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**'I'M NOT A WOMAN WRITER, BUT ...':  
GENDER MATTERS IN NEW ZEALAND WOMEN'S  
SHORT FICTION 1975-1995**

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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JANE NICOLE LE MARQUAND  
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### Abstract

From the late 1970s, New Zealand women short story writers increasingly worked their way into the literary mainstream. In the wake of the early, feminist-motivated years of the decade their gender, which had previously been the root of their marginalized position, began to work *for* them. However, rather than embracing womanhood, this growth in gender recognition led to many writers rejecting overt identification of their sex. To be labeled a *woman writer* was considered patronising, a mark of inferiority. These women wanted to be known as *writers* only, some even expressing a hope for literature to reach a point of androgyny.

Their work, however, did not convey an androgynous perspective. Just as the fact of their gender could not be avoided, so the influence their sex had on their creativity cannot be denied. Gender does matter and New Zealand women's short fiction published in the 1975-1995 period illustrates its significance. From the early trend for adopting fiction as a site for social commentary and political treatise against patriarchy's one-dimensional image of woman, these stories show a gradually increasing awareness of fictional possibilities, allowing for celebration of the multiplicity of female experience and capturing a process of redefinition rather than rejection of 'women's work'. Though in the later 1990s it may no longer have been politically 'necessary' to promote women's work on the grounds of gender, on a personal level the 'difference of view' of the woman writer remained both visible and vital. An increasing sense of woman-to-woman communication based on shared experience emerges: women are writing *as* women, *about* women, *for* women.

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## Introduction

### Questioning the Influence of Gender: Does it Matter?

You hear it all the time. ‘I’m not a feminist, but . . .’ and then they go on to tell you how they support all the things feminism and being a feminist is all about.<sup>1</sup>

In the early years of the women’s movement in New Zealand being a feminist was a clear-cut expression of a woman’s unwillingness to accept the status quo of male dominance. As Tom Hyde suggests, in his 1996 *Metro* article “I’m not a feminist, but . . .” “once the agenda was simple. All women were sisters in the war against men” (46). In the fight for liberation women were strongly united by their common cause and their shared belief that they were all victims of male oppression “both directly, by way of physical abuse, and indirectly, by prejudicial old-boy networks, the patriarchy, the phallocracy” (Hyde 46).

However, the politics of separatism actually fractured this united front of women from the very beginning. As Sandra Coney asserts in “Why the Women’s Movement Ran out of Steam”, what was perceived as a community of women, a united sisterhood, was in fact “riddled with factions, ‘ingroups’ and ‘outgroups’ and hierarchies” (59). The absolute anti-male stance taken by the most radical of feminists divided them from many of their ‘sisters’. Creating a life separate from men was seen as morally superior, but for many this was simply unattainable and, in fact, undesirable:

It was seen as a purer way of life, a way of ‘living your politics’ that was not available to women like me – mothers of sons who loved men . . . those of us who fucked men, and worse still enjoyed it, were seen as selling out . . .  
(Coney, “Why the Women’s” 71)

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Woodley of *Broadsheet* as quoted in Tom Hyde’s *Metro* article “I’m not a feminist, but . . .”, June 1996 43-53. This observation and the analogy drawn with the ambivalence of NZ women short story writers towards the label of ‘women writer’ lies at the heart of this thesis, hence it’s adaptation as a suitable title.

Not only did such radical, separatist beliefs divide those whom feminism was supposed to unite, they also contributed to the stereotypical image of feminists as “hairy-legged, bra-burning lesbians” (Marno “Mothering the New Feminism” 8).

Women’s reluctance to be associated with feminism in more recent years undoubtedly grew from the persistence of such stereotypical views. As Hyde wrote in the mid 1990s, “today it’s as if only die-hards describe themselves as ‘feminist’. Feminism suggests radical activism and few women today see themselves in that light” (49). However, for many women rejecting the label of ‘feminist’ did not mean rejecting their belief in the importance of women’s issues and herein exists the contradiction which lies at the heart of this thesis. While the politics of separatism may no longer have been relevant in the 1990s this did not indicate an end to feminism. And nor did it indicate an end to the important idea of there being a significant category of experience and expression peculiar to women writers and women’s writing. The ‘women’s movement’ and the rhetoric of ‘sisterhood’ may have been passé but the basic principles upon which they were founded remained intact:

. . . as we move into the ‘90s there is no ‘feminist movement’ as such, but it is easy to see, when one goes looking, that while the word is now rarely used in every-day parlance, feminist principles are alive and as well as can be expected. (Loates 32)

Women no longer wanted to be defined by traditional notions of feminism yet their feminist consciousness remained strong, highlighting the discrepancy between feminism as it was publicly perceived – in a way coloured by “les-sep-fems” – and feminism as it was personally accepted as a system of beliefs (Loates 32).

In this thesis I argue for the category of women writers. This is in spite of the fact that the changing fashion in feminism has led some New Zealand women writers to resist being identified in terms of gender, or seeing this identification as a temporary one. In June 1979 *Landfall* dedicated its one hundred and thirtieth issue to women

writers. Various contributors of both sexes presented a common case for the recognition and celebration of female fiction and throughout they suggested that women writers were doing something unique which set them apart from their male contemporaries. Opinions on the value of this difference varied but from a female perspective the case for writing by women was particularly strong, as contributions to a 'women on women' symposium revealed. In response to questions on women's writing in New Zealand Anne Else, then editor at Longman Paul, was especially passionate about the significance of gender in the relationship between reader and writer:

Today I care about what women writers have to say because I am a woman. There is no more point in telling me that the sex of writers is immaterial. . . Any woman writing in English . . . about what it means to be a female in a male dominated world, has something to say to me. ("Women on Women" 101)

However, while Else argued that a great need existed for such books which spoke "primarily to women" (102) her case was fraught with contradictions. The support she expressed for the uniqueness of the female voice was in some ways contradicted by her hope that such support need only be short-lived. In conclusion Else claimed to be looking forward to a "possible future beyond feminism, when the sex of the writer may, finally, no longer matter" (102). She foresaw a future of androgynous literature. Male or female, the sex of the writer would no longer have any bearing upon their work. The notion of the 'woman writer' would be obsolete. Fiona Kidman also revealed a sense of frustration regarding the inseparability of her gender and her work. In an interview with Else, Kidman expressed her impatience at being thought of as a 'woman writer': "I'm torn apart over this – I want to do without the 'woman/writer' label but if it is still necessary for the purpose of recognition, we'll just have to use it" (35). She too looked forward to a time when she could be simply recognised as a *writer*, a time when gender would not matter.



By the mid 1990s, though it could be argued that because of changes in the publishing and bookselling infrastructure the 'woman writer' label was no longer *necessary* for purposes of recognition and the widespread, politically-driven feminism of the 1970s had lost its force, literature had in no way entered the androgynous zone proposed by Else. In this thesis I take the position that there cannot be a time when gender does not matter and that notwithstanding all the recent ideas about gender constructionism the fact that women writers *are* women remains of the essence. Not only is the gender of the woman writer inescapable, her experience of 'being woman' cannot be separated from the creative process she engages in. As this investigation of the collected and anthologised short stories of New Zealand women writers from 1975 to 1995 will show, women's work *is* women's work: gender *does* matter, irrespective of time and place. This twenty-year period I cover has indeed been a time of significant change in perceptions of the experience of 'being woman', but the shifts which occurred in the short fiction of New Zealand women writers represent a process of *redefinition* rather than rejection of this changing 'woman-ness'. A uniquely female voice is identifiable throughout suggesting that even as the politics of feminism weakened women still needed a forum for their own uniquely female form of expression.

The starting point of this investigation is 1975 which, as International Women's Year, created an environment very much in support of the woman writer. Celebration and validation of the female experience was at an all time high as Rosemary Novitz identifies in her contribution to *Culture and Identity in New Zealand* (1990), "Women: Weaving an Identity". Liberation groups and consciousness-raising groups were mushrooming as women recognised the limitations of patriarchal society and attempted to define for themselves what it meant to be women. Such groups allowed them to share various aspects of their lives resulting in a sense of identification:

Many women learned that some feelings and experiences were not unique to themselves, that they were shared by other women . . . Their personal identity became inextricably linked to an identification with other women who shared similar experiences.” (Novitz 57)

This commonality not only enabled women to identify with one another; it also taught them about their value as individuals, awakening them to their existence beyond the roles of wife and mother traditionally ascribed to them within the patriarchal system:

The feminist pursuit of women’s identity has revealed these to be only aspects of their existence . . . our individual identity as women has greater possibilities of variety because we have, through research, meetings, women’s studies and consciousness-raising groups [and through literature], shared information about women’s experiences and understandings. (Novitz 71)

Women of the 1970s were beginning to discover that within their shared female identity lay alternative possibilities. The experience of ‘being woman’ was recognised as one of plurality and literature was beginning to emerge as a means by which to explore such possibilities.

The impact was significant for both writer and reader. Parallel needs arose among these two groups of women borne of their shared feminist consciousness. On the one hand, more and more women sought validation of and support for their creative expression through writing and many small local and regional women’s writing groups developed to fulfill this need, such as Auckland’s Womenspirit which evolved out of a 1979 writers’ workshop run by Renee at the United Women’s Convention. As the preface to this group’s 1981 collection *Roses and Razorblades* suggests, encouragement was strong: “We arrived as women who felt isolated in our writing, and during the workshop we found in each other’s company the kind of stimulating, responsive atmosphere we needed” (n. pag.). Within such groups the identity of ‘woman writer’ was removed from the confines of patriarchal definition and fostered in all its varying ‘ways of being.’ Writing, along with other forms of art, became “a means of expressing

a uniquely female perspective as an alternative to male-dominated artistic and cultural production" (Novitz, 58).

On the other hand, non-writing women also sought the support found in shared experience, and rejoiced in the knowledge that the various aspects of their lives and their feelings were not unique. Having previously been bereft of female models in the literary world, increasing feminist consciousness intensified their desire for books by women and about women:

Both good and bad writers, with a range of feminist perspectives from lesbian separatist to liberal reformist, were eagerly devoured by women who wanted to read about the full spectrum of female experience, with no concessions to the chauvinist or delicate sensibilities of male readers. (Dann 123)

Writer and reader met each other's needs. Writing women found support for their creations which in turn provided the reader with a point of identification more true to their experience. Female characters stepped beyond the marginalised space traditionally reserved for them in the writing of men:

. . . most books by women have women as central characters, to whom women can relate, instead of as marginal or stereotypical figures. New Zealand women now have an array of strong, interesting contemporary women with whom they can identify. (Kedgley, *Our Own Country* 19)

As New Zealand women became more conscious of different ways of 'being' their writing moved in a parallel direction. Their world was widening and their literature both reflected and encouraged the expansion of female selfhood.

By the mid 1990s, however, the feminist agenda which fired the liberation groups of earlier decades had largely burnt out. As women writers enjoyed the benefits of increased opportunities and recognition, feminism per se was rapidly losing popularity. The individualistic social climate of the 1990s was not conducive to the radical politics of 1970s feminism which dictated that the 'feminist' label not only indicated an individual's belief system but also their way of life. Feminists were

expected to look a certain way and to behave in a certain way, and for women writers such expectations extended to their work. 'Feminist writing' was branded as anti-male political treatise, and 'women's writing' as inevitably 'feminist'. Understandably many women writers became resistant to being associated with such politics and the limitations which feminist labels ascribed to their work. They sought an identity simply as writer, irrespective of gender. In fact, post-1995, the end point of this investigation, the publication of gender specific anthologies of women's work virtually ceased.

However, through examination of New Zealand women's short fiction published between 1975 and 1995 this thesis argues that the end to gender-specific anthologies was not an indication of an androgynous state of literature being reached. In fact, these works show that far from rejecting the influence of their gender, women writers of this era responded to and reflected the changing face of feminism, ultimately claiming their own identity free of political stigma while continuing to fully embrace feminist consciousness at a personal level. The process was one of redefinition not rejection.

Elaine Showalter defended this notion of redefinition in a 1984 *New York Times Book Review* article, "Women Who Write Are Women" after noticing "distinguished writers of the female sex . . . protesting that they . . . are not 'women writers,' or 'women's writers' (apparently worse), but *writers only*" (1). Showalter acknowledged that the rejection of the 'woman writer' label was reasonable in attempting to avoid certain stereotypes attached to the female gender: "It's understandable . . . that women writers resent being thrown together without regard to their differences of purpose, subject or style" (31). However, she stressed that rejection of gender acknowledgement by women writers was not the answer:

No one can argue with the writer's need to grow, to experiment, to take all of human experience for her province. But we have to ask why the artist's need to demonstrate her serious ambitions should require the denunciation of feminism, the refusal of solidarity with other women, the rejection of female

narrators or subjects and even sneers at the women readers who buy her books. If the term 'woman writer' is so denigrating, we must change its meaning; if identification with a female tradition is so injurious, we must redefine it. (Showalter 31)

This redefinition, she claimed, would come about through a widespread change in perspective, as writers and readers alike adopted the new ways of viewing women's writing already circulating in academia: "Feminist critics and scholars . . . have enlarged our sense of what women's writing has been and what it can be" (33). Embracing this enlarged sense of what it meant to write as a woman was surely preferable to rejecting gender difference altogether as the works under investigation show.

A chronological approach to the women's short fiction published from 1975 to 1995 shows that this process of redefinition is apparent in both content and form. Most striking is the gradual shift in the portrayal of the female protagonist. From the earliest works under investigation, New Zealand women writers portrayed female characters in search of selfhood, seeking identities outside of patriarchal expectation. However, while these early characterisations do recognise possibilities outside the traditions of marriage and motherhood, and thus suggest a shift in thinking, the alternatives they suggest predominantly remain unrealised. Female characters are repeatedly portrayed as passive victims of patriarchy. The subversion of their stories lies in the identification of their limited existence rather than in the acting out of new ways of being. The status quo remains intact.

Moving into the late 1980s, however, many woman writers offered expanded characterisations of female protagonists. More active women emerged, seeking out self-fulfilment and claiming their own identities. Sexuality came to the fore and female characters took control of their sexual selves, whether heterosexual or lesbian. A sense of hope surfaced as the unlimited possibilities of being women began to take shape through these stories and this hope grew into the 1990s as women were

portrayed stepping further outside the boundaries of domesticity. In these later works subversion is acted out, but it is when subversion of patriarchy ceases to be the central focus of these women's stories that redefinition of 'women's writing' becomes apparent. Those which stand out in this respect celebrate female individuality. The search for selfhood is portrayed as internal and personal rather than as a comment on or reaction to social norms and it is portrayed as an ongoing process rather than a situational response to a moment in time. As Judith Kegan Gardiner suggests in her "Female Identity and Writing by Women", static, one-dimensional images of women were being replaced by a sense of an ever-changing, fluid experience: "Female identity is a process and writing by women engages us in this process as the female self seeks to define itself in the experience of creating art" (191). The female aspect of the female identity remains vital but it must be recognised as only *one* aspect of that identity, not as the sole defining characteristic of women.

Paralleling this shift in characterisation is a change in the predominant tone and narrative stance adopted by these women writers. The early examples of 'woman as victim' were largely told from a third person point of view. Women's experience was conveyed through an outside (objectified) perspective and in many cases the stories became more comments on patriarchal society than engaging works of fiction. The message – generally a resoundingly feminist message – prevailed and these works became didactic treatise against the institutions of marriage and motherhood. A monolithic voice emerged which in many ways brought into the stereotype of 'women's writing', exploring only one dimension of the female experience.

Through the 1980s, however, as this singular view of womanhood was rejected in women's literature, the political focus of New Zealand women's short fiction gradually diminished. Increasingly, women writers sought to engage the reader's

emotional empathy rather than their political thinking. Stories became more personal, more focused on the female's inner experience. The search for selfhood remained central but was portrayed as driven from within rather than by the external forces of society. Women's experience was celebrated for its plurality and a multiplicity of voices emerged. Feminist doctrine was played down but feminist consciousness continued to impact upon women's work. In this respect the notion of women's work as singularly defined was again overturned, the women writer reinvented but not rejected.

Just as the portrayal of women in the short fiction of these decades underwent a metamorphosis, so too did the way in which their stories were told. The realist mode predominated throughout this period but as women's experience broadened, both actually and fictionally, realism expanded to accommodate new expressions of new ways of being. While the domestic realism of earlier stories effectively reflected the diminished possibilities faced by their female characters and, by extension, those faced by women readers, it proved too restrictive a form in later years. Yet redefinition not rejection was again the outcome.

As Lydia Wevers suggests, the realism adopted by women of the 1990s was less a site for social comment or critique and more an open playing field. Political didacticism gave way to a more subtle approach with greater reader appeal:

Realism is the preferred mode but, as in New Zealand short fiction generally, 'slice of life' realism has been superseded by writing which acknowledges fictionality as one of the many ways in which gender, race, or identity are reconstructed in the world and the text. ("Short Story" 314)

Realism had become a "more flexible and various form" in the 1990s ("Short Story" 305). No longer restricted by social realities, writers adopted the conventions of the form but presented "a heightened awareness of the fictionality of realism" ("Short Story" 307). Their works retained an element of recognisability yet were not limited by the world which they portrayed, suggesting a mode of increased possibilities. Such

fictionalisation also suggests a movement even further away from fiction as a forum for feminist politics and towards expression of women's 'difference of view' in new and effective ways.

More fictionalised realism, this thesis argues, also provides greater opportunities for reader identification, and in this context herein lies the measure of a story's effectiveness. As a reflection and refraction of female experience, writing must also be recognised as a site of sharing this experience. Through the text both writer and reader are engaged with the experience of 'being woman' as it is fictionalised and for the female reader this can involve a sense of self-recognition. As acknowledged by Dale Spender in *The Writing or the Sex?*, despite their various and disparate experiences, women do share a "common experience of being woman":

At the crudest, broadest level, all women know what it's like to be non-men, they know what it is like to relate to men as women and this in itself is a significant source of common experience. Women also know what it's like to be women . . . While some of these experiences of women have changed over time, and have had different interpretations placed upon them, it is still possible to assume a common core of meanings for women" (113)

Spender's notion of a common female experience establishes a point of difference between the sexes which extends also to their creativity. The case for androgyny is that if femininity is constructed by oppression and powerlessness then when women become powerful and autonomous they are in a certain sense no longer women or able to write as women. However, this position does not well describe the writing under investigation here. Not only have the power relations of the world in which these women are writing not shifted substantially but the way that women readers react to women's writing as a site for sharing the distinctiveness of being woman shows that the androgynous position is inaccurate. To reject the impact of gender on writing would deny literature's importance as a site for sharing the distinctiveness of 'being woman'. In an androgynous literary world the gender of neither reader nor writer would be relevant to



their interaction with the text. The idea of seeking to define, redefine and refine the female identity through literature would be redundant.

In the works investigated the quest for female identity is taken out of the home and freed from the limitations of traditional family roles. New ways of being are explored - sexual, spiritual, imaginative, creative - and a sense that 'place' lies within the self rather than in the definitions of the surrounding world develops. In short, these writers portray women as individuals, overturning the limitations of patriarchal ideals, and through the 1980s and 1990s, this sense of female individualism continues to expand, both socially and through literature. For many of these writers, developing a sense of individual identity also involved overturning the limitations imposed by racial and cultural stereotypes which identified them as ethnic minorities and, therefore, 'other' to the white, middle-class majority. However, as the Maori writers discussed here exemplify, even while presenting the struggle to be freed from the confinement of a collective racial/cultural identity, these writers cross the boundaries of ethnicity and present a shared struggle against the expectations placed upon women. At this moment in time, the discourse of feminism was stronger than that of post-colonialism yet the celebration of female individualism and new ways of 'being woman' also embraced racial and cultural distinctions.

As this thesis will show, New Zealand women short story writers of this period ever-increasingly produced works which rejected the existence of any one singular experience of 'being woman'. Just as Toril Moi deconstructed the notion that a text should be "pinned down to one unifying angle of vision" arguing instead for the existence of "multiple perspectives" (3) in her groundbreaking *Sexual Textual Politics* (1985), these women writers produced multiple literary expressions of womanhood, refusing to be pinned down to the expectations of patriarchal ideology. They redefined

the experience of 'being woman' and in the process they further cemented the uniqueness and the essentiality of the female voice. Female characters developed new dimensions and encountered new possibilities, celebrating the diversity of women, but they remained females none-the-less, as did the women who created them. These writers and their stories showed that gender does indeed matter. Together they capture the chronological process of redefinition revealed by this investigation, rescuing the 'woman writer' from self-rejection.

## Chapter One

### Domesticity and Beyond: First Steps Towards Redefinition in the Late 1970s

The feminist significance of 1975 provided something of an opportunity to overturn the marginalization of women writers in New Zealand as publishers recognised the marketability of 'all things women' and gave a number of women writers the recognition and support they had previously been denied. It was the year that Lauris Edmond, Fiona Kidman, Rachel McAlpine and Elizabeth Smither all published their first books of poetry and, more significantly here, also the year that Patricia Grace's *Waiariki* appeared as the first short story collection by a Maori woman writer. While recognised as a New Zealand *woman* writer, Grace is celebrated rather more as a *Maori* woman writer and in the stories of *Waiariki* race plays a more central part than gender: the focus is on what it means to be Maori rather than what it means to be woman. However, Grace's collection is also testimony to the way in which race and gender, as two unique aspects of identity, are closely aligned. The stories of *Waiariki* present a redefinition of Maori identity. Through them Grace aimed to redress 'false' representations of Maori found in literature of the past where comic images and romanticised ideals prevailed and writers focused on "outwardly observable things" such as speech and appearance (Grace "The Maori" 81). She strove to reverse these superficial portrayals:

My hope is that I can contribute towards greater understanding of who we are so that others may come to realise that we do have a legitimate and structured way of life, and a real seriousness and a deep spirituality. (Grace "The Maori" 80)

In these stories Maori people are recreated as individuals, overturning notions of a stereotypical collective and giving them worth in their own right, as a culture together and as individuals. She urges her reader to see beyond common generalisations.

John Beston recognises the celebration of a unique identity found in the *Waiariki* stories as reflective of a wider social context, growing out of “special conditions that prevailed throughout the world between the late 1960s and the late 1970s”: “That short period was one of liberal hopes and ideals for a number of suppressed groups . . . It was an exciting time of discovering their identity, developing pride in it, and asserting it” (53). While the Maori ‘otherness’ Grace exposes is unique to her race, the condition of ‘otherness’ itself is more widespread and is identifiable throughout the short fiction of her female contemporaries. As W.H. New identifies in *Dreams of Speech and Violence* not only cultural and racial differences create a sense of ‘otherness’ and a need to be heard; women can also be viewed as a ‘minority group’ (153). Gender differences and the inequalities constructed around them produce a like sense of ‘otherness’ in women and in the late 1970s this suppression was also voiced through literature.

### **Collective disillusionment in 34 stories by 22 New Zealanders**

In 1977, Christine Cole Catley edited *Shirley Temple is a Wife and Mother: 34 stories by 22 New Zealanders*, containing the short fiction of individuals who had attended one or more of her writers’ workshops. While not a ‘gendered’ anthology, a large majority of the stories included are by women writers, which, Cole Catley explains, directly reflects the demographics of her workshops:

. . . some people need initial stimulation from a group and sustenance from others to perceive what they themselves can do. Women, who outnumber men by four to one in workshops, often have a driving need to practise setting down a story which is particular and peculiar to being a woman. And most magazine editors, even now, are men. (“Writers’ Workshops” 157)

Through her collection, Cole Catley gives these women a voice which may have been denied them elsewhere and in doing so she creates a forum within which women can be seen writing *as* women. These women writers have come together through a common need to share their own expressions of female experience and, whether consciously or not, they therefore present a female perspective which, collectively, suggests an outlook specific to their gender. Interestingly, their fictional constructions of the female experience are consistently bleak and negative suggesting that being a woman carries only the promise of disillusionment. As Sandra Coney suggested in a *Broadsheet* review, these are stories “about where women are in New Zealand and are, therefore, rightly about bitterness, waste, resignation and defeat” (32). They directly reflect and expose that “world of diminished possibilities” out of which they were written.

The institution of marriage lies at the heart of many of these portrayals. Repeatedly, the ideals of love, happiness, and romantic togetherness which this generation was brought up to believe in are exposed as mythical illusions. In the harshest explorations, the loneliness and tedium of married domesticity are manifested in physical violence against innocent and defenceless victims. In Ruth Thomas’s “Previous Good Conduct,” for instance, the central protagonist cannot cope with the repetitive reality of ‘being housewife’: “She opened the front door. Nothing had changed. The beds were unmade, the dishes undone. She smelt the still recognisable smell of urine. The pain in her head returned” (3). Her child is the only available outlet for her frustration: “She began to hit him - on the face, hand, legs, anywhere - as if she would never stop” (3). The ultimate result is a term of imprisonment; one life-sentence is exchanged for another. There is no escape. The outcome for Frances Cherry’s Mrs Richards in “Nothing to Worry About” is a similar locking-away, in psychiatric care. And while the horror of her violence is not directly stated, the part which marriage and

the roles she is expected to fill within it plays in her downfall is all too clear in her own thoughts:

I wish I could go home. I miss the kids. I want to be nicer to them. Maybe he'll be better now too. Having to mind them he'll know what it's like, how lonely it can be. He doesn't really see much of them. (49)

These stories suggest that within the imprisonment of marriage satisfaction and fulfilment can only be dreamed of. Escaping this patriarchal institution appears to be the only alternative but other characters, such as the woman of Natasha Templeton's "Where Do I Begin To Tell . . ." reveal that escape can only be dreamed of: "She is awakened by conflicting desires, her need to escape and the wish to surrender to the enemy's warm grasp. As his familiar hands pull her back into captivity, she realises that it is too late" (45). Even in a marriage which attempts to break with tradition, and be open, liberal, and freethinking, there can be no escape, as Frances Cherry's protagonist in "Down to Earth" finds. Visiting her brother and his wife who have separated themselves from the trappings of the material world and are living a self-sufficient, hippie lifestyle, she witnesses the acting out of traditional gender roles and inequalities. Even outside societal norms, hopes for fulfilment in marriage are dashed.

The only option seems to be avoidance of marital union altogether but in this collection the unmarried woman is equally disillusioned, subsumed by feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and even failure. This despair is most strikingly conveyed in Yvonne du Fresne's "Shirley Temple is a Wife and Mother." In fact, as Sandra Coney suggests, the single woman appears to be du Fresne's speciality:

Her subject in all three stories is a woman alone; the unmarried woman at various ages and her anguish and conflict at being apart from what seems the mainstream of New Zealand existence, even when she knows it is a romantic fiction and even when she has rejected it. (32)

du Fresne's single women are left 'placeless' in their failure to secure themselves into the roles of wife and mother. Such freedom from the domestic tedium may on one level

represent independence, but autonomy must be paid for in loneliness. Even in “The Telephone” when Nan realises that she is wasting her life on hold for a man who will never commit, and stops willing the phone to ring, it is difficult to embrace her strength in regaining self-control. “Silence spoke to her at last” (156) are the words which mark her ‘freedom’, but they also identify her only true companion. Throughout, these stories reveal the roles of wife and mother as social expectations, providing a patriarchal definition of womanhood. When internalised this definition becomes a source of identity for women, restricting their individual growth and limiting, even warping, their perception. Continually the writers represented in *Shirley Temple is a Wife and Mother* expose patriarchally defined roles as leading to violence, madness, loneliness, and despair. On reaching the end of the volume, the reader has encountered them all:

. . . housewives who beat or kill their children; . . . women at the end of their lives driven mad by the emptiness after their children have gone; . . . the agonising loneliness of the spinster in a culture of couples. (Coney 32)

Together, these writers present a startling image of what it means to be a woman in the world from which they write. Their stories break the silence which ‘otherness’ in the literary world has imposed upon them and, in the process, reveal the nature of this ‘otherness’ as it impacts on all womanhood.

Despite the unquestionable significance of these themes and what they may say about the state of New Zealand at the time, however, the critical reception of *Shirley Temple is a Wife and Mother* was not welcoming. Cheryl Hingley claimed, “It is to be regretted that, with the exception of Yvonne du Fresne . . . none of the writers represented in this volume yet merits publication” (76), seeing the stories as having “neither irony nor clarity”, as being “hardly more than sketches,” inadequately developed (76). Sandra Coney agreed, identifying the same stylistic limitation. Many of the stories, she claimed, are “too brief, too stark to quite work - we are not able to

completely empathise with the actions of the characters because we have not been given enough time to grow to know them” (32).

Such criticisms carried their own contradictions though. Hingley, for instance, argues that the narrative technique of the majority of the stories which focus on a single character’s experience is limiting and restrictive, but when she considers the possible reasoning behind this focus she points out a strength rather than a weakness: “it is possible that the notion of giving an impression of strong emotions was more appealing than having to describe or analyse” (77). This seems not only possible, but extremely viable. Describing the external details of an event, or analysing the external motivations behind an individual’s actions may provide for greater identification with a character’s circumstances, but only at an external level. The expression of emotions, on the other hand, provides for internal identification since shared feelings create empathy. A character’s history, or the chain of events leading up to the time of the story cannot capture the feelings aroused in response to ‘the moment’, whether it be the moment of utter frustration faced by Ruth Thomas’s protagonist on returning home to endless domestic tedium, or the loneliness Yvonne du Fresne’s women encounter, isolated by their single state. Feelings are what drive these stories, inspiring revelation rather than imposing restriction and providing a point of identification for women readers at a time when the need was great.

These women write from their feelings and they also write from inside the experience. As Lydia Wevers suggests, their work is “particularly concerned with the meticulous investigation of the female condition and its emotional landscape rather than connections between the individual and society” (“Short Story” 301). Story-telling for these women, she claims, becomes “an articulation of the territory of the self” (Wevers “Short Story” 301). Their fictions represent searches for selfhood in a world which



hinders its realisation with the imposition of domestic roles and the expectation that women be no more than wife and mother, providing no 'place' for the female as individual. Although the women writers of *Shirley Temple is a Wife and Mother* may lack in practice and their stories in polish, their contributions are none-the-less valuable. They write, consciously or unconsciously, *as women*, sharing moments which are, as Cole Catley suggests, "particular and peculiar to being a woman" ("Writers' Workshops" 157), and providing points of identification for the female reader. Further to this, the collective bleakness of their works exposes the reality for these women behind the patriarchal, mythical ideals society creates for them to live by. Barriers of oppression and silencing are uncovered in the process of being broken. Cole Catley's collection takes a first step in rebalancing the scales tipped in the favour of male writers. Women writers are given voice and the unique nature of that voice is celebrated, raising awareness of the importance of New Zealand women writers of short fiction, and representing the first step in redefining the 'woman writer.'

Thematically the works of these writers do not present anything 'new.' Despite their relative exclusion from the male dominated publishing world, New Zealand women have been engaged in writing since pioneer times, and women of the late 1970s were simply taking part in a long tradition of reconstructing the experience of 'being woman' in literature. Within this tradition, as Wevers identifies, women writers of New Zealand have been historically engaged in producing stories caged in "social realism with a close domestic focus . . . concerned with the family as the *Realpolitik* of female experience" ("Short Story" 301). The socially imposed roles of wife and mother have always been central to their work and prior to the 1980s any attempts to discover selfhood or identity through literature occurred only within "the competing self-interests of marriages and families" (Wevers "Short Story" 301). Fictions were restricted to the

sphere of domesticity and the roles expected of women therein, repeatedly conveying the entrapment of women in a patriarchally imposed 'place'. In *Shirley Temple is a Wife and Mother* this tradition continued. The female voice was given a more powerful outlet for expression but it still failed to move beyond 'the home'.

### **Leaving home: Campion, Sutherland and Shaw explore the opportunities**

Moving beyond this 'realm of domesticity' can be seen as the next step taken by women writers of short fiction heading into the 1980s. Not only were increased visibility and awareness gained through greater opportunities for publication; a parallel shift is also notable in the way female roles and identities were viewed and subsequently constructed through fiction. As Wevers suggests, elements of female selfhood represented in short fiction were "reformulated and reshaped" in the 1980s ("Short Story" 303). The recognition of new roles for women offered new choices and possibilities in the search for self and writers of the late 1970s lay the groundwork, establishing a focus "on the metaphors of female sexuality and on the structures by which it is regulated and contained" (Wevers "Short Story" 303). Margaret Sutherland, Edith Campion and Helen Shaw all played a major role, publishing individual collections which explored the concept of female life existing outside the home.

Campion's *A Place to Pass Through and other stories* and Sutherland's *Getting Through and other stories* were both published in 1977 and are both characterized by the same bleakness and despair evident in Cole Catley's anthology, further developing the notion of marriage as a primary source of disillusionment. Campion's "Journey", for instance, portrays a woman longing to be noticed by her unfaithful husband to the point that even violent attention is welcomed: "He longed to strike her, she recognised his desire and registered a small victory" (107). Similarly lost in the identity of wife,

Sutherland's women attempt to achieve recognition by leaving 'home' and leaving domestic roles behind them but they are repeatedly pulled back in. In "A Living Organism" Mrs Sitwell leaves her "cobbled, ragged" marriage behind her and travels to the city in search of freedom and independence (52). However, when visiting the zoo she finds that the caged animals seem "less confined than secure" and she is drawn back to the 'safety' of her own marital imprisonment (53):

For a few days she'd been bolstered by determination, defiance; now she felt small and uncertain. Running away had resolved nothing, had only eliminated an illusory channel of escape . . . her place was there, with the man and the child . . . (54)

Further to this the defining power of wife and mother roles is emphasised in portrayals which expose the loneliness of being single and family-less and the despair of having no roles to fill, especially in ageing years. In "Good Morning Wardrobe," Champion portrays an old woman lost in the past, surrounded by emptiness with only her furniture for company but still desperate to 'keep up appearances.' Her daily ritual sees her fighting to convince the world around her, and herself, that she still has a 'place' by pretending that she still has a husband. Similarly, in "Separate Cages" the pensioners Erina visits are united by their lonely existence, with no family roles to give their lives meaning: "They were trapped, imprisoned - bound by the years to their rooms, flats and houses" (139). It seems that this may represent Erina's own future as she too is alone with only a bird for company, its caged existence reflecting her own: "She watched his frantic progress and thought . . . what a dreadful thing to do to flocking birds - cage them lonely, wrap them in wire" (139). Like birds that can no longer fly, these women are stripped of purpose and caged in solitude.

Sutherland's "Pretty Boy" plays on a similar metaphor. Sadie has been freed from a lifetime of servitude to her 'friend' May which saw them adopt the traditional roles of marriage: Sadie as the wife/mother/servant has given up everything, including

her selfhood, for May. On her friend's death she is left asking "what bound you to someone who often as not treated you like dirt?" (125). To celebrate her new found freedom Sadie decides to free May's caged bird but when she opens the door the bird fails to move. Sadie realises that without May she too remains imprisoned. She has freedom and independence but she must also face perpetual loneliness. Thelma in "Winter Coming On" faces a similar void with no husband or children to care for. To fill this gap she 'steals' the role of mother from others, taking over charge of their babies in her need to be needed and to have a purpose, to be 'complete' like her married sister. All these women face diminished possibilities of 'being.' A life defined by the roles of wife and mother is found lacking, but without this identity the void is even greater.

These examples suggest that there is little within the collections of Campion and Sutherland to indicate a shift in perspective regarding a woman's 'place' but in other stories both writers do move beyond marriage as defining a woman's identity and explore other aspects of selfhood and identity. As the movement of 'passing through' and 'getting through' in their titles suggests, both collections contain stories which step out of home and explore other roles women can *choose* to play. Most importantly, they uncover the existence of the female sexual-self, delving into the experience of being 'woman as lover' beyond the bounds of marriage. A new possibility is voiced and another silence broken. Awareness of female selfhood beyond patriarchal role definition is encouraged with this literary awakening of the sexual being.

The role of lover does not ensure fulfilment, however. Campion, for instance portrays being the 'other woman' as a disempowering experience. In her stories, the lover rather than the married man is 'punished' for his infidelity. In the shocking "Funeral Pyre" both wife and lover suffer. Everyone knows that Mick is being

unfaithful to Ursula but their disapproval is not directed at him. Rather, Daphne, one of his lovers, carries the burden: "They watched her approach in silent disapproval . . . The men watched her as if they mentally slapped the jouncing buttocks, but the women watched like hanging judges" (112). Daphne, with her child conceived outside of marriage, represents a threat to the institution which the women who watch her are defined by. She has attempted to live outside social 'norms' and has become an outsider. And Ursula is the forgotten victim, finally driven to burn herself to death to escape the unhappiness of her marriage. Only Mick survives unscathed. Sexual self-expression sees women condemned.

The woman of Campion's "A Place To Pass Through" faces a similar situation. Having served her purpose as lover she is left alone to face the pain and despair of being sent away to kill (metaphorically and literally) any traces of the affair:

Mad, sad, crazy wife now needed him . . . She would never think of him again with tenderness. He would be the sergeant major who bought the tickets, gave her names and addresses and loaded her onto the express for Taranui. He had stood outside her window; for him, she had departed weeks before. He had already tidied her out of existence. (80)

She is passed on to the equally cold hands of an abortion doctor: "he opened the door fully but didn't really look at her. He too denied her the right to exist" (81). Rather than being 'saved' from her situation, she is discarded and left to die, 'placeless.' Being a lover in these stories simply heightens these women's sense of 'otherness'. Sexuality outside marriage is both sought (by men) and feared (by women), but either way, when the institution of marriage is at stake, it must be controlled. Being the 'other woman' does not provide the key to the empowerment of sexual selfhood.

While these portrayals are resoundingly bleak and do little to suggest 'lover' as a viable identity, Campion does suggest hope for a new generation in "Miss Hallycombe and the Dirty Postcard." Miss Hallycombe finds empowerment in expression of her

sexual self, outside of the bounds of marriage, undermining all social expectations of spinsterhood. She openly celebrates her amorous past of parties, lovers, and naked picnicking, sharing these experiences with her younger female office colleagues who respond “smiling, enjoying her past, anticipating their own futures” (9). They are initiated into the joys and the importance of sexuality. Opposition comes from a married colleague who sees Miss Hallycombe as “molesting” the young girls’ minds (9), but as the younger women acknowledge, this colleague is simply jealous that Miss Hallycombe has a life beyond domesticity, existing as an individual with a strong sense of self. She provides them with a sense of hope. Neither wife nor mother, Miss Hallycombe appears both happy and fulfilled in old age: “She would die . . . cradled in remembering and unflinching love” (8). Being lover need not mean being punished.

Sutherland also draws a contrast between the sexual-self thwarted by social fear of ‘difference’ and the hope of self-realisation and empowerment. “Codling Moth” is a striking portrayal of the way in which patriarchally imposed definitions of what women *should* be restrict the individual, preventing growth and development of the ‘true self.’ The story centres on two adolescent girls exploring their developing identities, sharing their growing sexual awareness, and gaining strength in their togetherness. But this is all destroyed in a moment as one of their mothers expresses her fear of lesbianism:

“You see far too much of that girl . . . In case you don’t know it there are some funny people about, very funny men, and funny women too, and no girl of mine is growing up into one of them.” (44)

Hopes for individual and individualistic growth are dashed as Gabriel is turned against herself with shame: “I understand nothing, and everything, and I feel sick to my heart. A grey web of guilt is spinning itself about me. For the first time in my life I learn what it is to be quite alone” (44). As Jack Lasenby claims, the story is “a fine piece of writing

about the growth of self-awareness, sexual guilt and the awful loneliness that comes with the mature imagination” (60).

However, like *Campion*, *Sutherland* also offers a sense of hope through the suggestion that sexual awareness can give strength to female selfhood and lead to a more complete identity. Julie, the central character of “Need,” finds self-worth in the giving of herself to please others: “Born of need, her particular faith allowed her to understand the essence of others’ needs. She hadn’t the heart, that was it, to refuse” (67). Unfortunately, she finds that “married men too were subject to the need” (68) and falls pregnant to her boss. Help, security and a home are found with the Jacksons as she awaits the birth and subsequent adoption of her baby and she feels that she has found a place to be herself but this illusion is dashed when Mr Jackson descends upon her with his own need. Julie comes close to succumbing and fulfilling the role of giver once again but she finds the strength to say no thus recognising the power of her sexual-self. She is in control:

She’d forgotten the need. Not the doing of it; what they did. But their need, filling her now with strength, power. She stretched her body, luxuriating; in the darkness held herself tight, hugging close the possibilities of giving, of taking back. She felt strong, felt that, on her own, she would be all right. (74)

Julie’s new awareness gives her control of her selfhood and signals hope in future possibilities. She shows that women can take charge of themselves and be what they choose to be.

Despite the overriding bleakness and the despondent outlook of their collections, both *Campion* and *Sutherland* succeed in at least *exploring* the possibilities of ‘being woman’ outside the roles of wife and mother. It may be that choosing to live out these possibilities is shown to carry with it an even greater sense of ‘otherness’ in placing women outside societal expectations but these stories at least acknowledge the existence of these possibilities. They suggest that women should embrace every aspect of

selfhood, not simply those accepted as 'suitable,' and find strength in the sense of identity which results. In *The Gypsies and other stories* (1977) Helen Shaw further emphasises this suggestion. For the most part *The Gypsies and other stories* contains works reprinted from Shaw's first collection *The Orange Tree* (1957) which are steeped in the past, both in style and content. However, the newer stories added to this publication present a striking contrast, carrying the reader outside of the 'real' world into an[other] realm of being, within the "psyche of [her] characters" (Jones 122). Shaw identifies this shift in her perspective in her essay "Theories and Aims":

During recent years I have not been so concerned to present an extrovert outside view of life, defined as a story of realism, rather, to generate in a story or explode through it a kind of prose-poem or fragmentary poetry, out of a situation of characters, as their spoken and unspoken thoughts surface, overlap, interact . . . to be absorbed by the reader who finds empathy towards the story. (qtd. in Jones 127)

Female 'otherness' is explored in an 'other world.' Here recognition of the self can occur at a deeper level. The inner consciousness is explored in a quest for identity and the reader is carried along a parallel path, into the imagination.

In Shaw's collection this internal journey is taken by three young women. In a 1970s version of existential angst they question their 'place' in the world, their purpose in life, and the reason for living. For Tanya of "The Coat" this journey takes the form of a drug-induced dream-state which, while allowing her to connect with her inner desires, is but a temporary and limiting form of escape. Through other female characters, however, Shaw presents more positive journeys of self-discovery. In "The Samovar," Natasha Thorpe has left the adoptive home and controlling force of her aunt:

. . . I did not care to listen to her telling me what I should be and how I ought to think. I felt stifled, hemmed in, because I still believed I should accept her rules in life . . . And yet I could not live as she wished me to do, not to the extent of thinking as she did. I wanted wings to escape. I had to run away. (50-51)



Her journal entries become a metaphorical escape paralleling her physical leaving. Writing becomes central as she embarks on her new existence, bringing her internal world to the printed page and revealing her self-determination: "*Here there will be a chance to live, to be myself. Who am I? . . . Is there really a girl called Natasha Thorpe? What am I to anyone here? Who knows who I am? . . . I must live, discover myself. That is the great objective*" (37-38). Through her writing she can create her own fiction of life constructed of dreams, desires, hopes and fears: "She wanted to be a writer. Now she knew why she had run away from Aunt Vera. It was so that she might be herself, Natasha Belinsky, reclaim her name . . . To work. To write . . ." (54). Engaging the imagination becomes a means to engaging the self and moving beyond the diminished possibilities offered by patriarchal ideals.

Elfrida of "The Gypsies" has also escaped the responsibilities and expectations of the 'real world' by joining a cult-like community under the guidance of the great grandson of a gypsy artist, Angelo Colquhoun. Within this new environment, social norms, conventions, and role expectations are discarded. Elfrida's memory of her grandmother singing "*My mother said I never should play with the gypsies in the wood*" (94), is swept aside: "I am twenty years old . . . old enough to decide for myself" (94). As she falls in love with Angelo and his ideas she is awakened to her inner passions and desires, allowing her to express a depth of feeling beyond that 'accepted' from women. She sees the world in a new way, discovering an inner world of feelings, within which her 'true self' lies, and realising that this is a world to be explored and celebrated.

Shaw's new, more spirited women learn the release of being able to *feel* and be themselves, not 'other' to male domination. More importantly, they find this 'place' *before* becoming entrapped in the diminishing potential of marriage. In opposition to the state imposed by the roles of wife and mother, the inner world of the self is one's own

completely. As Jones suggests, it may be doomed in 'reality' but this world is preferable:

. . . the world of 'everyday feeling and seeing' is associated with puritanical repression, conformity, narrowness and materialism, while the interior world which the second self explores is associated with dream, fantasy, literature, myth and fairy tale, mystic illumination, and the imagination. (124)

The values held 'true' by the patriarchal world which oppress and silence women are escaped and a sense of spirit is found within. Being a woman becomes so much more than being wife and mother, or being husbandless and childless; it becomes what the individual *feels*, and the reader can make an emotional connection.

## Chapter Two Celebration or Marginalisation?: The Self-Sufficiency of the Early 1980s

In the 1980s interest in the women's movement was growing more widespread and publishers were forced to acknowledge an increased "hunger" among New Zealand women for books they could relate to, books by women and about women. Publishing women's work became economically viable and as the "hunger" grew so too did the opportunities for the New Zealand woman writer to reach her readers. Women writers had never before met such favourable conditions guaranteeing them a recognised 'place' in the New Zealand literary world. Even the short story as their historically favoured, but traditionally trivialised, mode of writing was finding increasing support: high numbers of women writers continued to find publication in the nation's periodicals; new short story competitions and awards encouraged new writers; and short fiction by New Zealand women was also being recognised and celebrated in anthologies designed to commemorate twentieth century women's work.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the appearance of increasing numbers of gender-based anthologies, collaborative efforts and individual collections show that, having forged a 'place' in the New Zealand literary world alongside her male counterpart the woman writer was at last being celebrated.

However, the majority of New Zealand women's short fiction was still restricted to publication in journals. The prolific output of women writers was certainly not reflected in the non-gender specific anthologies of the time. Women's work continued to be consistently under-represented. The pattern which emerged throughout anthologies of the early 1980s was of men's short stories significantly outnumbering those by

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<sup>2</sup> Of particular note here are *Women Writers of New Zealand 1932-1982*, eds. Margaret Hayward and Joy Cowley, published in 1982 to mark the jubilee year of the New Zealand Women Writers Society, and *Hyacinths and Biscuits*, eds. Penny Dunstan *et al*, published in 1985 to commemorate the diamond jubilee of the New Zealand Penwoman's Club.

women. *All the Dangerous Animals Are In Zoos*, *Listener Short Stories 3*, and *Some Other Country* all portray a literary scene dominated by the male writer and all fail to justify their failure to accurately represent women's strength in the short story genre. It seems that something stood in the way of freeing these women writers from the margins even if they were "some of the best and most forceful writers publishing today" (Wevers, introduction x). Despite both their prolific, praiseworthy output and their supposedly 'celebrated' status in the publishing world, women writers continued to be marginalized when it came to representing the literature of New Zealand. While the increase in contemporary collections and gender-based anthologies suggest that in the early 1980s it was easier for women to find publication, closer investigation shows that here too biases and processes of marginalization were at work. Feminist awareness may have been driving a hunger for women's books and thus assuring their marketability but publishers continued to 'play it safe'. Those writers who "achieved the status of a collection" were generally limited to already recognized novelists (Wevers, "Short Story" 301). Familiar names reappeared to tell familiar tales, removing the risk of the unknown.

### **Continuing cultural 'otherness': Patricia Grace and Yvonne du Fresne**

Patricia Grace's *The Dream Sleepers and other stories* (1980) certainly upholds this notion, its stories being resoundingly reminiscent of her first collection. Again the emphasis is on the cultural 'otherness' of being Maori in a society dominated by Pakeha with an over-riding sense of a culture attempting to hold on to traditional 'ways of being' in the face of a 'new' world, and an associated sadness as the inevitability of loss is faced. However, it cannot be disputed that Grace *is* a woman writer and the influence of gender cannot go unnoticed. Her female voice sounds itself most resoundingly in

“Between Earth and Sky” and “Mirrors,” both of which centre on the role of motherhood and an associated sacrifice of selfhood. As David Norton suggests, in these stories the voice “appears to be her own” creating a “coherence and completeness” lacking elsewhere in the collection (331). In both stories, a moment of freedom is embraced. In “Between Earth and Sky” giving birth marks a reclaiming of the body, freed from the demands of pregnancy: “The gladness was because at last I was to be free. Free from that great lump that was you, free from the aching limbs and swelling that was you . . . “ (16) In “Mirrors” the narrator simply seeks “a time to be” before facing the daily demands of motherhood:

In the mornings I issue lists - to flush the toilet, to wash, to comb. Not to swing on chairs, to grab, eat like pigs. But none of that this early morning. No lists, no nagging. This next half hour’s mine. (17-18)

The need to escape the realm of domesticity, however momentarily, is clearly expressed and so too is Grace’s own ‘place’ as a woman writer. Finding that half hour of her own, that “time to be” has always been a struggle for Grace. With seven children and a career in teaching, there was little time to write. Family always came first:

I just accepted my family as my priority, and that was the easiest way to deal with things . . . I would have liked more time for writing, but I accepted the fact that I could only set aside a certain amount of time without shortchanging everything else . . . And although writing is important to me, it’s not the most important thing in the world . . . my family is what I value most and it’s the top priority in my life. Whenever there was a conflict of interests I knew to put them first. (Grace, qtd. in Kedgley 62)

While the Woman’s Movement touched Grace’s world she claims not to have consciously set out to write a ‘woman’s life’. The experience of being Maori took precedence and even the raising of her feminist consciousness was bound up in cultural awareness: “I found I could easily understand what feminists were saying because of my awareness of racial oppression” (qtd. in Kedgley 66). The ‘otherness’ of being Maori retains the spotlight.

Yvonne du Fresne's 1980s collections explore a parallel sense of 'otherness' within the Danish immigrant community of the Manawatu. *Farvel and other stories* (1980) and *The Growing of Astrid Westergaard and other stories* (1985) centre on the world of a young woman as she grows up in the 1930s capturing "her attempts to learn adult ways in a new land [which] reflect the struggles of the Danish settlers, fiercely maintaining what they value from their past but trying, too, to master the conventions of a new language and country" (Manhire, 7). As with Grace's stories, a celebration of cultural 'otherness' lies at the heart of Astrid's search for identity but the influence of gender is also inescapable, extending beyond the adoption of a girl-child narrator.

As Bill Manhire suggests in his introduction to *Farvel*, a notable feature of du Fresne's writing is the "presence of the women in the Danish households" (8). Female characters play a central role in the stories and in Astrid's process of 'growing up'. She is surrounded by strong women who provide positive role models for her development. However, the experience of being woman is not always portrayed with such optimism. At the end of each collection the images captured are less inspiring. In *Farvel*, an older Astrid is faced with the reality of death and images of older women, widowed and awaiting death, darken the stories, introducing a "more sombre tone of leave-taking" (French "Others Together" 77), while in *The Growing of Astrid Westergaard* the focus shifts from Astrid into more troubled territory. The final groupings of stories show, as Ronda Cooper states, "situations of misery and frustration, focusing on women who are isolated and frightened, who have little value in their lives" (Rev. of *The Growing* 116). In sharp contrast to the active, 'peopled' experience of Astrid's youth, these are stories of women alone and helpless, women who can find no identity beyond that prescribed by patriarchal lore:

Each woman's tragedy consists primarily of her failure to achieve, or hold on to, the all-important roles of wife and mother, the failure of that all important

relationship with husband or lover on which all their happiness depends. (Cooper 118)

Again, du Fresne's own experience as 'woman writer' is present. As a child, du Fresne recalls being encouraged to pursue her ambitions, regardless of her gender:

A lot of New Zealand girls were shoved into kitchens. That never happened to me . . . Boys and girls were very equal and it was never assumed that you would get married and stop what you were doing. A relationship, marriage, was not a thing to defend you against the world. (qtd. in Edmond 25)

Yet choosing to carry on with 'what you were doing' meant choosing to be 'other' to the expectations of a patriarchal world, 'other' to the roles of 'wife and mother.' These final stories capture the resultant sacrifice, one which du Fresne herself mourns: "I know the bleakness of having no place in society, no grandchildren coming through" (qtd. in Edmond 25). Astrid's struggle to find a 'place' in a cultural wilderness parallels du Fresne's struggle as a 'woman writer.' However, while evidence of the 'woman writer' at work can be found in both Grace's and du Fresne's collections, there is a definite sense that this is secondary to their cultural significance. The theme of 'being other' in a cultural context prevails and was perhaps more likely to have caught the publisher's attention than their expressions of 'women's issues.' Both writers told predominantly 'safe' stories of childhood, free of any overt political agenda, and celebrating 'difference' rather than expressing outrage against racial oppression. Issues of women's liberation exist only at the margins of their work, presenting less of a threat to the status quo.

### **The revival of a long-standing tradition: recognition at last for Janet Frame and Joy Cowley**

It must be acknowledged that the surge in publication notable in the 1980s to some extent promoted an already well established process as New Zealand women had been writing *and*, albeit to a lesser degree, publishing for decades. Celebration of their

work, however, was long overdue and the early 1980s provided a suitable climate for revival. Perhaps most significant was the recognition of Janet Frame who, as Wevers claims, had been a “continuous presence in New Zealand literary history” (“Short Story” 279). Despite her prolific output and publication of both novels and short story collections and her established reputation in the literary world, it was not until the early 1980s that Frame really found acclaim with the New Zealand reading public. As Elizabeth Caffin claimed in 1984, “Janet Frame is at the height of her powers but only in the last year has she received the embrace of her native land” (“Ways of Saying” 7). In 1982, in the midst of a welcoming literary climate with ‘hungry’ women readers to sustain, Frame’s first autobiographical volume *To the Is-Land* was released. In a sense, the outstanding response to this book sealed Frame’s ‘place’ as a *read* New Zealand writer and signalled her move in from the margins. Her fiction became available to the masses and her short fiction was the first to benefit from this timely release. In 1983, Victoria University Press, with assistance from the Literary Fund, published a collection of Frame’s short stories, selected by the writer and spanning more than three decades of published work.

All but four of the stories collected in *You Are Now Entering the Human Heart* (1983) are drawn from previous Frame collections and, therefore, reflect the themes, concerns, and modes of expression of their time, ranging from the Mansfield-like accounts of childhood experience found in *The Lagoon* (1951), to the fantastical fable and parable of *The Reservoir* and *Snowman, Snowman* (1963). The final four stories, previously uncollected but all published in journals prior to inclusion here, range from “The Bath” first published in 1965 to “Insulation” the most recent piece with publication in the *New Zealand Listener* in 1979. These later stories are marked by a return to the more realistic mode of Frame’s earlier stories but on the whole their focus



remains the same. It is a focus which is, at least as it is represented here, predominantly free of the concerns of gender. 'Being woman' is not central to these explorations of the human heart.

Nevertheless, Frame remains relevant to even the most feminist-focused exploration of women's work in New Zealand, not simply because she is a woman writer but because of her undeniable influence on those who have followed her lead. 'Being woman' may not be central to Frame's short stories but 'being' lies very much at their heart. Questions of selfhood abound as her characters and narrators struggle with issues of identity, with their need to find a 'place' in the world, to find worth and meaning in life, to find insulation from their fears and protection from their own mortality. In *You Are Now Entering the Human Heart* such soul-searching is portrayed on the level of universal human experience but in her exploration of this act of 'searching' Frame has greatly influenced those writers more concerned with gender issues and the search for the female self. Wevers identifies Frame as a reference point for recent writing by women, claiming that her fiction "questions all given structures of knowledge" ("Short Story" 303). Unconventional, often unreal, ways of being are presented, the reader's perception constantly challenged and overthrown forcing them to see the world in a new way. Frame gives construction of self-expression beyond previously accepted and expected boundaries. She provides others with a deconstructive tool with which to dismantle patriarchal lore.

Joy Cowley's collection, *Heart Attack and other stories* (1985), suggests a move in this direction. Cowley's reputation as a novelist and writer of youth fiction was also established well before publication of her short story collection, and in a sense, the stories collected in *Heart Attack* chart the progress of her career, as Cowley herself suggests in the prologue:

The first twelve stories show the journey from youth to middle age. Stories one to five, written in the 1960s show a certain simplicity. I see them as linear, gauche, fresh, naïve. The next seven show more detachment. They are more complex, and have elements of irony. (9)

Indicative of the time of their writing, most of these stories describe what Felicity Day sees as “a pre-feminist world characterised by a preoccupation with the boundaries of the relationships between men and women” (Rev. of *Heart Attack* 45). On the whole, the male/female relationships Cowley portrays remain trapped within these boundaries. The final image of “The Silk” is a woman being beckoned to by an image of a man who clearly represents her departed husband. There is no life for her without him. In “Distances” the female protagonist is resigned to the playing out of roles her marriage has become:

It was a truth, she thought, that marriage, like everything else, had a natural lifespan. If it got old and died before the partners involved that was too bad, there was nothing one could do about it. (92)

Peace made is destined to be short-lived. In “House With a View” financial independence gives Marion the opportunity to move beyond role expectations and take control, to choose the home she has always wanted. But her hopes and dreams are dashed and Hugh reasserts his power, “his footsteps loud and confident” (36). Stasis prevails throughout. In all the relationships explored there is a sense of something missing, of a lack of fulfilment, but the only response is resignation. Patriarchal expectations are upheld and no alternatives of ‘being’ are offered.

Cowley’s focus on the internals of experience does ensure that feelings lie at the heart of all these stories. Every story, she claims, “begins with the heart”: “the story which comes first as an intellectual exercise, will never be born alive: it remains a corpse and decomposes with repeated writings until I end up burying it” (prologue 8). However, as in Frame’s work this interiority is not restricted to the experience of ‘being woman.’ Cowley is equally concerned here with exploring the emotional landscape of

male characters and as a result the collection does not carry an overwhelmingly strong sense of 'women's work.' In fact, as Day suggests, it is only the final story, the autobiographical "The Machinery of Dreams," "that celebrates the woman-unto-herself" (Rev. of *Heart Attack* 45). Here the central female character follows her dreams, claiming her independence and ultimately being rewarded with the utter sense of freedom captured in the story's closing image as she rides her newly acquired motorcycle open-throttle on the Himatangi straight:

I put my head back and give a long yodelling cry which scarcely rises above the racing engine.

'Oh-ee-oh-ee-oh-ee-oh-ee-oh-ee-oh-ee-oh!'

In that moment the road rises under the wheels, the trees fling back their arms and the whole world shouts with laughter. (133)

While the suggestion here is that girls *can* do anything, on the whole, the women of Cowley's stories do not act upon this ability. This final story may indicate an increased self-awareness on Cowley's part but mostly alternative ways of 'being' remain uncharted.

### **Subverting the male tradition from within: Fiona Kidman 'playing it safe'**

In contrast, Fiona Kidman enters into issues of female identity more fully in her first collection. *Mrs Dixon and Friend* (1982) reveals a startling feminist consciousness and Kidman's experience as its creator captures the conflicting forces faced by the woman writer. Kidman's first novel, *A Breed of Women* (1979), was acclaimed by the reading public, paving the way for publication of her short fiction, but the critical response (notably, from male academics and critics), on the other hand, was less welcoming. The novel was met with a string of bad reviews centred on, as Cathie Dunsford suggests, its dominant theme of "a woman's search for individual identity through her redefinition of relationships and venturing out alone, and the effect this has

on others around her whether men or women” (Rev. of *Mrs Dixon* 96). Despite public popularity such feminist concerns were not well received in the still predominantly androcentric New Zealand literary world, but Kidman continued to flout patriarchal convention throughout the stories of *Mrs Dixon and Friend*. These stories not only explore the theme of women’s search for identity, they also reveal “the difficulties placed in the way of any woman’s search for individual identity (and, implicitly, collective woman-identity)” (Dunsford, “Of Threatened” 43).

This search for self-hood and the struggles it presents is particularly central to the experience of “Mrs Dixon and Friend’s” Bethany, a woman who “strives against patriarchal society for a deeper knowledge of her own needs” (Dunsford, “Of Threatened” 43). She breaks out of traditional role expectations and follows an alternative path of self-discovery, fulfilling Kidman’s goals: “I wanted to show her becoming stronger and stronger and stronger. I wanted to create a positive role model outside of the pattern of male dominance” (“Of Threatened” 43). She created a character who forces even her ex-husband to acknowledge her growth: “Not the Bethany he had known, Bethany still with a long way to go, but Bethany on the up-and-up. In spite of everything . . . Oh she had come so much much further than he had done” (38-39). Bethany is a new woman, no longer willing to be defined by her relationship to others. She has claimed control of her self-hood and found an identity beyond that of “Mrs Dixon.”

Confusingly, Bethany’s emergent sense of self is expressed through the point of view of Peter, the ex-husband, seemingly circumscribing the female experience, yet this choice of narration can be explained. On one hand, as Kidman herself suggests, adopting a male point of view enables her to show the limitations of the male perspective: “I wanted to show the merely partial understanding of men who watch

women going through this process of feminist awareness, which is quite mysterious and incomprehensible to them. They feel defensive and threatened” (“Of Threatened” 44). On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, this point of view is simply reflective of the fact that the story was first written in 1972, at a time when Kidman was “still writing from a male option” (Dunsford, “Of Threatened” 43). Use of a male narrator is indicative of Kidman’s experience of ‘being woman writer’ at the time and her struggle to fit into an androcentric literary circle. The patriarchal nature of the New Zealand literary world was highlighted for Kidman early in her writing years. Attending a writing course in the early 1960s she and other participants were told by a male lecturer “ ‘women writers . . . lady poets . . . standing at their kitchen sinks, scribbling away. Forget it!’ . . .” (“Fiona Kidman” 61). Women writers were scorned, their creativity viewed as no more than a hobby, their work trivialised. Fortunately, Kidman responded with determination and fought back with strengthened resolve: “If I’m really honest, there was a part of me that was saying ‘I’ve got to prove myself to these chappies’” (“Fiona Kidman” 61). At the outset, however, trying to prove herself meant writing on male terms. To be accepted by male critics meant emulating their ways:

. . . in all my years working in the media I had really been one of the chaps, boozing in the pubs, talking to the male writers and trying to do it the way they did. (qtd. in Kedgley 164)

Use of the male perspective was simply one way of ‘competing’ on common ground, of breaking through the patriarchal barriers ‘protecting’ New Zealand’s literati.

Fortunately, Kidman’s first publication *Honey and Bitters*, a poetry collection marketed within the context of International Women’s year, marked a change in her thinking. Raising feminist consciousness had a huge impact on the way Kidman viewed herself as a writer, freeing her from previous attempts to ‘write as a man’ and allowing her to write on her own terms, as a woman:

It . . . made me realise that you didn't have to make it on male terms and clarified what had been going on in my life for the past few years . . . I knew it was possible to make a statement as a woman writer, and I also knew that because of things that were happening at that time I wanted to make some sort of political statement. (qtd. in Kedgley 164-165)

The beginnings of this realisation can be seen in "Dry Rot." The perspective is again predominately male as Edward Turner narrates the tale of a marriage that has died with "a kind of gathering incompatibility" (57). Journeying back to their honeymoon destination, he and his wife seek to rediscover and fulfill their dreams of the past but they appear to be on totally opposing wavelengths. Kidman captures this conflict through a clever narrative device. Edward may be telling the story but italicized interruptions convey his wife Margaret's perspective:

*What shit I talk to myself. But out loud? It's only with you, Edward, that thought is impossible to convey. You, a living, breathing, hearing receptacle for words; that's when I switch on the thought mike. (55)*

Edward effectively silences her in his attempts to control her emotions but as Kidman suggests, he cannot read her mind or dictate her thoughts. She knows that she must leave: "*And there will be no turning back. And I will be alone . . . which is not a new thing . . . but it must be acknowledged . . . for what it is*" (74). Being alone means being free to find herself and to voice all those things her marriage has silenced. From within a male-dominated narrative this glimpse of female self-discovery is all the more powerful.

In the final story of the collection this change in perspective is more fully realised. "A Decade Woman" follows the weekend of a middle age woman in a lonely motel in a strange town as she confronts her true identity. Ellen has travelled to this strange town to teach a weekend writing course but the usual sense of freedom attached to her time alone has been replaced: "this time she felt lonely and anxious" (133). She has just celebrated her fortieth birthday and the reality of this seems too frightening to

confront. Yet, alone in her motel room she cannot escape her ruminations on life and a sense of panic takes over as she questions her identity. Ellen has managed to successfully juggle family commitments with a writing career but still she is plagued by guilt, by the need to conform and meet the social expectations of wife and mother. The personal autonomy that writing provides outside these roles finds no validation in the patriarchal world, an experience matching Kidman's own as woman writer:

It's based, quite obviously, on my own experiences. Ellen is wrestling with a collective male system which won't let her succeed. Yes she *does* succeed, and they hate her and punish her for it. ("Of Threatened" 44)

But Ellen will not fold under the pressure of this 'punishment.' As Kidman did, she will continue to embrace her individuality and continue to write. She returns to her family with resignation, "she decided she would probably continue to cope after all. For a while anyway. Well probably longer. She always did. People depended on it" (144), but also with renewed strength founded on greater self-awareness. She has survived the harrowing journey of self-discovery.

As Dunsford suggests, at the time of publication "A Decade Woman" was Kidman's "most feminist story yet" (44). For Kidman, this meant embracing the sudden realisation that she "was writing for women and being responded to by women" ("Fiona Kidman" 61). Her readers, swept up in a like process of redefinition and self-searching, hungered for characters with whom they could identify, and who represented alternative ways of being beyond domesticity. Kidman was beginning to provide such points of recognition. However, the 'safety' of Kidman's collection with regard to publication cannot be denied, both in its predominant emulation of male form and technique and in Kidman's already established reputation as poet and novelist. Such factors assured her a place near the centre as a model of women's work worthy of celebration, a voice to be heard, but she was one of few. Women's writing which stepped further beyond this

‘safety zone’, further from the traditions of patriarchy and deeper into the realms of feminist consciousness, was not so well received by mainstream publishers.

### **Publishing collectives: giving voice to a shared feminist consciousness**

Major publishing companies were not willing to take risks with new names or more subversive subjects. Fortunately there were other systems of support to turn to. With increasing awareness of the distinctiveness of women’s art came the advent of specifically gender-based forums for their work. In 1976 the first issue of *Spiral*, “a woman’s art journal”, appeared, edited by Heather McPherson. Her editorial established a clear feminist agenda:

We have to become separatist to become ourselves: to grow past conditioning, to test assumptions of roles and capabilities, to resurrect rights neglected or suppressed through centuries of male hegemony . . . an opportunity for women to reach beyond their nurturant heritage to express a new consciousness. (qtd. in Dann 114)

While the journal was dedicated to ‘the arts’ in a broad sense, a publishing collective developed alongside, dedicated to supporting women writers. One way in which the *Spiral* collective promoted women’s writing was to raise previously unrecognised writers from their silenced position, such as with their 1983 publication of J.C. Sturm’s 1940s and 1950s stories in *The House of the Talking Cat*. While, as Marilyn Duckworth suggests, Sturm’s stories represent a pre-feminist era, and consequently celebrate the negative aspects of women’s lives (“New/Old” 92), *Spiral*’s initiative in finally bringing this perspective to the reader provides further acknowledgement of the growing awareness of women writers’ ‘place’ in New Zealand’s literary history. Smaller collectives perhaps had less to lose from such non-mainstream ventures. Ironically, stories from the past aside, the works they published seem to be more representative of those writers on the edge, offering more varied opportunities for reader identification.



