

**School of Media, Communications and Creative Arts**

**Circles of Meaning: Reading/Writing a Mother's Life**

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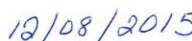
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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

  
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Date

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## Abstract

The thesis *Circles of Meaning* consists of two components: a creative work *Kate Annie* and an exegesis: *Reading/Writing a Mother's Life* both of which respond to the research question: *How can archival evidence, narrative strategies and memory be used to narrate little known family history from an invested position?*

*Kate Annie* *Kate Annie* tells the story of the search to discover the unknown parts of my grandmother's life. Kate, who became my second mother, was born in London in 1883 and at the age of thirty-five gave birth to an illegitimate child. Her refusal to marry the father or to ever tell her daughter his name became a family shame. As Kate's secrets were unfolded the identity of my grandfather was also revealed. *Kate Annie* combines biographical, socio-historical narrative and fiction with investigative research.

### *Reading/Writing a Mother's Life*

This exegesis examines the work of contemporary women writers who depict family history with a particular focus on the mother. It provides an overview of the history of biographical writing, analyses three works contemporary writers who use different generic strategies to narrate family history and considers the writing within the context of relational ethics in women's life writing. The texts analysed are; *Alfred and Emily* (2002) by Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble's *The Peppered Moth* (2000) and Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990).

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*Kate Annie* is unable to be reproduced here due to proprietary reasons.

**CIRCLES OF MEANING: READING/WRITING A MOTHER'S LIFE**  
**AN EXEGESIS**

## Introduction

My grandmother Kate was born in 1883 in a London suburb, the eldest child and only daughter in a family of four children. Unusually for the era she did not marry but at the age of thirty-five gave birth to an illegitimate daughter who was raised within the family. I was told that the following year Kate was due to be married, presumably to the father of the child, but at the last minute, she refused to go through with the ceremony. She remained unmarried for the rest of her life, never revealing the name of her daughter's father. Kate was a significant influence in my life, my second mother—yet I knew little of her early life.

After her death I absorbed the stories my mother related of a frivolous Edwardian woman who had blighted her own life and that of her daughter. I retold this story to friends, whenever I had the opportunity. As an adult I published a short biographical article in the belief that it was an authentic account of Kate's life (Neale 1999). Memories of my grandmother, and a desire to know more, impelled me to explore her life further. I also began drafting a fictional narrative using the scant information I had as a framework. The original archive for *Kate Annie* consisted of a few dates, anecdotes, memories and photographs. The gaps in Kate's story provoked lengthy searches into census material, archives and social history. Eventually I unearthed a plethora of previously unknown information.

*Kate Annie* constructs three different subject positions generationally. Kate is re-positioned from victim and source of family shame, to a woman whose behaviour was not what was expected of the stereotypical Edwardian female, and was therefore harshly judged. Micky the daughter, is positioned as a 'victim' of her mother's circumstances; disempowered by the shame of her illegitimacy. The narrator/writer/granddaughter is positioned as an observer who offers various perspectives on Kate's life through the use social history and family beliefs. She clarifies, within the text, that she is bound by memories and the need to exonerate Kate. I made a clear decision in writing *Kate Annie* to focus on what was most relevant to her story within a 60,000 word limit. Therefore, my own story as the third female to inherit Kate's shame is deliberately not told, although it is implied in the similarities between our lives that are mentioned.



The final form of the work, after experimentation with various generic strategies, is life writing with the inclusion of imaginary scenes and dialogue to create the little known parts of Kate's life. The work is informed by an understanding of the generic strategies used in family stories by contemporary women writers. Both the creative writing and the exegesis address the research question: *How can archival evidence, fictional strategies and memory be used to narrate little known family history from an invested position?*

The initial theoretical research, detailed in Chapter One, provides an understanding of the historical development of conventional biography. It was obvious that a birth to death mode as used for narrating the lives of public figures was unsuitable for my purpose. However, James Boswell's use of a conversational tone and his overt presence, as the narrator of *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, foreshadows features that are common in modern life writing (1791, 326). I note that in the 1800s woman writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell (1857) included personal and domestic details in their work. Published biographies of "hidden lives," or unknown subjects, indicated the social and literary changes during the period (Juliette Atkinson, 2010).

In the 1970s women's writing moved away from many of the conventional strategies, which, it was becoming clear, were unsuitable for telling a woman's life (Judy Long 1999, 2). The concept of biography as an inalienable truth was supplanted by narratives that questioned and speculated on events and characters (Linda Wagner-Martin 2012, 69). This knowledge determined that I examined contemporary women's writing to further my understanding of possible generic strategies for narrating a family story. I chose three disparate works by daughter/narrators and, to complement and explicate these texts, I explored articles and texts that theorise the practices and development of women's writing.

Chapter Two discusses Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* (2008), a separate fictional and biographical version of her parents' lives, within one volume. This gave me the opportunity to compare the diverse techniques Lessing employed—and to ascertain how sequential, contrasting portraits shaped a reader's view of a subject. Lessing's work illustrates the significance of the narrative voice and her extra-narrative comments reveal how the rationale of the writer underpins the choice of generic strategies. Lessing's use of authorial intrusion reveals the overt presence of the author and creates a narrative voice that offers the reader an analysis of events and characters.

At this stage in my research fictionalising Kate's life seemed an appropriate way forward. Thus, I selected Margaret Drabble's *The Peppered Moth* to discover what the

strengths, or constraints, of fictionalising family stories might be. In this “novel about my mother,” discussed in Chapter Three, the fictional mother represents an era of disappointed women. That story is interwoven with a narrative exploration into the effects of DNA and ancestry (2000, 390). This technique broadens the scope of the novel but overshadows the depiction of the mother. Drabble, like Lessing, gives little dialogue to the mother and frequent judgmental, authorial intrusions function to keep the reader aloof from the character. Drabble’s work clarified for me a wish to foreground the “partnership of subject/narrator/reader” in my own work, rather than the broader approach and distancing techniques chosen by Drabble (Judy Long 1999, 3). The third work selected for this thesis was chosen to investigate this “partnership” and to look into how a blend of biography *and* fiction might operate.

Chapter Four focuses on the intricacies of Drusilla Modjeska’s *Poppy* (1990). Modjeska’s use of fiction and biography to tell the life of her mother was instrumental in the ultimate development of *Kate Annie*. She intended to write a biography but, “I found myself irresistibly drawn into dream, imagination and fiction”(1990, 317). This approach to narrating a mother’s story addresses several of the challenges I encountered in writing *Kate Annie*: the fragmentary nature of available evidence, the need to detail my relationship with Kate, and to include my search for her. Modjeska captures the elusiveness of comprehending a mother’s life through narrative interrogation and the use of temporal fluidity. I saw how the use of memory and imagination allowed a writer to shape a life even when there is a lack of precise information; a strategy that also highlights the uncertainty of defining any life. Modjeska’s creation of dialogue for the mother engenders narrative conversations between mother and daughter that offer insights into the characters and, according to Judy Long, is the “praxis of empathy” (1999, 121). Jo Malin’s discourse on women writers’ subversion of traditional biography, the origins of women’s stories and the complexities of mother/daughter relationship was fundamental to this research (*The Voice of the Mother*, 2000). I gained an appreciation of how the conversational style of women’s writing is mimetic of oral story telling and resonates with women readers. Annette Kuhn’s exploration of family secrets and the work of memory in life writing was particularly useful as she likens family biography to enquiry or “detective” work which is pertinent the journey of discovery that was integral to writing *Kate Annie* (1995, 4).

