

**Celia Brayfield**  
**PhD by Published Works**  
**A Critical Review of Four Novels by Celia Brayfield**  
**Considering Their Production and Impact in the Context of**  
**Contemporary Literature**  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This critical review of four novels by Celia Brayfield, *Getting Home*, *Mister Fabulous And Friends*, *Heartswap* and *Wild Weekend*, outlines the themes that give the works defining coherence, which are a feminist evaluation of gender roles and an exploration of the relationship between space or place in millennial Britain. The author contextualises her novels in considering literary representations of the suburb in literature and use of the device of gender reversal in fiction. The review demonstrates that the novels make a significant and coherent contribution to knowledge as resonant and well-received creative works and provides an assessment of their international and national impact. In discussing the inspiration and influences of her work, her choices in characterisation, narrative and dramatised argument, and in particular her decision to create responses to two classic texts using the device of gender reversal, the author justifies the overarching approach and methodologies used for these novels.

## **Keywords**

Celia Brayfield; novel; fiction; popular fiction, *Getting Home*; *Mister Fabulous And Friends*; *Heartswap*; *Wild Weekend*; feminism; suburb; housewife; Edith Wharton; *Babbitt*; Betty Friedan; Terry MacMillan; *Peyton Place*; *Stepford Wives*; John Updike; *Witches of Eastwick*; *Desperate Housewives*; menopause; *Così fan Tutte*; gender reversal; Orlando; *She Stoops To Conquer*; New Labour;

## INTRODUCTION

This critical review reflects on my aims and process in writing four of my novels. In chronological order of publication, the novels are:

*Getting Home* (1998)

*Heartswap* (2001)

*Mister Fabulous And Friends* (2003)

*Wild Weekend* (2004)

These four books address recurring themes in my work, the suburban experience and a feminist consideration of gender roles. Two of these novels are also responses to classic texts in which I have used the device of gender reversal. The novels belong to the middle period of my writing career, in which I moved away from mainstream commercial fiction towards novels that commented on contemporary social issues. Having enjoyed an international bestseller status<sup>i</sup> with my first three partly-historical novels, I chose to focus on modern Britain in this period.

Gender issues and the female experience have been major concerns since my debut with *Pearls*<sup>ii</sup> (1986.) Although written for a popular readership, this novel contained a strong feminist argument, noted in reviews by Anthony Burgess<sup>iii</sup> and Howard Jacobson<sup>iv</sup>, as well as a feature in Time Magazine<sup>v</sup>. This theme is sustained through my nine novels. My first publication, however, was a non-fiction book, *Glitter: The Truth About Fame*<sup>vi</sup> (1985) an examination of celebrity culture which developed from experiences in my first career as a journalist, in which I had been both a profile writer and a specialist in media issues. The

arguments in this book were continued in my second novel, *The Prince*,<sup>vii</sup> (1990) and my fourth novel, *Harvest*<sup>viii</sup> (1995) as well as *Getting Home* (1997) and *Wild Weekend* (2004), considered here. In 2013, all four titles, along with most of my backlist, were republished in digital editions in the MacMillan Bello and Amazon Whiteglove imprints.

As a novelist, I have been more interested in social engagement than literary theory. At the start of my career I was inspired, among an entire generation, by the very young women writers of the late Fifties and Early Sixties, by works such as *Georgy Girl* (1965) by Margaret Forster, *The L Shaped Room* (1960) by Lynne Reid Banks, *A Taste of Honey* (1959) by Shelagh Delaney, *Poor Cow* (1967) by Nell Dunn and the early novels of Fay Weldon. I admired their political ambition, their direct engagement with the truth of women's lives and their ability to crystallise social issues, which seemed, and still seems, to me more important than literary *divertissement*. In my first career as a journalist, I had never written for fewer than 300,000 readers and as a novelist I felt disinclined to address a literary elite which a distinguished publisher, Mark Barty-King of Transworld<sup>ix</sup>, estimated at 3000 people. I found the preoccupations of this group extraordinarily insular in an era in which our understanding of human experience was challenged daily. The authors whose reputations had overshadowed my education were Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch, C P Snow and Angus Wilson, who focused on the preoccupations of London-centred Oxbridge graduates. The so-called Hampstead novel<sup>x</sup> was also fashionable at this time. From my perspective, these authors seemed unaware of their own privileges and unconcerned with the day-to-day challenges which generation confronted – dizzying social mobility, intergenerational conflict, entrenched sexism and the abrupt redefinition of womanhood. I agreed with one of my literary heroes, Anthony Burgess, that to become one of the “nice English ladies who live in Hampstead and write about discreet adultery, at about 200 pages,”<sup>xi</sup> was an unworthy ambition.

Both the publishing industry and the intellectual elite promote the binarism of serious intent or commercial success, which to me is entirely false. As Jane Smiley has observed:

The novel has certain inherent characteristics – it is naturally democratic; it promotes individuality and freedom; it is intimate and sociable and connective; it elevates inner life over appearance; it is often in spite of itself, hopeful and it is naturally popular.<sup>xii</sup>

In her acceptance speech at the US National Book Awards in 2014, Ursula Le Guin decried this divide and encouraged writers to resist market stereotypes, saying<sup>xiii</sup>, “We need writers who know the difference between production of a market commodity and the practice of an art.” In recent years the publishing industry has been surprised by “crossover” novels which succeed over many traditional boundaries, including literary novels which also achieve commercial success, such as *White Teeth*<sup>xiv</sup> or *Wolf Hall*.<sup>xv</sup>

Equally, I consider that commercial success is impossible for a writer without social engagement. As an example, the success of the much-criticised bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* (2003)<sup>xvi</sup> can be considered as a response to a consensual need or emotion. “The Da Vinci Code, published in 2003, was so enormously successful in part, I’d suggest, because it took a rather tired mythic structure (Christianity) and injected a whole new level of mystery and complexity into it. Sales figures for 2009 report that the novel had sold 80 million copies worldwide and it has also sparked some lively debate about Christianity. The point is that the public seems to be ravenous for some sort of experience of spiritual wonder, because they don’t get that from the existing religious structures. The Harry Potter series, which has now sold over 400 million copies worldwide, shares many of these traits.”<sup>xvii</sup> A successful novel, whatever the author’s ambition for it or the industry’s classification of it, is discussing what a large number of people are thinking. The power of fiction in public debate depends on its

ability to influence readers outside the “world of books.”<sup>xviii</sup> Literary history shows that popular novels, such as *Black Beauty* (1877) or *Mrs Miniver* (1940) have been powerfully instrumental in bringing about social or political change. All my novels have a strong political subtext, whether they were intended for mass market publication or not.

The novels discussed in this review belong to the era that has been termed “post-feminist.” They engage with the questions that men and women needed to resolve after the feminist movement of the 1970s appeared to have succeeded in challenging the norms of the post-war and earlier periods, and they portray women who are living out the ideals of 70s feminism, defining their roles as lovers, mothers and professionals, confronting sexism in their communities and addressing their own internal confusion and doubts. Many battles remained to be fought, not least those for hearts and minds. As Susan Faludi observed<sup>xix</sup> “the anti-feminist backlash (was) set off not by women’s achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it.” Women questioned the ideal of “having it all” with the passionate encouragement of a male dominated culture that had everything to gain from retrogressive artefacts such as the TV series *Ally McBeal*<sup>xx</sup>, in which a successful woman attorney is constantly overwhelmed by her own anxiety fantasies. At the same time, women lived in the realities of relationships, home lives and workplaces in which sexism was becoming entrenched. The rate of divorce doubled between 1971 and 1980, and had tripled by 2004<sup>xxi</sup>. The first refuge for women who had been victims of domestic violence opened in 1971; several charities now support such women and Polly Neale, chief executive of Women’s Aid, estimates that her organisation alone is active in 200 areas in the UK.<sup>xxii</sup> Home and work were chaotic battlefields on which both men and women were forced to explore their own individual concepts of gender, while fighting for a sense of survival as human beings. They were “postfeminist people” in the same spirit as Frederick Jameson’s



“postmodern people”: “Postmodern people capable of functioning in a very peculiar world indeed, one whose structure and objective features and requirements....would constitute the situation to which postmodernism is a response.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Throughout my work, I have sought to engage critically with prevailing assumptions about gender and, at times, to challenge the anti-male orthodoxies of certain strands of feminism. The work of Andrea Dworkin<sup>xxiv</sup>, Susan Brownmiller<sup>xxv</sup> and Judith Levine<sup>xxvi</sup>, among others, advanced the idea that all sexual relationships between men and women were essentially coercive, leading Dworkin in particular to conclude that all men are effectively rapists and all heterosexual sex a criminal act of which women were the victims.

Another major focus in my novels is the interaction of geography and community, Lefebvre’s “trialectics of space,”<sup>xxvii</sup> in which perceived and conceived spaces create the lived space. Thus the novels’ settings are not mere backdrops, but active forces in the narrative. Whether the environment that my characters inhabit is built or managed, it determines their emotions and actions. Many of them are involved in creating the spatial context of their own lives and of their communities. The characters participate actively in the perception and conception of space through their professional activities as town planners, government ministers, property developers, gardeners, environmental campaigners or farmers. I invite my readers to consider their motives and explore the personal moralities behind them. My novels explore also cultural divisions that are geographically rationalised, between urban and suburban, metropolitan and rural, old world and new, often by presenting the processes by which these divisions are created and maintained.

The inciting incident and often also the crisis within each novel arise, at least in part, from the troubling conditions associated with a very particular environment: the tree-lined streets of an

affluent suburb; the high-rises and subterranean car parks of London's business district; the once-fertile fields of "England's green and pleasant land,"<sup>xxviii</sup> rendered toxic by intensive farming. While the Westwick novels obviously address the suburbs, the two novels of role reversal explore the supremely urban and metropolitan landscape of London and rural England, once a national Arcadian ideal but, in millennial, New Labour Britain, an embarrassment best forgotten. These novels are, to use Raymond Williams' definition, "knowable communities," within the unknowable chaos of the larger world in which they are situated, although the unknowable infiltrates what appears to be a sanctuary and individuals are compelled to define their relationships anew.

In these four novels I have sought to widen the horizons of women's writing by enacting socio-political or geo-political arguments in their narratives. They contain love stories, and at times play with the tropes of romance, but look beyond the emotional plane. Forming a family and nurturing children are central themes in some of these works, but none is restricted to the domestic sphere. Gender roles are explored not only as part of individual experience but as choices made in response to cultural, economic or political forces. My aim is to make my readers question contemporary foolishness as well as conventional wisdom. Consequently, my novels address important social, gendered and environmental issues in late twentieth-century and postmillennial contexts.

## **PART I: THE WESTWICK NOVELS: *GETTING HOME & MISTER FABULOUS AND FRIENDS***

### **The Suburb in Literature**

“ La haine du bourgeois est le commencement de la vertu.”

Flaubert’s axiom, usually translated as, ‘hatred of the bourgeois is the beginning of wisdom,’ expressed the hostility of the self-styled bohemian in the nineteenth century towards the new middle-classes, who were replacing the old aristocracy as the patrons of art. Within a few more decades this divide was built into the expanding cities of the world; bohemia and suburbia were born enemies.

