

# the maternal heroine

JANE MESSER

At this point I should have taken wings and started to fly but at this point also, of course, I was involved in having children ... I think those are terribly difficult years for any young woman and for a young woman who wants to write or paint or anything else, even more so.

Charmian Clift<sup>1</sup>

There is a Chinese curse quoted in glib desk calendars that have a phrase for each day: 'May you live in interesting times'. In fiction, maternity has not often been seen as terribly interesting, and in the real world having babies often stops a mother from writing, off and on and even for years. The story of mothers and babies seems elusive, not fit for the imagination, for where's the story? The 'maternal heroine', a protagonist and main character whose actions and identity are closely bound up with her work and experience of herself as a mother of young and dependent children, is rare. How could she not be? She's busy giving off strong whiffs of routine. Where's the drama in that? And what are babies? They're not thinking, arguing agents for change—hardly protagonists—even if antagonistic at the cocktail hour.

At least, that is one way of opening up the question of the maternal heroine. The question evolved for me a few years ago as I began work on a novel after the birth of my first child. Three years of writing passed and after my second child was born the doubt turned into an engulfing mourning for my former writing self. Yet as a mother, I was completely at ease. During these years, I scraped story-lines together doggedly, inventing every character and scene from a depleted imagination. My vocabulary, surely the

building blocks of a writer's poetics, seemed to have shrunk. The ground and the sky were my daily metaphor: head literally bent to the floor, back humped to pick up children, food scraps, and toys. I felt I had lost the open sky's-the-limit vista that to me represented the upward and outward voice of imagination.

The novel I was writing concerned a young woman, Rafaela, who in 1960 runs away from her small home in a coastal town and within weeks finds herself accidentally pregnant to Chella, an Indian university student.<sup>2</sup> As lovers do, they part with misunderstandings and Rafi goes on to have her baby as the single mother of an illegitimate child. She creates an identity for herself and her daughter that is a lie: she gives an Anglo name to them both and invents a story about her husband dying in the cane fields before her daughter was born. Then Rafi comes to see that these lies render her unable to be intimate with anyone. She has to tell her real lived story:

When she had taken the Carmichael name and crafted her lie about her young husband Andrew Carmichael bleeding to death cutting cane, she had not seen how complicated the story's evolution would be, how wrong it would come to make her feel. Everyone—Penny, Mrs Gould, Ruby, Alex, and Chloe most of all—they all wanted to know more. She could not even invent stories about him for Chloe because her girl might repeat them, and then everyone would be at Rafi to be told more.

What Rafi suddenly wanted—as if it were the simplest wish in the world—was to return with Chloe to her family's home one sunny breeze-blown day, and have her daughter hear those same leaves rustle outside the bedroom window. Gathering in her was the thought that if she could do that, if she began there in that house or crouched down amongst the tall ears of corn at the end of the garden, she would be able to explain all the rest to Chloe, and to anyone else that mattered. But her story would never be simple, nor the way ahead straight.

Finding the dramatic shape for this story was hard work for a time, although I did find it, and my vocabulary and rhythms too. I often wondered why, beyond the tiredness, was my voice curtailed by having children, and not busted right open. Why must the mothering swallow up the writing voice and dramatic possibilities? Had I learnt, through thirty-five years of reading literature, that it was Jane Austen's unmarried heroines who were the stuff of literature, and not Gervaise, the slatternly mother of Emile Zola's wild and infamous anti-heroine, Nana?<sup>3</sup>

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Imagination, desperation and, a third term, masking—all suggest to me a reading of Louise Erdrich's *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year*. This is an exquisitely written book, taut

with ideas about time, geography and babies, rich in sensation and observation. Erdrich's insights startle and she is generous, such as when she writes of how important it can be for a child to be affirmed by another adult, someone outside the relationship with the parents. Women without children are also 'the best of mothers' because they can witness the child and see them anew with an 'interest and grace' that a parent cannot always sustain.<sup>4</sup> Here she is, in typical form, writing about the death of a rogue cat:

Chuck walks out on a patch of thin ice during a sudden drop in temperature—at least, so I gather. It is an uncertain February. Perhaps he is investigating a goldfish rising, one of the ornamental Woolworth's twenty-nine-cent carp released in the pond to grow huge and dreamy slow. Perhaps one of them touches the surface for a gulp of air before settling into stasis on the bottom. Perhaps Chuck jumps after it and then keeps going, descends through the nearly stiff water, his heart stopping as he falls, the water closing molecule by molecule so that he is finally suspended, his paws spread and reaching.<sup>5</sup>