Research into the modes and complexities of family writing inevitably involves an appraisal of the ethical considerations of such writing. In Chapter Five I evaluate P J

Eakin's main determinants for ethical life writing; (i) the need to avoid the "misrepresentation of historical and biographical truth," (ii) the "infringement of the right to privacy" and (iii) the "failure to display normative models of personhood" (2001,113-114). However, I argue that contemporary women writers' use of innovative structures and strategies creates problems if their work is assessed according to Eakin's main constraints. An examination of relational ethics; the guidelines used by ethnographers, led me to the conclusion these were appropriate for judging contemporary women's writing, including my own work. I note that a relationship between ethnographer and subject is akin to that of subject and life-writer, especially when the subject is family—in both cases there should be trust, empathy and connectedness (Marilyn Metta, 2010). Contemporary women writers accept the uncertainty of knowing a life and, instead, search for emotional authenticity. This approach corresponds with the questions Marilyn Metta suggests that writers ask themselves; "Why am I doing this?" and "What are my real motivations?" as well as an overarching consideration of who may be hurt by the writing. Metta argues that relational ethics accord with a writer's creative intention (2010, 59-60). A comprehension of relational ethics led me to develop of a personal set of ethics. Directing Metta's questions to my own writing ensured a firm basis for the work. I chose to disclose, within the narrative, which parts are fictional and to also make the processes of the work visible.

Chapter Six, the concluding chapter of the exegesis, reflects on my research journey. I discuss the deviations, challenges, strengths and understandings, all of which have informed the life writing, *Kate Annie*. Ultimately each successive research hurdle resulted in greater clarity and wider comprehension. Each creative stumbling block produced a more effective way to tell Kate's story. As a contemporary writer and researcher I understood the complexities that confront family storytellers and the imperative for women writers to bring hidden family lives to the fore. The process of examining social history, family stories and contemporary women's writing highlighted, for me, the intrinsic importance of past women's lives. Women writers, by recounting such stories can impart to the reader affective knowledge of women's' experiences. I hope that my memories of Kate and the vicissitudes of her life will be interesting to others.

## Chapter 1

### New Biography

The development of the creative component of this thesis, *Kate Annie*, was originally envisaged as a conventional biography. The final form; life writing by a participant narrator with the inclusion of fictional elements, is informed by an understanding of the antecedents of modern biography/autobiography, the changes to the form over the decades, and subsequent contemporary innovations. Margaretta Jolly writes, “Biography and autobiography are now generally appreciated as two genres within a bigger field of life writing, life narrative, or life story about self-other relations, although they remain touchstones for those interested in how life experience can be aestheticized” (2001, 2). This chapter offers an overview of those “touchstones” and in essence summarises key elements in the evolution of life writing. I outline the constraints of the genre and the modifications to the form and argue that implicit in the earlier forms are the strategising possibilities used by later writers. As this thesis concentrates on women writing about family, particularly mothers, this chapter particularly notes the work of women writers of the past and present, as well as the cultural positioning of their work.

It is generally accepted that, from a Western perspective, modern biography began with Samuel Johnson’s *An Account of the Life of Richard Savage* (1744) and James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). In view of the progression and diversity of biography I include in my discussion John Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*, published at the end of the eighteenth century, but written earlier, and novelist Mary Hays’s six-volume biographical dictionary of noteworthy women (1803). Hays’s work is rarely cited in discourses on early biography and Aubrey’s work is not accorded the prominence of Boswell’s, however, both works anticipate techniques noted in contemporary writing—Aubrey’s in the collective nature of his portraits—and Hays in her focus on significant women.

The encyclopedic work of Mary Hays provides memoirs, as she names them, of celebrated women from many ages and countries. She includes brief interpretations of subjects or their associates, as in this comment on Mary Queen of Scots’ husband Francis who was, “weak in constitution and feeble in mind, followed (sic) implicitly wherever he was led” (1803, 8). Aubrey’s accounts of lives are as brief as his title suggests and are “made up from spontaneous impressions which owe more to his imaginative gifts than to laborious research” (Holroyd 2002, 1). Of Edmund Halley Aubrey writes, “He went to

Paule's schoole to Dr Gale: while he was there he was very perfect in the celestiall Globes in so much that I heard Mr Moxton (the Globe- maker) say that if a star were misplaced in the Globe, he would presently find it" (1898, 3). Both *Brief Lives* and the work of Hays are collective portraits, but they lack the unifying theme that would inform a present day collective work such as Margaret Forster's *Good Wives* (2001).

Most eighteenth century biographies conformed rigidly to the template of recounting lives of eminent men from birth to death. Ira B Nadel cites Samuel Smiles (1859) who believed that the best works could be likened to the gospels in their ability to teach "high living, high thinking, and energetic action for their own and the world's good" (1984, 19). These biographies used precise, formal prose and were free from indelicate language in deference to an increasing number of women readers (Collins 1960, 125). Unpleasant or offensive traits of subjects were ignored in line with the didactic purpose of the form, yet they purported to offer objective and authentic life portraits. Boswell's subjective portrait of Johnson is at odds with biographies of that time as can be seen in this example:

We remained together till it was pretty late. Notwithstanding occasional explosions of violence, we were all delighted upon the whole with Johnson. I compared him at this time to a warm West-Indian climate, where you have a bright sun, quick vegetation, luxuriant foliage, luscious fruits; but where the same heat sometimes produces thunder, lightning, earth-quakes, in a terrible degree (1791, 361).

Michael Holroyd observes the autobiographical slant in Boswell's writing and notes that "Johnson really comes alive in Boswell's biography only when Boswell appears on the page" (2002, 1). This would not surprise a contemporary reader; by employing such strategies Boswell anticipates the importance of the narrator in contemporary biographies and demonstrates a partnership of subject/narrator and reader (Judy Long 2014, 3). The distinct presence of Boswell enlivens the account, unlike an aloof, omniscient narration. An intimacy is created, drawing a reader into the narrative, as shown here:

Johnson described it distinctly and vividly, at which I could not but express to him my wonder; because, though my eyes, as he observed, were better than his, I could not by any means equal him in representing visible objects. I said, the difference between us in this respect was as that between a man who has a bad instrument, but plays well on it, and a man who has a good instrument, on which he can play very imperfectly (1791, 326).

Boswell's conversational tone, inter-textual commentary on methodology and writing process are familiar to modern readers. He writes with an awareness of his investment with the subject:

Indeed I cannot conceive a more perfect mode of writing any man's life, than not only relating all the most important events of it in their order, but interweaving what he privately wrote, and said, and thought; by which mankind are enabled as it were to see him live, and to 'live o'er each scene' with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life (1791, 15).

Further on he writes:

I had a method of my own of writing half words, and leaving out some altogether so as yet to keep the substance and language of any discourse which I had heard so much in view, that I could give it very completely soon after I had taken it down (1791, 352).

We are left to our own conclusions as to what proportion of the conversations are verbatim reportage or a synopsis of the dialogue as in Boswell's phrase, "to keep the substance." His concern is to present what he believes is a faithful portrait of Johnson with the acceptance that "personality, not action, is central to comprehending a life" (Elizabeth Podnieks 2009, 1). Boswell attempts to construct a verisimilitude of life by including detailed domestic descriptions, dialogue and a wealth of dates and documents. The subjectivity and first person narration produce the illusion of a garrulous, yet erudite fireside companion. The techniques are not dissimilar to those employed in contemporary life writing, though the structure, syntax and choice of subject mark the

volumes as belonging to a past era. Contemporary literary discourse on the use of reflective language, the significance of narrators and the impossibility of defining the truth of a life have meant that strategies such as those employed by Bowell are embraced by today's life writers.

Victorian biography is significant to this research for the emergence of female writers and the publication of lives of unknown subjects. However, Juliette Atkinson is less than complimentary, "Broad consensus remains that Victorian biographies are wordy hagiographical tomes penned by whitewashing amateurs" (2010, 1-2). These works may be tedious for modern readers but are rich source material for historians able to glean social evidence from the sanitised lives. Philanthropic endeavors and a growing public concern for those less fortunate created an enthusiasm amongst readers for learning about obscure and previously unvalued lives. The term "hidden lives" (2010, 1) refers to lives that were ordinary when compared to those of the socially eminent subjects of previous biographies. They were hidden merely by being the lives of women, or persons of no public importance. By 1855 the improvement of printing techniques, progress in education and the availability of both subscription and public libraries created an environment conducive to the growth of biographies in general. In particular this enhanced female readership and the publication of works expected to be of interest to women.

