

The Reluctant Voyeur: the spectator and the 'object' in Gillian Mears' *Fineflour*

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In one of the stories in *Fineflour*, the adolescent Stacey Coope witnesses the disillusioning scene of her hero, Hugh Mann, verbally abusing his weeping father. From her favourite vantage-point on the footbridge over the Fineflour river, Stacey can watch the family drama in the Mann kitchen, as clearly as if their window were a television screen.¹ At one point in Gillian Mears' novel, *The Mint Lawn*, the protagonist, the pubescent Clementine, watches in embarrassment from her hiding-place as her mother masturbates.² In Mears' earlier collection of stories, *Ride a Cock Horse*, yet another teenage girl inadvertently sees something 'shameful': walking into the bedroom of her friend, an ageing jockey, she finds him engaged in sexual intercourse underneath an enormous oleaginous woman.³

Mears' fiction is full of such instances, in which people, usually children, see something which they 'should not see', or which they may not have wished to see, and in which those observed are unaware of the spectator's presence. In Mears' writing, there is a preoccupation with bodiliness and sensory information. Although all five senses are vividly evoked, her narratives are primarily visual in description, and the reader is confronted (in ways which are both vicarious and not vicarious, as I shall elaborate) with what the various narrators and protagonists see. The reader is placed at times in an uncomfortable position analogous to that of the reluctant

1 *Fineflour* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1990), p. 61.

2 *The Mint Lawn* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1991), p. 104. *The Mint Lawn* will hereafter be referred to in the text as *ML*.

3 'Dwarfed', in *Ride a Cock Horse* (Fairfield, Pascoe Publishing, 1988), pp. 61-70. *Ride a Cock Horse* will hereafter be referred to in the text as *RCH*.

teenage voyeurs described above.⁴ We recoil with the adult Clementine when her husband Hugh makes her examine his not particularly clean anus, after he has accidentally broken a thermometer inside it (*ML*, p. 211). We are lured into looking into the mirror with the social outcast Teddie Arthurs, into watching as he glumly squeezes his prolific pimples and wipes the results on the wallpaper (*RCH*, p. 144).

I would speculate with some confidence that there are more allusions to bodily fluids, wastes, discharges per page in Mears' fiction than in any other fictional *oeuvre* in mainstream Australian literature. The reader of *Fineflour*, for example, is compelled to consider the black blood of Judy's menarche (p. 12), the ferryman's earwax (p. 15), the abundant yellow mucus of the aboriginal boy Poddy (p. 67), the slow-drying semen of Kate's lukewarm lover on her thigh (p. 96), and the ecsematous flakes of Ted Pipe's skin falling into the sausage rolls which he is making (p. 136). The reader is thus continually reminded that bodies leak and shed; that the integrity of bodily boundaries is always fragile.

This is fiction which risks being dismissed as lewd, or perverse. However, the emphasis on the voyeuristic in Mears' writing can meaningfully be examined by way of Julia Kristeva's meditations on the concept of the abject, as outlined in *Powers of Horror*. Like Mears, Kristeva is concerned with constructing a discourse about 'looking', as her association of the voyeuristic impulse with the abject makes explicit:

Voyeurism is a structural necessity in the constitution of object relation, showing up every time the object shifts towards the abject; it becomes true perversion only if there is a

4 voyeur [...] A person whose sexual desires are stimulated or satisfied by covert observation of the sex organs or sexual activities of others. *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*. Vol IV, Se-Z. ed. R.W. Burchfield (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986).