Now, imagine that artful writing given over to parturition, to birth and to babies. The setting: a farmhouse in New Hampshire which Erdrich shared with her children and husband, Michael. Even when she writes in anger and frustration about mothering, the internal violence of her sensations is transformed by the beauty of her words—and her blue-jayed, wooded world—into something pleasurable. Ironically, it is through such masking that Erdrich makes her own extraordinary literature. And yet the narrator is also escaping the paradoxes of the maternal heroine by writing instead, and often, about the beauty of the natural world, as if nature's beauty not only illuminates but softens and silences the maternal experience.

A year after the book's release Erdrich's husband, Michael Dorris, died. The adored husband of the memoir had committed suicide in a hotel room after separating from Erdrich following allegations of sexual abuse of one of their children. Erdrich's 'mask' was away stripped by his death, more brutally than anyone could wish. Her technique of ellipsis and metonymy was hinting at, but then finally hid, the tensions between the good and the bad mother and the good and bad family. In fact, the book, subtitled 'a birth year', says nothing of the inherent, unavoidable terrors of raising six children—a couple of them adopted and one with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. The author's anger, her sense of being 'shattered'—all the overflows of being a mother and a writer—are hidden in the weave of an exquisite lace, her perfect deployment of language.

The impact of *The Blue Jay's Dance* upon the Australian writer Susan Johnson was similar to my own; we and a number of other writer-mothers, all with babies, were reading the book more or less at the same time after its release in Australia. Via networks of friendship and literary agents we were sometimes aware of each other's impressions. I

gathered that Johnson was more suspicious than I. One of my friends fell into fits of pure anger with the book, infuriated by its beauty and by the resources seemingly at hand for Erdrich: the birds, her patience, her studio, the way her huge family disappears each day, the beauty of the natural world that seemed effortlessly to fill the pages. More than the others, I succumbed to that beauty.

But after the news of Michael Dorris's death, the fissures in Erdrich's text showed themselves as dark wrenches where before they had been so seductive. As writers and mothers of babies, our dependence on Erdrich's invincibility was also exposed. Readers who are not themselves writers ask about where the autobiography is in a work of fiction, as if autobiography is *not* there in the fantasy, the willed-for and desired written thing. And so *The Blue Jay's Dance* now strikes me both as a book of longing, written as a gift and a love song to her three birth daughters, and also as a mother's solitary, grieving dance before the grave of her real family life opened.

Erdrich turns her undoubtedly keen eye to the problem of expressing the miraculous and the banal through a maternal heroine. Writing about this question of creating a narrative around a birth itself, she says:

Although every birth is a story, there are only so many outcomes possible. Birth is dictated to the consciousness by the conscious body. There are certain frustrations in approaching such an event, a drama in which the body stars and not the fiction-making mind. In a certain way, I'm jealous. I want to control the tale. I can't—therein lies the conflict that drives this plot in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

While she is saying she wanted to translate or recreate that experience through *The Blue Jay's Dance*, she is also backing away from the furthest reaches of the imagination when it comes to the maternal heroine and narrative-making. Is she right to say that 'there are only so many outcomes possible'? This is almost contradictory for Erdrich, because she has in fact fictionalised so much in her memoir. She quotes writers who have written about a woman's birthing days, including Toni Morrison and Jane Smiley.<sup>7</sup> It was Erdrich who led me to Sigrid Unsted's tale of a mother in *Kristin Lavransdatter* for which Unsted was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps for a writer to feel passionate about her work, there must be a sense of everything said, a personal limit 'beyond which their art cannot go'.<sup>9</sup> For *The Blue Jay's Dance* is not her most passionate work. It cannot be because she, unlike Sigrid Unsted and Toni Morrison, is afraid:

A woman needs to tell her own story, to tell the bloody version of the fairy tale. A woman has to be her own hero . . . And yet, the writing that ate me up, that saved my life, drove me over the brink, caught me flying off the cliff by the neck of my shirt, will not be my

story in this house. Writing that choked me, writing that gave me everything and took away my peace of mind. Writing, too, that I did with my husband. No, that will not be the story told here.<sup>10</sup>

Why the most passionate of her writing lies elsewhere she doesn't say. Again, the text has stopped, and changed direction. (The passages I have quoted are separate, and she doesn't link them herself.) It seems an extraordinary admission to make, a fissure in a text that otherwise is so seamless in its impulse towards smooth revelation.