Presenting an un-heroic or "hidden life" precluded a writer from using a conventional structure for the narrative. Previous biographies began with the birth, progressed to the years of accomplishments, which formed the most significant part of the work, then tapered off to the death. In *The Life of John Sterling* Thomas Carlyle (1851) builds a portrait using a technique that would have been deemed inappropriate for a biography of a person of renown. He constructs Sterling's life through minutiae and narrative conjecture such as, "Who John's express tutors were, at Passy, I never heard; nor indeed, especially in his case, was it much worth inquiring. To him and to all of us, the expressly appointed schoolmasters and schoolings we get are as nothing" (Chapter III, para. 20).

William Jolly's *The life of John Duncan* (1883) depicts the life of a Scottish weaver and botanist whose pursuits are of interest rather than his public stature. These "hidden lives" are precursors to numerous modern works, for example, Mark Tedeschi's *Eugenia* (2012) with its mock Victorian sub title, "*A True Story of Adversity, Tragedy, Crime and Courage*, which introduces the general reader to an unknown yet curious life. The "old art," as the author and critic John Macy refers to conventional biography (1928, 355) was

becoming far less staid than we might imagine and often embodied techniques that seem surprisingly contemporary, although they are not common enough to constitute a trend.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) is a precursor to contemporary ways of narrating women's lives (Atkinson 2010, 17). In the following example Gaskell weaves together Brontë's personal and professional life thus; "She told me afterwards, that one evening she had sat in the dressing room until it was quite dark, and then observing it all at once, had taken sudden fright. No doubt she remembered this well when she described a similar terror getting hold upon Jane Eyre..."(134.135).

The strategy of connecting Brontë's fictional and domestic world is a common contemporary technique, although today's writers usually analyse the connections between the two whereas Gaskell merely notes the link. Her depiction of a woman inhabiting a role beyond the domestic one caused controversy. Biographers of women in that era had to contend with the social implications of what they wrote as well as, in most cases, a dearth of available material (Atkinson 2010,146). Gaskell, as a friend of Brontë, had a wealth of material to work with, but her depiction of the writer as someone who struggled with two lives, the private and the public, caused concern. When Gaskell alludes to Charlotte's discontent and her failure to prioritise domestic duties the writer transgresses Victorian boundaries (Atkinson 2010, 151). Had Gaskell confined her writing to the subject's public life she would not have impugned "feminine propriety," since Brontë had already entered the public sphere by publishing, albeit under a male nom de plume (Atkinson 2010, 147). An autobiography by Brontë would have been deemed immodest. Gaskell avoided that censure since she wrote of another's life, not her own.

Women writers might not pen autobiographies but they "could explore their own concerns and experiences without appearing to thrust themselves before the public gaze" by including them within a biography of a less well-known subject (Atkinson 2010, 148). In the *Memoir of Annie Keary* (1882) the author Eliza Keary, Annie's sister, delineates the life of a middle-class Victorian writer of children's books who combined domestic duties with travels and an involvement in the suffragette movement (Atkinson 2010, 149). By describing Annie's school and the behaviour of students the narrator foregrounds her own displeasure at the belittling of female intelligence, thus including social commentary in the memoir as in this example, "Annie Keary was telling me all about gravitation and the stars. Very long faces all round, and 'H'm, it's a pity, I think, that Miss Keary cannot find something more edifying to say to her companions, since



she appears to be so fond of talking,' was the freezing rejoinder" (1882, 51). At the beginning of the work the writer explains her intentions by addressing the reader directly, "I wish to speak of their action upon her life, there-fore any detailed description of them in their relation to others is unnecessary. A few words will suffice to introduce her family and parents" (1882, 1). Keary's strategies are similar to those used by contemporary women writers. The subjectivity and affectionate tone of Keary's work might indicate that it was intended as a family memorial. Annie's fame as a writer for children guaranteed that the work was of a wider interest.

Decades on Virginia Woolf writes, "Biography, compared with the arts of poetry and fiction, is a young art" (*The Art of Biography* 1943, I). She preferred subjects to be represented "as they really were" (1943, II) yet suggests that any reliance on facts was a problem. "But almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders" (1943, IV). Woolf favoured the un-heroic, ordinary subjects and suggests, "Is not anyone who has ever lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography?" (1943, III para. 4). Her biography *Flush* (1933), a portrait of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel, demonstrates a literary approach that foreshadows contemporary flexibility. This work and Woolf's comments indicate how easily she would have embraced the innovations of the twenty-first century. Other twentieth century biographers, unlike Woolf, seem to be on the verge of moving beyond the constraints of the genre, but go no further than theorising.

Five years after Woolf wrote that all lives have intrinsic narrative value Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* was published. The memoir had the attraction of being a women's story and a war narrative. In the following years 120,000 copies were sold—the work was re-printed in the 1970s and has continued to be re-issued. At a time when biographers only cautiously ventured to attempt any changes in form Brittain's work foreshadowed the plethora of memoirs, particularly by women, that are currently published. Irrespective of Brittain's rich evocation of her lived experiences the focus of biography remained with the importance of documents and records. It would seem that autobiography (or memoir) was moving in a different direction. Thomas Larson notes, "memoir today has the energy of a literary movement, recalling past artistic revolutions that initiated new ways of seeing" (2007, 21). Brittain's work achieved what a women writers like Eliza Keary had attempted decades before. Keary's voice is heard only occasionally within the memoir of her sister whereas Brittain foregrounds her opinions

and interpretations of what she witnesses. Fifty years later Leon Edel's attitude to biography is much the same as John Macy's assertion that "there must be evidence" (1928, 356). Edel writes, "The biographer is allowed to be as imaginative as he pleases, so long as he does not imagine his facts" (1978, 1). A biographer should go beyond the obvious to look at how subjects "defend themselves against the indignities of life" (1978, 2). Edel views biographers as seekers and investigators, maintaining that biography "takes its form from its materials" (1978, 2). He does not suggest that a narrator should offer an interpretation of a life or speculate in any way, which seems to contradict the imaginative approach he had previously espoused. The change that was to come, while not necessarily negating factual information, does not place the emphasis there and Edel's cautious approach, though offering a critique of conventional biography, maintains a reliance on the conventional form.

The socio-political evolution of the second half of the twentieth century, in particular the changing status of women, precipitated and contextualised new paradigms for women's biographical narratives. Attention focused on the positioning of the writer within the text and on a consciousness of how the story might best be told (Linda Wagner-Martin 1994, 4). If biography in the 1900s was, "only at the beginning of its career" (Woolf 1943, IV), then the growing numbers of female biographers of the 1970s created its coming of age. The voices of women writers were heard to a greater degree than before, balancing the male dominance of the form. Carolyn Heilbrun viewed these years as pivotal for biography and autobiography (1988, 12)—the term life writing not being in common usage. "What should a women's biography look like?" she queries, and perceives that there are difficulties if a woman's life is to be assessed as corresponding to that of a man (1988, 27). If this were the case, a women's life would appear lacking in a plot, other than the refusal of the stereotypical role. Women's concerns, domestic or otherwise, were judged as trivial, and models for how a female life might be written did not exist. Heilbrun saw the need for women's stories to be elevated in value and constructed without recourse to the use of masculine narratives. She believed women should share stories, thus placing an emphasis on women's oral communications, which traditionally functioned as social history networks. This focus engendered the use of conversational rhythms for written dialogue thus foregrounding authentic female voices in narrations. Heilbrun realised the importance of a social context to explicate the life of a woman. Contemporary writers; Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Drusilla Modjeska, whose works are discussed in the following chapters, frame lives in this way

to elucidate their subjects' behaviour and life choices. Heilbrun envisioned how multi-vocal narrations moved narratives away from one-dimensional accounts, which then became mimetic of the information gathering function of oral communications.