Many contemporary women writers of the early 1980s also joined forces to make their voices known through small-scale publishing ventures. Another Spiral publication, *Drawing Together* (1985), captures both the collective spirit of the publishers and the need for women writers to unite to sound their voices. This collection brings together the works of Sue Fitchett, Marina Bachmann and Janet Charman and while Bachmann is the sole contributor of short stories, the themes encountered throughout introduce a notion upheld by other collective publications of the time. Relationships are central to all four of Bachmann's stories but her portrayal of unconventional relationships is particularly notable. "Dear Moon," for example, focuses on the 'lunar link' of a woman's cycle and the stability this relationship brings to her life: "the one who keeps pulling this body through its tides" (24). Most striking, however, is the story "Dying." At one level the female protagonist is dyeing her hair but her internal monologue suggests that she is also dying inside over a lost love. The nature of this love stands outside the norms of a traditionally patriarchal society and may take the reader by surprise: "And all day there was a lump in my throat. I wanted to tell them, 'Look, I feel terrible. Anna and I have just split up.' But they never wanted to know it existed. They made me honorary normal" (33). Bachmann insists the reader acknowledge the 'normality' of the narrator's grief, bringing the potentially 'shocking' into the realms of everyday life. This lesbian relationship is as deserving of recognition as any other. Bachmann's story makes a subversive statement that is familiar territory in smaller-scale publications of women's work in the early 1980s.

Dorothy Golder and Julia Millen also pooled their work to produce the collections *Soft Pawn* (1983) and *Phallic Cymbals* (1984).<sup>3</sup> Both volumes were published by Wellington based Serpentpress and carry the outer appearance of low-

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<sup>3</sup> In the discussion that follows the collection in which each story can be found is indicated by use of the abbreviations (*SP*) and (*PC*) respectively.

budget production which belies the scale of the stories within. These pieces have much to say about the experience of ‘being woman.’ Whether conveyed through the poetically inclined voice of Golder, or tinged with the more ‘realistic’ cynicism characteristic of Millen, the themes encountered are the same. Marriage is the most prevalent theme and both writers consistently portray a negative outlook on this institution. Marriage, they suggest, fails to live up to the mythical ideals it promises and they convey this point without compromise. In these stories marriage represents a loss of self; female powerlessness breeds in the face of male control. In Golder’s “Follow the Yellow Balloon” (*SP*), for instance, the female protagonist is lost before marriage has even begun. As her partner announces their engagement, having decided without asking her that marriage is “the logical thing” for them to do, she feels the life-spirit leave her body. The title image is one of deflation rather than buoyancy:

The seams to her dress were no longer too tight, she could feel the expanded cloth wrinkling into loose folds . . .  
 . . . It was true there was hardly anything left of her, the air had escaped into the night leaving her yellow, wrinkled skin without support. (4-5)

Throughout, other stories justify such a response. The dishwasher-disillusionment of Golder’s “Wet Finish” (*SP*) is matched by Millen in “Shit-Canned” (*PC*):

Everything was wrong, once we married. As though I put on wife-coloured spectacles instead of a ring . . .  
 . . . everything changed overnight - the wedding night. The fun went out of sex and Rhys turned into an overgrown teenager . . . And it was all my fault. (23-24)

Reality fails to live up to the image of marital joy constructed for the bride-to-be. If not struck by the curse of male infidelity, a less-than-blissful routine of arguments becomes the married way of life as in Millen’s “Marriage Rites” (*PC*).

The only respect in which marriage vows do hold true is in their escapability. Both writers portray marriage as a point of no return. The alternatives to ‘playing the part’ in accordance with patriarchal expectations are overwhelmingly limited and even

more bleak than the disillusionment of marriage itself. Golder's contributions to *Phallic Cymbals* in particular suggest the impossibility of breaking free. In "Dove Traps" the female protagonist has taken to a tree, along with the birds, in an attempt to escape a marriage she never wanted, hoping that she too will gain the freedom of flight:

Mother you told me it was what I should do. I'm tied to my tree by a golden band of hope and glory . . . What else was I fit for? But I won't come down. I'm a bird and I'm free. 'This morning.' She whispered to the tree, 'when *he* was still asleep, I crept out of the cage. The door was locked but I found a 'key' - *drink me up*, it said and I did. I shrank and shrank to the size of a dove. I flew to you. (15)

Sadly though, her hope for escape is no more than a fairy tale. Marriage has clipped her wings and in her flightless state the tree is simply another cage representing the life to which she must return:

She tried to fly once more but her wings were snapped, broken by uncertainty. 'Marry me,' he had said, 'and I will give you my little house to clean and you will raise my children and they shall bear my name, you will be my wife and fly my flag.' (16)

Golder does create an escape route for other female protagonists, but they are destined to follow an overwhelmingly limited path. The powerlessness of women under patriarchal rule becomes absolute in stories such as "Behind the Green Door" and "The Bride." Embracing the only act of self-assertion open to them, the women of these stories deny themselves any alternative existence. They literally kill the self which they long to express. Death is their only way out: ". . . Lost, that's what she had become, her life a black labyrinth without any thread. She curled up and closed her eyes." ("Behind the Green Door" 36)

Each of these stories can be viewed as a declaration against marriage as stultifying to the experience of 'being woman.' It is only in relating to men outside of marriage that Golder and Millen's female protagonists attain the power of self-hood. In Millen's "I Love You Hector Berlioz" (*SP*), for example, Elaine finds that her true passion lies with the music of a favourite composer rather than with the man whose

attention she has been seeking. Music provides a greater sense of fulfilment. Similarly, in her “Scars of Youth” (*PC*) the male is shown to be lacking as society’s double standard of ageing is subverted. Preparing to meet with her ex-husband, the woman of this story expects to find him “mature, desirable, sexy” (33) in his forties. Much to her delight, “Dave the invincible walk[s] with a limp” (33). Subversion of gender-power is also explored in the workplace as both writers portray women reclaiming their self-hood when faced with disempowerment at the hand of a male employer. The protagonist of Golder’s “Phallus Sea” (*PC*) has been made redundant and finds herself swimming in a sea of phallic symbols which seem to mock her in her powerless position, but she soon recognises their sterility and claims the final word, metaphorically castrating her boss. The woman of Millen’s “Singer in the Band” (*PC*) also faces redundancy, replaced with a younger and prettier face but to the stunned silence of her fellow (male)band members she claims financial entitlement. Again, the last word belongs to the patriarchally defined ‘weaker sex’.

Clearly, Golder and Millen’s focus is on the ‘clash’ between the sexes, and they sound this loudly and directly. Women, they urge, should avoid marriage in its patriarchal trappings at all cost, and should enter into any heterosexual relationship with extreme caution. Only when freed from the need to define themselves and their value as human beings through their relationships with men can women expect to find power within. Marriage, or any male-centred relationship, is seen to deny the experience of ‘being woman’ limiting the female character to ‘being other’. Such feminist polemics alone would have stepped outside the ‘safety zone’ in publication terms and may have contributed to Golder and Millen’s work being restricted to such a small-scale publishing venture. Other writers publishing through similar channels voice similar beliefs. In 1984, Kara Press of Auckland published stories from Daphne de Jong, Ann

Macrae and Anna Granger-Sharp in *Venus, Vagabonds and Miscellanea*. A rather more eclectic mix of works is found here, reflecting the diversity of its contributors. As Fiona Kidman suggests, “the early impression is of three women writers speaking with similar voices . . . Reading proves otherwise” (“Three in One” 47). These stories provide highly colourful and varied expressions of ‘being woman.’ While Golder and Millen predominantly focused on the particular demographic group of the ‘young’ woman, newly married or searching for love, in *Venus, Vagabonds and Miscellanea* the whole range of life experience is covered, from youth to old age. Women are represented in a broader context of being. However, while the feminist doctrine may be less overt and the stories less didactic, women’s issues still lie at the heart of the collection and the bleakness associated with the place of women, irrespective of their diversity, remains. There is an overriding sense of dissatisfaction in these stories, as characters face ‘gaps’ in their existence with little suggestion of finding fulfilment.

Again, the institution of marriage plays an important role. In Daphne de Jong’s “Vagabundus Vinea” for instance, marriage represents a loss of self for the female protagonist. As she attempts to fill the gap this has left, the scent of jasmine filling the night air engages her imaginative and creative spirit and in her mind the plant comes to life “climbing in the windows, pushing inquisitive tendrils over the sills, through the half-opened casements . . . waving its green pointed ends as though sniffing something out” (3-4). But to her husband the jasmine is merely a nuisance in need of trimming. He has no tolerance for her fanciful thinking - “Oh, do stop being silly” (6) - thus filling her with self-doubt and the need to turn to him for affirmation and definition. He even decides what she shall be called and the name Liz she seems to yearn for and identify with is lost in the more ‘suitable’ Elizabeth. She is silenced, his final gesture of kindness

in breaking off a stem of the jasmine to lay on her pillow symbolising her own loss. The “cool white constellation” (14) will now die, sacrificed as she is, in service to him.

The role of mother also leads to this sacrificial loss of self-hood in Daphne de Jong’s award-winning “Dying Light”,<sup>4</sup> which portrays a woman struggling to hold onto her identity as her short-term memory and coherency fail her and she faces death. Awakening in hospital she can neither connect to time nor place. Only the role of motherhood remains a defining force. Momentarily she thinks she is there to give birth but her body reveals otherwise. Her breasts are not “taut, engorged” but “soft and almost flat, drooping a little against her ribs” (34). This realisation is a death in itself. She feels useless: “not a hard, erect nub, with milk moistening its tip in anticipation of her son’s infant demands, but a useless, dried up little prune of a thing”(34). Roles have been reversed and she has become the child, forced to face the dehumanisation of utter dependency. Yet, even approaching death, it is the roles of wife, mother and lover that provide her with a sense of being and having a ‘place’:

A dark head lay against her breast, and she stroked it with a gentle hand, crooning soft words of love. It was small and downy and fitted into her palm, while greedy baby lips nuzzled at her milk-wet nipple; or it was heavy and thick-haired, and the caresses were adult and abrasive with masculine whiskers that grazed her firm white skin. (53)

So strong is the societal expectation of ‘wife and mother’ as women’s definitive experience, this story suggests, peace can only be found in the knowledge that these roles have been fulfilled. Even stories written from a male perspective such as Anna Granger Sharp’s “Anniversary” and “Bootlaces and Bailing Twine” reinforce this as women’s ‘place’ in patriarchal society. The old widowers at the centre of these stories

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<sup>4</sup>de Jong’s “Dying Light” was awarded the Katherine Mansfield Award in the 1981 Bank of NZ Writers’ Awards. As Fiona Kidman noted in her *New Zealand Listener* review of *Venus, Vagabonds and Miscellanea* “it is curious that this is [the story’s] first public airing in New Zealand” (“Three in One” 47).

are lost, unable to cope without women to exist as wife and mother. The women themselves are missed less than the roles they played.

Other stories suggest that this playing of patriarchally defined roles is not limited to marriage. The power of patriarchal rule to define women is portrayed as absolute. As Ann Macrae's "Suzanne and Venus" shows, not only does patriarchy label woman 'wife' and 'mother' it also claims the power to label her 'mad.' This story recounts the experiences of two young women as they battle with the mental health system, day after day, "zonked" on "hospital drugs and shock"(84): "we didn't count as people" (87). The two were labelled "schiz" and according to Venus who narrates their story Suzanne embraced this imposed identity:

She didn't have the textbook symptoms, fair enough. So she started pretending she had . . . I think she figured if she could squeeze herself into the pigeon hole they picked, maybe they could get her well. (89)

But "of course it didn't work" (89). Grasping onto the only identity available to her under patriarchal rule led to Suzanne's demise: "'I'm a nothing person,' she began saying" (89). Having lost all sense of self-worth and self-respect death becomes her only means of escape from this 'mad' world. Fortunately a contrasting sense of hope is captured in the narrator's experience, saving the story from complete tragedy. Venus refuses to carry the label of "schiz":

I started thinking the doctors didn't know what they were doing. And while they were finding out it wasn't them that was getting messed up. It was me. . . . They had nothing to lose if I never got well . . . I had my mind to lose - my only one. So maybe I should look after myself . . . (88)

She believes in herself and believes that only she can decide her destiny. Venus asserts control of herself, freeing herself from the label of madness and subverting patriarchal definition by being her own woman.

Granger Sharp conveys a similar breaking free in "The Invitation" in which a woman's nature collides with the cold and artificial nature of her male partner's world.

His passion for “stainless steel, vinyl and chrome” emphasises the “cold and efficient” man he is: “White cold hands with immaculate fingernails clasped in formal greeting on the platform. White plastic teeth exposed in cold formal smiles” (123). His life is lifeless, but she has decided that she wants to live, like the fern she has nurtured from her previous life: “You grow, you drink and reach out towards the sunlight.” (122). She too wants to grow and so she leaves, embracing the world of possibilities which lie beyond his arctic existence. Female characters such as these represent hope for finding fulfillment outside patriarchally prescribed roles. Existence beyond ‘wife and mother’ becomes more than an unobtainable illusion; it becomes a real possibility. Women writers of the early 1980s were discovering this reality for themselves in finding an outlet for their creative expression. Through the support of other like-minded women, inspired by the Women’s Movement and awakened to feminist consciousness, the power of the written word gave voice to their thoughts, their hopes, their dreams and their realities of ‘being women.’

### **The political arena of women’s writing groups: didactic distancing**

Through the work of women’s writing groups the hope for alternative ways of being found its greatest expression. The necessity of self-publication may have imposed its own financial restrictions, but it also allowed these women the freedom to subvert without the risk of silencing. As Cathie Dunsford claims in reviewing *Roses and Razor Blades*, a Womenspirit collection, self-publication allowed this group “the freedom and power to make their own decisions about content and style”. They could develop a style “unique to them as women, rather than perpetuating a male tradition of literature which is judged by distinctly male standards and denies women’s reality” (45-46).



Womenspirit, an Auckland group, was perhaps the most notable collective fostering women's writing. The group grew out of the 1979 United Women's Convention and 'women united' remained their mission statement as they went on to publish *Roses and Razor Blades* (1981) and *In This Bitter Season* (1983)<sup>5</sup>. With nine women writers represented in each collection by a mix of poetry and short fiction the emphasis is on diversity. While drawn together by the experience of womanhood, each work remains a celebration of individuality: "We are women whose lifestyles differ - politically, culturally and in our sexuality and have the diversity of opinions which this implies. What we have in common is our experience of speaking and writing as women" (preface *Roses and Razor Blades* n. pag.). 'We are all women' these collections suggest, 'yet as women we can be all of these things.' The feminist context within which the Womenspirit stories appear is undeniable. Together they represent a reclaiming of 'place' in the New Zealand literary world: "Experiences that are common to all women and misunderstood by men surface throughout" (Dunsford, Rev. of *Roses and Razor Blades* 45). The plurality of these experiences, their suggestion that there is no one singular way of 'being woman' is the key to their subversion of patriarchal norms. The female characters they create break all the rules, defying patriarchal expectation and being what and who they choose to be.

Jan Anker's female protagonist in "Secondary Growth" (*BS*) attempts to play by the rules but as the story progresses she becomes increasingly conscious of her dissatisfaction with married life. Gradually she realises that her happiness is secondary to her husband's, that her role is "to help Jeff's dreams come true" (33). Finally, a night-class artistic 'hobby' prescribed by a male doctor to help Pam deal with Jeff's extramarital flings provides her with an escape route. Through artistic expression,

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<sup>5</sup> In the discussion that follows the collection in which each story can be found is indicated by use of the abbreviations (RR) and (BS) respectively.

Pam's creative self is released, freeing her from the stultifying, oppressive role-play of the married woman: "She was wearing the look of someone who had wrestled a giant and won. She had been able to fight her way clear of the choking undergrowth and had burst out into the warm, healing sunlight" (35). Creativity has planted the seed for developing an alternative way of being. Similar journeys of self-searching are encountered throughout these collections, from the young female child of Renee's "Cross Stitch" and "Solo" (*BS*) who seeks identity within her mother's gaze, through solo mothers struggling to make it alone in a world which defines them as 'lacking' (Jan Benfield's "A Short Story" (*RR*) and Annabel Fagan's "Goldfish Days" (*RR*)) to the internal world of an old woman facing death in Carin Svensson's "A Brushstroke Only" (*BS*). The experience of being a woman is expressed at all life's stages, and through all its struggles.

Certain portrayals are outstanding in the alternative they offer. The introduction of politically driven women, for example, rewrites a traditionally male-dominated realm. In Jan Anker's "See You Saturday" (*BS*) the Springbok Tour is shown to not only have produced a situation of New Zealander against New Zealander but also woman against woman, as female protestors and female police officers meet head on. Another protest is carried out by the young women of Annabel Fagan's "Five Hundred" (*BS*) as they act out their anger at the objectification of black women, displayed as 'trophies' in a neat, white, middle-class neighbourhood:

'These heads included torsos with large breasts. And they're of black women, African, with heads back a bit, bright red open mouths and red nipples . . . white man's trophies. I couldn't believe it, made me sick . . . segregated sexual parts for men to look at. I identified with them! That's all men want, most of them, a cunt here, a tit there . . .' (93)

Their destruction of these sexual representations becomes not only a statement against racial discrimination but also against the double-oppression faced by black women.

Ironically, the owner of the trophies is himself 'black' but through his loss his wife takes a step toward empowerment: "'They weren't warriors you had up there Tai . . . They weren't men stuck up there Tai, they were women, black women. And I'm glad the rotten things have gone . . . Yes, I'm glad'" (96). Refusing to be silenced into roles of servitude, these protesters have made a stand against universal gender inequalities.

Further to these cultural and political aspects of female identity the women writers of *Womenspirit* also explore sexual identity, and in the process traditional ways of being are overturned as relationships between men and women are rejected in favour of alternative explorations of sexual selfhood. Continually, the female characters in these stories come to realise their sexual being in the company of other woman. Annabel Fagan, for instance, explores sexual selfhood in the context of adolescence, from the innocent school-girl crush Jane has on Mrs Black in "Whispered the Sea" (BS) to the incestuous undertones of sibling affection in "Moon Sister" (RR), in which Merian fulfills the dying wish of her fatally ill sister: "Flow over me dear sister, make love to me before I die." (39). Even more striking in feminist terms are the portrayals of grown women who, because of their unwillingness to adhere to the norms of male/female love, shock and disrupt the balance of the social world around them. Jan Benfield's "The Photograph" (RR), for example, sets up all the traditional expectations of romantic love as a woman mourns the departure of her soul mate: "Was she all right? Would she ever be whole again? Would she recover from losing half of her life, her body and her heart . . . ?" (13). It is only at the story's end that the true identity of Jenny's "Sam" is uncovered by a surprised male workmate:

Poor girl, he mused to himself. He had never seen her so bereft of her usual composure and poise. She had taken that guy's departure hard . . . he idly picked up Jenny's fallen photo. A stunning, long-haired blond smiled back at him from a sunny picture . . . on the back he read aloud 'To my beloved Jenny, Forever yours, Samantha 1980.' (16)

As amusing as this subversive twist is, however, the consequences of being 'uncovered' lie ahead for Jenny, and as Angela Boyes-Barnes' "The Woman Who Loved Roses" (RR) suggests she may face unforeseen opposition. This story is a portrait of a truly unconventional woman who horrifies her neighbours with "a)her drinking b)her garden and c)her remoteness" (22). They expect everyone to live as they do: "Their ritual was a drink after 5.30pm, pre-dinner, pre-television, pre-bed and pre-fornication, because of course, they were all blissfully married" (22). But she will not be confined by social definitions of morality. Her "close womin friends" visit and sit, relax, talk, laugh, even "lie naked in the sun or shade" (24), behaviour which ceases only on her disappearance. Even then, the garden she leaves behind refuses to be tamed, metaphorically representing the opposition to patriarchal norms these collections celebrate.

Whether accepted by society or not, these women writers refuse to be contained with the patriarchal boundaries of traditional creativity. Like the girl-child in Carin Svensson's "An Old Tale" (RR) their creative spirit is strong. In her work as a carpet maker, a traditional role for women, Ana rebelliously breaks the patterns of old: "Now they were to weave camels bringing riches to the gods and trees for their eternal life. But as Ana worked, carnations grew under her fingers and her trees carried pomegranates so ripe they threatened to burst" (87). As a singular act of subversion, Ana's behaviour faces the punishment of silencing, but a collective spirit overcomes this. The voice of women united brings the reward of freedom of expression:

They filled the square and the hundred steps. They covered every inch of white marble, huddled together with lowered heads. They stayed singing and they could not be moved . . .

. . . 'Let us weave flowers, when flowers want to grow under our fingers and let us weave trees, when trees want to grow. Then our carpets will be warm and alive like flames on the cold marble'. (90)

These words contain hope for a new generation of women writers in New Zealand to express what is true to them and write of their experience beyond the bounds of domesticity. *Womenspirit* led the way in this direction, towards realisation of Wevers' claim that for New Zealand women writers in the late 1980s short fiction became a site for exploration of the notion that "any construction of the self is possible" ("Short Story" 305). Self-publication seems to have allowed for greater diversity of self-expression.

A similar mode of publication went into the production of *When Women Write in Northland* (1985), a collection of contributions to a festival organised by the Whangarei Community Arts Council to mark the end of United Nations Decade for Women (October 1985). Again, the focus is on diversity, both in modes of expression and in content. As Felicity Day claims, "the impression given is of a thriving and diverse community of women who write with considerable confidence, flair and enjoyment" (Rev. of *When Women* 45). Their works again stress the many ways of 'being woman,' the familiar search for female selfhood running throughout this collection. Women are repeatedly portrayed in situations of conflict, their desires at odds with expectations placed upon them. The most effective of these representations are found in the stories of Janika Greenwood and Sue McCauley. Greenwood's stories, "With Love, Anna" and "Tree Hut", centre on women facing the inevitable loneliness of entrapment within the traditional roles of wife and mother. As "Tree Hut" suggests, the reality of "a comfortable home, with a comfortable husband, and comfortably growing children" (24) is revealed to be lacking. It fails to live up to the ideal of marital bliss:

She too had built the tree hut of her fantasies with wall-to-wall carpets and good upholstery and a nice husband and two nice children, with real dishes and windows and cupboards. And hers didn't stand empty now, like the children's. She was still in it. Playing mother. (24)

The women of McCauley's stories face a similar sense of disillusionment. The narrator of "Diary of a Victim" is forced to accept that while the roles of mother and lover can coexist harmoniously within the institution of marriage, a single woman cannot easily be both. Her son and her lover will not make peace so she must sacrifice one for the other, and the decision is made for her in a patriarchal world which deems her needs and desires as secondary. She leaves her lover to save her son, but in the process realises that she has lost them both: "I begin to realise I may never forgive him" (80). Being mother has cost her a claim to selfhood. Becoming lost in traditional gender roles is also central to McCauley's "Morning of the Turquoise Trousers". Here the narrator is angered and frustrated by the effect a male presence has on her being. Previously satisfied with herself, she becomes self-conscious and overly concerned with the externalities of her appearance. The loss of selfhood resulting from relations with a man is highlighted:

So here I am. Nothing's happened, but everything's changed. The inconvenience is enormous. My feet are ugly. I have a nervous laugh, I am uncertain and unsatisfactory. I write poems in my head and don't bother with dinner.

I remember now that this is much the way it was the other times. (34-35)

The woman starts to see herself through the male gaze, internalising her perception of his desires. Patriarchal definition takes over her concept of self, and while she is angered by this loss of self-assurance, escape from this vicious circle of dissatisfaction appears unlikely.

Such hopelessness runs throughout this collection. Regardless of the issues being explored, from the discovery of sexual identity in Thelma Hall's "The Galaxy" and the struggle with sexual desires in May Williamson's "The Lonely Road" to battling against old-age dependency in Dorothy Foster's "Catch Me If You Can," there is little here to suggest a way out. While the limitations patriarchal rule imposes upon women

are clearly expounded and this exposure is subversive in itself, there is no sense of breaking free and finding alternative ways of being. These women, unlike those created by the Womenspirit writers, remain trapped and marginalized. In part, this difference may be attributable to the fact that the work collected in *When Women Write in Northland* was subject to a process of editorial selection. While the publication grew from a similar feminist consciousness-raising movement as the Womenspirit collections, selection of works for inclusion lay not with the writers' themselves but with Phoebe Meikle. While, as Fiona Kidman commented, the anthology showed "all the indications of a fine editor at work" (Rev. of *When Women* 50) the subjective influence of the editorial process must also be recognized and Meikle's selection agenda considered.

The reasoning behind Meikle's selection process, as captured in her foreword to the collection, appears sound. While recognising the commonplace concern with "important women's movement type themes" found within the stories selected, she also acknowledges that, in terms of effectiveness, less is often more:

Janika Greenwood and Sue McCauley handle these themes perceptively and skillfully. But even they approached the danger (which some writers fell into) of preaching, of writing a secular tract instead of a story. Passionate feeling defeats itself when it leads a writer to hit her readers too hard with a moral. (iv)

Too often strong emotions can lead to didacticism. Rather than arousing empathy overtly subversive and politically charged portrayals can be off-putting. Ironically, the forces of patriarchy that prompt such feminist dogma in the first instance are the most likely to be threatened by it. Perhaps in tempering this collection Meikle was responding, whether consciously or unconsciously, to common patriarchal thinking.

### **Misrepresentation and marginalisation continue**

Whatever forces were at work, on reaching the mid 1980s New Zealand women short story writers continued to face mainstream marginalisation. 'New' expressions of female selfhood faced limited publication opportunities, small in scale and low in circulation, suggesting that editors and publishers were integral to the realisation of alternative expressions of 'being woman' on a broader scale. However, as *Women's Work: Contemporary Short Stories by New Zealand Women* (eds. Marion McLeod and Lydia Wevers 1985) shows, even female editorship did not prevent misrepresentation. On the surface this overtly female-centred anthology suggests a celebration of work by women, for women, and about women, which is upheld by the focus on women as writers, readers, and subjects. The image which appears on the cover of the collection also adds a subversive element to this gendered context created by the title. In a striking reversal of tradition Jacqueline Fahey's painting is a reworking of Manet's "Dejeuner sur L'Herbe." It portrays, as Jackie Matthews explains in her review of the collection, "two confidently clothed women picnicking insouciantly with two nude males in a New Zealand landscape, "a distinct contrast to the traditional image of the New Zealand woman as wife and mother, surrounded by "nappies and cups of tea"" (74). The sense of liberation this image conveys sets the scene for the expression of alternative ways of being woman. However, the stories themselves fail to live up to this subversive front. In *Women's Work* female characters have in (too) many cases found their way back to the kitchen, the domestic domain of the married woman. As Elizabeth Caffin suggests, "the house - confinement and comfort - is an insistent context " (Rev. of *Women's Work* 51).

Again, marriage relationships in these stories lead to female entrapment, and while dissatisfaction with this oppression is expressed, alternatives remain lacking and the patriarchal imbalance is maintained to the end. The woman of Phyllis Gant's "The



Revolver", for instance, is fearful of her husband's coveted weapon, a phallic symbol of his power. Secretly she disposes of the revolver but rather than dispelling her fear this action increases it. Her anxiety mounts with the possibility of being discovered and the inevitability of a violent reaction when her husband realises the loss of his prized possession. She really wants to leave him but familiarity and security, however illusory, make her stay: "Helen couldn't imagine leaving him, not after ten years together. It was a long time in habitude . . ." (96). She is trapped in a fearfulness even more powerful than that represented by the dangerous weapon.

Even when escape from the world of domesticity is realised, the freedom is fleeting. The woman of Violet Coalhouse's "The Mask" has removed herself from man and child, detaching herself from societal expectations but from the outset her recognition of the temporary nature of this escape is clear: "Do they need me - the man and the girl, do they? Ah how complicated it is! And yet it's quite simple really. I always do go back and it always does begin again. And I will not be free" (218). There is some hope in the time that she takes for herself, to simply 'be' outside of the roles of man's partner and child's mother:

I'm walking up the path. I unlock the door of my cottage. I enter.  
I hang up my mask behind the bedroom door. Kick off my shoes. Pour myself  
a big glass of white wine. The rest of the night's mine. (219)

But the cyclical nature of her existence is undeniable. She will return to again feel the need for escape. Time to herself may simply make the roles expected of her even more difficult to bear. Similarly, the woman of Jessie Feeney's "The Married Woman" sees herself only in the roles of wife and mother, a slave to domesticity: "she gave herself fervently to providing for her family, her home and her animals and she did it with a flourish of will and good humour" (246). She epitomizes the internalisation of patriarchal expectation.

Yet perhaps she is the lucky one. Further attempts to escape the world of patriarchal rule captured in the stories of this anthology have even more debilitating outcomes: break-away leads to break-down and break-down means further entrenchment within the patriarchal system. This is captured most effectively in Rosie Scott's "Diary of a Woman." While many of the stories of *Women's Work* carry the very didacticism and overt treatise Phoebe Meikle cautioned against, the internal monologue of Scott's female narrator appeals to the senses and the imagination of the reader as it gradually catalogues her loss of touch with reality. Following a husband who she claims "seems not to love me" (127) to Australia, her isolation and loneliness grows. Increasingly she can find comfort only within herself: "I only want my private world of communing, the external world is beginning to fade for me . . . the days merge into one another so that nothing is real or immediate any more"(139). Yet she continues to be lost in her love for her husband. She dreads his presence, "his stiff unloving body, his curt and cold words" but she cannot escape her utter dependency: "He is all I have" (140). Without him, she feels, life is not worth living. Any sense of independent selfhood has died:

The night before I woke up with my hair cut and Mike saying he hated my face, and I knew that if by any chance there had been a loaded shotgun by the bed, I would have reached down and in an idle moment shot myself in the head. (140)

Exposing the absolute limitations such a social structure places upon women is, in itself, a strong feminist statement. Inequalities are uncovered and the bleak portrayal of 'being woman' captured in these stories takes a stand against patriarchy creating, as the editors suggest, a "much less jolly picture of domesticity" (McLeod and Wevers, introduction viii). Regardless of the lack of movement beyond the domestic realm, *Women's Work* still exudes the sense of growing feminist consciousness its title suggests.

Yet even here, marginalisation cannot be avoided. The stories collected here under the label of "women's work" are then stripped of its significance. The editors' foreword to the anthology contains what can almost be seen as an apology for any hint of feminist expression. McLeod and Wevers open their introductory piece in full acknowledgement of the impact of the Women's Movement on women writers of the short story in New Zealand, particularly in terms of a "clear emergence of feminist awareness" (vii). However, while noting the importance of the feminist journals such as *Broadsheet* and other women's collectives in publishing stories which "explore the conditional roles and conditions of men and women, and which deal with subjects previously taboo . . . pushing at the barriers" (vii) they seem content to remain within these barriers. Their disclaimer is strong: "this book is not a selection of feminist writing . . . All these stories can stand alone; none needs to shelter under a "woman's' umbrella" (ix). However, the title of *Women's Work* is just that. As Elizabeth Caffin argues, it is true that the stories can stand alone, yet the process of bringing them together in this way cannot be ignored:

putting these stories together and calling them Women's Work constitutes a particular frame, forces us to look at them in a certain way, invites generalisations. Women readers will look for identification or familiarity, men, perhaps, for discovery or explanation. (Rev. of *Women's Work* 51)

It is difficult to understand why the editors diminish this commonality rather than celebrating the feminist consciousness expressed. The fact that representation of the 'new' voice of women writers remains on the whole unrecognised is also questionable. As Jackie Matthews suggests, much seems to be absent from the anthology: "I expected more audacity, not just in presenting 'a much less jolly picture of domesticity' but in exploring the desires, power balances and frustrations of public workplace and private eroticism. I expected new fantasies, women with strong opinions" (74).

Stories such as Matthews hoped for were being told, as the Womenspirit collections testify. Women writers of the early 1980s were indeed creating a New Fiction of their own, an alternative to patriarchal tradition. The fact that this fiction was not recognised at the time testifies to the contradictory forces these women writers were subject to: on one hand, facing the inspiring celebration of their work; on the other, facing continuing placement at the edge of the literary world. The only hope for future generations of New Zealand women writers would be to see the former of these forces proven the stronger, to see celebration overturn marginalisation. Indeed, McLeod and Wevers express this hope in their introduction, expressing their wish for the collection to stand not only as a celebration of writing by women but "also as an encouragement to those women who are just beginning to discover what it is they want to say and to risk finding their own way of saying it" (ix). Within the collection itself certain ways of saying are more successful than others, a point acknowledged in Caffin's review, and it is in the direction of these "better" stories that this hope lies. Stories which explore the experience of 'being women' from within rather than preaching from without, such as those of Keri Hulme, suggest a shift in direction.

Within the context of *Women's Work*, Hulme's voice leaves a lasting impression. She has undoubtedly found her own unique voice which reaches a level of introspective perception that carries the reader into the experience of 'being woman.' As Caffin suggests, Hulme's stories "explore and capture an explicitly female mode of thought and expression" (Rev. of *Women's Work* 51). The femaleness of the narrator of "One Whale, Singing" is immediately highlighted by her pregnant body which also separates her from the androcentric world of her husband. However, it is the link Hulme forges between woman and whale which best expresses the burden of her gender. Only when the whale helps her in destroying her husband's hopes for achieving absolute scientific

truth about the species can they both (woman and whale) be freed from his defining force. Only then can she embrace her womanhood and its ultimate condition. In the ocean she finds herself :

. . . in her womb the child kicked. Buoyed by the sea, she feels the movement as something gentle and familiar, dear to her for the first time.  
But she begins to laugh.  
The sea is warm and confiding, and it is a long long way to shore. (112-113)

She has found the freedom of the sea and she will not return to old ways of being.

Throughout this story, female 'feeling' exposes the limitations of male 'thinking.' In light of this it is ironic to find that Hulme's "Kiteflying Party at Doctor's Point" appears in Morrissey's *New Fiction* as well as in *Women's Work*. Morrissey praises this story for its "neo-Framenian" qualities (67) which are suggested in the intense concentration on the interior world of the narrator and the self-doubt uncovered therein:

I am tired of living a lie, the lie that is my life. Though it is better to appear dully normal . . .  
Let them be amused. Let them laugh . . .  
It is far better that they do this than get a glimpse of the chaos within. (169-170)

But Morrissey's praise is cloaked in post-modernist dogma. The value of Hulme's story within the context of his collection lies in the 'thinking exercise' reading it involves. There are no answers provided and no way of knowing what the truth is. The reader must work at the text. What Morrissey fails to consider is the value of the feelings themselves, the fact that Hulme's story captures an experience of womanhood within those very gaps he suggests the reader 'work at.' There are no answers to the feelings of self-doubt, of self-worthlessness engendered by a patriarchal society which worships female beauty. The narrator's physical deformity eats away at her very being until she comes to doubt the only thing she feels that she has left:

Have I told you anything?  
Has it meant anything to you?

Or is it all just writing?  
All just words? (178)

New Zealand women writers of the early 1980s could well have asked these same questions. The first steps had been taken in earning validation for a new women's voice beyond the safety of domestic tradition but the march needed to continue for true recognition and celebration of women's work in all its diversity of expression to be realised.

### Chapter Three

#### Discarding the 'Passive Victim': Active Female Characters of the Late 1980s

As the 1980s proceeded the opportunities for women writers to celebrate their voices continued to grow making this, as Laurel Bergmann suggests, "*the decade of women's fiction in New Zealand*" (217 emphasis mine). This advancement was supported by a number of factors among which Bergmann identifies publication of Keri Hulme's *the bone people*, the establishment of New Women's Press in 1982, increased funding from the QEII Arts Council, the establishment of the Women's Book Shop and Women's Book Festival, and most importantly, a change in attitude of the writers themselves:

Women took advantage of the empowering force of the 'second wave' feminist movement with renewed confidence in the standpoints from which they wrote, and in their collective ability to take on the entrenched institutions that had orchestrated their exclusion. (217)

New Zealand women writers had grown in confidence. With such support and acknowledgment the reality of publication was within reach rather than simply a dream.

#### **The growing recognition of women's work**

Women short story writers in particular were finding outlets for their work in increasing numbers. *Broadsheet* continued to provide a forum specifically for the female voice, and *Landfall* and the *New Zealand Listener* also continued their support of women's short fiction. General short story anthologies were also providing a more balanced approach to gender representation, with stories by men and women sharing publication space more equally in almost every case while publication of gender-specific anthologies of women's short fiction continued to rise. Women's work

continued to find increasing favour in its own right. Following the pattern which emerged earlier in the decade, 1989 saw the publication of three historically based collections of women's writing: *In Deadly Earnest* (ed. Trudie McNaughton), *Goodbye to Romance* (eds. Elizabeth Webby and Lydia Wevers) and *A Woman's Life: writing about female experience in New Zealand* (eds. Anne Else and Heather Roberts). Together, these anthologies provided further recognition of the important place women's fiction has occupied in New Zealand's past and further validation of this 'tradition' continuing into the present.

With *In Deadly Earnest* covering the period of 1870-1980s and *Goodbye to Romance* the years 1930-1988 their inclusion of contemporary women's fiction is limited to works already discussed here, yet their celebration of women's work remains significant. In her introduction to *In Deadly Earnest*, McNaughton acknowledges debts owed to past generations, "to earlier writers, for their struggles as feminists, writers, and feminist writers" (V) while the significance of *Goodbye to Romance* lies in its title. This collection, its editors claim, represents a shift away from the 'romance' which dominated women's writing of the 1920s and 1930s to a "rewriting of the self in opposition to the past . . . calling into question all the terms which might presuppose identity: wife, mother, daughter, lover, woman narrative, story" (introduction 3). Of most interest here, however, is *A Woman's Life*. While short fiction is outnumbered by other genres here, this anthology captures the many experiences of women's lives, highlighting the importance of women's writing as a point of identification. As Joan Curry suggests, "women will surely enjoy this anthology because the pieces in it explore so many shared experiences" (27). The notion that women write as women for other women to read and share is upheld.



The experiences these women write about are not necessarily solely female experiences but women experience them and write them differently. As Fiona Kidman acknowledges, not only do more women than men admit a "serious desire to write," they also express a desire to write in a particular way. Christine Cole Catley, Kidman claims, first alerted her to this fact:

she wrote: 'women, who outnumber men by four to one in workshops, often have a driving need to practice setting down a story which is particular and peculiar to being a woman.' I have taught creative writing courses for 16 years and I have found this to be true almost without exception. ("New Breed" 133)

There is something about the experience of 'being woman' that these women writers wish to explore, and to share. Despite all the individual variations of life experience which exist, women still share the common experience of being women. Through fiction, women can explore and express this common experience and share it with an audience of women for whom it 'makes sense'. The importance of gender cannot be denied and the contemporary works found both in women's anthologies and individual collections of the late 1980s provide an even greater challenge to notions that gender does not matter.<sup>6</sup>

### **Woman as passive victim: the one-dimensional characterisation of Frances Cherry and Paddy Richardson**

In many instances women's short fiction of the late 1980s continued to focus on domestic realities, with stories expressing the need for alternatives to the roles of wife and mother but not actively realizing them. Rather, alternatives appeared largely as

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<sup>6</sup> Some omissions from this discussion of works of the late 1980s must be acknowledged: Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Stories From the River* (1986) and Greville Texidor's *In Fifteen Minutes You Can Say a Lot* (1987) are recognised as collections which 'revisit' work of earlier eras which is less relevant to this contemporary analysis; Carin Svensson's *One Plain, One Purl* (1989) also steps back in time in its 'recollections from childhood' theme; and Yvonne du Fresne's *The Bear From the North* (1989) is simply a compilation of works from her earlier collections.

hopes and dreams against a backdrop of static female entrapment, the stories becoming forms of female protest against domestic imprisonment. In *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (1989), Paulina Palmer recognizes a similar pattern amongst New Zealand women writers' Anglo-American contemporaries. She views their works as indicative of "the politicization of personal life" which grew out of the 1970s Women's Movement and labels them "fictions of debate" (44). "Radical feminist ideas" were the source of their inspiration and, according to Palmer, the resulting texts "treat themes which are overtly political, illustrating women's struggles to transform their lives and resist male power" (44). As shown, the idea of feminism also featured largely in local narratives of the early 1980s, female characters of this era continually conforming to a prototype personifying the feminist 'idea' of 'woman-oppressed, trapped and marginalised'. A flat, one-dimensional woman, she fills the role of the 'passive victim', speaking out in protest from her patriarchally imprisoned state and creating a sense of political didacticism founded upon the myth of a singular 'female experience'. This construction of female experience continued into the late 1980s, most notably in the collections of Frances Cherry and Paddy Richardson.

The focus of Frances Cherry's *The Daughter in Law and other stories* (1986) is resoundingly domestic, all her women being portrayed as victims of the stultifying social expectations attached to the roles of wife and mother. Metaphors of oppression and entrapment are played and replayed. As the nameless 'wife, mother, and daughter-in-law' of the collection's title story lies in her "pale nothing sort of room - just like me" (7), unable to find enough life to even fulfil her household duties, the inescapability of her situation envelops her:

. . . the stainless steel band grips around her chest. She has a very clear picture of the shiny steel two inches wide tightening, tightening, one end slipping over the other, more and more until she can hardly breathe. (7)

This same band seems to encircle the women found throughout these stories, ensuring their passivity. These women wait. They cook and clean and care for children and wait (generally in fear) for their husband's return. Even when the role of wife has been rejected as in "A Matter of Adjustment" he maintains control:

Why have I no control over my body? I don't even know what it's going to do anymore. God damn it, I hate myself . . . somehow the world had stopped. Things were happening to her but she couldn't tell where one sensation began and another stopped . . . (32)

Throughout, patriarchal power is the controlling force; women are the victims. Cherry creates the sense of a feminist exposé of the world of domesticity in which women are objectified, bound and tied to traditional roles of womanhood. Unfortunately, in her attempt to expose this world she limits herself as a writer. Each story reads as a repetition of what has come before and the various women she portrays merge into one. As Fiona Kidman suggests, "her female characters have a rather flat similarity in a number of the stories -their main distinguishing characteristics are their names [when they have them] - so that they tend to blur into one another" ("Poignant and Pointed" 122). Even when alternatives to marriage and motherhood are explored, such as in the lesbian relationship of "A Spring Clean," the central protagonist finds herself replaying the power struggles of her earlier married life, emotionally blackmailed with wine, flowers, and expensive restaurants. She has simply moved from a position of being controlled by a man to one of being controlled by another woman and escape proves futile. Escaping marriage is taken to another level in the black comedy "Waiting for Jim" when Joanna locks her husband in the sauna, unable to suppress her anger and fear any longer. His death represents her only way out and while this may seem a far-fetched response, Cherry has apparently drawn upon her own experience:

'I used to lie in bed and plan the ways of murdering my husband - not that I would ever have done it, because it might have failed for one thing, and the

consequences are really too great. So the next best thing you can do is write it.' (Interview with Pat Rosier 36)

Fiction has become a means for Cherry to express her own dissatisfaction. However, she fails to fictionalise a way out. There is no suggestion of 'being woman' successfully for oneself, beyond the roles of domesticity. The collection comes bound in its own steel band.

In Paddy Richardson's *Choices* (1986) marriage also provides the thematic foundation and is again shown as a source of dissatisfaction. The title of the collection seems to belie its contents as the choices presented, for women at least, are limited. Escape does seem slightly more within reach for Richardson's women but it cannot be fully embraced. The female narrator of "Holding On", for instance, packs her bags and takes time for herself. Away from the demands of home she begins to smile, and anxieties vanish but she finds herself unable to enjoy her freedom:

. . . the sheer enormity of it all, packing up, should I have the washing machine, fridge, leave him the stereo, the TV? Sorting out old wedding presents; his side, mine, was beyond me. I wasn't strong enough. So I packed my case . . . and went home. (34)

She returns to the certainty of her marriage, for despite its limitations, the realm of domesticity provides security. Conforming to expected notions of womanhood is easier than being 'different', which often prompts self-questioning rather than self-fulfilment. On moving to a new town, the woman of "Moving Away" faces the struggle of rejecting the patriarchally-defined self so easily internalised by those around her:

I am Katherine and nobody likes me here. I have four boys, a successful husband, a nice house, and nobody likes me. I read and I paint and when I talk of this the women gaze at me and whisper amongst themselves that I only want to be different. When at a party I can no longer tolerate their talk of irons and schools and china, I cross the high invisible boundary which separates the women from the males. (14)

Katherine has been given opportunities enabling her to move beyond traditional expectations for women but they set her apart and make her life miserable: "Is it just

that my mother sent me to school, provided me with glasses, arranged that I would sit near the front, so I would see and learn for this?" (20). Being different leads to loneliness and ultimately, for Katherine, a nervous breakdown. While Richardson does move beyond the seemingly singular image of womanhood presented in Cherry's stories, adapting a variety of narrative voices and exploring her characters' worlds through many different eyes, the outlook seems unchanging. All her narrators view a similarly unfulfilling domestic reality and for the children in particular, there are no choices. They can only stand back and watch as their mothers suffer. Peter of "Going to the Pictures", for instance, is powerless to save his mother from his father's infidelity:

I thought mum looked a bit sad standing there all alone. I felt like I wanted to hop out and give her a hug and a kiss or even cling to her skirt and cry like I did when I was a kid and not wanting to go. (13)

While individually some of these stories may succeed, as a whole these two collections present an overwrought form of feminist writing. Their exposé of patriarchal reality loses its effect through repetition. Cherry and Richardson are limited by the archetype of female oppression. Their works become protests against patriarchal definitions of marriage and motherhood which fail to move beyond the realm of domesticity and show possible alternatives of female experience. While these are important stories to tell, feminist politics undermine the possibility of reader identification. The 'idea' of feminism seems more important here than the actual experience.

### **The emergence of the female hero: Patricia Grace, Barbara Anderson and Fiona Kidman**

While Cherry and Richardson's stories suggest an overriding concern with feminist thinking and notions of female oppression, rather than with the actual experience of 'being woman', other writers of the late 1980s were showing evidence of a

shift away from creating female characters simply to carry a political message. Their works continue to reflect the feminist concerns of the time but these notions appear as incidental rather than purposeful. Patricia Grace's *Electric City and other stories* (1987) captures a degree of this shift through her focus on personal rather than political experience. In the midst of texts focused primarily upon racial conflict and the associated oppression of both men and women, the stories in which Grace adopts a specifically female voice and turns to consideration of the concerns of her sex are outstanding. Within this context, even "The Geranium" which carries all the hallmarks of the 'woman as victim' stereotype creates an impact. The woman of this story is a familiar character-type but her experience illustrates the cross-cultural universality of suburban neurosis and Grace also assures the reader that this woman's experience is but one possibility among many. Elsewhere in her collection women are portrayed as strong figures in the face of racial discrimination.

Most significant is Grace's treatment of a specifically female issue in "Hospital". Here, political notions of feminism give way to a strikingly personal account of a woman facing loss of the very heart of her female selfhood. The story charts this woman's gradual recovery from surgery and her growing fear of what lies ahead. She feels disempowered and quite literally silenced. As Kate de Goldi suggests, "the removal of her reproductive organs, and therefore a former means of self-definition is so traumatic that it results quite literally in the loss of her voice and a new and terrible way of seeing" (54). Her entire world has changed, "nothing's the same" (88), and she finds herself questioning whether she now belongs. Everything around her appears distorted and she is fearful of what this may mean: "Out of the window there are rows of petunias, many times darker than what she's known. They are purple-black, black-blue, red-black, brown-black and black. She won't ask what's happened to colours" (89). The

exploration of her perceived loss of womanhood is powerful and emotional, drawing the reader into her experience. It reveals a side of 'being woman' perhaps less comfortable and less expected than a feminist political treatise and in doing so speaks *to* readers rather than *at* them. This story represents the shift evident in women's writing in the later part of the 1980s. By opening the doors to the many and varied facets of being a woman there are to explore and the unlimited definitions of womanhood that exist "Hospital" represents a shift in focus and in the construction of female characters. The one-dimensional character crying out from the domestic chains which bind her gives way to other experiences of 'being woman' which offer freedom rather than constraint and a search for selfhood rather than a prescribed identity.

In "Hospital" Grace conveyed this search for selfhood through a woman's relationship with her body. Other writers focused on different aspects of the female self but increasingly the one-dimensional woman was replaced by new and varied expressions of womanhood. Concentration on the domestic realm gave way to new thematic concerns. As Laurel Bergmann identifies, the "unhealthy claustrophobia" reflected in women's writing of the 1960s and 1970s, "a response to the lack of options in women's lives of the time" (221) was replaced by a fresh and freer perspective:

By contrast, fiction of the late eighties and nineties is marked by freedom - even sprawl, at times - of form and content. The female protagonists may still be under threat . . . but they are feisty women who were not born yesterday. They fight back, or they run away. At worst, they may be killed, or choose death (though this is rare); but inside themselves they are not defeated. (222).

New female characters emerged in women's short fiction as the passive victim of patriarchal rule was replaced by more active and varied individuals.

This shift, from passive to active, is central to John Watson's exploration of "The Female Hero in Recent Short Fiction by Women Writers", published in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* (1989). Watson suggests that women short fiction

writers of the late 1980s created "female heroes", a term borrowed from Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope's *The Female Hero in American and British Literature* (New York: Bowker, 1981). The 'female hero', Pearson and Pope suggest, is an embodiment of all that the passive heroine is not, an active female character who undertakes "a psychological journey in which [she] escapes from the captivity of her conditioning and searches for the true self" (63 qtd. in Watson 44). She overcomes the "myths" of sex differences, virginity, romantic love, and maternal self-sacrifice which society has traditionally imposed upon women and breaks free from patriarchal forces (18 qtd. in Watson 44). Rather than being caught up in patriarchal definitions of womanhood, these new 'female heroes' break free and explore other ways of being.

The realisation of this "female hero" is not equal in the works of all women writers of the period. Watson identifies Barbara Anderson and Fiona Kidman, for instance, as being held back in some way when considering alternatives for women. While an "atmosphere of choice" begins to develop in Anderson's stories as her characters respond with anger to the limitations imposed upon them, Watson claims that they "have difficulty still in shaking off their ingrained genteel modes of behaviour" (49). They do, he recognizes, "make whatever journey they can manage" in their search for selfhood but are not always successful, their anger often inhibited and indirect (48). Kidman's women, Watson suggests, are similarly restrained. While many undertake complex inner journeys which are more about exploring their selfhood than seeking a man, they prove "too conventional"(54) to act upon their instincts. Feelings of guilt move them to stop in their tracks and ponder the consequences of their actions. Inevitably, they bow to the moral code.

There is a sense of datedness to Anderson's stories in *I Think We Should Go Into the Jungle* (1989) which may in part be attributable to generational factors. As was



typical among her female contemporaries, Anderson did not enter into writing as a career until well into her fifties and while she attempts to present women characters who are in search of 'more' from life, their search is continually confounded by 'old' expectations. Anderson's women are plagued by an uncertainty which overrides their desire to escape and their actions become little more than token gestures. Separate beds rather than separation is the solution to marital dissatisfaction in "One Potato, Two Potato", for instance, while in "It Is Necessary I Have a Balloon" grasping at party decorations seems a rather inadequate attempt at regaining esteem on discovering a husband's infidelity.

However limited these actions appear though, Anderson's stories do show women *doing* rather than simply telling. The problems confronted may be familiar, but Anderson portrays women who respond to their dissatisfaction, and do so as W.H. New suggests, in many different ways:

Barbara Anderson manages to avoid the stereotypes. Her characters don't simply enact some preconceived message. They demonstrate by their actions some of the many ways people deal with frustration and unhappiness: they withdraw (into privacy or dependency); they punish others (or punish themselves, thinking somehow to punish others); they continue what they have been doing (which can mean aimless repetition); they look for symbols; sometimes they even learn enough to discover compatibility. (109)

Anderson's stories convey recognition that there are multiple ways of dealing with 'a woman's lot'. She may not show women asserting themselves and gaining unconditional freedom, but neither is the unhappy, unfulfilled 'woman as victim' the sole image: there are several possibilities.

The conflict between these 'new' possibilities and 'old' expectations regarding gender roles is encountered repeatedly in Anderson's stories as she considers the effects of change on women's sense of self. In the lengthy "Egypt is a Timeless Land" Shelia becomes increasingly aware of a gap opening in her life as her children grow up and

move away. She is no longer needed to fill the self-sacrificial role of mother; the years of "loving and being loved and being essential and minding and caring and knowing how lucky she was" (69) have passed. Now her daughter wants her to be a 'new' woman, to take on the world: "Why don't you do something real, Mum . . . something real. Sexual Abuse Help Foundation say . . . You're just fluffing about . . ." (74). But Shelia is ill-equipped for the role of modern feminist woman. She may be intellectually engaged with the ideals of the liberated woman but, practically speaking, wife and mother have been her roles in life. Loss of this integral aspect of her identity throws her into depression and the story ends with the feeling that her husband's proposed remedy of a trip to Egypt will prove just as ineffectual as the doctor's pills. Traditional, patriarchally-defined ways of 'being woman' do, for all their limitations, provide a clear sense of sex and clear boundaries to live by and this story captures the fear that may accompany any attempt to move beyond those boundaries.

In "Commitment" two young couples test the boundaries of their relationships, convinced of a need to find new ways of being: "We are conditioned from birth! she says . . . Fed myths . . . We have to get rid of these myths!" (88). However, when they truly put their marital ties to the test and each find themselves drawn to the other's partners, old patriarchal notions of ownership are reasserted. Within the bounds of their relationships myths of old seem unlikely to be overturned, highlighting the conflict between marriage and feminist beliefs which resulted from the Women's Movement.

One alternative was to reject marriage altogether as the narrator of Anderson's "Shanties" does, preferring the hardships of factory working and caravan living to the facade of happiness she was forced to present as a well-to-do business man's wife. Having escaped his defining force she is free to be herself. Friends and laughter return to her life highlighting what sets Anderson's collection apart from the likes of those by Cherry and Richardson. She does not present the reader with trite happy endings nor suggest that the days of female oppression are over but she does suggest that endings for

women are not pre-determined. There are alternatives to being the oppressed suburban housewife, whether by responding to the traditional situation in new ways or by moving beyond it to seek a new identity. Anderson's women are still limited and most remain within the domestic framework but the bleakness of inescapability is replaced by a sense of hope.

Fiona Kidman also explores the conflict between old expectations and new possibilities in her *Unsuitable Friends* (1988), with stories that explore "issues of transgression and non-conformity within a moralistic culture" (Stafford, "Kidman, Fiona" 285). Kidman's female characters are, like Anderson's, more prepared to act in response to their dissatisfaction. However, they are limited by questions of morality. Possibilities are recognised and sought after but the possible repercussions are feared, inhibiting these women. They want to act out their desires but fear the consequences of their actions and fear what 'freedom' may bring. Kidman's characters inhabit social realms in which there is 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour and in which 'fitting in' is a key to survival. At times Kidman treats this with a sense of humour, as in "Hats" where mothers of bride and groom compete over appearance, but on the whole the desire to fit in and to do what is socially 'right,' has far greater consequences. This dilemma between being true to one's own beliefs and judgment and bending to social pressure is seen at its most destructive in "Puff Adder". Here the sacrifice made for the sake of maintaining social status is far too great. The narrator recounts events from her past as a young mother in suburban Weyville, where Annabel Sherwin was "the queen. . . amongst all the young matrons" (101), the wealthy, domineering socialite. Fitting in with this crowd meant so much to the narrator that when Annabel's teenage son preyed upon her young daughter in the garden shed the whole matter was trivialized, for the sake of keeping up appearances:

It seemed to be the easiest way. We did not want trouble in the neighbourhood and somehow we felt vaguely ashamed of what had happened, as if in some mysterious way we were to blame. We were afraid that we were wrong or would be shown to be wrong and that that would disturb our careful neighbourly relationship. Yes, that is the truth, we were more concerned about the possibility of our lives being disturbed than about getting at the truth. (106)

An agreement was reached that the young girl made the whole thing up: "In return, it seemed, life would return to normal, we could go on as we had before, we could all forget, I could belong again" (107). But Annabel continued to assert her power, claiming control over their lives and threatening to destroy them should anything more be said. It is only later that the narrator realises that Annabel's strength lay elsewhere. She did what the narrator could not:

Annabel was stronger than me. She had said that she would kill anyone who touched a hair of her children's heads . . . there was a point at which I could simply have stopped agreeing with Annabel. It would have been the very least I could have done for my child. (110)

The narrator can see that she should have acted to protect her child, not been silenced by Annabel's social position, but her fear of social rejection was simply too great.

In other stories, the dilemma between 'right' and 'wrong' results from marital dissatisfaction. Kidman's female characters find marriage and the realm of domesticity similarly restrictive and destructive to their selfhood but rather than simply exposing this disillusionment, Kidman creates women who seek self-fulfillment. They are unwilling to play through their prescribed role of marital martyrdom and sacrifice themselves to husband and children. If they cannot find satisfaction within marriage they seek it elsewhere, following their sexual desires out of the domestic realm. As Frank Corbett suggests, these women respond with action: "Kidman's characters are seldom passive participants in their own fate; faced with decisions and choices they take responsibility for their lives in a way that makes even private inner realisations into moral acts" (Rev. of *Unsuitable Friends* 137). Unfortunately, fulfillment is not

guaranteed even on these terms and while these may be active women actively seeking sexual satisfaction, guilt continues to weigh heavily on their shoulders. The possible consequences of their actions limit their bids for liberation.

Kidman's women also find that acting outside marriage does not free them from their powerlessness. In "A Moving Life" the female protagonist meets with her lover in another city only to find that her love for him is not reciprocated. Telling him she plans to leave her husband and children to be with him, she is met with the realisation that, to him, she will never be anything but a casual lover. He controls the terms of their relationship and she is left to return to her unsatisfactory marriage. She may seek fulfillment but complete independence is not an option. In "Body Searches" Cushla is forced to face up to the consequences of her sexual activity at an STD clinic. Unable to say no to a lover who visits her each year she is now left to face the consequences and is overwhelmed with guilt and shame. However, an understanding doctor grants her a fresh perspective. Rather than thinking "that she will never, in all her life, stray from the path of virtue again" she is able to accept the existence of her desires and move on:

. . . there are no guarantees, and she knows that it is neither the disastrousness of ageing nor the good office she holds that will save her from herself. . . What if love, in one of its many guises, were to persuade her again? . . . If she cannot forgive herself she thinks, who else can she ask to do it for her? (134)

Rather than simply validating extramarital sex, Kidman's stories remind the reader that desires are universal and that women do not become unfeeling, self-sacrificial martyrs through marriage. Kidman acknowledges that acting out upon these desires may not bring any more satisfaction than that found in domestic tedium but the actions of her women do at least break down stereotypes of passivity. Rather than engendering sympathy or pity for the poor imprisoned housewife, Kidman appeals to a more

universal desire to break out, to do something new and different and to threaten the status quo.

### **Writing their own endings: the women of Fiona Farrell and Marilyn Duckworth**

While Anderson and Kidman's female characters are held back by issues of morality, other writers of this period portray women who are more self-assured when it comes to acting out their desires. They create female characters with fewer inhibitions, who actively seek out alternative ways of being. Fiona Farrell<sup>7</sup> and Marilyn Duckworth are two such writers. According to Watson's theory, they portray female heroes less restricted by society's 'myths' of what it is to be a woman, "because the image of self that they have is robust" (52). For Farrell this means creating women who express their emotions rather than avoiding them: they laugh, they cry and they rage. Duckworth's women have an even stronger sense of self. In fact, Watson suggests that Duckworth has carried this strength too far and created women who are "vigorous, headlong, amoral, selfish . . . self-centred and preoccupied with their reactions of their own bodies" (53, 56). Her women are so driven in pursuit of their own desires (often sexual) that all else comes second, including careers, motherhood and even independence. Both writers portray female characters actively seeking out fulfillment, refusing to deny their own desires, sexual or otherwise.

In *The Rock Garden* (1989), Fiona Farrell explores female experience through a wide range of relationships many of which represent new ways of connecting with others without self-sacrifice. This change in dynamics diminishes any hint of the 'old school' gentility seen in Anderson's and Kidman's stories. Where 'old expectations' do appear, as in "A Home Movie" their limitations are exposed. The extended family of

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<sup>7</sup> Fiona Farrell, as she now identifies herself, is being referred to as such throughout this thesis even though the works discussed were published under the name of Fiona Farrell Poole.

this story have largely left 'old' values behind them, as Farrell reveals through their actions and conversations at the christening of the latest addition. The baby's grandfather refuses to attend on moral grounds, for the child is illegitimate, but the other members of the family are more accepting. They are living in a world far removed from Pat's old values. This is a modern family of broken marriages and unmarried parents and of women unprepared to simply be wife and mother, recognising the existence of alternative ways of being which demand validation. Widowed Thea, for example, can cope on her own despite the family's doubts. In fact, her husband's death has allowed her to finally live as she likes:

They have all gone home, She spoons baked beans on to toast and settles to watch Mastermind . . .  
 . . . She mashes her baked beans. That's right, no one knew no one need ever know, so she answers all the questions out loud (Bill always hated her talking while they watched TV) she kicks off her slippers and decides she'll watch right up to the Goodnight Kiwi (he needed his full eight hours and couldn't sleep he said, if he went to bed after ten). "Orlando," she says, and guesses right. It has. It has been perfect. (98)

The christening has marked a letting go of old lives and a moving on from old secrets. Thea is now free to choose for herself and this sense of self-determination is notable throughout Farrell's stories. In "Choose your Own Adventure", for instance, she highlights the fact that the 'married woman' is not a singular entity. Every individual can choose how to respond:

And thousands of women have been in this place too, or somewhere like it and they have each had to make their way out of the maze.

- They turn west to tradition and religion and take up the mantle of perfect motherhood.
- Or they turn north to gloom and the Valium eiderdown which muffles sight and sound, hearing, taste and smell.
- Or they turn south to making a go of things and buy gym shoes and go to tennis on Wednesdays or find a job or take up kindy committee or simply put the kids in the pushchair and go round the shops.

- Or they turn east to why and no and can't and won't.

And no choice is perfect and all create the need for a hundred other choices.  
(47)

Pauline, the woman of this story, will create her own ending according to the choices she makes. Happiness is never an impossibility:

Life's an endless mess after all, an intricate clatter of forces and possibilities, an overwhelming chaos where we shove and grasp and grab and reel back. But sometimes, for a split second, it can settle into a pattern which is so close to being right, so familiar, that we call it an ending

or a start. (53)

It is up to the individual, these stories suggest, to make the most of what life offers. Farrell does not dictate what are 'good' or 'bad' choices; she simply presents the possibilities. In "Interest Free Terms" for example, on discovering her husband is having an affair with the neighbour the female narrator chooses to adhere to her philosophy of life: "sometimes if you leave things alone, they can mend all by themselves". She hides her anger and distress from him, releasing it instead by destroying their new dinner set in the clothes drier. Life can then go on:

. . . I went over to him and sort of tumbled him on to the floor. We made love and while we lay there I could hear the dishwasher chugging and whirring out in the kitchen, washing all our mess away. (147)

This may appear to be rather a self-defeating response and, as John Gibb suggests, it "does not appear quite enough to put their lives back together again" (29) but Farrell presents it as only one way of responding. Other alternatives are offered.

When exploring a younger generation of women, Farrell suggests an increasing awareness of what is possible as opposed to what is expected. While this awareness does not always result in increased freedom it does suggest a new feminist consciousness. In "Night Grown" for example Pan is not content to have been left sitting at home all night waiting for her boyfriend to return from a graffiti-spreed. She



wants to become part of the action. Her friend Maggie is cynical about her discontent: "well what did you expect male/female relationships are impossible corrupted by the imbalance of power and dependency" (165). However, in this case the dependency is more balanced. Pan is aware of what she gets out of her relationship with Mike and is drawn back to him:

. . . she strips off her clothes and climbs in cold beside him. Then he rolls over buries his face against her neck and they are together again at least for a while.

Dependency's a funny thing . . . (168)

Rather than grasping onto romantic ideals, she seems to know what to expect. In Farrell's stories a new generation of 'freer' relationships begins to emerge. The outcome of her stories may or may not be more hopeful but Farrell at least presents women who are more willing to act now and face the consequences later.

In Marilyn Duckworth's *Explosions on the Sun* (1989) a similar image of more independent women emerges, but in this case, the shift in the experience of 'being woman' is more apparent. The stories of this collection span three decades of Duckworth's writing and over this time changes are evident in her characterisation of women. Frank Corbett recognises this shift:

Her women grow over time from hapless victims (We Announce the Departure -1969) or proud but limited independence (The Troglodyte - 1968) into the worldly and almost Weldonian heroines in Takeover Bid (1987) and the very raunchy. . . Sharing (1987). ( Rev. of *Explosions on the Sun* 124)

While the earlier stories portray the familiar image of trapped, oppressed women 'stuck' in unsatisfactory relationships Duckworth's later creations are more active. As she herself identifies, her later stories are about "real life", presenting "something wider than just characters in bedrooms and kitchens" (qtd. in Kedgley 121). These later women step beyond the boundaries that inhibit their predecessors and learn more about themselves. In fact, many display a degree of self-interest which sees them act only for

themselves, disregarding any consequence for others, and the results are not always pleasant.

Love triangles are a recurring theme and Duckworth suggests that when two women bid for the love and attention of one man there can be no winners. In "All Those Daffodils" the central female protagonist is grieving the loss of her sister but as her story unfolds it seems that the accident which killed her was not so accidental:

Julie wanted to die. Well, one of us had to do it - Chris is not divisible by two. It made sense at the time - the accident. It does make sense - yes . . . . . Does Chris know or care that it was me sitting in the driver's seat, not Julie, when the car hit the old elm tree . . . We took that risk, Julie and I . . . (80)

Now surviving seems a worse fate than death. Being free to love the man who was her sister's husband is of little compensation in the face of what she has lost, but this realization

comes too late. The narrator is left to face the consequence of what love and jealousy have driven her to. Similarly in "Takeover Bid" twin sisters accustomed to a "burning necessity to ape each other's behaviour and achievements" (82) find that looking for love in adulthood becomes "just another form of rivalry, another kind of copying behaviour" (83). Elspeth finds love and happily marries while Barbara is left alone and lonely, but when Elspeth dies, Barbara takes on her sister's identity convinced that some Greater Force is at work:

. . . who had concluded that Elspeth and Derek's love was too real and rare to be wasted. She was being given Elspeth's spirit in order to carry on that love. Her own spirit . . . was being taken away. Her mind was dying in exchange for her sister's. (86)

However, while this is just what Barbara has always hoped for Derek rejects her and she is left shattered: "Was this what love was? Pain rejection? Was she to feel like this, caught in a web of true love, unassuaged, for the rest of her life? . . . she had gone to Hell after all" (89-90). In both cases, the choice of man over sister (whether in the literal

or metaphorical sense) does not pay. Acting out their sexual desires does not gain these women fulfilment.