Almost as soon as the first suburbs were built, late in the nineteenth century, writers questioned the intellectual and moral health of these ideal new neighbourhoods. Edith Wharton’s review essay, *The Great American Novel*, published in 1927,<sup>xxix</sup> expressed the writer’s fear that, without the epic landscapes of Herman Melville or Upton Sinclair, literature itself would be diminished by the new provincialism to be found in “the little suburban house at number one million and ten Volstead Avenue.” She wrote:

Inheriting an old social organization which provided for nicely shaded degrees of culture and conduct, modern America has simplified and Taylorized it out of existence. She has reduced relations between human beings to a dead level of vapid benevolence, and the whole of life to a small house with modern plumbing and heating, a garage, a motor, a telephone, and a lawn undivided from one's neighbor's.

Great as may be the material advantages of these diffused conveniences, the safe and uniform life resulting from them offers to the artist's imagination a surface as flat and monotonous as our own prairies.

It is worth noting that Edith Wharton, herself an enthusiastic motorist, lived in a small village in France and rarely visited her home country.

Fifteen years later, in Britain, George Orwell, in his novel *Coming Up For Air* (1939),<sup>xxx</sup> created the archetypal suburban husband, the insurance agent George Bowling, with his wife, two children, a mortgage, an expanding waistline and his life of quiet desperation. Like Wharton, Orwell highlights the sense of conformity and oppression associated with this newly modern built environment:

Down below, out of the little square of bathroom window, I could see the ten yards by five of grass, with a privet hedge round it and a bare patch in the middle, that we call a back garden. There's the same back garden, same privets, and same grass, behind every house in Ellesmere Road.

Orwell was, for a while, a teacher at a West London school, but this is the only novel in which he focuses on the suburban environment and what he sees as its stifling uniformity. The most vocal enemy of British suburbia is, of course, John Betjeman. Brunel University London is only a few miles from Slough, and his poem<sup>xxxi</sup> about this town, expressing his contempt for poor people who dared to aspire to comfort, security and homes of their own, has frequently angered me.

Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!

It isn't fit for humans now,

There isn't grass to graze a cow.

Swarm over, Death!

Come, bombs and blow to smithereens

Those air -conditioned, bright canteens,

Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans,

Tinned minds, tinned breath.

Mess up the mess they call a town—

A house for ninety-seven down

And once a week a half a crown

For twenty years.

And get that man with double chin

Who'll always cheat and always win,

Who washes his repulsive skin

In women's tears:

Betjeman was born in affluent north London and educated at Marlborough and Magdalen College Oxford, while George Orwell's early life was spent in the Thames-side village of Shiplake before he went to Eton. Although very different in wealth and political conviction, both writers were mentored by some of the most admired figures in English literature at the time - T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis in Betjeman's case, Aldous Huxley and Cyril Connolly in Orwell's. Orwell's fear and Betjeman's loathing for the suburbs are rooted in elitist disdain for bourgeois values, which at times conveys a sense of outrage that ordinary people - white or blue-collar workers - should feel they had any entitlement to domestic comfort or any right to live according to their own lights.

European writers were also infected by a horror of the bourgeois in all its forms. In the opening chapters of his immensely influential novel *Steppenwolf* (1927,) Herman Hesse portrays the love-hate which his eponymous narrator feels for a comfortable home:

There is much to be said for contentment and painlessness, for those bearable and submissive days, on which neither pain nor pleasure cry out, on which everything only whispers and tiptoes around. But the worst of it is that it is just this contentment that I cannot endure. After a short time it fills me with irrepressible loathing and nausea. Then, in desperation, I have to escape into other regions, if possible on the road to pleasure, or, if that cannot be, on the road to pain. When I have neither pleasure nor pain and have been breathing for a while the lukewarm insipid air of these so-called good and tolerable days, I feel so bad in my childish soul that I smash my rusty lyre of

thanksgiving in the face of the slumbering god of contentment and would rather feel the most devilish pain burn in me than this warmth of a well-heated room.

Like Edith Wharton, Hesse's narrator expressed terror that bourgeois life would be an intellectually sterile one. Inside his landlady's house were polished floors and flourishing pot plants. Outside were violent emotions, Goethe, Mozart, philosophy and love. These fears have proved unfounded and today it is a truism that the most anarchic and transgressive of rock stars, notably the Rolling Stones, were raised in suburban homes.

No sooner had Wharton expressed her low opinion of creative life in the suburbs than another American writer found them a fascinating setting in which to study human nature. A masterwork of social observation, *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis (1922)<sup>xxxii</sup>, depicts George Babbitt, a prosperous estate agent with a subversive soul, who calls his business suit his "Solid Citizen" uniform. A camping trip stirs his less venal spirits, a brief love affair reawakens his emotions. By the end of the novel he has returned to his revitalised marriage but also congratulates his son on his elopement. Babbitt's journey is a simple, domestic trajectory but one which examines a man's attempt to assert its uniqueness. Lewis's first novel, *Main Street*, had dealt with the traditional large canvas of American life, but with *Babbitt* he found tragedy and nobility in suburban life. Sinclair Lewis was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930.

Women writers of the interwar period certainly did not neglect the suburbs as a setting, but literary criticism neglected their work. The majority of middle-class women had no independent existence, little legal status and no hope of freedom in the early twentieth century in Britain, but their sufferings did not interest the publishing industry. Dorothy

Whipple was adept at portraying the near-slavery of a suburban wife, notably in the story of a woman married to a petty tyrant in *They Were Sisters* (1943).<sup>xxxiii</sup> (When Persephone Press republished this novel in 2003, I was honoured to be asked to write a new introduction to it.) The author has recently been compared with Chekhov<sup>xxxiv</sup> for contrasting the lives of three sisters whose fates depend entirely on their marriages, but it is the unluckiest of them whose story dominates the novel. One of the earliest examinations of marital abuse, the book was an immediate popular success, as was the film adaptation which followed in 1945. Described as “a woman who loves too much” decades before those words became the title of a book about women drawn to dysfunctional partners, the high-spirited Charlotte marries Geoffrey, a boorish, hard-drinking salesman who swiftly evolves into a domestic dictator. His blood-curdling sadism towards his wife and children is evoked without any physical violence or the use of a word stronger than “damn”.

The Second World War created an important shift in the perception of suburban life on both sides of the Atlantic. The tranquillity and conformity of the suburbs suddenly seemed more ideal than ever to men and women who longed to feel safe after the chaos and destruction they had experienced. (As a child, I heard one of our neighbours in the North London suburb of Wembley Park refer to other residents as “the scum of the ghettos of Europe.”) In British cities the remaining inner-city slums – areas of overcrowded and substandard housing – had been heavily bombed and their populations were rehoused in newly-built suburban estates. Richard Yates, the author of *Revolutionary Road* (1961)<sup>xxxv</sup>, cited the craving for security that drew people into suburban in the post-war period. He describes the aims of his own novel as follows:

I think I meant (the novel) more as an indictment of American life in the 1950s. Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity all



over this country, by no means only in the suburbs — a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Once again, the theme of conformity resurfaced. The narrow and rigidly drawn gender roles of the Fifties concerned male writers as well as female. *Revolutionary Road* depicts a young couple, Frank and April Wheeler, who are at first delighted to move into their suburban home. April fills her days with their two children and the amateur dramatic society, but the strain of nuclear family living soon tells on their relationship and Frank begins an affair. They struggle to regain their happiness and talk of escaping to Paris, but when April gets pregnant for the third time and Frank is offered promotion this dream vanishes. April tries to end her pregnancy and dies as a result.

This pessimistic view, although it won the author enduring acclaim,<sup>xxxvii</sup> was soon overtaken by more nuanced explorations of suburban living, notably by John Updike, whose novels *Couples* (1968) and *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984)<sup>xxxviii</sup> were the inspiration for *Getting Home*. *Couples*, like the later novel by Rick Moody, *The Ice Storm* (1994),<sup>xxxix</sup> is infused with an uneasy fear of female sexuality. In examining a conformist community struggling with the libertarian social values of the late Sixties and Seventies, it depicts the suburbs as an environment in which women, still denied full identity and personal freedom, find affirmation in adultery – with the Devil himself. The emotional claustrophobia of the nuclear family and the idleness imposed on women by the middle-class ideal of the non-working wife and mother are vividly depicted but never challenged.

The sex-starved suburbanite seized public imagination in a best-selling novel, *Peyton Place*,<sup>xl</sup> (1956) a book by Grace Metalious, which became a TV series aired in the USA from 1964-69. The sensationalist appeal of the sexually active housewife was reworked more recently in the TV series *Desperate Housewives*, (2004-12), which also examined the

friendship bonds between women. These narratives confirm a consensual suspicion that there are dark secrets beneath the surface of an ideal community, most of which are kept by women. Perhaps the final extension of this sub-genre is *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) by Jeffrey Eugenides<sup>xli</sup>, in which five sisters, one after the other, commit suicide as they reach the age of puberty, suggesting that to be fully female in a suburban community is an unbearable destiny.

Of all the novels of suburbia, the one that takes this challenge to the most honourable conclusion, in my view, is Ira Levin's science fiction fantasy, *The Stepford Wives* (1972)<sup>xlii</sup>. In this novel, a young photographer moves with her husband to a pleasant suburb, where she is very soon struck by the degree to which her female neighbours seem dehumanised. They are, in fact, robots – the four-square suburban husbands, unable to fulfil their partner's emotional needs, have turned their wives into attractive, compliant and undemanding machines. I liked this surreal comment on the inhuman perfection of the suburban ideal as it satirised the phenomenon without blaming either gender.

Other writers, much as I admired their style, treated women less fairly. Updike's characterisation and the American exoticism of his novels appealed to me but I felt the women were harshly drawn and little understood. Nor could I share the view that a suburb was a sterile and dehumanising environment built entirely for profit. As an environment, suburbs are intended to nurture families and I saw parenthood as an honourable, joyful and, indeed vital, activity. In my own work I wanted to disrupt and complicate the assumption that the suburb is a space of sterility, conformity, and confinement. Significantly, my work seeks to register and remediate the suburbs as an imagined space, partly by recalling the original motives to design and construct these areas. I knew that the world's first garden suburb, Bedford Park, in Chiswick, was created by the architect Norman Shaw in 1877 with

utopian motives, and intended to be a creative community clustered around an art school as well as the church. Many of the houses themselves were carefully designed to be unique.

In *Getting Home*, I aimed to identify the positive potential of suburban life as well as to satirise the prejudices and hypocrisy which flourish in these communities. I wanted to provide a new perspective on the trialectics of the suburb, examining the discrepancies between the residual conception of a utopian space and the lived realities and new perceptions. What would it mean to establish a creative relationship to space or place in the twenty-first century? How do people experience the relations between utopian ideals and the realities of the environment? For my chapter headings, I drew on the selling points from the 1883 advertising poster for the Bedford Park Estate.<sup>xliii</sup>, using them as comments on the events taking place there.



## Themes & Characters: *Getting Home*

Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question- 'Is this all?'