Contemporary women writers have embraced such strategies, in both memoir and biography, as nuanced ways to illustrate the experiences of women (1988, 31).

The innovations in women's biographical writing since the 1970s are often critiqued as a blurring of genres. Modjeska's *Poppy* clearly caused confusion and was published in 1990 as a biography *and* as fiction. Margaretta Jolly, as quoted at the start of this chapter, comments that biographical and autobiographical works belong to the "bigger field of life writing, life narrative, or life story about self-other relations" (2001, 2). Genre demarcations, according to Judy Long are, "symbolic environments that a narrator must come to terms with" (1999, 7). Contemporary writers have responded by placing the integrity of the narrative before formal generic constraints. Arguably it is of greater benefit to consider *how* the lives are narrated and what they may add to our understanding of human existence and interactions.

Women writers understand readers' need for points of identification and recognisable social contexts (Wagner-Martin 1994, 4). These stories should be told with "one focus on the subject's interior life and another on the external values and conflicts, which they, as women, recognise." In *Alfred and Emily* Doris Lessing validates this in describing her mother's recall of her glamorous past, "I wore that," murmured my mother, "On the last night of the voyage at the captain's table. People noticed it." (2008, 202). Lessing's narrative shows the mother's current life as distasteful, giving her words pathos, and positioning the reader to sympathise with the later deterioration of the dress, "Tiny holes appeared in the chiffon." The dress symbolises the mother's reduced circumstances and provides the reader with an understanding of the mother's emotional state. Lessing uses contextual history, as in, "This was before Mugabe licensed the grabbing of the white farms" and social commentary to explain behaviour and show women as victimised by the times, "Some girls had come out to the colony, as the custom then was, to get a husband..." (2008, 230, 190). Women readers identify with Lessing's portrait because she writes from a female consciousness, employing structures, strategies and details that foreground that perspective and embody a contemporary "feminist praxis," which recognises "connection," asserts relationships and employs a "real narrator" (Judy Long 1999, 118).

The use of fictional components is a frequent inclusion of women's work particularly when adequate details of a life are unavailable (Long 1999, 162). Modjeska's *Poppy* tells her mother's story by employing imaginary writing within an episodic narrative that is contextualised by historical facts. Modjeska explains in *Timepieces* (2002) that although the work began as biography, she didn't "like the polarity of true or untrue, as if there was just one register of truth" (2002, 67, 68). She defined her work as "narrative interrogation" (2002, 72) which fits neatly with Jolly's description of life writing as, a "life story about self-other relations" (2002, 2).

Claire Tomalin's life of Nellie Ternan, *The Invisible Woman* (1990) also combines biographic authenticity with fictional storytelling strategies. Nellie was known as the mistress of Charles Dickens but since there is little documentary evidence of her existence Tomalin draws on known events from Dickens' life to provide the framework for constructing a possible account of Nelly's life. Writer Frances Sherwood argues that, "This sort of work depends on our common sense of humanity," a reminder of Judy Long's assertion that the written text is "a process of communication" (1999, 5). Sherwood's methodology for creating *Vindication* (1993), a fictional biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, was to feel her way into the skin of another. She wrote from an instinctive perception, intuiting a close accord with her subject, "We both had very difficult childhoods, with a lot of trauma" (Prenatt, 1995). The strategies of Sherwood, Tomalin and Modjeska accentuate interconnectedness between subject and writer. The writers disregard "dissociative methods" in favour of creating a narrative bond which Long refers to as a praxis of empathy which, for these writers, entails the use of imaginary or fictional writing to come closer to a subject (Long 1999, 118). The writers' investment through subject selection, strategies and structure is enhanced by fictionalising which can engender a more nuanced understanding of the subject than would otherwise be possible (1999, 119).

Contemporary innovations such as multi vocal narration, interrogation and authorial intrusion subvert the conventional biographical/autobiographical genre. They produce originality, which Elizabeth Podnieks refers to as "the new biography" (2009, 1), a term John Macy had optimistically used in 1928 thus indicating the progressive transformations of the genre. Women writers redefine the narrative position by using it to overtly explore their relationship with a subject writes Long, which is echoed by Linda Wagner-Martin's concept of women's life writing as a commitment to the subject (1999, 103; 1994, 101). This resonated with for me as I was impelled to tell my grandmother's

story and yet, struggled to find appropriate generic strategies for how I wished to recount her life.

The research outlined in this chapter provided me with a greater awareness of the antecedents of contemporary life-writers and revealed the new directions negotiated by women writers. I gained insights into how my grandmother Kate's story, which is essentially that of a "hidden life," might be told (Atkinson, 2010). Kate was an unknown, ordinary woman, yet the events of her life represented the shape of many women's lives in the early 1900s. Her story required an authentic historical setting and first person narration to convey the emotional and archival journey to discover the concealed parts of her life. Research clarified that foregrounding my connection to the subject would give emotional depth to the work and allow me to present Kate's life in more detail. My relationship with her was akin to that of child and mother and I found the insights in works such as Jo Malin's *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiographies* (2000) analogous to my experience. My exploration of biographical and autobiographical works re-situated *Kate Annie* as life writing of an unknown female subject by a participant writer. This determined that I should select contemporary women writers to provide examples of narrating family life.

## Chapter 2

### Two Mothers

This chapter and those that follow examine the family narratives of contemporary the women writers: Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Drusilla Modjeska. The innovative generic strategies used in *Alfred and Emily* (2008), *The Peppered Moth* (2000) and *Poppy* (1990) demonstrate disparate ways to craft the life of a mother. These works informed my choice of strategies for writing *Kate Annie*, the creative component of this research. The lives narrated by Lessing, Drabble and Modjeska are unknown except for the celebrity of the daughter/writers and are contextualised within social environments shown to be constraining for women. My enquiry specifically focuses on how the rationale of each writer shapes the work, the functioning of the narrative voice, and the negotiation of the writer's investedness.

Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* includes a fictionalised life of the parents and a family biography, in that order. The title and the cover photograph of the parents presents the work as conventional biography yet this notion is problematised by the designation of the first section as a novella. Lessing also includes a section detailing the origin of the characters; "William, Emily's husband, came from the little picture of my mother's great love that lived on her dressing-table. But, strange, it was a cutting from a newspaper in that leather frame, not a portrait from a studio or a friendly snap" (2008, 140). A family biography completes the blend of fact and fiction. *Alfred and Emily*, in its entirety, uses a variety of techniques to tease out complex strands of imagination, memory, judgment and reflection.

I suggest that the writer's rationale for narrating family shapes both their choice of generic strategies and how they position themselves in the narrative. Insights into a writer's intentions also assist our understanding of the work, and of women's writing in general (Judy Long 1990, 101). Lessing believed that the First World War blighted her parents' lives. This assumption generates the first part of *Alfred and Emily*, an imagined life of fulfillment for Alfred and Emily. Lessing writes, "If I could meet Alfred Taylor and Emily McVeagh now, as I have written them, as they might have been had the Great War not happened, I hope they would approve the lives I have given them" (2008, viii). Blake Morrison suggests that the work is "a bold experiment – not life writing so much as the righting of lives" (2008, 1). The novella does suggest an act of reparation yet the latter part of the work, a biography depicting family life according to the author's recall,

indicates an intention to also show the reality of the parents' lives. Placing the novella before the biography invites comparison between the imagined and the authentic lives, thus prompting empathy for the real Alfred and Emily whose lives are shown as unsatisfactory: "It is so hard to convey the unremittingness of it all, the deadening slog" (2008, 256). Lessing sees clearly the effect of the social constraints on her mother and of the war on both parents. The structure and content of the work reveals a literary solution to psychological imperatives. Decades before Carolyn Heilbrun raised the question of what a woman's biography should look like (1988, 27). Lessing's experimental work offers a response: a biographical narrative may go beyond the microcosm of family to produce social commentary—in this case on war, the social positioning of women, and on emigration.