In "Sharing", the most sexually explicit piece in this collection, the threesome dynamics are reversed. The female protagonist of this story has two men eager to see her every desire fulfilled. Unfortunately, it seems that her gender prevents her from enjoying the situation: "Unfortunately women tend to be more considerate sexually, more concerned with fairness" (102). She hates having to continually choose who will be the one to satisfy her, ever aware of hurting the other. Even when she decides to choose once and for all, giving in to her desire for one man over the other, the pattern continues:

He is weeping with passion. She weeps with joy.  
 Outside the door Edward also weeps. Wetly; his penis limp now in his hands. He is still sharing, unbeknown to them.  
 Sharing is difficult. But sharing is a condition of the human race.  
 Unavoidable. (108)

Duckworth suggests that each individual, man or woman, must take what they can get. Each is held responsible for their own being. There is no political dogma at work here blaming men or a male-dominated society for women's lack of choices. Women must take control of themselves and seek out what it is they desire, reject entrapment and oppression and welcome freedom of expression. This action may not ensure a happy ending but at least it is a self-defined ending. These women make things, even sex, happen instead of sitting and waiting for things to happen to them.

### **The sexual self: women as lovers in the stories of Rosie Scott and Stephanie Johnson**

As Laurel Bergmann suggests, women's short fiction of the late 1980s had taken a more general turn in the direction of sexual selfhood:

Sexuality has become a permissible (perhaps even obligatory) subject, and has been. Its greatest hallmark is diversity . . . Many more speaking positions are now available, addressed with sensitivity but deep sensuality . . . (220)

The Women's Movement had freed female attitudes to sex and sexuality and many women writers of this time embraced a greater freedom of expression. Rosie Scott and Stephanie Johnson also portray women as sexual beings and, more often than not, as sexually active outside the bounds of marriage. The experiences of these women as lovers, Watson suggests, represent an even more active movement away from male sources of power as they free their bodies from the martyrdom of motherhood. Scott and Johnson, he argues, have "cast aside gentility" with a "general surge of energy as these heroes reach towards other partners and other goals"(59). Old problems such as patriarchal power remain but the women of these stories respond heroically, finding opportunities for "progress, even victory" (59).

In *Queen of Love* (1989) Rosie Scott approaches sexual identity at a more emotional than physical level, exploring sexual feelings rather than sexual activity. The complexities of the sexual self are revealed as joy and pleasure meet pain and disillusionment and a fuller sense of the female identity emerges. For the narrator of "Sisters Under the Skin", for instance, watching her daughters interacting with their father is a reminder of the pain of growing up, when this relationship will change: "They play rough sexual games with him and try to come in between us when we kiss or hold hands . . . they would like to have him, and I always hope that it's not too painful that they can't" (107). Sexual awareness will intervene as these young girls develop a sense of identity. Similarly, the narrator of "Warm Nights" recalls her awareness of this pain on finding her first love. This relationship provided the opportunity for self-definition and an expanded and strengthened sense of identity:

The summer I turned seventeen I fell in love for the first time and became a

grown woman. Up until then the richest source of my imaginings came from the legend of my mother . . . But during that summer I knew it was time for me to express my own life. (17)

But disillusionment soon followed: her man "had a real-life wife back in another country who was anxiously waiting for his return, an event which was bound to happen sooner or later" (23). She had to turn back to her mother for comfort and support and become a child once again.

Scott does not limit her stories to the suggestion that love brings only pain. In other stories, relationships offer a sense of completeness which runs much deeper than sexual desire. In "Leaving Home", for instance, the central female protagonist is facing difficulty in adjusting to the family's new life in the city. Leaving the "silences and privacy" of the countryside has meant leaving behind all she knows and a feeling of displacement engulfs her:

She wants fiercely to belong to a place again and a group of people, she wants to be cushioned against the cruelties of the city by that familiar kind of accepting love. She feels as if she is swollen with a longing that will never be satisfied, and that she will never feel safe again. (14)

But she does find safety again when she realises that all the love she needs is close at hand: "Her husband comes up behind her and rests his body against the full length of her back. She can hear his calm breathing . . . They just stand there dreamily. Looking out the window, leaning slightly against one another, balancing in the dark" (16). Within their relationship she feels love, peace and stability. She feels whole again.

This sense of loving and being loved as essential to the female self resounds throughout Scott's collection, creating a conflict with feminist notions of female independence which was true to the era. While extremist feminist thinking advocated "the politics of separatism", on a personal level, as Sandra Coney explains, those politics took second place to a more basic need for love:

Ironically, all the while the Movement was raging with bitter attacks, my greatest sources of comfort and support were my family, my male child and my male lover. The place that I always felt totally safe was in his arms. ("Why the Women's" 71)

Scott's stories support this notion that seeking out the comfort and security of a relationship, be it with a man or with another woman, does not necessarily result from a weakness of self. More important than seeking independence at a level of separatism is finding a balance between independence and dependency. The woman of Scott's "Choices" struggles with precisely this. She is secure in her marriage relationship and remembering the birth of their second child fills her with happiness: "Her mind acquiescent, sun coming through the curtains, the smell of flowers, her man watching over them lovingly". Yet she now questions whether there may be more to life: "does she want to live like this, she thinks, as the pushchair scrapes and rattles over the dusty stones, tapping away at infinity, a prey to comfort and cups of tea?" (31). Such doubts bring to mind an old friend whose life represents what the narrator left behind for marriage and domesticity:

Haunting the pub, fucking herself silly, weeping, quarrelling, moving constantly, she never stays with a man - no children, no possessions. Living her chosen life with ever-abiding style and wit; ah, the scornful and envious ladies who stare and wait . . . So whole and beautiful, she stands triumphant and tender over her sisters - she is so far away from her friend's safe life of washing dishes and being accepted. Anna has chosen much more clearly than her . . . and yet, and yet . . . (35)

Yet she is happy in "the tiny smallness of her universe, a hum of love beneath the sunny frieze. Hum of love, hum of love . . ." (36). Feminist thinking has made her feel guilty for not wanting more from life but Scott suggests that following her heart may have taken more courage. If she is happy in herself political ideals should not force change, whether those politics are patriarchal or feminist.

The woman of "Queen of Love" has clearly followed her own heart's desires. Her life has been one of loving, but loving strictly on her own terms:

I have never been the sort of woman who lived through a man, or my children for that matter; thinking my own thoughts has taken up a lot of my time. The great slow tracking of my mind wheeling through the world is a happiness I share with no one. (111)

Now, facing death, she is surrounded by people whose expectations deny what she truly is. They expect her to be thinking "only of religion, of family, or good works". But she refuses to give up the sexual part of her being, delighting in reliving her past loves: "The memories which keep my bones warm and make me smile are all of lovers long-dead, their beauty and the power of their loving" (111). This is the spark which keeps her alive until the very end: "There is no real end to things . . . I dream of pleasures that might still be, and then the power of love in me is like a fire, leaping out and lighting up the world" (119). As Jo Litson states, Scott "writes beautifully about female sexuality" clearly recognising the important part it plays in a woman's identity and continues to play throughout life (49). Scott dispels the myth of the sexlessness of the elderly. This woman will be woman until the bitter end, in every respect. She shows that women can be queen of their own desires, that the individual can choose their own way of 'being woman.'

The stories of Stephanie Johnson's *The Glass Whittler* (1988) are also very much concerned with individual emotional responses, covering an eclectic mix of situations and experiences. Marriage is not central to this collection but where it does appear it is treated with the expected sense of disillusionment. The woman of "In Singapore All the Taxi Drivers Speak English", for instance, cannot adjust to the family's move to a foreign land. Away at work all day, her husband fails to notice the horrendous domestic conditions she must struggle with. She becomes increasingly depressed and lonely and has nowhere to turn for comfort and support. Even the children blame her: " 'You're making Dad miserable Mum. Stop whingeing all the time.'" (33) In a final blow she is sent home to the tune of her husband's callous revelation: " 'I just fell out of love with

you.”(34). However, while this story conforms to the stereotype of the oppressed wife Johnson does not limit her collection to this singular female identity. Women are shown in many roles, whether it be caring for a mentally retarded child ("Shelley's Treat"), suffering the aftermath of a stroke ("Poking the Peevish Gutter"), or looking after an ageing mother ("Or Something Like That"). The most common portrayal, though, is of woman as lover. Unmarried female characters are shown to take on alternative identities within their relationships with men and occupy a 'freer' space.

Unfortunately, in the world Johnson creates the expectation that 'women as lovers' should be more in control of their own experiences and more able to express themselves is not met. In fact, her stories show that in many ways 'being lover' is just as oppressive as marriage, becoming simply another form of domesticity. In some cases passion, love, or simply the need not to be alone blinds these female characters. Men take advantage of this powerless state and these women become their pawns, used and discarded. At the story's beginning, the woman of "In a Language All Lips" feels secure in her love, even though she and her lover are from very different worlds: "*I smile at him because I love him. I smile at him because I don't want him to know how heavy my heart is - how I'm dreading this separation even though it's only for a few days*" (36-37). She is heading home to Ireland to wait for him. When he arrives she will tell him that she is pregnant and they will, she imagines, live 'happily ever after'. But this is revealed as a romantic fantasy. To him she is no more than a pretty object to be used, whether for sexual pleasure - ". . . one morning I entered her and she only woke up when I started moving. She is a stupid woman but I like her for her red hair, white skin and lilting voice" (36) - or for the horrid political pleasure her departure represents:

You know what they will say afterwards - only an Arab could've done that. The paradox is they won't know what I've really done. They will know I have killed you and others besides but they won't know why. Your death to me is a tool. . . (37)



She will not live to know the truth of his character, remaining blinded by love to the end. In "Poking the Peevish Gutter", on the other hand, romantic passion appears only in the narrator's memories. A retired English mistress from a girls' school, she lies paralyzed as the result of a stroke. Physically helpless and hopeless, she falls prey to Ferdie, a homeless man: "It was a long time since I'd had a man in my room . . . Ferdie at least was appreciative of me . . . it was so nice to have company. . . the young have no idea of the loneliness one endures when one is old and ugly" (73-74). Ferdie's presence reminds her of being in love and being loved but these romantic ideals are soon shattered. Once she has lost the ability to move he takes control, using and abusing her until every penny of her independence is lost. She allows herself to be used "in exchange for company" (78), yet in the end she dies alone.

Rather than representing empowerment, the love, lust or passion that drives these women disempowers them. The self is lost in the love obsession. These women strive to be loved and will give any and every part of themselves to attain that goal. Nola of "The Thinning of Nola" has been used by a German man to gain residency to her country but cultural differences divide them in the end and he leaves, but only after fattening her up: "When Helmut was here he'd had the telephone disconnected so that he could concentrate fully on altering Nola to his liking, and sleep and eat without interruption" (51). Now, by a strange turn of events she finds herself alone, locked in her apartment, the key lost. She cannot call for help and she cannot go for food, and so begins to transform back into the Nola of the past. The process is a lonely struggle but the outcome positive. Nola frees herself from the identity forced upon her by Helmut and emerges a new slim woman. Yet on her release it seems that this freedom may be short-lived. She sits and waits for her dinner date: " 'Just a man who applied for

residency last week . . . He likes his women small" (55). She has found herself only to give herself up again to the ideals of a man.

The unnamed woman of "The Glass Whittler" has also given herself up for her man, following him to his home city where he has work but she has only emptiness and sleepless nights in the dark room they occupy: "When they went to bed the man would sometimes make love to her, absentmindedly. Then he would sleep, drugged with his pleasure, and she would lie alert beside him" (8). While he gains increasing satisfaction from his work, her feelings of worthlessness grow. She has no place here: "nobody needed a glass whittler. Nobody even knew what a glass whittler was" (9). She has no outlet for her creativity, is oppressed and imprisoned, until jealousy drives her in pursuit of a way out, the only way she knows, through her craft.

Upstairs she molded the glass with her hands. . . trickles of blood ran down her arms to the sheets of the bed, where she crouched intent on her craft. Her fingers twisted and kneaded the glass, her blood working as mortar, thick and scarlet.

Finally the globe hung from the ceiling, a mass of flickering emerald, indigo and vermilion a perfect replica of a perfect world.

Below it she lay drained on the bed, splinters of glass cold in her cooling flesh.

That night she slept alone, giving neither pleasure to the man nor comfort to the souls of the city. (10)

She has acted for herself but again disempowerment is the ultimate outcome. As Cynthia Brophy writes of Johnson's stories, "in most the loss of love is an unspeakable tragedy that imprisons characters in inertia and desuetude" (38). These women become so lost in the experience of being lover to another their own self dies, whether metaphorically or, as in this case, literally. Relationships outside the bounds of marriage are still subject to the same patriarchal power play.

Johnson offers few alternatives, but those stories which consider women outside of traditional heterosexual relationships are the most effective. The narrator of "Irene

Goodnight" hints at one possible option in considering the path her niece, Toni, has chosen to tread. Her relationships are based upon equality and independence but they also carry a stigma of difference:

. . . since Toni's early twenties her talk of couples has not been of men and women, but of women and women. . . Sometimes my sister Jean implies it is all my fault: that without my shrugging off two husbands who were dud choices in the first place and my determination to do without men afterwards, Toni would never have become the way she is . . . (68)

Lesbianism may break with all conventional definitions of womanhood but Toni shows that relationships with other women can be fulfilling. In stark contrast to the trauma her Aunt has faced in marriages breeding submission and subservience, Toni "glows with health and peace of mind" (68). She carries hope for a better, freer future.

In terms of gender politics the most striking story in the collection is "The Invisible Hand". The narrator of this piece is a solo-mother struggling to make ends meet, until she starts receiving phone calls from a perverted secret admirer: "this is a man coming, somewhere in the city, into my phone" (42). This man uses her as a sexual outlet and she finds herself submitting to his need, showing all the signs of the patriarchally-programmed woman. However, when the caller propositions her with a business deal to start up a phone-based 'Wanker's Club' she is able to subvert male desire, earning money to give herself and her child a life free of financial struggle. Some of her friends are disgusted but others congratulate her, seeing the independence she has earned through the weaknesses of her male clients. She is in control:

I wouldn't recommend my line of business for everyone. In a funny sort of way it's like the time-release lights in the stairwell at our old place. Nothing lasts forever.  
On the wall in my new bedroom it says,  
I am a Strong, Free-Spirited Woman  
I Control My Own Destiny. (47)

Johnson's stories suggest this is what being a woman is about: controlling one's destiny. She portrays women seeking that control and while it is not always easy, particularly

within a society which conditions them towards oppression and self-sacrifice, it is possible. Self-definition is the key.

**No men allowed: the lesbian 'womyn' of Ngahuia Te Awekotuku and *The Power and the Glory***

As Toni in Johnson's "Irene Goodnight" depicts, one alternative path taken in defining the self which found its way into women's short fiction of the late 1980s is that of lesbianism. While stories of and by lesbian women appeared earlier in the decade, they were primarily found in self-published collections. In the latter part of the decade, lesbianism went mainstream. Wevers sees this growth in lesbian works as an integral part of a more general shift "into more fluid representations" of gender roles ("Short Story" 303). This shift, she claims, is "represented at its most politically radical in lesbian writing" ("Short Story" 303). In short fiction, Wevers explains, lesbian writing typically rewrites the traditional heterosexual romance, thus subverting it, transferring it to "a liaison which threatens the social fabric" ("Short Story" 303). The lesbian short story, she continues, "inscribes difference on the dominant structures of social experience and gender conditioning: by redefining the environment of short fiction it radically extends the territory of 'women's writing'" ("Short Story" 303). Outside of literature and in feminist terms lesbianism became for women "an act of political resistance" (Novitz 67). It subverted male definitions of female identity providing an alternative model through identification with other women, providing each "with a mirror for her female experience" (Novitz 67). In the late 1980s such lesbian redefinitions of the female self and of social structures appeared in the collected work of Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, and also in a groundbreaking anthology representing the collective voice of lesbian writers.

The "loosely autobiographical" stories of Ngahuia Te Awekotuku's *Tahuri and other stories* (1989) follow a "a young Maori girl's growing up and discovery of sexual identity" and make "Maori, and especially lesbian women central and Pakeha peripheral" (McLeod, "Te Awekotuku, Ngahuia" 529). The combination of Maori, feminist, and lesbian issues which marks her work are not, however, explored in terms of difference or otherness and lesbianism does not emerge as a separatist state. Rather the young women of Te Awekotuku's stories form their sexual identities through identification with other women, through shared feelings, not a sense of what makes them stand apart. As Michele Leggott suggests, 'difference' is overridden by an insistent focus "upon the woman-enveloped world from which Tahuri springs. This matrix is a warm and generally tolerant place in which to establish one's sexual orientation" ("Growing Up" 31).

Te Awekotuku presents lesbian role models in various guises but all are strong, confident women who reflect a sense of selfhood back to her young Maori women. In "Auntie Marleen" the narrator remembers the lifelong gift her babysitter 'Auntie' gave her which she now cherishes: "my very first look at what I could become" (10). Repeatedly these young girls connect with themselves through identification with others. In "The Basketball Girls" the narrator idolises Tihi, an older girl: ". . . oh how I loved to look at her . . . staring at Tihi was a treat . . . She walked like a princess. Very straight yet there was a ripple in there too. Maybe like a panther . . ." (11-12). The highlight of her week is watching Tihi and her best friends heading off to their basketball game: "Saturday after Saturday, I followed them, and I wondered at their pride, and their grace, and their beauty" (13). She longs to be like them, but one winter the ritual is broken when Tihi's friends, Pera and Cindy, disappear and are replaced by a boyfriend, Ahi who collects her for basketball every Saturday. There is something

familiar about Ahi and when he and the narrator come face to face, this familiarity is revealed:

. . . [he] took off the glasses, and looked at me. Smiling, talking softly in a voice I knew!

It was Cindy. Ahi had Cindy's eyes and Cindy's voice. Cindy had come back as Ahi. Wow! It felt like a secret - it felt neat, though! I was dying to run away and tell someone. (14)

Tahuri and her older cousin Atea share a similar secret in "Rainy Day Afternoon".

Tahuri is intrigued by the 'womanly' aspects of her cousin but even more so by the feelings she experiences in response to her womanliness when they take a nap together: "the warmth, and the soft smells, as she burrowed under the bedspread, and felt Atea's arm encircling her back, drawing her right in" (70). When Atea begins to undress the 'funny feeling' grows and Tahuri stands on the brink of discovery: "What was going to happen next?" (71).

The sexual experience of being lesbian is explored further in other stories and throughout the experience is presented as positive in the process of identity formation. In the title story, Tahuri finds warmth, security, and safety, as well as sensuality, in the arms of another young woman:

She was completely mixed up. It was crazy. Fantastic. Yet she felt like she'd never felt before, ever. Aroused, randy, free, and relaxed about it . . . The rest just happened. She felt slow and at ease, sure and gentle, flowing . . . eventually, she fell into a dense and dreamless sleep, sharing the warmth and comfort of Carol's body. (49)

She feels acceptance, and a freedom to be true to herself. She is able to give in to the enjoyment of the moment without fear of judgment or pressure to perform. Similarly, in "Mirimiri" Tahuri's desire is awakened by a visitor to a hui on the marae. The two form an immediate bond which soon moves beyond friendship: "Their bodies fitted together. Their mouths met, softly moist and flowering open, licking and leafing delicately; their fingers found their own way, probing, circling, kneading. Tracing the satin liquid

smoothness of skin" (92). All the ingredients of the typical romance story are present but the hero has been replaced by another heroine, completely subverting the love story tradition. The experience of love, romance, sexual fulfilment, and security is found within the arms of another woman and transcends any experience with men. In these stories, men are the antithesis of pleasure; they threaten, and destroy.

Tahuri's experiences with males in "Tahuri: The Runaway" stand in striking contrast to the comfort and security she finds in female companions. She is sexually abused not only by one male, but having defended herself wildly against him, she is passed on as a plaything to be shared around:

'Here she is boys -take her, she's a fucken tiger!'

Next thing, thrown across the corridor into a larger, open, well-lit room – four beds, four crawling, mauling, clumsy apes all ripping at her clothes . . .  
(14)

In "Old Man Tuna" the destructive male force lies even closer to home. Whero goes fishing with her brothers only to be raped by one of them in her own special place: "Her favourite place - a tree trunk. A wide, massive branch that reached over the river, it cradled her body" (57). He destroys her haven and any inner security she may have felt. Even within the family, men in these stories cannot be depended upon. Protection and security must be found elsewhere. As Margaret Taurere suggests, "Ngahuia Te Awekotuku presents lesbian sexuality as an acceptable - perhaps preferable - alternative, in comparison with the negative aspects of heterosexuality such as gang rape, child abuse and queer bashing" (7).

So, while lesbianism may be a positive alternative for these young Maori women, it is not an easy one. The threat of prejudice is ever present and for these characters it is threefold: against their race, their gender, and their sexuality. In "Red Jersey" Whero faces the forces of such prejudice when her attraction to another young woman marks her as different. Fear of the unknown leads those threatened by her

'difference' to attack in an attempt to maintain the heterosexual status quo. Although the exception within this collection, this story reminds the reader that choosing to be lesbian can be as isolating as it is fulfilling. While Te Awekotuku does not focus on this point of difference, she acknowledges the fact that others do. On the whole, however, her collection presents lesbianism as simply another way of 'being woman' and as other lesbian stories of the period show, she was not alone in wanting to convey this experience.

A number of these stories were published in *The Power and the Glory and other lesbian stories* (1987), the first anthology of its kind, containing only stories about lesbians, by lesbians. As Wevers suggests, the fictions it brings together create a strong sense of a "discovery of collective female identity" ("Short Story" 303). As a minority group, lesbian writers appear "concerned to represent the extent of homogeneity, rather than difference, amongst women" ("Short Story" 303). In her preface, editor Miriam Saphira explains how the collection came together from an attempt at finding a way of "sharing" her and others' lesbian "dreams, ideas, ramblings . . . thoughts". The resulting anthologised stories are said to "break away from [lesbian] stereotypes" to show lesbian women as individuals rather than a mass of sameness. Some of the stories, as Fiona Kidman suggests, do seem to contain only "a special pleading for the state of being lesbian"(55) making them too overtly political but there are also many which carry "emotion and conviction" (Rosier, Rev. of *The Power and the Glory* 45) and explore the experience of being lesbian from a personal rather than political point of view. This mix provides a sense of balance but the most striking feature is universal. All these stories, no matter the agenda of the writer, completely overturn the realm of domesticity traditionally associated with women's work. Domestic romance between man and woman is replaced by love between women, providing the ultimate challenge to



patriarchal power structures. Throughout there is a refusal to be defined by man/men and this is captured even in the way these writers construct the words which represent who they are: womin womyn wimmin. Men play no part and have no place in this female naming. The female self is redefined, and self-defined.

In many of these stories, lesbianism is presented as a 'new' way of being which follows a shedding of an old existence centred on traditional marriage and motherhood. The narrator of Fran Marno's "The Beginning of it All" has split up with her husband and offers a room for rent to her lesbian lawn mower, Jo. She hopes that through Jo's presence she will come to realise a different view of the world, an alternative way of being to that represented by her past, but she is unsure what to think when Jo suggests, "Some day this will be a women's place. I can feel it. Good vibes" (13):

I'm not really ready to visualise my house and garden swarming with lesbians . . . I very seldom think about the future. Still, I'm relived that she's picked up good vibes. I feel somehow included in her vision. I'm a little bit flattered. (13)

While the narrator is hesitant, Jo still represents an opportunity for a new beginning, whatever direction it may lead her in. Aorewa McLeod also explores this notion of starting anew with a redefinition of sexual identity in "The Beginning of the Story." Josie has joined a group of women at a writing workshop where she struggles with her creative expression. Melinda, a younger woman notices her immediately: "A strong face with prominent heavy lidded eyes, an aquiline nose and lots of deep lines. It was the clothes that had struck her though - yellow, purple, red, black -disheveled, untidy even, but striking. An interesting person a powerful person" (27). The connection between the two women is immediate and new feelings are awakened in Josie:

This felt like the beginning of a story. She could feel the weight of future interactions stretching out ahead. 'That moment of recognition' - recognition of what? . . .  
'Fuck, she's lovely,' Josie thought in astonishment - 'quite lovely' . . .

This is the beginning Josie thought. The beginning of a poem or a novel, or an affair. She has to be a dyke, she thought. (33)

Physical attraction to another woman seems to be something new for Josie which could represent a whole new way of life and could be the key to regaining her identity.

Choosing lesbianism is not, however, portrayed as a sure path to a happy existence. The patriarchal world with all its power struggles still exists and is threatened by anything that stands in opposition to the status quo of heterosexuality. Thus, lesbianism becomes a label carrying negative associations and stereotypes form to protect the traditions of marriage and male domination. Lesbians are not viewed as individuals but as a collective of oddity and abnormality. Miriam Saphira's "A Market" explores this prejudice in a political sense. Judy, the central protagonist, questions the invisibility of the lesbian population: "Gay liberation happened in New Zealand in about 1971. Now fifteen years later what had lesbians got from it except each other?" (61). The problem seems to be that the public has formed a view of lesbians based on the only knowledge they possess:

We were all butches who roamed the streets looking for femmes and we stole innocent wives from innocent husbands . . . It was little wonder that the public held such myths about lesbians when they never read any of the ordinary things about us . . . What lesbians need is a marketing strategy. (61-62)

And as Judy goes on to consider some outlandish ways to market lesbianism, to show lesbians as individuals, the story itself markets the concepts. It shows lesbian women in everyday situations, as human beings.

However, it is not easy to convince the public of such a view. The stereotype is ingrained and breeds on fear. Saphira shows the existence of such a threatened society in "Mrs Baker Said", set in the tearooms of small-town Inglewood, where women gossip about young Marie Robinson who has turned up in the tearooms "sitting with a

man! I thought she hated men" (60). Marie is blamed for the 'difference' of another of the town's young girls:

' . . . None of the girls around here would want to be seen with her. Ann Green was such a nice girl too. Then that little minx started playing up to her and now she's gone right off the rails . . . Her hair was cut off even shorter . . . All that lovely long blonde hair. I think that's awful, don't you, it's so unfeminine.' (58)

Their reaction embodies classic homophobia born of misunderstanding and fear. But while the women at the local tearooms can be ignored, even mocked for their ignorance, prejudice is not so easily dealt with when it hits closer to home. Nicola Patterson reveals the deeper hurt experienced when a loved one cannot provide acceptance in "My Mother":

. . . you are lesbian she said for all her sources that she sought of past experience and learnings said to her: no this is wrong, this is dangerous, this is abnormal, this is gross, can you rescue your daughter from this . . . Daughter, daughter I can not speak anymore and she thought to herself for I have loved you truly, and she hung up the phone and was deeply hurt not understanding.( 19)

What hurts this daughter most is that it was her mother who gave her the gift of being, and the strength to be true to her self: "I fortified by her great love faced infinity alone and took intrepid footsteps within its bounds" (19). While she has gained this strong sense of self through her mother's support, her mother can not now find the strength to carry that support through. Sadly, it is the mother who loses:

Now I feel strong and clear. I am lesbian and I acknowledge all it means with awe, and my mother breathes backwards, into the past and cries. She is lost and alone in shadows she has rescued me from and from which I cannot rescue her. (20)

It is from such views that the collection itself can be said to rescue lesbianism. One-dimensional patriarchally constructed perceptions of what it means to be lesbian are replaced by a new multi-dimensional self-constructed identity based on a variety of

individual experiences and fictions. Lesbians are not portrayed as a certain 'type' of women but are celebrated as individuals. They share the common bond of being lesbian but this alone does not define them.

Not all the women portrayed in these stories have such a strong sense of self, however. The narrator of Annabel Fagan's "Laughing Girl" for example, puts on a brave face for appearances' sake but the pain that lurks beneath cannot remain buried:

I'm a funny lesbian. Always the same, laughing and happy, good fun, they tell me. It's true, I am. I laugh and smile and talk all the time. But it's also a lie. Like the proverbial clown I cry with a smile. That way I always have friends. I chuckle ripping open my skin with razor blades or popping little pills . . . (35)

Eventually she ends up in a psychiatric ward where her lesbianism is ignored and she is drugged, rendered passive: "they tried to smother my mind . . . I had no choice in anything" (40). All control is taken from her: "What was I doing here, a sane person, in a place where a certain form of madness was assigned to us and we received it like a gift (the word gift in German means poison)" (40). Only when she lets down the façade of happiness she has been hiding behind does the narrator realise that the individual she is within is more important than her sexuality. She is able to simply be: "mostly I lay while my body worked things out, talked softly to itself and I was quiescent, a nothing - I didn't listen, didn't interfere. That was good because it did all right, it did well" (41).

Many women in these stories find self-recognition and self-acceptance through identification with other women. The two women who meet in Lynn Suttie's "To Be In Love With Other People" are immediately drawn together by the sharing of unsatisfactory relationships. In each other they find a point of identification, or as Novitz would recognise it, "an alternative model for female identity" (67): "The two women sit opposite, for the first time they face each other; eyes mirrored" (74). Jan and Margaret are emotionally and physically attracted but it is not a simple matter of

escaping into lesbianism as a happy alternative to Jan's uncommitted lover and Margaret's philandering husband. Jan has little to lose but for Margaret the stakes are higher: "I'm not brave. I can't risk my children" (75). While Jan is able to embrace her new identity, Margaret must play the part of married life. Only when she secretly meets Jan can she be true to herself: "They clutched, elbows knocking. Their embrace symmetrical in stance and emotion" (78).

The strictures of a traditional patriarchal society continue to insist that marriage and motherhood go hand in hand, but even without these responsibilities there is nothing innately 'easy' about this way of being. *The Power and the Glory* is not collected to suggest that lesbianism is an ideal state, an alternative way of being woman that is free of all the struggles associated with gender politics and power-play. Relationships with other women present their own struggles and differences. There may be no men involved but the women of these stories are not idealised as having found perfect relationships, as Daisy and Lilly of Linley Dearson's "The Power and the Glory" illustrate. These 80-year-old lesbians live the life of an old married couple but the balance of their relationship is thrown when Daisy joins a 'Women's Ritual group' which is said to change her from "a simple, conventional elderly lesbian woman" to one with "an added glittery and slightly wild look about her" (48). Lilly's jealousy at seeing Daisy revel in her new sense of self drives a rift between them reminiscent of heterosexual power struggles: "Bed socks and nighties were firmly in place. The electric blanket was warm, backs were resolutely turned on each other. Not a single hair touched - two bodies like stranded whales beached on each side of the bed - stony still" (49). When Lilly decides to go out and do her own thing, Daisy's response is equally irrational:

Lilly had that bedazzled look she gained when she had one too many sherries, or when lovemaking had been particularly sonorous. Daisy had the scenario already mapped out. One glance was enough to provide her with all the information she needed. It was obvious.

Lilly had spent all night frantically necking and drinking with Sybil. (50)

Dearson has rewritten all the elements of heterosexual jealousy and dissatisfaction which come of one individual seeking out independence. Ironically the true nature of Lilly's indiscretion brings the two women closer together and highlights the strength of their lesbian identity. Lilly has been out attacking the building of the city council with spray paint: 'OLD LESBIANS NEVER DIE, THEY JUST BECOME LESS VISIBLE' (51). Society needs to be reminded that lesbians are individuals who live and die in just the same way as anyone else. They do not metamorphose into heterosexual partners when their age decrees they no longer fit the lesbian stereotype; they continue to be who they are. This collection is all about acceptance, not simply the need for individuals to accept one another as equals, regardless of gender or sexual preference, but also the need for women in particular to accept themselves, to be true to their own desires and their own sense of selfhood regardless of whether it matches that of patriarchal society. Annabel Fagan's "The Woman Who Loved Trees" embodies the celebration of 'being woman' this collection invites:

There are times I feel so swollen with my womanliness that I am doubled, tripled in it. As if I need three of me to contain it, all this plenitude which seems to spill over, burst out of my one spare body to form another and another . . . Oh I'm a woman all right. A three-fold woman . . . (42)

### **Travel as a metaphor for the inner journey: Shonagh Koea and Sue Reidy**

The inner journey is a common thread throughout works of the late 1980s with female characters repeatedly portrayed on psychological journeys of self-discovery. This is not a 'new' theme but what is notable in this period is the adoption of a travel motif in depiction of such inner journeying. Writers portray women travelling around the world and back in search of an alternative way of being. On leaving home, they hope to leave behind or escape the social definitions that contain their beings. New

worlds represent new possibilities. Wevers also identifies this geographical shift away from "the domestic post-romance frame characteristic of earlier writing by women" ("Short Story" 304). Increasingly, she suggests, women's stories are set not simply outside the home but outside New Zealand:

Travel, afloat in another culture, as if on a metaphorical journey away from home, is perhaps the most commonly represented condition of recent fiction by women . . . As the expansion of the physical environment of fiction by women breaks down the metonymic association between 'home' and 'woman', gender roles . . . become conscious game-playing. ("Short Story" 304)

When away from 'home' in a truly geographical sense the possibilities available to women are extended. They can be anything they desire. In such fictions, as Wevers identifies, "musicians, solo parents, and travelling adventurers are located outside the home, and represent antidomesticity . . . strange events invade and interrupt apparently realistic surfaces" ("Short Story" 305).

Journeys as representations of freedom from the oppressions of 'home' appear throughout collections of the 1980s. Dorothy Golder's collection *Maggots and Marigolds* for example, focuses on tales of childhood memories which culminate in an attempt to escape the past through geographical relocation. "Night Shadows," presents entering a new world as akin to being reborn. As the narrator suggests, a new land grants a new identity: "The certificate said, 'You are now a New Zealand Citizen,' born again without baptism or beliefs. The transition nice and neat - no mess like at a real birth" (39). She may be unable to erase her past and her memories of being a burden to her mother, but moving to another country allows her a fresh start. As a child she may have been powerless, but now she is in control: "a neat rebirth, it involved choice" (41).

The title of Shonagh Koea's collection, *The Woman Who Never Went Home and other stories* (1987), is immediately indicative of the 1980s travel motif, and its contents follow through with numerous portrayals of women leaving domesticity to explore new

possibilities. In "Mrs Pratt Goes to China" the role of wife has been replaced by that of the widow carrying with it all the expectations of grief and misery. However, for Mrs Pratt, the death of her husband brings release from a marriage which had become little more than a "bargain":

Meticulous neatness was what he required and meticulous neatness was what he received . . . Affection, interest and animation she saved for the cat, the birds in the garden and successive spiders named Albert who lived by the bathroom door. (3)

Koea ensures that her husband's family will not see the weakness and vulnerability they hope for. Her loss does not bring the despair they expect: "If there was anything to cry about it was the wasted years and she had wept over those as she wasted them" (4). Rather his death represents a new start, the opportunity to say goodbye to marriage and all its associations, including his family: " I am going to say goodbye to all of you now permanently. Now that Arnold is no longer here my link with you is severed' . . . In her life their season had come and now it could go" (5). This new life begins with a journey to a foreign land: "somewhere . . . that reminds me of nothing. Where the people are not like people I have ever known and where nothing is at all familiar" (9). Freedom and renewed hope await her on arrival:

A peculiar blitheness came over her as she tripped, like a forty-seven-year-old child of five summers, out over the tarmac to the aeroplane. She feared her radiant joy would scorch the steps to the cabin . . .  
It seemed that her whole life, which had been made up of chaos with flashes of joy, was now being weighed down on the side of joy. (10)

Not all journeys within this collection represent freedom from marriage. In some, travel provides married couples with an opportunity to reassess their relationships, or to make amends for past transgressions. In "To the Taj Mahal", for example, as husband and wife travel across foreign land their conversation revolves around an absent third party, the wife's ex-lover Henry. Henry is now dead but his name is kept alive by the husband as a reminder of her wrongdoing. Knowledge gives him power:



She watched him covertly and wondered again if he had trapped her with cunning or kindness before they left home . . .

For the last year he had taken her on all his business trips. He bought her gifts at hotel shops . . . Everything was big and heavy, like anchors. India had supplied so far a handbeaten silver necklace like a yoke, several bracelets that resemble shackles and a choker of deceptive fragility shaped like the serpentine end of a lash. (127)

These gifts tie her to her husband, further guaranteeing her imprisonment. However, on finally reaching the Taj Mahal, the sight of a corpse floating alongside them in the river changes her perspective on reality: "I feel better than I have done for months. I feel wonderfully cheered up to see it all, so beautiful and so dead and so dirty. If a wonder of the world's all slimed, what can the rest of us expect?" (132).

Shifting perceptions are common among Koea's characters. The woman of "The Dragon Courier" revels in the freedom of travelling to China without the presence of her husband: "It was lucky Roland was not with her, she thought. They would have quarrelled bitterly already and the idea that she was at least spared his recriminations and her own explanations made her nearly joyful" (45). Instead of her husband's recriminations to deal with, though, she is hounded by the insidious Mr Ling, the organiser of her tour, who continuously attempts to force her into unwelcome situations. Being free of all wifely associations, however, appears to compensate: "She had been able to send her best friend a postcard which stated truthfully, 'This is a ghastly place and I am having an awful time but I am happy being miserable on my own, thank heavens'" (46). The final train journey Mr Ling sends her on with his wife, sisters and mother is both terrifying and freeing. She is frightened for her safety yet something about the position of anonymity the journey allows her is appealing: "I will die strangely, she thought, in a vivid and distant spot, disappearing without a trace like a small shaft of light behind a cloud" (49). Again travel has resulted in altered perception.

"The Woman Who Never Went Home" involves a similar shift in sense of 'place'. Once more travel indicates a degree of independence and free will:

'Won't you be bored?' her friend had asked before she left home. 'Fancy staying in Noumea for three whole weeks all on your own. Whatever will you do?' She told them she would look at things and they gave her up as ridiculous. At eighteen she had been a wild, shy, ridiculous creature and had not altered greatly in twenty years. She had merely become more practiced at it and more accomplished at hiding her tendencies. (88)

This journey seems to take her back in time rather than forward to a new world. On arrival at her destination she finds herself attracted to a man, interesting for his familiarity: "The man in chamois leather who looked almost exactly like the man she remembered so well, a man who had been dead for ten years . . . he was almost an exact duplicate except that his eyes were the wrong colour" (87-89). She becomes obsessive in her pursuit of this image of a mysterious figure from her past:

No. . . it was another one, not her husband. Her grief. . . had become unresolved and she bore it with her always like a silver plate in her head. She had not cried when he died. She had gone on calmly cutting star shapes out of shortbread and had said, callously, 'Dead? Who? What a sad accident.' (91)

The details from her past and the role this man played in her life remain a mystery but being reminded of him envelops her in a sense of peace:

An insomniac for years, she now fell at night into a gentle sleep which came upon her swiftly, as if she were a small falcon that rode on a prince's arm and had a velvet cover thrown over her head . . .  
. Her sudden content was an old illicit enchantment, remembered from days past. (92)

Away from the restrictions of home (and perhaps those of being wife) she can enjoy this sense of contentment more fully. When the stranger finally approaches her he is roaring with laughter and she is again drawn back to the past: "The other one had been exactly the same, she thought, she had always been able to make him laugh and that was how it had all begun" (94). But while this hint at reliving the past is unsettling, the travel

metaphor suggests the possibility of change and new opportunities, and the title itself suggests that this is a story of no return. It looks forward.

Most stories in this collection are similarly open-ended, leaving more questions than answers. Jan Pilditch is critical of this fact when considering Koea's stories alongside those collected in *Happy Endings: Stories By Australian and New Zealand Women 1850s-1930s* (eds. Elizabeth Webby & Lydia Wevers). The latter is said to chronicle the end of the happy endings which were something of an institution in the nineteenth century, but increasingly gave way to "stories which ended in an assortment of deaths" (106). Against this backdrop Koea is praised for her wide range and stylistic precision, but Pilditch finds her stories' endings less convincing:

. . . one wants to ask whether women shedding the stereotypes and setting out joyfully for French Polynesia, India or somewhere in the east is not becoming every bit as platitudinous a conclusion as those which ended the romantic stories of the nineteenth century. A sort of feminist equivalent of riding into the sunset? . . . On reviewing short stories which span some 130 years of women's writing in this country one is entitled to ask if anything has changed, or are women writers still unable to make an end. (107)

Pilditch fails to recognise that not knowing what happens to these women characters is the point. There is no one 'happy ending', no formula for feminist success. 'Other' possibilities do exist but it remains up to the individual to create those possibilities. Koea does not provide answers; she suggests that women must leave the confines of the social world to find their own answers, making their untold endings products of self-definition and self-determination.

In Sue Reidy's *Modettes* (1988) the travel metaphor is encountered at its most extreme, and in many cases, bizarre. In Reidy's stories escape through travel occurs on a variety of levels. The destination is always exotic and unfamiliar, providing an enlarged sense of new possibilities and new ways of defining the self. Rose and Vicki in "Modettes", for example, become cabaret girls: "they sing, flashing their silver, elbow-

length gloves. There's something not quite real about them - something definitely larger than life. Nobody would be able to tell who they were under their masks. Nobody" (20). And in "The Sarong" Rose is presented as a cultural mosaic, her very being defined by the places she has travelled:

She wears long, finely wrought silver earrings from Celuk, a coral necklace from Pokara an apple green singlet from Kuta, a violet patterned Sarong from Solo, and some transparent plastic Parisian sandals . . . Rose's freckled arms are swathed in silver bangles from Nepal, India, Tibet and Thailand . . .

. . . She is a walking globe. A grab bag of opinions and catch phrases from a multitude of cultures . . . (78)

However, in most cases, a sense of realism is maintained even in the most magical moments of adventure. The narrator of "Bad Busyness" for example travels to Bali to escape the mess she feels that she has made of her married life: "I fell in love with my best friend's husband . . . I'm still madly, passionately, insanely in love" (106).

Perhaps my problem is that I never had a plan. I guess you could say I just drifted. Drifted into marriage. Even got pregnant by accident. And I've just muddled ever since. I must be a classic case. (106)

In Bali she hopes to find peace of mind, away from the demands of being wife and mother. However, this vision of a paradise away from home is destroyed. Her travelling companion falls for an Australian man who invades the narrator's peace turning Bali into an island of murderous people with his opinions: " 'a total blood bath - from one end of the country to the other'" (109). His words haunt her with images of violence and chaos. She cannot escape the 'mess' of home.

Similarly, in "The Sarong" Rose's sense of independence and freedom is encroached upon by a man. A fellow traveller becomes her lover with "no strings attached" but the enjoyment of their relationship is marred by another man, a young Indonesian pursuing her with shows of European wealth. Again these symbols of the materialistic 'home' she has rejected invade her peace of mind and she is forced to move

on. In "Second Chance" the female traveller is the interloper. Audrey is sent to Singapore by her father to check up on his widowed sister who has made a new life for herself with a new man. While she finds that her Aunt truly is happy, Audrey cannot find peace for herself and her journey becomes a search for self. Eventually, on discovering that she is pregnant, she is forced to face up to the realities of her return home, but her initial response of panic and a strong desire to be rid of this burden is overturned by her Aunt who helps her come to terms with the new way of being a child may represent: "Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all. She didn't like her job at the bank anyway. And it might be a girl" (72). A new form of freedom could be born of motherhood, to be embraced rather than resented. Whatever the circumstances, foreign lands repeatedly provide opportunities for personal reassessment.

When Reidy extends this travel metaphor and takes her women on journeys to places unreachable by normal means even greater possibilities open up as the boundaries between reality/fantasy/dream/imagination are blurred. Reidy represents worlds which traverse the lines of what is real, true and acceptable, and she does so in 'new' ways, adopting 'new' forms of writing, partaking in the general trend for writers of the 1980s to be more experimental, not only thematically, but also technically. As Laurel Bergmann writes, while the majority of women writers of this era "retain some form of psychological (or social) realism" many are engaged in some "version of metafiction" or other, from magic realism and the supernatural to shifting points of view and self-reflexive structures (220). The *form* of the short story entered the spotlight.

**Chapter Four**  
**'New' versus 'Old': Thematic Highs and Lows**  
**and Technical Debates of the Late 1980s**

Works published in anthologies of women's short fiction in the late 1980s displayed thematic shifts paralleling those of individual collections. The fictional stereotype of the passive female victim was increasingly replaced (to varying degrees) by more active individuals. Watson identifies this shift in the works of the *New Women's Fiction* series, claiming that they move away from the need to focus solely on the experience of female entrapment, portraying women defining their own experiences: "The female hero strikes out on her own account, with or without partner/family/sexual expression . . . so that the state of passivity can give way to one of activity" (63). There is also a more modernist sense of the inner-consciousness guiding this process of definition which sets these works apart from earlier versions of domestic realism. While the editors of these collections sought something exciting and different in terms of form, many of the works published failed to deliver.

**A sense of hope emerges: *Mscellany* and *New Women's Fiction***

While the *New Women's Fiction* series produced the most noted anthologies of New Zealand women's contemporary short fiction at the time, other collections must also be recognised. In 1987 The New Zealand Women Writers' Society published *MsCellany: Women Writers' Prose and Poetry*, a collection of members' poetry, short fiction and autobiographical prose from the 1980s compiled by Betty Bremner, Sonia Kellett, Julia Millen, and Joy Tonks. As the title suggests, not only is the work woman-centred but it is also varied and eclectic: a miscellany. The works collected illustrate variety in both form and content. Women are represented in all their diversity and at all

stages of life, from teenagers struggling with losing a job in Rosaleen Conway's "A Raw Deal" or the shocking death of a teacher in Julia Millen's "The Death of Minnehaha and Miss Davies" to the elderly in Heather Marshall's "Final Chapter: Mills and Boons in the Eighties" seeking sexual fulfilment even in the midst of arthritis, sciatica and prostrate problems. There is certainly nothing one-dimensional about the view of womanhood presented here.

While the stories of *Mscellany* tend to be focused on the individual a number deal with universal issues which extend far beyond the domestic realm, such as the questioning of religious faith in Ellen Butland's "The Concrete Cathedral" and facing mortality in Janet Slater Redhead's "The Migration". However, the questioning of self which accompanies confrontation with such issues remains the focus. For example, the woman of Ivy Preston's "Underground Station" is forced to confront her own helplessness in the face of the many homeless "asleep on their pavement pillows": ". . . I wanted to do something to help. But I was alone and rather afraid of those other huddled shapes, so I passed by on the other side" (35). And in Iole Clarke's "The Story of My-Good-One" a couple living in South Africa must face the reality of life for their servant's son who on turning two must return to "the location." The poverty that faces him there causes them inner turmoil:

The straggling trees of the waste-land strip were just visible in the hollow below. From here we could see that it was more than just a physical barrier. It was a dividing line - of ignorance and fear and indifference. And we could see no way across it. (18)

Women are shown to have concerns beyond those of political feminism. These stories place them in the larger scheme of things, as individuals outside and beyond the roles of wife and mother. Where 'home' is explored, as in Alice Glenday's "Sisters" it is more in geographical terms than in domestic. In this story Lucy struggles with her 'place' in the world. She lives in New Zealand but Canada is 'home', and on returning to visit her

sisters she anticipates a sense of instant belonging. However, all she feels is distance. She finds no reflection of selfhood in the faces of her sisters, only resentment at her leaving.

The 'woman as victim' scenario appears in only one story. Florence Yates' "Requiem For a Dream" portrays a woman locked in a destructive relationship. Books are her only escape but her reading presents a threat to patriarchal control and so is scorned and oppressed: "I make it to the bedroom but I hear, 'Nose stuck in a book again,' as I flit past the lounge. I wonder what the statistics are, re. male and female readers. How can I front up to nearly two metres of barely concealed rage" (62). He returns her books to the library seeing them as the cause of her 'illness' and although she retaliates physically her mind is already resigned to his power over her: "He's standing there, vainglorious, daring me. I hit out at him. He's immovable, smooth as marble, no curves or bumps. My hands capitulate, they know what is going to happen, a long rest to set me back on my webbed feet" (64). Fortunately, other stories told here suggest more hopeful alternatives. Women, young and old, are shown in a variety of contexts testifying to the multi-dimensional nature of female identity. The stories are all women's stories but they refuse to be limited by an externally imposed idea of what women write about or what women are, indicating a shift away from feminist political dogma to a consideration of the many aspects of identity that can make a woman who she is. They strike a personal rather than a political chord which is also evident in the *New Women's Fiction* series.

The first volume of *New Women's Fiction* (ed. Cathie Dunsford) was published in 1986, following a call which went out in early 1985 for new stories by women. In her introduction to the collection, Dunsford emphasises both the "truly contemporary" nature of the stories and the fact that all "have women at their centre" (7). While the



latter is expected, the former is what makes this series as a whole stand out. The stories presented are new and, according to Dunsford, they present a new vision of female experience: “Drab political correctness is not the issue. Searching for new perspectives is” (7). Their female characters emerge with a “growing consciousness of their own inner power” (7), often as the result of a moment of transformation which results in “an awareness of and trust in the intuitive self” (Dunsford, introduction 13). The traditional woman’s role of “repressed bitter victim” is replaced by a new kind of woman who refuses to be limited by this label. She questions ‘old’ ways of being and embraces new:

This woman does not passively accept abuse, defends herself against violence, wants more than material things and is aware of the roles that have trapped her in oblivion and defeat. She is not content with domestic servitude, and seeks to explore a wider range of relationships. She questions authority and makes connections between personal and global issues. She is a political and spiritual being. She slowly begins to trust her inner knowledge, her in-tuition. (Dunsford, introduction 13)

As Michael Gifkins suggests, the collection may not be radical, but it certainly shows “women on the move” (“Bookmarks” 125), and these fictional women are moving in parallel to their real life counterparts. These stories reflect, Dunsford identifies, “the vast transition that women are experiencing in the Aotearoa of the nineteen eighties” (introduction 13). This new fiction reflects as well as suggests new possibilities for women.

Familiar situations continue to appear and marriage and the roles of wife and mother remain central, but the women of these stories are coming to a realisation that this way of being is not enough. They desire more. In “The Break” Daphne de Jong reconstructs the suburban coffee meeting. Young wives and mothers gather to temporarily escape their duties and to bemoan their oppression: “All women are crazy. Why else do we put up with men?” (139). They all seem to yearn for an escape from their domestic drudgery, yet when they learn that a friend has acted on these yearnings

her leaving is viewed as a betrayal: “now Francie belonged to another species - must have all along, really. Women who left their husbands - well that was understandable . . . But to leave the children!” (138). Francie’s action threatens in that it further reinforces the passivity of her peers. In fact, when one of the women meets with a fatal end in a car accident on the way home they find this less shocking and more easily accepted than Francie’s ‘walking out’. Despite an apparent awareness of their oppression, these women’s reactions are entrenched in patriarchal definitions of women. They are not yet ready for the ‘transformation’ Dunsford speaks of. The process is gradual.

Karen Ferns explores this ‘growing consciousness’ in “The Watershed” as Wendy gradually sees beyond the entrapment of her marriage. While holidaying in Tahiti, the distance between Wendy and her husband Frank becomes unbridgeable: “their needs were separate and unmatched” (33). Wendy knows that she needs to escape the confrontation and conflict that marks their every move, and the anxiety she suffers as a result but it is not until the day of their departure that she can see a way out. Witnessing a child drowning she sees her own life reflected in the dark waters. She too is drowning, in the despair that is her marriage, but there is no one who can save her other than herself. Wendy realises that she must leave now:

She pulled open her shoulder bag. There was enough money in travellers’ cheques and she still had her passport . . . Once out into the lobby, she continued across its length and out the main hotel doors. Her steps were hesitant at first, then grew stronger as she walked away from the hotel. Step by step she concentrated on stemming the tide within her. She didn’t look back . . . (38)

Marriage is not the only social institution that these female characters find stultifying. They also seek redefinition of the role of motherhood. While not rejecting the role altogether these women do demand choice. In particular, they want to be freed of their identity as a reproductive tool. The woman of Wendy Simon’s “God and the Pregnant

Woman” has just entered her tenth pregnancy but despite everything she has ever learnt as a woman she cannot face having another child:

She had been told frequently that He had chosen her specially, along with millions of other women, for this particular job. Hadn't He provided her with the mechanism the tool so uniquely female, with which to fulfil the task? All her life, she had been led by priests and other men, her mother and other women, to believe this to be so. It had never occurred to her to question God's role for her. This latest gift, however, was the last straw . . . (80)

Secretly, at every possible moment, she prays to God to be relieved of this burden, but God is too busy enjoying life up in the heavens to listen. It is only when He hears her cries of pain in labour that he finally takes notice and takes action: “He adjusted the scanner, peered in and saw the plight of the woman. ‘Goodness me,’ He said. ‘What suffering.’ Immediately He summoned the angel, Death” (81). She is freed from the burden of motherhood but only through sacrificing her life. A patriarchal world, led by a patriarchal religion defines the role she must play and death is the only way out. The female protagonist of Violet Coalhouse’s “Nearer to the Heart’s Desire” faces a similar outcome. In this fantastical sci-fi piece, Violet is seduced by a member of the futuristic ‘Messengers of the Fallen Angel’ and transported to their world to find that she has been chosen to give birth to a very special child that is to replace Earnest Rutherford, thus preventing the splitting of the atom and ensuring world peace. Violet enjoys a wonderfully happy, pampered pregnancy but once the child is born there is no place for her in the new nuclear-free real world. Her usefulness as a reproductive tool is short-lived. The limitations of patriarchy’s myth of self-sacrificial motherhood are again exposed. In both cases, the writers of these stories distance the reader from the anti-motherhood sentiments of their texts through the creation of fantastical contexts but the restrictions of this role are revealed all the same. Selfhood is compromised.

Other stories suggest that the universal female experience of ‘being daughter’ also requires redefinition. The ‘ideal daughter’ is as unattainable as any other ideal

imposed upon women. The young woman of Lora Mountjoy's "Leaves of Magenta," for instance, faces a mother who is "only prepared to own a daughter who smiled, who did the dishes without being asked . . ." (129). Magenta cannot be this person: "I shouldn't have said I will be good, because I never could, not the way you wanted" (128). Only on realising that she must free herself from her mother's expectations and seek her own identity, can she find inner peace. Margaret Sutherland's "The City Far From Home", however, shows that the role of daughter can also be difficult to give up. The narrator sits at her dying mother's bedside struggling with the concept of letting go, with the transition from being the one to leave, to the one left behind:

Her anxious heart had always pursued me along the hall and down the steps and on towards the gate. I hadn't understood how one day I would leave alone, abandoned to my freedom in the city far from home. (103)

Freedom is not always desired, as having a role to play (however limited) provides a sense of identity but at least these women are questioning such roles in their conflict between inner self and societal expectation.

Throughout this collection the women portrayed are more in tune with their inner worlds and less willing simply to maintain the status quo. There is an increasing sense of self-belief which is perhaps most notable in matters of the heart. The women of these stories are not ruled by romantic idealisations of 'true love.' They do not lose themselves in the attentions of men but hold on to their own ideals. Even when they do become blinded by their emotions it is but temporarily and the female self remains intact when the affair is over. The narrator of Jan Kemp's "The Very Rich Hours", for instance, can see that her relationship with a married man actually ended before it began: "Had I read the signs as they came to me I would have held myself closed. Not let him in. For I saw in his face his wife's look. They have shared time. They have a child. . . But the signs are so fleeting. You can ignore them" (133). She ignored these

signs for a time, the reality of the situation blurred by passion, emotion, and exultation, but when he returns to his wife and the sadness of loss passes, she is able to reclaim her independence and to embrace his leaving as liberation: “The hours and speaking are over. I am not allowed to think of him. This is not illusion. He must become fiction . . . I must walk through this wall as if it were air” (136). Similarly, in Elizabeth Smither’s “The Love of One Orange” the narrator recalls reclaiming her self from the thrall of her first love, who told her “When you’re close to me your face reminds me of an orange” (116). Having realised the importance of being seen for who she is, not as a reflection of his gaze, she is now glad that the romance died: “I couldn’t bear to be reduced to an orange” (118).

These women reclaim what belongs to them and suggest that self-definition and a sense of self-belief allow women the ability to move on and move forward. Rather than simply showing the entrapment of women and exposing their victimisation under patriarchal control these stories show women being who they are according to their own inner beliefs and thus reflect the variety that makes up the female experience. In projecting this level of self-discovery and diversity, the collection carries hope for future generations. Jean Strathdee’s “The Wonder Tree” embodies this hope. Through searching for her origins, teenaged Rebecca gains the strength to believe in herself and to pursue her dreams. She will not sit and wait for life to happen to her; she will reach out and grasp at every opportunity.

### **A return to despair: *New Women’s Fiction 2***

- In contrast to this more hopeful view of the female experience, the second volume of *New Women’s Fiction*, published in 1988, marks a return to the bleaker outlook of earlier anthologies. The vast number of stories collected in *New*

*Women's Fiction 2* (Ed. Aorewa McLeod), 27 in total, guarantee a degree of variety in expressions of womanhood, yet a common thread of negativity runs throughout. In her introduction to the collection McLeod explains that stories chosen for inclusion were those “that suggested there are many different ways of expressing ourselves as women and that demonstrated the many and various voices women can use” (7). However, a striking number of stories adopt the familiar and limited voice of ‘woman as victim,’ portraying the stereotypical feminist image of oppressed wife and mother with no way out. They may explore the experience with greater depth through a first person perspective but they still tell the same old story. The narrator of Philippa Mansfield’s “Lullaby”, for instance, recalls the ‘pre-feminist’ reality of the suburban housewife:

. . . It was different from now, believe me.  
 Women’s liberation had hardly begun. Husbands earned the money and came home to a clean house, clean children, and a meal . . .  
 They didn’t understand the worries you had with kids hurting themselves . . .  
 The feeling you got sometimes that you might be the one to do the hurting.  
 There weren’t any of those support groups then. You’d had kids so you must love them it was as simple as that. (44-45)

While she coped, trapped at home with ‘two under two’ her friend Althea did not, killing her children in a fit of rage or frustration. Yet shocking as this crime was, as a wife and mother the narrator understands the motivation behind it:

I guess, if I’m honest, I was just lucky. The times I felt like beating my kids to pulp . . . I’d go for a walk outside . . . If only I was dead I used to think, I’d be a happy mum. Because, believe me, that screaming like a circular saw, going on and on in your brain, can slice it to little bits. (45)

The narrator of Barbara Rea’s “Story” shares a similar sense of oppression. Her husband is a doctor and she is expected to play the part of the ‘doctor’s wife’, but she knows that there is more to her identity than this singular definition. Unable to be true to the many and varied facets of her being she can see no point in carrying on:

Mary is a funny girl  
 Mary is a bit of a feminist.  
 Mary is an anti-vivisectionist.

Mary is a depressive but the drugs help.

Mary finds herself for no logical reason wasting a sunny afternoon, achieving nothing. . . I've found myself here, as you have found me here, the end of the road, the house is a mess, the day gone, wasted - I would not say this to a living soul but this is dead paper - and in my hands a twisted rope . . . around my neck a noose and no way out, you must understand that, no way out at all. (18)

She has chosen the only way out she can find, a dead end, resulting in yet another bleak and hopeless story of victimisation under patriarchal control.

Again the message of these stories tends to override any inner sense of the experience of being woman. The oppression of women is at the fore throughout. As Elizabeth Newton suggests in her review of the collection, "being a woman is not, on the whole, presented as worthwhile or fun"; generally it is accompanied by "anger, depression or discontent" (197). Whether from within or outside of marriage, the female characters of these stories still struggle against the dominant, patriarchal structures of society and patriarchal definitions of women which limit their self-realisation. Patriarchal power is shown to have multiple manifestations. It can be overt and violent as in Janet Arthur's "My Friends the Bikies", a horrific story of violent sexual abuse by a group of males who see women as tools of initiation. Or it can be asserted more subtly as in Elizabeth Smither's "The Girl Who Loved Mathematics" which sees a young woman defined as 'homemaker' by her father in spite of her great intellectual potential. Even lesbian relationships, as portrayed in Frances Cherry's "Undertow" and M.A. Sotheran's "A Body Like That," fall victim to patriarchal power structures. In fact, drugs feature as possibly the only way to find freedom from this oppression. Yet as Jen Kemp's "Born Moments" and Anne Kennedy's "A Veil Dropped From a Great Height" show, this escape route is pointless; drug effects simply create another barrier to self-fulfilment. Regardless of the way in which it is presented, patriarchal power dominates throughout this collection and women are the victims.

Some stories do provide glimmers of hope amongst this despair suggesting that ‘moving on’ from the role of victim is possible. The young woman of Suzi Pointon’s “Shark Alert”, for example, regains her sense of selfhood and empowerment by walking away from a new love interest who has proven himself to be a chauvinistic jerk. He is left gazing out to sea in the face of a shark-spotting “defeated, his arms slowly raised in an unmistakable gesture of helplessness” thinking her dead (42). Cynthia Thomas’s “Another Colour” also shows a woman moving on. Her flourishing love affair suddenly ends due to a perceived racial divide but the experience strengthens her sense of self: “I felt unique and strong and I was myself again after all that time under you” (76). She redefines the world around her:

. . . I am still alive, and I will not stop living because some boy I once knew refuses now to be intimate. Already I can see another colour, and it is not blue, or grey, as you might have wished or supposed in thinking that I needed you only to lean on. . . It’s not your colour and it’s not mine and it belongs to nobody. It is a colour far, far brighter than that . . . It is another colour. (76)

A sense of self-renewal pervades her thinking and she is free to follow her dreams. Helen Watson also portrays a successful case of female self-renewal in “Two Worlds” through the narrator’s redefinition of her past. She can now see the way in which ‘boys’ perceived her and her friends when they were young:

We were blind and dumb, we girls, and forgiving to the end. Clearing up the mess after parties, stacking the bottles, wrapping up the glass. For what? For the privilege of appearing of an afternoon at a friend’s place with a man’s arm around our shoulders. Of being told we were okay. Of being taken for granted like milk and fresh eggs, or the waves that perpetually stroked the beach at St Clair. (143)

This realisation awakens in her a sense of female solidarity and drives her to reconnect with an old girlfriend who she fell out with over one of these boys: “We don’t have to go along with it, I thought. We don’t have to live in their world. Let them get their own shit together. Let them clear up their own bloody path” (144). She is now ready to



command the respect and individuality she deserves. Similarly, the woman of Judy McNeil's "No. . . Not Marilyn Monroe !" has also moved on, from her obsession with photographing broken things. This obsession appears to stem from past experiences: "After her marriage had broken up she'd systematically smashed the dinner-set and the best china. She'd called it therapy. It helped her deal with the divorce procedures" (71). Now she has reached the realisation that things need to change. She can see that there are more positive images to capture and more positive products of her married life, such as her children: "She loved every inch of their bodies . . . their value was obvious. They were so smooth, so round, so whole. She knew she'd never have to fix them. Not one tiny part. One thing she'd done well was form these human creatures" (71). In recognising their value, she also recognises her own. She is more than a remnant of a broken marriage and it is time to rediscover her whole being: "She knew she'd let it go too far for far too long. Soon she would have to begin some mending" (71).

Each of these stories suggests that every aspect of the self must be accepted and celebrated to find fulfilment. Disappointingly, such positive portrayals do not predominate. The majority of stories in this second volume fail to provide the variety of expressions of womanhood promised. They are primarily stories of struggle with the echo of 'no way out' reverberating through their pages. Hopelessness prevails and in many ways this was more reflective of the concerns of the time as women grew disillusioned by feminism's apparent failings. As Camille Guy concludes, "for all my jaded feminist impatience with recurrent themes, these stories do take in the contradictions and ambiguities and messiness of life" ("Finding a Voice" 41). Whether hopeful (few) or bleak (many), they give voice to their writers' perceptions of life for women. Sadly, as Watson identifies, this perception has not altered greatly over the decade:

Pain and disillusionment fill the narratives, bringing suicide, murder, rape, illegitimate babies and fatal accidents as the inevitable consequence of this breaking of the spirit . . . Men in these stories want their wives, daughters and broads to stay put, as the objects of sexual and social gratification. Female intelligence is to be suppressed in the ultimate interests of male power. (60)

While 'new' possibilities may have been emerging for women, both in fiction and in society, many women still sought to express the struggle of being female in a male-dominated world. In fact, the heyday of the Women's Movement having passed, many women of the late 1980s felt even more alone in their struggle. As Paulina Palmer suggests, the breaking down of a previously strong female collective prompted its own disillusionment among women, which was then voiced through the stories they told:

One gains the impression . . . that the author, rather than writing out of anger at patriarchal oppression and injustice with the hope of promoting political change as tended to be the case in the 1970s is, on the contrary, motivated by feelings of frustration and irritation at the ineffectualness and fragmentation of the Women's Movement itself. (163)

Many women who did not perceive themselves as having directly gained anything from the feminism of the 1970s expressed their dissatisfaction through fiction, creating a disproportionate sense of despair in the writing of New Zealand women.

### ***New Women's Fiction 3: breaking away from tradition***

Mary Paul and Marion Rae, editors of the third volume of *New Women's Fiction*, were keen to address this sense of repeated desolation in New Zealand women's short stories, but admit to being limited by the nature of the stories submitted for inclusion:

[the series] tends to attract stories about problems and issues, resulting in a sameness of approach and subject matter - particularly in documentary treatment of personal problems.

. . . Without being unsympathetic to problems that women face, we have tried to avoid this sort of homogeneity, and to undercut what would seem to be certain expectations about collections such as this. (introduction 7)

Their aim was to produce a collection with a 'difference'. However, in some ways this 'difference' manifests itself in less than convincing forms. A bias towards 'child centred' narratives, for instance, creates an alternative mode of expression but it appears similarly limiting to those adopted in earlier volumes. Many of these stories deal with the struggles faced in childhood and adolescence in attempting to find a place and a sense of belonging in an adult world. In Alexandria Chalmers' "Best Mates" a teenage friendship is tested as two girls explore their attraction to boys. Debbie is forced to reassess her country friend when she reveals herself as more worldly and experienced than Debbie had imagined: "she senses a dark spot on her sweetgirl soul" (50). When they sneak out to meet some boys Debbie feels betrayed further as Flora goes off with the 'good one' while she is abandoned to the 'leftovers'. It is not the exciting experience it was meant to be: "She reckons that if this is how a girl has to grow up, then it's starting with a godawful day and it's one big pain. She never felt unhappier in her entire life"(52). However, following her mother's advice about 'boys' leaves Debbie with a stronger sense of self. She does not bend to peer pressure.

The young female characters of other stories are forced to face the struggles of being women in an adult world before their time. In Jenny Vulgar's "First Birth," a sixteen-year-old rural girl faces the physical and emotional struggles of childbirth without the support of her parents. Her labour is no more than an "inconvenience" on sale day on the farm; she has no choice but to wait out the pain until her father is free to take her to hospital. Throughout, she likens the situation to that of the dairy cows: "I had as little choice as them as my breasts swelled and chaffed" (73). And just like the unwanted bobby calves the cows produce, sent away to the sales, her baby will be taken from her: "I could see them lined up in front of the maternity hospital taking them from the windows, all the little boys in blue and the nurses laughing and handing them out"

(75). She becomes another victim of a society which will not accept motherhood outside of marriage.