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* ( 1963)<sup>xliv</sup>

### 1) Utopian Aspirations in the Suburbs

For second-wave feminists such as Friedan the suburb was a living death. Friedan, influenced by the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim<sup>xlv</sup>, even compared the women who married, lived in suburban homes and devoted themselves to their husbands and families with full approval of 1950s society to prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, in her notorious chapter heading “*Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp.*”

Reading this as a schoolgirl, in the suburb where I lived for the first 19 years of my life, I could not but question Friedan’s argument and, at the least, find it absurdly overstated. She was far from the first writer to find the calm, order and family-centred suburban community a kind of hell, but, much as I intended to escape that environment as soon as I could, I found her judgment shallow and insecurely founded. In the early 1960s, the entire neighbourhood still felt the trauma of World War II, and the bomb sites and estates of temporary housing for families who had been bombed out of their homes, were our playgrounds. Among our neighbours were many refugee families and others who were survivors of the Holocaust. Security and peace were precious hard-won blessings, and not regarded as instruments of oppression by the community. It also seemed to me that suburbs themselves were not anti-female; the expectations of a woman, or a man, who lived in a suburb were what imposed

oppressive norms of behaviour. These expectations were almost built into the environment in that the community had been constructed from the outset as an ideal.

## **2) Exclusion and Marginalisation of Lone Parents**

The protagonist of *Getting Home* is Stephanie Sands, a wife, mother and garden designer living in the fictional London suburb of Westwick. With the docile and non-aggressive character of a nurturer<sup>xlvi</sup>, she is perfectly content in this environment and appreciates what seems to be a supportive community and the aesthetic environment of historic houses with large gardens. She has never had cause to question her role until her husband is kidnapped on a business trip to the former Soviet Union and she becomes, effectively, a single mother. As a single mother in the suburbs myself, I was acutely aware of the status of a married woman in such a community, in which marriage to a man with earning power sufficient to sustain an aspirational lifestyle was considered an entry requirement. As a trustee of the charity for ‘lone parents’, now known as Gingerbread, from 1988 to 2003, I was also aware of the negative judgments made about single parents by those who considered themselves more fortunate. So violent was the impulse to demonise single mothers at this time that a study<sup>xlvi</sup> of British press coverage of the issue between 1993 and 1997 suggested that the single mother had become a “folk devil” in Britain. On my own bookshelf was a dog-eared copy of one of the leading parenting manuals of the time, the *Book of Child Care* (1984) by Dr Hugh Jolly, an eminent paediatrician; his only comment on the single mother was that, for the sake of her child’s welfare, she should give him (sic) up for adoption. Consequently, with *Getting Home*, I set out to challenge the prevailing stereotype of the single mother, and to demonstrate that economic difficulties, rather than marital status, represented their greatest challenge.

In presenting Westwick as a community created for ideal living, I highlighted the dysfunctional nature of the two-parent families in it: the Parsons family, emotionally deformed by the excessive ego of the mother, a TV presenter who trades upon the image of her perfect home life; the Carmans, ruthless status hounds who annexe moral high ground because both are doctors; the Pikes, a coupling which the husband regards as only temporary; and the de Souza's, a shell of a relationship in which the wife has traded sexual satisfaction for social status. By contrast, the warm, nurturing families in which the children are thriving are headed by single parents, namely Rod Fuller, a widowed fitness instructor, and Gemma Liebermann, the proprietor of a garden centre.

Stephanie only gets to know these marginalised figures after she joins them in social exclusion. They call themselves the "Witches of Westwick," a direct reference to John Updike's novel. Updike never questions the fact that his witches are united by their pariah status; instead, he suggests that, without husbands, they are sexually insatiable to a dangerous degree. My work contested this view by demonstrating the swift marginalisation of Stephanie and her children by the school, her neighbours and her husband's business associates.

### **3) Consumerism, Materialism and the Built Environment**

The third theme in the novel is of man in conflict with nature for profit. Two of the major characters, Ted Parsons and Chester Pike, are property developers. The politicising event in Stephanie's temporarily single life is the discovery that her own home, the temple of her marital existence, is threatened by the web of financial interests that has, from the very first, underpinned the creation of the community. A feature of the suburb in Britain was that the earliest, dating from the late nineteenth century, were effectively speculative developments

built for the rising middle classes. By the 1980s, however, these homes had become highly desirable real estate, sought after by profiteers such as Parsons and Pike. Ted Parsons, a secondary protagonist in the novel, discovers that his innate interest in buildings and concern for living environments eventually outweighs his greed. We meet him as a dutiful cog in the profit-generating wheel, whose emotional outlet is listening to tragic opera in his car, a habit that suggests his unexpressed feelings of anguish. As he becomes aware of the human cost of the schemes with which he's involved, he rejects his part in the consortium developing a business park, and refuses to continue as a victim of his wife's egotism. Ted finally pursues an ethical development that appeals to him and leaves his wife for Gemma, the hippyish proprietor of the Gaia garden centre; in doing the latter he also saves his two young daughters from what amounts to emotional abuse. Thus, I show how he seeks to find his own way to establish a creative and ethical relationship to the suburb, revitalizing its utopian potential through his own newly configured spatial relations.

The "establishing shots" in the novel, which orient the reader in Westwick and also mark the passage of time and the changing seasons, are written with a repeated focus on the shops in Grove Parade, the area's equivalent to Los Angeles' Rodeo Drive, a strip of premium retail outlets. The space is described as follows:

Here the municipality had been induced to create a theme park market square, with old shop fronts glowing under their preservation orders around a red granite horse trough now planted with begonias [... ]The long afternoon sun sparkled in the bottle-glass panes of Parsley & Thyme's bow window. The boy from Catchpole & Forge was sweeping up the day's sawdust. The window designer of Bon Ton slipped a Max Mara beige silk shirtwaist over the single display dummy[....]In Bundle's Baby Boutique, the

assistant, her mouth full of pins, finished a window display of sunsuits and swimming costumes.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Most of the residents do their household shopping in the large supermarkets, of which the Magno chain owned by Chester Pike's employers is the most prominent. These shops are the high-end luxury boutiques supplying what the supermarkets do not, and recreating, in the residents' eyes, the desirable ambiance of a market town in the country. This vision identifies that shift in urban geography that, thirteen years after my novel was published, prompted the Government to commission the retail consultant Mary Portas to produce a review of Britain's high streets. In the introduction, Portas cites her belief in the role of shopping in creating "communities" with some passion, and observes:

I believe that our high streets have reached a crisis point. I believe that unless urgent action is taken much of Britain will lose, irretrievably, something that is fundamental to our society. Something that has real social and well as economic worth to our communities and that after many years of erosion, neglect and mismanagement, something I felt was destined to disappear forever.<sup>xlix</sup>

#### **4) The Role of the Media in Creating Suburban Life**

West London is often referred to as a "media ghetto." The presence of the BBC Television Centre in Shepherd's Bush and the Sky Television Studios at Brentford, to which can be added the long-established studio complexes around the edge of the conurbation at Twickenham, Pinewood and Shepperton among other locations close to the western M25, means that a high proportion of media workers live in West London; at the time of writing the most celebrated residents of Chiswick were the actors Colin Firth and John Hurt, the television presenters known as Ant and Dec, and the former Deputy Director General of the



BBC, Mark Byford. The BBC Media Correspondent until 2013, Torin Douglas, edits the church newsletter. A significant proportion of opinion-forming senior media professionals appear to share the values of this community, which, consciously or unconsciously, they promote through their work. The area may well lack the liberal intellectual traditions of Hampstead or Highgate, but I have encountered distinguished television producers in various community roles, ranging from anti-traffic activists to churchwardens. They are, in all senses except the literal, pillars of the community.

The major antagonist in the novel is Allie Parsons, Ted's wife, who generates and stirs the pool of malicious gossip into which Stephanie plunges shortly after her husband disappears. Allie presents a popular TV show, *Family First*, and personifies hypocrisy of the media in shaping expectations of a middle-class wife and mother. Despite being a national arbiter of maternal values, Allie herself is the worst of mothers. It is implied that, by insisting on an elective Caesarean at a time to fit with her screen commitments, Allie has caused her first child, Damon, to be born prematurely and suffer brain damage. He has low intelligence, lack of social skills and a range of dysfunctional behaviour but she denies that there is anything wrong. She terminates her next pregnancy without telling her husband, then has two more children, both girls:

Designer babies were in vogue the year Cherish was born; models carried them down the runway at Calvin Klein. Allie cuddled her baby on camera throughout a report on breastfeeding; Cherish, who was bottle-fed like her siblings, had to be sedated for the event. The Catholic Broadcasting Union gave *Family First* the award for Most Outstanding New Show in TV.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their mother's approval, Chalice and Cherish Parsons are nervous and withdrawn to the point of seeming almost catatonic at times. They are, in fact, weapons that Allie uses to

justify the irrational rage that she directs against her husband, a rage which, the book suggests, was generated by overwhelming resentment of the demands of parenthood upon women – demands created in her own work. I intended this character to be almost consumed by this internal fury, as if the effort of presenting a hyper-perfect front as a wife and mother was burning her up from within. In a community less at pains to live perfectly, and which placed less emphasis on the ideal of nuclear family life, her ego-driven personality would perhaps have led her to choose to be childless, but in Westwick such a choice would have barred her from social acceptance and curtailed her career.

In contrast, the character of Gemma Lieberman is presented as the quintessential “good enough” mother, chaotic but loving and increasingly parented by her very organised oldest daughter, Topaz. The name of her business, Gaia, the name of one of the primordial deities in the Greek Pantheon, the goddess of the earth and the grandmother of Zeus, indicates the ancient maternal qualities of abundance, fertility and generosity which are presented in contrast to the externals that concern the mothers of Westwick, from designer clothes to developmental precocity.

Rod Fuller, who eventually usurps Allie’s role as presenter of *Family First*, is another single parent, trapped in the short career of an aerobics instructor by his commitment to his daughter, and very much the most vulnerable of the three “witches.” When he is introduced he is drinking heavily and still grieving for his wife. He too is isolated, not only by his status but also by the degree to which he, as a fit, healthy and handsome young man, is objectified by the women who take his classes. This is a reversal of the more common phenomenon of an attractive young woman who is dehumanised by men who can relate to her only in terms of her sexual attractiveness and availability.

Two minor characters are highly significant. Clara Funk is an eccentric old woman who campaigns tirelessly on community issues and who, as a resident of Westwick for decades, is also the living memory of the area. She reminds readers that these prosperous streets were once run down and the suburb itself so neglected and unfashionable that penniless refugees from Nazi Germany could afford to settle there, and also indicates that far worse things happen in the world than the petty misdemeanours of wealthy families. Her traditional methods of protecting the community, letter-writing and local politics, are less effective than the media-savvy campaigns of the activist Crusty. The eco-warrior in his luxury yurt indicates the future as one of an outwardly more responsible, aware and ethical generation; nevertheless he is a highly sophisticated manipulator of the media. It takes little imagination to see Crusty in ten years' time with a column in *The Observer* and a regular chair on *Question Time*.