Mothering contains the extremes of working to community expectation, but also of encouraging the child's individuality. The responsibility of raising young children poses constraints: ideally the parent of a baby or young child doesn't swear, punch, leave the house unexpectedly, or even read a good book for hours shut in her bedroom. The way we behave, speak and feel towards children, the protections and the opportunities we offer them are an essential measure of a society's sensibility. 'Good' mothers are constrained by the responsibility at hand of caring for babies and tending to young children: who are also *our* children, our collective futures, the essential measure of a citizenry's humanity. Notwithstanding the habitual nature of much of the tasks—encouraging your child to learn to chew, walk, hold a cup, speak, see the moon, and enjoy the love of others—mothering is a self-making, creative action practised night and day. Writing is a little like that too. While the writer has a sense of readers' or the publishing industry's expectations, the writer knows it is vital to be brave, uninhibited, curious and daredevil if great writing is to happen. Louise Erdrich felt these often opposing forces; and on reading her words they went some way to answering my own questions of what had happened to my writing voice:

Writing as a mother shortly after bearing, while nurturing, an infant, one's heart is easily pierced. To look full face at evil seems impossible, and it is difficult at first to write convincingly of the mean, the murderous, the cruelty that shadows mercy and pleasure and ardour. But as one matures into a fuller grasp of the meaning of parenthood, to understand the worst becomes a crucial means of protecting the innocent.<sup>11</sup>

Erdrich sees Toni Morrison as a literary mentor here. In an interview she speaks of Morrison's achievement as a mother and writer in challenging great wrongs:

She spoke of being a mother, and she always spoke about it as a great boon to her as a writer. Previous to that I don't think I'd read anything positive ... she's able to be both a mother and also admit to the cruelties of the world. *It's a very hard thing for a mother to do because one almost protects the imagination against that kind of intrusion, protecting the children's imagination.* She's so valiant, she doesn't do that.<sup>12</sup> [my italics]

*The Blue Jay's Dance* combines the experience of raising three daughters into the story of one deeply loved, unintruded-upon baby. Erdrich describes herself as 'thick' with love for her daughter (quoting Morrison), and milk-brained and milk-visioned. She correlates this intimacy and intensity of feeling with the imaginative, literary yearning shared by many esteemed, male writers:

One day as I am holding the baby and feeding her, I realise that this is exactly the state of mind and heart that so many male writers from Thomas Mann to James Joyce describe with yearning—the mystery of an epiphany, the sense of oceanic oneness, the great yes, the wholeness. There is also the sense of a self merged and at least temporarily erased—it is deathlike ... Perhaps we owe some of our most moving literature to men who didn't understand that they wanted to be women nursing babies.<sup>13</sup>

Well, maybe. Frustratingly Erdrich stops with this thought, rather than going on to think about what the effects of the writer's maternal erasure will be in her actual writing. She sees it as 'deathlike'. Is Erdrich saying that the maternal 'yes' creates a forgetting, the writer lost in her mother-self's milky self-loss? That a writer needs unlocated desire to write, and that with the baby the mother loses her desire in the 'oceanic oneness' of becoming located firmly as mother with child? The social and political are well out of sight in this speculation.

It is not that *The Blue Jay's Dance* is a complete fiction, or that it is lies. It is a wishful, fabricated memoir, one filled with desire for a way of living that is not wholly there; present in the pages, but not always in her family. Erdrich's writing is gorgeous, but finally and disappointingly, the narrative shies clear of the brutal and the ugly. All the 'bad' mothering—the failure to protect her child against cruelties—is left to lie well beneath the pond's surface, as frozen as Chuck, the cat.

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In *A Better Woman*, also a memoir and story of the birth years, Susan Johnson writes of the death of the old prenatal writer's self, and of a new self yet to be discovered, following the birth of her son: 'I think now that by keeping my pen and red and black Chinese notebook close at all times I was trying to avoid creative extinction'.<sup>14</sup>

By this she means, and means it in retrospect, that the self and daily life can be so changed by becoming a mother, that the original writer is sunk and quickly fossilising. What the mother in Johnson's memoir doesn't know then is that a phoenix-like experience will also be possible, that later a renewal of the writer's self takes place. The stress points in this engineering lie between the sense of imminent extinction as a writer and the realignments discovered in the post-gravidas writing.

