her that she is neither fat nor ugly, Scotty candidly states that Wally 'is a shit' (74), to which Laurel explains that Wally doesn't want her to be his sister when there are other kids around and that he's not proud of her. When Scotty insists that *she* is proud of her, Laurel replies, 'But you're not in my *family*' and 'No matter how much you love me' 'you can never be my real mother' (75). The conflict between Ruth as a (real) mother, and Scotty as a 'surrogate' and its unfairness, is the undercurrent that drives this narrative. Scotty's emotional and political investment in the 'alternate family' is contingent on Ruth, and to an extent Laurel's world view, and both have the power to exclude her, despite the fact that of the two women, Scotty is arguably the more maternal. In this way the friendship

that was built on a shared idealism now oscillates between constraints influenced by patriarchal norms (Laurel's social world view), and their own idealistic, transformative model. As the novel ends with Ruth deciding to move out (and take her children), the women's friendship and idealism is proven to be, like feminism, on the wane.

Laurel's attitude to Scotty, whom she loves, shows how children are conflicted by heteronormative values. Laurel is influenced by the heterosocial world outside of the collective household and to an extent upholds, or at least considers, the traditional ideal of 'the family' in her deferring to what is 'real' (75). As Nancy Chodorow explains, '[t]he social organisation of parenting has meant that it is women who represent the non-social—or the confusion of biological and social—and men who unambiguously represent society (81). Clinging to convention is typical for children at certain ages however, and not proof that Laurel would prefer a normative family, but rather that the heterosocial normative family ideal pervades, even in non-normative households. In the next quote Garner's Scotty conflates housework and raising children—specifically other people's—with the disassembly of patriarchy:

> It was a big household. Rosters. Telling life stories. Signs! *When was the last time you saw a man round here with a broom in* his *hand? Revolution begins in the kitchen* ... the kids were everybody's kids. We thought everything we'd theorised about was coming true. Breaking down old structures. ('Other People's Children' 80)

Yet this was not the case a few years earlier when the kids 'were everybody's kids,' as Scotty explains to Alex, as she reminisces about their previous household in which Ruth had started a new women's group.[6] This is another indication in Garner's fiction that by the end of the seventies, the political zeitgeist has shifted *away from* revolution. Looking back—as both the narrative and a decades-later reading does—there is a naive quality about the era, but also a sense that people—as depicted by Garner's fictional men and women—had energy, agency, and enough belief in the future to warrant 'breaking down old structures.'

**Bravado, Balancing Maternal Responsibility and Erotic Desire**

In *Monkey Grip* abortion and contraception are faced head-on. When Nora takes her friend Angela to the clinic to have an IUD inserted she is surprised that she is so scared. She says, 'But it's not going to *hurt* is it? ...' To which Angela replies, 'You've had a *child*, Nora, and *probably* a couple of *abortions*' (Garner 158). Nora as narrator responds, 'she elbowed me in the ribs with a touch of her old bravado' (158) expressing frankness about sexuality, camaraderie and openness about the 'female' condition, in an era when contraception and abortion had been freely available for, roughly, a decade. Nora, as a mother, is 'experienced,' not a victim. She decided to have 'a couple of abortions,' chose to have Gracie, and the narrative drive of *Monkey Grip* hinges on her irrepressible desire for Javo, *not* motherhood. Yet, most interestingly, in terms of the way single motherhood is depicted, is the way Nora negotiates the two potentially disparate parts of her life: the maternal with its concentration on responsibility, nurturing and loving her child, and the erotic, with its concentration on self-gratification through the pursuit of adult interests and sexual pleasure. While Nora does balance both, at times it feels that even Gracie is swept up in her mother's desire, or at least is framed within it, as Nora reflects: 'People like Javo need people like me, steadier, to circle around for a while; and from my centre, held there by children's needs, I stare longingly outwards at his rootlessness' (7).