**Themes & Characters: *Mister Fabulous and Friends***

So you finally named the day when wedding bells will chime  
I was sorry to hear you say, you're gonna be his not mine  
Do you think you will be happy, giving up your friends  
For your semi-detached suburban Mr. James

So you finally got your man, I hope you won't regret it  
He can't love you the way I can, so please don't you forget it  
Do you think you will be happy, buttering the toast  
Of your semi-detached suburban Mr. Most

I can see you in the morning time  
Washing day, the weather's fine

Hanging things upon the line

And as your life slips away, ay, ay - yeah

So you finally named the day when wedding bells will chime

I was sorry to hear you say, you're gonna be his not mine

So you think you will be happy, taking doggie for a walk

With your semi-detached suburban Mr. James (semi-detached suburban Mr. James)

Semi-detached suburban Mr. James

Mike d'Abo. *Semi Detached Suburban Mr. James*. (1966)

The Manfred Mann song quoted here made it clear that no suburban husband could be considered rock'n'roll. *Mister Fabulous And Friends* is a novel rooted deeply in observation of the men around me in suburban West London. The band which unites the protagonists, main events and even lines of dialogue were drawn from life and arranged into a book which explores the tensions in men's lives as they struggle to resolve the conflict between ideals of masculinity and the roles of father and breadwinner. The men are not the only ones who cannot resolve the opposition between these two sets of values and, while the central characters of the novel are male, the female characters are also conflicted in their expectations of their partners.

### 1) Suburban Masculinity

If the suburbs have been considered oppressive to women, the imposition of rigid and idealised gender stereotypes in pursuit of the unattainable suburban ideal has been no less painful for men. In Manfred Mann's song the counterculture of the 1960s articulated the artists' contempt for the uncreative, almost sub-human male who would willingly discharge

the role of breadwinner in exchange for unenthusiastic sex and domestic services. The song is a gentler, more individual and more domestic extension of Bob Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man*, released the year before, with its refrain of contempt for the bourgeois conformist, in Dylan's case the A & R men who did not understand his music: "Something is happening here/ But you don't know what it is/ Do you, Mr. Jones?"

For many, the suburb is female territory and the real life of the male is conducted in the city.<sup>li</sup> The attributes valued in a suburban community, such as conformity, social skills and parenting, are at odds with the masculine norms identified by Ronald F. Levant in his influential work, entitled *Masculinity Reconstructed: Changing the Rules of Manhood -At Work, in Relationships, and in Family Life* (1995). These included: avoidance of femininity; restricted emotions; sex disconnected from intimacy; pursuit of achievement and status; self-reliance; strength and aggression; and homophobia.<sup>lii</sup> Of these, only the pursuit of achievement and status sat easily with the values of suburbia.

The norms of masculinity, as Levant defined them<sup>liii</sup>, did not require a man to establish or sustain any kind of emotional relationship, nor did they extend to any fatherly role, something that was certainly a cardinal attribute of masculinity for previous generations. A father's biological role was a key indicator of masculinity for the Victorians<sup>liv</sup> and men in public life who were childless, such as John Stuart Mill or John Ruskin, had to endure insinuated slurs on their masculinity. However, John Tosh also notes that the actual role of the father within the much-prized family was unclear by the nineteenth-century, suggesting that industrialisation had by that time already removed the father from the home for most of his waking hours.<sup>lv</sup>

In my first non-fiction book, *Glitter: The Truth About Fame*,<sup>lvi</sup> I noted the role that rock stars play in society by acting out the transgressive behaviours associated with masculinity, such as

promiscuity, drug-taking, violence and, at an almost domestic level, wearing bizarre and provocative clothes and makeup, making a lot of noise, getting dirty and sleeping late. They project a picture of testosterone overload, the normal state of many male teenagers, and thus act as scapegoats for the law-abiding adult male, functioning as sacrificial figures who take on the anti-social traits of masculinity. When I lived in West London, I discovered that the phenomenon of the rock band composed of middle-aged suburban fathers was widespread. These bands played regularly in the local pubs and provided a space and a context for the “rock’n’roll lifestyle” which was otherwise forbidden to their members in their adult lives. Such a band became the central motif of the novel; four of the band members – Andy, Mick, Richard and Sam – were relatively successful middle-class professionals while the fifth, George, was frozen in his teenage persona as a biker boy and amateur drug dealer of no fixed abode. The other four characters had, in effect, seconded their anti-social masculinity to George to act out. His death, therefore, is the inciting incident of the narrative

## **2) Men in Middle Life**

“Menopause.” The word itself is female, meaning the cessation of a woman’s reproductive cycle, the end of her fertility. Men, by definition, cannot be menopausal, although they suffer similar hormonal changes and a reduction in fertility. At the time that *Mister Fabulous and Friends* was written, recognition of the biological changes affecting men in mid-life was developing. A specialist clinic, the Well Man Clinic, had been set up in Harley Street, the London Street where leading medical specialists have consulting rooms, in 1999. Today, every pharmacy sells vitamin formulations aimed at men aged 50 or more, and many National Health surgeries include a Well Man clinic. We are some way, however, from universal acceptance of the idea that a specific range of symptoms, both physical and psychological, are associated with the middle years of a man’s life. The terms, “andropause,”

“viropause,” and even “menopause” are used but there is still not universally accepted term for a man’s mid-life challenges. These are defined by Jill Shaw Ruddock, founder of The Second Life Foundation, as follows:

a decreased sex drive, lower energy, reduced strength and endurance, erections that are less strong, a diminished ability to play sports, and a decreased zest for life. Falling asleep after dinner as well as a constant questioning of values, accomplishments and future directions are also classic symptoms of lower testosterone.<sup>lvii</sup>

My research indicated that there were other common symptoms. Hot flushes and excessive sweating are experienced by men as well as women,<sup>lviii</sup> from similar causes – fluctuating hormone levels. Depression and the re-emergence of adolescent emotional difficulties also happen to both sexes and patterns of weight gain also change.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this life passage in men is a sudden and inappropriate attraction to very young women, as depicted in the film *American Beauty* (1999). This film, added to my own observations, inspired *Mister Fabulous And Friends*. Directed by Sam Mendes, who was 34 years old at the time, the film was written by a veteran screenwriter, Alan Ball, who has cited a real life incident as his prompt – the affair between a 35 year old Long Island garage owner, Joey Buttafuoco, and a 16 year old girl, Amy Fisher.<sup>lix</sup> The affair became a national scandal when Fisher shot her lover’s wife in the face, after which he was convicted of statutory rape, sodomy and endangering the welfare of a child – charges to which he pleaded not guilty. Fisher was also jailed for the shooting.

I was struck by the inherent misogyny of the film, which portrays the protagonist’s wife harshly as a neurotic, almost OCD, home-maker, and dwells at length on extended fantasy

sequences on the physical beauty of the young girl with whom the protagonist is infatuated. When they begin to have sex, the protagonist nobly stops caressing the girl when she reveals that she is a virgin. The writer seemed to me to have extrapolated the motif of a middle-aged man and a schoolgirl from the Buttafuoco case, adding ten years to the age difference in the process, and created the film as an apology for a male sexual phenomenon, compulsive sexual interest in females close to the age of puberty, recently considered as a specific variant of paedophilia.<sup>lx</sup>

Overall the protagonist is shown as craving his lost youth in other ways, such as abandoning his career for a job flipping burgers, and this instinct is endowed with nobility. The film seemed to me to gild the phenomenon of the almost compulsive attraction some middle-aged men feel for much younger women. The 1960s insouciance of Vladimir Nabokov in *Lolita*, an elegant literary apology for the middle-aged paedophile, had faded by the end of the twentieth century and was beginning to appear deeply questionable. Considering that such a theme would be sensationalised in the novel's reception, I decided not to include this motif. That was not the book I wanted to write.

My own community abounded in examples of men whose judgment seemed to have failed in other ways as they reached middle age, causing personal pain, professional failure and, in a few cases, financial ruin. I chose to reflect different aspects of this phenomenon in each character. While George, who has never grown up, behaves as an adolescent male, the remaining four band members, who have assumed the roles of mature adult men, experience challenges to their masculinity. Andy, the novel's protagonist, has been confined within his home – female territory – as he establishes a second, self-employed, career. He is a “good” husband and father, but his wife no longer feels any desire for him and he is increasingly bewildered by her contempt. A gay couple move in next door, and the less stable of the two



men develops a crush on Andy. Mick, a commercials director, sees his career hitting the buffers in an industry that is youth-oriented; unable to articulate his anxiety, he simply runs away. Richard, a surgeon, is trapped in his marriage to a highly neurotic and emotionally abusive woman. Professionally, he becomes a victim of ageism. He has sought comfort in an affair with Mick's wife – which is serious to him, but not to her. Finally Sam, after sustaining a dishonest relationship with a woman he has bullied into inadequacy, decides to leave his wife for the higher-status partner he considers his due, but his years of deceit have reduced his emotional intelligence, blinding him to the fact that his new partner is a prostitute.

Contemporary novels about men in mid-life seemed to me to avoid sexual and biological issues. *The Information* by Martin Amis<sup>lxi</sup> and *Therapy* by David Lodge<sup>lxii</sup> both concerned writers in mid-career disenchantment, narcissistic creatures with whom it was hard to empathise. Novels by women, in contrast, were beginning to celebrate meeting the challenges of mid-life and the sisterhood of older women, particularly popular novels such as *The First Wives' Club* (1992) by Olivia Goldsmith<sup>lxiii</sup> and Nancy Thayer's *Hot Flash Club*<sup>lxiv</sup> series, published in the UK from 2005 onwards. It is noticeable that popular writers and mainstream films have been more willing to investigate the phenomena of mid-life, although perhaps the most successful voyage into this territory remains *Mrs Dalloway* (1926)<sup>lxv</sup> constructed from two short stories and capturing a successful society hostess in the act of reflecting on her life and her choices as death begins to deplete the circle of her friends.

With *Mister Fabulous and Friends*, I aimed to explore issues around shifting constructions of masculinity, examining the ways in which men rose to the challenges concerning conflicting expectations of masculinity; alarming physical changes; relationship breakdown and family tensions; and, the prospect of death. As well as locating the story in the feminised territory of

a suburb, I chose to give both Mickey and Andy careers in the notoriously youth-oriented advertising industry. Andy has already been “outplaced” at the start of the novel, while Mickey comes under increasing pressure from a younger director. He also experiences excessive sweating, which generates the anxiety that he may have been infected with HIV. Richard, like Mickey, finds himself suffering from assumptions that a middle-aged man will be racist, uncool and out of touch with younger generations. By drawing these men together in a group, I found a way to address collective and individual concerns.

### **Rock Music and Masculinity**

It is possible to write an entire thesis on presentations of masculinity in rock music, and many people have done so. For the purposes of this novel, I narrowed the thematic focus of the music to two genres: the American folk blues of the 1950s, also called delta blues, country blues or front-porch blues, the inspiration for The Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen and a great many other rock performers; and the “hair metal” bands of the 1980s, also part of the folk blues legacy, but louder, sweeter and built around good-looking performers, notably Jon Bon Jovi.