Suzi Pointon's "Grief" also contains the image of 'woman as victim,' conveying the tragic results of an unhappy marriage through the eyes of a child. Fleur's mother has committed suicide and she is left with memories of watching her decline:

She often lay in the dark and willed her thoughts down the hall to the spare room where her mother had taken to sleeping . . . willing her to be happy, willing her back to sleep, and at the same time feeling a childish helplessness that she could not fill in the spaces and make everything right for her . . .  
(116)

Her Aunt Beryl claims that it was her mother's own fault: "she was never prepared to take her place in the real world . . . She had her head in the clouds half the time" (119). Yet this was precisely what Fleur loved the most about her mother: the expression of her real self. Tragically there was no room for this self within the institutions of marriage and motherhood. Even the memory of her mother's 'difference' poses a threat; her aunt's solution is to remove "all the last traces of her mother's presence in the house, erasing her and leaving nothing of the warmth and the sadness that Fleur was clinging to" (118-119).

Benita Kepe's "The Dew" is an exception to these negative portrayals. In this story the young Maori protagonist finds strength in the face of grief through communication with her Nanny Ma in heaven, suggesting the possibility of growth through positive role models. On the whole, however, these child-centred narratives do not present positive experiences of being woman, an issue which Jane Stafford explores at length in her review of the collection. Stafford finds the disproportionate number of stories with children at the centre a disappointing feature of the volume and finds the editors' justification that 'we all go through childhood' naïve. She suggests that there is far more to these stories, particularly in terms of the attitudes towards women they

reveal. In her view the narrative stance taken in these child-centred stories carries with it an “inbuilt set of assumptions and values” which are “dangerously antipathetic to women”:

The child as subject is powerless, victimised, self-pitying and passive - inevitably, by virtue of biology . . . The implication is that the child has a voice only when it is unable to assert that voice. When the child becomes a woman, she becomes the silenced, despised object, her limited, family based power attacked and undermined by the orientation of these stories. (“Some Surprises” 45)

The powerlessness of the child narrator to control the situations they recount possibly reflects how these writers view women’s place in society, collectively creating an alternative version of ‘woman as victim’. As Stafford suggests, the way in which women write can reveal as much as what they write (“Some Surprises” 45). The way in which women write is, in fact, the feature of this volume which most sets it apart from its predecessors.

In their introduction, Paul and Rae claim to have searched for the work of writers who had “found new ways of saying things” seeking elements of “humour, surprise, freshness of expression, and playfulness at the level of language” (7). However, there is little evidence within the works themselves to support such claims. Anne Kennedy’s “Organi,” an excerpt from a larger work, and Linda Birch’s “Swallow This” are indeed outstanding examples, showing “textual and linguistic awareness” and a level of “intellectual complexity” (Stafford, “Some Surprises” 45) but beyond this ‘cleverness’ such pieces can be viewed as lacking. They encourage reader response on a very intellectual level, providing little scope for personal involvement with the text. As Heather McPherson suggests in her *Broadsheet* review of the collection, these stories seem to mark the emergence of “an impersonal literary strain’ which may interest, or puzzle but does not ‘involve’ on an emotional level (34).

Kennedy and Birch's stories also stand out because they are exceptions. As Stafford concedes, "realism in one form or another, with its insistence that words simply convey the story and the story simply reflects reality, is still a powerful presence" (45). The majority of the stories collected are in the realistic mode, but while accepting and adopting this way of writing the stories are not as limited by it as Stafford's claim may suggest. Revealed in a number of these stories is a more subtle subversion of the expectations of 'slice-of-life or 'documentary' narration. Rather than producing pieces which challenge understanding, these writers adopt a mode of 'magic realism' in which the bizarre and unexpected are encountered within familiar and recognisable contexts. Such stories, suggests Stafford, present a "matter-of-fact collision of the fantastic and the everyday" ("Some Surprises" 45). They may not capture all those elements which Paul and Rae suggest as common features of the stories collected, but they are definitely indicative of a 'newness' in women's short story writing. As McPherson suggests, these works represent change and a breaking with tradition:

It's happening - the new writers are ignoring muted knitting patterns and opting for colourful self-designed wings. Maybe women editors, selecting adventurously, nurture a more adventurous writing - or maybe feminist boundary-kicking has untrapped latent imaginative energy . . . (34)

Subversion by way of 'magic realism' avoids the didacticism of feminist politics disguised as fiction. Rather than 'ideas' controlling and taking over the stories, magic realism introduces an element of fictional fantasy which involves the reader in a sense of wonderment. For example, the magical element of Sue Reidy's "The Visitation" softens the message entrusted to the young girls of the story by "a beautiful young woman wearing a long white dress and veil . . . levitating above the Flynn's lemon tree":

' . . . I've come to give you a message for the Pope . . . the message is about

contraception and it's very important that the Pope receives it. He might change his mind . . . The message must come from you . . . You will be the mothers of the future . . .' (31-32)

Well schooled in patriarchal lore the girls pass the note on to their father, who, despite his wife's protestations - "she particularly liked the bit in the letter that mentioned 'avoiding children for *plausible* reasons'" - rewrites the letter: "He wrote about upright men, conjugal acts, moral laws, the mission of generating Life, God as Author of that human life, and finished off with the plea 'to face up to the Efforts needed'" (38). His silencing of the female voice and patriarchal preaching are familiar features yet the context in which they are presented here lightens their presentation, avoiding over-politicisation.

Similarly, in Beryl Fletcher's "Janet and Gyppo" there is a familiarity about the process of the female protagonist regaining a sense of self after losing her husband, but the surprising events which lead to that self-discovery make for good story-telling. Janet returns home one night to find a strange woman occupying her house, her life and her identity, claiming, in fact, to be her. Rather than destroying this illusion, however, Janet comes to embrace it, as through this stranger she is presented an alternative way of being and slowly comes to the realisation of all that marriage has denied her:

. . . this is the first time she had ever told anyone about Richard's selfishness, his tyranny, his withholding of love. She listens to herself speak, she is amazed at the words that come out of her mouth.  
So this is what it was all about. All I had was the pain. I've never had the words before. (89)

She feels increasingly more alive and casts off "all those years, dry as dust, loveless and alone, trying to turn [herself] into what he wanted [her] to be" (91) until finally she leaves, happy to grant this stranger her old identity and embrace a new name and a new definition of self: "She sheds Janet, she buries it deep, she silences the cold sound that Richard gave to it when he was angry with her. She kills the look of it, printed

underneath his name on their cheque book” (95). The mystery of the stranger remains but the unsolved and the unbelievable are what make such stories appealing. The realistic and the questionable intertwine.

The most intriguing example of this form of realism is Annamarie Jagose’s story “Signs of Life”. In the face of unemployment and her own inadequacies, Alison is overcome by despair, self-pity and helplessness. These feelings reach a climax when, drowning her sorrows at the local pub she is harassed by a group of young drinkers. She ignores them to a point but when one yells at her out in the car park ““Ya f&ken dog”” her response defies all expectations:

Alison felt her teeth lengthen and her spine shorten. She lunged onto the bonnet of the car and was comforted to feel thin metal give way under the weight of her limbs. . . snapping the windscreen wiper off between her teeth, Alison smashed it through the glass with a jerk of her head . . . walking home she felt triumphantly light headed and strangely off balance on two legs. (104)

From this point on, Alison takes on the identity of a dog, leaving a note to her unsuspecting flatmates: “ ‘Life’s a bitch,’ it said in Alison’s sprawly hand, ‘and now, so am I’” (104). Oddly, they do not question her new way of being. In fact, she seems to be treated with more respect as a dog, becoming an important part of their daily routine:

. . . a sort of order asserted itself. Maneck walked Alison in the park before work in the mornings, Prue drove her to the beach for a run in the evenings . . . Maneck was seen to save Alison choice food scraps, to scratch her belly while watching television . . . (105)

Alison’s metamorphosis is presented in such a matter-of-fact way the boundaries of reality and fantasy are truly blurred, suggesting that life may in fact be better as a dog.

These slightly bizarre stories stand out in this third volume of *New Women’s Fiction*, not only for their oddity but also for their enhancement of realism to *involve* the reader rather than simply speaking *at* them. Women continue to be presented as victims but these writers evade the stereotypes which have come to be connected with women’s



work. Their women respond to their victimisation in a variety of ways, acting out rather than simply passively submitting silent protests and such changes in modes of expression highlight the 'newness' of these works.

### **Keri Hulme and the gender debate in postmodernism: where are all the women?**

From a theoretical viewpoint there was much debate over what precisely constituted 'newness' in a literary work in the late 1980s. Contestation was a key word and breaking boundaries and breaking away from literary traditions commanded attention, the more radical the breaks the better. Postmodernism was in its prime, the newest of the new, and was taken as a yardstick by which to measure any literary development. A number of literary journals such as *Parallax*, *AND*, *Antic*, and *Splash* appeared in the early to mid 1980s with a commitment to publishing postmodern work and thus validating the mode, but most successful in bringing this 'new' form of writing to public attention was Michael Morrissey. In *The New Fiction* (1985), Morrissey forcefully touted postmodernism arguing in his introductory essay that the time had come for the 'old' humanist-realist tradition to be replaced by 'new' postmodernism. Realism, he suggested, had done the New Zealand short story a disservice:

The New Zealand short story has had a largely non-innovative, almost drab, history. Story after story has had the same beige moral tone . . . the same dreary humanism... the same truncated, banal dialogue occupying itself with similar issues, confrontations and characters . . . our writers have kept their work decent and dull.. . asexual and aexperimental. (16)

In fact, Morrissey viewed the whole New Zealand literary world as immature and unsophisticated, the writers he had chosen to represent standing out as exceptions. Their work exists outside the boundaries of the realist tradition: "There is a subversive difficulty, an abhorrent elitism, a dangerous insouciance, a risque refusal to conform to the national standards of tepid tone and simplicity of form. A new aesthetic fearlessness

has manifested itself" (19). This writing was viewed by Morrissey as superior to any that had come before and he was convinced that it was the direction of the future:

. . . with the writers of The New Fiction . . . replenishing has now occurred here, a replenishing that occupies the present and will continue to shape the direction of New Zealand letters in a manner most appropriate to our time. (72)

Morrissey was not alone in seeking out risqué writing. Doing something 'different' seems to have been in general the desired position from which to present short fiction in the late 1980s. Editors even felt the need to justify any selection of 'orthodox' works, particularly in the face of those "academic and literary theoreticians" whom Graeme Lay described as "predisposed to the notion that the fantastic is more meaningful than the real" (introduction *Metro Fiction* 2). The expectation was to embrace postmodernism and leave 'old' forms behind. However, it was an expectation which failed to consider writers themselves.

In their introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Short Stories*, Susan Davis and Russell Haley also claim that their collection presents "edge" work of writers keen to take risks but, as Jane Stafford suggests in reviewing the collection in *Landfall*, the stories themselves show this to be simply "a pious editorial hope": "Risk taking . . . seems largely confined to the editors, whose conception of the direction in which the short story is moving seems increasingly at odds with that of their writers" (258). The new, exciting 'edgy' writing that these editors promise cannot be found. While Morrissey's selection testifies to a new mode of writing, his claims that this new mode was 'superior' and would replace 'old' humanist-realist forms remain unsubstantiated. Few writers actually made the postmodern style work for them and few mainstream readers embraced the fiction of those who did. Rather, postmodernism seems to have been simply a passing phase in New Zealand literature, attracting more theoretical attention than artistic.

*The New Fiction* is, of course, most notable here for its exclusion of women writers but in this regard Morrissey's selection, suggesting a male domination of the mode was in fact more representative of general trends. In the late 1980s, New Zealand women writers were relevant to the postmodern debate mainly for reasons of their absence, justifying Morrissey's male bias. There were exceptions, the most obvious of which is Anne Kennedy's *100 Traditional Smiles* (1988). More a novella than of the short story genre although really defying such labelling all together, *100 Traditional Smiles* centres on a sense of displacement which is shared by the reader. The jumble of narratives that continually drift from time to time, place to place, character to character, contain no signposts to direct the reader, as Anna Neill suggests:

This calculated blurring . . . makes the novel almost impossible to read. Not only does the narrative hop incoherently from one moment to the next (it is very hard to distinguish who is who or where), but the extravagant play of puns so disturbs the text's own metaphorical territory that finally it can say very little. (517-518)

The confusion may be, as Neill acknowledges, "significant"(517) but exactly what that significance is may be lost on many readers.<sup>8</sup>

A similar sense of confusion surrounds many of Sue Reidy's stories in *Modettes*. Reidy takes the female characters of this collection on journeys which blur the boundaries between reality/fantasy/dream/imagination. Repeatedly, the reader is left wondering what is real and what is not, for even the most bizarre and other-worldly events are presented as matter-of-fact, everyday happenings. In the title story, for example, travelling showgirls Rose and Vicki seem to think nothing of encountering a strange dwarf named Wah living in their apartment block and before long he and Rose become intimately acquainted:

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia Were's 1989 collection, *Juliet Bravo Juliet* is similarly confusing in its eclectic mix of poetry and prose. As Michele Leggott claims, "the bite-size quantities are frustrating" (29) creating a sense of dissatisfaction in the reader. The collection presents random 'snippets' rather than stories.

The tall woman and the small man half fall, are half dragged by the groping entangled organism they have become, onto the floor.

Wah moans, a string of words in a pot pourri of languages. He is busy everywhere about her. An outrageous child committing profane adult acts. His tongue is an animal which leaves a fever in its path. (21)

The world of Rose's dreams is even more bizarre: "Kali, 'the Black One', is waiting for her. The bloodthirstiest goddess of all is sitting at a red formica table drinking a cup of tea and eating a meal" (23). But again Reidy explores this world with a sense of acceptance:

Rose does not question why a Hindu goddess should be eating a Chinese meal in the middle of the night in her apartment block.

. . . She is completely naked, but she doesn't feel embarrassed about it; Kali doesn't seem to have much on either . . .(23)

Dreams and real life coexist in a blurring of boundaries which is also found in "Alexandra and the Lion." Alexandra is taken on night-time journeys on board a lion's back, "transported swift as thought" (114), and she is not simply dreaming for she physically disappears from her bed. Again, confusion reigns throughout the story and at its close all that remains is uncertainty: " 'I've had such an odd dream . . . ' she murmurs" (129). These are not the only two stories within Reidy's collection which challenge the reader's perception of what can or cannot be. In fact, almost every story contains at least an element of the unreal or seemingly impossible. It is when these elements of improbability take over, when the postmodern overrides the realistic, as it does in "Swan Song", that fascination can easily turn to frustration. There is no opportunity for reader identification beyond a shared sense of complexity and this could be why women (writers and readers) were less attracted to the postmodern form.

Keri Hulme, on the other hand, displays the positive use of the postmodern form in women's short fiction. From the outset of her collection, *Te Kaihau: The Windeater*, Hulme establishes a postmodern framework for her texts. Her use of a 'Foreword' ("Tara Diptych" – the first wing) and an 'Afterword' ("Headnote to a Maui Tale") to

enclose the stories of the collection immediately turns an old tradition on its head. In these pieces poetry and prose intermingle. Many words carry multiple meanings (including those in Maori) and there is little indication of who, where, when or why with regard to narrative voice. While some of the stories contained within display similar features and are similarly perplexing, however, the majority do not become lost in the confusion of the postmodern form. All share a sense of narrative uncertainty but through combined use of realist, modernist and postmodernist modes, from “direct storytelling” to “fragmented stream-of-consciousness” (Olsson Rev. of *Te Kaihau* 220) Hulme creates works which remain engaging, the characters and their emotional responses recognisable.

As already identified in relation to her contributions to *Women’s Work*, Hulme’s best stories stand out for their introspective qualities. As Suzann Olsson suggests in her *Landfall* review of the collection, Hulme’s work “shows a consistent concern with psychological and social exploration . . . the external and the imaginative scenes are equally substantive experiences” (Rev. of *Te Kaihau* 219). In fact, the characters Hulme creates rightly lend themselves to psychological exploration. In almost every story the focus is upon a protagonist facing the aftermath of some terrible loss and coming to terms with that loss involves a process of journeying inward, seeking answers within the self. The woman of “When My Guitar Gently Sings”, for example, is facing the loss of her mother and trying to come to terms with words unsaid and rifts unmended. It is through her guitar, a gift from her mother, that she finds a connection between them:

It rings. Te ao tawhito, te ao hou. Different worlds . . . a slow minor chord and suddenly the strings sing so softly, my ingers play so easy – suddenly the stale smoke and the damp chair and the crowded dark are another world away. (115)

Her thoughts come and go as she searches her memory for her mother’s laughter, to embrace and take strength from, and the story unfolds as fragments of these thoughts.

There may be no clear plot but Hulme suggests that an inner journey such as this does not follow any mapped out course. The feelings evoked are what matter.

More disturbing than the loss of another through death is the physical loss of part of the self which Hulme exhibits a rather macabre fascination with in a number of stories. Maimed or crippled as the result of terrible accidents, the characters of these stories will never be the same but the social stigma of their disabilities is largely ignored. Hulme's focus is on *self*-acceptance; their emotional responses and subsequent soul-searching come to the fore. The women of "A Nightsong for the Shining Cuckoo" has broken her back but she refuses to become one of the "blanket-lapped waists, wheeling through the streets" (119). Rather she decides to leave her familiar home at the beach and move to the city. Her resolve is unbreakable yet the pain of this loss on top of that she has already suffered eats away at her inside:

I didn't say, 'Beneath the cage of ribs there's a bare scarred heart. My old life is smashed. I want a new way so different I won't have to think about what I was. In the city, I won't hear the sea, the bush-wind or the birds.'  
(120)

The woman of "Hooks and Feelers" cannot outwardly express her emotions either. In fact, in this case her story is revealed only second-hand, through her partner as he struggles to reconnect with her. Their son's hand has been amputated after she accidentally slammed it in the car door and, guilt-ridden, she has retreated into herself. Throughout the story her partner tries to find his way back to her but she is a closed book. Both suffer alone, struggling to find peace on their separate pathways. Of course here, and throughout the collection, such journeying has no end. Hulme offers no resolution, no happy ending. Uncertainty prevails but one element of her work remains certain: the emotions she brings to life are real, raw and engaging. The postmodern framework she chooses to adopt merely enhances the sense of loss and confusion felt by her characters.

Hulme was, however, in the minority in her postmodern experimentation. In fact, The very elements of her texts seen here as strengths were used by Morrissey to justify the exclusion of women writers from his collection. Patronisingly he suggested their absence was necessitated by their inferiority. Citing Frame as a reference point, Morrissey suggests that writers who share her preoccupation with “inward-looking experience” are generally women and that they “share the author’s natural reticence about pushing themselves forward” (67):

It is . . . male writers who most willingly disengage themselves from social comment and self-analysis and give their work over to formal concerns and to wilful experimentation . . . For whatever reason the high formalists, the postmodernists are predominantly male. (67)

Women are more or less ‘excused’ from the postmodern mode of writing with the suggestion that on the whole they are not able to reach the heights of male experimentation. In her article “A New Breed of Women,” Fiona Kidman cites Mark Williams as another key player in this debate against women writers. She feels strongly that, at the time, the influence of such men ensured that those who failed to be experimental were written off:

‘Realism’ seeks to closely represent life, as it is lived, through literature. But women writing from the perspective of hidden lives, who want to tell ‘truth’ as they see it, usually write in a ‘realist’ mode. So, the argument goes roughly, women who write in a ‘realist’ mode are not as advanced as men who have passed through this ‘truth-telling’ phase. (142)

This viewpoint may reflect Kidman’s anger at her own experiences rather than providing an accurate account of how ‘women’s work’ was treated in the face of postmodernism. However, it does highlight the common perception of gender being irrelevant to the form by virtue of women’s absence. Julie Ewington presents a very different view on the relevance of gender in postmodern art in her *ANTIC* article, “Past the Post” Postmodernism and Postfeminism” (1986). While primarily focused on the visual arts, Ewington’s line of questioning is relevant to any art form. She recognizes

that debates about postmodernism have been “exclusively gender indifferent” with the understanding that both men and women have been swept up in the “changing modes of consciousness.” Her own viewpoint is different:

I'm convinced the period ahead will affect women and men differently . . . whatever it is that postmodernism is must be addressed by feminists, for women's place in history and historical change is now firmly on the theoretical agenda, and debates about such issues are no longer being run in theoretical indifference to gender roles. (7)

It cannot be denied that theories of postmodernism have tended to neglect or repress the feminist voice and Ewington suggests a number of possible reasons for this exclusion. It could be, as Craig Owen suggests in “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism” (1983), that the absence of “discussions of sexual difference” in the postmodern debate shows that “postmodernism may be yet another masculine intervention engineered to exclude women” (qtd. in Ewington 10). On the other hand, there may not have been any actual ‘intention’ to exclude women. Rather, Ewington suggests women's “otherness” in society may have more to do with it, or perhaps ‘women have absented themselves’ (10).

Whatever the reasons behind it, this exclusion is not justifiable. In fact, Ewington claims that postmodernism actually has special relevance for the woman artist in several ways. In one respect, she suggests, postmodernism could be viewed as positive for women. The bleakness associated with this mode reflects a time of “dark confusion and despair and the loss of power over circumstances . . . the final loss of mastery . . . the realization that there is no one central normative culture” (9). Ewington argues that this is precisely what feminists have hoped for: the realisation that traditional patriarchal definitions are not and *should* not be absolute, and that “existing canons of representation” need to be challenged. From their place of ‘otherness’ women



have been well positioned, according to Ewington, to expose the limitations of the status quo and this in itself can be considered a postmodern act.

Other critics were more of Morrissey's thinking, regarding the lack of women writers visible in the postmodern world of fiction as due to a lack in their writing ability. These critics viewed women as behind the times, stuck in some realist timewarp, too afraid to move forward and to take risks, and it was not only male academics who made such claims. Women who embraced postmodernism also charged their contemporaries with such 'failure'. Most striking is Anne Kennedy's response to the first volume of *New Women's Fiction*. Analysing the collection from a postmodernist position she finds little of value within its pages. Some of Kennedy's charges against these stories can be more readily accepted than others. For instance, it is true that, as she suggests, the majority of the works collected fail to present "self as subject": "the author stands back and watches herself – as she has been taught to do" ("Watching Herself" 55). These women describe their world from the outside rather than from within, and in some cases this is accompanied by a continuation of learnt passivity. However, Kennedy's notion that the volume comes off "looking anything but new" with the stories conveying "a lack of freshness" is less convincing. Some of the stories, she claims, may be "quite good" but "none of them is innovative" and her reasoning behind this claim is that the collection is grounded in "New Zealand women's realism": "There are no post-modern Millys here. It seems now there is a bridge to Frank Sargeson's house, New Zealand women living in the suburbs have taken up realism where the men left off" ("Watching Herself" 55). Kennedy does recognise that these writers may be adopting realism as a "common language" in order to share the 'truth' of their existence; she refers to any reader empathy these stories may arouse as "hideous." In Kennedy's view reader identification is of little value. She is more concerned with form, and perceives the form

adopted by *New Women's Fiction* writers as *old*: "They create environments in which battles of political correctness can be fought. Yet they are realistic stories in that they don't stray from writing conventions that have become the bread-and-butter of the way many women think" ("Watching Herself" 55). Kennedy wants writers to break free of these conventions. This, she seems to suggest, is the only way to be perceived as 'new,' and therefore, of value. In other words, 'Do as I have done.' Stop being P.C. and be P.M. – postmodern.

Kennedy's review sparked a debate in the literary world of women which is central to this thesis. In a letter to the editor of the *New Zealand Listener*, Susan Henderson responded to Kennedy's criticisms with a case in support of realism. It is quite obvious, Henderson states, that the New Women's Fiction stories are *not* postmodern but it is not so obvious why this fact necessitates "damning and misleading statements" to be made about them (6). New Zealand women writers, she suggests, continue to write realist stories because there is still so much 'real' material important to women to be covered:

When women use realism to tell 'the truth' about women's lives, it is because 'the truth' about women's lives is rarely told, certainly not by New Zealand women, for New Zealand women. If women are not yet writing fiction for fiction's sake perhaps it is because many 'true' stories have yet to be told. (6)

Further to this, many 'true' stories are yet to be read, for as this thesis argues, readers of women's fiction want more than an indication of how 'clever' the writer is. Women readers want to find something meaningful to them as an individual within a text. They seek character identification and women writers, with their shared experience of womanhood, better create texts which provide the opportunity for self-recognition, as Judith Kegan Gardiner suggests:

we can approach a text with the hypothesis that its female author is engaged in a process of testing and defining various aspects of identity chosen from

many imaginative possibilities. That is, the woman writer uses her text . . . as part of a continuing process involving her empathic identification with her character . . .

Presumably the woman reader goes through a somewhat analogous process in her empathic identifications, identifying particularly with female characters closely bonded to their authors . . . Both writer and reader can relate to the text as though it were a person with whom one might alternatively be merged empathically or from whom one might be separated and individuated. (187-188)

Consciously adopting the postmodern mode and constructing a text to fit within its framework possibly denies both writer and reader participation in this search for selfhood within the text.

Henderson's case is continued in the second volume of the *New Women's Fiction* series. In her introduction, editor Aorewa McLeod directly addresses Kennedy's concerns regarding the limitations of the earlier volume. McLeod acknowledges the fact that while the humanist-realist tradition prevails, writers do indeed face the possibility of being restricted by it: "we can be trapped and limited by the realist mode . . . we need to feel free to write in other ways" (9). However, while realism may be seen as 'old school,' it does have the advantage of appealing to the common reader: "most of us, as readers, want and need the realistic mode. We've grown up with realism, we think it, we want it in our fictions" (9). Critics, literary theoreticians and academics aside, the general reader of the late 1980s continued to embrace the realist mode. Where the challenge of a postmodern text could be an alienating experience, a realist text could provide identification, recognition and reinforcement of self. As McLeod stresses, "I'd like to feel that this collection shows women that there's no right way to write, that no one writes like you, and that the way you write is fine *if it talks to someone else*" (introduction 10 emphasis mine). There are other ways of presenting something 'new'. Because women of the late 1980s continued to write in a traditional mode did not mean

their stories were tired replays. They were continually rewriting their 'truths' and exploring the experience of being women in new ways, through fresh and varied eyes.

**A female 'difference of view': Suzann Olsson's *Woman-sight* and the importance of identification**

In her 1989 anthology *Woman-sight*, Suzann Olsson celebrates women's writing in precisely this way: as new, as varied, and as presenting the world through women's eyes. Published by Palmerston North's Nagare Press, the collection is smaller in scale than the *New Women's Fiction* series but Olsson's introduction is highly significant. Opening the collection with a piece entitled "Broken Frames: A Non-Introduction," Olsson establishes rather a postmodern framework for the collection. It breaks all expectations and conventions of traditional introductions and is highly self-reflective. "As a child," Olsson writes "I skipped introductions . . . As an editor, how do I approach these post-prefatory comments?" (3). No longer believing in "authoritative voices, objectivity, non-political acts", she decides upon the "metaphor of broken frames" and thus, offers a "*non*-introduction" (3, emphasis mine).

Olsson feels that there is no longer any need to justify basing an anthology upon gender, or to make explicit the need for 'women's collections' to exist. That argument, she claims, is well documented elsewhere. However, there is a need to explain her own position in bringing together this set of stories and in doing so Olsson asserts her desire to break with tradition, to "rework the established connotations of language" (4). Such reworking is reflected in the title of the collection, a reconstruction of the traditional notion that the attributes of sight, insight and intellect are male prerogatives: "Breaking away from such assumptions, my term 'woman-sight' refers to what Mary Jacobus calls 'the difference of view' that constitutes a woman's sight, insight and intellect, and it

encompasses both physical and inner vision” (4). It may well be that women continue to write predominantly within the “dominant patriarchal cultural mode” (4) but they write *as* women and in ways which expose and often overturn the very assumptions behind such patriarchal ways of thinking. As Olsson suggests, realism allows women writers their own form of subversion:

On the surface, many of the stories appear neither experimental in style nor radical in conception; unless, that is, you regard postmodernism as a desired norm and realism as radical because it is supposedly an outmoded convention. However, I suggest that with N.Z. the choice of many women both to write and read realist fiction is part of a still unfulfilled need to express ‘the difference of view’ by rewriting and revising both the past and present in predominantly realist modes. (non-introduction 5)

These women writers are breaking frames in their own ways, outside postmodernism. Their works, Olsson argues, *are* distinctive; they stand out in terms of “the things women notice, their ‘women’s eyes’ and their thematic concerns” (5). By addressing new issues, or seeing old issues through new eyes, women writers are just as surely breaking new ground as if they were writing in new modes such as postmodernism.

There are various ways in which the distinctiveness of this female ‘difference of view’ manifests itself in the stories collected, as Olsson suggests in her introduction. In some cases universal themes are presented through distinctly female perspectives. Cultural difference, for example, is captured both with humour in Wilhelmina Drummond’s “Streakers” in which a Filipino woman cannot comprehend the intolerance of nudity in New Zealand culture, and in a more serious tone in Lisa Cherrington’s “A Funeral and a Tangi.” Here the two culturally distinct grieving rituals are presented side-by-side as the narrator farewells two grandparents, one Maori, one Pakeha. She finds the more restrained pakeha way of doing things unfeeling and lonely and yearns to grieve fully for both grandparents: “I want to hug people and cry with them. I want to share their tears” (38). Whether light or serious, however, both stories

show a woman's view of the world. The perspective is female and it is the 'female detail' that these writers' eyes perceive, from the wink shared between the old lady stalker and the sergeant's Filipino wife in "Streakers" to the different ways the Maori and Pakeha women dress, act and speak their grief in "A Funeral and a Tangi."

Other stories, Olsson suggests, explore more specifically female themes such as 'the search for female freedom.' In Marianne Tremaine's "Escape," for example, the female protagonist's desire for freedom is highlighted when she is forced to attend a party with her husband. Hating such events, "joyless occasions where people tried to impress each other"(70), she is delighted to find company with a like-minded man:

'Most of the people here aren't at all real, or if they are they're trying to hide it. They're wearing the mask they want the world to see. But your face shows feelings and emotions. You're different. You're real.' (73)

Although her escape is but temporary it does provide some hope and back at home she has this memory to hold on to: "She slept and dreamt of the sea and the sand and the stars and escape from her own self imposed prison" (76). The female protagonist of Rosemary Wildblood's "On the Road" takes a more permanent step toward freedom. Hitchhiking with her partner of two years, she is overcome with a familiar unhappiness about their relationship but this time she breaks her usual pattern of silent acceptance:

. . . for a moment she reacted as she always did. His need, as always, cancelled out her own. She melted with affection and reassurance. But then the same flash of clarity exploded in her brain. 'I've become a helpless addict,' she thought, 'a victim.' She sat very straight and looked unseeingly at the mountain. (99)

Recognition of her self-imposed imprisonment is enough to drive her escape and she catches a ride without him. Both women long to be recognised for who they are as individuals rather than for the expected female role they play. Their stories express a specifically female search for fulfilment.

Looking back as a way of looking forward is also a notable theme in *Woman-sight*, with stories retelling the past through women's eyes and with women's wisdom. The narrator of Theola Wyllie's "The Insurance Policy," for example, is able to look back on the Depression years of her childhood, spent on the family farm with a better understanding of the gender roles played which saw the 'menfolk' making the decisions. Similarly, in Fiona Kidman's "Skulking Around," the narrator's memories of Polly Lomas who arrived in the village of her childhood "flaunt[ing] her single state" (113) at a time when it was considered a "scandal to be divorced" (111) now reveal the limitations of way in which she was judged. Polly's only indiscretion, she can now see, was being true to herself: "Polly was having a ball. Wherever Polly was, there were men . . . If there were other women there they were usually older ones who offered little competition to the singular, bony and absolutely magnetic Polly" (116). She was a woman in charge of, and not ashamed of, her own sexuality and the narrator can now admire her having the courage to be 'different'.

Other writers present a matriarchal line in what Olsson identifies as "thinking back through the mother" (6), and create a sense of new generations embracing new ways of expressing the female self. In Shelagh Cox's "Private Widow," for example, a young girl bears witness to her mother's love affair on board a ship as they journey to join father and husband. The child-narrator does not fully understand the tryst at sea but she does see her mother as a very different woman to the person she is accustomed to on land. The poetry her mother shares with this newfound lover brings her to life:

Now she takes into her trunk great draughts of poetry. Her legs push power into her body, then into her arms and head . . . the words of sonnets she has taken and made hers. He speaks then too . . . They come together, each one complete, each one completed as they meet . . . (53-54)

On leaving the boat, the narrator's mother must leave this passion behind her but the child carries it forward. Back on land, as they return to life as wife and daughter, she

holds the voice of her mother's true self within her: "She hears her mother's voice come from the straight trunk of her body, ride the sea wind, fall on the world around her" (54). She has witnessed an alternative way of being and the unspoken hope is that she will seek such passion for herself.

Noeline Arnott also explores changes across generations of being woman in "Different Ways of Dying". As the narrator faces the death of her mother, she thinks back over the course of her own life and feels a sense of disappointment. In many ways, her memories reveal, the maternal line has circled back on itself. Her own father abandoned his wife and children and now she too is a casualty of divorce. Her older sister died of diphtheria as a child and she also lost her first born. Now all she can hope is that her second daughter, Jane, will have a more fulfilling life, yet at the same time she resents Jane's independence. She finds herself judging her daughter for having chosen the 'wrong' path, her judgments reflecting an inability to escape patriarchal ideals:

Jane had aborted two foetuses by the time she was twenty. Jane lived with a man (vasectomised before he met her) who was fifteen years older than she was. Marcie resented the two babies Jane had done away with so recklessly, although why she would want her daughter to bear children when children were patently the root cause of a woman's pain she couldn't imagine. (81)

Jane is breaking the pattern, choosing the role her body will fulfil, but this independence comes at a cost. The maternal line is broken and the narrator mourns this as much as she does the death of her own mother. More positively, of course, breaking the line really represents Jane's refusal to be victim. She has embraced a new way of being woman, and is moving forward within this identity, in control of her sexual and reproductive being. The young girl of Judith White's "Just a Boarder", on the other hand, has not been able to escape the role of victim. When the old man who has been boarding with



them passes away she reveals that “he did things” (16). For her mother, life seems to stop:

I hold Fritha against me. Her face is wet, but she is still and quiet. I watch the storm and the gulls and Brendan raging on the beach. I’m glad they’re doing it for me, I have no energy for fury. We are statues, Fritha and I, we have turned to rock standing against the storm, we are stopped here, frozen forever, numb to everything. (16)

However, rather than leaving the reader with this image of helplessness, White turns the agony of the moment around. Fritha has been freed from her secret and is free to move on, to grow: “Then she moves. We are not frozen forever. It was a moment of metamorphosis. Now she is struggling, crumpled and bedraggled, from a chrysalis . . . (16). As Olsson suggests in her non-introduction’, the story turns to “the metamorphosis that goes beyond victimisation” (7). It ends with a sense of hope.

Through these stories the limitations of ‘old’ ways of thinking are continually recognised, reworked and revised and throughout the voice which offers this ‘new’ perspective on the world is resoundingly female. The voice of the female self which has been ignored and misunderstood, for so long asserts itself ever more strongly opening the world’s eyes to life beyond traditional frames of perception. Like Ella in Olsson’s own story “Cloud Light,” now that women have found a voice they must celebrate in sharing it with others who share their woman-sight:

Ella looked up to the sky. There was a great press of white feathery animals in the sunshine blueness today but she could easily make out her pony among them. Against the sky curtain he was tinged with pink and gold. Ella thought he was more beautiful than ever before as he looked down at her and whinnied a greeting. And now she spoke too, for she was safe to share the magic with someone at last. “Cloud Light,” she said. (110)

These women writers avoid the risk identified by Ewington: the threat of a “feminist challenge” becoming lost in a postmodernist form (12). Rather, they suggest the emergence of a uniquely female form of ‘newness’ which does not simply involve following a limiting prescription of what a postmodern work should be. They are

writing outside the boundaries of a tradition which has historically worked to exclude them and they continue to rewrite and rework what it means to be a woman writer and throughout they maintain an affinity with the reader. The realism they refuse to discard allows for identification as the experiences of writers, their characters and their readers collide.

In “A New Breed of Women”, Fiona Kidman draws further support for the use of the ‘realist’ mode from the work of Adrienne Rich. While Kidman’s notion that at the height of the postmodern form in New Zealand, certain male writers ‘mentored’ women whose work seemed experimental, seeking to “create schisms between them and other women writers” (142), may be questionable, the underlying theory she draws from Rich is significant. A male mentor, claims Rich, may be able to introduce the women writer to “the common world of men”, thus opening doors to publication and acknowledgement, but he “has no key to the power she might share with other women” (qtd. in Kidman 142):

Ultimately, Rich is saying, the power of women’s writing lies within women themselves and what they know; not the forms or the fashions of the day, intrinsically interesting and useful as these may be. (Kidman 143)

The power of women writers, to some degree at least, lies within the common bond of womanhood they share with their readers. As Anne French suggests, women want to read about being women, to find something of themselves within the texts they read in a process of identification which may have played a large part in the popularity of Kidman’s work:

Thousands of women identify with her women characters and regard her as in some way speaking for them . . . part of Kidman’s appeal for her audience comes from her image as ‘just one of us’ . . . women pack into her public readings; they ask her about getting started, and applaud her answers with the warmth that comes of identification . . . unlike your average clever academic writer, she is brought in large quantities, and she is read. (370)

Her women are familiar, from the crises they encounter to their everyday existence. As she herself acknowledges, her writing serves as a means for people to read about their own lives: “One reviewer said I recognised that women had secret longings and I was exposing their secrets”:

It’s interesting how people do identify with characters. I get all sorts of letters from people who identify very strongly with what they perceive as being our common experience. I sometimes get some strange calls and letters from people who think I’ve taken bits of their lives and put them in my books and want to know how I know. . . (qtd. in Smith 15)

Clearly women readers enjoy this sense of identification. They want to read about ‘being women’, want to hear a woman’s voice.

In her article “An Innocent’s Look at New Zealand Women Writers,” Aorewa McLeod presents this case from a reader’s point of view. McLeod’s interest lies in “what New Zealand women writers are saying to her” (3). In support of this she quotes from Patrick Evans writing in *An Inward Sun: The Novels of Janet Frame* (1971): “we tend still to demand a reflection of ourselves in the fiction our writers produce; we have a narcissistic thirst for identity which has sociological rather than purely artistic implications.” But while Evans objects to this outlook, McLeod embraces it. Before *the bone people* she claims, only two other novels presented to her a sense of identity “that felt like being a New Zealander to me, a New Zealand woman” (“Innocent’s Look” 4), Joy Cowley’s *Man of Straw* and Patricia Grace’s *Mutuwhenua*. Now she seeks out writing which “speaks to [her] as directly relevant to the condition of being a woman and a New Zealander” (“Innocent’s Look” 6), and to McLeod, this means writing which does something different, like *the bone people*. She seeks out works which move beyond bleak images of the fortyish woman bound up in domesticity, limited and constrained. Hulme’s novel for instance explores alternatives, ways of being other than wife and mother. It stands as a new form of writing:

the bone people will appear as a watershed, a beginning point in New Zealand writing. It represents a freedom and opening up of possibilities, both in form and subject. It rejects the limited and the limiting images of women that New Zealand writers, women as well as men, have been trapped with. . . it suggests alternatives to the way we have lived. New Zealand writing will never be the same. ("Innocent's Look" 4)

While McLeod acknowledges that "the striking sameness in so many New Zealand woman novelists' portrayal of the lives of adult women suggest how we ourselves are still trapped by the conditions and limits of our lives" she also stresses that it is time to move on: "we need new ways of living and writing" ("Innocent's Look" 11).

Women writers cannot, however, simply shed their life experience. The stereotypical image of the passive female victim was reflective of a way of being true to its time and for some women writers of the late 1980s it was still of central concern. Frances Cherry's work for instance, has been identified as flat and one-dimensional and her portrayal of women limited yet this clearly relates to the phase of feminism from which she wrote. Phillipa Moylan captures this in her *Broadsheet* review of Cherry's collection. Writing as a 24-year-old single university student, Moylan acknowledges the huge difference between Cherry's life experience (married young, had several children, divorced) and her own, and recognises that perhaps this accounts for her initial disappointment with Cherry's work, the "continual domestic situations and the very simple language" (47). A second reading with this difference in mind exposed Moylan to another perspective:

I realised with horror that Frances Cherry has depicted the frightening, realistic situation of frustrated housewives and their lost ideals . . . Her writing is a reflection of what must have happened to many women of her age who entered marriage with idealistic assumptions, believing that marriage was the beginning of a 'wonderful we together', that child-rearing comes easily and that everything will work out in the end. (47)

Moylan acknowledges "a difference between the idealistic attitudes passed on to women in the 1950s as they approached marriage, and the ideas about domestic life that I share

with my friends” (47). Cherry wrote from her own experience, revealing that ‘being a housewife’ was not sad in itself, but because of all that was lost in being defined *only* as a housewife:

. . . the frightening thing in Cherry’s stories is that she is showing the deadpan, preoccupied housewife as the result of what was a potentially interesting, stimulating person . . . the downtrodden characters of her domestic stories are potentially active and vital women . . . (47)

Women writers like Frances Cherry and Paddy Richardson, were writing of *their* experience of what it meant to be women. The changes that are evident in the late 1980s do not suggest that their view is old or inappropriate, but that new writers, and new alternatives for women were bringing new possibilities for female selfhood to the page. It is not a shift away from ‘women’s work’ but toward more varied ways of presenting what it means to be woman. The singular definition of feminism which led to those didactic protest stories of the early 1980s had expanded by the later part of the decade into a notion of “shifting feminisms” highlighting that there are many ways of writing with a feminist voice, and of writing as a woman. To Marilyn Duckworth, for example, feminism is not about being anti-male; rather she sees it as meaning many things. It cannot be worn as a label in a singular sense as that suggests creation of yet another stereotype of women: “Feminism isn’t a fixed dogma. It’s constantly changing and so tomorrow it may mean something rather different. I don’t like labels - labels impose limits and I don’t want to be limited by the label of feminism” (qtd. in Kedgley 128). Duckworth realises that there is no one ‘right’ way to write about being woman or to write as a woman writer; she writes about women as *individuals* rather than as a feminist grouping who represent anti-male ideals:

I want to write about women the way I think they are, which isn’t a pushy stance. I don’t want to agonise and analyse and explain and explain and tell men how they’ve got it wrong all the time. That to me is a very boring thing to do. I’m certainly interested in the feminist dialogue that’s going on - I’m

listening in and learning all the time - but when it comes to fiction I'm more interested in individuals. (qtd. in Sharp 58)

In her late 1980s stories Duckworth writes from an active perspective, women being, doing and acting rather than being (un)done and acted upon. She rejects the notion of a singular place "where women are at" which demands philosophising in fiction.

I certainly don't want myself to be one of those women who are writing propaganda about gender. When people become so excited by their message . . . you get that kind of unreal dialogue where you can feel the author at your back beating at you with these ideas. (qtd. in Kedgley 128)

She also has strong views against the use of the label 'woman writer' but redefinition rather than rejection is again viewed as the solution: "I see myself as a writer who happens to be a woman and who wants people to know what it's like to be a woman, and to see some of the things that women have to cope with" (qtd. in Kedgely 125-126).

Similarly, Stephanie Johnson expresses a changing view of what it means to be a woman writer. While the majority of Johnson's stories portray women in rather extreme situations of loss of self control it is the self that remains central. Her interest lies not in what men have done to these women but in the women themselves: their feelings, responses and attempts at escape. And while "The Invisible Hand" could be the subject of lengthy political debate this is not Johnson's ultimate goal. She does not wish to show how the world is wrong for women or has wronged them; she simply wishes to show the various ways women live in this world:

"I don't like that kind of writing now called 'women's writing' - confessional, vaguely whingey, victim stuff. . . . We've got to get away from that. This whole Renaissance of women's writing has done us a disservice. I suppose it comes down to what inspires you to write. If you feel that the world had dealt you a bum hand because you're a woman then you'll write that. If you are proud of being a woman" she says making it clear that that is her position, "and passionately interested in other women's' lives, you'll write that." (49)

The problem is how to do this within a literary world keen to claim a time of gender irrelevance, when even the writers themselves resist being identified by gender. Graeme

Lay, for example, debated the issue of writers' identity in response to the third volume of *New Women's Fiction*, claiming to have found the stories concerned with 'personal problems' as the most "truly accomplished" of the collection. Whether that person be woman or man, he argued, is irrelevant: "The gender of writer and reader has become immaterial. The humanity is all. And that, surely, is what literature is about" (Rev. of *New Women's Fiction* 3 9). Similarly, in response to Olsson's *Woman-sight* he suggested that "it is to be hoped that like the Berlin wall, gender based anthologies will soon become as unsustainable as any other artificial attempt to divide people" ("Women's Stories" 18). His hope was for an androgynous literary world which would deny women's 'difference of view' or any gender concerns whatsoever (whether female or male), a literary world which would not allow for celebration of a woman's voice, life or being.

Fran Marno's "Blood," anthologised in the second volume of *New Women's Fiction*, epitomises the problem faced by women writers of the late 1980s. For Clarence, the central protagonist of the story, writing has become a vital means of self-expression, an outlet for what is important to her. However, what *is* important to her is diminished by those around her. 'Women's issues' her friend Kay argues, are old news:

She wants to write about blood.

. . . 'Depressed women, insensitive men, birth and blood. It's all been done,'  
Kay says.

'I haven't done it.'

. . . 'Political dynamics have changed. We don't need feminist angst any  
more.' (19)

Clarence wants to write about menstruation, an experience unique to womanhood, an important part of female self-definition and the experience of 'being woman' and an experience which should tie her to other women but other women (not men) attempt to silence her: " 'It's post-feminist.' Anne tells her. "The woman doesn't need to be central anymore.'" (21). Clarence will not accept that in a post-feminist world women cease to

be women. She still has a woman's voice to sound and celebrate: "Clarence wants to be central and she wants her daughters to be central too. She isn't ready for post-feminism . . . She's preoccupied with femaleness and she still says rude things about the new breed of sensitive, aware men" (21).

Through her story, as Aorewa McLeod identifies in her introduction to the collection, Marno highlights questions which she herself may struggle with. In the face of post-modernism and post-feminism "how can she avoid being read as a naïve seventies feminist?" How can she "write a story which expresses her physicality as a woman in a mode appropriate to the late eighties amongst the multiplicity of feminist discourses?" (8). Didactic feminist politics expressed through fiction may have 'had their day' but women writers of the late 1980s still had things to say about their own world, about being women. To silence that need would be to reinvent the very patriarchal structures feminism worked (and continues to work) to overturn. Women readers can identify with the experience of being woman. As Sue Aitchison-Windeler writes of "Blood" in her *Broadsheet* review, it is sure to provide a point of identification: "many will relate to the struggles of being politically correct while at the same time bringing up teenage daughters" (15). And this is but one of many struggles women continue to face, highlighting the importance of their continued expression.

However, even in the late 1980s, denial of women's work continued and New Zealand women writers still faced contempt and bias on account of their gender. For many male writers, it seems, this boom time for women's writing presented itself as a threat and was met with the expected response, a questioning of the actual value of the women's work being produced. CK Stead, for example, saw the publication of *the bone people* as an attempt to suggest that sexism existed where in truth it did not: "The energy which had caused the book to take off, he said, had 'nothing to do with the



quality of the work” (Kidman, “New Breed” 142). As Kidman goes on to suggest, this attack can be seen as “some of the first tangible evidence of a backlash against the success and new-found acceptance of women’s writing” (“New Breed” 142). Michael Morrissey is said to have followed “hard on [Stead’s] heels” peppering many letters columns with “his diatribes against women’s writing”: “Writing in *Kite* recently, he said: ‘increasing numbers of women in my writing classes tell me that they only read women authors. If this sexist tendency continues to spread male writers will obviously suffer’” (Kidman, “New Breed” 142). There is no recognition of the possibility that women writers offer women readers something which male writers cannot, and that perhaps there is in fact a like bias among male readers to seek out work from their own sex. The debate continued to be one-sided.

Dale Spender writes of a similar experience in *The Writing or the Sex?* (1989) citing the comments of an Australian reviewer who complained publicly “that there was a conspiracy being orchestrated among women to buy women’s books and that this was grossly unfair”; male writers were suffering, he claimed, as women writers received “advantageous treatment” (46). As Spender suggests such comments really reveal is a defence of power:

What this great and aggrieved writer was really objecting to was the threat that women’s efforts represent, the challenge they constitute to the deeply entrenched – but unsupported – belief that men are the genuine writers, readers and subjects for study and that any legitimacy given to women is an alteration, and aberration, in the proper scale of values. (46)

Similarly, the newfound success of women writers in the New Zealand literary world of the 1980s did not represent automatic, widespread acceptance. Women’s short fiction may have shifted from the one-dimensional portrait of woman as passive victim but this shift did not represent an end to short fiction as an outlet for feminist expression, or for speaking out from a female perspective. As John Watson points out in the conclusion to

his discussion of the 'female hero', although female characters of the late 1980s are clearly more active than those of the past it is not simply a case of stating that they have 'progressed.' These stories show an ongoing struggle:

The seeds for later heroism are there in the defeat of the earlier heroes. Further, in the violence now openly expressed in the experiences of these many contemporary victims and survivors, there is a sense of an on-going struggle; small gains balance painful losses. (63)

This is not the time, Watson claims, to sit back complacently.

Julie Ewington agrees. Comments such as those made by Lay and Morrissey suggest a notion of postfeminism, a term which suggests that feminism is theoretically 'old' and that there is a desire for something 'new', something 'after' feminism. Ewington suggests that such a notion could lead to younger women becoming 'depoliticised' in their approach to female experience. She recognises that young artists do not want to present what has become 'traditional' political feminism. They seek to avoid the connotations built up around the notion of 'feminist art' or 'women's work' and so reject the label altogether. But Ewington urges that rather than rejecting this label women should work to reformulate it, to 'be feminist' in alternative ways. They should not simply relax, for while there have been great improvements since the feminism of 1970 "it would be premature to claim that women working in the arts are free of the constraints that have historically oppressed them" (17). Recent gains must be continually stressed or risk being lost:

Nothing remotely like a 'feminist' era has been achieved to date. It is ironic, given the continuing struggles . . . one can only speculate about the value, to whom and for what ends, the assumption of a postfeminist era represents. (18)

It is not so much a case of being postfeminism in general as being post a particular *phase* in feminist politics: post the phase that insisted upon singularity in authentically feminist styles, methods and modes in the arts.

The last decade has seen an explosion of feminisms and our resources are now very rich. Yet the one certainty in feminist writing on the arts is the recognition of difference(s). Multiplying desires must be our one desire . . . (19)

While feminist political protest in its early form may be rejected by writers and readers alike, and that particular phase of singularity in feminist politics left behind, feminism is in no way dead. Gender remains important. Women present a 'difference of view' which should be celebrated, not denied. As Rosemary Novitz suggests, androgyny simply equates to denial:

Identity is ultimately about our connections with others. Feminism has, for many New Zealand women, cemented their connections with other women. This sense of women's links with one another cannot be divorced from the movement for change of which it is a part. Involvement in that process of change can be more satisfying than the security of a simplistic national identity which smooths over differences between women and men . . . Recognising divisions in this society and responding to them may be a more creative reaction to life in the late 1980s than papering over the cracks in our national identity with a variety of symbols which neglect complexity and variety in the lives of New Zealanders . . . (72)

Women writers should continue to celebrate their difference in whatever shape or form it presents itself. A new generation may experience 'being woman' differently but sharing that experience remains vital.

## Chapter Five Held Back in Time: Fiction as Social Reflection Continues into the 1990s

The trend for gender-specific anthologies remained strong throughout the early 1990s with publications presenting a good mix of established and emerging writers and reflecting, as Peter Simpson suggests, “the ongoing strength of women’s writing on both the demand and supply side” (57). Movements in the publishing world continued to work in women’s favour, furthering, as Laurel Bergmann suggests, the “process of legitimation of women fiction writers” (“Where to From Here?” 217) which developed throughout the early 1990s. It was not simply a matter of increased activity at a grassroots level. The business of women’s short fiction was also expanding through the rise of women in the publishing industry, and the rise of the *New Zealand Listener* Women’s Book Festival, introducing and validating women’s writing to a wider audience.<sup>9</sup> Short fiction in particular benefited from the culmination of these positive influences, the number of collected works by New Zealand women writers of short fiction published in the early 1990s suggesting a definite breaking into the mainstream and a new-found freedom from the forces of marginalization. Through increased feminist awareness and through the work of women in the industry they had established their place at the centre of the literary world and were no longer resigned to the struggle of making their voices heard from the periphery.

### **Generational distancing: Shonagh Koea’s *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight***

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<sup>9</sup> Influential figures included Daphne Brasell, Cathie Dunsford, Wendy Harrex, Bridget Williams and Cathy Wishart.

However, not all New Zealand women's short story writing published during the early 1990s exhibits a shift away from earlier modes of expression. The works of previously well-established writers in particular point toward a continuation of what was seen in the 1980s, writing in many ways firmly rooted in the past.<sup>10</sup> The 1990s context within which these writers worked is sometimes evident in their handling of contemporary issues, but a 'dated' feel predominates which borders on a sense of nostalgia. Shonagh Koea's *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight* (1993) is perhaps the most obvious example of this 'generational' distancing. The stories found in this collection contrast strikingly with her earlier pieces. While in *The Woman Who Never Went Home* Koea repeatedly portrayed women embarking on journeys of self-discovery, travelling far away from the expectations of their social reality to gain independence from the defining powers of patriarchal forces, in *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight* her female characters remain static and trapped within this male-centred world. Any action they take is minimal and largely ineffectual.

Koea's portrayal of men in these stories is particularly reminiscent of the stereotypical 'woman as victim/man as antihero' construction prevalent in the writing of earlier years. As Ronda Cooper suggests, Koea's male characters tend to be cast in the role of abuser, enacting violence (generally of an emotional rather than a physical nature) against women. She repeatedly creates "men who just steamroller their way through life, utterly selfish and manipulative" ("Significant Subtleties" 155). Elizabeth Caffin agrees, suggesting that Koea's men are "on the whole more attractive dead": "A parade of ageing and predatory males struts grotesquely through the stories, exhibiting a need for sex, food and housekeeping" ("Pleasures" 30). They view women as ideally

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<sup>10</sup> Amelia Batistich's *Holy Terrors and other stories* (1991) serves as a further example of 'the past revisited' with many of the stories collected appearing in Batistich's earlier *An Olive Tree in Dalmatia* (1963) or previously published elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s. Even the more 'recent' works included share this datedness and as a whole the collection rings of the tones familiar in stories by Yvonne du Fresne and Carin Svensson.

suited to fulfilling these needs and blatantly prey upon them. A favourite candidate is the widow, who has proven herself in the role of wife, nurturer and housekeeper and now, obviously, needs a man in order to continue doing what she does best. 'The fat man' of "The Widow" makes a career of this: "He gauged the life of widows well and had hunted in it before with some gains in funds and flesh, for even an ugly, greedy man might be welcomed into their seclusion" (134). The victim's husband is barely in the ground before he pounces: "She would be docile and demure, plumper but still lovely, and he would insist she had a hysterectomy so he was not inconvenienced" (135). Similarly, in "The Tea Party" Manny treats afternoon tea with a widow as the first step in replacing his own wife, telling the new prospect how life with him will be, planning out her future to best meet his miserly ways: "Like a palimpsest, she was to have all her own inscriptions re-engraved, all her own ideas stamped out. Even the shopping would be severely supervised" (77).

Throughout the collection men treat women (widowed or not) in this way. They are viewed as valuable in terms of what they might offer a man, whether it be sex, food, or a clean and tidy home. Subservience is the key. The man of "Naughty Maureen", for instance, travels the world with his little notebook containing "all the phone numbers of all his dolls" and uses his latest conquest to go and entertain an old flame over lunch. She will then be able to report back and he will know whether she is worth renewed pursuit. He believes that every entry in his black-book awaits his call, ready to pleasure him. Similarly, the wife/lover (it is unclear which) of "The Antique Dealer" is treated like part of the furniture, her presence barely noted, until she mentions spending time with another man, a rival dealer. Suddenly the laws of supply and demand come into play. Her value increases because someone else has shown interest and he must protect his ownership rights: "he raised one of her hands as though suddenly it might be as

precious as Chelsea, as glorious as Sevres, kissed it gently . . .” (10). To him, she is no more than a possession, another antique.

Fortunately, Koea does not present women who simply accept their lot in relation to these men and willingly bend to their demands. In each case, the woman comes out on top. When ‘the fat man’ of “The Widow” decides it is time to make his play he is met with a very different version of womanhood from that which he had fantasised about, finding “a figure in overalls and gumboots wading through the lush branches of a fallen tree near the house”(137). She means business and is getting on with life independently; she is not the vulnerable, subservient widow he hoped for. Similarly, the woman of “The Tea Party,” finally finds her voice when the persistent Manny questions her religious faith:

‘my faith. I haven’t any. I don’t go to church. I have no religion. My religion is the idea of democracy, the rights of the individual, the dignity each person deserves to have even if other people’ – and she stared right into those pale blue eyes – ‘do not understand his, or her, aspirations. I believe in the right to privacy, the sanctity of each person’s home.’ Listening to herself she thought she might never stop. ‘The right we all have to do as we please, without supervision or intrusion by strangers, if we pay for ourselves and keep ourselves quiet and plain and do not break the law. I believe in self-worth, peace, privacy.’ (85)

She does not long for guidance and protection; her strength lies within.

However, while these widows show strength and self-assertion, going about life without need for a man, the women of “Naughty Maureen” and “The Antique Dealer” see through their men but use this knowledge to win them over rather than to escape them. The unnamed woman of “Naughty Maureen” sends her lover off to meet with his past, powerful in the certainty that once he sees the aged, ruined Maureen he will return to her with greater devotion. The woman of “The Antique Dealer” plays up her meeting with her husband/lover’s rival to rekindle her husband’s interest in her. These stories may expose the cruel natures of their male characters, but in the end, their women still

seem to need them, manipulating them only in order to ensure that they stay. Throughout, Koea's stories depict a social milieu in which it is essential to 'have a man' in order to fit in.

In "Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight," a single woman invents a lover to protect her from her friends' constant disbelief and errant matchmaking attempts. By creating the illusion of a doting doctor who is always conveniently called away on urgent cases when social occasions arise, she can be alone, with no need for a man, and yet evade the stigma attached to her unmarried state. For everything in the world which Koea creates hinges upon appearances. The artifice of this world is captured most effectively in the black comedy of "Edward and Lally/Ted and Pam" which sees a woman sacrifice her inner self in the interests of outer beauty. Through a series of beauty treatments, calorie controlled diets, cosmetic surgery, and vocabulary lessons, Edward and Lally have reached perfection, leaving the Ted and Pam of the past behind. However, when Lally is forced to face the farce of their marriage she realises just how empty this perfection really is:

Lally put one hot hand on the ivory splendour of her left cheek. The tucks taken beyond her hairline to lift the forehead, the reshaping of her eyelids, the implants in her (now) pouty lips, were all useless. She could see that now. To have reached the end of a painful search for perfection only to discover that the manufactured beauty was charmless was a piece of cosmetic horror that not even yoga could cure. (60)

Despite all that she has undergone in the interests of self-improvement, her husband still turns his attention to other, even more artificial women and there is no alternative offered.

While Koea's stories do expose the limitations of the social milieu inhabited by her characters, these characters remain subject to its codes of conduct. The women of these stories are ascribed value only through their relationships with men. There is no escape, no hint of journeying into new lands to discover independence and a freedom of



selfhood which characterised Koea's previous collection. These women are trapped within the bounds of their social reality and herein lies the datedness of these stories. As Elizabeth Caffin recognises, Koea seems to be concerned more with "the pleasure of the past" than with contemporary interests and this leads to stories which are "constrained in time and place" ("Pleasures" 30). Added to this focus on an era past, which may be seen to distance a contemporary reader of the early 1990s, is a style of writing which mimics the artifice of this social realm and creates an even greater gap between the world of the story and its reader.

Koea's stories are full of minute detail. The surroundings of her characters, from items of furniture and décor to food and table settings, are described with exquisite attention to the finest points, but while these details are skilfully rendered into virtual visual existence, their effect, as Norman Bilbrough suggests, can be detrimental rather than advantageous to the larger picture:

Food, furniture and flowers are Koea's territory, and her continual emphasis of them makes her stories too similar, and often airless. Meals and/or menus, or a beautiful staircase, or something exquisitely botanical can block off the story – and story line is not Koea's strong point. She loves her decorative diversions and the reader can quickly tire of them. (Rev. of *Fifteen Rubies* 329-330)

The stories themselves are at times lost in Koea's attempts to create artistic effect. As Lindsay Botham suggests, the stories seem unable to hold the weight of the detailed information they contain. Koea, Botham claims, has a tendency to "over-write which detracts from the serious themes and issues she covers" (12). The fact that many of these superfluously detailed items are antiques also sweeps the reader back into the past, further removing them from the writer's concerns.

One story does stand out from the rest in focusing on letting go of the past. In "Good Order and Naval Discipline" two older women unite in their widowed state to feel a sense of empowerment for the very first time. Hilda and Jean share a past as the

wives of naval officers and now live alone in the same retirement village. Social status continues to dictate their lifestyles and Hilda, as the wife of a rear-admiral, lives in one of the expensive separate villas, while Jean, wife of a captain, lives in a joined studio apartment. Despite their different 'places' in society, however, their shared past unites them and this unity saves them when a new arrival to the village is announced: "Helen Hartley of the lisping whisper, the golden curls, the cause of disquiet in formerly peaceful, if not happy, households, the plunderer of husbands" (145). Beneath the surface of happy marriages both women suffered as their husbands fell prey to this Helen Hartley's charms, forced to simply carry on and pretend all was well, ignoring the disparaging comments from their husbands and the gossip surrounding them and now they must face her again. Until Hilda speaks out, deciding it is time to take action and determine their own destinies:

"It's time we went,' said Hilda ' . . . I don't mean we're going to town. I mean we're going. Going. You know – going. They buy the places back here, if you decide to go. So we can go. We're going to the office to say we've decided to go. I don't know where we're going, but we're definitely going there . . . We're fools,' she said, 'fools, just fools.' (162)

It is time to reclaim themselves from their husband's identities and take a chance, not as naval wives, or naval widows, but as themselves. It is only a shame that more of Koea's women did not learn from their example.

### **Margaret Sutherland and the perpetual loneliness of *The City Far From Home*:**

Margaret Sutherland's *The City Far From Home* (1991) also contains portrayals of women who have yet to assert their identities, and their stories are similarly lacking in contemporary flavour. Little has changed for Sutherland's women since her 1977 publication. Loneliness and bleak disillusionment continue to dominate their experience. While in the 1970s Sutherland was recognised for breaking through traditionally

restrictive stereotypes of womanhood and acknowledging alternative possibilities to the roles of wife and mother, her female characters repeatedly failed to make these possibilities more than fictions within the fiction. A similarly pessimistic outlook continues into these 1990s works. Sutherland's women continue to search but true self-realisation seems forever out of reach.

The loneliness which Sutherland's characters face as a result of their inner emptiness threatens to overshadow the entire collection. Even when surrounded by others, or involved in an intimate relationship, they still feel alone, to the point, Patrick Macaskill suggests, of obsession (5). In many cases the story's setting highlights this feeling. Geographical displacement in particular adds to the characters' sense of dislocation. Being 'far from home' intensifies feelings of isolation, particularly if the motivation to be in foreign territory is not one's own. The married women of "Drowning" and "A Letter From the Dead" are both suffering the loneliness of marriage, separated from the familiarity of home at their husband's will. Una of "Drowning" is filled with anxiety as she sets off on a honeymoon cruise with her new husband: "When the visitors were sent ashore and the gangways taken away, she felt anxious . . . The safe solidarity of the group on land made her want to cry" (20). While he is full of passionate desire, their first act of love-making leaves Una somewhat unmoved: "She said she loved him, to make him happy, wondering whatever she meant" (21). Una does not feel as though she fits in. She does not know how to behave in this role of 'wife': "she was tired of him, and marriage. She felt she'd been given a complicated kitset with no instruction book on how to put it together and make it work" (25). She can only adopt a pretence of happiness. Mrs Lake of "A Letter From the Dead" has adapted to her marriage in the same way. Forced to follow her husband around the world "from one economic problem to the next" (31), Mrs Lake lives a life

of “endless adjustment” (32). All she has to provide a sense of stability to her life are the ordered events of domesticity, the routines of cleaning, shopping, cooking. While she does find moments of peace and companionship with her husband she longs to call somewhere ‘home’: “Others had homes, babies, a place in the community – at least a friend to telephone. Where is my world? She thought despairingly. I am dependent and waiting, no better than that poor wretched dog” (38). Mrs Lake sees herself at the mercy of her husband with no choice but to make the best of this life:

She would smile or commiserate until he settled back, his gaze on the harbour [not her], enquiring, What about you, Amy? A good day?  
All her days were good. Unlike the dog, she had the sense to know complaints were rarely worth persisting with after a certain time. She felt it was up to one to be happy, and so she was. (30)

A familiar sense of resignation resounds throughout these stories.

Even when Sutherland portrays women alone outside of marriage, the isolation they face overwhelms any sense of independence or liberation. Interestingly, the stories which do centre upon single women present them within vocations built upon the roles of subservience and nurturance traditionally associated with being a wife and mother, and in the case of nursing, hospital settings with backdrops of physical illness and death heighten the women’s loneliness and isolation. The widowed narrator of “John,” for example supports herself and her daughter by practising as a nurse, juggling work and childcare. Her often harrowing role in the neo-natal ward takes on even greater significance when she is forced to confront her own unplanned pregnancy. Unable to tell the father and without the support of her friends who are already well “jaded with the responsibilities of children” (101) she must face her options alone. As she toys with the possibility of abortion deaths confront her from all sides and she is left wondering about her ability to wilfully take a life.

The narrator of “Particular Friends” also struggles with the loneliness of isolation from her fellow nursing students. As a nun, the narrator has learnt to depend upon her faith and finds human connection on an emotional level virtually impossible:

I began to endure deep loneliness. At group meetings held for the students as part of this psychiatric training period, I sat miserably apart . . . No one questioned my silence. No one commented on my evident uninvolvedness. They were accepting. I found this most painful of all. (92)

One day she cracks and crumples on the floor weeping “like a catatonic woman whose silence is at last plundered” (94). At this point she is most alone: “There on the floor I wept and waited for the comfort of my friends. It did not come. They did not know a nun can weep, that she can need the comfort of a human touch” (94). Her religious vocation has excluded her from not only the traditional roles of wife and mother, but also from the intimacy of true friendship and she feels a despair paralleling that of her patients. In Sutherland’s stories any alternatives to marriage and motherhood or any attempts to be *more* than simply wife and mother bring increased emptiness rather than fulfilment. Throughout this collection the possibility of change, even of happiness, lies beneath a cloud of illness, death and despair and any hope that is expressed is not realised. There is no sense of a new world, nor a new way of thinking / living / being. In a resigned tone, loneliness is presented as something which must simply be adapted to rather than something to overcome.