*A Better Woman* is ostensibly about the author's colostomy following the birth of her two boys. The bag, needed to help a vaginal fistula heal, was not in itself the impetus for the book, but the injury does shape the narrative and provides its narrative tension. The wound is pivotal to her undoing and remaking as writer, mother and wife: the wound itself must be remade using the skin of other body parts to close it up. The effect of living with her injuries, of coming close to death, of giving birth to her children and struggling to raise them, and of having to remake herself so as to live and write is what makes Johnson (she believes) 'a better woman'. She doesn't claim to have become a good woman, nor is there any implicit sense of that in the writing. Rather, she says that before her experiences she was self-centred and immune toward much that should have involved and affected her; that her self, as it broadens with compassion and the experience of humility, is 'better'.

Johnson's story was preceded by the sudden eclipse of a vital aspect of Louise Erdrich's narrative—its veracity—in the aftermath of Michael Dorris's death. And so Johnson's approach to 'truth' and her awareness of the reader's eager desire for *her* truth is entirely different to Erdrich's. On learning of Dorris's death, Johnson was 'reminded again of all the other narratives the story must necessarily leave out in order to build the one "true" story'.<sup>15</sup> Johnson herself sets out to tell a much less beautiful story. She strives to be transparent in her writing process, acknowledging that in a communication as elaborate as a book, transparency is not fully possible or even desirable from the author's point of view. Her two children are named and not reimagined, as is the one unnamed child in Erdrich's memoir. Her husband 'Les' is a parallel character of sorts to Erdrich's 'Michael', though Johnson's words about him are sometimes ungenerous, carrying the whiff of revenge. As she makes clear, their marriage was on the rocks. He doesn't want her to write or publish the book, but she does; though also includes his protest.

There are no heartbreakingly wonderful landscapes as in Erdrich's wooded mountain home, just the acoustic faults of a badly constructed Melbourne warehouse conversion. She investigates herself as a writer and mother, asking broad questions about both. Hers is a double effort of exposure and fabrication, given that both roles more often than not demand masking and invention. In relation to her writing, she discovers that where she once thought writing brought her close to experience it can also create distance. Johnson warns the reader not to trust her. But, of course, this a strange position to put the reader in. It is like entering a friend's house but never being shown the other rooms, yet being expected to be relaxed and intimate:

although I had long believed that my writing was a process by which I brought the world closer, making everything more real or at least more understandable, more *mine*, this was not always the complete truth ... [Then, on the day she is to have the operation to close

off her bowel] I suddenly saw that instead of bringing reality closer, my writing was acting as a buffer zone between reality and me. I had always thought my work was an exposure, a peeling back, but I understood then that I was recording what was happening to me as a way of stepping outside the reality of waking up the next afternoon with a bag of shit stuck to my belly.<sup>16</sup>

Unmasked in ways that don't always flatter the author is the difficulty of expressing the round of anger, depression, recrimination, joy and pleasure that young infants provoke. 'In reality I am the good mother and I am the bad mother: I am the good woman and the bad woman caught in the same net of skin. Can any words I write hope to capture this tension?'<sup>17</sup>

Johnson's memoir, by articulating her experience as a bad mother and incorporating that possibility within the becoming of a 'better' woman, makes a significant move toward embracing the contradictions necessary to the creation of 'unheroic' but humane maternal heroines.

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American novelist and essayist John Barth has written an essay on the limits of the imagination, asking if we cannot imagine poetry or language or even the creative imagination itself going farther than 'this', or dealing commensurately with 'that', are we describing real limits of the medium or those of our imaginative faculty? Are we then 'merely demonstrating the limitations of our own imaginations, which the experience of a new masterpiece might disprove tomorrow, if such things were really measurable?'<sup>18</sup> A scene in the American actress Frances Farmer's autobiography *Will There Really Be A Morning?* set me thinking about Barth's discussion of the limits of the imagination, and how it can come into conflict with the kind of real mothers that we find acceptable and the fictions that we as writers write, or as readers seek to read.

Consider what Farmer witnessed as a steerage passenger on her way by boat to Russia in 1935. She was just twenty-one and had won the prize of a trip to Russia and Europe. The ship was carrying 'Pols', 'Slavs', Germans and Irish 'back to their homelands'.