Lessing's use of disparate narrative voices is congruent with her intention to delineate an idealised mother as well as the authentic parent. The novella's narrator presents the fictional mother as an effective member of the community: Emily "loved her work" as a nurse, and marries an "eminent doctor" (2008, 27, 48). This contrasts with the narrator of the biography, assumed to be the daughter/writer, who is strident in judgment of Emily, as evidenced in such statements as, "To this day I can feel the outrage I felt then. I was outraged, in a rage, furious, and of course desperately sorry for her" (2008, 157). The novella complements an understanding of the authentic Emily when we refer back to it after reading the biography. Then we comprehend the disparity between Lessing's construction of what might have been and her version of actuality—and understand the writer's wish to re-envisage the lives of her parents.

The character of Emily is fashioned from three components: the positive narration of the novella, judgments of the biography, and interwoven authorial commentary. These narrative voices provide the "plural subjectivities" that Judy Long views as necessary for telling another's life (1999, 2). Emily, already a young woman at the start of the novella, is introduced as "Emily McVeagh, the other girl" (2008, 4). She is presented as an outsider and begins her fictional life destined for very little, "She'll be a skivvy amongst skivvies"(2008, 5). However, the reader is assured that Emily could have gone to university thus providing the fictional mother with a potentially upward trajectory. Emily is rarely described negatively—however, the final phrase of the following description implies that she tries too hard—and this causes us to re-evaluate how we view the character:

She worked hard at her piano and took her finals in that time. The examiners told her she could have career as a concert pianist if she wanted. She played the organ for services at All Souls, a fashionable church in Langham Place. She played concerts, recitals, and for social events at the hospital, even for nurses' dances. A good sport was Sister Emily McVeagh (2008, 27).

The gentle irony of the last comment, and the alteration in tone, undercuts the earlier praise. It is difficult to be sure what Lessing intended by the comment. Arguably it denotes the writer's ambivalence towards her subject, as exemplified by this affirmative fictional portrait, yet the censorious presentation of the real Emily. At the end of the novella Lessing widows Emily but leaves her with "enough money for a really good house, staffed comfortably..."(2008, 135). The fictional construct of an independent woman who can manage without a man is in contrast to the real mother who is often unwell and cares for an invalid husband.

A reader's acceptance of the novella as fiction is disrupted by authorial intrusion. Amid a description of Alfred on crutches Lessing writes, "In life my father's appendix burst just before the battle of the Somme," (2008, 31). An added confusion is the explanation of the fictional characters; "Writing about my father's imagined life, my mother's, I have relied not only on traits of character that may be extrapolated or extended, but on tones of voice, sighs, wistful looks..."(2008, 139). Lessing's techniques signify what Judy Long refers to as a "feminist praxis" which emphasises the writer/subject relationship and moves away from a "monistic linear narrative" (Long 118). Ling suggests that these techniques may produce a "messiness"—yet as a female reader I found the "messiness" of *Alfred and Emily* discernable only if compared to conventional biographies. Rather, it suggested temporal fluidity and offered a narrative voice that encourages reflection and engagement with the text.

Lessing's alternative family portrait concludes with the child-like vocalisation of the addendum; "Alfred Taylor was a very old man when he died. He came from a long lived family" and "Emily McVeagh ...was seventy-three years old. Hundreds of people came to her funeral" (2008, 138). The fictional parents are dispensed with quickly and yet the novella is the longer of the sections. This addendum plays with the reader, reminding us of the illusion—the Alfred and Emily of the novella were never real. Their creation is the product of the daughter's wish to compensate for unpleasant truths. Susanne Juhasz



suggests that the use of fantasy allows a daughter/writer to construct the mother of her choice (2000, 180). Lessing, although doing this, is not content with this alone. She wishes to document the real mother and in doing so she demonstrates an intention shared with Drabble and Modjeska, whose family narratives are considered in later chapters. These writers engage in retrospective understandings by contextualising the mothers' lives, thus providing greater insight. Lessing's two versions of Emily's life; one delineating achievement, and the other disappointment, present the reader with a nuanced portrait of a mother.

Authorial intrusion and the retention of the parents' real names fosters an illusion that the novella too is biography. This may not be Lessing's intention. Her stated imperative is to re-envision the parents' life but in doing this she creates a narrative that has an appearance of authenticity yet at the same time directs the reader through authorial comments, such as this slip from omniscience in the novella:

And now Emily and Alfred were at the top of their lives, their fortunes, of everything. 'If only we could live out good lives all over again,' my mother would say, fiercely gathering those years into her arms and holding them safe, her eyes challenging her husband as if he were responsible for their end (2008, 24).

This demonstrates Jo Malin's contention that writer/daughters "are not simply telling their mothers' stories. They are engaged in conversation" (2000, 6). When Emily's niece, says to her, "I simply have to tell you how much I admire this idea of yours," it is as if the writer is approving the ability, albeit unrealised, of her real mother (2008, 92). Lessing also engages in "conversations" with the reader, which seems impelled by an authorial desire to explain, such as, "The way he had said *Sister McVeagh* told her that he had not entirely admired her, or did not now. Well, he could hardly stop her, could he? Yes, he had, with one cold remark" (2008, 49). In this empathetic dialoguing Lessing uses a conversational tone and rhetorical questioning to engage the reader, as opposed to the spare, plain prose of most of the novella, such as in the description of Emily's routine; "Emily went to her chief suppliers, ordered them to send a good selection of children's books to Longerfield, and went down herself. She stayed with Mary, as usual, and slept in the room where she had slept so often, with Daisy in the other bed" (2008, 100). The change of narrative voice positions *Alfred and Emily* as unconventional. For

Judy Long, contemporary women's writing, in its difference, requires a "different reader" (1999, 121). Lessing offers the reader engagement with the writer/narrator and participation in another's reality as evidenced here, "So there was this load of suffering deep inside my mother, as there was inside my father, and please don't tell me that this kind of pain, borne for years, doesn't take its dreadful toll" (2008, 172).

The biographical component of *Alfred and Emily* articulates the struggles between mother and daughter, which the writer had chronicled in earlier novels such as *Martha Quest* (1952). Lessing's anger suggests a further motivation for the work, "I look back at the mothers of my generation and shudder and think, Oh my God, never let it happen again... and I know that what she really was, the real Emily, died in the breakdown she had soon after she landed on the farm" (2008, 192). This sentiment is reiterated in the quote from D H Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* preceding the biography; "It is then that the terrible after effects have to be encountered at their worst" (2008, 151). In some respects the work is an anti war story showing the devastation, even for those who survived. Lessing's words, "Oh my God, never let it happen again," are the reflections of a feminist author and, I suggest, refer not only to the war but also to the past social inequalities for women. Such comments highlight the autobiographical quality of *Alfred and Emily*. For Janet Beizer "The biographer is herself at the very least implicated in the biography," even by the selection of subject, but in narrating family, the work becomes akin to autobiography (2009, 26). Lessing writes herself into the work through the first person narration and memories of the biography but also through authorial commentary in both novella and biography.

The lives of mother and daughter overlap in the biography and seem to demonstrate a daughter's inability to develop her own story without placing the mother at the centre (Jo Malin 2000, 2). This part of *Alfred and Emily* gives the daughter's evaluation of the parents' lives, especially that of the mother. The work moves effortlessly between past and present as the writer shifts between her own experience and that of her mother, constructing episodic scenes, akin to internal musings, as though the narrator is looking through family snapshots. Descriptions are prompted by memory rather than historical temporality, "'The same dear old moon is looking down on... ' became a catchphrase for us, the children included," is juxtaposed with the present, "Thus. It is a bright moonlight, we stand on the hill and over there the great mealie field is rippling in the moon rays, just green, just not green." (2008, 155). The blurring of time is imitative of oral storytelling, that can circle forward and back according to trains of thought. Lessing signals a change

of era by simply writing, “Now fast forward to the war years...” (2008, 189). Frequent commas provide pace and add to the conversational cadence. The daughter/writer negotiates the unknowable components of family life, “What was to blame?” signalling her uncertainty and inviting conjecture from the reader (2008, 173).