#### **A document of social reality: Fiona Kidman’s *The Foreign Woman***

A similar sense of limitation and restriction also pervades Fiona Kidman’s *The Foreign Woman* (1993). The women she portrays are more-or-less interchangeable with those of her earlier collections providing little to suggest any ‘newness’ of approach to the experience of ‘being woman’, particularly within the context of the 1990s. Again, ‘datedness’ is the impression created, with stories looking back rather than forward.

“Marvellous Eight”, for example, concerns one women’s struggle with liberation in the early 1970s and is a telling record of the era. Natalie Soames’ life is followed from her escape from the loneliness of suburban neurosis, through failed love affairs, to battling her way into the male-dominated world of television, and finally returning to her husband, enlightened and embracing a new beginning as an empowered woman. The result, however, is a document of social history rather than a fictional exploration. Kidman repeats the tale told all too often in the previous twenty years.

“Nasturtium” is similarly familiar. The narrator recounts her involvement with Vree, a political activist and ardent feminist. She recalls watching Vree pouring her heart and soul into feminist politics and saving other women while personally she suffered from the same patriarchal oppression. Despite her strong and courageous appearance, Vree was her husband’s powerless victim. He wielded the power of financial support and she had become dependent upon the security that marriage provided:

‘I’m afraid of my life without him. He gives me space to do the things I want . . . I watch him sleeping and know that I don’t want to do these things alone. I don’t know whether this is good feminist philosophy, but if we cannot find someone to love, what’s the point, why do it, for whom?’ (133)

She even put up with his physical abuse, using alcohol to numb the pain and carrying on. An end to this imprisonment in marriage came only when Vree was found dead, shot in the back of her head by her husband. Her feminist politics failed her and failed them all: “All of them had known that Vree was in trouble, and nobody had done anything to save her because, in the end, they were afraid of her husband, afraid of losing their causes” (138). The image of women as powerless in the face of patriarchy re-emerges and social history is again recorded. The story captures “women’s liberation and the protest movement and what happened to the lives and marriages of women

while their ideas were changing” (Wevers “Rich and Disturbing” 4). It captures feminism *as it was*.

While other stories in the collection are told against a slightly more modern-day backdrop, on the whole, they simply repeat themes found in Kidman’s earlier works. While variety in characterisation and setting creates what Mary Raphael identifies as a “smorgasbord of human experience” (“Smorgasbord” 50) Kidman’s female characters *are* united by a shared sense of dissatisfaction. They are not so much direct victims of the patriarchal institution of marriage but they do seem to have internalised patriarchal lore to the extent that it limits their self-discovery and self-growth. The saga of Bethany and her ex-husband Peter continues in “Furs” in an endless pattern of marriages dissolving, new relationships forming, and children trying to find a sense of family as the past constantly invades upon the present. Bethany is struggling to find her own identity in the midst of a new generation. She is faced with the competing demands of her own children, one from her marriage to Peter, one from another love affair, and is also ‘playing mother’ to her new husband’s daughter and Peter’s son from his remarriage: “there seem to be more and more children everywhere, who all appear to believe they have some kind of claim on her” (86). While her situation reflects the eclecticism of family life in the 1990s, Bethany still insists upon playing the traditional role of wife and mother; it seems to provide her with purpose. Even though she resented it in her marriage to Peter, it is ingrained in her female identity.

Even independent women in these stories are unable to fully realise their own potential. Nellie of “The Foreign Woman” cannot move on from her father’s dream that she would one day marry a Greek man like him, not a New Zealander like her mother. Even in middle-age, her father dead and gone, Nellie lives in the hope of fulfilling his expectation. She rejects the New Zealand side of her being, claiming that she does not

fit in and does not belong, that she feels foreign. She longs to return to the country her father wanted her to be a part of, to fulfil his romantic, patriarchally inspired ideals. She is not living her own life; she is trying to live out his dream.

Further to this focus on past eras and old feminist struggles, the way in which Kidman tells these stories also adds to their 'datedness'. They continue to reflect an outside reality, to capture the real world as of the object of a feminist comment or critique. There is no sign here of what Wevers sees as "a heightened awareness of the fictionality of realism" ("Short Story" 307). Rather than self-consciously inventing a world, Kidman continues to write as if it is possible to simply mirror it. These traditional assumptions do, however, suit some readers. Sian Robyns suggests, that the women (and the men and children) in Kidman's stories could be any woman (man or child) and that readers can find themselves reflected in these works:

They ring so true, Kidman could be writing of your home town, your childhood, of the people you stood next to in the anti-tour marches, the kids you grew up with, the people at work, on the train, all wrestling with regrets, commitments and choices . . .

You'll recognise them and you'll recognise the characters' choices and understand why. And when you've finished and are putting the book away you may even be thinking, as I was, how very well she knows us. (12)

Kidman exhibits a keen observation of human behaviour through her work. She captures the inner workings of the female mind with astuteness, revealing the various complexities of the experience of womanhood. In this sense she can be clearly identified as a 'woman writer', whether she chooses to accept that label or not: she writes *as* a woman and provides points of identification *for* other women. For this reason, as Anna Smith acknowledges, the realist mode that Kidman adopts in exploring female experience should not be underestimated:

Fiona Kidman claims that women write about what they know best – their experience – and they frequently do so in a realist mode, but her latest collection of short stories shows once again that words like 'realism' and 'domestic' undersell their product. What Kidman's stories may lack in



formal innovation is more than compensated for by the nuanced register they provide of the social exchanges of a whole generation. (Rev. of *The Foreign Woman* 138)

However, while formal innovation is not necessarily sought as superior to 'old' ways, realism which is restricted to social exposé and comment does run the risk of becoming repetitious. Also, while Kidman's collection may capture the workings of 'a whole generation' it is questionable whether this is necessarily the generation of 1990s readers. The stories in *The Foreign Woman* may well appeal only to those women who have shared Kidman's own generational experience.

This notion of generational difference is highlighted in Kidman's story "Nobody Else". The narrator, a younger woman confused in her love life, turns to her mother for answers.

What I wanted to know, more than whether they 'did it' or not, as all the kids at school put it, was why they did it. Why they had ever begun. What made them decide, out of all the other people in the world, that they would spend the rest of their lives as lovers? Why did they love each other? That was the question that really consumed me. (121-122)

Her mother tells her that she loved her husband because he reflected back to her something of herself: " 'I felt that I recognised something in him that was like me'" (123). Things were not easy for them as a young couple as the narrator's father always "looked different" and didn't quite fit in but she was determined to make it work: " 'I knew that if I was embarrassed by him then, it would never work. I thought, if I love him, this is it' (125). The narrator is in a similar situation. Her love interest is not the 'nice boy of her own' her mother assures her she will one day find. The narrator has a girlfriend, Naomi, and now more than ever she is aware of her 'difference':

She was wearing the same old black gear that she always wore – baggy black sweater and leggings, like a large chrysalis, and heavy boots. Her hair is so short you can see her scalp through the yellow bristles. She wears a long earring in one ear and a row of studs above it. (126)

But from her own mother's experience she also knows that this difference is less important than what they share. When Naomi gives her a gift, "the mate to the earring she was wearing," the narrator is aware of her watching for a response: "I didn't particularly like the earring for itself, but I knew that being given it was important. Naomi stood there waiting for something" (126). Part of her longs to put the earring in her pocket, say she'll put it on later but she knows that this would be a rejection and that is not what she wants.

'Here,' said Naomi. She reached out and slipped the earring on for me, there in the middle of the street. I kissed the air beside her face, promising more. Then I took her hand in mine and we walked down the street. (127)

The lesbian relationship of these young women stands in contrast to the conventional marriages of past generations as an alternative and equally fulfilling female experience. It suggests the existence of a new generation of women freer to experience unconventional possibilities and demanding respect for their choices. However, this story remains an exception. On the whole, the limitations, expectations and dissatisfactions of Kidman's own era continue to form the basis for her work.

### **A façade of happiness: marital dissatisfaction in Elspeth Sandys' *Best Friends***

Elspeth Sandys' *Best Friends* (1993) is also characterised by "a retro quality which evokes the early 1970s" (Coffey, Rev. of *Best Friends* 2:6). As Mary Raphael suggests, these stories contain little promise for the future: "no, girls, it could not be described as a handbook for the revolution. It is, however, a clear flashback to the days when quiche was a novelty and we took men seriously – and a sobering sight that is" (Rev. of *Best Friends* 50). Sobering as it may be to encounter a slice of social history which shows (hopefully) how much the experience of 'being woman' has changed, it is far from refreshing. Again those writers of the 1970s and early 1980s, bent on exposing

the injustice of marriage as a patriarchal institution of which women are universal victims, are recalled.

Sue Taylor plays the lead role of the oppressed wife in *Best Friends*, her marriage to Grant providing the focus for several of the stories in the collection. Sue has followed Grant from New Zealand to the UK where he sees greater opportunities for his professional acting career. She also hopes to pursue her acting career but, in true patriarchal tradition, her ambitions are secondary to Grant's. Wife and mother are the only roles she will play, and they bring little in the way of applause, or satisfaction. In a series of linked stories, the Taylor's marriage is viewed from a number of narrative perspectives, through the eyes of friends, acquaintances, strangers, and Sue and Grant themselves, but all tell the same story. Theirs is a marriage in decline and in which Sue is the stereotypical oppressed female victim.

It is clear from the outset that Sue and Grant view marriage very differently. Geographical displacement intensifies Sue's loneliness, particularly when Grant is away acting, but she remains devoted and loyal, holding on to her belief in an idealistic version of their love for one another. Grant, on the other hand, shows little devotion. He is utterly self-centred, continually putting his work ahead of their relationship, and showing his fondness for philandering whenever the opportunity arises. The ironically titled "Best Friends" establishes this 'difference of view' as it emerges through their friendship with another couple, Delia and Chris. Delia and Grant are fellow actors working on a project together which takes them out of town. Chris sees this as the perfect opportunity to seduce Sue but she repeatedly rejects him, determinately devoted to her husband. Even when rumours circulate that Delia and Grant have been sharing more than scenes in a play, Sue will not be swayed.

Throughout the collection this pattern is repeated. Sue is propositioned by another married man in “Plays with Sad Endings” but again she rejects his advances, remaining true to Grant despite all his indiscretions. In “Writing About the War” it is left to a stranger to save Sue when she bursts into tears at a dinner party, unable to escape the lewd attentions of the host, with Grant again showing his indifference:

At that moment Sue looked up, and her eyes met her husband’s. “No one,’ I was to say to my wife later, ‘could have mistaken that silent entreaty. If she’d shouted ‘Help me!’ her message couldn’t have been clearer.’ I turned to Grant, confident he would now go to her. His hand was on his glass, and he was smiling. ‘The children get her down, I’m afraid,’ he said. (62-63)

“The Best of Both Worlds” offers the most revealing portrayal of gender difference. As Sue travels to Heathrow to collect Grant on his return from New Zealand she thinks back to the depressing time they were having before he left: “Five months without work, mounting debts, a growing disenchantment with the rural life they’d embraced so confidently when the children were babies” (118). She knows that Grant will return happier as he always does when he has been away acting, but her own happiness seems to be in question:

He would be pleased to see her. Whenever he came back from work like this he was always exhilarated. A gust of life would blow through the house as, at other times, black clouds formed. Sometimes Sue felt as if marriage had turned her into a barometer of other people’s needs. Her own were so deeply buried now she only knew of their existence when she found herself suddenly, and for no particular reason, in tears. (119)

However, despite this recognition of her loss of selfhood Sue continues to hold on to some kind of romantic illusion and an unshaken belief in the sanctity of marriage, perhaps because this protects her from the truth which is so far removed from the myth. She imagines Grant’s homecoming as cause for excitement: “Other reunions had been passionate. Why shouldn’t this one? At least she knew Grant was faithful to her. Beneath the quicksand there was always that rock” (199).

However, as Grant flies home to his wife his thoughts are with another woman, an old acquaintance he has been reunited with: “Their next conversation took place in bed. Thinking back on it now Grant refused to feel guilty. What had happened was both natural and inevitable” (121). Despite twelve years of marriage to Sue he has told this woman that he wants to see her again, that he wants their relationship to be out in the open, and he has no fear of telling Sue: “ ‘She’ll understand. She’s an understanding woman . . . He was glad Sue couldn’t make it to the airport. He’d stop on the way home, have a pint, and work out exactly what he was going to say to her” (121-122). When he finds Sue waiting for him he is surprised but also pleased for he realises that he does not want this other woman *instead* of Sue; he wants them *both*:

He opened his mouth, and let the taste of her sink into his consciousness. They’d always been good together, physically. ‘So glad you could make it, darling,’ he said. ‘I’ve something to tell you.’ He took her hand, and smiled confidently. Andrea and Sue. New Zealand and England. ‘The best of both worlds,’ he concluded. (122)

Undoubtedly Sue plays her own part in this patriarchal drama, continually trying to convince herself that her marriage is a happy and successful one. Even upon hearing Grant’s news about his new relationship she remains loyal to him, continuing to play the subservient wife. Like so many other female characters before her, Sue exposes the injustices of patriarchy but fails to action any protest. At the end of the collection it is revealed that she has finally left Grant, but rather than subverting the previous stories and portraying her as an independent, self-realised woman, Sandys focuses on Grant. “Pub Talk” presents him as a lost soul, slowly drinking himself into oblivion while telling the barman of his wonderful life in the country and showing him pictures of his children. When Grant leaves, the barman learns the truth from a regular:

‘He lives in the country. He’s an actor,’ the barman volunteered.  
 ‘Country my arse!’ Len said ‘He’s got the flat above King’s Electrical.’  
 . . . ‘Tell ya somethin’ else for free.’ Len continued. ‘He’s not married. Not any more. Wife left him five years ago. Ya hear things in pubs.’ (143)

While Grant's fame and good fortune have been overturned there is no indication of what has become of Sue. She has simply disappeared, her value as a character limited, perhaps, to the extent of her victimisation. For Sue is one of the "stock characters" Elizabeth Smither refers to in her review of the collection ("Heyer Plane" 33). She is the archetypal oppressed wife.

The dissatisfaction of marriage is not limited to the Taylors. As Patricia Glensor recognises, "Grant and Sue's story is interwoven with the lives of other couples in a complicated pattern of tangled and brittle relationships" (7). Unfortunately, the widespread nature of this dissatisfaction does not create variety. The struggles and tensions between couples and between friends are captured convincingly, but as Glensor suggests, these struggles and tensions remain the same throughout:

. . . the flat, undifferentiated tone of the narrative (despite changes of narrator) and the disconcerting sameness of many of the characters and situations eventually made me lose interest in them and the traps they are caught in. (7)

Ultimately this could be acknowledged as *a* trap (singular) for all these couples are imprisoned in the same situation: Delia and Chris of "Best Friends" are in an equally unsatisfying relationship as the Taylors, each seeking fulfilment elsewhere; the wife of the man who preys upon Sue in "Plays with Sad Endings" has come to expect and accept her husband's extramarital indiscretions by way of survival; the narrator of "Writing about the War", who saves Sue at the dinner party, views his own marriage as a battlefield, a minefield which must be navigated so as to keep the peace. All live a façade of 'the happy couple' and all fail miserably.

Even stories which portray relationships outside marriage expose romantic happiness as an illusion. There is little to suggest what alternative possibilities may lie ahead for women if they do eventually escape the oppression of marriage. In fact, the one story in

the collection which does portray a single, independent woman – “Someone to Talk to” – gives the impression that choosing a career brings loneliness and disconnection. Even here, struggles and tensions are the focus, the same bleak and outdated story, documenting social history. Sandys joins Koea, Sutherland and Kidman in reflecting a time at which women’s writing was an important political tool and continuing to argue the familiar case against female oppression in the familiar mode of realism. While identifiable, their stories are repetitive and dated.

### **A hint of change in Grace and Watson: beyond reality, into spirituality**

In many ways the work of Patricia Grace encapsulates the continuities and changes which characterised women’s stories at this time. Grace remained at the forefront of New Zealand short story writing throughout the early part of the new decade, her popularity highlighted with the re-release of her work in two collected volumes: *Selected Stories* (1991) and *Collected Stories* (1994). It was her new collection, *The Sky People and other stories* (1994) which carried the most impact, however, and the stories within combine a number of the features typical of the period. Old, familiar themes meet new concerns; tried and true modes of expression meet with experimentation. As Phoebe Meikle suggests, this collection is indicative of Grace having reached a new level of complexity in her writing which gives these stories “more levels of meaning” (Rev. of *The Sky People* 308). They contain a sense of multiplicity which is characteristic of this period and can be associated not only with women’s writing but with postcolonial writing generally .

This is not to say that Grace moves away from her old concerns or modes of expression entirely and the stories of *The Sky People* are in many ways reminiscent of those that have come before. Social realism continues to be Grace’s preferred style and,

as Sian Robyns suggests, her stories are predominantly tales of New Zealand life: “They are the stories behind the stories in the news media, behind the tagging on shop walls, behind the glue bags in parks . . . These are windows, mirrors on contemporary New Zealand . . . (“Grace and Favourites” 20). For Grace writing about contemporary New Zealand life has always meant writing about the ‘otherness’ of being Maori: the place of the Maori people and the struggles they face living in a predominantly Pakeha society. This political spin on things, however, plays less of a role in this collection than was seen in Grace’s earlier work. Most of the stories here appeal on a more personal level. Maori culture and Maori belief systems permeate them all, but several focus less on the Maori community as a whole and more on intimate, personal relationships between individuals. Most importantly, they focus on the world of women.

While clearly located within a specific cultural context, several of Grace’s stories speak of the universal experience of ‘being woman’ more than they do about ‘being Maori’; relationships between the genders rather than racial conflicts come to the fore and again these relationships are portrayed as sites of disillusionment. In “Chocolate Cake Raffle” and “My Leanne”, Grace shows that even young romance is afflicted by racial tension and grief, or by violence and tragedy but it is when she invites her reader to engage more closely with her female characters that the struggle of ‘being woman’ is expressed with real effect. In “The Day of the Egg” Dorothy’s husband delivers her an ultimatum: she must choose between him and an old drunken family friend who they have been left to care for. He expects her to make the choice any good wife should, to choose her husband, but Grace introduces the simple detail of a broken egg to turn Dorothy’s decision around. The egg stares up at her from the floor like an eye, an embodiment of her conscience demanding attention and suddenly she finds the conviction to be true to herself. She will not be manipulated by her husband and



subverts patriarchal control by making her own unexpected decision. He will be the one to leave as she regains a sense of power in the universal struggle of 'being woman'.

For other women in Grace's stories the power of the past works to prevent them from finding happiness within themselves. "Flower Girls" is a sad glimpse into the way in which a woman's past can shape and limit her future. The story takes place at a tangi of a chief as preparations are made to ensure he gets a send-off appropriate to his status. His sister and sister-in-law have dressed him in his best and he lies looking serene, but "the blight of his daughters", Hyacinth, Violet, Lilac, Verbena and Marigold, shatters that peace (20). In varying ways, from prostitution to alcoholism, these girls have brought shame to their father. While they used to be "beautiful and sister-looking when they were little girls" they now form a sorry sight:

It was the mother, wife of the man, that everyone felt sorry for. She deserved better in the way of daughters, especially at a time like this. She'd been a true support to the man in all that he did. She'd been a loving mother. It was said over and over again. (23)

But even their mother is unresponsive, trickling only the occasional, insufficient tear. It is not until the close of the story that the reason for her behaviour, and for the people her daughters have become is revealed:

She was the only one who knew what good girls her daughters really were. They were good girls, deserving of the names of flowers, who had kept the secret of themselves and the big man – kept the secret, kept the secret, kept the secret. (24)

As Anne French suggests, the secret revealed in this closing paragraph is a shocking one: "one of the most unmentionable topics in the Maori world, incest, has now been mentioned" ("Confidence and Cheek" 51). Through her fiction, Grace exposes the struggles that women face. She speaks out from their silence and poignantly portrays their reality.

Grace does not restrict herself to stark realism and social comment, however. She also moves beyond this world into a dimension only hinted at in her earlier volumes: the realm of Maori mythology and spirituality. From the opening story, "Sun's Marbles", which tells the tale of Earth and Sky's children who destroy the natural world in pursuit of progress, to the closing story "Sweet Trees" which sees birds of the forest attempt to rekindle love between a couple who have lost their way, Maori myth features throughout. It always carries with it the suggestion that there is something more than the reality which we live, that the world of the spirit should never be neglected and can offer hope and comfort in times of struggle. Mythology is portrayed as a positive force in contrast to the disillusionment of an often violent society. As well as providing this contrast and sense of hope, the integration of Maori mythology into her stories allows Grace to present the everyday world in new ways, to challenge the reader to view ordinary life from a new perspective. Realism prevails but Grace's stories are somehow 'enhanced' by these other-worldly elements. As New Zealand women writers of the short story in general were seen to be doing in the late 1980s, she seems to have entered into a new spirit of writing which makes its appeal to the reader with more subtlety than the political dogma seen in earlier works. Everyday life and all its struggles are revealed but through use of mythology, of magic and of imagination, Grace distances the reader. The bleakness of reality is recognisable but escapable. Realism takes an innovative turn.

The effectiveness of such innovation, however, lies in attaining a balance, and in "The Sky People", Grace leans a little too far into surrealism. Nina, the young female narrator of this story has been sent away from home because she is perceived as being different and the story tells of her journey in search of a place to belong as she struggles to come to terms with the spiritual powers she possesses. But the magical, spiritual elements of this story seem overwrought. They cross over into the realms of surrealism

which inhibits reader identification. As Ruth Nichol suggests, the title story is “one of the least engaging” (“Flying High” 38). Rather, Grace’s writing is at its most effective in this collection when it is, as Bernadette Hall suggests, “putting postmodernism on the run”: “If there is anything that will blast away the thin wiry sounds of postmodernism it is the full-bodied breath of passion and humanity, especially when these are allied with a writerly technique that is innovative, bold and aware” (Rev. of *The Sky People* 22). At its best, Grace’s interweaving of the ordinary and the extraordinary retains a level of accessibility which allows for reader identification and in which words and ideas do not mask or wash away feelings. As Hall puts it, “in utterly recognisable settings magic boils over” (Rev. of *The Sky People* 22).

In “Harp Music”, for instance, present-day reality meets the imaginative world of the child as a woman seeks to reclaim her sense of self. This woman has always put herself last. She is everything to everyone, particularly her grandchildren, leaving no time for herself. She has decided that this needs to change, that she must make time for herself and the studies she wishes to pursue but letting go does not come easily. Once again she ends up sacrificing her own time to attend her grandchildren’s school gala day, but some good does come of it. She has her tea leaves read and the advice she receives highlights what she already knows to be true: “ ‘You get pulled this way and that until it’s too much. Too many demands . . . You need the time for yourself. It’s difficult isn’t it, when you’re not used to it, to take time?’ (144). The tea-leaf reader also sees something in her past to do with harp music which she claims will bring a memory to the surface. The woman is left wondering. Later, alone again and free of the demands of her grandchildren it comes to her. She sees a girl running down a country hillside and stopping at a wire fence. She walks along “bending or reaching up, to turn the twists and ties” which have been used to fix the fence in places where it has broken:

She is setting up the orchestra in which she will be one of the players, and turning the knobs of the giant radio over which the music will be heard . . . with both hands she begins to pluck and stroke the strings, and it happens as it has happened before, the music.

The music is all around walking, then running, swirling, climbing, and she is part of the playing . . .

. . . she knows it is her own. (148-149)

She is remembering herself as a child and rediscovering the joy she found in creating her own symphony. Now the hope is that she can recapture some of that music and reconnect with the inner self from where it came: “There is a girl. She was playing a harp. I forgot about her for fifty years but when I saw her again I remembered how I like her. Loved her” (137). Through reconnection with the magic of her past, this woman gains insight into her own sense of self.

The effectiveness of such stories lies in what goes unsaid. As Phoebe Meikle suggests, in this collection Grace “reveals a story’s central points by implication, by a brief glance, rather than by plain, explicit statement” (Rev. of *The Sky People* 308). Her characters and their lives appeal for their ordinariness which in the telling becomes extraordinary. Lydia Wevers agrees, claiming that the stories of *The Sky People* simultaneously amuse and disturb, subvert without passing judgement. They are “far too graceful and subtle for the full frontal” yet still reflect the violence and oppression (against Maori and against women) at work in our society (“Rich and Disturbing” 3). Grace’s stories, according to Sheridan Keith, do all things:

soaring effortlessly between earth and sky, binding contemporary urban reality to timeless myth, encompassing humour, sly wordplay, stark tragedy, satire, irony, realism and surrealism in pieces of shining intelligence. (“Stories From” 13)

As a collection *The Sky People* highlights new possibilities within the realist mode. The balance between familiarity and utter fantasy is not always maintained but at its most effective, Grace’s use of cultural spirituality enhances the everyday stories she tells.

Jean Watson also draws upon cultural spirituality to explore the female identity in *Three Sea Stories* (1994) and similarly enhances the effectiveness of her narrative. *Three Sea Stories* actually sits rather uneasily within this discussion, not fitting the generally recognised characteristics of the short story collection. The three long pieces which make up the book form a continuous narrative more reminiscent of a novella and there are also additional features of travel writing, love story, and biography which defy any definitive labelling. However, in many ways it is this elusiveness which makes Watson's work vital to this discussion. Features of Watson's work do hark back to works of the previous decade. *Three Sea Stories* is a highly overt, if not clichéd, example of a woman's search for her true self and, as was commonly seen in stories of the late 1980s, this inner journey takes place within the context of physical geographical travel. Catherine, the protagonist/narrator of the stories has travelled to Kanyakumari in India as a writer, but as well as writing she is in search of answers about the world she has left behind, and about herself. Her life back home, as it is revealed in "Eyes See in Sleeping", fails to satisfy her. She wants more:

At times she felt herself to be full of resentment; a never satisfied hunger. She was guilty of envy towards people who had things she wanted but did not have. A good house in a nice place; her house was small and dingy, and in a valley. A well paid interesting job; hers was low paid and boring. A good husband; she had two broken marriages behind her. (38)

Her experiences in India, however, alter this perspective. Catherine develops a close friendship with a local man, Satya and through him she experiences first hand what it means to live in this land of poverty and struggle. She recognises the boundaries which trap the Tamil people, all the opportunities they will never have. At least in her country, she thinks, there is a welfare system which can help someone like her "break through from being an uneducated, downtrodden solo mother to being an educated, promising writer" (43). Yet at the same time she is envious of the simple way of life Satya enjoys,

not wanting for more so not being dissatisfied. Her journey in search of selfhood becomes an inner struggle to reconcile these conflicting emotions:

There was no way she could explain anything about her life to him. The years she had spent paying off a mortgage. Her small house with three bedrooms would seem like a palace to him. People had rooms of their own to sleep in; no one had to sleep on a cement ledge inches away from a drain. So how could she explain to him such things that worried her? Insurance, tax returns, leaky taps, trees that might fall down in southerly gales. Everything one has to cope with in Western society. She's had to manage such problems for years; a lone woman with children to support. A familiar resentment surged up in her.

Satya was sleeping so peacefully. He had nothing, no security in the world, and she had everything, for no matter what happened she would always be looked after . . .

But then his life seemed so simple and uncomplicated, and one thing he had and she didn't – a happy marriage. (50-51)

In this way, as Sheridan Keith claims, Watson captures “the narrator’s dialogue with the self” (Rev. of *Three Sea Stories* D:8). Catherine’s innermost thoughts and feelings are revealed as she makes connections between her past and the present, and between the individuals that inhabit each. However, while the hint is ever present that Catherine is yet another victim of a patriarchal society that places her at the mercy of male-centred systems, her journey to selfhood contains no political agenda. This is a more mystical account. As Neville Byrt suggests “personal and spiritual connections across distances and cultures” lie at the heart of the collection (Rev. of *Three Sea Stories* 2:6). While the Indian surroundings and the geographical journeying itself are vividly detailed, Catherine’s inner journey is “plotted with meditations and allusions” (Byrt, Rev. of *Three Sea Stories* 2:6).

Herein lies the point of difference that sets these stories apart: they cannot be clearly categorised. Aorewa McLeod suggests that this may be why Watson’s work has largely been ignored in a critical sense, that she may be viewed as too idiosyncratic: “New Zealand literary commentators find it difficult to cope with authors who do not fit into definable categories” (“Single Woman’s Search” 7). *Three Sea Stories* does not slip

into the unfathomable realms of postmodernism but neither is it realism in its traditional form. There is no 'slice-of-life' captured in succinct sequence; nor is there a clearly plotted tale of events. Stories of Catherine's time in India are interjected with memories from the past, with dreams and visions, with hopes, and with a continual inner struggle for understanding, which doesn't end even when she is back home in New Zealand writing to Satya:

Even now, with you so far away, there are times when I feel strangely near to you. Who is he? I ask myself. Who were they?

Which leads to the inevitable question – who am I? Then I feel a rare questioning wonder that for a few minutes causes me to feel disoriented, lifted out of space and time. (70)

The situations and the events which form the background for these stories are familiar in the sense that they are 'realistic' but Watson does so much more than simply describe these events to capture a moment in time. In many ways her work parallels the 'magical realism' seen in the late 1980s. Rather than making Watson inaccessible it simply suggests, as Jane Stafford acknowledges, "that realism is a far more complicated and interesting form than post-modern criticism is willing to concede" (Rev. of *Three Sea Stories* 338). This is the 'enhanced' realism that Wevers identifies in suggesting that a shift is evident in women's short fiction of this period. It exemplifies the recognition that realism can function as much more than a tool for social or political comment, that its application can be far more varied. Here realism takes on spiritual and mystical dimensions as one woman searches for a sense of self, but, as the writing of other women of this period shows, the possibilities are limitless.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Women Alone: The Freedom to Embrace Unlimited Possibilities**

Elizabeth Smither and Stephanie Johnson are two writers whose early 1990s collections exhibit the possibilities which an expanded view of realism allow. Their writing edges outside social documentary and reveals new and original ways of expressing what it means to be a woman. This is not to say that their stories exist outside of the social world which may be familiar to their readers, but rather that they take a fresh approach to portraying this world. They fictionalise rather than attempting to recreate. Both writers have been recognised in earlier chapters as standing out from their contemporaries in terms of the ways in which they portrayed women in their short fiction, but what can also be recognised in their earlier works is a hint of this ‘enhanced realism’. “The Invisible Hand” of Johnson’s *The Glass Whittler* portrays a slightly bizarre yet strangely believable situation blurring the boundaries between what is perceived as real and what seems fantastical, while the narrator’s experience in Smither’s “The Love of One Orange”, published in the first volume of *New Women’s Fiction*, is enhanced through the story’s richness of metaphorical language.

#### **Intellectual wit and the woman alone in Smither**

It is perhaps this depth of expression which led Fiona Kidman to see Elizabeth Smither as “spearheading new developments” in the world of New Zealand women’s writing (“New Breed” 144). In many ways the poet in Smither enriches her stories. As John Needham suggests, Smither’s work in *Nights at the Embassy* (1990), her first collection, is enhanced by her metaphorical way of thinking which enables her to create “images and feelings as well as ideas” (8). However, while Needham sees Smither’s



metaphorical thinking as carried too far - “her metaphors are sometimes wilful, her tone sometimes merely whimsical, and her continuities sometimes obscure” (9) – it can be argued that this ‘whimsical touch’ is what makes her work so appealing in providing an antidote to the existing prevalence of sober realism.

There is something of a sombre tone to the stories collected in *Nights at the Embassy*. Smither’s focus is very much on the ‘woman alone’ but rather than celebrating her independence the majority of these stories highlight the solitary nature of her existence. In a style reminiscent of Anita Brookner, the lives of Smither’s single women are revealed against a backdrop of coupledness, the possibility of their own intimate relationships seemingly replaced by the relationships of friends, even acquaintances. Continually the narrator’s aloneness is highlighted by the togetherness of those around her. “Wie Geht’s”, for example, takes the form of a series of letters sent by the narrator to her friend Beatrix in which she reacts to the news of Beatrix’s developing love life. From the outset she advises Beatrix that the man she has met is wrong for her but rather than genuine concern for her friend, this advice reveals more about her own loneliness. Clearly she has always found solace in the fact that her friend shares her solitary existence: “you scrawling algebra across a blackboard at St Hilda’s and me in a laboratory with an experiment that has been going on far too long” (147). Now she is left alone. Who is there to ask her ‘wie geht’s’?

The narrator of “What Happened to the Pipers?” seems even more obsessed with others’ affairs. She meets Susan and Rob Piper at a friend’s dinner party and becomes fascinated by their relationship. Every time she sees the Pipers they ooze with togetherness:

[I] thought of the Pipers as a nearly perfect couple . . . I saw them . . . at the opera, where they looked musical and absorbed in each other; they came by my friend’s flat for coffee and could hardly keep their eyes off each other. (116)

She does not see them often but, having settled into a state of “residual envy” (119), she asks after them constantly. It is not until later that the truth of their relationship is revealed. It seems that the Pipers are carrying much baggage from the past:

Both Pipers . . . were married to other partners. Both families in the small Canadian town they lived in were friends and their children played together . . . They fled the country taking a single bag each and never communicated with their families again. They half hoped their spouses might marry and the families amalgamate. They had a solemn pact like people who have crossed each other’s wrists in blood. (123)

Their pact has proven inadequate. Bob is revealed to be “notoriously unfaithful” and after playing the perfect partner, giving Susan “the most tremendous fiftieth birthday party” and “two days of his most passionate loving at their bach” (124) he walks out on her. Suddenly the narrator’s single state is not so bleak. Her illusion of the perfect couple has been shattered. Smither suggests that single life, in spite of its solitude, is preferable to this kind of pain.

The narrator of “In Memory of Bee” also finds herself weighing up these options. She has watched her friend Bee fall for and marry a man who has a reputation for being “always with or between women” (67). Bee has become simply another entry in his catalogue of “vibrant” women:

There had been two wives, or was it three? . . . but they all seemed part of the procession and hardly more distinguishable than the mistresses. Sometimes the mistresses turned into wives, which was usually a fatal mistake, since it’s almost an impossible transition. (68)

The couple continually break up only to reconcile again and again. The narrator urges Bee to leave Rupert and get on with her life, but Bee does not believe in herself, or in her ability to survive as a single woman: “You do understand, don’t you darling? I’m not cut out to be alone . . .” (97). But the narrator cannot understand. As a writer she finds life a solitary journey but she still views being alone as preferable to staying in a

loveless marriage. Smither's women may be alone and perhaps lonely but the relationships around them suggest that their circumstances are more favourable.

The isolation of being a woman writer or academic is explored in many stories. In "The Mask of Keats" a young female academic studying the poet buys a mask of his face and carries it with her as though her sole companion. The poet of "Nights at the Embassy" fears failure when called upon to read her work publicly at a foreign embassy, preferring the comfort zone of her private world to the social interactions such a reading necessitate. Yet throughout the solitariness of their role as writer is portrayed as a preferable state; the self is in control and answers to no one else. Similarly, in "A World Elsewhere" Clare is attending a conference when she finds herself losing composure under the gaze of an attractive man:

Clare bought another Canada Dry and walked about, not she thought, unlike Miss Bingley or Elizabeth Bennet in front of Mr Darcy . . . it was so many mirrors catching all aspects of her promenade that made her feel self-conscious as though, like Elizabeth Bennet, she had forgotten how to walk. (48)

However, by the final night of the conference she has realised this man is anything but a Mr Darcy when having said "something about all women being the same or equally useful" (51) and she is all too happy to decline his offer to go out dancing, retreating to her room and her own company. Her work provides far greater satisfaction than his attentions ever could. Alicia, the woman writer of "Deconstructing", reaches a similar realisation about her own inner wealth when attending a conference dinner. She finds that she does not fit in with the other women present, likening herself to a bird seen earlier in the day:

The formal dinner was notable for the care the women took with their appearance. Uncrushable flimsy dresses that must have been squeezed between books appeared and some that were almost backless. Alicia, who had underestimated the occasion, was a bit like the takahe and looked forward, in her simple skirt and blouse, to being seated in the same way the takahe might have wished to disappear into the scrub. (105)

Yet an earlier comment made about the takahe - “in spite of its failed colouring the bird was meaty, substantial” (105) – could equally apply. What Alicia lacks in fashion and finery she more than makes up for in depth and intelligence.

This sense of dislocation is perhaps most central to “Excerpts from *A Journal of an Academic Year*” which describes the isolation of being a writer-in-residence heightened by the ‘unknown’ nature of the position:

The hardest time at the university is arrival. I climb up through Victoria Park . . . and climb panting to my room. Open the door and then quietly close it behind me. Then I am not sure what to do. Is this the secret confession of all writers-in-residence? (128)

With only part of a degree, the narrator feels like a fraud: “Not only am I not an academic . . . I am the wrong size for the scenery, my attempts at joke (and also to cover up) have the wrong terminology . . . I listen to the language and it seems to have changed” (132). As the year unfolds her feelings begin to change but she still turns to her journal as an outlet for her doubts and insecurities which reveal the solitary nature of her experience. She is isolated in a room working on a solitary project while, on the other side of the walls are ‘true’ academics with clearly defined roles.

The continual appearance of such solitary female characters, all possessing a self-awareness of their ‘being alone’, may suggest that Smither’s collection has a limited perspective, for in many ways the women she portrays could be one and the same, a stock character-type as seen in Koea’s *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight*. While Smither’s women are not victims of male control or the subjects of their oppression, they do hint at an alternative stereotype – the intellectual, academic, literary woman destined to always be alone – which could be seen to project the same anti-patriarchal outlook. These women have chosen intellectual pursuits and while they provide their own level of fulfilment the choice seems to exclude them from love, marriage,

motherhood. However, the way in which Smither writes of their experiences and their views of others' lives around them sets her work apart. She does not seem concerned with the feminist politics which could be attached to such images of women nor does she attempt to capture a social reality. Rather, these stories show the beginnings of Wevers' notion of fictionalising realism.

Smither is actually more concerned with the inner worlds of her female characters than the social milieus they inhabit. As Suzann Olsson claims, "Smither's stories focus on inner selves, where action is primarily the reworked experience of the first-person narrators" ("Wit, Irony" 26). These narrators construct, reconstruct, even deconstruct the world around them through their stories and enrich their experiences with the power of language. They continually display a level of knowledge and a clever intellect, the literary allusions which reverberate through the collection both revealing the fulfilment books provide in the lives of these solitary narrators and metaphorically enhancing their stories. For all that may appear lacking in the lives of Smither's women, they do not lack wit. Ultimately it is their humour that most enhances the realism of these stories. As Gaelyn Gordon suggests, "a poet's eye captures the ridiculous" and the stories are in fact "full of fun that bubbles up through the placid glint of Smither's irony" (8). Take the short piece "Miss or Ms" in which two female librarians bet on the choice of title to be taken by a young woman about to fill out a subscription form. The usual answer is 'Miss' and the librarians find this disheartening. They hope that women have come further and moved on from being defined by their marital state but the narrator seems sure that the next young woman to approach will also disappoint:

Doomed, I thought. The girl had a pale face like a violinist and fine straight conventional hair that might have been ironed. A girl who would be pleased to be called Miss, who might even be reflecting she would grow into it. The sort of girl you pitied, I thought, in spite of being talented; that a sheik or rake would ignore as they ignored the moon. (110)

She is wrong and the 'girl' chooses 'Ms'. While the feminist undertones of the story are obvious, the lasting image is far from serious as the narrator imagines the utter dismay of the poor young woman at their reaction:

. . . she must have been thrown off guard by two librarians: one reaching across the counter to place a licked kiss on top of her hair . . . and the other replacing a long black wand in its holder, and silently clapping the fingers of one hand against the palm of the other. (111)

As Gordon suggests, these stories recognise the funny side of life, rather than taking it too seriously, while still providing a point of female identification: "they acknowledge – even celebrate, and certainly they don't bewail – that life is often rather ridiculous. We recognise the universal – the human condition – in what Smither has to say, and our laughter is often the laughter of recognition" (8).

The women of Smither's *Nights at the Embassy* find and exhibit their strength, and gain audience appeal illustrating the energy women can find within themselves. Smither's second collection, *Mr Fish and other stories* (1994) is charged with the same sense of inner energy, conveyed with a similar intellectual wit. Thematically speaking there are also a number of parallels between the two collections but while the 'woman alone' figure continues to appear, the stories in *Mr Fish* are not limited to portrayals of women in the mutually exclusive roles of wife and mother *or* lover *or* solitary writer. An impression of diversity is created showing that women can be many things. They do not, however, paint an idealistic picture of the experience of being woman. In some cases they suggest that being true to oneself can mean a lifetime of struggle.

"Mr Fish" is one such story. The narrator writes of her Great Aunt Alex who, after a lifetime of struggling to keep her passion for writing alive, died gasping for a pen to be placed in her hand. Alex fought against patriarchal forces who labelled her insane for calling for a pen rather than her newborn baby, and who intercepted her attempt to leave her home and husband carrying only "a whole ream of paper, an indication of

crisis, pens and a change of clothing” (10). In the face of such opposition she did succeed in filling notebook after notebook with her prose but the narrator now finds that these notebooks contain only plots, outlines for stories that were never written. Rather than representing a series of lost opportunities, however, Alex’s plots can be seen to represent an exploration of the chances she was never able to take in life. Through her fictional creation Mr Fish, Alex could live out any experience without having to choose one over another, and no one plot had to be followed to its conclusion. Now, through her Great-Niece, Alex’s passion for words and the inner self her words expressed, is kept alive:

Alexina Ballantyne Froude was all plot. Notebooks and notebooks of it . . .  
And I, Elizabeth Froud, write poems which are not allowed plot at all. Or . . .  
only a scent, something borne by a breeze. (15)

Just as Alex of “Mr Fish” never gave up on her passion to write, women throughout these stories overcome various obstacles in life and come out on top. As Laura Kroetsch writes, Smither portrays women “who successfully negotiate emotional agonies – and usually triumph” (52). These “emotional agonies” are manifest in varying degrees. At one end of the spectrum are the horrific instances of domestic violence portrayed in “The Avenging Angel” and “Sister Felicity and Sister Perpetua”. In these stories, Smither manages to subvert even physical brutality against women creating small moments of female victory.

The narrator of “The Avenging Angel”, Maud Goodall, is obsessed with the actions of her neighbours, particularly Mrs Derungs who is guilty of introducing immorality into the neighbourhood: “A husband absent for long periods supervising the construction of hydro electric dams and male visitors in cars that pull in very close to the kerb, often, it seems to Maud, with their lights switched off for the last few yards” (72-73). However, when Wikitoria Kemble from the valley arrives on Maud’s doorstep

one afternoon she is forced to look beyond the social immorality of this display and consider the individual damage it is causing. Wikitoria's husband is one of Mrs Derungs 'visitors', and learning of the conditions she must live in – "nothing more than a little corrugated shack with a smokestack and a line of washing held up by a wooden prop" (74) – on top of being treated so poorly by her husband, Maud declares war on her neighbour. Later, when Wikitoria reappears on the doorstep, swollen and bruised and very frightened, Maud vows to help her, but the disparity of their lives is all too clear:

' . . . we've got Dan. He's a lawyer. He's already sent a warning letter next door.'

And you've got me, Maud thinks, though she doesn't say it. Wikitoria at the bottom of the valley and Maud above. Dirt floor and polished linoleum against hoardings and turbans and fast-growing paulownia. (77)

Looking back years later, Maud cannot remember whether she and Dan ever got around to talking about Mrs Kemble before a fire in the valley claimed her life: "Wikitoria Kemble's body, burned beyond recognition, was found lying under a mass of wood and tin" (80). Maud still wonders whether Wikitoria's husband lit the fire or if Wikitoria lit it herself, unable to bear the suffering any longer and she still continues to carry the guilt of her own inaction: " 'Why didn't I go down Dan. And call on her? Oh I blame myself'" (81). Yet, in her own small way she remains true to the memory of Wikitoria and will not let Mrs Derungs forget about the part she played in her misery:

She has been on her own for nearly twenty years, since Dan collapsed with a brain haemorrhage. She should have moved but the old siege, withered now, has held her there. As shabby as the street is getting, she thinks. But only last week she has freshened it. Their eyes met over the fence and Maud said, 'You needn't think I've forgotten.' (82)

This may be only a small token of revenge but it sees this tragic tale end on a note of triumph. In "Sister Felicity and Sister Perpetua", victory is realised a little more fully. Here the victim of the destructive patriarchal forces of male violence is rescued before it is too late. Ironically, it is the workings of perhaps the most patriarchal institution of all,



the Roman Catholic Church, that save her. On the closing of their convent, the Sisters have moved to a suburban neighbourhood where they hope to work good among the people. Their first 'test' comes in the form of a battered woman, arriving on their doorstep in the early hours of the morning in search of safety: " . . . it makes a change to have somewhere to go. He'll never think of looking for me in a nunnery" (23). They take her in for the night but in the morning they find that there is little they can do to change things for the woman. She seems resigned to her situation. The Sisters are left to continue do-gooding work which seems insignificant in the light of such violence but later their more worthy work is revealed:

When they came to successes – though none of this would be written down – they both thought of Cherie-Lee, the young woman whose face had looked like fruit salad, who had spent not one but several nights on their sofa. Hints she might have a vocation, threats of taking the veil, idyllic descriptions of two resident nuns, had proved remarkably efficacious.

Cherie-Lee had called late one night with a bottle of Marque Vue.

'It's all I can afford,' she said.

'Then we must drink it together,' said Felicity, rushing for the glasses.

And when the Marque Vue had been drunk, Cherie-lee had asked if she might borrow a rosary. (27)

The Sisters have offered Cherie-Lee an image of compassion to save her from a life of violence and victimisation and have perhaps given her renewed faith in life. In any case, it seems she has been able to use religion in her own way, as a subversive tool. While the story again deals with the horrors of domestic violence the humour of the closing scene, of a woman sharing a victorious bottle of cheap bubbly with two nuns, cannot be denied and somehow softens the blows.

This story is just one example of the way in which Smither's collection manages to be at once funny and sad. As Kathryn Vivian suggests, these stories are "satirical and thought-provoking . . . humorous and serious at the same time"; Smither "likes to entertain and suggest ideas simultaneously" (D8). The sometimes grim reality of her subjects do not take over; they are fictionalised and often made humorous, and thus

more appealing to the reader. In other stories, Smither's use of extended metaphor has the same effect; the various roles which women play in life are explored through rich, clever, and often humorous use of language. These stories see the issues which arise from 'being woman' conveyed in a sensory and intellectually appealing way rather than being charged with political intent.

One such story is "The Liverspot Club" which brings humour to the experience of growing old. As they begin to detect the physical signs of their decline in the form of liverspots a group of 'mature' women resolve to form a club, uniting them in their agedness: "*The Liverspot Club* would keep it from the youngsters, those under forty or forty-five, upon whose still vaguely cherubic backs of hands no tightening was yet required" (88). Through these meetings the women come to embrace the signs of their aging. The liverspots come to represent their ability to survive all the crises life has thrown at them. They are testimony to the fullness of their lives and the women begin to seek them out. Until, that is, they find there is still life to be lived:

After three luncheons had passed in similar fashion: paws, pistols on the table and the talk turned as it incessantly did to age. The Liverspotters decided to cheer themselves up. There was a hit play in town, called *Ladies Night*. It was reported to be raunchy and artistic. They booked the centre, second row. (94)

At the performance their age is soon forgotten: "the air filled with sweat and male competitiveness" (95). Later, as the liverspotters argue over their favourites among the men, *The Liverspot Club* loses its appeal. It is as though the evening out has rekindled the desires of their youth. The physical signs of aging may continue to develop, but the women realise that they do not necessarily *feel* old. Focusing on the aging process has simply sped up their decline while *Ladies Night* has reawakened their spirits.

The majority of the stories found in *Mr Fish* involve similar rekindling of the female spirit. Smither's female characters face a variety of struggles, all of which relate

specifically to the experience of being a woman, but the richness of her metaphorical expression injects life into these women just as it does into her writing. She portrays women at various stages of life triumphing over their emotions, suggesting not only the struggles of being women but also the celebration womanhood demands, and the metaphors she adopts are as various as the women whose experiences they describe. In *Mr Fish* Smither's focus is not limited to the 'woman alone'. She also considers the experience of being wife and mother and the oppressive nature of these roles. However, her approach is more uplifting.

Perhaps Smither's most striking portrayal of female self-acceptance subverting male objectification is "Handbag". The woman of this story, Monica, is having a hysterectomy, the result of a culmination of medical terms which now seem to blur into one: "fibroids, bleeding, amenia" (83). She likens the procedure to the emptying of a handbag:

There are large handbags, large wombs. The space left when one or other is emptied may be considerable, Fibroids and face powder, cysts and change purse, endometriosis and an extra pair of tights, haematoma and a handful of rolled up tissues. But the space emptied does not stay emptied for long: in goes the lipstick, the car keys, the chequebook again and the organs are placed back and the ovaries arranged like flowers in a vase. Except there is no longer any vase. (84)

After the procedure, the surgeon adopts the same metaphor:

'A handbag,' the surgeon says, on his one and only visit.  
'I wanted to wait until you were stronger to have this little chat but now you look in the pink you might find it amusing. Your uterus looked like an old handbag. You're much better off without it.'  
'You mean it was worn out with dulled leather and the lining coming undone?'  
'Exactly. I knew you'd like it, being a writer. One of the nurses noticed you scribbling.' (86)

Yet the difference between the way each has drawn this likeness is significant. While the surgeon has diminished the physical essence of her womanhood to an old, worn-out

and useless accessory, its appearance laughable, she is able to see the great service her womb has done her. She can see it as a part of herself to be farewelled with gratitude:

Handbag: two babies, three miscarriages, honoured receptacle, provisioner, open, closed, shed lining, friable, old liver. Handbag, Monica says to herself. Though I've left it a bit late. Thanks. (87)

Monica chooses to celebrate her life rather than mourn her loss. Her good humour and her positive view of the handbag image save her from despair and enable Smither to celebrate the female body with wit.

Smither's clever use of language is also highlighted in the extended metaphor of "Degustation Domestique" in which the entrapment of the dual roles of wife and mother reads like a menu for a lifelong meal. A series of recipes follow a woman's journey through life, beginning with that of the cheese soufflé written in her seventeen-year-old hand "on a smeared piece of paper like a love letter. As sure of the recipe as I was hopeful of love" (42). Marriage follows with an infuriating wedding present of *Recipes for the Busy Bride* which does little to assist her in hosting her first dinner party in the role of wife. Ferocious arguing about Nouvelle Cuisine is followed by her husband complaining about the coffee which leaves her wondering how she can actually keep him happy:

In the same week he mentions the dearth of flowers in the house. Add a few nasturtium leaves to a salad. Should I go further and become a fruit bottler, stripping entire trees, carefully gathering the windfalls for tarts and jellies? (44)

The demands of motherhood add another dimension of stress and completely destroy any enjoyment food may have brought to her life:

Years, cycles, now of carrot, silverbeet and potato . . . cooked and pureed. Stewed apple. Rice . . . Icecream, fruit crackers, cheese, muffins, pizzas, shepherds pies, poached eggs on spinach nest, macaroni cheeses with diced ham, nursery cum adult like two languages: one simple, the other simple enough to contain deceit . . . Measure the energy level of both partners. In the morning, toast, egg, cornflakes, a small destroyed encampment on the

table top. Plain food, bland food, carrot, potato, green leaf with white lining in the stem. Why not mash everything? Why not pills? (46)

The roles of wife and mother have destroyed her passion for food and the pleasure taken in its creation and when her husband takes her out for an intimate candlelit dinner only to announce that he wants a divorce she is left questioning the point of it all. All the hours in the kitchen, the fancy recipes she has spent years perfecting seem an utter waste. All she yearns for now is the comfort of the simplest of foods: “Baked beans on toast and poached egg left to frill in the water. I have returned to baby foods. Stewed apple. A canister of Dairy Whip” (50). However, through these simple pleasures she rediscovers the joys of life. Her endless attempts to construct the perfect dish, to impress with her culinary skills, have enabled her to bury her dissatisfaction. Now the need to play the role of the perfect wife is over there is no need to use food to please anyone but herself:

I am walking by the sea eating fish and chips from a newspaper. The newspaper is as warm as a muff or a hot brick. I insert my fingers, greasy and salted as the sea is, and pull out a plump golden chip . . . As my hand goes deeper into the bag it feels like fire and at the same time is oddly comforting, a bandage under which healing and all that entails is taking place. I think of the absurd Recipes for the Busy Bride and when the bag is empty I go and dip my fingers in the sea. (52)

The recipe for happiness is far simpler than she imagined. Again Smither has shown a woman triumphing against odds which are stacked against her, the odds of being wife and mother, and again the struggle which she explores is contained within the language of the story rather than *being* the story. While the ‘anti-domesticity’ message “Degustation Domestique” contains may be familiar, this fresh, clever and entertaining approach to conveying it creates a more lasting impression. Rather than the despair of the victim this story is memorable for its clever and fun use of food as a metaphor suggesting a hint of the “exuberance” James McLean identifies as typical of Smither’s

stories. (7). It is this exuberance, McLean claims, which makes Smither's short fiction so "enjoyable to read"; there is an appealing "quirkiness" to these stories (7).

This quirkiness which Smithers lends to the everyday experience explored in her work exemplifies the trend toward 'enhanced realism' It is also perhaps what led Jane Westaway to identify Smither as "one of the most original New Zealand writers, without straining to be so" (16). There is an ease about her stories, particularly those of this second collection, which is perhaps best described by Janet Wilson in her *New Zealand Books* review. Wilson identifies a "Smitherian" quality to these stories which makes them eminently readable:

Reading Elizabeth Smither's prose resembles the sensation of travelling in the Deux Chevaux Citroen . . . : it purrs along sedately, it conveys more than a hint of the exotic, the erotic and even the idiosyncratic, yet with remarkable consistency and lacking any hint of obfuscation it remains always comfortable for its passengers. ("Greater Than" 8)

Touches of the unusual, the humorous, the bizarre even, seem to spice up Smither's recipe. Yet their flavour never overpowers. As Wilson goes on to suggest, Smither never allows her "penchant for the exotic, the fantastic, for the sly literary allusion" to fully take over her work: "At any moment she can revert to the undecorated normality of fish and chips, bringing us down to earth" ("Greater Than" 8). Rather than create another, wholly fictional world, she simply enhances the world we know through the wit and vitality of her writing:

These stories, therefore, essentially display the shape of everyday life, but a life which has been transformed and transported by the intrusion of the unknown and unfamiliar . . . In this respect Smither's approach to fiction is not unlike that of the Russian formalist writers: creating a fictional world by defamiliarising everyday reality sufficiently to render it surprising, but not so much as to make it unrecognisable. Her heroines, middle-class, often middle-aged, suburban women with the preoccupations of this group, succeed by their capacity to be taken in by life, to be challenged and surprised, to find themselves where they are. (Wilson, "Greater Than" 9)

These women may be all too familiar to the reader of New Zealand short fiction but Smither's focus sets her work apart. The struggle of being woman does not take centre stage, and neither do, as Wilson recognises, "questions of moral and political responsibility, or issues of ideological difference" ("Greater Than" 9). Smither offers a fresh new perspective on a recurring theme. She can not be labelled a realist but nor does her work enter the realms of surrealism:

Showing her penchant for the bizarre and fey, her ability to reinvent the immediacy of the moment, her breadth of literary allusion, the poetry of her prose, *Mr Fish and other stories* confirms Smither's transformation of her poetic aesthetic and practice into the parameters of short fiction: in doing so she has created an accessible, varied, delightful form that few will dare emulate, but many will admire. (Wilson, "Greater Than" 9)

In short, Smither has succeeded in adapting realism to present the experience of being woman in a way which is free from the traditional repetition of victimisation but simultaneously real enough to be meaningful to her female readers. Her stories seem to epitomise Wevers' notion that the 1990s saw the rise of a new form of realism in New Zealand women's short story writing.

### **Taking charge of their actions: Stephanie Johnson's new women**

Smither was not the sole innovator within the realistic mode. Stephanie Johnson's earlier collection *The Glass Whittler* also hinted at a form of 'enhanced realism' and the stories of *All the Tenderness Left in the World* (1993) confirm this description. In many of these stories Johnson portrays a vision of a 'new world', exploring contemporary and often even futuristic issues and concerns in a way which parallels her own impact on the New Zealand literary world. In 1996, Nicola Legat named Johnson as one of a group of writers "who look set to lead our fiction into the next century" (98). While Legat's focus is on Johnson's novels her comments are equally true of Johnson's short fiction. The shift Wevers identified in New Zealand

women's short fiction is also marked by Johnson's work, paralleling Smither's in its presentation of her own form of 'enhanced realism'.

Johnson also shares with Smither a focus on the 'woman alone'. As David Hill suggests, she writes repeatedly of "solitary, watching women": "The women in Johnson's work are particularly alone – even if accompanied by men, or surrounded by family and household cleansers. The recurring image is a solitary woman watching from bed or kitchen or from under a hedge" (2:6). While this solitary state may not appear to be a very satisfying existence Johnson does not portray 'being alone' as a direct result of female oppression; she does not present women as victims, of patriarchy or of any other force. As Debra Daley acknowledges, Johnson's women may at times appear as "damaged" or "deluded" but ultimately they triumph against life's struggles and their various victories are celebrated with a literary vitality matching that of Smither: "these characters spring to life with a sensuality of expression and a comic vigour that erases the suggestion of flint-faced dourness that seems to cling to those still political enough to declare themselves feminist writers" (50).

Johnson herself would not be comfortable with the label of 'feminist writer.' According to Denis Edwards, Johnson refuses to bow to political correctness. She will not express feminist beliefs through her writing or her way of life simply because it is the expected 'thing to do':

For example, she was an early defender of playwright and drama teacher Mervyn Thompson after he was physically attacked by feminists accusing him of sexual harassment . . . Then she took a well publicised chip at the Listener Women's Book Festival, querying the need for it all. Fiona Kidman led the chorus of rebuttal, branding Johnson, then 30, a callow youth. (13)

Such a stance inevitably earned Johnson something of an 'outsider' status among woman writers, but in many ways this stance is what makes her work so skilful in expressing female experience. While Johnson may not wish to be recognised primarily



as a 'woman writer' and while she may reject the celebration of women's writing for its 'difference' her writing does none-the-less speak strongly to and for women. Paradoxically, a less politically motivated agenda allows for a greater degree of reader identification. It also extends this identification beyond the realms of shared struggles, limitations and restrictions to a consideration of new possibilities. Rather than simply providing a guise for political treatise, fiction becomes a tool for the subversion of patriarchy in and of itself.

Nevertheless some of the stories in *All the Tenderness Left in the World* do resonate with tones of feminism. "A One Page Settlement", for example, is an obvious case of the 'woman as a victim of patriarchy' story. A vulnerable woman is preyed upon by the male tutor of her creative writing class and the story follows the tragedy of her suicide after having been sexually used and then rejected by him. However, Johnson moves beyond the expected, tired formula in her telling of the story from the point of view of the male tutor. His statement to police on the woman's death is a totally androcentric account of events exposing his chauvinistic, self-centred attitude:

At all times of the year I feel the female eyes take in my blue unshaven neck and sweating, square-jawed face . . . It's unlikely my students have smelt fresh male sweat for a long time: they are, almost without exception, female, divorced, overweight, over forty and desperate\*.

\*The description of myself in this paragraph is to pre-empt any criticism from my feminist colleagues. It proves that my perception of myself is just as clear-eyed and objective as my perception of the students. (59)

He clearly believes that his point of view is the only viable position, that his truth is the only truth and Johnson develops this profile as the statement unfolds. The narrator views women as having a weakness for him over which he has no control and the dead woman, Robyn, was perceived as just another example of her 'type':

Physically she wasn't much – a nervous quivery jaw, pale blue eyes, bottle blonde hair . . . She waited and walked with me downstairs, gazing at me

hungrily. You may think this is over-stated, but it's not so. Women of her age react to me very obviously. It's a pity I prefer the younger ones. (62)

He may have turned to her after an argument with his girlfriend, but he justifies his actions repeatedly, seeing himself as totally innocent:

Just as I was trying to slip unnoticed from the bed, she opened her eyes and moved against me, murmuring – 'Darling.'

I mention this only to demonstrate that there had been a discrepancy in our perceptions of what had taken place. As far as I was and am concerned, the sex was as mediocre as what leadup there had been to it. All I remember is the point of entry when it became obvious to me that she'd borne children and she had looked up at me murderously. Women often do that though. It is to save their consciences – to pretend for one moment that it is all against their will, that you are raping them. Perhaps it makes it more exciting for them – who knows? (64-65)

The narrator claims this to be a true and objective account of his interactions with Robyn before her death. He was in no way emotionally involved and therefore, in no way responsible.

Perhaps, if women ran the world and thank God they don't, I would be considered in some way responsible for Robyn's suicide. However, I'm sure common sense will prevail and that the men investigating Robyn's death will see it as a straightforward case of self-dispatch. (67)

With its overt construction of misogynistic attitudes a feminist reading of this story is inevitable. However, consideration must be given to Johnson's choice of narration. By relaying this belief system through the point of view of the man himself, Johnson allows him to expose his own flawed thinking. Rather than engaging in the cliché of an overt anti-male treatise, judgement is passed satirically and indirectly. Throughout the collection any political intent on Johnson's part is well fictionalised; it never dominates her narratives; and she maintains this outward objectivity throughout, whether writing in first or third person. The viewpoint expressed may vary from narrator to narrator but, as Graeme Lay suggests, the way in which their viewpoints are expressed remains constant: "the narrative voice is consistently clear, the language tightly controlled, the language free from sermonising. Readers don't have the moral standpoint inflicted on

them in Johnson's writing, they can make their own conclusions" ("Love Me Tender" 163).

Rather than directing her readers in their thinking, Johnson simply alerts them to a variety of possibilities. Her use of realism is not limited to capturing and passing comment on aspects of the social world. Rather, she creates a sense of what *can* be, of what is possible, and she portrays women as very much in control of their own endings. Throughout there is a sense that Johnson's women are to be viewed as individuals responsible for themselves, not victims to be pitied. This is not to say that Robyn of "A One Page Settlement" is to blame for her predicament or that the narrator is vindicated. Rather Johnson's stories suggest that victimisation is not a given, that women need to take responsibility. Their conclusions rarely enter the realms of 'happily-ever-after' but the forces behind them are not subjected to overt political examination.

Johnson creates rather obscure circumstances for some of her female characters. A number of her women are involved in obsessive relationships that see them lose sight of themselves and while this is hardly a 'new' theme, the actual relationships Johnson chooses to portray incite a level of discomfort. The widowed narrator of "Alec, My Love", for example, so adores her grown son that he has become an idealised object of worship. She has built a garden gazebo as a shrine in his honour, housing all the 'treasures' of his life, from bronzed shoes to certificates and trophies, and dreams of the day when he will marry and settle nearby so that they can be together. However, on unveiling this 'temple' to Alec when he comes to visit, she is unprepared for his response. She imagines he will be delighted, feel honoured, but instead her obsession drives him away. He cannot stand to be around her and she is left alone once more.

Clearly it is loneliness, emptiness in her life, that has driven the narrator's behaviour. Her son provides her with a reason for being. Yet Johnson does not suggest

that we pity her, nor does she present her as a victim of a patriarchal world which defines her as valueless beyond the roles of wife and mother. Such an interpretation is possible but Johnson does not dictate it. The narrator is portrayed as a victim only of her own delusion, which persists even after Alec's rejection:

When it's all packed up I'll write to Alec. I'll tell him I have moderated my feelings. I'll tell him I now have a cat and have joined a bowling club. I'll tell him the gazebo is packed to the rafters with garden furniture. I'll tell him it's safe to come home now. (149)

She prefers to hold onto her dream rather than give it up and live her own life but the choice is hers. Throughout Johnson suggests that women do have options, that alternatives are available, but they must be grasped before it is too late. The narrator of "Hold Fast", for example, waits too long. She admits to belonging to a family who share a common desire for things they cannot have:

This isn't so unusual, I suppose. Most people want things – bodies they weren't born with, expensive cars and houses and inviting personalities that the grind of their lives could never allow them. What was unusual in my family was the intensity of this desire. (77)

Her recognition of "how dangerous wanting what you shouldn't have can be" (78) has not prevented an obsession with her brother turning into a love affair which eventually sees them living as a married couple. However, the passion she feels for her brother is not reciprocated. He is passionate about getting ahead and she is simply a means to this end:

If you are truly bound to your soulmate you both become extensions to a central personality. Sometimes the central personality, which of course is just the bit where you've melded, seems to have a mind of its own . . . somehow Lyle has come to have responsibility for our financial life. Every now and then we have dinner parties and I have to organise the catering and wear provocative clothes. Lyle says this is my new job. Some of the rich and famous who flock to these parties realise we're brother and sister. It adds to the allure of our parties. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it gives some of those jaded old bastards the horn. (83)

Yet the narrator has only awakened to this fact after the ultimate tragedy has occurred: she is pregnant. The reader can only imagine what the future will hold for her and the child, just as any moral judgement which this story may provoke is left open to the reader.

Despite the bizarre nature of her obsession however, the narrator's emotions are believably conveyed and herein lies the key to the effectiveness of Johnson's version of 'adapted/enhanced realism'. In these stories traditional elements of realism such as the matter-of-fact tone, the utter believability of the narrative voice, the control and objectivity of the language, meet with unusual, unbelievable, even bizarre situations. Events that contain hints of the surreal are presented as ordinary, everyday occurrences. As David Hill suggests, Johnson rearranges reality: "There's an effective tension between the stories' calm, restrained prose and the frenzied events they often contain" (2:6). However, while Hill argues that these "rearrangements of reality are a reward for readers of Johnson" (2:6) this is not always the case. Combining these contrasting elements requires a sense of balance which, at times, evades Johnson. In some stories the surreal takes over, reducing their effectiveness.

"God's Garbo Man", for example, begins as a recognisable version of reality. The central protagonist is an unhappily married woman and Johnson conveys her mixture of sadness and relief when her husband dies with skill and believability. Yet the events which unfold thereafter involving a bizarre male angel dressed in running attire, mountains of rubbish, and explicit sexual acts, throw the story into the realms of the surreal. Similarly, the title story of the collection "All the Tenderness Left in the World" is too unbelievable to be engaging. The jealousy which drives Gwenda, a solo mother, to lock her daughter Pearl, an astounding beauty, away in a glass tower, is both

recognisable and revealing of social constructs of ideal beauty. However, the plot which contains this expose is simply too extreme for connection.

More rewarding are the stories in which elements of the extraordinary are blended more equally with familiar everyday experience, and the fictional world remains recognisable. "The Deep Resounding" is one such story. Wendy, a divorcee, is embarking upon a moneymaking venture to support herself and her daughter. They make a fresh start in a 'new-age' neighbourhood surrounded by 'alternative' enterprises and Wendy joins them with her own invention: Musical Analysis, "her first major foray into the realms of deception" (11). She makes up this analysis as she goes, playing musical notes to her clients and claiming that the one they respond most to is their 'deep resounder' and reveals the essence of their inner being.