While Nora discusses the angst she experiences trying to balance domesticity and her love life, it's not as if she questions her agency, her right to a love life, or that either should be subordinated to motherhood. In terms of the historical good or bad mother stereotype, Nora would fall into the latter, though by the time this novel is set (post-pill, pre-AIDS), it is evident that as an educated, middle-class woman, with all the hallmarks of Single Motherhood by Choice, except perhaps money, she represents something in between. [7]

Nora's non-mother-centric subject position, while not negating that she loves and cares for her daughter, is evident in her three self-focused dilemmas: her irrepressible desire for Javo, the monogamy question, and how best to juggle single motherhood with her love, work and social lives. Perhaps, partly because she is youngish, her future, despite her procrastinations, seems optimistic. She knows she can manage without Javo, and while she also takes drugs regularly and often desperately ruminates about her irrepressible desire for him, there is no sense she will lapse into addiction and jeopardise Gracie's well-being. Neither is she weighed down by a 'harness of gloom' like Ruth in 'Other People's Children.' She does, however, indulge—though her reveries are intellectual rather than desperate—in moments of feeling it's all too much. And it is through Nora's self-reflections—essentially a kind of measuring of her own moral fibre—that we glimpse both her interiority and the ethics by which she manifests her material world. One example is when she conflates the 'struggle' to live cooperatively within the constraints of—again—other people's children, and how, in this case, Rita's single motherhood reflects on her own:

> It wasn't that I didn't *love* Rita and Juliet: on the contrary, I suffered some painful emotion towards them, something to do with Rita's daily struggle to live, and the fact that I had been through this struggle myself with Gracie, years before: hating her because her existence marked the exact limits of my freedom; hating myself for hating her; loving her, all the while, gut-deep and inexpressibly; and beginning each day with the dogged shouldering of a burden too heavy for one person: the responsibility of the life of another human being. (*Monkey Grip* 171–72)

Again, Garner, through Nora, addresses the 'loving' of friends, communal, emotional responsibility and its attendant irritations, and the burden of maternal responsibility. Yet, unlike later single mother protagonists, such as Amanda Lohrey's Marita in *Camille's Bread* (1995), Garner's single mothers do not privilege or prioritise parenting over sexuality and desire. Rather, because of the zeitgeist's focus on individual freedom (despite the way Garner's women still lament the unfair divisions of domestic labour and childcaring in share households), the children are afforded a certain agency, courtesy of the openness and fluidity of the households in which they live.

Expressing the relaxed moral codes of her mother and her friends, Gracie says that she wants to go to see her father 'because round there they always buy the Sunday papers, and they have in them carturns (*sic*) and horse racing and stories about girls who fuck with men to get money' (61). While Nora is open with Gracie about her sexual relationship with Javo and the fact that he is a junkie, she does not neglect or endanger her in deference to him. Nor is there the slightest expectation that he should perform any kind of fatherly role. The demarcation of parenting roles, when the single mother has a new lover or partner, is quite radically contended in Garner's fiction. Nora contemplates how to divide her time, love and attention between her lover and child. She does not inculcate Javo or any of her other lovers, into sharing her parenting responsibilities. A slight contradiction is born here in that householders are expected to take on the parenting role, but lovers are exempt, keeping the lines sharply drawn which, in a way,

prioritises the importance of friends over lovers in regard to Garner's single mother protagonist's children. Despite this, Nora still feels a pressure to mediate between the needs of Javo and Gracie, a mediation that is vital if she is to keep both parts of her world—the erotic and the maternal—functioning. This 'peacekeeping' role is one that is also lamented by women in married and de facto arrangements, the difference being that in these, the biological father's responsibility is already established. I am not debating the difference in the quality of biological versus non-biological parenting, rather that the role of the non-biological lover or partner of the single mother needs negotiation. As in the case of Nora with Javo and her other lovers, and Ruth with Dennis, it is usually the mother that assumes the more flexible subject position. This could be because she is more inured to the push and press of inhibiting and restrictive pressures, or it could relate to what psychoanalysis describes as women's propensity to give more because of their 'flexible ego boundaries.'[8]