“The blues” is a colloquial expression for sadness or unhappiness, and blues singing typically expresses these emotions. The novel begins with a quotation from the folk blues guitarist and songwriter John Lee Hooker: “No matter what anybody says, it all comes down to the same thing: a man and a woman, a broken heart and a broken home.”<sup>lxvi</sup> The suggestion is that life is inherently sad, a philosophy at odds with the striving for comfort, security and happiness embodied in a suburb such as Westwick. Folk blues was also known as rhythm’n’blues or R&B until the evolution of contemporary R&B in the 1980s. It is an inescapable influence in rock, but I emphasized the connection in this novel to highlight the difficulty that the male characters have in identifying and expressing their feelings:

On the second Friday of each month, these five immigrants from reality arrived at the Beehive (pub) in search of a better quality of life.....being at least three-fifths intelligent and three-fifths sensitive, they knew they were a bunch of lucky white men who were still obsessed with ghetto music because their own language had no words for pain.<sup>lxvii</sup>

The genre of blues enables them to give creative expression to their inner feelings of loneliness and futility.

Ironically, the character of Andy Forrest is imagined with the gift of a Bon Jovi voice so Mister Fabulous himself, in life the most domesticated of the band members, sounds like a wild man on stage. Bon Jovi is one of the most successful bands of all time and one of the highest earning, ranked No 2 in the list of rock'n'roll millionaires in their last touring year, 2011.<sup>lxviii</sup> The band itself embodies the contradictions in the men's lives, in that its music is positioned very close, but not quite inside, the boundary of pop and the visual presentation of the band, while nowhere near as extreme as glam-rock acts such as Kiss, nor as deliberately androgynous as contemporaries such as Prince or Boy George, is equally far from the ripped-denim-and-axle-grease aesthetics of Bruce Springsteen. The classic Bon Jovi look includes studded leather and long hair that is clearly both highlighted and extended. The argument is that the masculinist qualities of high volume, a driving beat and male-oriented lyrics "allow" the band to make a feminised fashion statement. The particular relevance of this band to the argument of the novel is thus that Andy himself needs to achieve the same balance in himself, between assertive masculinity and the "feminine" quality of caring for his family.

A third musical influence in the novel is an eccentric British group called The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, often more simply known as the Bonzos. Formed in the 1960s, and, like the band of the novel, a group of art school students at the time, they mixed music hall, acid pop

and traditional jazz with surreal comedy. In the novel the reference to the Bonzos underlines the creative, iconoclastic and revolutionary instincts of the youth that all but George have left behind. Mickey, however, still has the Bonzo spirit and will rediscover it by the end of the book, taking his artistic career to a new level.

### **Friendship between Men**

The five men who are *Mister Fabulous and Friends* share a friendship based on their student days, a typical form identified by Geoffrey Greif in his book *Buddy System: Understanding Male Friendships*<sup>lxix</sup> as “rust friends.” Greif defines this form of friendship as follows:

[...] rust friends, guys from high school or the neighborhood who knew and accepted everyone in the group before adulthood intervened. For many men, being with rust friends is a chance to revert back to being 16 again. [...] For those men who have achieved great success in adulthood, returning to the friends who liked them in the old days, their rust friends, can be a refuge from those who only want to be with them for their trappings.

Following Greif’s argument, I suggest that four of my characters are successful men who find comfort in reassuming their youthful identities, while George, who has never become an adult in emotional or material terms, is comforted by the company of others who accept him as he is.

Grief has characterised male friendships<sup>lxx</sup> as “shoulder to shoulder” relationships while friendships among women, in which greater intimacy and disclosure is typical, are “face to face” friendships. This presented me with a problem as a writer, in that my male characters would not credibly share their emotions or discuss intimate topics and all the information which I could give the reader about their feelings would need to be conveyed through

external events or actions. As the work Deborah Tannen<sup>lxxi</sup> has explained, men and women have entirely different communication styles. These differences are so profound that Tannen created the term “genderlect” to describe them. When I listened to men talking after tennis games at my local health club, or sharing conversations at suburban Christmas parties invariably polarised by gender, I noted the reluctance to disclose any personal information at all, to reduce talk itself to a minimum and choose neutral, external foci for discussion, such as cars or sport on TV. Even opinions seemed to be off-limits, as likely to reveal differences which would strain the bonds of friendship. I found myself facing number of challenges about how to give expression to men’s silence, self-censorship, and nonverbal efforts at communication.

I resolved this dilemma in part by following the playwright Yasmina Reza, in her play *Art* (1994)<sup>lxxii</sup> and allowing my male characters to talk, at least to themselves in internal monologue, more like women than men. However, I wanted to acknowledge the difference between the genders in terms of communication, and show that some men could suffer for their silence. George, of course, commits suicide as the only way he is able to acknowledge his sense of failure. Richard has never been able to talk to his lover, Mo, about his hopes for their future. The least communicative of the friends is Mickey, whose intelligence is visual rather than verbal, but his relationship with his wife Mo, despite infidelity on both sides, is the strongest of the marriages in the book, as both of them communicate by non-verbal means and understand each other, even if they do not articulate their feelings. Mickey, however, is also driven to extreme behaviour as his sense of stress increases. He witnesses a plane crash and sees it as an opportunity to fake his own death. He makes a random choice of destination at the airport, spends a weekend in a small town in Denmark but, in the isolation enforced by a blizzard there, is able to commit his life to a new direction, in which Mo supports him. In portraying this relationship, I intended to challenge the consensual wisdom that a healthy

marriage depends on emotional disclosure. It seemed to me that this belief required men to recognise and express their feelings in a way that is not compatible with the social construct of masculinity, placing them in a double-bind. And expressive man, such as Andy, gained only the contempt of his wife with what is now called emotional intelligence.

## **PART 2 – The Gender Reversal Novels: *Heartswap* & *Wild Weekend***

### **Role Reversal as a Literary Device**

The two novels that I will explore in this section are both based on classic dramatic works, *Heartswap* on the opera *Così fan tutte* and *Wild Weekend* on the play *She Stoops to Conquer*. The novels transpose the classic narratives to the present day and switch the genders of the characters. For the psychologist, role reversal is a psycho-dramatic technique used by therapists to increase their patient's awareness of the dynamics of the role they are playing in a relationship. It can help the therapeutic protagonist to feel and understand the behaviour of the other person in a relationship and also to gain a perspective on their own actions and feelings.

Role reversal is a particularly useful technique in exposing hierarchical relationships or a discriminatory environment which the protagonist wishes to challenge, and it was this dynamic that attracted me to the device. Writers may choose to reverse the gender roles of their characters in order to interrogate stereotypical assumptions and also because of the immediate and inherent comedy in the switch. Shakespeare, with the added bonus that women's roles were played by boys in the Elizabethan theatre, employed the device in one of his earliest, if not his first, plays, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1589-92) and again in *As You Like It* (1599-1600). In both plays the female character who disguises herself as a man gains immediate insights into her situation, and the playwright has the opportunity to explore the true nature of male and female, as he does when Rosalind says:

“..... in my heart

Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will -

We'll have a swashing and a martial outside,

As many other mannish cowards have

That do outface it with their semblances.”<sup>lxxiii</sup>

Later writers questioned gender-based norms in more extreme scenarios. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1927) has been described<sup>lxxiv</sup> as a love-letter to Vita Sackville-West and also a veiled autobiography. Woolf wrote in her diary that *Orlando* was to be "Vita, only with a change from one sex to another."<sup>lxxv</sup> In the novel itself, as the eponymous protagonist changes from man to woman, she wrote: "Orlando had become a woman there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity." The novel's implication then is that gender determines nothing but the responses of others. The same point was later also made forcefully in 1967, by Gore Vidal in his novel *Myra Breckinridge* (1967)<sup>lxxvi</sup>, a sexually explicit and ragingly camp satire in which the protagonist, introduced as an attractive young woman, reveals herself to be a biological man in the process of gender-reassignment surgery. Frank Altman considered the novel to be "part of a major cultural assault on the assumed norms of gender and sexuality which swept the western world in the late 1960s and early 1970s."<sup>lxxvii</sup>

In millennial London a new interest in the technique was galvanised shortly after Shakespeare's Globe theatre opened in 1997, dedicated to offering audiences an authentic Elizabethan theatrical experience which, under Mark Rylance as Artistic Director, included men playing female roles. Rylance himself played Cleopatra in the theatre's season of the Roman plays in 1999, but the ensuing public debate centred on the question of authenticity rather than what a male actor might bring to the interpretation of a female role. In this



climate, however, what interested me were the societal responses and assumptions that were gender based, and it was this line of inquiry that led me to choose two classic comic texts, reimagine them for the millennial era and reverse the genders of their characters.

### ***Così fan tutte* and Themes & Characters in *Heartswap***

***“Opera is very cruel to women.” Philip Hensher<sup>lxxviii</sup>***

*Così fan tutte*, which could very loosely be translated as *They’re All the Same*, was a scandalous work from its premiere and outraged even the patriarchal society of Vienna in the late eighteenth century with its cynical misogyny. Subtitled *The School for Lovers*, it concerns two young army officers who, at the start of the opera, are blissfully in love and convinced their fiancées will always be faithful. An older man, Don Alfonso, argues that all women are fickle, plays on the anxiety he arouses in the young men and persuades them to adopt disguises and to pay court to each other’s fiancées. The sixth character in the plot is the maid and confidante of the two women, Despina, who urges them to succumb to their two new suitors.

The libretto is one of the few original works by Lorenzo da Ponte, a friend and contemporary of Casanova and also an ordained Catholic priest, who was exiled from his native Venice for womanising but found his feet in Vienna.<sup>lxxix</sup> The opera seemed cursed at birth. A few days after its first performance the creators’ patron, the Emperor Franz Joseph, died and theatres were closed in mourning. The libertarian spirit of the eighteenth century was dying too. Soon Da Ponte was forced to leave Vienna. Mozart was never fully paid for the work and died shortly afterwards. The opera almost at once fell into an obscurity from which it did not emerge until the 1940s.

The exquisite brilliance of *Così*'s score almost intensifies the bitter, misogynistic cynicism of the story. Within a few lines of the beginning of the opera, the manipulative Don Alfonso argues: *E la fede delle femmine/Come l'araba fenice: /Che vi sia, ciascun lodice; /Dovia sia...nessun lo sa.* (The fidelity of women is like the Arabian phoenix. Everyone says it exists, but where ...nobody knows.”). This saying had been current in libretti for half a century by the time Da Ponte appropriated it.

Philip Hensher observes,

critics, almost immediately, found some good artistic reasons why *Così Fan Tutte* should be dropped. This upsetting, artificial story of a psychological experiment, ....very soon started to seem immoral, or heartless. [...]

In many 19th-century accounts, Beethoven is said to have loathed it. [...]. For the most part, the 19th century found *Così* distasteful, unfunny, morally ugly and unworthy of Mozart/ [...]one standard critical belief was that there is a gulf between the purity and beauty of the music and the degraded vulgarity of the libretto.<sup>lxxx</sup>

It was not only the cruelty and cynicism of the story that I disliked, but the almost surreal level of misogyny in both its creation and its narrative. Here were da Ponte and Mozart, two men whose promiscuity was deplored even in their libertarian age, arguing that *women* were inherently promiscuous. Here was a narrative in which two women are called “unfaithful” but the two men who seduce them are held to be guiltless.