The process of analysis is described in great detail as Wendy 'reads' her clients and gives increasingly far-fetched advice but throughout there is a sense that this could be possible. 'Musical Analysis' is no more obscure than any other 'new-age' therapies encountered. Wendy's clients believe her to the point that she begins to believe in herself. Regardless of the obscurity of 'Musical Analysis', establishing her 'business' and making a success of it transforms Wendy. She gains financial independence and a greatly improved sense of self-worth.

The most important thing, of course, was that she was making lots of money. This was put to use not so much to improve her lifestyle, but to maintain what she'd had before Bevan left her. Until then she'd been a doctor's wife enjoying her lower North Shore home, the overseas trips to medical conferences and the weekly aerobics. With Musical Analysis thriving as it was, Wendy and Sophie ate out a lot and bought clothes that were sometimes synthetic and always startling to all but the most hardened of optic nerves. (16)

The means to this end may be questionable but the result of a woman making her own way, no longer defined by her marital status, is another example of the universal female experience with appeal to a specifically female audience. The uniqueness of the specific

detail makes the story original yet also identifiable, and equally identifiable (and undeniable) is the woman's voice resounding throughout.

The female narrator of "The Extension" also goes to great lengths to assert her independence and her story also prompts disbelief, yet the forces which drive her are easily recognisable. Her husband has walked out, leaving her with their son to care for and a pile of debt. Various tradesmen are chasing unpaid bills for recently completed house extensions and she has no way of paying. Her initial reaction is to take all their bills and burn them in the kitchen sink. It is hardly a revolutionary response but it does give her the sense of empowerment necessary to drive her toward a more extreme form of revenge. With apparent reason and calm (firstly removing all their furniture and belongings) she arranges for the newly renovated house to be demolished. What was once her home has now come to represent her controlling, cheating husband and she watches it crumble without emotion. Driving away from the scene she remains numb, suggesting that little has been gained: "I don't even think 'What now?' or wonder where I'm headed. My head is merely a pair of eyes watching the road, a casing for something as electrically dead as Troy's television set in the rain" (158). However, the fact remains that she has taken control and whatever comes next will be a fresh start. As she says earlier in the story: "Maybe I'll make friends again, I tell myself. I'll be like I was when I first married . . . In those days my head was full of thoughts . . . busy and bright . . ." (155). Perhaps she can return to this way of being. These stories contain a far greater sense of hopefulness.

Like Smither, Johnson explores female sexuality with a matter-of-fact frankness of expression and hint of comedy, and with a sense of women controlling their own destiny. The unnamed narrator of "Taken in the Rain" epitomises this female control.

She works at a zoo and the story opens with a rather unusual catalogue of the lovers she has 'collected' since being there:

The Marine Mammals Keeper.  
 The Ungulates Keeper.  
 The Reptile Keeper.  
 The Carnivores Keeper.

They knew about each other now. So what. (18)

Sexual gratification is what she seeks, not a 'relationship' and each of the men seem to provide this satisfying her in different ways and to varying degrees. While "one night with the Reptile Keeper was enough" the others seem to compensate: "After a while it fell into a pattern. The Ungulates Keeper during the week, one or two nights, but the weekends reserved for the Marine Mammals Keeper" (23). She enjoys being the object of these men's attention while also fulfilling her own sexual desires and she feels no need for emotional attachment. In fact, she 'gives' as little of herself as possible:

The Marine Mammals Keeper loved her arse. Sometimes he rubbed himself between her buttocks until he spouted like a whale. She didn't mind him doing it, although she was irritated by his requests for her to move. Why should she move? There was nothing in it for her. You only moved like that for men you loved. She'd never loved any man, not properly. Men loved her though, she knew. She was soft and white and, they thought, sort of helpless. (24)

Really she is anything but helpless. She is fully in control of her sexuality and in a reversal of gender role stereotypes she is happy to use men for her pleasure. The Carnivores Keeper, however, challenges the narrator's sexual empowerment. *She* arouses feelings beyond those of physical desire:

'I want to go to bed with you,' said the Carnivores Keeper, a long strand of red hair floating in her wine.  
 'All right,' she said.

It was the taste of the sea and warmth of all mammals.  
 It was the embrace of like to like.  
 It was the release of something caged to be wild.



They hardly slept. It was a new country. And the Carnivores Keeper was so proud. Everybody at the zoo knew. He sat on her desk at lunchtime and fed her tidbits between kisses. (26)

The Carnivores Keeper has uncovered a hidden side to her self and to her sexuality, revealing her ability to fall in love, but the narrator will not let go. Determined to maintain control she rapidly moves on from the zoo and begins planning a new challenge with new opportunities for conquest:

Of course, Politics. Why hadn't it occurred to her before? . . . Politicians were generally older than zoo-keepers . . . perhaps she would benefit, therefore, by having more highly skilled lovers.

She smiled, a delicious tremor of anticipation running through her body . . . All she needed was a little job. Perhaps as a receptionist in the foyer. Somewhere she would be noticed by the men and women who held the steering wheel and gearstick of the nation.

Parliament! What havoc she could wreck! What a challenge, somehow to be infinitesimally more herself, and this time with global consequences. (28)

Men are destined to be mere stepping stones as she forges ahead and takes on the world. She is an independent woman and from a feminist perspective her behaviour overturns patriarchal notions that such sexual promiscuity is acceptable only for men. Johnson shows that women are human beings with human desires, that their gender does not preclude them from sexual desire nor from actively seeking fulfilment.

Independent or not, however, the narrator of this story is not a likeable character. She may not be judged for her actions but her self-centredness is unavoidable. In fact, throughout this collection the reader is presented with characters, both male and female, who are less than agreeable. Gwenda, the mother of "All the Tenderness Left in the World" is perhaps the most extreme example of the 'terrible woman' but the majority of Johnson's female characters join her in breaking down the stereotype which may have been traditionally ascribed to women's writing. As Ronda Cooper suggests even the title of the collection creates an expectation of "sweetly heart-warming 'women's writing'" (167), making the "selfish and self-deluding, dishonest, greedy and vain"(168)

characters which lie within even more subversive: “Johnson is ruthless, sending up pretension and complacency, undermining the politically correct, sarcastically picking away at the usual assumptions” (“Dangerous Liaisons” 167).

She creates a world within which women act upon their feelings, express their anger, their desires, their sexuality, and do so utterly selfishly with no regard for any impact upon others. They may not find happiness or self-fulfilment and they may not be liked but they are in control of and responsible for their own actions. In fact, these stories carry a suggestion of ‘each woman for herself’ which further clarifies Johnson’s own ‘anti-feminist’ sentiments and also highlights a more universal shift in women’s attitudes. Rather than an outright rejection of feminism, Johnson’s criticism of the feminist label can be seen as a reflection of the changing face of ‘the women’s movement’ at this time. The feminism which flourished in the 1970s as a sisterhood of women united against the oppression of a male-dominated world had gradually transformed into a battle which each and every woman fought for herself and by the early 1990s this shift was undeniably evident. Johnson’s dissociation from being identified as a ‘woman writer’ can be seen to acknowledge a need to recognise this shift and to view feminism differently.

Johnson captures this change in feminist perspective in “Sappho Reclining”. As the lesbian narrator of the story prepares dinner for her women friends she recalls a similar night they shared in the past discussing notions of ‘loyalty’ and ‘discretion’:

It was generally agreed by those who bothered to listen to one another that they were old and tired notions belonging to the patriarchy. Sisterhood, which is a word you don’t hear so often any more, is an idea diametrically opposed to personal loyalty. Sisters, you see, like to have everything out in the open. If a sister does something one doesn’t like, for example, one complains about it to everyone else as a preliminary to confronting the culprit herself. By this stage one has everyone else’s opinion on the matter. The words ‘loyalty’ and ‘discretion’ imply the involvement of an individual. In sisterhood there is a common morality, a commonly-held knowledge of our common selves. (123)

Her recollections are heavy with feminist ideals of women united for a common good, of a sisterhood which exists as one in a common experience of womanhood, and the dinner she is preparing is in celebration of this sense of unity. The narrator and her friends are involved in a Labour Department 'Woman's Work Scheme' for women on the dole and, while in paid training as carpenters, they have constructed a free deck and kitchen for the narrator. Clearly they have illegally taken advantage of the very system which is offering them support but the women do not see it in this way. In a united front they justify their fraudulence as a challenge to patriarchal lore, the sisterhood taking revenge. Unfortunately, they find themselves to be standing on shaky ground. As they gather on the new deck to toast their achievement the narrator unveils her crowning glory - a garden fountain in the shape of Sappho, symbolising their shared womanhood:

The water rushes through, into the hose, along the ground through the high grass to Sappho, who stands black, shining, magnificent, the water bursting behind her and streaming between her abundant breasts . . .  
 'Own your own sexual fantasy!' I shout above the rushing water. 'Look at her!' (128-129)

However, with these words the deck collapses and the women tumble into the garden. The sisterhood and their creation crumble and it is every woman for herself as they each try to stay in one piece. Ultimately it becomes a question of individual survival as it is throughout Johnson's stories. Independence replaces female solidarity.

Such individualism can, in fact, be identified as a key theme throughout New Zealand women writers' short fiction in the early 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Of course, this change in thinking was not limited to the politics of feminism and must be recognised within the wider context of society as a number of forces at the time were culminating in a rise of individualism and the effects of this were widespread. The significance for feminism,

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<sup>11</sup> Worthy of particular mention here is the aforementioned and ironically titled *Best Friends* by Elspeth Sandys. Throughout this collection women betray others of their sex. Female solidarity is non-existent. As Kate Fortune suggests, "friendship has a hollow ring . . . there is no sisterly solidarity here" (16)

however, was particularly notable with its ideological foundations built upon notions of 'community'. As Tom Hyde suggested in his *Metro* article "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." "once women seemed united in their push for equality, today they act in increasingly disparate and diverse ways" (47). Notions of women united had been replaced by a sense of each and every woman for herself.

### **Individualism and lesbianism: the death of the sisterhood**

This 'disintegration' of the sisterhood was perhaps felt most keenly by the lesbian community, as their short fiction of the early 1990s demonstrates. At the height of the women's movement, being lesbian was seen as the ultimate expression of commitment to feminist beliefs. Lesbian relationships were viewed as political statements rather than personal expressions of feelings and this carried over into the writing of short fiction by lesbian women. Even in the early 1990s lesbian short stories continued to exhibit this political edge, but at the same time a discernable change in the fictionalising of the lesbian experience was emerging which is evident within the two specifically lesbian anthologies published in this period: *The Exploding Frangipani: Lesbian Writing From Australia and New Zealand* (eds. Cathie Dunsford and Susan Hawthorne) and *Spiral 7: A Collection of Lesbian Art and Writing From Aotearoa/New Zealand* (eds. Heather McPherson et al.).

The editorial introduction to *The Exploding Frangipani* (1990) claims that the writers represented do not write of being lesbian in an exclusive way, that their fiction is not limited to this aspect of their existence. Rather, the editors suggest, they write as women and, more universally, as human beings, of experiences which are universal, not unique to lesbians:

Lesbians write about our lives. Although the outside world defines us by our sexuality alone, we write about as wide a variety of themes as you would

find anywhere, because we are everywhere and we exist in every culture in the world. We are sexual, we are sensual, just as we are political and spiritual, and just as we might swim or kayak or garden or run corporations or write. We are good and bad. (Dunsford and Hawthorne 7)

These stories, the editors claim, subvert any stereotypical notions of lesbian women as conforming to a singular identity, defined only by their sexuality, resisting this by means of “experimenting with language and new ways of being and relating” (Dunsford and Hawthorne 7).

In its subversive power, however, fiction can become overly politicised, as seen in lesbian works of the 1980s. Such over-politicisation does not occur to the same degree in *The Exploding Frangipani* but there remains a sense that the ideas and beliefs of lesbianism predominate over the actual experience of ‘being’. The editors may claim that lesbianism is not the primary focus of these stories but the stories themselves show that lesbian identity *is* central to the collection. Just as women’s writing has traditionally expressed the struggle against patriarchy, these lesbian stories reflect the struggle of being ‘different’, the struggle for acceptance. This anthology is very much a representation of a united sisterhood, reflecting the female solidarity of the lesbian community. Whether consciously or not, Dunsford and Hawthorne create a sense of ‘us’ against ‘them’ which unavoidably creates a political context for the texts. Certainly there must be more to the lesbian experience than simply ‘being lesbian’ but in this context lesbianism is indeed the focus. The act of collecting stories under this categorisation immediately establishes the fact.

Some stories focus more overtly than others on the politics of being lesbian. In Katrina Ings’ piece “Lesbian Etiquette at Doorways” the message is particularly clear. Three lesbian women are attending a meeting within a corporate environment “carrying with them the veil of an obvious lack of belonging to this world of dresses, high heels and shiny brightness” (56). Their difference, however, is in no way diminished. Rather,

as they approach the various doorways they must pass through on their corporate journey their lesbianism is highlighted. Doorways are recognised as having a tradition of being “the site of complex social rituals and courtesies” regarding who gives way to whom and lesbian women are not exempt from these customs:

Lesbians are not absolved from such rituals. It is simply that our rules are different. When it comes to doorways it would appear that the rule is that each of us does not go first. Or, to put it another way, each is to wait for the other to enter. The effect of such a rule is that each doorway brings with it a dance as each of us moves sideways, backwards and sideways again in expectation of the other going first. We dance the Lesbian Dance of the Doors. (56)

This ‘politically correct’ dance and all the frustration it brings are described with wit and humour but it is the issue of equality which it raises that is of utmost importance:

In a world of men and the inherited right of these men to be first, as Lesbians we work to honour the place of each other. Doorways have simply become one of the many sites where this is expressed, albeit in a confused and sometimes bizarre way. (57)

The political feminist treatise of earlier women’s short fiction is echoed. Although humorously expressed, this remains a story of struggle against the patriarchy this corporate world represents.

This fight for equality and the subsequent struggle to overturn well-ingrained social stereotypes of lesbians is repeated throughout the collection. In Marewa P. Glover’s “A Woman’s Field” the focus is equality in the workplace. Erica faces discrimination not only because of her gender but also because of her sexuality; she is doubly disadvantaged:

They had no objections to her being a woman, no that wasn’t it at all, and yes, they were sure she could do the job, but the replies were always the same. ‘I’m sorry, I advertised for a married couple, you’d do better putting an ad in the paper. Advertise yourself as single – you’ll get work as a single farm hand.’

But Erica wasn’t single. She tried to explain that her ‘friend’ who would be sharing the house with her, could also do dairy work; that she’d be able to do anything normally required of ‘the wife.’

‘No, sorry, I really wanted a married couple – thank you for applying.’ (40)

Erica is left angry and bitter and her partner Annie is unable to offer any consolation. It seems that this injustice is something she has come to expect:

Annie's thoughts strayed, inevitably, to the question 'Is it because we're lesbians?' – a question she always asked herself whenever things weren't going right. (41)

Remaining true to their lesbian identities becomes a burden these women must carry: the price they must pay for honest self-expression.

Other writers portray a more positive outcome in this search for acceptance, although the struggle itself remains central to their work. Young female characters are portrayed as being particularly vulnerable as they come to terms with sexual identities which fall outside the perceived 'norm'. Ngahua Te Awekotuku returns to this theme with a further story about Tahuri. "He Tika" sees Tahuri arrive at the home of two aunts, Roi and Hiria, distressed and searching for comfort and answers. She has been preyed upon by a drunken Auntie Valma "rolling around on top of me, mashing up against my mouth with her big huge titties out" who, when rejected, spat and swore at Tahuri for being "like that" (110). Now Tahuri is overwhelmingly confused:

. . . I don't know what to do and it's so dumb and I'm drunk and Auntie Valma's my auntie too and I love Mirimiri and I miss her and I want to be with her forever and is that wrong Auntie? Is it all those horrible disgusting things that Valma said? Is it, Auntie Roi? (110-111)

Tahuri's whole identity has been called into question. She cries out for acceptance and validation. Fortunately Roi and Hiria are also lesbians and have also faced Auntie Valma's prejudice. Their strength in the face of such discrimination offers hope for Tahuri. With Roi and Hiria she finds acceptance and is urged to be true to her own lesbian self:

They answered – two voices, one voice, blending perfectly after all the years.  
'If it was wrong, kare, we wouldn't be here to look after you like this. But we're here. And we love you. And we know, ae, we know. The pain of what

you're going through, how sore it is, how much it hurts. The feelings you have for your friend from up the river. We know. That it's right. For you. It's right. He Tika. It is, Tahuri, it's right ...'  
 She shut her eyes, then.  
 Auntie Valma could go to hell. (115)

Lynx's "Grandmother's Arms" portrays a similar moment of acceptance. The young narrator, Kit, fears revealing her sexuality to her grandmother despite the older woman's constant reassurances: " 'There isn't anything in this crazy, uptight world that you can't talk about with me. Remember that'" (120). The utter despair she feels on facing the loss of Helen, her lover, whose family is taking her away, forces Kit to open up but as her grandmother reacts she immediately regrets her revelation:

'We do everything together. Everything, Merry.'  
 Kit's voice had wavered, the words stumbling out.  
 'We sleep together, when we get the chance. I can't imagine ever sleeping with anyone else.'  
 Merry's eyes had widened. Other than that she'd stood there like a giant marble statue. Cold. No smile. Absolutely still.  
 'Helen's mother found us in bed together one night, when I was staying at her place. She called me a filthy queer bitch and told me ...'  
 Merry had stepped forward, her arms half raised. Then a moan, a garbled shout, and her thunderous exit from the room.  
 'Oh shit, shit, why did I say it?' (121-122)

However, her grandmother is not the woman Kit thought her to be. She returns full of fighting spirit to defend her granddaughter's being:

'We'll beat the buggers, Kit, you'll see. Y'know, they'll try and tell you that you'll grow out of it, but you won't. Not if I can help it, anyway. What they mean is, we'll tie you up in a little package and make you fit. They tried to make me fit once, but I don't squash easily. Grow out of it, my arse. Kit m'dear, Christchurch can be cold in July. Lets' go shopping for some woollies.'  
 And she wrapped Kit in her huge, warm arms. (122)

Both stories suggest that while discrimination must be faced, love and acceptance can also be found. There is hope for a new generation in the realisation that they are not alone in their struggle, underlining the notion that strength lies within the solidarity of sisterhood. While women 'outside' their experience of lesbianism may not understand,



may even betray them, together they can continue to fight. The nurturing arms of aunties and grandmothers bring not only comfort and support, but also the key to keeping the universal lesbian identity, their community, alive: the personal is the political.

In seeming contrast to this 'serious' message, Louise Simone's "The Exploding Frangipani" portrays lesbianism in a comical, almost farcical light. Traditionally held stereotypes of lesbianism are dressed up rather than stripped bare, exposing them for what they are. The couple at the centre of the story, Svetlana and Olga, face a turning point in their relationship; they both find themselves attracted to other women. Svetlana has fallen for Inge, a gym instructor at "Lesbian Ligaments" while Olga is taken by Anthea from her "Sapphic Liquid Embroidery Co-Counselling Therapy Group". As the story unfolds these infatuations are humorously detailed and a world is created in which everything is overtly lesbian but in the process the story's subversive potential is obscured. While Simone is victorious in portraying characters whose struggles concern everyday existence rather than being limited to the political struggle of 'being lesbian', the feelings which may prompt reader identification become lost in the over-the-top nature of their presentation. Too much comedy seems as distancing as overtly political treatise, somehow diminishing the subject.

A story such as Nancy Stone's "Moments", on the other hand, appears to provide a deeper insight into the experience of 'being lesbian' in its treatment of the tensions surrounding a sexual relationship. Here a first person narrator shares her feelings and insecurities about her lover. She longs to live in the moment of their sexual union forever, to never move beyond this level of connection: "I want to hold on to this moment, a moment during which I desire closeness, in which our desires are mutual and we can be one woman in our touching, holding, lusting" (88). Yet even in the sharing of

this intimacy, feminist politics intervene. Although she wants it to last forever, the narrator cannot actually let go and enjoy this moment because she perceives it as a loss of self, a loss of control, and she projects these fears and insecurities onto her lover. In her mind, their relationship becomes simply an alternative version of patriarchal tradition. Her lover, she claims, wants to “capture love for her own possession”:

. . . to tame me to her desires. To make herself feel good and loved and wanted. I will be her instrument.

She dreams of love reciprocated, a domestic situation in which we live happily ever after. She will make love to me, give me pleasure, show me how wonderful she is. I will love her, admire her, adore her, show her how wonderful she is. (88)

She denies herself even the pleasure of orgasm, perceiving it as giving into this inevitable process of disempowerment, unable to separate her lesbian lover from men of the past:

It's the men, I say. I'm so used to their pressure. I guess I'm conditioned into it. Men always want to make me orgasm. They have to be in charge, take over everything, even my orgasm. They always want to own me, my orgasm is only the beginning. (89)

Even in a lesbian relationship, this woman remains a victim of patriarchy. She has internalised female oppression to the degree that makes her story a repetition of those told by so many women writers in which relationships are equated with a loss of self:

. . . I'm losing myself to her. I can feel me draining away second by second, no longer knowing who I am. I'm afraid of possession, of trying to please someone instead of myself, of feeling bad about myself because I don't want to please them or fail to please them. Love means not being seen for who I am, but for who they want me to be. (93)

Through this story, Stone raises important questions about the nature of power structures in relationships making it, even though it is very much based in the realms of the inner psyche, a *thinking* story. Again, it is more about the political implications of being lesbian, the struggles against patriarchal indoctrination, than it is about the experience of simply ‘being’ a lesbian.

Perhaps in an effort to avoid such lesbian politics other writers represented in this collection experiment with new forms of writing. Playing with words in the style of postmodernism becomes a way of reclaiming language from androcentric control and expressing the experience of lesbianism in a form of its own. In “Love Affair With a Boat” Wendy Pond presents a story in two parts, the second of which is a reworking of the first. The variation between the two versions amounts to a redefinition of male appropriation of language. Through contrast, it illustrates the way in which women can communicate in appreciation of one another:

We recognize which of us is competent to act, we think on our feet in unforeseen contingencies, meditating, not in danger of coercion from each other. You, whose agile skill is matched with my dexterity, whose ambient sensuality is consonant with my elusive sexuality, who are not subsumed in my identity, who are not my destiny, I embrace your stoneground thighs and knarr-shaped breasts and set sail. (76)

More overtly, in Susan Sayer’s “La Ngu Age or Music to Our Ears” a Lesbians and Language Forum in Italy provides the setting for the narrator’s change of perspective: “I decided to come here while recovering from the realisation that I was not welcome in an academy where feminist scholarship is feared and where lesbian scholarship is denied” (32). However, while the poetic prose which makes up the bulk of Pond’s story may be vague and rather non-directional, this story and the events which unfold within take a step further toward the surreal. Again, the reclamation of language lies at the heart of the story and women are seen to gain strength from silencing the patriarchal construct they believe language has become. Yet the process of subversion in this case is bizarre, distancing the reader from the women’s lives upon which it impacts. The originality and experimentation with form these stories display should not be dismissed but in terms of the ‘search for self’ the reader seems excluded from the experience.

Conversely, the most outstanding story of this collection succeeds in exploring the subversive powers of language in a way that is effective even when viewed from

outside the lesbian experience. The narrator of Annamarie Jagose's "Milk and Money" is searching, along with her sister, for a sense of 'home' and a sense of identity having spent their childhood as 'outsiders', continually on the move through foreign lands. Her sister, Flytalker, is particularly 'lost' suffering from an aphasic condition which leaves her literally speechless, the power of language totally beyond her reach. While the girls' parents showed them how to gain acceptance in a new land through adopting the language of the majority, this is not an option for Flytalker. She must find another way to reach 'home' and she does, along with the narrator, in a flat they share with a lesbian couple. Here they learn that they have the power to define their own place in the world, that they need not assimilate to others' versions of what they should be.

The catalyst for this realisation is a flyer brought home by one of their politically active lesbian housemates. A women's art gallery is calling for submissions for an exhibition to be entitled "Lesbian Re/presentations". Flytalker is immediately taken by the idea and her creative spirit is unleashed. She exhibits her art and thus finds her voice – her art speaks for her. She presents a sculpture which reflects her very being, an obscure form which defies classification in the same way that she and the narrator have no fixed identity:

Like a Mobius strip its inside is its outside and it seems to swell and contract fluidly according to the idiosyncratic pulsing of its aqueous heart. We are all in here somewhere: our settlements and our migrations, our compromises and our negotiations . . . There is a foreign familiarity to the whole piece that draws me in . . . (18)

Traditional forms of language become obsolete in the presence of visual art. It transcends speech providing a universal form of communication and it can be whatever the individual observer desires. Difference is not excluded; it is celebrated:

Flytalker is standing opposite, watching me. Our eyes connect and a high tide swells up inside my skull, something inside my head casts off its moorings and drifts. Our secret and complex selves, so often held apart by barriers and borders, come together to stand solidly at a knot of intersecting

lines. We have not been given the new names we were waiting for: we have made them up for ourselves. (18)

Just as this thesis claims women's writing can provide a point of identification in the search for the female self, this story portrays visual art as a site of recognition, an image which speaks to the 'reader' of their own experience. In the universal search for identity and a 'place' in the world lesbianism is but one option for women, one of many. Jagose's story is a celebration of the limitlessness of the possibilities women can embrace. The focus is on the positive realisation of self-definition, not on the struggle, nor the politics behind it and the result is a positive point of identification, which seems missing on the whole from this collection. "Milk and Money" is an exception, and an exceptional example, amongst the majority of stories which remain overbearing in their indoctrination of feminist separatism.

It must be acknowledged that this stands as a heterosexually based viewpoint and that the possibility of identification with these stories from such a position may be questionable at best. However, Aorewa McLeod expresses a similar dissatisfaction with the collection from a lesbian point of view claiming that the "explosive sensuality" suggested by both the collection's title and the cover image is not upheld by the contents. The stories, she agrees, fail to present an identifiable portrayal of the experience of lesbianism:

For me, a lesbian thinking and reading about what makes me what I am, here and now in 1991 in Auckland, this book is a disappointment. I wanted an introduction that excited and challenged me, stories and poems that I could identify with, or that would disturb and challenge me. I wanted stories and poems that would make me think – yes – this is what it's like to be a dyke. (Rev. of *The Exploding Frangipani* 32)

She did not find such works in *The Exploding Frangipani* suggesting that the editor's claims were not upheld by the stories they selected. Subversive power won over sensuality. *Spiral* 7 (1992), on the other hand, offers a rather different approach to the

lesbian material it presents. Free of any introductory analysis, the aims of the editors are stated in their acknowledgements: “to celebrate our lives and works. And to make visible and documented, those whose art, writing or presence might otherwise be overlooked or forgotten, whether entirely or in a feminist context” (McPherson et al. n. pag.).

In short, *Spiral 7* shares the goals of the collective’s previous publications. The focus here is specifically on lesbian creativity as expressed through art, poetry and short fiction and once again the context for its presentation is one of ‘celebration’. The examples of short fiction collected here differ from those found in *The Exploding Frangipani* in the way in which this celebration is expressed. The experience of being lesbian is portrayed as a personal rather than a political experience; any struggle present is a struggle of self rather than of a ‘collective sisterhood’ concentrating on the internal experience of lesbianism. The women of these stories undergo journeys of self-discovery, revealing their insecurities, their self-questioning and soul-searching, and the personal impact of these uncertainties shadows any political implications. As Guy Allan suggests, although the collection contains “some theorising it is in no sense a manifesto” (2:5). Lesbianism is affirmed as a personal rather than a political way of being.

As was the case in *The Exploding Frangipani*, form does intervene in some *Spiral 7* stories. Jennifer McLean’s “A Mystery Story in Two Parts” and Sara L. Knox’s “Life Without an Audience”, for example, are to varying degrees surrealistic and confusing. It can but be presumed that some essence of lesbian experience is reflected through this uncertainty, but a lack of connection is the lasting impression. The majority of these stories, however, subscribe to a long-standing literary tradition of realism, portraying easily recognisable situations and characters on a personal level which extends their appeal beyond the intellect into the realm of feelings. Sexual feelings in

particular are central, sexuality being the defining essence of lesbianism, but Hamesh Wyatt's claims that readers may be "insulted by parts of [the collection's] contents" warning them to approach the book "cautiously" if "offended by explicit sexual content" (14), are more reflective of his own attitudes than of the work he critiques. What the sexual exploration of these stories actually suggests (to the more open-minded reader) is that sexual preference is very much secondary to the actual sexual experience and the feelings which are involved, feelings which are experienced irrespective of sexual orientation. The sexual experiences of these stories are sensual and emotional and are revealing of vulnerabilities and insecurities as much as of strength and solidarity.

The sexual experience captured in Jenny Rankine's "Periscope" echoes that of Nancy Stone's "Moments" (in *The Exploding Frangipani*). The narrator is struggling with letting go of her inhibitions, with relaxing and expressing her sensuality and enjoying the pleasures of sex. However, where the focus in Stone's story was on this reluctance as a result of patriarchal conditioning, Rankine does not politicise the moment. She does not suggest that relations with men have caused the narrator's aversion. Rather, her hesitation is conveyed as a personal issue. She is afraid of surrendering herself to her feelings and her mind intervenes to attempt to control the situation:

This monitor sits in my mind, measuring how fast I'm getting aroused. Or telling me how silly I look in this position. I want a touch to fill my world, but my conscious mind treads water, its periscope ceaselessly turning. I'm afraid to stop monitoring. I'm scared of giving myself up, putting my body in other hands, no matter how trusted. (95)

Finally she reaches the realisation that this is a relationship of equality, acceptance and reciprocation. She does not face judgement from her lover; each is as vulnerable as the other and surrendering to the moment does not mean losing control entirely:

Suddenly, she puts both hands on either side of my jaw, controlling the angle of my face. She lowers her mouth hard onto mine. I love her swooping down on me, but I feel caught and hesitate. In that instant I realise I have a choice. I give myself to being held, restrained, swooped on. I lower the periscope and drown. (97)

Clearly this is more a struggle to be certain of her own self than a struggle to live up to the expectations of a 'sisterhood'. Through self-assurance the narrator is more willing and more able to be vulnerable.

The lovers of Sapphic K/nights' "Slouching Towards Mt Maunganui" experience similar sexual tensions and meet at a private hot pool to try and reconcile their differences. The singing and prayer of a baptism taking place in the next pool threatens to interrupt their attempts but they are able to turn it to their own advantage, into their own "conversion . . . subversion?" (188). In these almost reverent surroundings their sexual intimacy is reignited: "jolting to consciousness and fundamental baptism, we spurt in silent laughter, choke, choking, coming up three times, going down, clutching each other . . ." (189). In both stories, the images of love-making are in no way intended to shock the reader nor to stand as a representation of what it means to be lesbian. In this context exploration of sexuality speaks of the depth of feeling within this relationship and speaks to any reader who has experienced similar emotions. Again, the gender of 'the other' is less relevant than the feelings aroused by the experience.

Of course, even when physical intimacy is not the focus, sexual preference inevitably remains central throughout the collection and in most cases, the women of these stories question their preference and the 'lesbian' label they wear as a result. However, their concern is not with the political implications of their lifestyle choice. Rather, they are looking inward seeking an answer to the question 'who am I?' In Marewa Glover's "Out Of It", for example, the narrator's inebriated, drugged state at



the end of a night out with her friend temporarily boosts her self-confidence: “Dizzy, I grab her arm, linking mine with it. Giggling. Never mind the public, they’re asleep. The morning streets belong to the lesbians walking arm in arm. I don’t care if anyone sees” (140). Yet on returning home to find an audience of flatmates awaiting her and facing the desertion of her friend she becomes paranoid, not about who may be watching her but about her loss of control:

Can we stop it now? What if it doesn’t stop? What if I’m going to feel like this forever? What if I can’t stop talking? Ever? Or I’m never to sleep again? Always to be paranoid that people will be able to tell that I’m out of control, or is it under control?

‘I better get going,’ she says. But what am I going to do? Who will I talk to? Hey you can’t leave now, what if I spin out? She hasn’t even made love to me. (141)

Under the influence the narrator has lost her sense of self. She has completely lost connection with her ‘true self’ and with her friend gone she has no one to turn to for identification: “I concentrate hard on imitating a memory of myself” (141).

Young women struggling with issues of identity are also central to Meliors Simms’ “Sally”. The title character plays a role in the lesbian community of ‘helping’ younger women come to terms with and develop their sexual and lesbian identities. As the narrator suggests, she is “notorious for her baby dykes” (154). Sally helps the lost find their way, initiating new recruits into the lesbian lifestyle:

She likes to bring them out, or rather, catch them on the rebound from that first rollercoaster affair, teach them a few tricks and settle them into the life. She’s been doing it for nearly twenty years and her style has hardly changed. Sally looks happy enough and her lovers don’t seem to mind being part of a tradition. (154)

Sally may appear happy but the narrator suggests that this role is limiting. An opportunity for change arises when one of Sally’s ‘baby dykes’ becomes too attached and is driven by jealousy into a public brawl with Sally’s latest ‘initiate’. The women watching on cannot hold back, overcome by the humour of the spectacle unfolding:

“before you knew it Sally and I and the three other women at the table who’d been through Sally’s Sapphic initiation were laughing so hard we were crying” (155). Sally is finally able to see herself in a new light and as a result is able to once again be herself:

For the first time since I’ve met her Sally hasn’t had some fresh young thing hanging off her arm. She’d gotten a bit tied up in her reputation and a little lost in reframing her life across the generation gap four times a year. I’m getting re-acquainted with Sally my old friend. We’ve been going walking, like the old spinsters we are. Climbing mountains in sensible shoes, chuckling. (155)

No longer tied to the role she has been playing Sally is free to simply ‘be’. Lesbianism is no longer the sole defining characteristic of her life.

Yet while these stories suggest that being lesbian is very much a personal rather than a political matter there is still a sense that one’s lesbian identity should be publicly celebrated, not denied. This is certainly clear in Powhiri Rika-Heke’s more political “Tattoo”. Rika-Heke’s narrator is mourning the loss of her lover, killed in an accident while on army manoeuvres. She is being buried in her uniform which rouses great pride in her family but for the narrator it represents only the farce of her lover’s life. Her lover’s family are not proud of the true self they are farewelling but only the role she played within the system which denied her actual identity:

I hate that uniform and all the rules and regulations that go with it. She couldn’t openly show her love for me – they would have crucified her. Yet, she couldn’t, wouldn’t give it up. Said it made her whanau proud, especially since she’d gained her stripes . . . Sure there were other dykes in the unit . . . but they behaved, out of the bars, as if ‘it’ wasn’t real life. If they faced the reality of their lesbianism they would be forced to leave the security of the army, and many had nowhere else to go – no family, no haven. (166)

She was the only one who *really* knew her lover and she is perhaps the only one who can recognise the irony of the funeral service: “Here lies Huhana, wept over by her lesbian lover, and they’re playing ‘The Last Post,’ a bloody military tattoo!” (167). She lies, a victim of the very patriarchal institution which was killing her identity, even as she lived by denying her sexuality.

Being true to one's lesbian self is portrayed as something of a balancing act. While succumbing to patriarchal pressure is to be avoided at all costs this can also be carried too far. If sexuality becomes one's sole identity everything else is sacrificed. Crissie Louise Smith's "Untitled Story" illustrates the potential cost of putting the politics of feminism first and foremost. Personal life suffers. Gertrude is the epitome of the stereotypically lesbian woman and holds a significant 'place' in the 'sisterhood' of her community:

Gertrude believes that a dyke must have strong political principles and must be able to vocalise them in any situation and that it is a serious compromise for the revolution if you do not.  
Gertrude has a high profile and standing in the political lesbian circle because Gertrude can do this (54)<sup>12</sup>

Her personal life, on the other hand, is a mess. Of particular note is the appalling way she treats her lover: she sleeps with other women to uphold her belief in 'free relationships'; she refuses to welcome her lover's family, exercising her own discriminatory behaviour by ironically stating that she "can't have men and non-whites in the house" while hosting a "lesbian anti-racist group"; she leaves her lover at the door, apparently ashamed of her, when visiting her own family. In short, Gertrude is happy to see individuals suffer for the good of the feminist lesbian cause. Politics come before people.

This is precisely where individualism and radical feminism collide. The loss of selfhood which lesbian separatism came to represent at the height of the women's movement was clearly a driving force behind the rethinking of feminism so apparent in the 1990s. Lesbianism could no longer be viewed as the ultimate achievement of living in a way true to feminist beliefs. As seen in Johnson's "Sappho Reclining", the

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<sup>12</sup> The formatting of this quotation from Crissie Louise Smith's "Untitled Story" follows that of the original which, in its entirety, creates a sense of political monologue, further removing the reader from the 'personal' experience of the characters.

sisterhood was crumbling. This disintegration of female solidarity is also seen in Aorewa McLeod's fictional contribution to *Spiral 7*, "The Closing of the Phoenix". In true separatist spirit it is 'women-only' night at the Megadrome Nightclub but it is also to be the last. It is closing night and crowds have flocked to make the most of this final female gathering: "women in purple lurex tights, women in tuxedos and bow ties, women in leather jackets with shaven heads and just women" (24). Lost within the crowd is the narrator, Judy, who attempts to find peace amongst the throng of women after arguing pointlessly with her partner Mel: "*Breathe in and out deeply and slowly, smile, sip your soda water and watch the scene at the Phoenix. It's the last night. And this is my community*" (26). Repeatedly she tells herself that the women surrounding her are her people, that together they form a united front, that at their centre she is secure and safe. Her doubts, however, will not be overcome. Rather than finding a sense of well-being within this 'community' of women she is plagued by the question "Who are they?" (27).

It is not until one of her friends comments on the fact that Judy's past three lovers have all since turned 'straight' that she realises why she is struggling to find peace within this society of women. She can relate to these women who have gone 'straight' and abandoned the sisterhood, for their lesbian community is no longer united with the strength it once was:

*It's because lesbianism is no longer seen as the vanguard of feminism. And where is feminism anyway? It's true. Vicki ran off with her professor. Male of course. Louis merged into New Age personhood. Peoplehood! And had an exhibition celebrating her new found heterosexual sexuality. And she used to run lesbian coming-out rituals! And now she's a fucking counsellor! Counselling us! She's shouting. Shouting with tears running down her cheeks. Maryanne's nodding so perhaps she's heard her. Mel puts comforting arms around her.*

*It's okay. It's okay, she murmurs. We are hungry, and thirsty, sometimes – We are barefoot and cold...*

*I cannot hear you, says Judy. What are you saying? Who are we? (27-28)*

Carrying the label of lesbianism once gave her a strong sense of identity – it was *the* answer to the question of who she was. Now this sense of ‘belonging’ is crumbling around her. Her identity is no longer simply defined by a collective consciousness; she is an individual. The women of these stories stand alone and Smither, Johnson and various lesbian writers discussed allow this individuality to shine. They share a common experience as women writers but each approaches the fictionalisation of this experience in her own unique way, extending the boundaries of realism and further highlighting the need to acknowledge each and every aspect of the female identity.

## Chapter Seven

### Continuities and Changes: The Shifting Tide of a New Wave

While previously established writers continued to find support in the early 1990s, new voices were also entering the mainstream through publication of individual collections. The emergence of these new voices did not, however, produce a sudden wave of discernibly unique writing or an abundance of fresh approaches to realism.<sup>13</sup> While some new writers of the period celebrated contemporary shifts in the experience of being woman, others continued to write of old familiar struggles in old familiar forms. The shift away from a political towards a more personal focus had become widespread but individual writers displayed varying degrees of success in fictionalising this experience to reach a 1990s reading audience. The only constant amidst this transitional period was the influence of gender as the female perspective these women writers brought to their fictional creations continued to flow through to the reader.

#### **From the shallows to passionate new depths: Sheridan Keith**

Sheridan Keith swiftly entered the New Zealand literary scene in the early 1990s with the publication of two short story collections in rapid succession: *Shallow Are the Smiles at the Supermarket* in 1991 (shortlisted in the Best First Book category of the Commonwealth Writers Prize) and *Animal Passions* in 1992. Together, these collections illustrate the shifting times of the early 1990s. Even with such a short space between publications a change in Keith's writing is clearly discernable. A traditionally bleak, one-dimensional view of women is transformed by rich and witty use of language and

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<sup>13</sup> Jean Hamlin's *Pot Pourri: a collection of stories* (1990) is a particularly good example of this, hence its absence from discussion. Hamlin's stories not only capture another era, they are also extremely contrived pieces. In the style of Maupassant most hinge on a twist which focuses upon the 'thing' of the story's title, e.g. "The Bird", "The Doll", "The Farm", with little life to their narratives.

by a sense of passion being freed from containment. Keith's work comes to parallel that of both Smither and Johnson in the increasing recognition of the limitlessness of fiction it displays.

The 'enhanced realism' identified in Johnson's work is hinted at in Keith's *Shallow Are the Smiles at the Supermarket* in a story which blurs the lines between the believable and the bizarre. "Her Hollowness" tells the seemingly familiar tale of a woman struggling to face her aging self:

Angela's immediate problem is that on Christmas day, tomorrow, she will turn fifty. She has over the past few weeks begun to dwell more and more on this fact, and the more she has considered her life the more depressed she has become. Now it seems to have manifested itself in a totally physical way. She feels her body to be completely hollow, while at the same time her head has become so heavy that she is having real difficulty carrying it around. (60)

An identifiable reality is established for the reader as this woman attempts to deal with the emptiness inside her but as the story unfolds the reader's expectations are challenged. Angela is visited by a golden man shooting rays from a golden gun which impregnate her through her navel. She has been chosen:

'You have found favour with God, and will, in the usual nine month's time, bear him a daughter. It was considered high time we redressed the balance . . . Last time we chose a virgin, this time it's a mature woman who's had a tubal ligation. The whole idea is to prove the omnipotence of God, not to deny women their sexuality.' (67)

At this point female identification is lost in the fantastical nature of the situation. The story suggests that in her earlier writing Keith was experimenting with new modes of expression but had yet to find her own voice. The collection as a whole upholds this impression with its more traditional approach to constructing women.

The women of these stories fit the 'character-type' noted repeatedly throughout this analysis. As Michael Gifkins suggests, Keith's women emerge as inhabitants of a rather bleak (and familiar) territory, disillusioned by marriage and facing the

inevitability of ageing, they suffer pain and loss (Rev. of *Shallow Are the Smiles* 50). Overall, their outlook is unpromising and the tone of their stories pessimistic. They are portrayed, as Brigid Shadbolt claims, “seeking self assertion and greater independence” (19) but repeatedly they fail in their search. Their efforts are futile, undertaken as they are in a social world which denies their value as women and as individuals, and which they are powerless to change.

The stories of *Shallow Are the Smiles at the Supermarket* consistently take place within this familiar patriarchal construct and Keith’s women continually suffer. For instance, when Mrs Harris of “Ephemera” shows signs of ageing she longs for some care and support:

. . . Mrs Harris thinks about Humpty Dumpty who sat on the wall and remembers the picture of Humpty lying in pieces on the ground . . . She remembers how she used to sing that song when she was a very small girl, and she wishes she was a little girl again, with a mother who would bring her a boiled egg in the egg-cup which said A is for antelope. (79)

To her daughter, however, she has come to represent the short-lived usefulness suggested in the story’s title and is treated with disdain. Age has stripped Mrs Harris of her value and her identity and she is left questioning her own sanity. She has become a woman alone with no role by which to measure her worth or define her ‘place’. ‘Being mother’ is no longer an option but no alternative is offered.

A lack of positive alternatives is notable throughout this collection. Keith’s women continue to exist only within the roles patriarchy defines for them. Wendy of “Over on the Island”, for example is driven to fill the gap a failed marriage has left in her identity. No longer able to define herself as someone’s wife she fights to be accepted by the birth mother she has never met, to find an alternative ‘place’ as someone’s daughter. However, soon after realising this hope, her birth mother dies and



an even wider gap threatens to open up in her life. She is now free to be herself but rather than a wealth of opportunity this freedom presents a void:

I'll go away somewhere . . . I'll just head off somewhere. There's nothing holding me back, no missing pieces any more. No longer any excuses for not living.

It's just that the world seems such a terribly bleak place.

It's frightening, I feel so empty. (51)

She remains unsure of herself as an individual without others to define her 'place'.

Being herself *for* herself is foreign and frightening.

Being a 'woman alone' is not a desired identity for any of Keith's women in this collection. Marriage remains the mainstay of their lives, even when it is "a recurrent arena of pain and the suppression of life energy" (Olsson, "Wounds That" 9). The husband and wife of "A Christmas Story" epitomise the loneliness of such a union. She has been rushed to hospital for a mastectomy and on Christmas Day he takes their two young girls to visit her. The exchange the girls witness captures the state of this marriage. Husband and wife are unable to connect:

Her father is giving her mother the Christmas present

He says, 'You couldn't have picked a worse time to be in hospital.'

She doesn't like the brooch. 'I've never liked orange topazes,' she says, 'perhaps I can change it.' (85)

"Marriages, Marriages" also portrays a couple divided. Paula comes to realise the lonely state of her own marriage through witnessing the commitment of her parents. They have something she does not: "they are together, there is no doubting that. And that is what makes Paula jealous" (39). Her own marriage is a façade, a game of role playing "an empty, hollow, resounding vessel in which she and Geoffrey exist, wearing the polite masks of civilised behaviour . . . All their everyday living processes have become exercises in delirium" (40). It seems that she and Geoffrey have become strangers and when she confronts him in an attempt to understand why things worsen. Only after

another year of living in a “state of trance” (42) and knowing that Geoffrey views her as “rather asexual” (41) does she find the strength to take action:

*Dear Geoffrey,  
I am leaving home. Please ascribe my behaviour to mid-life crisis, pre-menstrual tension or menopausal syndrome, whichever appears the most appropriate. I can only explain that I wish to affirm, outside the confines of my marriage, the exquisite tenderness of my loins, the delicious nuances of my emotions . . . and to assure myself of my most certain, most glorious, femininity. (42)*

Her leaving represents a reclamation of self but her decision to go to Alaska “where there are at least ten men for every woman . . . as good as anywhere to find her idea of the perfect man: one able to converse with intelligence . . . yet able to maintain an erection for a satisfactory length of time” (43) suggests that she can only find happiness with another man. Again, being alone is not an option.

Other women in these stories seek the fulfilment missing from their marriages through extramarital affairs but these prove to be equally futile. The woman of “Pain”, for instance, finds herself trapped in a hopeless situation. She finds sexual fulfilment in the arms of her lover, “she could never believe the degree of pleasure afforded by the simple contact of her flesh with his” (52), but beyond this physical connection their relationship is non-existent. Her husband, on the other hand, is kind and he needs her as his wife. The woman’s identity is split between married self and sexual self. She cannot find complete satisfaction with either man, but being with both brings pain. There is no solution. Similarly, Janet of “The Tennis Court” has asserted her independence and freed herself from an unsatisfactory marriage. Yet she continues to see herself as “the first Mrs Henley”, the role of wife inextricably bound in her identity, and she questions her earlier need for autonomy:

Mrs Henley, Janet, left Mr Henley, Michael, five years ago for reasons that seemed important at the time, and were to do with asserting herself as a person, though these reasons have now become obscured by loneliness, illness, and menopausal insecurity. (106)

Returning home for her daughter's wedding she finds that Michael has "emerged the long-term winner" (106). Not only does he have a new marriage, but he has also transformed "from a middle-aged lethargic bore, into a fit purposeful fellow" (106). No indication is given of the life Janet may have made for herself. She is simply portrayed as the loser.

Even when Keith moves beyond the 'woman as victim' story, she creates only limited outcomes for her characters. The independence of her independent women is not always successfully conceived. Jenny of "Sky Walking", for instance, a divorcee with three teenagers, seems to regain a sense of self through her relationship with Rufus, an artist. They are both eccentric characters but their oddities seem to draw them together. However, when Jenny reveals to Rufus that she likes to communicate with God by writing Him messages on the mirror, his response is disconcerting:

When Jenny explains to him the details of her obsession, that mirrors are the sensory cells of God, he looks at her, his expression containing ecstasy. He says, 'Well, that's fine, because although it's not the right time to tell them yet, I have this growing awareness that I am God, and I thought I'd seen you somewhere before.' (22)

While Keith portrays the relationship as blossoming and shows Jenny reaching a higher level of self-acceptance, a relationship with a man who considers himself to be God and continually views her as an object of his art is questionable at best.

The outlook for women, as Keith presents it in this collection, is resoundingly bleak. Even the young woman of the title story, "Shallow are the Smiles at the Supermarket," whose musical genius promises her a fuller more independent life than Keith's married women can realise would rather be 'normal':

. . . Suddenly to be married seems to be far more important than playing the piano. Clare feels like a tiny lost child with her whole terrible life in front of her, alone, while all her friends are pairing off, chattering away, laughing together. Maybe even laughing about her. (15)

Her subsequent decline into anorexia presents little hope for a new generation. In fact, as a whole this collection presents little sense of change in the experience of womanhood. Inertia is the predominant mood. The majority of these women exhibit feelings of resignation. Even instances of newfound independence or turning points which offer the opportunity for fresh beginnings inspire little more than half-hearted responses. The stories lack feeling and their characters, as suggested by Brigid Shadbolt, lack depth: "Keith asks us to believe in them, yet they have no qualities which endear them to us" (19). *Shallow are the Smiles at the Supermarket* provides a mere outline of women as they may exist within a system of patriarchal control; they fit the one-dimensional character type with no sense of the inner selves which make them individuals. For a deeper level of insight the reader must turn to Keith's second collection, *Animal Passions*.

Relationships between women and men remain central to *Animal Passions* but a discernable shift in Keith's mode of representation 'lifts' the stories from the domain of inevitability. In some cases a sense of resignation does remain evident. Rosemary of "Dancing in the Dark", for instance, is supposedly happily engaged to be married when she unexpectedly stumbles across her first love:

. . . she saw, there, over there where the potted palms fringed the dark window overlooking tethered barges whose navigation lights shone in the river water, black-tied, martinied, with his shoes shining, just as they had the night they had met at the teenage dance at the Karori Baptist Hall, was Max Palmer.

Ten years. Ten years later. Max Palmer, her very first boyfriend, making her eyes roll in their sockets when she was fifteen and still at school . . . (84)

Transported back in time and swept away by teenage romantic illusions, Rosemary remembers the pleasure in being the object of Max's attentions and suddenly her present engagement seems lacking:

(Rosemary, standing on the other side of the crowded room, looks down at her emerald ring, and goes through the flurry of difficult emotions that are to do with her fiancé, and wonders again why he never seems to want to make love to her . . . Maybe it will be different when they are married.) (90)

Even though Max left her, Rosemary is still deluded by the romantic ideal he represented, but when he leaves again and she discovers he has had to return to his wife who is having a baby, her dreams are again shattered. Rosemary is resigned to living in the present:

The brassy band starts up, 'Dancing in the Dark,' and though the room is bright, too bright, the river outside is an ominous thread. That's what we are all doing, Rosemary thinks, dancing in the dark. (96)

Similarly, "Is There Anything More Poignant Than an Eggshell" retains a sombre tone in its recognition of human mortality. The eggshell of the title becomes a metaphor for the papery thin quality old age has bestowed upon Rosalie's mother's skin. Mrs Hudson is not portrayed as a dying woman. Rather, the death of her "mean and gloomy" husband has filled her with life, freeing her from a household once filled with "heavy steps and sighs, weighty judgements and ominous predictions" (128). However, when she dreams of an event from her childhood, the burying of a friend's prized porcelain doll, Rosalie finds it "ominously portentous". Initially her mother seems invigorated by the memory, "as if reclamation of her mischievous young spirit somehow bolstered her beleaguered frame" (132), but later she reveals her terror:

'Will you promise that when I die you'll make sure that I'm really dead?' She is having trouble getting the words out. 'I have this terrible fear that I'm going to be buried alive.' Her mother is close to tears . . . (133)

The reader is left with this bleak image of mortality. Mrs Hudson is fearful that even the peace death promises will evade her.

Such resignation to the suffering of life does not, however, dominate this collection. While *Shallow are the Smiles at the Supermarket* presents a rather static version of patriarchally constructed womanhood, the majority of stories within *Animal*

*Passions* look beyond social constructions to explore inner feelings. As Jane Stafford suggests, the result is a “depth of characterisation . . . often difficult to achieve within the narrow confines of the short story” (Rev. of *Animal Passions* 7). Neither a collection of repeated one-dimensional female victims, nor a forum for social comment this is a collection of ‘animal passions’. Keith’s characters are driven from within by their feelings and desires, which, as Michael Gifkins suggests are ever-changing, ever-defying expectations:

For love is what drives these stories, whether the characters are children with absent parents or adults orphaned by their need to be other than they are . . . what this writing really charts is the Sargasso Sea of human longing, marooned bodies slowly turning, pale flesh glistening in the dark. (Rev. of *Animal Passions* 13)

Through enhancement of realism with both elements of the bizarre and clever use of metaphor, Keith brings the human spirit to life in a style rich with hints of both Smither and Johnson. She has, as suggested by Graeme Lay, animated her work creating stories that are “more subtle . . . gentle, richly detailed, sophisticated and at times highly sensuous” (Rev. of *Animal Passions* 127).

The predominant metaphor adopted is that of the title. Throughout animal imagery serves to capture the inner tension of Keith’s characters as their ‘human’ control and rationality does battle with their more ‘animalistic’ passions and desires. In “Fare Forward, Voyagers”, for instance, Patricia is torn between her role as wife and mother and the sexual desire evoked by her new lover. This lover is known only as “the dog-handler” as their animals have brought them together, unleashing their own animal passions:

A few walks together in the park, exercising their dogs, and successfully managing to stop them from coupling . . . two afternoons of roughly three hours each spent in a suburban motel on the other side of town where they had wrestled together, enjoying those pleasures they had denied their animals. (110)

However, Patricia's newfound lust also seems to have a positive effect upon her marriage. Learning of the affair, her husband, more interested in the "pursuit of money" than intimacy with his wife, suddenly notices her again:

How was it that being a charming wife, a devoted mother, a good hostess, had brought her nothing beyond a polite friendship; the wearing of alluring night attire had proved a sad embarrassment; while a slip into wicked, immoral behaviour had earned her the intensity of passion she had always yearned for? (117)

Recognition that her sexual self is alive and well is more satisfying than playing the role of the good wife and mother. Her husband may continue to put her after his 'manly' sporting pleasures and she may have lost her chances with the dog-handler but Patricia has found herself and reasserted her identity beyond the bounds of marriage.

The woman of "In the Fog, the Dog" also displays a need to accept the animal side of human nature. The story's title refers to a poem she read as a child:

*In the fog  
The dog  
Waited for his dinner  
He wanted meat  
So he ate his feet  
Is he fatter or thinner? (73)*

As an only child Julia longed for the companionship of a dog but her neat and tidy, ordered and controlling parents would not relent. When older she is free to find this companionship for herself and her husband replaces the longed for dog:

. . . she married Toby (a dog's name?), who was unruly, like a rough-coated dog, but nice . . . and Julia was happy because she had Toby, who was her very own, someone to cuddle and stroke, and run her fingers through his hair (coat?), and snuggle up with in bed, and Toby like Julia doing all those things. (76)

When Julia suffers a miscarriage and becomes "inert with grief" (77), however, their contentment is shattered and the imaginary dog of her childhood re-enters threatening to engulf her with the despair and loneliness it represents: "now she was terrified of it. She knew that it was voraciously hungry, but that no matter how much it ate, it would never

get enough” (78). Overcome with panic, Julia takes to feeding the dog, attempting to keep it at bay but it continues to haunt her and one night she is forced to confront it face to face:

The dog was perfectly composed, looked at her directly and without surprise, and carried an expression of extreme nobility. They looked at each other, eye to eye, and neither moved. It conveyed the feeling that it was certain of its own worth, but just as it seemed that it must be a construction of lifeless steel or some such silvery metal, so silent and still was it standing, it turned suddenly and disappeared into the bushes. (81)

Julia is able to stand her ground and recognises the dog’s beauty and dignity. The sight of its reptile-like tail as it turns from her remains a source of horror, seeming to speak of “dreadful, unspeakable acts” (82), but in confronting the dog Julia has come to accept this aspect of herself. She has her own hunger and now that the dog has gone she is free to satisfy it once more:

She felt very calm, as if she contained the entire world . . . an excitement began to rise through her body. A ripple that began in the skin of the soles of her feet, and flickered, fluttered all over her skin.  
 . . . She explored her lips with her tongue, all over, making them wet, making her wild.  
 She was listening for the first sound of Toby’s car . . . (82)

Julia has joined Patricia of “Fare Forward, Voyagers” in defying controlling forces and questions of morality to reawaken and embrace their passions and desires.

This refusal to establish a moral code allows Keith to enter more fully into her characters’ true feelings, their animal passions. As Michael Gifkins suggests, “the one distinguishing feature in this writing . . . is the complete (and refreshing) lack of an overriding morality that tells its characters how they should behave” (Rev. of *Animal Passions* 13). These characters are driven from within and react to their feelings rather than to any outer imposed expectations. “Zoology” epitomises this sense of “the way in which nature can rule our emotions” (Nichol 18). Alexa, a young, eccentric art student falls for Stephen, a middle-aged, prominent community figure, when they meet at the



zoo. This age difference is not the focus of their story, nor is it suggested to be the source of their problems. Rather, Keith focuses upon the power of their feelings for one another and their inability to control or overcome them. In one sense their relationship is purely platonic:

They were friends, nothing more, though it was a sensual friendship that happily encompassed verbal innuendo, and the discussion of bodily functions. Hands were caressed, cheeks kissed upon arrival and departure, but nothing further, their fleeting touches were never permitted to build into the critical mass required for sexual intent. (23)

But underneath the surface this “sexual intent” hounds them. It is only when they succumb to this suppressed desire that they are freed from what has become an obsessive relationship. Stephen finds peace in the realisation that his sexual self did not die along with his youth and can now be happier with his solitude. Alexa is freed from the desire that has been keeping her chained to Stephen and can pursue her own youth, be true to her own self. The mating dance in which they have been engaged has imprisoned them just like the caged bird they witnessed on their first meeting. Now that the dance is over they can move on.

The female protagonist of “Belle Mondo, Belle Bugie” must also free herself from a love affair to regain selfhood and she does so by telling lies (hence the story’s title which translates as ‘Beautiful World, Beautiful Lies’). The unnamed woman has detected a lump in her breast and gone through the agony of investigation to find that it is only a benign fluid-filled cyst. She is relieved and delighted, “she could live again, think about the future,” but this sense of joy is clouded by the absence of her lover, John:

. . . where was he anyway? He’d said he’d come with her. It was his idea. He wanted to be supportive . . . It didn’t mean he would support her, not that. Anyway he had a wife to support, an alcoholic wife, but ‘supportive.’ An emotional back-stop, as it were. (57)

Slowly, the woman begins to realise that she is wasting her life waiting for John: “What good was it anyway? Two years of agonising love for a man who spent a few hours with her every fortnight, every three months, every month, less and less” (59). Two weeks later, not having heard from him, she phones John to tell him she is all right and his response sparks her into action: ‘That’s good then,’ he said. ‘We wouldn’t want you to have to lose one of those lovely knockers, would we?’ (61)

The lies pour forth. She tells John she has met someone else, someone who is “free”, and finds herself describing the doctor who performed her ultrasound. As the lies unfold her sense of empowerment grows:

She was shaking all over, as if a storm had passed through her flesh, leaving shredded leaves and cast branches on the ground. Such lies, such wonderful lies! She had never told lies. But now she had told lies, beautiful lies. It was so easy telling lies. And the sun shone on her lies. The trees gleamed at her lies, the birds sang to her lies. (62)

She has rid herself of the man who was holding her back from living and through this reclamation of her identity her lies come true. She meets a man “who fitted her description . . . as the hand fitted the glove” (62). Through acting out her subversion of male expectations and putting her own feelings first this woman gets what she wants.

Ironically, the most effective story in *Animal Passions* is in many ways both conventional and familiar. In “The Kiss”, Lily recalls a particularly memorable childhood summer when her mother tested the bounds of marriage. To alleviate the exhausting heat and the boredom of confinement due to a polio epidemic, Mrs Walker decided that she would build a swimming pool in the backyard, a notion ridiculed by her husband who claimed “she couldn’t even organise her way out of a paper bag” (47). This ridicule soon turned to anger when Mrs Walker put her words into action digging a huge hole in the back garden and lining it with concrete she was forbidden to use. Mr

Walker's patriarchal views come up against the mind of a strong woman, fiercely defending her independence:

He muttered something about why was it he had to put up with such a wife, when all the men he knew had wives who were perfectly prepared to darn their socks, and bottle fruit and . . .

'And do as they're told?' asked Mrs Walker.

'Yes, do as they're told. And why shouldn't you do as I tell you? I'm your husband.'

'You may be my husband,' she replied, 'but I take no orders from you, nor from any man for that matter.' (52)

The struggle Mrs Walker undergoes to build the pool clearly symbolises her refusal to bow to patriarchal oppression. However, it is not this assertion that Lily remembers most vividly. She was most affected by the 'moment' which gave the story its title:

And just once, Lily remembered, once, when her father was hot from mowing the lawn, and he was sitting on the back step drinking a glass of beer, Mrs Walker had gone into the house and put on her Jantzen bathing suit, walked back past him down the newly mown grass as if it were a catwalk, as if she had high heels on, as if she were an elegant feline, or a strikingly fine feathered fowl, which she was, and she had sat seductively on the side of the pool, calling out to him . . .

Mr Walker didn't say anything . . . he put the glass down carefully on the step, and walked down the lawn to the pool . . . and lowered himself into the water. Lily could see from his face that it felt very nice. But it was even better when Lily's mother slipped off the side of the pool, slid through the water, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him. (56)

Perhaps it is this unspoken passion for one another that keeps them together, overcoming the patriarchal conventions of marriage which threaten to force them apart. Ultimately, this story suggests that feelings matter the most, however fleeting their expression. Throughout this collection passions take precedence over politics and feelings over actions. Jane Hurley may make a valid point in claiming that passion is "largely absent" from the "male/female encounters" explored in these stories ("Bestiary In Her Bed" 49) but she fails to consider the fact that passion resides elsewhere in Keith's work. Rather than engaging her characters in grandiose outward acts, Keith conveys their inner desires with greater subtlety through the language she adopts and

the details she chooses to impart and herein lies the opportunity for identification. The feelings Keith explores more fully in her second collection are not simply fragments of fiction; they are recognisable, true-to-life feelings engaging the reader in their familiarity. Heather Murray, for instance, writes of her personal connection to Keith's work with stories such as "The Kiss" capturing their "shared past" but she also suggests that the "value of fiction" is far wider reaching: "It takes our experience, isolates it for a brief, concentrated instant, and makes it, and us, valid and enhanced" (23).

As recognised throughout this discussion, the need for such 'validation' is particularly great for women inhabiting a traditionally patriarchally constructed society. The feelings conveyed through Keith's stories speak to these women. They are transferable; the reader can find their own experience of being woman reflected within the text. Keith's stories seem primarily addressed to women. As a male reviewer, Norman Bilbrough writes of his failure to identify with her work claiming that her "over-use of language" and "learned detail" distances him from the text:

There's a strong element of artifice in her stories and I found it difficult to connect with them. One isn't aware so much of the stories, they don't have a life of their own, but of lots of small agendas of the author. ("The Sacred Fish" 2)

Keith, Bilbrough claims, is "showing us her writing, much in the same way she might show off her jewellery, or an expensive dress" ("The Sacred Fish" 2), suggesting that her stories focus on outer appearances rather than internals of experience, but perhaps such a reading reveals more about the reader's gender difference than it does about Keith's writing. Bilbrough's focus upon the superficial details of Keith's stories may be the result of an inability on his part to identify with the female experience such details convey, causing him to surmise that there must be some hidden agenda. The suggestion here is not that male readers can not and do not ever relate to 'women's work', for that would be a gross overgeneralisation. Rather, the point which becomes increasingly

obvious is that a gap *does* exist. The gender of the writer *does* matter. Indeed, according to comments made in an interview with Megan Fidler, Keith herself would agree. Her emphatically positive response when questioned about the viability of claiming the existence of “a female voice, a female style of writing in modern literature” suggests that the label of ‘women’s writing’ should not simply be dismissed:

‘I think men and women are interested in different things, so they are going to write in a different sort of way. I’m not saying that you can look at any particular story and say that’s written by a woman or that’s written by a man . . . But I do think basically men are interested in action, territory, power and women are interested in their own feelings, love and death, and relationships. There’s just a totally different view of life or areas of concern.’ (“Shallow Smiles” 21-22)

The works discussed thus far certainly uphold Keith’s notion that female interest lies within the realms of feelings and relationships and as a whole they also illustrate the subtle shifts which have occurred in the way this female-centred experience has been fictionally portrayed. Short fiction of the early 1990s was slowly dismantling the stereotypical, one-dimensional ‘woman-as-victim’ figure and embracing instead the multiplicity and individuality of women.

### **More of the same: the familiar strains of Catherine Delahunty and Colleen Reilly**

As the work of established writers has shown, not all women’s short fiction published in the early 1990s took a fresh approach to the female experience, and many ‘new’ writers also remained entrenched in the tradition of social realism and focused on the struggles and limitations faced by women in a patriarchal world. Catherine Delahunty’s collection *Past Light* (1992), for instance, is primarily located in a bygone age. Specifically, these stories focus on the Coromandel of early colonial New Zealand, exploring the experience of womanhood in this time and place of hardship. As highlighted in her preface to the stories, Delahunty portrays pioneer women as “vibrant

with the character and passion of individuals” rewriting myths of “colonial stereotypes in starched aprons” (n. pag.). Her stories show the courage which carried these women through the harsh, grim realities of colonial life in a land which represented, as one of her male characters states, “Good country for men and horses, bad country for women and dogs” (“Hard Road” 11). Circumstances may have trapped them into endless, repetitious days of “milking, washing, cooking, weeding, preserving, milking, eating” (“Hard Road” 12) but Delahunty suggests that the female spirit remained strong.

Presented as it is, however, this suggestion seems to have more historical significance than literary appeal. As a whole, *Past Light* reads more like a document of social history than a collection of fictional works. These stories are more informative than entertaining and, as Barabara Neale establishes, the sense of déjà vu upon reading is undeniable: “so many of our writers have done this kind of thing in fiction already” (5). This sense of repetition also exists within the collection as the reader is continually presented with the same story of female struggle in the guise of seemingly varying characters and circumstances. This repetitiousness, as Jane Hurley suggests, is “the book’s major flaw”:

It is not simply that Delahunty returns to the same themes; it is rather that the narrative voice seems to continue unchanged through the whole collection . . . . Delahunty uses a variety of narrators (women of every age from young girls to the elderly, and even a man) and narrative forms . . . but I found it hard to see each protagonist as a new individual. It’s as if a travelling actress is performing a series of roles. The props change . . . but the person remains the same. The diversity of these women’s lives has been evened out by a smooth, confident and over-strong narrative voice. (“Some Secret Source” 54)

These past lives seem to blend into one. In rewriting misconceptions of colonial women Delahunty appears to have created her own stereotype. This woman may show courage but she remains a patriarchal victim, prisoner to rural hardship and the men who rule the land.