I am using the term 'voyeur' somewhat loosely in this discussion, with a sense of the ambivalence of the reaction of the voyeur and the inadvertent spectator - a sense that what he/she sees inspires simultaneously feelings of power, guilt and fear.

failure to symbolize the subject/object instability. Voyeurism accompanies the writing of abjection.⁵

By its Latin root, the word 'abject' means 'thrown from':

abject *a.* brought low, miserable; craven, degraded, despicable, self-abasing [...] abjection *n.* state of misery or degradation⁶

The inclusion of the term 'self-abasing' as one of the meanings of the adjective 'abject' indicates that the abject person is one who rejects (would expel, literally or metaphorically) a part or parts of his or her self. 'Any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles.'⁷ As Kristeva suggests, 'filth is not a quality in itself' (p. 69) - thus, the 'abject' is in the eye of the beholder. Kristeva's most precise definition of 'abjection' is 'a boundary-subjectivity' (p. 141). 'We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity [...] abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives' (pp. 9-10). Mears delights in eliciting just such an ambivalent response from the reader - a simultaneous fascination and disgust. We may secretly enjoy the prospect of Teddie Arthurs' composition of his imagined 'pus postcard' (*RCH*, p. 145) - but we do not wish to be the addressee.⁸

5 *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 46.

6 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 7th edn, ed. J.B. Sykes (Oxford, O.U.P., 1982).

7 *Powers of Horror*, p. 102.

8 Abjection is a reaction to the recognition of the impossible but necessary transcendence of the subject's corporeality, and the impure, defiling elements of its uncontrollable materiality. It is a response to the various bodily cycles of incorporation, absorption, depletion, expulsion, the cycles of material rejuvenation and consumption necessary to sustain itself yet incapable of social recognition and representation.

Elizabeth Gross, 'The Body of Signification', in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John

In her discussion of the laws pertaining to defilement/purification in the book of *Leviticus*, Kristeva groups what is taboo in three categories: food taboos; bodily alteration, culminating in death; the feminine body and incest (p. 93). The three elements of this schema - food, as fundamental, as misusable, as potentially toxic; the corruptible body; and the 'proper and improper' contact between consanguineously related bodies - are foregrounded throughout Mears' fiction.

As an early reviewer of *Fineflour* remarked, food is a central motif in the collection. 'Food seems to provide some sort of consolation for the sadness of life [...] but ironically it is often a false consolation.'⁹ There are abundant references to mothers, particularly, offering food, and to people making themselves sick by overeating - a perverse form of self-punishment. In 'Kiss the Moon', the child Lily plays 'mother' to her uncle by making a dessert from biscuits, cream and Cointreau. 'The pudding makes him ill' (p. 131). Some time later, Lily expresses regret at her mother's recent, misguided adoption of asceticism, one of the consequences of which is her having ceased to make chocolate cakes ('Downriver', p. 168). In 'Aeroplane Jelly', Nadia Moy obeys her unloving husband by creating a culinary triumph - a jelly cake in the shape of the Australian flag - for their son's birthday. Stacey Coope's mother pours hot milk on to her Cornflakes despite her protests, a power-struggle of loving control and filial rejection being displaced on to this most redolently symbolic maternal substance ('From the Footbridge', p. 55). The nourishing mother becomes a sinister figure in 'Afterthoughts'. An elderly woman complacently remembers watching her mother, many years earlier, poisoning flour which would kill the aboriginal population camped by the river (p. 68).

Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London, Routledge, 1990, pp. 80-103).

⁹ Rachel Robertson, 'Saying it With Flour', *Australian Women's Book Review*, March 1991, Vol 3.1, pp. 3-4, p.3.

Mears' fiction presents a number of stark evocations of death and decay, often in a darkly comic mode. When the Mann children incompetently bury their deceased pet dog Dingus, they leave his legs protruding through the grass. Enraged by their refusal to mow the lawn, their father hysterically attacks the canine legs with the mower, sending skin, bone and fur flying everywhere.¹⁰ On the first page of *Fineflour*, Judy recalls how she used to wonder if 'small baby bones would be clinging in the dusty root systems' of the weeds she and her friend would pull from the grave of a long-dead infant. The possibility of 'raising the dead' is both appalling and inviting.

In the same story, Judy describes the revulsion she had felt upon looking at the newspaper photograph of George Onions at the age of one hundred.