Here too was a story predicated on the faithlessness of women, when men are more likely than women to betray their partners. The most authoritative statistical survey was carried out in America, the US General Social Survey, sponsored by the National Science Foundation

and based at the University of Chicago which used a national representative sample to track the opinions and social behaviours of Americans since 1972. This work is on a larger scale than UK research. It suggested that, among married couples, about twice as many men cheat as women. The survey data show that in any given year, about 12 percent of men and 7 percent of women say they have had sex outside their marriage. Data for infidelity over a lifetime show similar results. Anecdotally, there is far more evidence of male infidelity than of female. At the time I was writing *Heartswap*, the scandal of President Clinton's liaison with Monica Lewinsky was making headlines around the world, a coincidence which nevertheless underlined the timeliness of the novel.

Moreover, disproportionate jealousy related to infidelity is also more common in men than women. A recent study of almost 64,000 people by Chapman University in California<sup>lxxxi</sup> also confirms that heterosexual men are far more disturbed by their mates' infidelity than women. "Heterosexual men really stand out from all other groups," said psychologist and lead author David Frederick, in a statement. "They were the only ones more likely to be most upset by sexual infidelity."

To me the opera reflects the male fears about female infidelity which, throughout human history, have been used to justify the oppression of women through a panorama of legal and social constraints, from the execution of Anne Boleyn in Renaissance England on charges of adultery which are now considered to have been fabricated, to the imposition of the niqab, chador or burqa in Islamic countries in our own times. In particular, I wanted to focus on the idea of the fidelity test, a concept that appears to be as old as the human race, with the Greek myth of Procris and Cephalus introducing very early in our written history the idea that obsessional concern for your mate's fidelity cannot end well. The story, retold by Ovid, was the subject of at least six operatic treatments before da Ponte. Cephalus, a hunter, is married

to Procris but allows Eos, goddess of the dawn, to seduce him. Tired of being compared to his wife, however, Eos plants doubts about her fidelity in Cephalus' mind. Cephalus disguises himself and tries to seduce Procris – perhaps where da Ponte got the idea – and she wavers. Cephalus then reveals himself and Procris runs away to the forest to join the goddess Artemis. Later she returns, bringing Cephalus irresistible gifts, an infallible hunting dog and spear that never misses. The couple are reunited, but then Procris hears that her husband is cheating again. She hides in a bush to spy on him when he's hunting but when Cephalus hears rustling, he hurls the non-missing spear, and kills his wife. Overcome with grief and remorse, Cephalus throws himself off a cliff.

I had long cherished the idea of reversing genders in the story of *Così fan tutte*. By 1999, when women were visible in the workplace and, in younger age groups at least, earning comparably with men, and young women were also becoming assertive in sexual relationships, the scenario seemed plausible and offered a valuable opportunity to interrogate post-feminist struggles to redefine gender roles. In particular, I became interested in post-feminist misanthropy, sometimes termed misandry, a phenomenon I had observed among my own circle of acquaintance as well as in intellectual debate in both the UK and US. The reception of the play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996)<sup>lxxxii</sup> crystallised the issue, particularly with the subsequent move to rename Valentine's Day as V-Day and reinvent the traditional celebration of romantic love as a day of protest against sexual violence. A critic of the move, Helen McElroy<sup>lxxxiii</sup> was one of many who questioned the elision of masculinity and violence against women. In *Heartswap* I sought to examine female misandry within the conventions of chick-lit, the form of romantic fiction in the late twentieth century.

### **The Women – Georgie and Flora**

My first task was to devise characters for the two women that would provide a satisfying axis for the whole novel. Georgie, whose androgynous name was a deliberate choice, is a city girl in the mould of the figures created by Candace Bushnell in *Sex And The City*,<sup>lxxxiv</sup> a successful professional whose major challenges are in defining her identity as a woman, which entails marrying the qualities needed in her career with the cultural expectations of a woman as a sexual partner and wife. In my novel, I describe young women in the City of London as follows:

They were fluid, flexible, future-friendly, multi-skilled, relational, communicative, radiant with intelligence, swift with modesty, aware of their superiority and above competitiveness. Which is to say, they competed only over things that did not matter. It was simple, really: they were women. Tomorrow belonged to them.

As they moved through the ancient alleys (of the City of London) they left the others behind, the men who strolled obliviously in twos and threes, men illogically uniformed in dark blue suits[...]men who were rigid, bloated, wordless, incapable of evolving and stuck in eternal childhood. Tomorrow was a fugitive shadow that glanced back at them with a regretful face. They were loud because they were afraid but they had no words for their fear and so no-one heard them. They looked about them but only a few of their neurones could register what was happening. Thus the dinosaurs blundered towards their last grazing grounds.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

Georgie is also woman in the traditional male role of breadwinner and provider, holding down a city job which she despises in order to pay the care home fees for her charming elderly father. While she can act assertively in her profession, she is easily undermined in her personal life by her fiancé, Felix, who turns her own moral sensitivity against her in order to increase her emotional dependence on him. Flora, in contrast, presents herself as a spiritually

aware New Age therapist, a pose which disguises her exploitative and materialistic nature. She is the dominant party in her relationship with Dillon and of the two friends she is the more enthusiastic about the deception, feeling that she can do better for a mate than this essentially good-natured insurance executive.

### **The Men – Felix and Dillon**

To the experienced reader of romantic fiction it would immediately be apparent that neither of these relationships is built to last, and that the kind-hearted and decent Dillon is destined for the honourable but put-upon Georgie, but too traditional in outlook to consider himself enough of an Alpha male to have a chance with a high-earning city girl. In translating the scenario to millennial London, I added the device of the women boss from hell to this character's sufferings. In acting as a good traditional male, establishing a career to enable him to start a family, Dillon becomes the victim of both Flora and Donna, his boss, the figure equivalent to Don Alfonso in the opera. Felix, in contrast, appears to be an altruistic and successful medical researcher. The discerning reader is soon aware that his character is fundamentally controlling and it also becomes clear that, in pursuit of his professional aims, Felix has no moral scruples whatever. After this, the reader should conclude that Felix and Flora deserve each other.

### **The manipulators – Donna and Des**

The opera scenario locates the instigation of the fidelity test clearly with the malevolent Don Alfonso, described simply as an older friend of the two younger male characters. I translated this figure into Donna, a successful professional woman who has put her career and its material benefits above her emotional needs – if, indeed, she has any. I envisaged her as the victim of the extreme feminism of the 1970s, who had adopted the mid-century male lifestyle

model promoted for women in the Thatcher years (power suits, long hours,<sup>lxxxvi</sup> promiscuity) and saw the efforts of the younger women to establish different balances between work and life as a threat to her guiding philosophy. Donna's choices reflect the dilemma that faced professional women at this time, when the ideal of having it all had met the buffers of the 1980s workplace culture in the UK and USA. Research by Rosemary Crompton and others into gender and employment concluded:

There would seem to be a growing body of evidence to the effect that contemporary strategies of employee management in contemporary capitalism are making it more, rather than less, problematic to combine employment and family life....the current intensification of paid employment associated with organisational 'cultures of excellence' and 'high commitment' management are likely to lead to greater world-family conflict[. . . .]Although gender role attitudes are certainly in the process of transformation, a combination of workplace pressures may seriously inhibit their capacities for realisation.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

Despina, the maid in *Così*, is interestingly the most nuanced and sympathetic character in the libretto, a powerless, disadvantaged woman who cannot refuse Don Alfonso's demand that she support his scheme. I translated Despina as Des, the estate agent who is engaged by Dillon to sell his flat and who ultimately has the power to bring Georgie and Dillon together. Apart from the general contempt which his profession elicited at that time and continues to receive, Des's own background, as the son of chaotic hippies, has denied him a model of nurturing love or domestic happiness, and he vainly looks for a lasting relationship in London's gay club scene. In the final scenes of the narrative, however, he emerges as an old-style romantic.

## Secondary Theme: New Liberal Hypocrisy

In thinking about the environment of millennial London, I was also struck by the hypocritical dimension of New Age morality evident in societal movements at that time. The vegetarians, vegans, Buddhists and eco-warriors of my acquaintance were the most intolerant and fanatical people I knew. The political climate that was soon to produce a response in Jonah Goldberg's book *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Change*<sup>lxxxviii</sup> was already showing symptoms of totalitarian control. The New Labour government of Tony Blair seemed anxious to micromanage every citizen's life from *in utero* to death. The "lexicon of control" that is now a mainstream concern<sup>lxxxix</sup> was in clear development. In my own life, as the street representative in our community council, I heard delegates leave meetings with the dire imprecation, "I hope none of you made an unnecessary car journey to get here tonight."

That control also seemed tinged with guilt and unease about the unnatural, deracinated and inherently fragile way of life in cities in the developed world, so that punitive legislation was directed against farmers and rural communities (q v) while urban initiatives such as food labelling and cycle paths (not to mention the relaxation of financial control in the City of London) were facilitated. This theme is worked out throughout the novel. It is clear that both Flora and Felix claim the moral high ground in their relationships and use it to control and exploit their partners. Donna uses the "immorality" of politically incorrect ideas to seduce American business associates, while Flora, nominally a vegetarian, similarly employs the forbidden excitement of the bullfight meat to tempt Felix. The implication is that immorality is not a sexual or relational concept to these characters, but a matter of consumption and lifestyle.



### ***She Stoops to Conquer and the Themes & Characters: Wild Weekend***

The inspiration for *Wild Weekend* gathered momentum from the earliest days of the New Labour Government in 1997. The polarisation of metropolitan and rural Britain was immediate. Within weeks of the landslide victory of the Labour Party, led by Tony Blair, three formerly amiable minority-interest groups which shared concerns about the new government merged to become The Countryside Alliance, in July 1997. New Labour's opposition to field sports, especially fox hunting, was the catalyst for this change and by 2002 The Countryside Alliance organised its first protest march against the proposed legislation, in which 400,000 people took part.

The sense that rural industries were disadvantaged, and that the rights and needs of rural communities carried no weight in a democracy predicated largely on voter numbers, had been inflamed by the outbreak of the deadly livestock infection foot-and-mouth disease in 2001. This event, which agricultural scientists considered was the product of long term underfunding and marginalisation of the farming sector, brought government and rural communities into dramatic conflict. Two cases of the disease were identified, leading to the cull of an estimated 10 million cattle, pigs and sheep, the vast majority of which were perfectly healthy.<sup>xc</sup> The news media were dominated for weeks by apocalyptic scenes of carcasses being incinerated and the remains tipped into landfill sites. One farmer described coming home after seeing thousands of his animals slaughtered and burnt, to watch politicians on the TV as if they were creatures from "another planet."<sup>xc</sup><sup>ci</sup>

Traumatic as these events were, they did not inspire a strong artistic response. It seemed as if the British intelligentsia, many of whom were initially New Labour supporters, felt unable to break ranks and express empathy with the farming community. "Have we really seen anything analyse that artistically, as a crisis is in British farming and in British identity?"

demanding Hannah McGill, the critic and former artistic director of the Edinburgh International Film Festival, in 2015, reviewing the film *Blood Cells* which used the tragedy as a context.<sup>xcii</sup> This trauma came shortly after another public health scare whose basis lay in the thoughtless application of market logic to agriculture. Research into the origins of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) in the UK led to a complete ban on the sale of bone-in joints of beef, another mass cull of cattle in which thousands of animals were slaughtered and a ten year ban on British beef exports to the EU which lasted from 1996 to 2006.