The narrator of “The Outing” for example lost any freedom of selfhood upon marrying:

I had been married to Jay for thirty-one years and spring had dissolved into a single memory. I wasn't the same girl who stumbled along the jetty and followed the young man up the steep track to the house . . . I entered the kitchen half daunted, half captured. I caught the apron Jay tossed me and tied it over my black satin travelling dress, and I made supper on the wood range. Real life had begun. (86)

This is the ‘real life’ shared by all of Delahunty’s pioneer women: a life of hard physical labour, interrupted only for childbirth, with no time for the self. While this particular woman does find temporary relief from her imprisonment by defying her husband and going on an outing with her brother, the bleak sense of inevitability surrounding her return is unmistakable. Similarly, other of Delahunty’s women who do show spirit, casting off their aprons and taking action to free themselves from lives of domestic servitude, find themselves in even more limited circumstances. Eileen of “Blue Silk Petticoat”, for example, defies all expectations of how a young widowed woman should behave when she leaves a dance with the violinist, swims with him in the moonlight and makes love to him on the wet sand. In the morning she has no regrets, “[she] knew she would pay fully for her actions, but fullness was better than emptiness” (158) though the fact that she will face consequences casts a shadow over her moment of pleasure. Mrs Carpenter of “A Round Dozen” reveals “the only way out for a good respectable woman” (135) when she finds herself pregnant for the twelfth time and realises that she has nothing left to give. She drinks a specially brewed liquid which brings on the bleeding and she waits for death to take her. Delahunty offers no better alternative. These women are also united by the inescapability of their circumstances.

Some hope is expressed in “Hard Road to Half a Home” when young Victoria realises that there is life beyond the harsh realities of her parent’s farm, but its realisation remains difficult to imagine. Sent to the village for flour Victoria is treated

like an adult by the store woman, Mrs Huhmann: “‘We will have coffee,’ she said to me. Dreamy warmth spread through my whole body. I felt myself blush for no reason. Here was I in a proper kitchen about to have coffee with another woman. Did life begin like this?” (17). But her sense of liberation is short-lived. The coffee leaves a bitter taste in her mouth as she realises the limitations imposed upon her as a ‘woman of the land’. Hope turns to resentment at her entrapment: “I felt then that one day had brought me to an anger at this life that would never leave me” (2). Her greater awareness simply intensifies her dissatisfaction. The ‘woman as victim’ is set to continue into the next generation. Writing about women of contemporary times gives Delahunty the opportunity to offer a fresh perspective and to move beyond this singular female identity but even those stories narrated by women of the 1990s continue to focus on their pioneering predecessors. In “Past Light”, for instance, the narrator’s search for identity through exploring her past becomes her grandmother’s story rather than her own and the repetitiousness of the collection is not escaped. Delahunty has, as she intended, reclaimed the identities of New Zealand’s pioneering women, freeing them from the starched-apron stereotype and revealing, as Suzann Olsson suggests, “a woman spirit that shines forth in passion, hope and humour” (Rev. of *Past Light* 11). However she has failed to achieve an expression of this spirit as an *individual* spirit. Delahunty’s portrayal of what it meant to be a colonial woman living on the land denies the multiplicity of the experience; she continues to follow the well-worn path of one-dimensional social realism.

Colleen Reilly also treads this path with *Jim’s Elvis* (1992), her mode of expression reflecting the circumscribed state of her characters. As Michael Gifkins suggests, Reilly’s stories are “essentially case studies” (Rev. of *Jim’s Elvis* 22). They present slices-of-(real)life and fail to explore what may lie beyond, leaving the reader as



empty and dissatisfied as the characters within. Like the women of the stories the reader is left with “little room to move” (Richards 5). The experience of being woman is again reduced by resignation to a singular notion of womanhood. For most of Reilly’s women the source of this suffocating dissatisfaction is found in their relationships with men and marriage is again revealed as falling far short of its idealised status. The narrator of “About Vivienne”, for instance, is resigned to the fact that her husband is continually unfaithful and the matter remains unspoken between them: “we do not have a modern marriage, we do not pretend that honesty is the best policy. We married twenty years ago, and we will stay married” (27). The only satisfaction she can gain is through hurting him, taunting him with his current lover’s name:

He sat there, grinding his teeth, clutching his cup so tight I thought it would break. I don’t know why I didn’t help him, he really was hurting. But he hurts a lot, it’s how he knows he’s alive, and he hurts me a lot. I used to hurt all the time. This night I felt powerful and I was not going to ruin it. (36)

Her only happiness lies in the knowledge that her husband may share in the loneliness and pain that marriage brings her. Even his adulterous behaviour does not provide an opportunity for escape. Both are trapped in this marriage union which paradoxically divides them.

Throughout, Reilly tells this same story of woman imprisoned, whether “just waiting” for a man who never appears and whose whole existence is questionable, as does the woman of “Invention”, or seeking fulfilment outside marriage in a lover’s arms only to be “punished” by the hands of God with a daughter’s death, like Laura of “A Death”. Her women passively accept the hopelessness of their circumstances and in fact, *expect* the men in their lives to ‘behave badly’. Both women *and* men become character types in these stories, reducing their relationships to a singularly flat, one-dimensional theme. As Graham Adams suggests, Reilly’s stories lack the animation of real life:

. . . although obsessions, relationships and sexual liaisons are Reilly's literary stock-in-trade, passion is what her stories lack most in the telling. A sense of excitement is missing in all of them . . . (52)

There is at least one exception to this general sense of lifelessness. "Umbrella" stands out as the redeeming story of Reilly's collection. Amidst the monotony of like characters in like situations, this story explores an added dimension. Emotions are brought to the surface as Reilly's focus shifts from the outer forces which create struggles for women, to pain and suffering as it may be experienced within, making "Umbrella" a personal rather than political account, and allowing for the "emotional involvement" Patricia Thwaites questionably claims is "easy" throughout the collection (22) to finally come to light.

In "Umbrella" Reilly portrays the inner turmoil of a woman struggling to maintain control of her world. From the story's outset Ann's psychological struggle manifests itself in a constant state of agitation and anxiety. An old and well-read newspaper article reveals the source of her fretfulness:

She read, in a ritual begun when her child was six months old and performed again and again since then:

A two year old boy was killed here yesterday when a wind-blown umbrella pierced him through the heart. A second gust of wind wrenched the parasol out of the child's body again. (79)

This tragedy haunts Ann. Her own son, Peter, is safe and well, but she is plagued by a relentless fear that he too may be taken from her. Already she has been deserted by her husband who did not want children and left as soon as Peter was born. Now her son is all she has left and she is terrified of losing him. Ann's neighbour takes Peter away to give Ann a much needed rest but peace alludes her even in sleep and the horror of the umbrella invades her dreams. Waking in terror, unable to find Peter, she panics and stumbles down to the beach certain that he is lying there, an umbrella piercing his heart, and that she must save him:

I can't see. The sun. Hiding. The wind waiting. I must keep walking.  
Looking . . .

She looked for three figures, for her son, running on sand, shouting in wind  
and bright sun. She saw windless dark, and knew her son was with Norma.  
Wrapping the grey blanket around her, she knelt on cold sand and through  
tears called, Peter.

And again quietly, Peter.

Steady white waves came towards her, broke, and retreated into black.

Now there is nothing.

The grey covered her. (96-97)

The loneliness of her despair engulfs the reader but there is a degree of fulfilment in being moved on a more emotional level. "Umbrella" captures raw female experience, providing a greater opportunity for identification and highlighting what is missing from Reilly's collection as a whole. Ann's despair may result from her failed marriage and her subsequent struggles with being a solo parent but Reilly does not focus on these forces. Rather, Ann's own experience of her torment is central, presenting a version of women as individuals rather than as a singular being.

On the whole, however, Reilly's *Jim's Elvis* maintains a sense of telling the same stereotypical story of womanhood that has been shown to characterise the work of so many New Zealand women short story writers of the 1980s and early 1990s. Rather than offering a wealth of new opportunities for women, Reilly portrays their lives as circumscribed and predetermined, their existence surrounded by bleakness and despair. Ironically, these are precisely the charges laid against other writers by Reilly herself in a *New Zealand Books* review entitled "The Same Old Plot". Here Reilly critiques Elspeth Sandy's *Best Friends* and Stephanie Johnson's *All the Tenderness Left in the World* alongside the collections of two lesser-known writers, Vivienne Plumb's *The Wife Who Spoke Japanese in Her Sleep* and Kate Flannery's *Like you, Really*. While Johnson is recognised as an exception from the outset, Reilly's views on the remaining three collections directly parallel the views expressed here regarding *Jim's Elvis*.

Reilly claims that while Sandys, Plumb and Flannery may think that they are telling 'new' stories, they could not be more wrong: "The reader recognises the same old plot, devices and plaintiveness from a thousand stories written by women over the last 20-odd years" ("Same Old Plot" 6). The collections in question, she claims, show their authors telling stories in a way that has long become clichéd. Both male and female characters are said to lack in credibility constructed as they are around stereotypical foundations: "[these] authors are unable to distance themselves enough to create credible characters instead of one-dimensional types" ("Same Old Plot" 6). What Reilly fails to recognise, or at least acknowledge, is that her own collection opens itself up to these very same criticisms. As suggested above, in *Jim's Elvis* Reilly tells the same old 'woman-as-victim' story seen throughout Sandys' collection and populates it with similarly stereotypical, one-dimensional female (and male) characters. The works of Flannery and Plumb, on the other hand, speak for themselves in presenting an originality of expression Reilly has clearly failed to detect.

### **Memories and magic: Kate Flannery and Vivienne Plumb explore new dimensions**

In claiming that Flannery and Plumb merely rehash 'the same old plot' Reilly suggests that their stories "perpetuate the myths of our time without exploring them", that the writers fail to stand back from their subject(s) far enough to dismantle these myths with humour or self-awareness ("Same Old Plot" 7). In particular she criticises the one-dimensional nature of Plumb and Flannery's characters with the implication that only one version of male/female interaction results: men are contemptible, women must endure. Ironically, Reilly is in fact rejecting the very circumscribed myth of womanhood perpetuated in her own stories; her comments better represent her own stories than those she so boldly critiques. The collections of Flannery and Plumb, albeit

in quite distinct ways, suggest an ongoing search for female selfhood which is an individual rather than a collective experience.

Flannery's *Like You, Really* (1994) captures the ever-shifting experience of being woman in a way which immediately sets it apart from other collections. These stories are all contained within the bounds of a single family, connecting each to every other in a manner unusual for the genre. In a series of recollections and retellings, Flannery explores the female identity through the matriarchal line of this family, exposing the way in which a young woman's sense of self can be shaped by her perceptions of those who have gone before her. Reen lies at the centre of the collection but the stories which unfold as she attempts to make sense of her place in the world are as much stories of her mother Rose's own search for self and that of the women who came before her. Such an approach does present problems. As Sue McCauley suggests, the stories of *Like You, Really* "are interwoven to a degree where they become almost like a novel" ("Exploring" 5) and in this respect they lose something of the intensity of the short story genre with each piece contextualised and developed by those surrounding it. However, as well as contributing to the larger picture each story can and does stand alone. In fact, when read together their restricted focus is a strength rather than a limitation. Flannery's collection conveys the multiplicity of being woman more effectively than those which evoke a myriad of characters who are essentially set apart only by name.

In speaking of the collection, Flannery identified her "principle concern" as "the slightly shifting mores as we move through the generations – attitudes towards love and marriage" (qtd. in Gregg 58), and portrayal of these shifts across the generations of a single family proves effective. In her younger years, Reen is portrayed as caught up in an illusion of 'Romantic Love' which she has absorbed from the world around her and

which colours the way she views the past. For instance, in “Scarlet Rose” Reen reveals the images of her mother’s return from England in the 1950s she has deeply etched in her mind:

Reen thinks of her mother’s early life taking place to the accompaniment of fifties newsreel music. She sees the younger, unmarried Rose, the woman who was not yet her mother, dressed in frocks, cinched waists and wide belts, and with crimped, close hairstyles, bright scars of lipstick . . . . . She sees a very thin woman emerging from a heavy plane. She is smartly dressed, even a hat . . . . Reen hears the cosy but somehow snappy tones of the commentator describing the return of the traveller, the tears of joy, the longing for homely virtues, for butter and cream and eggs. (134-135)

She acknowledges that these images are likely borrowed from “photos she has seen of Dutch brides arriving in Christchurch after the war” (135) rather than being a true representation of her mother, but she holds onto them along with her idealised version of the romance Rose had to leave behind in England: all love letters, gifts, dance and music. This is the reality she has chosen to believe in.

In “Devotions” it also becomes clear that Reen has built her own hopes for happiness on such romantic ideals. Having met Kim, the man of her dreams, Reen’s thoughts turn to marriage and her longing to recreate for herself the undying love shared by her parents and grandparents. She thinks back to her father’s old family home and the wedding photographs that lined the living room walls. These images have been a constant source of hope and in her mind she creates a space for herself amongst them:

Reen has studied these photos lovingly over the years. She has moved dreamily from one to the other, absorbing every aspect, and in itself every aspect is perfect, she finds; still there are certain details, transcendent elements she favours over others . . . .

. . . . She takes all these parts and in her mind’s eye makes another whole, another bride, resplendent, perfectly finished, framed in the arch of a church doorway, a vivid, luminous study in white, a shining bride, stepping forward, devouring the camera. (201-202)

In Reen’s mind, happiness has come to be equated with love and marriage to the degree that she sees her happiness as dependent upon finding love. She recalls a friend taking

her to a tarot reading some time before she met Kim where she found herself with only one question to ask:

Will I find someone? Reen blurts silently, knowing, as the question bursts like a renegade firework inside her head, that it is the wrong sort of question, a naughty, indulgent query, really, and she will never confess it to Cissy. Still, the notion burns through her, making her heart pound, the blood beat at her temples, and she repeats it, earnestly, staring hard at the cards.

Will I?

Will I?

Will I be happy? (205)

The Reen of this story has absorbed a mythical idealisation of marriage. In other stories, however, the myth is exposed. Returning to “Scarlet Rose”, Rose’s own perspective on her sojourn to England overturns Reen’s romanticised version of events. She did indeed fall in love with a man and “he melted her heart” (157), however, Reen’s idealisation does not capture her mother’s reality: “Reen is half right. There is a love story. There is Rose’s love and Harry’s love, but their two halves don’t match” (157). Rose and Harry came together through their shared musical talent but when Rose introduced Harry to her strong religious beliefs they won him over. Harry gave up his music and entered a monastery driving Rose back to Wellington with a broken heart. The future she had dreamed of was shattered.

Similarly, in “I am the One with my Hands on the Ball” Reen realises that even her parents’ seemingly perfect marriage harbours tensions beneath the surface and her early romantic beliefs are further dismantled. Watching Tommy tell one of his old rugby playing tales, Reen observes the interplay of Rose, his brother and his sister-in-law as they listen:

They throw trip-wires in the path of his stories, roguish facts which confuse him, upset his singular recall. Reen has watched them sitting close on the couch, a subversive triumvirate, smirking, picking and pulling, unravelling the weave of Tommy’s dreamy recollections. (183)

As Tommy tells the story of a fabled game of rugby which landed him with a very personal injury and subsequent hospital visit, Rose seems to take great pleasure from his humiliation. Reen senses that there is more to this than harmless jest:

Reen is sharp, now, She is a sensory scythe, she thinks, slicing through her family, their games, their exchanges. She is so alert she vibrates, she hums. She hears loud meaning in her parents' silences, she sees unrealised expressions hovering behind their features, she smells secrets hanging between her mother and father, her uncle and aunt. (189)

Later she quizzes her aunt and uncovers the secret beneath the silence. Tommy has been married before but lost his wife, along with their baby boy, in a car accident: “ ‘Rosina,’ Teresa said, ‘she was the nurse, the nurse at the hospital. The one who had to see his privates.’ ” (194). Clearly, the stories Tommy loves to tell of his younger years create a distance between him and Rose. Unspoken tensions lurk beneath the romantic ideal of happiness Reen has believed in.

Other stories suggest that the matriarchal line provides the support Reen needs to let go of her romantic dream. Throughout, Flannery depicts women learning life's lessons from women who have gone before them, providing role models of strength in the face of struggle. Reen has constructed a sense of her maternal grandmother, for instance, from various stories she has heard. The resulting character she creates is memorialised in “Parkhaven Hotel” as a woman of conviction and endurance with a strong sense of self and Reen carries these qualities with her. Influential figures of womanhood also appear outside the family. In “Resistance” Reen recalls a German woman, Greta, who lived near their holiday bach in Banks Peninsula and introduced Reen to a whole new world:

At Greta's I felt queenly and mature and as if I might be expensively clothed.

This perishable sense of adulthood, privately harboured, flourished in Greta's permissive presence. She did not acknowledge the hierarchies or divisions of age; she spoke to us as she did to Rose, dispensing, without coyness or malice, information of a sort usually denied us, or for which I had



to listen at closed doors . . . It was Greta who revealed the underbelly of bay life. (87)

Greta also displayed a strength of character. Coming upon her husband and Tommy listening to a recording of Sir Winston Churchill's funeral, Greta immediately defended her sense of self: "she stood very straight, her fine features set hard . . . 'You ignorant clowns. How dare you listen to that sottish inbred pig in my house . . .'" (96). At the time Reen fled, fearful of Greta's rage, but later she can recognise what lay behind the woman's outburst: "I understand, I wanted to shout at Greta. I am brave, I am like you, really" (99). She has learnt what it is to show resistance, to stand up for her beliefs, her self and her identity. This sense of identification flows throughout as Reen finds herself through her relationships with the women around her.

"Eriskay Love Lilt" suggests that later in life Reen has been able to emulate some of the strength other women have shown her in her own troubled relationship. In bed she and Kim no longer settle into "the cosy positions of their early days together" being rather overly aware of each other's movements "touching awkwardly" (102). Neither can they find the motivation for their work, depressed and disinterested. Finally Reen finds the strength to take action and move on from this unhappiness:

She is filling her suitcase, now, putting back the clothing she took out only two weeks ago.

It's no good, she has written to Liz, it's not working, and I hate this place. She packs pots and dishes into cartons, a wooden salad bowl, her glass vases. They divide everything equally . . . They secure the boxes with packaging tape, Reen holds one end and Kim pulls the tape hard over the top of the carton; they smile warily at each other, acknowledging the strangeness of this final collaborative act. (116)

After leaving Kim, Reen attempts to keep busy but her marriage continues to haunt her. In "Chimborazo, Cotopaxi, Popocatepetl" Tommy suggests that an annulment is the obvious solution but Reen resists: " 'You can't say something that happened didn't happen. I was married, you can't wipe that out with the stroke of a pen'" (174-175). It

takes her female friends to help her find what she really needs to recover from her 'disappointment of love':

'... you know,' says Reen, unblinking. 'I'm just tired of it all. He talks too much,' she says, starting to explain. 'Oh bugger it! Lets' get drunk,' she says, upending the bottle of wine, splashing the pale remains recklessly into her glass.  
'Yes!' Eva shouts. 'Vassal! Bring more wine.'

'Come on, come on!' Eva calls to Cissy. 'Get that cork out! This is a celebration,' she says to Cissy. 'Reen is charting new waters. Here's to womb!' she says filling their glasses, holding her own high, smiling mysteriously.  
'Womb?' says Reen, vaguely, pressing her abdomen.  
'W.O.M.B.' says Eva, 'Women only, men banned, I just invented it. We're foundation members.' (178)

Reen needs to find herself, for herself. The guidance of other women has given her strength and with the ongoing support of the women around her she will find her way. Rather than reaching this conclusion by way of a chronological account of Reen's development, it is the theme that resounds throughout this collection of moments recalled and retold. The stories appear in a more random order than this discussion may suggest and it is only when considered as a whole that the collection is seen to convey a more novelistic inner journey. By restricting her exploration to a small character base Flannery avoids rewriting 'the same old plot', introducing a fresh perspective on the ever-changing female identity. Her collection celebrates individuality whilst also reiterating the importance of the collective 'womenspirit', the essence of identification.

Vivienne Plumb also offers a fresh perspective through the originality of expression displayed in *The Wife Who Spoke Japanese in her Sleep* (1993). While the degree of effectiveness her approach yields is questionable, Plumb's work in no way upholds Reilly's charge of unoriginality. Within its contemporary context this collection stands out significantly, particularly in terms of the magical features which pervade the stories. From magic realism reminiscent of that in Sue Reidy's fiction to the utterly

surreal, elements of the unexplained and the unexplainable are trademarks of Plumb's stories and it is this sense of the bizarre and unnatural which sets them well apart from those one-dimensional portrayals of womanhood previously discussed.

It must be conceded that at times this magic overwhelms the reader. As Sheridan Keith argues, Plumb's continual reliance on fantasy becomes "an overworked mechanism . . . an avoidance of technique, a way to suppress reality rather than to embellish it" (Rev. of *The Wife Who* 161-162). A story such as "Black Dodo", for instance, loses the reader in its obscurity and while other of Plumb's works may not be so inexplicably surreal, many do suffer from overly bizarre action as her characters work their 'witchcraft.' In some cases the result is what Vivienne Shakespear identifies as "modern fairy stories in a New Zealand vernacular" (9). In "Mrs Gittoes' Compleat Art of Simpling", for example, the narrator recalls the way in which her kindly yet mysterious neighbour was able to somehow detect the loneliness in her life and her silent desperation to have a baby. The story enters the realms of make-believe when she leaves a "wee pressie" for the narrator's birthday:

It was small, wrapped in a tea towel. It felt warm . . . I flipped back the corners of the tea towel. From inside the cloth a baby smiled at me.

A tiny baby, only as big as my fist. A brown baby that smiled broadly, its chubby arms and legs curled up around itself. I touched it. It was bread. A dough baby. But baked, made into a bun. A bun that was a baby. Or a baby that had become a bun.

I giggled. And of course I ate it. (50)

Nine months later the narrator's baby was born. While it may be possible to identify with Mary's longings and loneliness, the magical 'solution' offered is too fantastical to identify with, upholding Mary Raphael's claim that Plumb's work "floats free of the world as we know it" ("Family Tree" 52). The fable-like qualities of the story are undeniable and overworked to the degree that they distance the reader.

However, while this sense of fantasy and fairytale may overwhelm a number of Plumb's stories, it is not an entirely negative element. It can also be seen to introduce an impression of entertainment, of 'having fun' with story telling, which breaks through the monotony of the seriously didactic and mostly bleak tone which remained largely characteristic of the genre in the early 1990s. In this respect, the freshness of Plumb's approach is undeniable. Her collection stands out amongst its contemporaries for the variety, imagination and quirkiness that are Plumb's trademarks. The challenge which she faces is balancing this surrealism and fantasy with a sense of familiarity or a point of recognition for the reader and it is here that the success of the individual stories shows disparity.

As a female reader, the possibility for identification in spite of Plumb's penchant for surrealism lies in the fact that her work is unified by its focus on the female experience. The stories of *The Wife Who Spoke Japanese in her Sleep* are 'women's stories' and, to their merit, they portray women as individuals. Plumb does not present several versions of a single character-type; rather she asserts individual difference. Her stories celebrate the limitlessness of the experience of womanhood and in many cases the differences that exist between her female characters manifest themselves in conflict. Throughout the collection interactions *between* women predominate. At times, the peculiar, fantastical nature of the situations Plumb constructs override any sense of the experience of 'being woman' the stories may hint at. For instance, there are the bizarre "Bookie and Mookie", a lesbian couple who seem to inhabit their own strange reality which they share with the outside world through their wookie newsletters, and the equally odd Dora of "Celestial Bodies" who attempts but fails to convince her domestically-focused sister Della to join her and her friend, a rock named Molly, on their journey to a Paradise in the stars. In other stories, however, Plumb's fantastical

leanings are more controlled and her female characters are more believable, their experiences more recognisable.

Through the narrator of “Up North”, for example, Plumb effectively conveys tensions which any female friendship may be subject to. The narrator and her friend Joycie are hitch-hiking across Australia but an incident has put their relationship under strain. Joycie has been attacked by one of the drivers and while she escaped unharmed she feels betrayed by the narrator who ran for help:

‘You were going to leave me there all by myself!’  
‘I was going for Help!’ I said. ‘. . . I’d never leave you Joycie, you know I’d never leave you.’ But it didn’t matter what I said, the whole day she kept staring at me in a funny way. (14)

It is as though the experience has changed her friend: “She’d gathered a bright, shiny, hardness to herself” (14). An “unsaid feeling” lurks between them and, as they travel on, this distance increases. Joycie is fearful of her own vulnerability and her dependence on the narrator. It is only when she is able to prove her own value within the friendship that the balance of power is righted: “. . . you need me, don’t you, to tell you these things . . .” (20). Recognition of the mutuality of their dependence reconnects them:

. . . Then she started jogging around me in a circle. Next she threw back her head and shouted. I grabbed her and we linked arms, and together we went racing across the white glistening sand, whooping and calling . . . (20)

“Coral and Zetta”, the collection’s longest piece, also portrays the struggles but ultimate sustainability of a female friendship. Coral and Zetta are opposites, both in terms of their physical appearance and their personalities and it is immediately obvious that Coral dominates the friendship. When they learn that they are about to lose their flat Coral ignores Zetta’s resistance and decides that they should seek refuge with Zetta’s ex-boyfriend George in his small bach out on the beach. Coral knows that Zetta still loves George but she wastes no time in sending her back into town so that she can make her move: “Let’s go and have a good fuck while she’s gone” (61). All the while Zetta

simply muddles along, following her friend's lead: "it doesn't seem to matter what the situation is, Coral always has her own way" (61). It is only when she is on her own that Zetta begins to question Coral's true motives:

'Surely Coral would never hurt me? We've been everywhere together . . . And I understand Coral, no one understands her better than I. Sometimes she's a little prickly and needs some special attention. She likes it when I pretend to listen to her theories on life. We stay in at night and cook for each other and only go out to a movie together on Saturdays. She likes it like that. She doesn't like it when I go with other people like Jim, people I used to know . . . She says she wants to protect me and help me make more of myself . . . but I've never really understood why she should say that. I'm quite happy the way I am. Maybe it's really Coral who wants to change . . .'

(63)

Initially Zetta is horrified to be thinking in such a way but on her return to the bach she realises that her suspicions are well founded. She can sense what has been going on between George and her supposed best friend and finally asserts herself against Coral's dominance:

'You've always had what you wanted, Coral. You've had it all. If you felt like it, you took it, whether it hurt others or not. And it's always been easy for you because men like you. But me, I have to work, always be on my toes, none of it comes easily to me. You knew George and I were nearly married once . . . We could've got back together again, I know it. So why did you do it, Coral, when I asked you to leave him alone?' (66)

Their friendship destroyed, Coral and Zetta go their separate ways but after numerous confrontations and catastrophes each discovers how much they miss and need the other. Coral returns to their old flat to find that Zetta has sought comfort in the arms of Jim, their landlord, and is overcome with rage. She decides to seek revenge and men are her target. Men, she decides, have come between the two friends and it is time to overturn them: "They're a bit scared of us, the men," thinks Coral. "We women are the unknown factor, the joker cards of the world. We can't be relied on, we suddenly turn coat when it's least expected" (77).

In true Plumbian style her methods of revenge involve magic and the baking of charmed doughmen which are cast into the sea. Spells and surrealism aside, however, the real magic of the story lies in the self-searching their time alone has afforded both women. Zetta soon realises that Jim is a poor substitute for the “all-embracing”, unconditional love that Coral provided but at the same time her independence from Coral has given her new strength and allowed her new opportunities. She is able to save Coral from the overwhelming despair that has grown from her loneliness without Zetta. Their friendship survives and together they are able to celebrate their female solidarity. Rather than proposing an ideal of separatism or rejection of men, however, Plumb’s female characters are reunited by the delight of Zetta’s newly discovered sexual being:

‘. . . I love it. And that syrupy feeling I get when I’m being kissed. It’s okay to like it, isn’t it?’ . . .  
 . . . ‘One more thing, before we get to the bach. It’s fine isn’t it, if you want to keep going all night? Too much isn’t bad for you?’ Coral laughs.  
 ‘Yeah, keep them at it all night, Zetta.’  
 And she throws back her head and the sound of her laughter whips and cracks the sky above them. (98)

As Sheridan Keith suggests, this story stands out from those of Plumb’s works that rely too heavily upon fantasy. Here, Keith argues, the characters “feel real”: “the eternal attraction and repulsion between the two central women, as they struggle with their personalities, circumstances and sexuality is both infuriating and convincing” (Rev. of *The Wife Who* 161). When Plumb achieves the balance necessary to successfully meld realism and surrealism, the notion of female identification through short fiction is upheld.

These stories of female friendship also testify to the ongoing focus on the search for female selfhood and/or women’s struggle for independence within New Zealand short fiction, even in the midst of experimentation with new forms. This focus is clear throughout Plumb’s collection. “The Wife Who Spoke Japanese in her Sleep”, for

example, can be read as a tale of female awakening. Honey Tarbox, the wife of the story's title, not only speaks Japanese in her sleep, she makes prophecies, and the discovery of this strange talent empowers her: "She feels in control. All her life she's had nothing. But now she has this. And this is becoming important, making her important" (30). Honey finds that she is able to dictate how her power will be used. She agrees to allow the public to come to her in her sleep for advice but only if they are willing to pay. Over time she becomes famous for her predictions but while she prospers in her new role, her husband's world is overturned:

To Howard, Honey now appears controlled, never flustered. She's always well dressed, her make-up well applied. She offers her opinions even when they've not been asked for. And she expects Howard to keep accounts that add up.

Howard thinks he liked the old Honey better. She pottered around the house in her fluffy dressing-gown. She always looked to Howard for advice about how to dress, and everything else besides. She was warm, caring, and she looked after me, thinks Howard. Now he thinks she's a Dragon Woman. (33-34)

Howard cannot adjust to his wife's new-found sense of self-worth and when she finds him caught in an intimate embrace with Miss Florica, their translator, his defence is that she is "not the same Honey [he] married" (35). Honey remains calm and simply thanks him for her new role in life: " 'We all change,' says Honey. 'From decay grows new life. From the old is born the new'" (35). That night she takes control of her own destiny. She prophesises the disappearance of her husband and within a week he is gone, vanished. Only Miss Florica seems to notice:

Kenta Yamashita has finished Honey's Japanese garden. Ten tons of white gravel and sand was delivered and raked into uniform patterns. Only Miss Florica can remember the particular day that the gravel arrived.

Yes, she can remember the day, the month, and the year (in case she's ever asked). It was the day Howard disappeared. (36)

Freedom from the controlling force of a male is also the key to other of Plumb's women asserting control and gaining independence. For example, the narrator of "Angelfish"



who is an ichthyologist studying coastline fish from a seaside bach, discovers that she is being followed and watched by her strange neighbour, Mr Popov. While Plumb's expected element of oddity is introduced through the narrator's unemployed boyfriend who joins the Jesus Christ Church of Nazareth of the Crystal and begins to talk of angels, the action of the story lies in the hands of the female narrator. She lies in wait for Mr Popov with a huge lump of wood and strikes him on the back of the head, freeing herself from his male gaze. Similarly, the young women of "The Baker's Three Daughters" must also defy their father, a baker instilled with old-fashioned skills of bread making and equally old-fashioned notions of a woman's place to assert control over their own lives. Having lost their mother the girls have known only his version of reality: "we three relied upon his words as the truth. The way we perceived the world came strained to us through his eyes, his mind, and his views" (99).

According to his perception, baking is a man's job: "he said a woman's hands would never be strong enough to knead the dough" (99). The narrator has begun to suspect that "this could be a lie" (99) and her impression that a different world to the one they have been taught to believe in exists beyond the bakery grows as she sees her two elder sisters escape, one to a happy marriage and motherhood, the other into the company of a famous woman writer. However, while their escape is literal and they urge the narrator to follow and free herself from her father, she feels a passion for the bread which has always surrounded her. She does not wish to leave the bakery; she wishes to make it her own: "I had never been interested in leaving. I was sure that metamorphosis was not a fantasy, change was always as inevitable as bread rising on a warm shelf" (103). The narrator takes a chance. She begins to bake her own bread following a special brioche recipe and soon, in spite of her father's opposition, they are attracting a "new clientele, sophisticated, travelled people" (104). Ironically, it is when

he is forced to try one of these new delicacies for himself that he chokes and dies. His opinion no longer counts. The narrator now has control of the bakery and the freedom to create as she chooses. She has, in her own way, come to life:

My bakery is doing very well. I am proud of myself in my tall white baker's hat and clean apron. Every day the bread comes to life under my hands. I knead it and shape it, and work life into it, in return for the life that the bread has given me. I believe happiness comes to all who wait for it long enough.  
(105)

This is a classic fairy tale ending: the bad man is done away with and the patient, virtuous young woman finds happiness. However, there is no knight in shining armour or handsome prince and this lack of hero directly subverts such happy endings. The baker's daughter finds *self*-fulfilment. She is not dependent upon a man to make her happy but finds satisfaction within. That she follows her passion in the kitchen, at the very heart of domesticity strengthens rather than weakens her defiance. She has subverted patriarchy from within the very realm it defines as 'a women's place'.

This story may present a rather too clichéd and honey-coated example, but what Plumb does manage to achieve through injecting the recognisable, everyday world of her stories with elements of magic and fantasy is a sense of limitless possibilities. As Ronda Cooper suggests, the collection is successful in "cutting through the bland and the everyday to reveal unexpected possibilities" ("Nostalgic Journeys" 128). The surreal and bizarre quality of the stories allows for transformations which may not be realistic but which serve to move the reader beyond the boundaries of 'ordinary' female experience. In this respect, Plumb's approach is undeniably fresh and, as Chris Peterson sees it, "wondrous": "Nothing seems impossible in the world she creates" (D:6)

However, the mainly negative critical responses to the collection cannot be ignored. On the whole, reviewers are in agreement that Plumb's work places her clearly in the position of "emerging" writer. As Ralf Ungar suggests, this publication alone

does not establish Plumb as a success. Rather it presents an up-and-coming writer and Ungar can only express hope that Plumb will move on from the fantastical position of these stories to better reach her audience:

Quaint and quirky, simply constructed, the stories have the flavour of an emergent writer of the kind found in experimental literary magazines. Perhaps Ms Plumb will move the next step towards becoming a more generally appealing writer of completed stories and thus move away from the category of 'promising.' (sup. 12)

Praise for her willingness to experiment with the short story form abounds, but Plumb's ability to produce stories with literary merit is disputed by male and female critics alike. She is definitely not simply perpetuating patriarchally constructed myths as Reilly suggests, yet the form which her subversion takes is quite different to that noted in Kate Flannery's collection. Plumb takes a greater risk in moving the boundaries of her stories further away from common experience. As a result she distances her readers, at times stretching the tenuous line of identification beyond breaking point. If the opinions of those reviewing her work are to be believed, the literary merit of Plumb's collection is questionable.

### **Worth the wait?: Judith White and the question of quality**

The critical response to Judith White's *Visiting Ghosts* (1991) provides a striking contrast to that received by Plumb. White was the 1988 winner of the Katherine Mansfield Centenary Award for an earlier version of this collection and while reviewers seem in agreement that the resulting publication testifies to her merit, reactions were not so positive at the time of her taking the prize. According to Michael King, the decision to grant White the award "provoked controversy":

the virtually unknown White had been up against some of the country's biggest literary names and reputations. There was, apparently, an attempt to have the judge's verdict overturned. (Rev. of *Visiting Ghosts* 135)

It was perhaps due to this contention that White had to overcome some hurdles in publishing *Visiting Ghosts*, but once published her work was praised for the universality of experience captured and the way in which she conveyed these experiences for universal appeal. White's stories reflect an understanding of humanity which is timeless. Social concerns and political happenings, past or present, are notable here only for their absence. Rather, the focus is on personal experiences that are universally identifiable.

As one of the most universal of all experiences, facing the death of a loved one features repeatedly in White's collection as she explores the experience of being the one left behind at all stages of life: from the young boy of "Soul Survivor" who has lost his father, turning his whole world upside down, to the teenager of "Phoebe's Mother" who blames herself for her mother's death, to the grown woman of the title story, "Visiting Ghosts", who is convinced that her dead father spies on her disguised as other people she meets. Each individual character responds differently, as do the people around them, but all are united by their search for an understanding and acceptance of human mortality. More importantly, however, in terms of the effectiveness of White's portrayals is the way in which she handles a subject so open to sentimentality. Rather than brimming with nostalgia and a longing for the past, White's matter-of-fact approach remains intact even when dealing with such an emotionally charged theme. As Brigid Shadbolt claims in her *Stamp* review of the collection, "White is unafraid to tackle heavy subjects and always manages to veer away from over-sentimentality" (22). In "Soul Survivor" Georgie and his mother travel to India and through their journey gain a new perspective on death. They experience a culture in which death is faced head on, celebrated rather than mourned:

‘In my country,’ said Caroline, ‘it’s hidden away. It’s taboo. It’s silence, it’s pain. Here . . . here it’s all part of everything. All in the open, on the streets, the other side of life. Like night and day.’ (14)

Similarly, White’s stories bring death out into the open without an overwhelming sense of lament. Grief and pain are expressed but not to the point of excluding all else. As Graeme Lay notes, White approaches the subject of death in such a way that the stories are “anything but morbid, and never depressing” (Rev. of *Visiting Ghosts* 119).

In “All Alone” a potentially depressing situation is eased and lifted through use of humour. Roland has returned home to bury his mother and is overcome by loneliness as he sits in her home the night before the funeral:

Finally the one left, the winner, is stranded; facing death with not a hand to hold, not an ear in which to whisper the last words, not a memory to be remembered. A deserted island amidst an archipelago teeming with mindless youngsters. (17)

His morbid soliloquy is interrupted by the arrival of a woman Roland went to school with who has since befriended his mother. As she is about to leave, a strange set of circumstances turns the story around from focusing on the past to considering the future. An intruder enters the house and Roland and his mother’s friend, Norma, end up locked in his mother’s wardrobe together with no way of escaping. Eventually the inevitable occurs:

Later, creeping through corridors of his sleep, her fingers tentatively sought the soft flesh of his inner thigh, then rested, waiting for him, between his legs . . . Eventually they found each other in that midnight of wardrobes and began their awkward dance. (24)

This represents a new beginning for Roland. Having found Norma he is able to view his mother’s death as a release rather than a burden of guilt. He is no longer stranded alone. White reminds the reader that life continues. Wallowing in self-pity is not her style. In fact, this story exemplifies the clarity of expression for which the collection as a whole is recognised. Familiar, everyday material is presented without artifice but with enough

artistry to maintain the reader's interest. As Sandra Arnold suggests, these stories are easily managed:

White's special talent lies in her ability to dissect everyday situations in ordinary lives, giving the reader the opportunity to view these with a fresh perspective, sometimes with a wry smile, sometimes with a jolt of recognition.

Her stories are unpretentious and accessible, written mostly in a no-frills narrative style, many with a deliciously sardonic humour. ("Wry Smiles" 7)

There are exceptions. In a few stories White dabbles with postmodern form and produces pieces such as "Underground" and "Collage with a Cow" which lose effectiveness in the state of confusion they create and suggest experimentation rather than confidence with the form. In the majority of White's stories though balance is maintained. Despite her use of predominantly third person narration White is still able to draw her readers into her work establishing universal appeal.

The internal focus of White's stories is one aspect which attracts readers, evoking an internal response, and this is most obvious in stories which centre upon female characters. For, while White is praised for the universality of her approach, the fact that she is a woman writer cannot be ignored and as such she does indeed display that 'difference of view' recognised by Suzann Olsson as a women's perspective at work. *Visiting Ghosts* is not solely focused on women's issues and is definitely not feminist propaganda in disguise but White inevitably brings the experience of 'being woman' to her writing. The women's stories in this collection tend to be stories of self-recognition. White's female characters make discoveries about themselves which change their perspectives on life and lead them either to a passive resignation and acceptance of their 'place' or, alternatively, to taking action in the hope that they can take charge of and change their reality. Meg of "Pauvre Meg" falls into the first of these categories. Her husband has brought a business associate from Paris home for dinner

and Meg is determined to charm him with her attentions but she is outshone by her young daughter:

Elysiah is charming him now. She's talking with him, look how she's talking to him, using her eyes so. And now he's laughing, what did she say to make him laugh like that? And look, look! He's touching her cheek! (98)

Filled with jealousy Meg sends Elysiah to bed but once her daughter is removed from the picture and the adults "plunge into the dungeons of ordinariness again" (99) Meg realises that times have changed. Elysiah is now growing up to be the young woman she once was, a young, single woman far more alluring to their French visitor:

Elysiah, help your father get the coffee, she could tell her. Elysiah, stop gawking at that man so provocatively. Elysiah, when did you stop being a child?  
What can she do but concede to Elysiah, and what was she thinking of, anyway? (99-100)

Meg is shocked by her own behaviour, her attempts to compete with her daughter for a man's affections. She returns to the kitchen assured of (or resigned to?) her place in the family, that of wife and mother.

On the other hand, some of White's women discover that it is never too late to defy patriarchal expectations surrounding their behaviour. Rhianon, the central protagonist of "Blue Skies", is presented as the stereotypical mother. While her husband Andrew thinks that a parachute jump would be the perfect birthday gift for their fifteen-year-old son Rhianon thinks only of her 'baby's' safety. Her motherly instinct rejects the idea but he has the final say and the plan goes ahead. On the day of the jump all Rhianon can think of is 'what if?' Already she blames Andrew for what may happen: "As for Andrew, she'll divorce him. He'll be sorry. If anything happens to Toby he'll have neither of them. How callous he is, how unfeeling. She hasn't spoken to him properly for two weeks" (58). But as her son successfully jumps Rhianon comes to the realisation that he is a grown young man entitled to his independence. She sees a new

surge in his confidence after the jump and while she cannot define the change in him “she did know that she didn’t feel the same urge to check on him at night” (61). Rhianon has let go of her son and in doing so has freed herself from the chains of motherhood. She realises that she too can have independence, that she does have an identity beyond her domestic roles:

Rhianon says to Andrew, ‘You know, I’ve been thinking. I might have a go at a parachute jump myself. It could do me good.’

Andrew looks up from his magazine. He isn’t able to hide his astonishment and concern.

‘That could be dangerous,’ he says. (61)

Indeed, taking such action could be dangerous, both literally and figuratively in challenging his patriarchal construction of what a wife should be but the story suggests that a change has occurred within Rhianon which will not be reversed.

On the whole, White’s women reveal themselves to be in a process of developing greater self-awareness and, along with it, a greater sense of self-worth. From Ruth of “Gored By a Bull”, who comes to the realisation that her relationship with a married man is taking her nowhere, that she is being used by him, and seeks revenge through exposing his indiscretions to his wife, to Mrs Isobel Humphrey of “Passion” who attempts to murder her husband after discovering that the passion he no longer has for her is being directed toward another, younger woman, White presents women of action, not passive patriarchal victims. Politics aside, their portrayal testifies more importantly to White’s female perspective, the voice behind the writer which is necessarily a woman’s voice and which enables her to present the experience of ‘being woman’ from the inside. While *Visiting Ghosts* is not a collection focused on ‘women’s issues’ or the politics of patriarchy, it remains the collection of a woman writer and the difference of view the writer’s gender offers cannot, and should not, be denied.



## Chapter Eight

### Political Motivation and Misrepresentation: Women's Anthologies in the 1990s

For the majority of anthologies which appeared in the early 1990s, gender was not an issue. Other themes took precedence and women writers seemed to be on a more equal footing with their male contemporaries, the exclusion and silencing of previous decades overcome. However, an ongoing need for women writers to inhabit their own space remained evident. Collections of women's work continued to appear and with women in control of the selection process they presented a female approach to anthologising. No longer content to settle for male constructs of 'quality' and 'good writing', women wanted to make their own decisions regarding what was worthy of publication. Gender was, of course, the primary basis for inclusion in such anthologies but further analysis suggests that in some cases gender *alone* was considered adequate justification for publication. Some women's anthologies of the early 1990s seem to be based more on the politics of the editor than on the literary merit of the writers represented.

#### ***Speaking with the Sun: a denial of gender importance?***

While anthologies of women's work are generally overt and entirely unapologetic about their gender bias, *Speaking with the Sun*, a trans-Tasman anthology published in 1991 under the joint editorship of Stephanie Dowick and Jane Parkin, stands apart. It breaks the trend of presenting an explicit celebration of the female voice, subtitled simply "new stories by Australian and New Zealand writers." There are many possible reasons for not highlighting the gender focus of the collection. On one hand, as Andrew Mason acknowledges, *Speaking with the Sun* was competing for room in "a

pretty crowded part of the bookcase” with the recent burgeoning of gender specific collections. Presenting the collection in this way, he argues, extends its appeal to all readers and therefore improves its marketability (“Writing For” 9). On the other hand, this collection could stand in opposition to the notion supported by this thesis. By downplaying the female focus of the anthology its editors may be claiming that gender does not matter, but then there would seem no point in centring the anthology on the work of a specific gender in the first place. The fact that this *is* an anthology of *women’s* work is a claim of gender difference in itself.

In her introduction to *Speaking with the Sun* Stephanie Dowrick offers no explanation for this lack of gender acknowledgement. However, in outlining the directives given to its contributors she does seem to highlight the importance of the female perspective:

The brief to each writer whose work appears in this collection was, more or less, to express something that seemed to that writer significant about living, *as a woman*, in the South Pacific in the last decade of the twentieth century. (vii emphasis mine.)

Further to this, while Dowrick’s introduction goes on to emphasise the supposedly strong regional flavour of the stories included, the works of the New Zealand writers in particular are less about ‘living in the South Pacific’ and more about ‘living as a woman’ irrespective of cultural concerns. On the whole, the anthology supports a continuation of those ‘women’s experience’ themes recognised throughout this analysis. Again female characters are portrayed at particular points on the pathway to self-recognition and self-acceptance and again the struggles which their gender presents them on this journey are exposed. As Jenny Fulton suggests, the collection contains “some excellent examples of the mythology retold”, stories which show that “women’s experiences as wives, mothers, daughters and lovers often directly contradict the social fictions of true romance and domestic bliss” (5).

The majority of writers represented are well established and the themes identified in their individual collections are repeated here. Barbara Anderson and Shonagh Koea, for instance, contribute further portrayals of women objectified and used by men. Anderson's "We Could Celebrate" explores the tensions between a male artist, Cliff, and his partner, Carmen whom he treats first and foremost as a source of inspiration. Cliff objectifies Carmen constantly reducing her being to "the angle of her curving arm, the curve of her bum" (18), and valuing her only for what she may add to his artistry. Even when they dine out as a couple Cliff takes his sketch pad and ignores Carmen as he focuses on drawing other diners. He even fails to notice when Carmen is insulted by a table of young drunks until it is too late. Another diner steps in and becomes Carmen's saviour, convincing the young drunks to leave and giving her the strength to turn away from Cliff's lack of concern:

Carmen and the old man turn to each other. They shake hands. He waves one hand towards his table, he asks the jittery waitress for another glass. He holds the chair back for Carmen to sink into, He pours her some wine, showing her the label as he does so. They lean towards each other with their arms on the linen cloth. They talk together, nodding occasionally. They smile at each other. (25).

This man sees Carmen as an individual, not a collection of parts to be painted, and by joining him at his table she chooses this same definition of 'being woman' for herself. The reader suspects that she will no longer settle for being the muse. Similarly, the woman of Shonagh Koea's "Wednesdays" comes to realise she should no longer settle for being used by the man who visits her every Wednesday evening, but promises nothing more:

'You're a good girl, flower,' he used to say when she boiled the kettle, brewed up in the late afternoon. 'A very good girl, my flower.'  
'Yes, I'm a good girl,' she said as she grew older, and older. 'I don't rock your boat.' (74)

So she never told him she loved him or that she was glad to see him (on Wednesdays) or that she was always afraid Wednesday would come without a ring on her doorbell. Never told him any of that. (76)

When he turns up one Wednesday to announce that he has married Yvonne, whom he has been living with for years, her quiet acceptance is broken. She realises that too much of her life has been wasted on this man for no return: “ ‘I’ve worked out that seventeen years of Wednesdays come to 884. With the days I’ve spent out on the boat I estimate I’ve spent, possibly, two and a half years with you’” (77). To his horror she asks him to leave, ignoring his assurances that “everything’s still the same, flower”: “‘it’s all quite different being a bit on the side to being a married man’s girlfriend. It’s quite different’” (79). Her ideas may appear old-fashioned but in reality she is taking control of the situation. No longer willing to simply live her life by his terms, always waiting for Wednesday, she lays down her own conditions:

‘It’s just business. You paid for having me by not marrying Yvonne. Now you have to pay for Yvonne by not having me, or you have to buy me in a separate commercial transaction. It’s very simple.’ (80)

Selling herself to a man hardly seems the most liberated of transformations but she is setting the price, claiming her worth and demanding that he recognise it too. His return at the story’s conclusion to ask, ‘Will you take a cheque?’ completely reverses the power structure of their relationship.

As the only New Zealand writer making a first appearance in this collection, Sharon Blaikie treads the same path as these more established writers. The narrator of “The Letter” travels home to New Zealand from Canada to visit her dying grandmother and this physical journey is paralleled by a metaphorical journey of the self. Thinking back, she realises that she learnt a lot from her grandmother, most importantly “the Guiding Principle of Life: ‘To Thine Own Self Be True.’ It was the way to heaven and in the meantime the key to self-respect” (171). Now, as she faces her grandmother’s

death, the narrator must also face the realisation that she has failed to live by this rule. Her marriage is a farce in which she and her husband play the parts of 'true love'. Her grandmother did not approve of Hugh from the start but she was not one to question true love: "she assumed the quality of my love matched hers for my grandfather" (179). Now, alone again with her grandmother, the narrator realises this was not the case:

We sat in silence. It came into my head to say, 'You were right Nana. About Hugh. I don't feel about him the way you felt about my grandfather. I never did. I just got tired of waiting, that was all.' (182)

But she cannot bring herself to shatter the illusion, to admit that she ended up with Hugh because there was no one else. She has reached this point of self-recognition yet she still cannot be true to herself. The unhappiness of her marriage is more bearable than her fear of being alone:

'Do you think you'll ever come back to New Zealand to live?' she asked. 'No. No, I don't think so,' I replied, working hard to make sure I kept any hint of regret out of my voice. To have said 'yes' would have been admitting the unthinkable – the end of my marriage and the frightening blackness beyond it. (182)

Transformation is too much of a risk. Even though the woman of the story can see the dissatisfactions of her life more clearly she is fearful of altogether removing herself from the shadows of patriarchally mythologised 'true love'. It is easier to maintain the status quo.

The narrator of Fiona Farrell's "Rag Bag" and her husband also maintain a facade of happiness as they attempt to reconstruct their fractured marriage by transporting it to the other side of the world:

Michael fretted. 'You're not bored?' he asked over and over. 'You're not lonely?' He was completely happy . . . Michael and I took care. We were a couple in convalescence, living quietly and hoping the spots would go away. We were solicitous. Michael tried not to be too happy and to soothe him I wrote a few pages, left the paper about as evidence of creative disarray. He relaxed and I was able to return to looking out the window undisturbed. (130-131)

She never does complete the novel she is supposedly trying to write. He, on the other hand, finishes his book and the male/female power balance remains unswayed. Similarly, as Sue McCauley's "Do" explores the topical issue of unemployment, gender struggles rise to the surface. The woman of the story is desperate for a solution, her husband having been recently made redundant and turned to gambling, but she is hesitant to accept an offer of part-time cash work as she doesn't want to upset the patriarchal order of man as breadwinner:

Not because it feels like charity, but because it might seem a betrayal. In making dole payments Social Welfare divides the money equally between us, but *he* is the one who is registered as unemployed; *he* must report in, fill in the forms, sign the declarations. If I earn the money even that token sense of contribution will be gone. He might feel he had no substance. (103)

A definite sense of 'a woman's place' remains. Even when self-awareness is heightened, the experience of 'being woman' continues to be presented as a struggle.

Annamarie Jagose provides the most hopeful image for women in her "The Black Garbanzo". Freyni, the central protagonist of the story finds her job, choosing quotations for appointment diaries and desk calendars, boring but when she stumbles upon a cycle courier who is full of surprises things become more exciting:

The cycle courier is standing behind the reception desk, pulling a loose floral print dress over his jeans and T-shirt. He combs his blond hair with his fingers.

'Better get togged up before the boys arrive,' the courier says, kicking off her basketball boots and strapping on a pair of red stilettos. (39)

Freyni's first quotation of the day sums it up: "*One's life is particularly one's own when one has invented it – Djuna Barnes*" (39). Freyni has fallen in love with this "woman in drag", Alice, and soon they have both resigned from their jobs to welcome a new life of endless possibilities:

They will travel around the country staying in out of the way bed and breakfasts. They will attend night school and retrain as journalists, as flame throwers, as heroes in their own stories. They will open a small soup and salad restaurant in the central city. They will leave this long white cloud

behind and investigate their other locations on the world map. In short, they have no plans. (41).

Jagose highlights the limitlessness of what it can mean to be a woman, characteristic of the more positive outlook that was to become more prevalent in 1990s publications. Her story suggests that women can be anything, denying the existence of a defined, singular notion of womanhood.

Despite the 'hidden' nature of the editorial agenda, *Speaking with the Sun* is undeniably a woman-centred anthology, both in terms of its contributors and in the focus of the material they present. While 'new' stories were called for 'new' writers were not, which explains in part the continued focus on the struggles of gender within the collection, but this shortage of new voices does have its advantages. As identified by Andrew Mason, the stories selected for *Speaking with the Sun* are mostly from writers "who blossomed during the 1980s" and were, thus, *invited* to contribute. The result is a collection of more established writers producing works of greater quality and less ideological drive than were found in the likes of *The Exploding Frangipani*: "the work is so good, so assured, so aware yet unselfconscious: this is writing for the sheer joy of writing, not as mission or therapy" ("Writing For" 9). There is the suggestion of the editors 'playing it safe', preferring to support already established writers rather than take risks on those just emerging but the resulting publication provides the reader with recognisable and identifiable portrayals of women which are engaging and which create a sense of shared experience. The works themselves speak out where the book's outer appearance failed, providing a point of identification for women readers.

Surprisingly, the fact that the events and the people in these stories are recognisable and knowable attracted some criticism. Anne Howard, for instance, claims that reading is a means to escape reality, not "to be reminded of how dull life Down Under can be" and that the stories of *Speaking with the Sun* fail to provide this outlet:

An entire collection of similarly inspired stories seems like a slight overkill. In a nutshell, if these stories are any sort of benchmark, the attitudes and actions of modern-day 'colonial' women are predictably similar . . . when I read, I like to escape completely from my surroundings, to travel worlds far removed from my own. At a pinch, these stories let me go as far as the next street. (148)

Howard's viewpoint directly opposes the argument of this thesis, suggesting that identification can repel rather than attract a reader, but at the same time her critique of the 'sameness' of these writers' portrayals of women strengthens the point that women *do* share some commonality of experience. Perhaps her charges are directed more at the 'sameness' evident in the way these writers *express* women's experience rather than the similarities of the experience itself their stories portray. An overriding sense of traditional social realism pervades which, along with a continued focus on struggle over celebration, perpetuates a sense of 'datedness'.

### **The continuation of *New Women's Fiction***

A new volume of *New Women's Fiction*, edited by Wendy Harrex and Lynsey Ferrari, was also published in 1991. Sharing the aims of its predecessors, *New Women's Fiction 4* was intended as a forum for 'new voices' and, as Harrex and Ferrari establish in their introduction, adherence to traditional notions of 'quality' were considered irrelevant:

We wanted to support emerging women writers, to provide them with a venue which accepted their subject matter and areas of concern, a place to publish that wasn't bound by definitions of 'good' writing and 'serious' fiction imposed narrowly by a literary high culture that was oriented towards the work of men. (8)

Rather than promoting 'quality' writing as androcentrically defined, denying women's difference of view, these editors claim to be interested in experimentation with the short story form. Their hope was to provide a space within which women writers could express themselves in new, exciting, and potentially more subversive, ways: "a place



where women could be daring - a place to play with language and form, and to write about things none of us had ever read about before" (Harrex and Ferrari, introduction 8).

However, like its predecessors this volume largely fails to deliver on the "daring" front. The majority of stories selected for inclusion present the reader with recognisable, familiar forms. Examples of experimentation with the genre are fewer than the introduction suggests and where they do occur their effectiveness is questionable. Cherie Barford's "John Brown's Body", for example, in which a woman discovers the remains of a missing man's body in a geothermal pool, at best challenges comprehension and Jan Kemp's "Yolks" is similarly confusing for the complexity of its narrative structure in following the narrator's relationship with Vladimir Navatovsky. Johanna Mary's "The Runaway Body" has greater clarity with its matter-of-fact storyline but this is overturned by the surrealistic quality of its contents. The narrator is suffering from a case of literal disembodiment, her body parts detaching at will as though thinking for themselves and while there is a sense of gender significance in the notion of objectifying the female body, Mary's portrayal reads more like a fantastical fairytale, complete with the simplistic, superficial happy ending. Similarly, Aorewa McLeod's "Leaving Home" does explore the mother/daughter relationship but the central protagonist's strange obsession with dolls overrides any recognisable dynamics between the two. Within the context of the collection these stories stand out for their point of difference and the daring their authors display, but alone they are lacking in identifiable effect.

Perhaps fortunately, realism prevails on the whole. As Lydia Wevers suggests, these writers "construct a view of the place we inhabit" (51). They do not, as the editors claim, write about "things none of us [have] ever read about before" (Harrex and Ferrari, introduction 8). Rather, the landscapes they create are identifiable and their

characters recognisable. What sets these stories apart from those in earlier volumes of the *New Women's Fiction* series is not their technical daring but their vitality. The overall tone of the collection inspires more confidence, with the vigour of women, not their victimisation, leaving a lasting impression. As Chris James proposes, New Zealand women are presented as “strong, whimsical and with an amazing sense of humour” (25). The stories continue to focus predominantly on the struggles faced by women on account of their gender but the endings written for them tend to present hope more often than despair. From the most innocuous situation such as that portrayed by Barbara Tipple in “Party Etiquette Etiquette Party” in which a woman breaks every possible social rule at a friend’s birthday, to more serious circumstances, a sense of perspective is maintained and touches of humour lighten potentially sombre events. As Tipple’s narrator realises on returning home from her disastrous night, life goes on: “I laugh because it doesn’t really matter because that’s what it’s like . . . Isn’t it?” (57). Her sense of selfhood survives.

There are exceptions to this more positive outlook. The narrator of Sue McCauley’s “Trembling Annie”, for example, is a nurse-aid in a geriatric ward and her interactions with one particular patient open her eyes to the harsh realities of aging, producing a lasting image of hopelessness. Similarly, the narrator of Christine Johnston’s “Triangle” is trapped in a hopeless relationship with a sister who continually diminishes her sense of self. In both cases, the inescapability of the situation is underlined. On the whole, however, the collection presents a more hopeful outlook for the individual. Even in stories underwritten by a critique of society’s workings, a sense of optimism prevails. Individuals are shown to make a difference with personal experience overriding any impression of political motivation. In Te Aroha’s “An Unwelcome Presence”, for example, Mihi organises a sit-in protest to defend her Maori community from the

intrusion of a planned army camp but her role in leading the demonstration says more about her strength as an individual and as a woman than it does about issues of race.

Mihi is defending her own identity as much as that of the community:

Mihi heard the riot act being read, and as the police formed up to move in she lifted her head and began to sing in a loud, clear voice... 'I have dreamed on this mountain, since first I was my mother's daughter...'  
 'The Mountain Song' was well known and loved among feminists worldwide. Mihi had first heard it sung outside the Auckland district Court in support of Maori women on trial for trespass, following a reoccupation of Takaparawha. It had thrilled her then, and it filled her now with an immense pride at being Maori and a woman. (89)

This is what it means to Mihi to be a Maori woman. While the context of the story is political, Mihi's race and gender define her sense of individuality as much as they make her part of a collective. Similarly, stories which concern lesbianism focus on individual experience rather than the politics of feminist separatism. Melior Simms, for instance, brings the issue home in "Taking Tess to Meet the Family". The narrator takes her girlfriend to a family gathering and is anxious about what they will make of her, particularly with their rather conservative attitudes to a woman's place:

There are very traditional gender roles at Wilson reunions. All the women cook and go shopping together (my aunts are the kind of women who buy 'Born to Shop' T-shirts and wear them). All the men fix each other's cars and drink crates of beer. (58)

They are captured on video throughout the weekend and while the narrator appears in scenes from the kitchen, as her gender dictates, Tess is shown outside with the men: "The camera panned back to Tess who was holding a beer bottle and a handful of chips. Various uncles and cousins were listening attentively to her explain what she'd done to the starter motor" (60). However, even when the camera zooms in for a close-up revealing the "cunt tattoo" on Tess' right forearm, the narrator's embarrassment is unnecessary. In spite of the narrator's reservations they can see Tess for the person she is, not judging her by her appearance or her sexuality:

Everyone was laughing hysterically. I sat on the floor beside Grandma's feet. She bent down and whispered in my ear. 'You've got a lovely girlfriend.' I leaned my head onto her knee and looked around at my family . . . 'Not a bad family either,' I thought. (60)

Acceptance of their individuality is what the women of these stories search for and many struggle to find. In Mahinarangi Tocker's "A Woman" the situation is further complicated as issues of culture and sexuality collide. When a man in his mid-sixties with heart failure is admitted into Roimata's care she becomes increasingly annoyed by the woman accompanying him. She will not leave Mr Kingi's bedside, even offering to take his urine sample herself and getting in the way of Roimata's nursing: "'we won't follow those pakeha rules'" (48). But when Mr Kingi dies Roimata is drawn to Mrs Kingi, feeling her pain: "Roimata became lost in the women's grief. She went to her. Placing her arms around her she swayed in time to the woman's cries" (51). When they make the arrangements for the removal of Sam's body Roimata discovers that the connection between them lies deeper than their shared gender and culture. Now aware of the man's true identity, she helps Mrs Kingi, Ripeka, take the body away:

She wept silently as she thought of her final goodbye to Ripeka, and found comfort in recalling the softness of the woman's voice.  
'Kia ora koe, girl. We would be upset if strangers found out that Sam is a woman.'(53)

Ripeka and Sam are a lesbian couple and have kept this secret for thirty years. Roimata understands for the strength of their love has reawakened her sense of commitment to her own partner, Moana. Again the characters are presented first and foremost as individuals, not simply lesbians.

The search for an individual self is a common focus throughout the collection with many writers portraying women in a process of separation, a process of carving their own identities free of the expectations of others. For several of these women,

young and old alike, finding a 'place' of their own involves freeing themselves from the family identity. Judith White captures this in the title of her story:

“The Middle-Class Teenage Girl, Her Anxious Middle-Class Mother and the Boy from the Band; A Melodrama concerning Mothers and their Teenage Daughters” or “The Empty Pushchair Syndrome.”

Here, both mother and daughter are finding their way within the turmoil of their changing relationship. Gwyneth is growing up and is fixated on finding freedom and her own place in the world. She is totally ignorant of her mother's own struggles, responding to her mood swings and tears with frustration: “She was pathetic and Gwyneth had never seen her in this state before. There was something weakened within her; there was no dignity, no self-control” (21). What Gwyneth fails to appreciate is that her growing up is also forcing her mother to redefine her identity. Gwyneth no longer needs her as she once did; she has “her own life to live” which represents a huge loss for her mother:

. . . a sudden intuitive dread gripped her. It was a *knowing* that Gwyneth's furtive escapades had only just begun. Communication would be censored, whittled and honed to the essentials; she would never again be automatically included in her daughter's life. (24)

She too must gain independence through redefinition of the role of motherhood “as no longer altogether responsible for the things the girl did” (22). White captures the ever-shifting nature of the female identity.

The narrator of Elizabeth Truell's Irish story “Mammy” is more perceptive about the change she witnesses in her mother following her father's death. Travelling home to the funeral, the narrator is fearful of how her mother will cope on her own but on arrival she finds a surprisingly strong woman who reveals to the family that their father was a Forester. She wants the funeral service to praise his loyalty as an Irishman but the narrator's sisters oppose the idea, not wanting their father's political choices to

be brought to bear on his daughters. Only the narrator can see what her father's political role represents and she helps her mother:

The coffin was taken out and laid on the ground. My four brothers stepped forward.  
 'Now,' said Mammy. 'Now!'  
 She took the sash from the breast of her pocket and shook it out till it sparkled and flashed green and gold in the sun. She handed it to me.  
 I ran forward in one dash and spread it out over the coffin, so there wasn't a wrinkle.  
 There was a gasp. Oh... such a sound!  
 The sash looked glorious.  
 'Lift up your Da,' Mammy said to the boys. 'Walk on in!'  
 There was no soul in that chapel who couldn't see the colours and not know what they meant. (32)

An insignificant figure shadowed by her husband during his lifetime, the narrator's Mammy breaks the silence she has kept for so long and in doing so, shows that her own spirit is alive and well: "She looked beautiful. She had the strength in her, do you see?" (33).

The narrator of Mary Logan's "Tiare Ei" has also lost her husband but it takes a visit to her daughter's family in Rarotonga to show her that even without him she has a 'place' in the world. Watching a cultural show, the narrator is moved into imagining Rarotonga as her own home:

. . . now, because of hibiscus and gardenias, waves lapping on pale sand, lorelei voices, the almost unbearable beat of the drums, and, oh yes, the gleam, the movement, of one body, the turn of a head, the curve of an arm, I can't think any longer. All I want is to stay here in my ageing madness. (133)

Yet in her heart she knows that this is not her 'place'. To seek comfort in her daughter's new home would be to admit defeat, to give in to her ageing and enter a state of dependency. Instead she realises that life awaits her back in where she has a 'place' and a future she can call her own:

I can't bear to leave. But I'm not ready yet to be a lotus-eater. There is work for me to do. Soon Mata will need to go to school in New Zealand, perhaps university. She'll need a home there. Then Tino . . .

On the plane I cry, but not for long. I'm going home, but it's as if I'm going somewhere new.

I leave my ei on the plane – the bridge. It's a spontaneous gesture, to please only myself. Something is finished, but there are other things to do . . . (134-135)

A new identity awaits her. No longer defined by the roles of marriage or motherhood she is free to find her own sense of self, independent of others' expectations. Again, the female identity shifts and changes in response to the changing circumstances of life. The possibilities are limitless.

However, the many limitations imposed upon women which can stand in the way of reaching these possibilities continue to be reiterated. Perhaps the most powerful stories of the collection are those which speak out against abuse of women, seeing it as a means of disempowerment. While the social comment implied by such stories cannot be denied their focus is notably on the personal rather than the political. Lyn Watson's "Mum", for instance, provokes certain discomfort in its treatment of the taboo subject of sexual abuse against children, yet the message the story contains is strengthened by giving the narrative voice to the victim. Tania's mother and stepfather are playing cards with Uncle Benny, not suspecting anything when he leaves the room, but Tania reveals his dreadful secret:

Uncle Benny wants me to take my pants down. He said he'll whack me if I don't have them down by the time he comes back from the toilet. He said he'll tell everyone what a dirty girl I am. (27)

Finally Tania's scream 'Muum!' alerts them. Her stepfather defends her, fighting

Uncle Benny, but shockingly her mother furthers the betrayal:

Mum watches the men fighting each other. Then she comes and puts her arms right round me. I can smell beer on her. There are tears on her face. 'Oh Tarnie,' I hear her whisper. 'Trust you to spoil everything.' (28)

Rather than defend her innocent child from such a horrific act, she perpetuates the patriarchal myth which vindicates the male and blames the female. While the narrator's

voice has quite literally subverted male violence, stopping it in its path, her mother's reaction suggests defeat.