The terrible black hole that's meant to be a smile is terrifying. [...] so I ended up reading the details underneath in order to avoid the face. (pp. 12-13)

For the child, George Onions is an horrific signifier of the tenuous boundary between life and death, a death-in-life figure, whose toothless orifice implies the unspeakable. As Barbara Creed observes in her recent study of horror films, *The Monstrous-Feminine*:

The ultimate in abjection is the corpse. The body protects itself from bodily wastes such as shit, blood, urine and pus by ejecting these things from the body just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome. The body ejects these substances, at the same time extricating itself from them and from the place where they fall, so that it might continue to live.¹¹

The discomfort aroused by the spectre of George Onions is intensified by the location of the newspaper clipping - the toilet door of Judy's friend's house.

¹⁰ 'Mothers and Old Lovers', *Fineflour*, pp. 39-50.

¹¹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, Routledge, 1993), p.9.

With reference to Kristeva's third category of the taboo, 'the feminine body and incest', we can focus on the story 'Cousins', in which the only unambiguously incestuous bodily contact in *Fineflour* occurs, and on the often unhappy Mann family, who yet remain comfortably tactile in their expressing of affection to one another.

The sexual congress between the teenage cousins Alexandra and Rhys is not incest as exploitation, but rather a consensual relationship of equals. More disturbing than the adult Alexandra's memories of this first affair is a vicarious memory, evidently described to her by Rhys, of the sight of his parents in bed.

For the first time he saw his father as a stranger in the middle stages of a self-inflicted decay: an excess of mottled flab. Her little pale breasts threatened in his hands. (p. 150)

The flawed parental bodies evoke in the boy both loathing and desire, inexpressible and unresolvable.

By contrast, as children, Hugh, Mathew and Kate Mann appear to derive their bodily unselfconsciousness from their mother. In 'Mothers and Old Lovers', the maternal body, this time taut and alluring, is flaunted. When Jonathan Mann's pushy lover insists on seeing slides of his children as babies, he neglects to censor the cartridges.

[...] there were a whole lot of just Mum, naked except for a lemon scarf in her hair and much more beautiful than Erica.

Our mother has nut-brown nipples and is brown all over. On the white beaches she looks like a girl. (p. 47)

The reader 'sees' the slides from the perspectives of the humiliated Erica and the triumphant children, still loyal to the mother who had deserted them. When Erica attempts on another occasion to take part in the family's easy intimacy - she laughs at the pubescent Mathew in the bath - she is fiercely shunned.

In the next story in the collection, 'Cold Hands, Warm Heart', the mature Kate is massaged by her brother, Hugh.

She thinks how because her brother is a masseur, the closure of bodies normally inevitable between sisters and brothers past a certain age hasn't happened. Or maybe it happened for a while but didn't last. She feels at ease. (p. 80)

Their mother having become increasingly less interested in them after she had moved north, the siblings have learned to nurture each other. However, as other stories in *Fineflour* indicate, this degree of intimacy with anyone outside the family circle eludes them.

In her critique of horror films, Barbara Creed has drawn from Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and also from the work of the film theorist and film-maker Laura Mulvey. While Creed's subject area is outside the parameters of this discussion, the contiguity of the ideas of Kristeva and Mulvey, as they inform her work, is instructive for a study of the positioning of the reader/spectator in the work of Gillian Mears.

The three main 'looks' which have been theorized in relation to the screen-spectator relationship are: the camera's look at the pro-filmic event; the look of the character(s) in the diegesis; and the look of the spectator at the events on the screen. In his discussion of pornography Paul Willemen (1980) has specified a fourth look, the possibility of the viewer being overlooked while engaged in the act of looking at something he or she is not supposed to look at. The act of 'looking away' when viewing horror films is such a common occurrence that it should be seen as a fifth look that distinguishes the screen-spectator relationship.¹²

Although the situation of the spectator of a film differs in obvious ways from that of the reader of fiction, nevertheless certain elements from film theory may usefully be carried across to a discussion of the reader as quasi-spectator.