A change that expressed the uneasy relationship between country and city was the adoption of the word “countryside” in place of “country” to describe rural areas. No longer was Britain as a “country” defined by green fields and villages. While this change in usage was not officially specified, as far as I can discover, it was evident in changes such as the renaming of “The Country Code” of 1981 as “The Countryside Code” in 2004. The code is a set of guidelines for people who are not part of a rural community, telling them how to act in a responsible and environmentally aware way in a rural area. The “Countryside Code” was far shorter than its predecessor, and advice on the care and safety of livestock was one of the many suggestions that was removed.

At the same time, the animal rights movement was gathering strength in Britain and was not always a force for good. Some events in *Wild Weekend* were directly inspired by episodes that I observed, such as the phenomenon of fox-dumping. Animal rights activists working in urban areas misguidedly captured urban foxes and released them in the countryside, where the majority of animals were ill equipped to survive and died. The lack of knowledge and understanding among the animal rights movement seemed striking. In one case, in the area of Suffolk where some of my family lived, dead foxes were frequently found because the

animals' rescuers had fitted them with flea collars, which eventually strangled any that survived long enough to grow in size. Also evident were the obsessional and sometimes illegal activities of hunt saboteurs, who had begun to take extreme action to impede the progress of fox hunts:

Hunt supporters, Master of Foxhounds (MFH) and Hunt Kennels have been targeted by these groups as have those with high profiles, royalty and politicians [13]. Letter bombs, incendiary devices, hidden wire.... are all examples of the more sinister side of Animal Rights Terrorism.<sup>xciii</sup>

There was no doubt that urban and rural Britain had almost become two different countries, and that there was great hostility and little understanding between them.

The conflict was a new face for an enduring divide. Urban and rural societies have had an uneasy relationship ever since the first cities emerged. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, considered by many to be the first written work of literature, concerns the degenerate ruler of the city of Uruk in Mesopotamia whose excesses are curbed through his friendship with Enkidu, a man of extraordinary strength who lives outside the city walls, "born in the grasslands and the wild hills reared him."<sup>xciv</sup> In the early books of the poem, Enkidu is presented as a moral force whose authority is rooted in the natural world. Gilgamesh attempts to claim *droit de seigneur* and rape a young bride, and Enkidu prevents him. They fight, but become friends and Gilgamesh, a historical figure, was subsequently the greatest ruler of his era.

There are many playful elaborations of the theme. Aesop's fable of *The Town Mouse And The Country Mouse* is itself a version of a Green folk tale, and was reinterpreted throughout Europe for centuries, with La Fontaine's *Le rat de ville et le rat des champs* (1668) and Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Johnny Town Mouse* (1918) prominent among the more naïve

versions, while authors such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift used the theme in political satires. The essence of the story is that a sophisticated urban mouse visits his country cousin and sneers at his poverty. When the country mouse visits the town mouse, however, they are attacked by dogs, and the country mouse goes home, saying he prefers poverty and peace to luxury and violence

When the Irish playwright Oliver Goldsmith took up the theme in *She Stoops To Conquer* he added the irresistible dimensions of class and sex to the story. The National Theatre, which revived the play in 2012, billed it as “one of the great, generous-hearted and ingenious comedies of the English language,” – interestingly omitting any mention of the urban/rural standoff at the heart of the piece. The playwright’s father and grandfather were clergymen in rural Ireland, where he was educated until going to Dublin as a student and thence, by way of many adventures, to London, a trajectory which gave him ample experience of the contrast between city and country. The play was first performed in 1777 in London, a few months before Goldsmith’s early death, and has been revived all over the world at frequent intervals ever since. It seemed to me to offer an inherently positive and comic context in which to satirise the metrocentrism of the New Labour era.

Goldsmith is often considered with his countryman and contemporary Richard Brinsley Sheridan as a leading playwright of the Georgian school, who wrote “laughing comedies” in response to the moralising “sentimental comedies” championed by Colly Cibber earlier in the eighteenth century, and the worthy Shakespeare obsession of David Garrick, the two actor-managers and writers who arguably established the British theatre as we now know it. Garrick rejected *She Stoops to Conquer* when Goldsmith offered it to him in 1773. In my novel, as homage, I named the Labrador owned by Annabel Hardcastle, Garrick; the exclamation, “Down, Garrick! Bad dog,” occurs several times.

The play can fairly be called a farce. Its subtitle is *The Events of an Evening*. It takes place in two buildings in one village, in one night, and relies on multiple misunderstandings for comedy. As it tells the story of a young couple brought together in spite of themselves, it can also be classified as a romantic comedy. In the play, Mr Hardcastle, the country squire, hopes to marry his daughter Kate to the son of his old friend, Mr Marlow, who despairs of his son ever finding a mate. The young Marlow is overcome with nerves in the company of women of his own status and can only make advances to barmaids or waitresses. The Marlows are travelling from London to visit the Hardcastles in the country. They get lost, and stop at a tavern to ask directions. Hardcastle's amiably boorish son from his first marriage, Tony Lumpkin, directs them to his own home, telling them it is an inn. Kate Hardcastle, overhearing Marlow complain that his son only opens up with working-class women, poses as a barmaid and gets her man.

### **Professional women, blue collar men**

In patriarchal societies, a relationship between a middle or upper class woman and a working class man has been regarded as highly transgressive as it challenges the normative superiority of the male and highlights the emotional independence of women. Works such as the novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D H Lawrence (1928) and the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams (1947) make the strength of the taboo clear. A woman who attracts, or is attracted to, a man of inferior status will bring disaster upon herself: shame and exile in the case of Connie Chatterly, rape and madness for Blanche Dubois. The male characters, however, are imbued with the erotic compulsion of the forbidden which the idiom "a bit of rough" identifies.

In developing the concept of role reversal in *She Stoops to Conquer*, I intended to explore the implications of women's increasing economic independence in 21<sup>st</sup> century relationships. As

we have seen,<sup>xcv</sup> the pursuit of achievement and success is a defining masculine attribute. The idea that a woman will judge potential mates primarily on their ability to provide for a family was universally accepted in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, but after second-wave feminism and anti-discrimination legislation in the early 1970s the economic expectations of men and women had changed. A study by the Council on Contemporary Families at the University of Miami found in 2014 that:

In 1977, two-thirds of Americans believed that the ideal family arrangement was for the husband to earn the money and the wife to stay home. By 2012, less than one-third still held this belief[.....] Through the 1980s, couples in which the wife had more education than her husband were more likely to divorce than couples in which the wife had less or equal education. But couples who have married since the early 1990s have no added divorce risk when the wife is better educated. In fact, the researchers found hints that such couples may now be less likely to divorce than those in which the husband has more education.<sup>xcvi</sup>

At the time of writing, the most up-to-date statistics on pay suggest that the gender gap in earnings in the UK is down below 10%.<sup>xcvii</sup> While this remains too much, it also implies that in a significant number of two-gender couples the woman out-earns the man. The first author to identify the challenges of this new order was Terry MacMillan, the American founder of the “sistah-lit” genre, in her highly influential novel *Waiting to Exhale*, (1992).<sup>xcviii</sup> MacMillan portrayed black American women as “settling for” men of lower social or economic status because it was hard to find the traditionally richer mate among men of their own race. In the sequel, *Getting to Happy* (2010), a character describes men deliberately searching for richer women to date: “I been saying it for years: church is full of sneaky men posing as honest souls, and they are perpetuators out here looking for women just like you,

with giant holes in your hearts, and they can smell when you got a good job and when you lonely as hell.<sup>»xcix</sup>

Considered as a partner in recreational sex, however, the lower-status male seemed to benefit from the allure of the forbidden. *The Sex & The City* TV series took a more positive view of the phenomenon and acknowledged that a man of lower status might be sexy for that very reason.

Charlotte: I'm married, I can't be looking at gardeners. This is insane.

Samantha: Honey, what's the point of being in the suburbs if you're not going to fuck a gardener?<sup>c</sup>

The choice of younger and poorer lovers, representing the effective reversal of the male economic advantage over the last quarter of the twentieth century, meant that, at the time I was planning to write *Wild Weekend*, it was entirely possible to create a female character who was more comfortable with men of lower status as romantic partners, rather than those of equal or higher status. Thus, gender roles in *She Stoops to Conquer* could plausibly be reversed.

### **The Hardcastles & The Marlows**

I intended to challenge several stereotypical views of British society in this novel. Mr Hardcastle became Mrs Hardcastle, known as Bel, but her extreme affection for the English country house decorative style I attributed to the immigrant's desire to assimilate. Bel is the daughter of Polish refugees who fled to Britain just before the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1938. In common with Goldsmith's Mr Hardcastle, however, she is a devout traditionalist.

Although she has lived all her life in London, she “had always considered that her heart was in the country, because everything good and right and traditional about English life had its roots there. She believed this more passionately because her own roots were in Warsaw.”<sup>ci</sup> Her son, Oliver, is a far more rounded character than the slight sketch of Kate Hardcastle in the play. He is the protagonist of the novel, a man of conscience who abandons his successful banking career to become – as he hopes – an organic farmer. Throughout *Wild Weekend* the severe financial difficulties of the farming industry are highlighted. Oliver buys his farm at auction after the tax authorities have seized it from the former owner, and within a few months his substantial savings have been exhausted in attempting to rehabilitate land rendered toxic by intensive farming. And, in pursuit of her dream of English country house living, Bel has also run out of funds.

The Marlow family are represented by Clare Marlow, the newly appointed Minister of Agriculture. Her department has been named Agraria, recalling the disastrous rebranding of the postal service as Consignia by New Labour in 2001<sup>cii</sup>. The following year the Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was renamed in 2002 the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) – suggesting that the mere idea of agriculture as a political fief was antipathetic to the government. Like Donna in *Heartswap*, Clare Marlow is a successful professional woman from the Jungian “armoured Amazon” mould who has completely rejected traditional female roles: “The first half of her life suddenly seemed like a cosmic waste of her time. The years she’d frittered away trying to be a flower child or a foxy lady or a yummy mummy, when she could have been mastering the universe!”<sup>ciii</sup> As it is politically expedient for her to appear as a mother as well as a minister, the classic woman who “has it all”, she attempts to reconnect with her daughter, Miranda, over a country weekend.



Despite her successful career as a town planner, Miranda is a young woman almost overwhelmed by a sense of inferiority which is more acute in her mother's vicinity. Afraid of contracting a relationship of which her mother will disapprove, she can only be herself with barmen and waiters. She also has an obsessive relationship with food:

Food meant fat and fat meant failure and failure meant hatred and hatred meant death.