The contentious relationship between the daughter/writer and mother/subject is untangled through interrogation and a re-evaluation of memories, as in this observation:

‘Marry to get away from my mother?’ What a joke. When she visited me, she would move the furniture, throw out any clothes that displeased her, nag the servants and give orders to the cook. ‘And why didn’t you ever say no to her?’ demanded the therapist to whom I was driven, years later (2008, 190).

Other reflections denote the writer’s regret and re-evaluation of Emily, “...but it took me years to see that I had not known my mother, as she really was, either. The real Emily McVeagh was an educator, who told stories and brought me books. That is how I want to remember her” (2008, 192). The “plural subjectivities” of *Alfred and Emily*—those of the novella’s narrator, the autobiographical self, and the ostensible subjects—are a manifestation of the interconnectedness of Lessing’s work (Long 1999, 2). The positive imagined life of the parents originates in the bond between writer and subject, however fractured. The biography makes visible the interconnectedness through ruminations and recall of the actual relationship; “My mother’s letters to me were dreadful. Only a mad woman could have written them” and “That I was saving myself by escaping from her I did know, but had no idea of just how powerful is the need to take over a child’s life and live it ”(2008, 186). Lessing’s work accentuates the paradigm of narrator/subject/reader (Long 1999, 119). Whereas the narrator of conventional biography is deemed to be objective—and the reader can easily forget their existence—*Alfred and Emily* re-defines the function of the narrator. The focus of the work is no longer wholly on a subject’s life; it is on *how* the life is told, by *whom* and to *whom* it is directed. The reader’s complicity activates the meaning of such narratives, which is unlike an engagement with conventional biography. A portrait of a mother wrought in this way can encompass intimate reflections and the use of an interrogative narrative voice welcomes the reader into that space, as for example, “Do children feel their parents’ emotions? Yes they do and it is a legacy I could have done without. What is the use of it? It is as if that old war

is in my own memory, my own consciousness” (2002, 258). The mother in the biography is presented through the prism of a daughter’s judgmental voice. The harsher assessments are ameliorated, a reader might feel, by Lessing’s explanations, such as “... my mother nursed my father day and night for the last four years of his illness, a minute by minute vigilance...” (2008, 256). The biographical portrait of Emily will influence the reader according to the perceptions and life experiences that they bring to the work.

Traditional genre conventions dictate that biography is assumed to be authentic but this component of *Alfred and Emily* is a construction as much as the novella, which may create insecurity for the reader. However, contemporary women’s works require the reader to be reflective. Just as a life writer should “question and challenge” their “pre-existing knowledges and assumptions” so must a reader (Marilyn Metta 2010, 60). The partnership of narrator/ subject/reader defines the modern comprehension of text (Long 1999, 3). I suggest that readers should view *Alfred and Emily* as several components—each complementing the other. The lives of the novella balance the biography which is a “dialogue with the personal processes and archives of memory,” a reliance on the lived experience (Smith and Watson 2001, 14). Lessing writes, “As a child I was desperately sorry for my mother, even when I was planning to run away (how? in the bush? where to?). I was sorry for her because she was hardly ever silent about her sufferings” (2008, 156). The imaginary Emily attends a ceilidh, has a financial manager and decides to set up a women’s refuge. The narrator does not need to make that comparison overt because the reader will (2008,121-135). The structure and voices of *Alfred and Emily* are intended for a reader who is part of the narrative process.

Lessing believed that biography and fiction were similar; in both, characters “suggest their own behaviour,” although a writer of autobiography, such as the latter section of *Alfred and Emily* is disciplined by self-reflection and an interrogation of memories (2000, 17). Accordingly, Lessing develops scenes constructed of colloquial hesitation, short phrases and hanging sentences similar to those of oral storytelling, “It hurts seeing that house, and the children without any kind of well, anything. Nothing. It was a way of making sure children were safe and out of mischief. Lock them up in an empty house...” (2008, 230). Judy Long refers to this rhythm as “Face to face” communication that resonates for women readers (1999, 123). The conversational style involves the reader in the lives of the authentic parents far more than with their fictional counterparts. Lessing’s wish to make sense of identity, within “a set of shifting self-referential practices,” creates

a biographical/autobiographical negotiation of the past that has an integrity and purpose that the novella cannot have (Smith and Watson 2001, 1).

Contemporary women's writing characteristically focuses inward to "women's private lives" (Wagner-Martin, 1980, 11). Lessing describes books, household items and food, "...pieces of pumpkin are sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon and allowed to caramelise. Delicious, particularly with roast meat" (2008, 239). These images honour family meals and domestic concerns, often the heart of women's lives, even though Emily is shown as a woman entrapped by domesticity. Such imagery originates from childhood memories and balances the grim pictures of family life exemplified in such sentences as, "It was such a bad time for everyone, the war and its aftermath, but particularly for my mother" (2008, 256). *Alfred and Emily* offers an "avowal of a women's experiences" (Long 1999, 121). Lessing details, at length, medical equipment, clothes and music scores and the books for teaching children that her mother owns or orders, "First, the trunk with the dozen or so dark red leather volumes of music scores – Liszt, Beethoven, Grieg, all of them – and, too, sheets of popular music..." (2008, 164 -169). The lists are a testament to the breadth of Emily's interests in contrast with the narrowness of her actual existence.

The mother presented in *Alfred and Emily* is diminished further by strategies that distance Emily from the reader. Dialogue, as James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) aptly demonstrated, gives vigour and immediacy to a narrative, but Emily is only given short phrases, almost asides, instead of dialogue. When Alfred judges life on the farm "all worth it," Emily retorts, "Worth it!" The silence of women is much theorised by feminist writers and equated with the social powerlessness of women in the past (Malin 2000, 81). I wondered why Lessing chooses to create a largely unvoiced Emily and conjectured that this represents the social repression and provides a contrast with the imaginary Emily. The fictional mother is easier for a reader to visualise and relate to because of dialogue, "I am going to have music evenings," she said one night, into the dark. She had not known until this moment that she was going to say this" (2008, 55). The paucity of dialogue given to the biographical Emily accentuates the words she does speak, particularly in this example, "'She called her little children to her and she said, 'Poor Mummy, poor Mummy.' To this day I can feel the outrage I felt then" (2008, 157). The pathos of this scene is especially strong since a reader is introduced to the sad Emily after 'knowing' the independent, confident Emily of the novella. Lessing delineates the real Emily's life as forlorn, a wasted experience, as communicated through harsh narrative judgments, "So, how did these pathetic demented

women come about?” and “These were women who should have been working, should have worked, should have interests in their lives apart from us, their hag ridden daughters” (2008, 191). The biographical Emily is created through the words of daughter/narrator; “If there was ever a woman who would have been happy to see her little daughter never leave fairy childhood behind, then it was my mother” (2008, 237). The lack of dialogue for Emily arguably marginalises her, albeit narratively, as she was in life.

Lessing might have represented her mother differently by foregrounding her self-sacrifice as laudable. This would be an unusual observation for a contemporary feminist author and Lessing chooses not to write a new understanding of Emily’s life. Janet Beizer suggests that “Each biographer has a mission (and I use the word advisedly) to retrieve a lost woman’s life” and that the intent produces a “salvation narrative,” one that seeks to explain the mother’s life and is a re-shaping of a primary relationship in a daughter’s life (2009, 25). Lessing’s opening sentence, “My parents were remarkable, in their very different ways,” (2008, vii) suggests that *Alfred and Emily* is a “salvation narrative,” a coming to terms with the past. The inclusion of simple childhood memories focalised by the child is evocative and accentuates the missing voice of the mother yet leaven the writer’s fierce reflections of family life:

Probably the most exquisite sight I have ever seen is hundreds of butterflies, different ones, all sizes, fluttering their pretty wings and spread over cowpats on the track. Oh what beauties, what a gorgeous sight, and the family stood as near as we could, marvelling. Then one by one of the butterflies drifted, back to their more ordinary delight: nectar (2008, 223).