For the sake of the argument, the perspective of a narrator of fiction might be considered as approximating that of someone looking through a camera. When the narrative voice is in the first person, that of a character involved

12 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 29.

in/remembering/imagining the events of the narrative, then the 'looks' of the camera and the character(s) are, as it were, conflated in that perspective. Such a conflation is felicitously exemplified in the first and last stories of *Fineflour*, which are narrated by Judy Pendle.

The suggestively cinematic pivotal scene of the opening story, the funeral of Joy and Gracie Wyre, is related by the child, Judy, a spectator from above, concealed in a tree in defiance of her parents' wishes. In the concluding story, 'A Bitter Joy', the reader 'views' the adult Judy's black and white photographs of old Merv's stained underwear, her ironic souvenir of her visit 'home' to *Fineflour*. Judy's eye is here the reader's aperture. Judy is effectively associated with photography throughout *Fineflour*. In the story, 'Another Country', she experiences what is tantamount to an estrangement from herself, when she discovers that an old slide, which she had assumed to be of a friend, is a picture taken by that friend of Judy herself (p. 113). When it is 'herself' that she is seeing, she misreads.

The analogy between the reader of a book and the spectator of a film is partial, of course. The reader of a book plays a far more active mental role than the spectator of a film, because there is no physical screen to look at. By necessity the reader brings his/her individual imaginative process to bear upon the work of fiction. Reading is in that sense a collaborative undertaking between writer and reader.¹³ Reading is also a more private (and in the case of pornography, more covert) activity than watching a film. *A propos* the 'fourth look' mentioned in Creed's summary of the permutations of the screen-spectator relationship, then, a reader is less liable than a film-viewer to be 'overlooked while engaged in the act of looking [...].' As for what Creed proposes as the 'fifth look' that distinguishes the screen-spectator relationship, the reader may lift his/her eye from the

13 In view of the emergence of reception theory, as associated with Hans Robert Jauss, and later American critics such as Stanley Fish, this statement is something of a truism.

page, but cannot strictly speaking 'look away' from the image that repels or shocks, precisely because the reader has already been implicated in the production of the image. Judy can choose to focus on the article 'to avoid the face', but it is too late for the reader, who has naively been led into 'seeing' her or his own particular mental image of George Onions on the toilet door.

In Laura Mulvey's influential article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'¹⁴, she argues that a masculine or masculinized perspective predominates in the majority of Hollywood filmic narratives. The focus of the article is

the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the 'masculinization' of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer.¹⁵

As Mary Ann Doane suggests, responding in part to Mulvey's theorizing of the 'look':

spectatorial desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression.¹⁶

There is a great deal of fiction which is more egalitarian in its perspectives than the products of the Hollywood cinema industry. The concept of the 'male gaze' has its limits in

14 First published in *Screen* in 1975. Reprinted in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London, Macmillan, 1989), pp. 14-26.

15 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 29-38, p. 29.

16 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator. Mary Ann Doane on the Woman's Gaze', *Screen*, Vol. 23, No. 3-4, Sept. - Oct. 1982, pp. 74-87, p. 76. As Gayle Austin points out in the fifth chapter of her book *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*. (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1990), Mulvey consistently uses the term 'look' for which other feminist film theorists have subsequently substituted the word 'gaze'. I am grateful to Catherine Pratt for drawing my attention to Austin's book.

terms of usefulness for literary criticism. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Gillian Mears' fiction derives largely from her figurative redistribution of the power of looking. The stories of *Fineflour* are told by, or mediated through the consciousnesses of, a variety of characters, but primarily those traditionally comparatively disempowered in a patriarchal society.

To clarify and bring together the various strands of this discussion, I will conclude by focussing in some detail on two of the stories in *Fineflour*, 'Kiss the Moon' and 'Pipedream'. Both of these are narrated in the third person: the privileged consciousness of 'Kiss the Moon' is that of a homosexual art teacher, Mathew Mann, and 'Pipedream' is projected through the eyes of a naive teenager, Margot.