She lived in terror of food. The fear of eatables ran in her mind all the time, like the stock market prices running along the bottom of the screen on the TV news. Living proudly on the edge of what she assumed to be hunger, everything she might eat had a moral weight to which she was sensitised. Bread: bad. Cookie: horrific.

Chocolate:obscene. Apple: unnecessary.<sup>civ</sup>

The Marlows set out for Suffolk for a weekend at a country house hotel, lose their way in bad weather and ask for directions at a village pub where Oliver's half-sister, Toni Lumpkin, directs them to Mrs Hardcastle's house, telling them that this is the hotel for which they're looking. The stage is then set for the farce to unroll and as soon as Oliver and Miranda meet and are attracted to each other the misunderstandings multiply.

### **Toni Lumpkin**

Toni Lumpkin, in the play mostly cheerfully drunk and determined to escape his mother's marriage plans, is the pivotal character in the scenario. His determination to avoid marriage and stay at the inn drinking as long as possible is the engine of both the plot and the subplot in the play. In creating Toni, Bel's angry Goth step-daughter, I retained the character's last-act redemption, when, having found a suitably unsuitable man to love, Toni comes into her inheritance and saves her family's finances. In re-imagining the narrative, however, I introduced a different sub-plot to extend the novel's theme of urban interference in ways of

life developed in relation to nature. To contrast with Miranda's emotional reticence, I created Dido, a friend very willing to fall in love. The object of her affection is Florian, one of the "posh poor" or asset-rich cash-strapped upper class farmers who have inherited land but little else. Florian was the proprietor of a bio-dynamic vineyard in Suffolk.

### **Carole and Ashok, the Activists**

The final strand in the drama involves Carole, the animal shelter owner, who was inspired by the well-known British figure of Celia Hammond, a leading model who gave up the catwalk to found an animal sanctuary, later setting up the Celia Hammond Animal Trust in 1986<sup>cv</sup> and becoming a supporter of the Animal Rights Party after its foundation in 2004. With a few years in fashion journalism behind me, I had often wondered about the effect that this particularly cruel industry has on vulnerable young women, and I saw Carole's extreme sensitivity as linked to Miranda's obsession with her own body shape. As Carole's associates in animal rights activism, I added Ashok, an American campaigner focused on bee liberation. At the time that this novel was written the collapse of honey bee populations in the US and Europe was in the future; since then the issue has become a major concern for farmers and environmentalists all over the world and Ashok's slogan "Free the Bees" is now the name of a Swiss non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of feral bee colonies.<sup>cvi</sup>

### **Juri and Tolvó – the Lithuanian immigrants**

It would be hard to discuss rural communities in Britain in the twenty-first century without including the migrant workers, mostly from Eastern Europe, who contributed to the regeneration of whole sectors of British farming in this period. Speaking at the Terra Madre conference in Italy in 2012, Cinque Stelle politician Lorenzo Tucco blamed the industrialisation of food production for working conditions he termed "slavery," on farms:

When farmers are required to sell their food as cheap as possible it forces them into looking for the cheapest possible labourers. Consumers must understand that the cheap, canned tomatoes and other cheap products in the supermarkets very often are a result of this degradation – and paying a cent or two more for your food may translate into a large improvement for the workers.... “The competition on lower wages has led us to a new form of crime – slavery.”<sup>cvii</sup>

As a regular visitor to the north Suffolk coast, in the region of Aldeburgh and Orford, I heard many stories of rubber dinghies found abandoned in the marshland creeks, suggesting that immigrants had used them to reach the shore from vessels further out at sea. It was widely known that many of these immigrants were seasonal farm workers, arriving to harvest vegetables, paid illegally low wages and housed in appalling conditions at local farms. In 2014 for the first time four members of an organised criminal gang were convicted of people-smuggling at Orford quay.<sup>cviii</sup> Juri and Tolvo, the illegal immigrants from Lithuania (which did not become a member of the EU until 2004), represent this feature of modern British agriculture. Ironically, although working in food production, they are the only characters in the book ever to feel genuinely hungry.

### **Ostara, the Hare**

*Wild Weekend* is the only one of my novels to include an element of magic realism. I found I had created, in Miranda and Oliver, two lovers who were almost unable to love for the weight of contemporary anxieties that suppressed their natural desires. Impossible parents are an impediment that true love frequently overcomes in literature, but Oliver’s burden of deluded idealism and debt, paired with Miranda’s depressed sense of self-worth and borderline BDD (body dysmorphic disorder) had created people who were unable to act on, or even recognise, their own feelings. The joyous romanticism of Dido and Florian and the pragmatic

attraction of Toni and Tolvo contrast with the emotional paralysis that afflicts the protagonists of the story.

It seemed to me that a supernatural force, representing the eternally renewing nature of love, was needed to push the lovers into their final embrace. I chose the Easter weekend as a setting for the novel originally after a spring visit to Suffolk during which many of my own concerns about farming in England were crystallised. My daughter and her cousins were small children, and we took them to the neighbouring farm to see the spring lambs, only to find – as Oliver Hardcastle does with his first flock – that the grazing on fields poisoned by intensive agriculture had caused many ewes to abort and the rest to give birth to stillborn young. The lambing barn was occupied only by a sad pile of dead lambs. This picture of death and despair was the more poignant on a day of springtime celebration.

Setting a classic romantic comedy against such devastation raised the hope that nature, like love, would conquer all in the end. To emphasise this strand in the story, I added the mythical figure of Ostara, or Eostar, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, dawn and fertility. She embodies the “‘irreducible’ magic which cannot be explained by typical notions of natural law,” as noted by Zamora et al, allowing the reader to re-experience the everyday events of the novel as also supernaturally marvellous.” The exalted mind-state of the lovers evokes Ostara’s pagan spirit.<sup>cix</sup> The novel is finally hopeful beyond the simple trope of a romantic happy ending. Clare Marlow’s unstoppable careerism brings her political success and the urban fox finds a way back to the comfort of the city where, as a predator, he is most at home.

### PART 3 – RECEPTION AND IMPACT

The impact of these four novels was considerable, in both national and international terms. Perhaps predictably, the British media were avidly interested in the suburban titles, which received substantial coverage and acclaim. *Getting Home* was published in hardback in 1998 and in paperback the following year. It was well received, including a major feature in *The Guardian* colour supplement. BBC Radio 4's *Women's Hour* discussed the book with me and Dr Vesna Goldsworthy, then head of a research centre for Suburban Studies at Roehampton University. Confirming my belief that suburban phenomena are not confined to England, the book was also published in Germany. In Chiswick and the other West London suburbs it attracted significant attention, particularly after the American television series *Desperate Housewives*, approaching similar territory, aired in the UK 2004. When the local literary festival asked me to give a talk on it, the director entitled the event, "*Desperate Housewives of Bedford Park*."

*Mister Fabulous & Friends* was similarly successful, with major feature coverage<sup>cx</sup> in *The Times*, whose reviewer found it, "A faultless tragicomic observation of middle age in Middle England." The ChiswickW4 website also noted that the author, "achieved the impossible in making the M4 slip-road to Heathrow with its scary view of jet underbellies overhead appear almost poetic."<sup>cx</sup> The novel was optioned by Friday Night Films and remains in development with them. *Mister Fabulous* was also acclaimed for its accurate investigation of mid-life as a biological and emotional phenomenon. I was invited to discuss the subject on the Sky TV books programme and again on BBC Radio 4's *Women's Hour*. My publishers asked a number of medical authorities to comment on the book. Among them, the broadcaster and campaigner Clare Rayner wrote, "There are very few writers who understand what goes on in the minds of grown up men and women as well as Celia Brayfield."<sup>cxii</sup> Ron Bracey, a

consultant clinical psychologist and founder of Urban Psychologist, wrote that, “Celia Brayfield does for middle-aged men what Bridget Jones did for thirtysomething women.”<sup>cxiii</sup> “A glorious portrait of middle class suburban life of our times and worryingly close to the truth – superb,”<sup>cxiv</sup> was the opinion of Duncan Gould, the consultant physician at London’s specialist medical centre, The Wellman Clinic.

*Heartswap* is arguably the most successful of my London novels in terms of impact. A lead title for Little Brown, it was favourably reviewed in quality newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, in women’s magazines such as *Marie Claire* and outside the UK. It was “Delicious ...the perfect antidote to most of its genre. A laugh-out-loud book,” according to the *Ireland Evening Herald*. In addition to numerous literary festival appearances, I was invited to give a reading from the book by the Writing Programme and Warwick University. It was, however, the foreign sales achievement of the book that indicated its exceptional impact. While selling in my usual territories of Germany and Scandinavia, it was the only one of my London novels to be sold in France, under the title *Epreuve d’Amour*, published by Editions Florent Massot in Paris in November, 2000. Earlier that year the film rights to *Heartswap* were sold to Cruise-Wagner/Paramount, after an auction in which Oprah Winfrey and Demi Moore were underbidders. The novel went into development with Nicole Kidman attached and the deal made front page news in the US film industry trade newspaper, *Variety*<sup>cxv</sup>. Tom Cruise and Kidman announced their divorce six months later and the option was not renewed but their enthusiasm for the novel remains a powerful indicator of its international relevance and impact.

## CONCLUSION

These four novels, published between 1998 and 2004, demonstrate a sustained creative focus. While different in tone, style and subject, they share the wide socio-political horizon which I have been concerned to maintain, particularly in exploring women's issues. They consider the communities which they portray in "vertical section," in which all classes, ages and economic positions are included. They also offer varied but coherent perspectives on both the relationship between individuals and their geographical space, inviting the reader to consider not only the economic mechanisms by which living space is created and the natural world managed or exploited, but the moral and spiritual implications of these processes. The novels also examine concepts of gender in contemporary capitalist society, while engaging with key cultural legacies which defined gender roles in the past. In these foci they continue and elaborate themes which have been dominant in my writing from my first book onwards. The Creative Writing research embodied in these works informs my teaching in that, with my colleague, Professor Fay Weldon, I encourage our students to accept the social duty of a writer and create work that engages thematically with their world.

At the time of writing this thesis, I had completed a historical novel in which I re-evaluate the figure of Mary, Queen of Scots from a standpoint informed by fourth-wave feminism. I have also begun work on two non-fiction books, one, *The Chelsea Girls*, a critical group autobiography of the very young women writers of the Sixties and the other a study of the role of women of power, such as Catherine the Great, the Empress Josephine and Catherine dei Medici, among others, in creating historic buildings, provisionally entitled *Great Women, Great Houses*.

The works discussed in this commentary also demonstrate a sustained creative focus and a stylistic coherence. In reviewing my first novel, Anthony Burgess observed that it had

distracted him from the Monaco Grand Prix, but wrote that “plot is only the bone you throw at the dog that feeds on narrative while the real work of literature proceeds elsewhere.”<sup>cxvi</sup>

For me, however, the narrative should also be the real work of literature, dramatizing the author’s argument in a series of events. Perhaps the element which defines them most clearly in stylistic terms is their robust narrative construction, in which characters, action and argument combine in works that are engaging, entertaining but also persuasive. Considered with their international acclaim and critical reception, these four novels show my “substantial and sustained contribution to the literary field over a significant period of time.”

## THE END

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