Early one morning I saw a young girl of perhaps seventeen lying under a hulking moustached man who bore his weight down upon her like a pile driver, and she shrieked with each thrust, clawing at his back, pulling him deeper into her. When he was spent, she rolled on top of him, straddling his body, and churned herself against him until he could take her again. Still it was not enough. He rolled off and two other men boarded her. One sat upon her breast and she grappled for him with her mouth while the other entered her like a grunting boar. An old man was asleep beside them. A baby crawled

around underfoot and picked trash off the deck and stuffed it in his mouth. A gnarled, wrinkled woman squinted at them and grinned, letting tobacco-stained saliva dribble out of her hollow mouth.<sup>19</sup>

The young woman's hands 'continued to explore and excite her body' while the baby crawled alongside. Read as written, the young woman is on top, and not a victim of rape, though possibly of her own sexuality. Reading the scene for the first time, I assumed that the baby was the young girl's, and that she was his mother. As a woman 'reading' and later writing this scene Farmer was perhaps vulnerable because she was only a few years older herself at the time, and never having children wasn't later able to mediate the memory through her own experience of being a sexual or transgressive mother. Instead, Farmer was always the transgressive, disobedient daughter.

Farmer's absolute need to be herself and independent, along with her heavy drinking, led to many punishments by the film chiefs who employed her, as well as her mother's and husband's cruelties. Later, Farmer had a long but secret relationship with another woman. In her autobiography, Farmer asks crucial questions about her experiences on that ship, and of acting and literature. Farmer wanted to comprehend the divide that existed between herself and the people with whom she shared the deck, but was less clear about the confusion the young mother caused within her and what to do with that confusion. How could she articulate the 'baseness' of the girl she'd seen on the boat, if she was horrified by it in herself? She said frankly that, in her confusion she hated her, and, 'hated her needs'. It is fair to speculate that some of Farmer's anguish was because she knew the girl *was* the baby's mother.

Wherever I looked, my eyes fell on sex ... I realised that our so-called search for reality at the university [through drama studies] had been infantile ... How could we, smug and secure in our intellect, assume to pursue the base motivations of others. It was then I knew that I had far to go and much to learn before I could give life and truth to my work ... I wondered: If I were ever faced with creating such a role, could I do it? Could I understand it? And, if I understood, could I possibly convey it?<sup>20</sup>

The questions Farmer put to herself as a fledgling drama student are equally valid today in relation to writing. The problem is never too simple: what is suitable to literature, and how to convey it? Between the boat trip to Russia and the writing of her autobiography Farmer was incarcerated for years in an insane asylum. (During the same period over thirty states in the USA allowed the sterilisation of men and women deemed genetically 'unfit', such as those in mental institutions; while Farmer was not herself sterilised she spent years in the asylum with women who were.<sup>21</sup> This was the same period during

which Australian Indigenous children were forcibly separated from their mothers and families, what we now understand as the 'stolen generation'. Maternity was a brutally contested state.)

On the ship watching the young mother fucking, Farmer had, in the words of Anne Brewster, encountered the 'space of terror', a space which she could not fully understand. Brewster discusses the space of terror in an essay on Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.<sup>22</sup> This biography tells the story of Pilkington's mother and aunts' removal as children from their families in Western Australia's north-west Pilbara in 1931. In order to write the book, Pilkington talked at length to her mother and surviving aunt about their removal from their mothers and families:

Molly and Gracie sat silently on the horse, tears streaming down their cheeks as Constable Riggs turned the big bay stallion ... A high pitched wail broke out. The cries of agonised mothers and the women, and the deep sobs of grandfathers, uncles and cousins filled the air ... Behind them, those remaining in the camp found strong sharp objects and gashed themselves and inflicted wounds to their heads and bodies as expression of their sorrow.<sup>23</sup>

The girls were incarcerated at the Moore River Mission, then escaped and trekked 2,000 kilometres for nine weeks along the rabbit-proof fence back to their home and their mothers at Jigalong. Doris Pilkington's mother Molly was fourteen at the time. Pilkington writes that it was 'without a doubt one of the longest walks in the history of the Australian outback ... An incredible achievement in anyone's language.'<sup>24</sup> Molly was recaptured in 1940 and sent back to the mission with her two young children, Doris and Annabelle. She escaped again in 1941 with baby Annabelle, only to have Annabelle later removed and also sent to a mission.<sup>25</sup>