By now accustomed to Mears' confrontational style and subject-matter, we perhaps assume that the title 'Kiss the Moon' has an obscene implication. Halfway through the story, it is revealed as the name of an innocuous child's game. Like so much of Mears' fiction - like so many of the other stories in *Fineflour* - the story engages with the dubious binary of knowingness and naiveté.

'Kiss the Moon' opens with a scene calculated to affront staid notions of propriety - Mathew's lover Alfred luxuriously bathing in the front of the deconsecrated church which is Mathew's home. It is a mock-baptism without spiritual consequences. A deconsecrated church is a site of sublime ambivalence, a liminal place, both sanctified and forsaken. Mathew watches the aesthetically perfect Alfred with the adoration of a courtly lover. It is not that Alfred is sexually inaccessible, expecting forever to be worshipped chastely. On the contrary, by the end of his visit, the skin on Mathew's penis is broken and inflamed from excessive friction. Alfred is, however, emotionally inaccessible. He will not allow Mathew the intimacy of a kiss.

From motives which he himself does not fully understand, Mathew has chosen to return from Sydney to live in *Fineflour*, a move which has left him physically, culturally

and psychologically isolated. One consolation is the closer proximity to his niece Lily, the result of his sister Kate's schoolgirl affair. After Alfred has returned to Sydney, Kate leaves Lily with Mathew for the last days of the school holidays, during which they stay up late, play endless games of cards, and recklessly consume pimple-producing quantities of chocolate.

In the character of Mathew Mann, Mears challenges stereotypical preconceptions about homosexual men who, in the eyes of the ignorantly bigoted, are by definition promiscuous and paedophilic.¹⁷ In making Mathew Lily's surrogate father and older brother, her playmate and confidant, in making him 'safe' for the adolescent girl to share a bed with, Mears also implicitly rejects conventional assumptions about the proper nature and forms of 'family' and familial interactions.

The story is dominated by a 'male gaze' but it is pointedly not akin to that generally delineated in feminist film theory, that which derives 'a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body.' Mears, a female writer, has imaginatively entered the mind of a male character whose eyes notice every physical detail of the two people he loves, Alfred and Lily, but what prurience there is in the story is directed towards the tantalizing (in the original sense of the word) Alfred, not towards the feminine form.

Superficially, Mears' fiction appears to depict a great deal of casual or unloving sexual activity and this in itself makes *Fineflour* a controversial, even a brave, choice as a set text in a New South Wales HSC English course. However, it would be inaccurate to represent *Fineflour* as lacking instances of

17 In the character of Mathew, and in the positive portrait of the gay 'uncle' figure Patrick in *The Mint Lawn*, Mears is possibly paying tribute to a real person from her childhood. She gives a hint in her piece in the collection entitled *Sisters*, ed. Drusilla Modjeska (Pymble, Angus and Robertson, 1993), pp. 1-37: '[...] Eileen [...] helps our mother clean our house. Her son is flagrantly gay for such a small town and I love him silently for years, from afar, for his exquisite style' (p. 4).

love and loving. Rather, Mears' fiction celebrates the diversity of love, while lamenting its precariousness. In the title-story, the burgeoning adolescent love between the butcher's son and the aboriginal girl Roo is thwarted by the racial prejudice which surrounds them. The story 'The Hundredth Island' concludes with a scene of conjugal sexual pleasure. The woman is heavily pregnant, Mears defiantly contradicting the outdated image of the 'expectant mother' as an unsexed or a-sexual being. By and large, though, this is overtly anti-romantic fiction, subverting and refusing predictable narrative trajectories of heterosexual courtship, marriage and happiness. Mears' anti-romantic vision is starkly realized in 'Pipedream'.