Ngahua Te Awekotuku takes a different approach to violence against women in "Kurangaituku", a rewriting of the Maori myth of Kurangaituku, the bird woman, and Hatapatu. Kurangaituku's capture of Hatapatu and his subsequent betrayal and escape is told in keeping with the traditional legend, as is Kurangaituku's end when she chases Hatapatu through unfamiliar geyser land and falls to her death. However, while customarily the story would end here, with Hatapatu a hero and his tale legendary Te Awekotuku subverts the male hero and has Kurangaituku rise again. When Hatapatu returns to the forest to claim his abandoned treasures she is waiting:

Without warning, she struck.

Claws reached down into his mouth, and tore out his tongue. Crushed his back teeth to a pale, ashy powder, snapped the front ones, so thin and white; shredded the coll, soft flesh of his gums, hacked deep into his throat muscles.

Silenced his voice. Forever. (16)

Hatapatu's legend dies with the loss of his voice. This female figure will not be defeated. Unfortunately, while both Watson and Te Awekotuku produce powerful images in opposition to male violence, neither story provides much opportunity for reader identification. Watson's "Mum" is memorable and powerful for the shocking nature of its subject while Te Awekotuku's "Kurangaituku" stands out for its mythical point of difference and the landscape it evokes. Yet in terms of capturing a sense of what it may mean to be a woman both the child and bird woman prove difficult to relate to. Both stories carry a message to the reader but neither seems to evoke empathy or affinity at a deeper level.

In this respect Lynx's "Mirrors and Mannequins" is outstanding. Violence against women also lies at the heart of this story but Lynx's approach is subtler. She finds the balance between overt social realism and psychological exploration, injecting



just enough uncertainty into her narrative technique to hold the reader's attention. The story opens with a moment of self-recognition as the central protagonist catches sight of herself in a shop window:

. . . a bloated wet scaly pop-eyed fish with black spikes silver studs black holey singlet and torn fishnet stockings, caught trapped stuck standing up in a fish net . . . That's me, she thinks, as if she hadn't already known. (103)

Although this third person point of view predominates, the narration increasingly enters this young woman's mind as the story progresses. She feels trapped by the environment she faces, "sharp steel girders, glass and concrete . . . lights mirrors cars trucks people bikes . . ." (103) and her sense of panic is captured in the breathless commentary. She is overwhelmed by the sounds around her and by a need to escape:

an urge to get away  
to move outside this hard grey frame of reference and search  
for memory  
among the trees  
whichway  
whichway to go (104)

Fumbling through this environment she is driven by a need to reconnect with nature, to find something living amidst her cold, steely surroundings:

She knows that if she finds some plants, some grass and trees, she may be able to remember who she is, understand what is happening to her. An ache has begun to creep through her body. She needs some green. Some real growing wet living green. (105)

Just when it seems that she might find such a place, and perhaps some calm, a shop window display catches her eye. It features a "superthin" black mannequin with a "rectangular head, no eyes, no mouth" and behind it stands another mannequin, "white with eyes nose and mouth. Short hair thick eyebrows square jaw. Colourful jacket white trousers male . . . Its hand on the black mannequin's shoulder" (106). Something in this posture distresses her and past events flood back into her memory, threatening to drown her:

She doesn't want to remember now, not until she reaches some green but the memory is growing more persistent despite her attempts to shut it out.  
*there is darkness, rain...*

*from the darkness a car appears beside her, a door is flung open against her leg...*

*hands pulling at her hair her face hurting her skin  
 no she will not think of that*

*darkness, rain  
 falling out of the car onto the road smelly gutter wet  
 bruised crawling through running water onto pavement  
 soggy paper sticking to her hand  
 crawling falling crawling into a dark recess in the wall  
 darkness (107)*

She has been violated and she will not be ready to face and overcome this abuse until she has reached the safety and warmth of sunlight and the green of nature that represents new life. Here she will reconnect with her selfhood: "I will find a flower, and give it to myself" (107).

The effectiveness of the enhanced realism evident in Lynx's story sets it apart from some of the less accomplished pieces in the collection. The events and landscapes in "Mirrors and Mannequins" are recognisable but it is through Lynx's clever use of language and her breaking away from traditional narrative structure that the feeling behind the story is conveyed. The woman's panic, her flight, her desperation, are all identifiable in the pace and the form of her telling and her survival instinct is also carried in this movement creating an enduring sense of hope. She will not be defeated. The lasting impression is one of looking forward to a new beginning, and this in turn encapsulates the editors' hopes for the anthology (and the series) as a whole. Through the profile gained from appearing in *New Women's Fiction* it was hoped that emerging writers would find encouragement for further work and support for publication of their own individual collections.

Including the works of a number of more familiar names provided further validation for the less experienced writers and separated the *New Women's Fiction* anthologies from the many 'writers' groups' publications also appearing. Therefore, in spite of the many less accomplished pieces it contains, this collection stands as a continuation of a celebration of women's work without a continued need for feminist over-politicisation, a celebration which remained important and valid even at a time when women's short story writers seemed to have created their own alternative mainstream. However, as Andrew Mason suggests, this validity was weakened by the virtually simultaneous emergence of Cathie Dunsford's *Subversive Acts*:

The dedication of Wendy Harrex and the tiny New Women's Press has seen into print four volumes of the New Women's Fiction series . . . Now that the series is established and looked for, along comes a mainstream publisher with multinational connections, keen commercial instincts and a powerful marketing arm, offering a rival anthology (edited by the compiler of New Women's Fiction 1) and releasing it at the same time . . . There is clearly a big readership for such collections but can the market sustain two? ("Big Press" 7)

While, the two anthologies shared the same aims of providing a forum for new, daring, experimental women writers, Dunsford's stood apart for its overtly anti-male stance, a position which ultimately called into question the entire notion of gender-based collections.

### **Cathie Dunsford's *Subversive Acts*: publication opportunity or politics in fancy-dress?**

Although a writer herself, Cathie Dunsford's name is most synonymous with the role of championing women's, and particularly lesbian issues. This 'cause' led to her involvement in compiling the first volume in the *New Women's Fiction* series which in turn fuelled her interest in New Zealand women's literature. Over 100 submissions were received for inclusion in the first *New Women's Fiction* collection and reading these

alerted Dunsford to the vast number of women actually writing *and* seeking publication in New Zealand; she “realised the vast and growing need for a continuing place for women to publish their work in this country” (“Writing Ourselves Whole” 29). For Dunsford, this presented an opportunity and in a complete turn-around of her anti-establishment thinking, she spent the early 1990s teaching creative writing and directing a publishing consultancy:

For a while Dunsford rejected ‘literature’ as a ‘male, middle-class, pakeha cop-out.’

‘But then I thought about all the women who have influenced me, and realised it was through their books. So I decided to devote the next 35 years of my life to women’s writing.’ (qtd. in Guy 2:5)

This devotion materialised in the aim of helping New Zealand women publish in a marketplace which Dunsford continued to view as predominantly male-focused. In 1990 the call went out for stories to appear in *Subversive Acts*, an anthology which would attempt to take a step in fulfilling this aim.

Michael Gifkins made this call in his “Bookmarks” column of the *New Zealand Listener* explaining Dunsford’s hope for stories with a tendency to “subvert, uproot or overthrow” through content, theme, style or language. The anthology, Gifkins suggested, would address any complacency regarding the need to continue pushing women’s writing forward:

With the mainstreaming of women’s writing over the last decade and its increasingly high profile on publisher’s lists, the notion of women’s fiction as a series of ‘subversive acts’ needs reassessment for the 90s. Those in the know stress that vigilance is most necessary precisely when the greatest advances appear to have been won. ‘Out there’ the tendency remains to marginalise women, a sort of gender entropy whereby in the absence of continuing nurture, the flowering will fade. (“Subtle Subversion” 113)

Gifkin’s justification for the collection makes sense. It was necessary to continue celebrating women’s writing even when it had reached such highs in order to maintain the strength of the female voice in New Zealand’s literary marketplace. However, in

calling specifically for works which *subvert* Dunsford moved beyond celebration of women's writing and created a heavily loaded context for would-be contributors, predetermining the theme of their works. Ironically, in "Writing Ourselves Whole" Dunsford rejects this process, claiming that a writer should not bend to a publisher's dictates: "she must write what she wants to write and then find the appropriate publisher to sell it" (29). Confusingly, her creation of *Subversive Acts* suggests that the same need not apply to a potential editor.

Dunsford's commitment to providing a forum for experimentation and a platform for 'new' work which breaks away from literary preconceptions is more favourable. The stories finally selected for inclusion in *Subversive Acts* uphold this commitment. As Janet Wilson acknowledges, while the stories of *New Women's Fiction 4* prompted a sense of familiarity, Dunsford's collection is more exciting, containing elements of "zany humour and the unexpected" ("Story Writers Show" 5). The variety evident within also illustrates that there are infinite ways different writers can respond to any one given theme and while the literary merit of many of the pieces may be questionable they do, as Clarke Issacs claims, reward the reader with an element of 'newness' which should be celebrated:

Many of the stories are very short, quite unstructured, and the quality overall is somewhat uneven; but most possess the spark of refreshing individuality, and a quiriness that makes one pause, and thank the publishers for letting non-conforming talents bloom. (25)

This individuality is obvious in the variety of both situations explored and modes of expression adopted by these writers. Landscapes range from the schoolroom of Janette Sinclair's "Lessons" to the workplace of Lesley Curnow's "Rudel Parkin's First Conspiracy"; from New Zealand as in Frances Cherry's "Painting the Town" to more exotic places as in Sandi Hall's "The Woman Who Hugged the Virgin"; from the past of Beryl Fletcher's "Dressmaker to the Queen" to a possible future in Julie Glamuzina's

“Zhed.” Furthermore, the modes of expression adopted in exploration of such diverse ‘locations’ are even more varied. While Powhiri Rika-Heke opts for social realism in “Grandmother”, the surrealism of Keri Hulme’s “Hinekaro Goes on a Picnic and Blows Up Another Obelisk” stands in direct contrast, as do the elements of fantasy adopted by Johanna Mary in “Minna’s Quince” and Sue Reidy in “High Flyer”. Add to this the extended metaphor of Louise Simone’s “The Ministry of Internal Despair” and the humour displayed in Joy MacKenzie’s “The Bride Doll’s Got Bunions” and the scope of the collected works begins to emerge.

However, the vitality that may be expected from such variety is constantly under threat from the predetermined theme which guided contributions to *Subversive Acts*. Brigid Shadbolt identifies some of the limitations such a specific premise imposes in her *Stamp* review of the anthology. While supportive of Dunsford’s drive to encourage new writers, Shadbolt argues that the theme of subversion creates a sense of monotony and while the theme is conceived spontaneously by some writers, too often it is “painfully laboured”: “each writer had the main theme in mind when they wrote their individual contributions, this means that they can sometimes be too self-conscious in their motivation” (Rev. of *Subversive Acts* 24). The overturning of power is central throughout and the gendered focus of the anthology leads to the additional common idea of this power being male power, a point which Dunsford labours over in her introduction, making any approach to the stories outside of this largely ‘feminist’ context virtually impossible. In fact, the critical debate which surrounded the release of *Subversive Acts* concentrated more heavily on Dunsford’s introduction than on the works themselves.

The length of this introduction brings to mind Michael Morrissey’s prologue to *The New Fiction* and the single-mindedness of Dunsford’s approach strengthens this

parallel. Dunsford bases her introduction, and by extension the entire anthology, on the notion that being a woman writer is, in itself, a 'subversive act'. Writing by women, she claims, breaks away from "traditional malestream definitions of New Zealand writing" (9). Through their writing, women affirm a voice which is their own, simultaneously empowering them and asserting their difference, while also allowing them a deeper level of engagement with their "essential selves" (12). Fiction, Dunsford continues, allows women writers to explore alternative ways of being, to make sense of what it means to be a woman: "What dominates for me is the sense of a female voice that wants to work out how it really is in the later years of the twentieth century" (12).

Dunsford draws on Nicci Gerard's *Into the Mainstream* in support of her argument that fiction comes to stand as a point of identification for both writer and reader as they attempt to find a greater sense of self. However, when considering the stories of *Subversive Acts* as inseparable from the context Dunsford has developed around them, this process of identification is somewhat thwarted. It is questionable whether the female voice trying to make sense of 'being a woman' which apparently dominates for Dunsford can also dominate for the reader. Rather, the fiction becomes part of a larger scale, polemical, political production. In responding to Dunsford's subversive agenda these writers are restricted in their portrayals of the experience of womanhood. Their stories reflect women 'being subversive', capturing only one aspect of female experience. In the majority of cases, their female protagonists are victors rather than victims but the need to be subversive, the struggle to claim an identity, remains central, and this struggle is presented as political.

Dunsford's introduction reads as an attempt to force her own perspective onto the stories, and by extension, onto the reader telling them how to respond to the texts. Not stopping at elaboration of the theory behind her choice of subject, Dunsford extends

her opening comments into critical analysis of the stories themselves. As David Eggleton identifies, this saw her ‘packaging’ of the stories attract more criticism than the works themselves:

Buttressed by footnotes and reinforced with sloganeering gynocentric jargon, Cathy [sic] Dunsford’s heated introduction attempts to synthesise an ideology held in common by the heterogeneous bunch of stories assembled in *Subversive Acts*. However, feminism is a multi-faceted force, capable – like many –isms – of meaning different things to different people. The attempt to yoke or yank together disparate writers’ motivations appears transparently self-defeating. Cathie Dunsford’s polemic contains arguments which run around in circles and then fall over panting and out of breath. (25)

Having established her ‘ideology’, Dunsford goes on to categorise the stories according to the ‘type’ of subversive action they supposedly portray, subjecting the reader to analysis and labelling of the stories before they have even read them. The ordering of the stories within the collection furthers this sense of preconception, as Mara Math acknowledges:

*Subversive Acts* is loosely structured around clumpings of stories with related themes, very roughly: colonialism, sexism/corporate life, relationships, food and fat, naming/(abuse). Rather than showing different facets of a specific oppression and resistance to it, the grouping felt a bit preachy to me, a sort of didja get it yet, huh, huh? that actually dulls the edge of the stories a bit. (49)

The stories are given no opportunity to speak for themselves, becoming consumed by the editor’s political treatise. Unfortunately, the sense of feminist rebellion Dunsford identifies is in many cases poorly conceived.

Several of the stories seem to have been selected more for the feminist viewpoints they project than for any literary merit. In particular, strong anti-male sentiments are a recurring feature, frequently expressed with little subtlety. Marewa Glover’s “A Small But Effective Support Group”, for example, is populated by the most stereotypical of feminist characters, from Kath, the lesbian feminist social worker to Joze, the asexual part Polynesian women’s refuge worker, and the sentiments they



express regarding gender politics are equally stereotypical. Kath is dealing with a difficult case involving an ex-husband who returns to rape and beat up his wife whenever it suits him. The other women demand to know the man's name; they want to make a difference, to put a stop to his power:

‘If we could help other women, like in this case, then we should do it. There’s too many people saying, ‘It’s none of our business,’ Deb continued. “Fact is, it’s everyone’s problem . . . Men made up the rules to protect each other. We women have got to break them sometimes because they don’t have our best interests at heart,’

Joze stopped pacing and stood leaning over Kath. ‘Think about it, Kath. If you want to help this woman, then stop helping her husband . . . Come on! You feel bad enough already, don’t you? Take control, Kath. Fight back.’ (173)

In the end, these women do take the law into their own hands to liberate this victim of patriarchy, repeating the classic tale of politically-charged female rebellion. Frances Cherry’s “Painting the Town” tells another such tale. At forty-five years of age, her marriage failed, Marnie has returned to study at university where she has fallen into the trap of the male-dominated system, seduced by her handsome year-one English lecturer. When she finds out that she is just one of many women who have fallen for his charms, she takes action, driven by the strength of women before her:

‘. . . The world has got to know about him. Or at least the university does. You know how shit scared they all are about sexual harassment since those women tied that bastard to a tree in Auckland. He was another one, just like Hector, who abused the position of power.’ (163)

The Mervyn Thompson case is reinvented. She leaves her mark in bright pink letters – ‘Hector McNee Will Be Tied to A Tree’ – and before long several other women are communicating their support. Two weeks later, Hector has resigned, convinced that the lesbians in the Student Union are plotting against him. Again taking political revenge against ‘malekind’ is more predominant than any internal female response.

Such politically driven pieces distance the reader. Identification at an emotional, or even an intellectual level is inhibited. These stories do little to arouse feeling and

little to arouse debate. Rather they create a sense of being preached to, of being told what to think of men rather than being subtly led to respond as an individual. Jane Stafford draws a similar conclusion:

‘Subversive Acts’ presents little intellectual challenge. Most of the stories are gleeful accounts of women doing something unpleasant and naughty to the men in their lives. Murder, real or imagined, is a popular though unsubtle choice. And in many stories the subversion theme produces a tone of malice, impotence and complaint. (“Gleeful Tales” 22)

Even when stories bring the politics of feminism into a more personal space, the principles of feminism and an associated anti-male viewpoint continue to override any individual, emotional response. Furthermore, at this personal level, subversive acts do not seem to be realised; they are imagined but not actioned, illustrating a degree of the impotence Stafford remarks upon. In Isa Moynihan’s “A Case Of Display”, Gloria attempts to reconcile the anti-patriarchal ideals discussed at her first ‘Women’s Support Group’ meeting with her everyday life as a woman and a wife but her arguments are all too familiar and even she realises that inequalities between the genders are unlikely to be suddenly overturned:

‘It won’t of course,’ Gloria says bleakly. She lifts her head. “It won’t ever be the day . . . a man is a serious thing. Not to be exposed, or laughed at, patted on the bum, pinned naked on a wall . . . ‘ Not quite sober, she becomes portentous. ‘And because he still carries the club and the axe, girls, ape-man or king . . .’ She draws a finger across her throat. (156-157)

Similarly, the woman of Nancy Stone’s “A Quiet Day” cannot remove herself from the power of her husband who abuses her, sexually, physically and emotionally. She imagines fighting him off, throwing clothes in a case and walking out the door. She even imagines murdering him but neither option seems viable in the end. She is left simply facing another “quiet domestic day” (107). Even Joy MacKenzie’s attempt to introduce humour to the situation in “The Bride Doll’s Got Bunions” fails to move beyond the patriarchal myths it exposes. The narrator finds that marriage fails to live up

to her idealistic expectations. Like her inherited bunions, “sticking out like Dolly Parton’s breasts in a too tight jumper” (189), what is beneath the surface causes her pain. She realises that “bride dolls don’t have bunions”; they do not represent the reality of inescapable domestic drudgery that awaits their human counterparts:

I want to be a writer, but I’m a housewife with bunions. W.H. Auden had bunions. He used to wear his carpet slippers everywhere. He was a great poet. ‘All I have is a voice...’ I’ve got a voice but it gets strangled by the vacuum cord and drowned in the kitchen sink. (192)

The outlook remains bleak and the subversive act of writing these stories is largely ineffectual, despite the overtly feminist belief systems they convey.

Perhaps in an effort to avoid this type of polemical, politically driven expression while still responding to what necessarily presents itself as politically motivated theme (that of ‘subversive acts’) other writers included in the anthology have opted for less realistic approaches, introducing elements of surrealism, fantasy, science fiction and fairytale to their works. Unfortunately their efforts are equally distancing for the reader. While polemics are replaced with a sense of humour and the stories (at best) entertain rather than preach, when making light of subversion within a specific context of ‘subversive acts’ it is difficult to see what remains. These stories may be experimental and thus overturn traditional notions of story telling but their content certainly does not seem seditious. “High Flyer”, for instance, is written in Sue Reidy’s familiar mode of ‘magic realism’ and sees a woman gradually transform into a cat as she recognises her need for independence. Similarly, in Johanna Mary’s “Minna’s Quince” pieces of fruit magically become men, while the extended metaphor of Barbara Neale’s “Wall” brings bricks and mortar to life and Julie Glamuzina creates a bizarre, futuristic corporate world which discriminates against three-armed people in “Zhed”. In each case, a degree of reality makes some sense of the narrative but the peculiar characters and landscapes which are developed are unrecognisable and fail to satisfy. Any sense of subversion

these works may contain is belittled by their obscurity and lack of possibilities for identification.

Due to the sheer variety of works contained within *Subversive Acts*, any form of generalisation is dangerous and it must be acknowledged that some stories selected by Dunsford do straddle the line between political treatise and utter fantasy more successfully. These stories capture the experience of 'being woman' on a more personal level which is subtle yet recognisable, inviting reader identification and giving them life beyond the 'subversive acts' context. In some cases experimentation is still an apparent feature but it succeeds in enhancing rather than overpowering the fiction created. Bronwyn Civil's "Lycanthropy", for example, features another bizarre transformation. The narrator has embarked upon a diet programme determined to reach her goal weight but as she begins to shed kilos other changes occur to her body and to her behaviour. The process of transformation from human to wolf indicated by the story's title takes over her being. She develops yellow fangs and pointed ears, chases rabbits, eats raw meat, sniffs the breeze and howls at the moon, all of which suggests another fantastical tale. Yet this transformation is set apart from the likes of that described in Sue Reidy's "High Flyer" by virtue of its being psychologically based. The focus here is on the narrator's *self* perception, the way in which she views herself rather than the way in which she is seen by others. When she realises that she is no longer in control of her body, that striving for perfection has led her to a form of madness, she is able to reverse the process, begin to eat again, and most importantly, embrace and celebrate who she really is:

In the mirror it is my body. The legs are tree trunks, from knee to groin uneven with cellulite. The bum juts out and at the same time sags; the stomach sags. Almost covers my pubes. The boobs hang down, and there are flaps of flesh under my armpits, dragged down by the boobs. If I could see my back I could see the continuation of these flaps – two creases in my back. My chin is defiantly double. I raise my arms. 'Welcome back!' (150)

The wolf images, for all their oddity, effectively illustrate the narrator's warped sense of self, a product of a society that places unattainable ideals above acceptance of the self and prevents celebration of the female form in all its diversity.

Self-acceptance is not so prevalent in Wanda Barker's "A is for Arsenic, B is for Belladonna and C is for Cyanide" but this story is also outstanding for its absence of anti-male sentiments. Rather than a battle between the sexes, Barker presents a power play between three women, Carol, Candace and Charlotte, which, as it travels the span of their lives, reveals the ever-changing experience of being a woman. From their teenage years when "they stalk the beach, eyes gleaning the talent, wiggling their collective arse, breasts on alert" to middle-age when the physical signs of ageing begin to emerge, each phase these women pass through is recognisable. Despite their collective front the three are not on equal footing. Charlotte has always been the leader of the group, the one in control:

Carol and Candace are her shield and her sword, their positions change and are subject to Charlotte's whims.

C is for Charlotte and conductor. She says you are in or out, that you need more practice, that your clothes are wrong. She changes the rules. She takes your lunch in exchange for her friendship. (203)

Charlotte suffers the most as her body succumbs to the ravages of time. She puts on weight, enters menopause, but "she still believes she has control over everything" (205).

Maintaining an illusion of agelessness allows her to stay 'in charge':

Charlotte is going to stay forty or thereabouts, she has stopped bleeding. Carol and Candace are getting old and wrinkly, and she is quick to count the lines spreading like road maps over their bodies.

She is on hormone therapy to stop her bones turning to dust and ashes. She will never die, no never. (205)

While the reader may be inclined to question Charlotte's resistance to ageing, Barker's portrayal does not come across as politically motivated. The matter-of-fact tone of her narrative frees the story from laying blame or passing judgement. Rather, it suggests

that this is one individual's experience of womanhood: a constant struggle for control and power, in relation to herself rather than to any patriarchal representative.

The realism of Lauris Edmond's "Dear Max" is also enhanced by the narrative perspective adopted. The story of one family's Christmas is told through a series of letters each family member addresses to Max, the absent son and brother. Together the contradictory views of the day which emerge form a picture of family politics; individually they highlight differences in seeing. In particular, Max's parents, separated but together for a 'family' Christmas, are shocked at the way they now perceive one another. Mavis tries to present Max with an image of a perfect day but she cannot avoid mention of Malcolm, his father:

It never ceases to amaze me that we lived together for all those years and now when he comes to these family occasions he seems like a total stranger, and not even one I like. Was he different, Max, in the old days? When we were just Mum and Dad and you were all sitting round the table as kids, was he like this? Do I remember it right? (93)

In contrast, while she seems somewhat nostalgic about the past Malcolm is more direct and perhaps more honest:

She's so bossy these days I can't stand being in the same room with her, let alone at the same dinner table. She organises everything, pushes people around, and if you do something she doesn't like, hold your knife and fork back to front or fart at the table, she gives you a withering look as though you're some sort of animal that's strayed inside. (95)

The tension between the two is clear but Edmond allows both parties a voice, providing a more balanced portrayal than a single-minded, one-directional treatise against males.

Denise Cush's "The Whalers", on the other hand, is very much a singular and personal narrative but this too succeeds in diminishing any sense of a message taking over. The title of the story comes from the name of the bar at which the narrator has met her new male 'friend' for the past two weeks but the images which such a name provokes recur throughout the story. The married narrator knows that she shouldn't be

meeting this man but she feels understandably drawn to him. Her marriage is in trouble and he listens to her:

I was hooked, harpooned, like a whale in a bucket. We talk a lot, at least I do, and sometimes I wonder what he hears. All I seem to talk about is Nick (my bastard/prick/slob/husband), and how miserable I am, and how much all of this is affecting the Kid.

He doesn't say much, but I know he sympathises, his eyes tell me. (197)

The walls of the bar are hung with a gallery of sailors and whalers. Amongst them is a sole woman, "caught, captured forever somewhere between a boat-ramp and an old dog; solid, indistinct, one hand raised to hold her hat on, peering" (200). The narrator identifies with this woman. Reflected in the picture she can see herself, trapped in her marriage, waiting for things to change:

I feel as though I know that whaler-woman, though. I know her better than I'll ever know him. I feel for her pain quite vividly as she waits, for days, weeks, to hear the familiar footstep. I understand her mood when she gives up waiting, frightened and alone, maddened by her nagging womb and pines for the arms of someone more available ...

Then, when she least expects to hear it, there's the footstep. (200)

When she returns home from the bar the same old domestic duties await her and enthusiasm drains away but when she finally decides to take a chance and move away her escape is thwarted. Her 'friend' has a wife and she has no choice but to return to her 'place': "I'm Mrs Respectable, dragging a comb through her paralysed hair, smearing some colour on bloodless lips. I'm Mum going home to cook the tea" (202). Fortunately, unlike the whale woman captured on film, her identity is not set in stone. Her homecoming is transformed into hope for a new beginning through one simple act:

. . . unexpectedly, amazingly early here's Nick, wielding a huge friendly-looking parcel of grease and a six-pack . . .

Thank God Nick never knew. Thank God my bridges aren't too badly burnt to cross ... What the hell is happening? He's hugging me! It feels strange, uncomfortably familiar.

'Can we forget about the last two weeks and start again?' he asks. For the second time today I'm speechless. (202)

The sense of a second chance this ending offers is more appealing than any feminist rebellion, just as the narrator's thoughts and feelings are far more identifiable than any political treatise.

Sue McCauley also captures more of the 'essence' of what it means to be a woman in her two short pieces. While the small moments in time she depicts are seemingly insignificant in terms of gender, the way in which she portrays her female characters' emotional experience of these moments reflects the difference of view a woman's voice provides. In "Purple Trousers" language becomes a metaphor for the narrator's vulnerability as she attempts to decipher her conversation with a male visitor:

I was watching conversation very carefully in case he should leave a couple of words invitingly ajar so that I would feel entitled to reach a warm hand through. And I was folding up the used conversation and hiding it on my lap so that later I could run over it with a hot iron looking for invisible messages. (100)

In the end he leaves her feeling "uncertain and unsatisfactory" (101) and she decides that she prefers not to know what may be hidden beneath the surface of their exchange. Instead she takes care of herself: "I treat myself gently, as I would an accident victim" (101). The unknown is not worth paining herself over. Language is also central to "The Day . . .," although in this case the pain belongs to another woman and the narrator cannot find the words to ease it. Her friend's husband has been arrested and taken away by the police and she feels powerless to offer support:

I didn't know what to say or do, so I kept fixing the deck chair. I tried to imagine how it would feel to look out the window and see your husband walking away between two policemen, but nothing came. (102)

However, there is a sense that simply being there is enough – "she sat at a table and cried while I hammered in three nails and five tacks" (102) – and the narrator's son trying out her repair job ends the silence. The new seat stretches until he hits the floor and the tension in the air is broken:



We laughed at the look on his face. Her husband had been taken away and put in a cell but we laughed at this kid lying in the deck chair with his bum flat on the floor.

She wiped her face then and said could she use the phone to ring her friend in the city . . . Hey, she said first thing to her friend, you'll never guess. After I left you last Friday I went back and bought that ridiculous dress.

I just couldn't resist it. (102)

In both cases there is a lasting impression of female self-preservation. Little happens yet much is experienced; McCauley conveys emotional responses to personal situations rather than political responses to social issues, building her stories around moments rather than messages. Stories such as these raise *Subversive Acts* above Dunsford's politics but even these pieces cannot be extracted from the context created for them. The way in which Dunsford packages these stories lets them all down, irrespective of their individual literary merit. As Rob O'Neil suggests Dunsford *misrepresents* the stories she so avidly claims to be representing: "To produce a collection of such fictions and then attempt to wrench strong and consistent didactic messages from them is a fundamentally flawed procedure" (7). Dunsford does not allow these stories to 'tell themselves'. She takes them as a collective, denying their points of difference, and placing them all under the same banner of feminist politics.

### **The politics of the female body: Cathie Dunsford's *Me and Marilyn Monroe***

In apparent contrast to this heavy degree of politicisation, Dunsford's 1993 anthology, *Me and Marilyn Monroe*, with its focus on the female body is suggestive of a more personal approach to the experience of womanhood. Dunsford's brief for this collection also carried potentially wide-ranging significance for contributors, with women writers called upon to express their reactions to the idea of 'Writing the Body' but the stories included in the anthology produce a pattern similar to that of *Subversive Acts*. Dunsford's selection does not reflect the diversity such a subject may be expected

to invite. The stories are not all the same, for as Kathryn Walls suggests, a sense of variety *is* evident in terms of the modes of expression adopted by the chosen writers:

There is realism, caricature and fantasy. There are elaborate plots, slight plots, and purely meditative structures. Some stories are satires, while others are what we might think of as defiantly feminist versions of romance (in which the female hero moves towards triumphant independence). (4)

However, considering the content of their work and what these writers have to say rather than how they say it reveals more of a common cause. The problem is that, presented in this way, the cause seems to belong to Dunsford rather than to the writers' themselves. Again the overriding sense is of Dunsford's anthology existing as a representation of her own point of view rather than existing to represent the writers.

Another lengthy, polemical introduction strengthens this impression. As Pat Rosier claims, Dunsford opens the anthology with a prologue brimming with "overblown explanations and interpretations" which do little to promote the writers whose work is represented:

. . . the first half of the introduction reads like an extended self-promotion brochure, with as much reference to where Cathie Dunsford has been, who she knows, and what she has done, as to the rationale for the book. This serves to draw attention away from the writing the book was published to present. Surely the purpose of an introduction is to focus on the book's purpose and comment on how the content achieves that purpose. (Rev. of *Me and Marilyn Monroe* 62)

In defence of her disproportionate introduction, and also perhaps as a result of the critical reaction to that of *Subversive Acts*, Dunsford expresses her belief that simply publishing women writers is not enough. She argues for an ongoing need to 'contextualise' women's work, to acknowledge that the short fiction of women reflects not only their own individual concerns but also reveals more widely held social attitudes. Such attitudes, Dunsford goes on to explain, provide the impetus for this anthology. In much the same way as her previous collection, *Me and Marilyn Monroe*

was created to challenge and attempt to subvert, commonly held beliefs. Here the subversion is simply more specifically focused on attitudes to the female body.

Inspired by a series of artworks, Dunsford defines her aim as production of an anthology which presents stories with “women as subject not object”, to reveal women’s bodies as seen through women’s eyes, removing them from the objectification of the male gaze. She was guided in her selection of stories by her conviction that “the battlefield for women is our bodies” and her determination for others to acknowledge this ongoing struggle:

Women are the walking wounded with mental and physical scars forming the shrapnel of their battles. Attitudes and practices of the medical profession reflect the widely held prejudices of the dominant culture and until this ignorance is replaced by an educated and sensitive awareness, very little will change. It is time for the dominant culture to listen to us. (5)

The anthology becomes the means to this end, a tool for making ‘them’ listen, and the fictions contained therein serve as Dunsford’s message-carriers. Stories have obviously been carefully chosen with this purpose in mind, stories which, according to Dunsford, question “the dominant culture’s representations” through their portrayals of women overturning patriarchal definitions and asserting their own versions of female identity (9). The ‘message’ which these stories project is not in itself problematic. Rather, as Penny Huber suggests, their universal call “for women to be allowed to speak and act for themselves and to fully accept their own bodies in defiance of media demands for perfect (even if artificially created) bodies” is a positive one (22). The problem arises when the politics take over and literary merit becomes irrelevant.

In *Me and Marilyn Monroe* this imbalance is too often evident. As Pat Rosier acknowledges, being politically motivated in the writing of fiction is no bad thing but when the ‘idea’ overrides any sense of literary creativity effectiveness wavers:

Fiction can be powerful political writing. But ‘political fiction’ that works, has the power to grab the reader’s emotions and attention, does not subsume

the story to the ‘messages’. And that is what, I think, many of the writers in this book do; in many instances the focus has moved too far from the writing (in the craft sense) and the narrative or essence, and become over-focused on the ‘message’. Instead of the ‘message’ being inherent, carried in the story, experience, reflection, or exploration, we are told about the message. This leads to a didactic and alienating tone. As a reader I feel browbeaten and irritated. (Rev. of *Me and Marilyn Monroe* 63)

Again, overtly conceived political intent is shown to distance the reader, disrupting identification. The narrator of Jeanette Galpin’s “Booby Trap”, for instance, envisages taking revenge on the opposite sex for the creation of the “cold steel plates of the mammogram” which “could only have been designed by a thoughtless man”:

. . . what if all those victims of this underhand assault were able to have their way with the inventor. Wouldn’t they just love to clamp a penis in a vice. And I write this sentence not as a question but as a statement because I believe it would be justified revenge. (153)

While a woman reader may be able to identify with the physical and mental anguish a mammogram may evoke, this anti-male stance seems overwrought and pointless in a narrative which otherwise celebrates the female form. Similarly, the clever satirical journey through the female body, contemplating what could be cosmetically improved upon in Wanda Marcia Barker’s “We Witness Three Tits on a Body, the Worship of Christa Tu – Beauty-Fool and the indelicacy of Mechanical Hands” is undermined in the narrative’s final moments. Objectification of female body parts is overturned as the woman claims control of her brain and her hands, but the suggestion of using this control to enact violent revenge against the male population, “*doing irreparable harm to the Humanus Malus Genitalia*” (150) sees fiction overtaken by political slogan:

LEAVE HER BODY BITS ALONE.  
LET THIS BE A WARNING. (150)

Similarly, while a woman rather than a man is blamed for perpetuating unrealistic ideals of the female form in Eva Petro’s “Eating Your Words”, the subversion of these ideals lacks subtlety. Rather, Petro portrays a stereotypical feminist rebellion in which

members of the MOOS – “Militia of Ordinary and Obscure Sisters” – kidnap romance writer Eleanor Richecoeur, charging her with “presenting a false and harmful picture of womanhood” (33). Her captors are unlike any women Eleanor has encountered before; they are ordinary:

Some of them were fat, flesh falling randomly down their bodies. Others were not so much obese, as merely loose, and she could even discern the cellulite on their dimpled thighs and dough-like arms. None of them wore any make-up and oh – their clothes! . . . A gruesome medley of unshaven legs and lank unstyled hair that was lucky to be seen even once a year by the most suburban of hairdressers. Eleanor could plainly make out the lines and wrinkles on their faces, undisguised for the world to see. (33)

The MOOS refuse to conform to the ideals that Eleanor’s fictions valorise: ‘all breasts must jut and strain unsupported against sheer silk blouses! All bellies must be flat and firm but yielding! All bottoms must be small and peach-like, legs long and smooth, faces unlined and forever youthful, craving the kisses of cruelly handsome and sexually adventurous men!’ (33)

She is guilty of having “perverted [their] rights to be accepted as [they] are” and she is punished by being force-fed her own words, turning her into the shapeless, unidentifiable female form she so despises. Eleanor has become the scapegoat for feminist fury and through her Petro enacts her political coup. Feminist politics are also central to Powhiri Rika-Heke’s “Maori Admire Fat Vulva”, albeit it less actively realised. The coming together of two women as intellectuals and friends portrayed here serves less as an exploration of relationships and more as a site for political discussion. Gender and racial politics collide as Ngariki expresses her distaste at the statement of the story’s title, made by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*:

Who the hell had this ‘white’ girl talked to for her to come up with a line like that? Was it merely a device to give some authenticity to her statements about beauty not being a universal given, or had she been conned by some Maori ‘expert’ out to get a laugh at her expense? Whatever the reason behind this throwaway line Ngariki was pretty pissed off. (53)

‘. . . don’t you see? It’s those sort of statements that continue to define and redefine us as a people – keeping us as exhibits to the world – which peeve me off.’ (54)

Her anger subsides, however, when she finds intimacy with Leah and discovers that they can define their own truth separate from any racial or gender stereotypes. Thus their relationship becomes a political gesture, held up in subversion: “. . . if you think your throwaway line is going to rest here, Naomi Wolf, you’ve got another think coming” (54).

While these may be the most extreme and overt examples of fiction as politics encountered in the anthology, the political struggle which forms the crux of Dunsford’s theory of the female body as battlefield predominates throughout resulting in a markedly negative outlook. As Dunsford suggests in her introduction, these stories question the way in which the dominant culture represents women. They expose the patriarchally imposed ideals women are constantly pressured to achieve and in doing so they show them up as the myths they are. However, the majority of stories selected by Dunsford fail to offer positive alternatives to these male constructions. They stop short of redefining the female body on female terms providing little hope for escaping the male gaze even when viewing women’s experience through women’s eyes. Rather, these stories suggest internalisation of unattainable patriarchal standards. There is a notable lack of stories focusing on the positive aspects of the female form. Overall, the tone is bleak and depressing.

In particular, the outlook for the younger generation of women presents little hope. Myths of female beauty are continually perpetuated. Jane Gray’s “Hothouse Flowers”, for instance, sees Sophie being cultivated into a beauty queen by her mother in much the same way she arranges her greenhouse orchids:

She considers the display for a moment, lips pursed, eyes narrowed. No, that simply won’t do – the flowers **MUST** be symmetrical!

Raw beauty is not enough, even for orchids. Their fragile stems must be bent and stretched into tortured shapes with pieces of chicken wire and netting. ‘Aah,’ sighs Laura, ‘That’s much better.’ (96)

As her “most treasured bloom” (89) Sophie must also be presented as an image of perfection. As a teenager she has internalised this expectation and can be found late at night “busy examining her baby skin for wrinkles, a silky thigh that has never known cellulite” (94). Her father feels powerless and can only sit back helplessly and mourn for the childhood innocence Sophie used to enjoy, “a happy dancing nymph, amidst the swings and slides”:

. . . there was always ice cream, lots of ice cream . . . Sophie’s fingers sticky from dribbles down the cone. But never now of course, ice cream is so fattening and would cause pimples on Sophie’s flawless skin. Already her body is being sculptured into shape. A model in the making is a work of art. (99)

Sophie’s objectification is unavoidable. Her mother views her as a blank canvas upon which she can create an embodiment of her own perception of beauty.

In contrast, the mother of Geraldine Oliver’s “Me and Marilyn Monroe” wants to protect her daughter from the pain and suffering such beauty can bring but Janie lives with her father on the other side of the world so her maternal influence is limited to long distance communication. Janie sees an image of her mother every time she opens her school locker but here she must compete with a photographed Andy Warhol picture of Marilyn Monroe. While her mother represents the reality of a broken marriage, Marilyn Monroe represents iconic beauty and glamour, as Janie cannot see the pain beneath the star’s one-dimensional image. Her mother can only stand back and hope she chooses wisely:

Marilyn and I are dreams to you Janie but our pictures lie. Dreams are always different from the outside . . . Real stars like Marilyn and I wear our scars secretly, in our hearts and wombs, as you will, one day, in yours. Don’t doubt that it will happen, Janie. Marilyn and I have both got you in our sights but only one of us will win. We’re competing for your dreams, your heart, your life and soul. (30)

She knows, however, that the power of the dominant culture stacks the odds against her, that as a woman her daughter will be objectified. Isa Moynihan’s “Morphing” captures

this same inevitability. At twelve, Allie has been left motherless and her father has been left to handle her “end-of-summer metamorphosis” into a young woman in preparation for boarding school. The “all-female empire” of clothing stores is too much for him and he goes in search of a drink. Meanwhile, as she is being measured for her school uniform Allie’s awareness of her changing identity grows: “[she] now owned bust, hips and an official Size. Still slightly pear-shaped, but once the knobs developed . . .” (183). She decides to make the most of the opportunity and eventually leaves the shop looking “at least fifteen”:

New hair style, new dress, new sandals (with low edge heels) and a huge, soft shoulder bag (plumped out with discarded shorts, T-shirt and sandals wrapped in underpants) . . . She emerged into the sunlight, tossing the smooth shining hair, trying out her new image in the shop windows . . . (186)

Her newly found self-confidence is soon shattered. First by a stranger - “In her nostrils a sudden gush of stale sweat, milky tea and bad teeth. A man behind her, body pressing against hers, hand squeezing her bottom, voice muttering in her ear” (186) – and then by her own father:

His scanning gaze reaches her face – she begins a smile – and passes on. He didn’t recognise the new Allie! Her smile broadens. She’ll have him on about that. They’ll have a good laugh. His gaze swings back to her. She waits, still smiling. His hand goes up, smoothing his hair, and comes down to straighten his tie. His eyes hold hers, his mouth half-smiling. It isn’t a look she’s ever seen before. At least not from her father . . . Knowing, furtive . . . complacent? She remembers other things half-heard. That girl who had to be taken away from her home because – No! Allie swallows. Not *my* father. Not *Dad*.

Now he’s recognised her and he’s all embarrassed. See? She knew it couldn’t be . . . the other thing. (188)

Both men have subjected Allie to the male gaze of female objectification. She has been awakened to the realities of growing up, becoming an object of male pleasure and a victim of male violation.

The teenage girls of Claudia Bell’s “Story” face similar dilemmas as they attempt to reconcile conflicting viewpoints about the female body. Outward



appearances are seen to determine the likelihood of success in life and love. Even though the girls know that looks should not matter, they have absorbed the ideals of the dominant culture around them. While in theory they may see the limitations such ideals impose, in practice they are unable to subvert them:

‘But it’s so unfair,’ says Kirsty, as she returns the salad from her plate to the bowl in the centre of the table. ‘Women’s bodies have never had to be as thin as they are now. Every year beauty queens are taller and thinner. I read that somewhere.’ (81)

They are convinced that in the past being thin was not important. Ironically, one of the girls suggests “it was before we had feminists”. The women’s movement is blamed for the unattainable female body they strive for:

Since we have had feminists saying women should look however they like, you get lots of women trying to prove they are not feminists by getting thin. They don’t want to put men off, because if they are an ordinary build men might think they are feminists. I suppose you could be a feminist . . . Then you’d develop a political consciousness that how your body looks doesn’t matter.’ (82)

Being a feminist and having a relationship with a man are seen as mutually exclusive options. The only way to find a man is to be thin and as the girls cannot imagine a life worth living without a man there seems little hope that they will replace patriarchally inscribed ideals of womanhood with their own definitions of self-worth:

Liz says she’d quite like to be a feminist because then you wouldn’t put up with shit from men. In fact, maybe you could get rid of men out of your life altogether and save a lot of problems. But that wouldn’t be so good, because then you’d never have a boyfriend.  
‘That would be really terrible,’ sighed Kirsty. (82)

Other stories show that even the supposed wisdom of years does not necessarily diminish a woman’s belief in such values. Older women in these stories continue to be judged and to judge themselves by standards of appearance. In Janice Marriott’s “Hair Apparent”, for instance, Delia’s reaction to her mother’s death is an expression of concern about her own appearance. She cannot bear the sight of coarse, curly hairs on

her mother's chin as she lies in the Funeral Parlour: "She collapsed into a chair and thought, 'This could happen to me.' She would add a mortuary beautician to the instructions in her will" (173). Her sister Angie tries to convince her that it no longer matters how their mother looks but even when she finally breaks through the barrier of Delia's outer control she cannot erase a lifetime of indoctrination:

It was Angie's command of the situation that broke Delia's self control. She collapsed against Angie and started to cry. Angie stroked her. Delia sobbed for all the times in her pressured professional life it had mattered so much what she'd looked like. She sobbed for all the times she'd met a new client confidently without a hair, a tooth or a breast out of place. But even now, over the sobbing, she heard her mother's voice; 'You are what you wear.' 'If you look good, you'll be happy.' (179)

Such notions are also central to Sue McCauley's "Said Linda". The narrator and her husband have welcomed recently widowed Linda into their home as a way of helping her build a new life for herself but they get more than they expected:

She wasn't what I had expected, which was someone a bit bewildered and fragile. She looked tanned and capable and slightly irritated. She was in her early thirties, and her appearance didn't match her voice. (39)

Linda enrolls in a Women's Studies course and begins preaching her politics to the narrator, encouraging her to love her body, not in order to please men, but to please herself. Resistant at first, the narrator soon finds herself obsessed with her looks only to find that her attempts to make herself more attractive have been thwarted. Linda the feminist, her "fellow victim, compatriot, sister" (40), has taken her place:

They felt I should get to stay on at the house, because of the garden and all the work I'd put into it. Our oldest son has lent me the money to buy Martin out of his half. Martin was shame-faced about taking the money but, as Linda said, it was best to keep everything cut and dried. 'I'm sorry Fay.' She clutched my hand. 'But I guess you just left it all too late. By the time you started taking pride in yourself the marriage was already dead.' (43)

Eventually what emerges from *Me and Marilyn Monroe* is a repetition of 'woman as victim of patriarchal definition' with little evidence of subversion or redefinition.

'Writing the Body' seems to be more about having the body written by others, at least this is the view Dunsford has chosen to represent. She has created the battlefield of the body but has largely failed to show women winning (or even fighting) the battle. Even emotionally powerful stories which capture the internal horror of eating disorders, such as Stella Duffy's "Seven Stages of Knowing" and Beryl Fletcher's "Letters to the Interior", fail to redefine womanhood on positive terms. The narrators of these stories assert extremes of control over their bodies but the result they strive for is brought about by that same patriarchally inscribed truism that thin is beautiful. *Believing* that beauty can come from within is one thing; being able to embrace that beauty is another. As Duffy's narrator states, "I am separate from my body and I hate it" (56). The women of these stories continually objectify themselves.

There are a few exceptions with some stories portraying a sense of internal positive transformation which contains more hope for a change in attitudes to the female form. In "Moving Pictures", for example, Ro Cambridge shows a woman coming to appreciate her mother as a person, in spite of the imperfections of her overweight body:

. . . the mother who crept with us into the cool jungle of boysenberry vines and laughed with us at our juice stained mouths and fingers. The mother who waded into ice-cold creeks with us to catch cockabullies with nets she'd helped us make. Who chafed our feet warm again afterwards and told stories while we ate windfall apples and cheese sandwiches on the bank. (106)

Similarly, the woman of Joy MacKenzie's "The Girl in the Photograph" is able to embrace her ever-evolving identity as captured on film. Her body has changed constantly over the years, a source of pleasure and of pain, and now she is the aged woman of the final photograph: "She has smoothed on anti-ageing creams without magical results. She no longer stands on the scales each morning. Her blood has long ceased flooding her life with passion" (160). However, the essence of herself beyond outward appearances continues to shine:

The woman raises her twelve stone from the old couch and sees her image in the mirror. She smiles. Her whole face is involved in this smile. The lines move up from her mouth meeting the laughter lines from the sides of her eyes. Where is the girl? Colours have faded and seasons have changed. Soon she will hug a new grandchild to her wounded bosom. The blood still flows. And yes, she can still see the girl. (161)

Ironically, Dunsford's own contribution to the collection, tellingly entitled "Celebration", is also outstanding for the positive image of the female form it presents. Through her story, Dunsford conveys the realisation of her hopes for this anthology. Art is portrayed as a powerful force capable of changing attitudes, just as she hopes the stories she has chosen will impact on those who read them. Cowrie allows her friend Zilla to photograph her nude so that others can share in her celebration of the female body:

It has taken her thirty years to grow to love the soft sensuous, vast expanse of her body. She wants to share this. But not in an overtly erotic context. She wants others to appreciate the soft curves and exuberant strength of her and their own bodies. She desires them to see the lines and shapes as a part of nature, the landscapes of the body. (196-197)

The bodyscape which results is beautiful, so much more than simply a picture of a woman: "This woman is an island connected to earth and sea. She embodies dark mysteries . . . The picture they have created together is a celebration" (198).

The narrative shifts to consider public response to the piece and as Tony and Jan encounter the celebratory woman their reactions are familiarly different: "Tony points out the lines and curves, the light and dark, the shapes and angles of the pictures. Jan pretends to listen but is responding on another level within" (199). Jan has been touched in the way Cowrie and Zilla hoped; she "sees the hidden beauty in the woman's face" (199). But, at the same time she is appalled by the lack of self-control the woman's weight suggests and her own regime of controlled dieting is revealed. She could never let herself go like the woman in the photograph has and Tony's evaluation of the portrait underscores her resolve. He sees the woman as full of self-hatred, unable to face

her obesity. However, taking a closer look at the photograph alerts Jan to the limitations of his one-dimensional viewpoint. She “detects contentment on the face” (200), seeing beyond the outer appearance into the feelings the image conveys and she is moved:

The woman is deep within her own world. She does not appear to be in strife. She seems soft and at peace with herself. She is like a queen in her lava lava. She looks as if she is floating on her back in water.

Jan says nothing, but vows to come back to see the photograph in the daylight the following morning. And she vows to eat papaya, wondering what would happen if she could stop herself from regurgitating her food. Maybe she would enter this inner world too, float on air, be in touch with the reptiles crawling through her imagination.

Jan closes her eyes and dreams she is floating.

A large sea turtle swims past. (200)

The artist and the subject have achieved their aim. Jan has identified with the landscape of Cowrie’s body and her contentment within it. There is hope that she will now find the same.

Unfortunately, as an editor, Dunsford is not so successful in achieving her aim of harnessing the transforming power of fiction, for as an editor she lacks subtlety. In her story Dunsford allows Jan to be gradually moved by the photograph. Jan is not told what to think by the exhibition manager, nor does the picture appear to be surrounded by any theoretical subtext dictating her response. The photograph, the beauty of the female form it captures, speaks for itself. Disappointingly, in producing both *Subversive Acts* and *Me and Marilyn Monroe* Dunsford does not allow the writers she supposedly set out to represent do the same. In many ways the two anthologies actually amount to a misrepresentation on Dunsford’s part. As Rob O’Neill suggests, several questions arise from the way in which she has introduced these predominantly ‘new’ writers:

First, why did she feel the need to provide such glosses in the first place? If the stories were felt to be capable of speaking for themselves, surely such summaries could have been dispensed with.

Secondly, if Dunsford believes, as she says, that we ‘need to learn to listen in different ways’ why is she so concerned with ensuring that the stories in her editions conform to certain preconceived ideological positions? (7)

In fact, as O'Neill continues, the nature of Dunsford's anthologies calls into question the entire purpose or necessity of collections of women's work in the 1990s:

There appears to be a conflict in the kinds of roles such anthologies are being asked to play. Are they forums for new women writers, providing, for many, the opportunity of first time publication? Or are they a venue for the promulgation of polemical messages? (7)

Rather than providing a platform for new and exciting short fiction, Dunsford seems to use these stories to vent her own frustrations and to support her own political agenda. In the process, as Jane Stafford suggests, rather than promoting new women writers she does women's writing in New Zealand a disservice:

The abysmal quality of the stories inevitably suggests that women writers are measured by a different (lower) standard, and that judgements about what is suitable for publication depend more on political and cynically commercial considerations than on literary merit. ("Lowering the Standard" 5)

It is no wonder then, that in the early 1990s, when women's short fiction was flourishing and breaking away from traditions of old in celebrating a female difference of view, many women writers chose to completely deny the influence of their gender upon their work. The 'woman writer' label so recently rescued from the negative connotations of domesticity had come to carry a new stigmatic sting.

## **Conclusion**

### **The Gifted Female Voice: Women to Women**

While Dunsford may be deserving of praise for providing new and unconventional women writers with the opportunity for publication, her supposed devotion to women's writing was undoubtedly jeopardized by her polemical political packaging of their work. In many ways Dunsford's anthologies made being recognized as a woman writer less rather than more appealing. She succeeded in her aim of assisting women writers into a marketplace which she viewed as overwhelmingly male-focused but in doing so she created a sense that women writers were owed a place in this market simply *because* they were women, regardless of the literary worth, or lack thereof, of their work. This alone would encourage any serious woman writer to downplay her sex. Finding validation in the marketplace through gender alone would provide little creative encouragement.

As well as further stigmatizing the woman writer with this added suggestion of inferiority, Dunsford's work also calls into question the very existence of such gender based/biased anthologies. While the need for increased acknowledgement of women writers was indisputable in the 1970s and continued to be relevant in the 1980s, on reaching the 1990s New Zealand women writers no longer faced the same degree of 'silencing' and marginalisation. Increased recognition in general collections of New Zealand fiction, and also more publication opportunities on an individual basis, saw the necessity of promoting women's work in such an overt manner decline and while the publication of individual collections by New Zealand women short story writers continued to flourish throughout the 1990s, the second half of the decade was marked by the virtual disappearance of gender-based anthologies. After Dunsford, it seems, their time had passed. Having made their way into the mainstream, albeit to varying

degrees, women writers appeared to be more capable of standing alone and letting their works speak for themselves; merging into the literary world just as 'writers' would supposedly gain them the equality of representation they had hoped for.

General attitudes towards 'women's issues' also contributed to writers' 'rejection' of gender acknowledgement. The increase in opportunities and recognition for women writers was paralleled by a decrease in the 'popularity' of feminism. The individualistic social climate of the 1990s was not conducive to the radical politics of 1970s feminism which dictated that the 'feminist' label not only indicated an individual's belief system but also their way of life. Feminists were expected to look a certain way and to behave in a certain way. Sadly, over time such expectations worked against the women's cause. As Ingrid Gunby suggests in her *Sites* article, "A 'Postmodern Feminist' Identity Politics?", long after the peak of the Women's Movement, knowledge of feminism continued to be reliant upon, or at least associated with, "crude stereotypes" which inevitably resulted in a perception of feminism as "an abnormal way of *being*: an identity which would imprison us at a time when we want to believe that we can be anything we want" (111). Women became hesitant to associate themselves with anything 'feminist'.

For women writers of the 1990s, being identified as feminist also attached certain expectations to their work. 'Feminist writing' was branded as anti-male political treatise, and 'women's writing' as inevitably 'feminist'. However, while some of the short fiction published in the late 1970s and 1980s has been shown to support these expectations, such a limited definition of women's (and/or feminist) writing fails to reflect the great depth and variety of work which has been produced since the height of radical feminism and which this investigation has revealed. It is obvious, therefore, why many women writers object to being labelled 'feminist' or indeed even to being



identified in terms of their gender. Their stories may well express a need to speak for women to women as women and they may reflect feminist beliefs but this is not their sole purpose. Stereotypical constructions of feminism deny the variety of female experience, the endless possibilities which women writers of short fiction were, as evidenced here, increasingly expressing through their work.

Together these factors suggest that by the mid 1990s the time for androgynous literature in New Zealand had been reached. The need to differentiate a woman's work from that of her male contemporaries seemed unwarranted and equally unwanted. In fact, more concern was being expressed about the relative disappearance of New Zealand male writers as women's anthologies flooded the marketplace.<sup>14</sup> Gordon McLauchan wrote of this male absence in the *New Zealand Herald* claiming that "women's writing is becoming so dominant in New Zealand that the literary voice of men can hardly be heard" (7:6). In a marked turnaround, male writers had become the 'silenced', overwhelmed by a strong collective female voice. In the light of such perceptions, the continuing 'need' for women's work to be rescued from the margins was understandably questionable.

However, any suggestion that women's issues simply went to ground when the limitations of radical feminism began to show is unfounded. The politics of separatism may no longer have been relevant in the 1990s but, as suggested previously, this did not mean an end to feminism. Rather, as part of a continual process of renewal, perceptions of a singular experience of feminism built upon "the fantasy of a viable inclusive identity politics" gave way to "alternative popular feminisms" allowing for freedom of expression and embracing individual differences (Gunby 110-111). This movement away from radical, political definitions of feminism did not reflect a stance *against*

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<sup>14</sup> These concerns also coincided with the 1996 publication of Kai Jensen's *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature* which reignited discussion of the importance of gender in literary circles.

feminism nor a suggestion that the need for feminism had passed. Women in the 90s were recognising that while a singular notion of feminism might be obsolete and limiting, 'women's issues' persisted and some form of feminist consciousness was inevitable *and* necessary. Rather than declaring that feminism had had its day there was a need, as identified by Lyn Loates in "Excuse me, are you a feminist?", to address the discrepancy between feminism as it was publicly perceived – in a way coloured by "les-sep-fems" – and feminism as it was personally accepted as a system of beliefs (32). The 'women's movement' and notions of 'sisterhood' may have been passé, but the basic principles upon which they were founded remained intact:

Now, as we move into the '90s, there is no 'feminist movement' as such, but it is easy to see, when one goes looking, that while the word is now rarely used in every-day parlance, feminist principles are alive and as well as can be expected. (Loates 32)

This 'feminist persistence' followed through to the woman writer. While the separatist publication of women's work may no longer have been relevant in the later 1990s, the need to recognize the unique qualities of the female voice as expressed through short fiction was ongoing. Politically speaking, the gender of the writer was indeed becoming increasingly irrelevant, but on a personal level, woman-to-woman, the distinctiveness of the female voice was more vital than ever.

In her 1995 *Takahe* editorial, Isa Moynihan lamented the current literary climate in New Zealand which had women writers "being told that they must stand on their own two feet," encouraging them into a more androgynous position:

Be judged solely on their literary merits, do away with special promotions and courses for 'women's writing' and so on. This advice was especially noticeable after what some considered to be the worst excesses of Women's Suffrage Centennial Year (and there was rather a lot of it about). Women writers themselves began to make apologetic noises, and to be persuaded that positive discrimination was actually patronizing and should be rejected by every right-thinking woman writer. (n. pag.)

While agreeing that women writers had come a long way, Moynihan urged that to maintain this standing women's work must continue to be celebrated *as women's work*: "Better to be 'patronised' than to disappear altogether" (n. pag.). For women's writing to return to the margins would represent a great loss for women writers and readers alike, at a time when literature provided one of the sole platforms for sharing the female experience.

While the limited position of 1970s radical feminism could not be denied, some of the more positive aspects of its collective focus were sacrificed in the shift toward greater individualism. As acknowledged by Larissa Marno, early notions of 'sisterhood' may not have accounted for individual diversity but the women's movement did play an important role in allowing women "to validate each other and their experiences":

Forums such as consciousness raising groups afforded women a place to discuss their own lives, to argue issues and belief systems, and to be challenged on their personal politics. They had a place to meet where they were safe to learn and develop as feminists. ("Mothering the New Feminism" 8)

In the 1990s such forums no longer existed, individualism having negated the need for 'sharing'. Unfortunately, Marno argues, becoming focused solely upon the individual does not conclusively benefit women. Rather it reflects "a lack of identification with feminism as a personal belief system", a failure to move beyond the 1970s stereotype of feminists as "hairy-legged, bra-burning lesbians (and the subsequent suggestion that they are 'bad')" ("Mothering the New Feminism" 8). While the separatism of 1970s feminism actually resulted in division and fragmentation, the united front of womanhood upon which it was built remained, according to Marno, both valuable and necessary. Regardless of what being a woman means to the individual, the experience of 'being woman' is a shared experience. Despite individual differences, as Marno suggests, women need to identify with one another. They remain united by issues

specific to their gender and such issues need to be shared: “we have to have our own space as women to meet and discuss on a more personal level” (8).

Through literature the meeting of like minds and inner discussion of shared issues could continue to take place and could do so without the ‘distancing’ effect of politics. The importance of women’s fiction in this respect is captured by Whendii Marett and Rain Ferguson in their afterword to *Where Grew the Tree: a collection of 18 Hawke’s Bay women’s writing* (dated 30 November 1992).<sup>15</sup> In Hawke’s Bay in the late 1970s, they recall, women’s groups were “thriving and exciting” but on reaching the 1990s a “huge contrast” was evident: “the ability to reach other women with similar intentions and aspirations is increasingly difficult” (77). Women of the 1990s, Marett and Ferguson suggest, have embraced the new roles and opportunities opened up as a result of the Women’s Movement but they have also maintained their old roles, creating a new form of unattainable expectations and leaving less time for emotional connection: “Paradoxically, as women are more visible their emotional reality has become obscured and more and more women are coping in isolation” (77). In the face of this, literature presents an ongoing opportunity to encourage sharing: “Producing this book is an attempt to redress this increasing invisibility and silent suffering, and to provide some continuity and communication, women to women” (Marett and Ferguson 77).

Consciously or unconsciously, the writers discussed throughout this thesis have fulfilled the same need. Their works have consistently captured the experience of ‘being woman’ from the political implications to the personal, embracing their ‘difference of view’ and displaying an increasing awareness of the multi-dimensional nature of the female self. In fact, in spite of women writers’ resistance to focusing on their gender, the shifts notable in their works over the 1975-1995 period reflect similar shifts in

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<sup>15</sup> Marett and Rain’s anthology was omitted from the body of this investigation due to its predominant focus on poetry. The few pieces of short fiction included were of less relevance to this discussion than the editors’ views, as expressed in their afterword.

feminist perspective. As Tom Hyde suggested in his previously cited *Metro* piece on the Women's Movement, "I'm not a feminist, but . . .," an end to political activism did not automatically coincide with an end to personal beliefs. While many 1990s women were uneasy about the label of 'feminism', feminism was precisely what their personal concerns reflected:

Today it's as if only die-hards describe themselves as 'feminist'. Feminism suggests radical activism and few women today see themselves in that light . . . 'You hear it all the time,' says Alex Woody of *Broadsheet*. ' "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." and then they go on to tell you how they support all the things feminism and being a feminist is about.' (Hyde 49)

Redefinition rather than denial was necessary for these women to come to their own understanding of "feminism" and focus on what it meant to them and their lives. Rather than rejecting feminism, women needed to recognise that it could be embraced as an expression of their own experiences. As Hyde proposes, "It's a matter of women defining for themselves what it means to be feminist and then not being afraid of social stigma to say so" (49). Self-definition lay at the heart of new 90s feminism(s). Personal belief systems took precedence over political indoctrination and being true to the *individual female self* gained greater significance than any collective spirit.

Just as women writers resisted standing up and being recognised as women writers, Lyn Loates found a similar resistance to being seen as feminist in an investigation of young 1990s women. The women questioned still *believed* in feminism in terms of equality issues; they simply did not want to *be* feminist, convinced that 'becoming' a feminist would prevent them from being other things (Loates 35). Unfortunately, just as women writers denying their gender could see them face renewed marginalisation, a more general refusal to acknowledge feminist beliefs could result in them disappearing. Rachel Cooper addressed this possibility in her Woman's Book Festival speech "I'll be Post-feminist in Post-patriarchy" (transcribed in *Broadsheet*

Autumn 1993 as “I’m young, feminist and proud!”). In spite of her recognition that ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ have become ugly words, Cooper remains willing to stand up and proclaim her beliefs:

I am a feminist and proud of it, and I do believe that feminism is just as valid and vital as it has ever been . . . Feminism is far from being redundant. There have been feminists as long as there has been a patriarchy, and we will be around until it’s over. (9)

Rejecting the label of ‘feminist’ is not, Cooper argues, the right course of action in overcoming negative stereotypes: “we have to keep calling ourselves feminists, and young women in particular must keep the ideals and politics of feminism alive . . . we cannot become complacent, and we cannot believe that this is a Post-feminism era” (9).

However, while Cooper speaks of “ideals” and “politics” perhaps her focus should instead be on the actual personal experience of feminism. Being feminist in the 90s did not mean conforming to a set of ideals, belonging to a ‘women’s group’ or engaging in political activism. Simply *being* a woman and acknowledging what that meant to the individual was the most important step in perpetuating the feminist belief system and redefining feminism for *all* women. Sharing the experience of being women may form a vital part of this female self-definition, yet as Larissa Marno suggests, the context for such sharing should be personal rather than political. In fact, the “space” she claims is needed for “women to meet and discuss” need not even be physical (9) and it is here that fiction plays a significant part. As this thesis argues, regardless of their willingness to accept the label of ‘woman writer’, women writers do write *as* women, and their writing does speak *to* women.

Through literature women can share their experiences. Reading provides the opportunity to identify with the words of other women, to share in the experience of ‘being women’ without the need to for political acknowledgement or action and without having to embrace a certain way of life. In the 1990s, amidst mainstream resistance to

'feminism' and the decline of female solidarity, the need for such a forum was great. Therefore, the significance of the writer's gender could not be underestimated. As recognised by Whendii Marett and Rain Ferguson, literature would remain a valuable forum of female expression long after other sites for sharing womanhood had ceased to exist:

Our voice as women is ultimately where our power lies, lending understanding to the past and shaping the future. This is women's work. The sharing of everyday, ordinary, extraordinary experiences that make up women's lives is the offering, the gift, to the reader. (77)

Through fiction, the female voice is a gift that goes on giving. As the work of New Zealand women short story writers investigated here shows, the trends identified by Wevers as beginning in the early 1980s did indeed expand significantly over the following two decades. Fictionalisations of the experience of 'being woman' became increasingly dominated by positive, active and more varied female characters, celebrating the individual diversity within the common bond of womanhood through increasingly effective modes of expression. While on reaching the later 1990s the outward politics of women's writing may have become unnecessary, even repellent, the uniqueness of women's work remained undeniable and the influence of their gender inescapable. As the new millennium loomed, women's 'difference of view' and their gendered perspective continued to present themselves through short fiction. The sex of the woman writer continued to matter and any suggestion of an androgynous literature had failed to materialise. It is hoped, by this writer at least, that while little else may remain constant as New Zealand literature journeys through the new century, that one certainty will remain: women will write as women and readers and writers alike (of both sexes) will overcome the stereotypical stigma of feminism and learn to appreciate the importance of feminist beliefs beyond political agenda. The unique 'gift' the woman writer offers through her voice should be gratefully accepted.

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