## Conclusion

Garner is famous for her authentic renditions of raucous, inner-city households, and the dilettantes who inhabited them. What is not as often noted is that in Nora and Ruth, she has authentically depicted two fictional Australian single mothers—rare for that, or *any* period of Australian literature, to date. And while women writers frequently win writing awards now, they weren't nearly as likely to do so then, *especially* if they were writing about the personal and the domestic. [9] As reported by Hilary McPhee (236) the number of literary awards between 1975 and 1985 increased from three to 25, but women were not among the winners, and Kate Ahearne commented that in the mid-1980s no women had been included in the National Book Council's Ten Best Books (cited in McPhee 47). In 1978, however, Helen Garner surprised critics and caused considerable contention when she won the National Book Council's award for *Monkey Grip*. The fact that critics were surprised seems strange in retrospect, considering that her fictional households captured the shifting state of play in heterosexual, mostly de facto relationships, in which the men—while still considered objects of desire—were often not around, or only when it suited them, and the women navigated motherhood with and without them. In *Monkey Grip* and 'Other People's Children,' therefore, Garner not only delineates the tensions between Australian men, women, children and desire, but reflects on the emergence of single motherhood and non-traditional family models. In this way, Garner's early works depicted single motherhood as a feminist site for re-imagination. A re-imagination that is worth considering contemporarily, especially if contemporary mothers are to be again judged according to outdated 'good' mother myths.

## NOTES

[1] Feminist philosopher Pamela Hall rejects the myth of the 'natural mother,' which she describes as 'a complex and heterogeneous array of beliefs, stories, images, and perceptions connected to an equally heterogeneous array of mothering practices, social institutions, knowledge projects, and ideologies' (1998, 59).
[2] Though as many feminist scholars noted the 'honour [of being the first feminist novel in Australia] probably goes to *All That False Instruction* published by Kerryn Higgs under the pseudonym Elizabeth Riley in 1975 by Angus and Robertson.
[3] Rosi Braidotti defines 'becoming' as the 'starting point for the deconstruction of phallogocentric identities precisely because sexual dualism and its corollary—the positioning of woman as a figure of Otherness, are constitutive of Western thought' (*Becoming woman* 50).
[4] An idea also expressed by Zora Simic: 'By the time *Monkey Grip* was released, some of the earlier optimism about the potential for feminism to transform not only women's lives but society more generally had dissipated for reasons both external and internal to the women's movement' (Simic 142).

[5] While women were no longer being forced into what Anne Summers delineates as the 'damned whore' or 'God's police' categories (2002), children were being removed for adoption in Australia until as late as the 1970s, and many Aboriginal and 'unmarried' white women from poor and religious families were pressured into forced adoptions, many of which were not properly recorded. 'Overview of forced adoption practices in Australia.' (The Forced Adoption History Project. *National Archives of Australia.*)

6 By the end of the novella, when Ruth is trying to convince her new boyfriend that they should 'live together,' she declares that 'There hasn't *been* a group for two years (*Other P. C.*139).

7 The idealised figure of the Good Mother casts a long shadow on many actual mothers' lives. This shadow looms in the construction of textual mothers too, as writers draw on age-old dichotomies to position the mother who is seen to be selfless, sacrificial and domestic as angel/Madonna ('good'), the mother who is judged to be seen as seeking autonomy beyond her children as whore/Magdalene ('bad') (O'Reilly and Podneiks 4).

[8] Because of the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible ego boundaries (Chodorow 169).

9 Eight years ago, male authors' overrepresentation in coveted prizes such as the $60,000 Miles Franklin Literary Award was denounced as a 'sausage-fest' [since then] Seven of the past eight Miles Franklin winners have been women, including Michelle de Kretser, Anna Funder and … Melissa Lucashenko. Twenty women authors scooped all 17 prize categories across the latest Queensland and Western Australian state literary awards, while women enjoyed further clean sweeps of the main prize categories in the 2018 and 2017 Victorian Premier's literary awards and netted the lion's share of the 2019 awards. Among that suite of awards is the nation's most lucrative book prize—the $100,000 Victoria prize for literature—and women have won four times over the past six years (Neill 5).

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