Margot is employed in the bakery of Ted and Mrs Pipe. Impatient for the 'freedom' of adulthood, she left school early, and now feels ostracized by the girls who were her classmates. Sunbathing alone by the river on her day off, she is accosted by the Pipes' second son, who invites her for a ride on his speedboat. Instinctively appealing to her desire to be a sophisticated woman, he persuades her to accept by telling her 'he knew plenty of places along the river for all-over tans' (p. 132). As Margot's breasts become more and more severely burnt by the sun during the course of the day, the reiterated phrase 'all-over tan', implying possibilities of glamour and adventure, accrues a painful irony.

The narrative technique is equivalent to a series of cinematic 'Cut-Tos', the camera, as it were, oscillating between Margot's viewpoint and that of a distant observer, and between the boat on Margot's day off and the bakery a few days later.

Through Margot's eyes (our lens, as it were) we observe the penis of the Pipes' second son, quickly displayed for Margot's awe, the red eye of its opening ominous. The Pipes' second son is completely unattractive to Margot. She objectively notes his fat white pimpled buttocks and small mean eyes, yet passively submits to his rape of her, perceiving herself to be in every way powerless. As a literary construct, she is 'empowered' by the privilege accorded to

her perspective. Within the terms of the story, however, her isolation, lack of education, and low social standing serve to crush what nascent self-preserving acuity she has.

From Margot's suddenly supine position, we 'see' flying foxes in the branches of overhanging trees. After the act, Margot's first experience of sexual intercourse, the Pipes' second son consumes his lunch, while she is further unnerved by the unfamiliar trickle of semen on her legs: 'Thick sperm floating like something dead and disintegrating' (p. 141). The semen has become a far more abject substance than the excreta of the flying foxes, which had interrupted the Pipes' second son's pleasure in his ejaculation. Having finished his lunch, the Pipes' second son commands her to swim in the nude. '[...] her legs felt vaguely greasy - as if the water was still full of little bits of old cream from the creamery that shut down years before' (pp. 142-3). Margot is projecting on to the river the pollution to which she has just been subjected.

With childish sadism, the Pipes' second son pushes her underwater. When she escapes, she watches him stuffing a calico sack full of new-born puppies into the opening of one of the disused creamery pipes, where they will drown at high tide. The source of the whimpering, which Margot had imagined she heard within herself, is now explained. Her identification with the puppies, made explicit when the Pipes' second son calls her a 'little bitch', momentarily gives her the strength to resist him, albeit to no avail, when he rapes her again.

For the Pipe youth, the violent thrusting of helpless animals into the creamery pipe connects erotically with the intrusion of his penis, a bodily 'pipe', into the vagina of a defenceless adolescent. A few days later, on the day of the annual Fineflour bridge-to-bridge boat race, Mrs Pipe unwittingly torments Margot by coercing her into crawling under the staircase in the storeroom, to retrieve supplies of soft drink. The claustrophobic space, dank, dark and hot, recalls the creamery pipe. Never again will she be able to look at the snake of uncooked sausage roll without recollecting the erection of the Pipes' second son.

The title of this scrupulously crafted story has multiple resonances. 'Pipedream' is the name of the boat belonging to the Pipes' second son. It also, obviously, implies Margot's disappointed illusions. She had envisaged working for the Pipes as a means to greater liberty and happiness than she had enjoyed at school. Saddest of all is her persistent desire for a man's attention - even the attention of her unprepossessing rapist - to bring her self-esteem. When she reacts with jealousy on the day of the regatta at the sight of him flirting with other girls, when she bribes a child to bring her news of the fortunes of 'Pipedream' in the boat race, when she wonders if the Pipes' second son still intends to marry his fiancée, the hairdresser - then we have a consummate portrait of abjection.

Pathos is the presiding mood of Gillian Mears' fiction, but empathy for her characters is often tinged with the embarrassment that precludes sentimentality. It is a curious game which Mears plays with her readers, seductive and aggressive by turns. She ensures that her readers maintain an emotional distance by figuratively focussing their gaze too close for comfort. Mears' particular skill is her capacity to arrest her reader's attention, even as her narrative mockingly shocks.¹⁸

¹⁸ My thanks to Philippa Kelly, for her helpful comments on this paper in draft stage.