Biographic narratives require a writer to struggle with the multifarious nature of personality and an inability to completely know anyone. This is exacerbated by the complex nature of the mother/daughter paradigm and is a conundrum for all three of the women writers discussed in this thesis. Lessing notes, “Nothing fits, as if she (her mother) were not one woman but several” (2008, 156). Similarly, in *The Peppered Moth*, Margaret Drabble comments that her mother remained elusive but “I think I captured the enigma of her” (Merkin 2001, 2). Drusilla Modjeska quotes a sister’s response to the portrayal of their mother in *Poppy*, “I think you may have got her after all” although the

sister had previously said it wasn't *her* mother (2002, 86,87). Lessing's generic strategies are a response to grappling with the intricacies of comprehending a subject and narrating that understanding.

Mothers are the central figures in the texts of Lessing, Modjeska and Drabble, while the fathers remain peripheral. An analysis of three texts cannot constitute a definitive conclusion but the nature of life writing as a self referential practice, and the embeddedness of the mother, often found in women's life writing, strongly suggests that a daughter/writer presenting the life of parents is fated, by her interconnectedness with the mother, to create a narrative conversation between herself and the mother, that subordinates the father (Smith & Watson 2001,1; Malin 2000, 4). *Alfred and Emily* produces a sketchy portrait of the father in comparison to the delineation of the mother. We know the character of Emily, albeit mostly unvoiced, better than that of Alfred. Lessing addresses this at the start of the biography, "I have written about my father in various ways, in pieces long and short, and in novels. He comes out clearly, unambiguously, all himself. One may write a life in five volumes, in a sentence." (2008,152). The sentence that follows encapsulates the narrator's presentation of Alfred as a man incapacitated by war wounds, "He was too ill, he was so dreadfully ill..."(2008, 238). He stays in the background, occasionally coming forward, while Emily takes centre stage. Do feminist writers choose to write the father as a secondary figure to foreground the mother? If the connectedness of the mother/daughter relationship shapes their work it is strange that Lessing denies the mother a voice. It may be that the answer lies in the embedded nature of the work. Lessing, while writing her mother's life essentially writes her own version of that life. The voice that is dominant is her own—this explains both the shadowy father and the unvoiced mother.

*Alfred and Emily* concludes with a brief account of the mother's death, "...for the short years before she died, at seventy three, she spent her afternoons and evenings playing bridge with other widows. She was, they all said, a very good bridge-player" (2008, 274). Here, Lessing parodies the conclusion of conventional biographies; there is no eulogising, only a bittersweet observation of the mother's card skills. Emily is not overtly idealised, nor does Lessing affirm her life as recent biographies by women have sought to do (Wagner-Martin 1994, 133). Emily is shown as an ordinary women living what was, until the daughter /writer's work, an unknown life. The bathos of the final sentence implies that the anger Lessing expresses in the narrative is not wholly directed *at* the mother; it is anger for the plight of the mother.

Structurally *Alfred and Emily* offered an example of the way I might have developed *Kate Annie*. I drafted fictional chapters of Kate's life but recognised that a biographical section would be the shorter of the two accounts owing to the fragmentary nature of evidence available to me. Lessing's dual portrait allows for the construction of disparate perspectives on a life and, if I intended to speculate on the life Kate might have lived, this approach would work but I had no imperative to re-envision Kate's story. My intention was to relate as far as possible what *did* happen to Kate and to provide a social and historical context that explicated, in some measure, the actuality of that life. My second consideration was a certainty that the narrative should include the long search through archives and the internet to recover the details of my grandmother's life. These explorations formed part of my emotional journey and hovered on the periphery of the narrative waiting to gain entry. I contemplated Lessing's authorial insertions, and the autobiographical elements of *Alfred and Emily*, but I was not sure if those techniques would produce the effect I wanted. My investment in Kate's narrative was integral to her story but I had yet to formulate a way to achieve this. The innovative generic strategies employed by Lessing illuminated the possibilities for writing a life. The plethora of new knowledge, historical material and drafted fictional drafts chapters suggested components I might integrate.

The possibility of fictionalising Kate's life, as opposed to creating an alternative life, prompted me to examine Margaret Drabble's novel *The Peppered Moth*, a work that is based on her own family. She comments that her creative process is "...an accumulation of ideas. Things that have been in the back of my mind suddenly start to swim together and stick together, and I think, 'Ah that's a novel beginning'" (Gussow 2001, 2). Her work presented insights into narrative strategies for *Kate Annie* and is examined in the next chapter.



### Chapter 3

#### A Novel About a Mother

I selected *The Peppered Moth* (2000) by Margaret Drabble to explore more fully the way a family story might be fictionalised. Several fictional chapters of *Kate Annie* had been drafted but I was uncertain that a completely imagined narrative would suit my purpose. I compared Drabble strategies with those used by Doris Lessing in *Alfred and Emily* in an effort to gain more insight into differing approaches for constructing a mother's life. As with the previous chapter, I examine how the writer's rationale informs strategies and structure, the construction of the narrative voice and the negotiation of the writer's investedness.

Drabble's statement, "This is a novel about my mother" and the dedication to her actual mother, "For Marie Katherine Bloor," positions the reader insecurely (2000, 390). We are never sure how much of the work is fiction and how much is not; a conundrum that is encapsulated by Daphne Merkin's observation, "What is the reader to do when an author can't decide whether a particular bad mother is the stuff of a novel, a memoir or some creative genre in-between?" (2001,1). Drabble contemplated writing a factual memoir but believed the research would be onerous and the material inaccessible (Drabble, 2010). Linda Wagner-Martin argues that biography and fiction are often very similar as both are creations. A novel can, however, encompass a biographical mode by "refashioning and revising the life narrative, bringing to it more background and, it is hoped, more insight than the subject may have ever had" (Wagner-Martin1994, 8-9). *The Peppered Moth* provides "more insight" through tale of matrilineal ancestry interwoven with the Bawtry family narrative. Judy Long suggests we may learn more of a subject from differently formed narratives such as this, but that the reader is required to be a reflexive part of a narrator/subject/reader paradigm (Long 1994, 4-6). This novel offers understanding of the social positioning of women like the mother, and of generational changes, but does not offer a comprehensive view of Bessie, the mother. The depiction of Bessie is somewhat subjugated to the novel's other components.

The connotations of a novel that is declared to be about the mother, but not named for her—yet given a title containing a word that is part of the maternal common noun—suggests not only a move away from conventional biography, but also a distancing between writer and subject. The moth of the title is metaphoric code for the decline of the mother's life according to the writer, as in this sentence, "The discontent of the women

was festering and the smell of it spread” (2000, 177). Originally the black moth had sufficient camouflage for its existence in England’s northern industrial towns of the early 1900s, such as the birthplace of Bessie Bawtry, but the evolving paler moth cannot survive. The moth is as fragile as Bessie—who is shown as unable to live happily in her original setting.

Judy Long stresses the importance of the narrator in women’s writing. She argues that telling women’s lives requires plural subjectivities and different points of view (Long 1999, 2). *The Peppered Moth* offers one portrait of the mother, unlike Lessing’s two narrators for the distinct sections of *Alfred and Emily*, as well as authorial insertions. A reader of Drabble’s work has only the aloof, often sarcastic narrative voice to rely on, such as this comment on Bessie’s frequent illnesses, “Shingles, neuralgia, lumbago, neuritis, peritonitis, a hiatus hernia? Whatever it was, she kept to her bed long enough for Joe to feel he had wronged her” (2000, 169). Bessie we are told, “...may be an evolutionary mistake, a dead end, a throwback to the clear valleys” (2000, 8). In addition, comments like, “Do these two think they can escape?” and, “Will they be able to take on the colouring of a new environment?” equate the characters with insect specimens—a strategy which keeps the reader from knowing Bessie too well and dissuades us from empathy for characters (2000, 208).