The story of these three generations of women is an encounter with the state and maternity of the kind Toni Morrison activates fearlessly in *Beloved*.<sup>26</sup> Morrison herself has said she wants in her writing to 'expand articulation', to stretch the imagination. Morrison's story of Sethe is about 'the effort of a woman to love her children, to raise her children, to be responsible for her children. And the fact that it was during slavery made all those things impossible for her.'<sup>27</sup> Doris Pilkington's mother, Molly, shares with the character of Sethe an analogous impossibility of mothering. Indigenous Australians have experienced decades of forced, state-orchestrated separation of families, and have been put to work without pay. African-American slave mothers were separated from their children so as to be put to work in the fields, with all the consequent breakdown of family and self that Morrison explores so insightfully.

Sethe does not know who her mother is; one day a woman working in the field is pointed out to her but that is as much as she ever remembers about her experience of being mothered. Her own mothering creates the storyline of the novel: it is the drama at the heart of the novel.

All these texts articulate and reveal the mothers' 'space of terror', pushing at the limits of our literary imaginations and historical knowledge.<sup>28</sup> In Morrison's *Beloved*, the political and social 'space of terror' that Frances Farmer strove to understand and which Doris Pilkington tells of is illuminated clearly through Sethe's personal and social history as an ex-slave. The question of how to be a loving mother in a life that is overfull with every kind of pain and need—the slave's life—is central to Morrison's novel. Sethe remembers the sight of lynched slave men she had lived with at the Sweet Home farm. This memory is one of many terrorising experiences:

there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty ... Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys.<sup>29</sup>

Sethe flees slavery after the farmer's sons hold her down while one of them sucks on her breasts, taking her baby's breast milk, in a game of annihilation which they end with a brutal whipping of her back that almost kills her. Sethe runs away, makes a new home for herself and her four children with Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, but is later confronted by the Sweet Home slave owner, who tracks her down. She cannot bear for her children to be taken back as slaves by him, and slashes her young daughter Beloved's throat. Beloved dies, and later becomes a ghost who haunts Sethe and Baby Suggs's home.

This *historical impossibility* of being a loving and responsible slave mother frees the public writer Morrison—and Pilkington—from the private shame and anger that constrains Erdrich. Morrison creates a heroine who is both the good mother and the bad mother. Sethe admits to making very grave mistakes. When Sethe suggests to Baby Suggs that they abandon their home because it is haunted by the dead Beloved, old Baby Suggs turns on her, giving her a walloping history lesson:

'What'd be the point?' asked Baby Suggs. 'Not a house in the country aint packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? Or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased,

all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil.' Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. 'My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember.'<sup>30</sup>

Baby Suggs grieves her separation from her children and the loss of the civility of memory, overwhelmed by the 'historical impossibility' of not having been able to raise and keep her babies and children and responsibly grow them up as free citizens.

In all the texts, other than Erdrich's, children die; murder is committed; a mother is damaged in childbirth; mothers are forcibly stolen from their babies; mothers lie and steal; and all the mothers encounter the 'space of terror' of mothering. These maternal heroines acknowledge failure—failure to keep their children alive or alongside; failure to love, to be always strong and sane; failure of their own bodies; and, in Pilkington' and Morrison's books, the failure or impossibility of overcoming the political and social imperatives of genocide, slavery and separation that bear down on them. When the maternal heroine shows her placement, however fraught, in the social and political sphere of life, the literary and 're-memorative' figure of the mother as a privatised, civilising, good woman somersaults into imaginative and daring literature.<sup>31</sup>

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JANE MESSER writes fiction and essays and was recently appointed to a lectureship at Macquarie University, coordinating the postgraduate Creative Writing Program in the Department of English. New writing includes *The Happiness Project*, a novel, and forthcoming works in *Best Stories Under the Sun* and *New Writing* (UK).

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1. Charmian Clift, in Nadia Wheatley, *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*, Harper Collins Australia, Sydney, 2001, p. 214.
  2. Jane Messer, 'Provenance', unpublished manuscript, 2004. See extracts in *Hot Type*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1996, pp. 90–7; *New Writing*, UK, 2005, <<http://www.multilingual-matters.com/multi/journals/>>.
  3. In addition to this canon were the feminist works of theorists and writers taught and read in the new women's studies, sociology and philosophy humanities courses of the early 1980s. Writers such as Shulamith Firestone, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Anne Summers and Germaine Greer, alongside local journals such as *Hecate* and *Refractory Girl*, focused on the negating experience of maternity and children as both victim and burden. The French feminisms of Julia

Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous variously argued the impossibility of the speaking woman. This was an historically important stage of theorisation and an understandable response to the postwar construction of family that these women were raised in. These theorisations occurred during (and importantly, enabled) an era of Australian women's fiction writing, which in turn significantly changed the Australian publishing economy—for a while. New small presses such as McPhee Gribble, Spinifex Press and Fremantle Arts Centre Press brought new kinds of writing and writers to notice, and sometimes to prominence. However, even with women's fiction being published as never before, the fiction didn't then find ways to conceive of maternity as having dramatic and socially significant narrative possibilities. See also Kate

- Jennings, 'What Any Washerwoman Can Do' in *Save Me Joe Louis*, Penguin Books, 1988.
4. Louise Erdrich, *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year*, Flamingo, London, 1996, p. 162.
  5. Erdrich, p. 39.
  6. Erdrich, p. 43.
  7. Erdrich, p. 147.
  8. Sigrid Unsted, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Abacus, London, 1995. The trilogy comprises *The Bridal Wreath*, *The Mistress of Husaby* and *The Cross*. See also: Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*; Margaret Atwood, "'Spotty-Handed Villianesses': Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature" <[web.net/owtoad/niness.html](http://web.net/owtoad/niness.html)>; Sara Dowse, 'Connections around Childbirth', in Debra Adelaide (ed.), *Motherlove*; Lucy Frost (ed.), *Wilde Eve: Eve Langley's Story*; Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*; Amanda Lohrey, *Camille's Bread and The Philosopher's Doll*; Chandani Lokugé, *If the Moon Smiled*; Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood*; Mary Morrissy, *Mother Of Pearl*; Sally Muirden, *We Too Shall Be Mothers*; Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*; Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*; Beth Spencer, *How to Conceive of a Girl*; Brenda Walker, 'All the Points of the Compass', in Adelaide; Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flaneuse', in *Feminine Sentences*; Emile Zola, *L'Assommoir*.
  9. John Barth asks, are we 'merely demonstrating the limitations of our own imaginations, which the experience of a new masterpiece might disprove tomorrow, if such things were really measurable?' In 'The Limits of Imagination' in *Further Essays—Essays, Lectures, and other Nonfiction, 1984–1994*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1995, p. 59.
  10. Erdrich, p. 104.
  11. Erdrich, pp. 146–7.
  12. Erdrich interview by Robert Spillman, in *Salon Magazine*, 18 April 1998, <<http://www.salon.com/books/>>.
  13. Erdrich, p. 148.
  14. Susan Johnson, *A Better Woman*, Random House, Sydney, 1999.
  15. Johnson, p. 64.
  16. Johnson, p. xii.
  17. Johnson, p. 219.
  18. Barth, p. 59.
  19. Frances Farmer, *Will There Really Be a Morning?*, Fontana Paperbacks, New York, 1983, pp. 67–8. Thanks to Sara Dowse for pointing me towards Frances Farmer in her essay 'Pearl Divers' in Jane Messer (ed.), *Certifiable Truths: Stories of Love and Madness*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998.
  20. Farmer, p. 68.
  21. Alan Bullock, *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Fontana, London, 1988, p. 289.
  22. The film of this book, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, was written by Christine Olsen and directed by Phillip Noyce, Miramax, 2001.
  23. Doris Pilkington (Nugi Garimara), *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1996, p. 129.
  24. Pilkington, p. 129.
  25. Pilkington, pp. 130–1.
  26. Note that *Beloved* is a novel based on historical research and that it won Morrison a Nobel Prize for Literature, while Pilkington's is a biographical/nonfiction account.
  27. Interview with Toni Morrison, *Contemporary Authors*, Gale Research, 1993.
  28. Anne Brewster, 'Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalisation: Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 25, March–May 2002. Brewster argues that indigenous 'counter-histories' such as Doris Pilkington's 're-encounter the space of terror in order to perform a remembering and rememoration'. She comments that Aboriginal women are making a 'choice of life writing as their preferred genre'.
  29. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Pan/Chatto & Windus, London, 1987, p. 6. The shame that Sethe experiences in recalling the trees' beauty rather than the lynched boys highlights to my mind the erasures that Louise Erdrich engages in, in which she hides the terrors of motherhood within the blue-jayed woods.
  30. Morrison, p. 5.
  31. Brewster, p. 5.