The narrator is an observer of the characters and addresses the reader as an equal who appreciates informative detail, for example: “one short generation took the industrialised world from horse and cart and pony and trap to railroad and steamship, and from that point we had galloped onwards...” (2000, 59). The factual context is similar to the style of a conventional biography but in this work the narrative voice breaks the illusion and is a continual reminder of the novel’s construction:

It is not pleasant to use this tone about Bert and Ellen Bawtry. They cannot help their stony lives. But if we were to find another tone, the heart might break. And then where would we be? What good would *that* do? Ellen Bawtry herself would be the first to ask. We might find ourselves obliged to weep. We might not stop weeping. And where would be the point of *that*? (2000, 13-14).

The pronoun “we” in the paragraph above, invites complicity between reader and narrator and the italicised words accentuate the conversational tone. The interrogative

emphasis precludes alternative opinions. Is this the authorial voice? I think it is. The reader is encouraged to judge and comment on the characters as Drabble reins in any suspension of disbelief. The characters do not exist and the lives they represent are doomed. The use of the colloquially reflective phrases—“where would be the point of that?”—posits the possibility that the narration, above, is Ellen’s interiority and the detached tone thwarts immersion in the fictive world.

Drabble deconstructs the process of the novel further, by a discussion of the narrator’s role:

If this story were merely fiction, it would be possible to fill these gaps with plausible incidents, but the narrator here has to admit to considerable difficulty, indeed to failure. I have tried – and I apologise for the intrusive authorial “I”, which I have done my best to avoid – I have tried to understand why Joe and Bessie married, and I have tried to invent some plausible dialogue from them to explain it” (2000, 129).

By noting the unlikelihood of Joe and Bessie’s marriage Drabble suggests the contradictions of life. She invites the reader to ponder such things and at the same time distances us from engagement with the characters. Her comment, “...I apologise for the intrusive authorial “I” is merely a rhetorical device since authentic dismay would ensure that the words were removed from the narrative (2000, 129). The strategy is another prompt for the reader to accept the world of *The Peppered Moth* as uncertain. Drabble’s extra-narrative statement is clarification; “My descriptions of those early years are backed up by documentary evidence and by some research, though I have filled out the record with invention” (2000, 391). Her work does not offer the illusory world of the conventional novel. A reader teeters between being told the work is a creation and contrasting scenes of realism such as, “Bessie, sitting up in her bed-jacket of lacy cream wool, thanked him for the Keats, and said she would treasure it” (2000, 103). This realism is interspersed by the narrator’s analysis that evokes complicity with the reader, “Perhaps it wasn’t fair to say that nobody in that chapel had ever had a proper job. Some of them had tried. It is true that the first generation of the Gaulden family, once uprooted from Berlin and its homeland, had found it difficult to settle and to find appropriate employment” (2000, 223). The narrative voice of the novel functions to engage the

reader with the narrator, and with the psychology of the imagined world, but not with the characters in the manner of a conventional novel.

Such strategies construct a mother who is difficult to like. Drabble admits to problems during the writing, “I encountered great difficulties.” She believes she judged the real Bessie too harshly, “Yes, I did. She was so difficult to my father” (2000, 390; Drabble 2010). The writer’s intention is to understand her mother, yet casting her as a specimen or type creates incongruity, which is manifested by the mocking narrative voice. Bessie is central to the novel but not agreeable or easily known, yet she is not an anti-heroine either. The reader’s position would be simplified if we believe this work to be entirely fictitious; yet the writer’s extra-textual comments make this impossible. Ultimately, we must situate ourselves as a “different” sort of reader of an innovatively constructed text. We also need to accept the “messiness,” which, in *The Peppered Moth* is dissociation with the characters (Long 1999, 121). How are we to understand Bessie as we proceed through the narrative? It may be that we can only re-appraise the portrait *after* reading the entire narrative. I suggest that we are not intended to receive a distinct depiction of Bessie. The world of the novel contextualizes, and thus, explains Bessie. Like the moth of the title, her existence is to be understood as integral to the world she inhabits. Drabble “went down into “the underworld” to find her but it is not Bessie alone who is placed under the microscope (2000, 392).

Both Drabble and Lessing conceptualise their mothers as part of a generation of disappointed, disenfranchised women. Their choice of generic strategies foregrounds the mothers’ frustration. Bessie is depicted within the realism of a social setting and, in this respect, the narrative functions as social history, psychology and feminist commentary, providing “readers with a bridge back into history” (Wagner-Martin 1994, 29). The character representing Drabble’s mother, and similarly situated women of the era, only ventures out of her “underworld” to attend university before fate, in the shape of marriage draws her back. Drabble’s strategies predispose the reader to see Bessie as a specimen. The narrator’s facetious questioning continues that process, “And will she succeed in her escape? To answer these questions we must try to rediscover that long-ago infant in her vanished world” (2000, 7). If the feminine pronouns and the word *infant* are removed these sentences have the cadence of a voice-over for an animal documentary.

Bessie is fashioned in a way that precludes the intimacy that we might expect with a character in a novel. She is compared to Faro, her granddaughter—disadvantaging Bessie—and signifying the importance of Faro who is “radiant with light” (2000, 3).

Bessie is described as physically deficient. She has "...short arms around her thin knees" and is often sick (2000, 10). The few images of her as attractive are embedded among negative depictions and are therefore undermining, for example, Bessie's prettiness is diminished by the words "her extra toe remained well hidden" (2000, 127). The knowledge that Bessie represents the writer's mother further confuses a reader's engagement with her. Are we meant to dislike this character? Did the real daughter dislike the real mother?

Readers bring their own subjectivity to a text but it is difficult not to agree with the narrator's opinion of Bessie (Long 1999, 6). Interiority is rare and allusions by the narrator persuade us to consider Bessie as unworthy, "Is Bessie to be our heroine? Something must happen to her, or we would not have wasted all this time making her acquaintance" (2000, 18). The Rose of Sharon is selected by Drabble as metonymy for Bessie and her surroundings; it is a "weedy, untidy, scruffy suburban undershrub, with leaves that curled and turned brown at the edges, with undistinguished yellow flowers..." (2000, 10). An acceptance of Bessie's specialness, "She thought of herself as special. And so she was," is broken by the narrator's irony, "Most children are special to themselves" (2000, 7). We are positioned to observe rather than to know Bessie, "See her as she walks along the banks of the Cam" (2000, 12). "It would be tedious to follow Bessie through all the stages and stopping places of her infancy, through those interminable Sunday School classes and Whitsuntide processions" (2000, 19). The reader is too often nudged into assessing Bessie through the prism of a narrative tone that negates compassion.

A further diminution in the depiction of Bessie is that she is largely unvoiced. Linda Wagner-Martin's assertion that female characters should speak to elucidate their distinct reactions to situations implies that Drabble does not wish to negotiate Bessie's point of view (1994, 30). Third person indirect speech is used to explicate the character's lack of voice, "Bessie does not know whether this is meant as a compliment, nor, if it were, how she should receive it. She says nothing" (2000, 90). Drabble constructs a character who does not know how to behave and who lacks power or independence. A character without dialogue, even if this is, in the most part, true of the real mother, creates a dilemma. Readers understand a character by what they say and do. Our knowledge of Bessie is mediated through the narrator and, although intellectually we know that whole novel is a construct, an unvoiced character cannot engage the reader in the way that a

character who is given dialogue can. The barrier constructed between Bessie and the reader seems to signify one between the ostensible subject and the daughter/writer.

Marilyn Metta suggests that writers may “give voice to the silences” in a character’s life by providing “new knowledges” through different points of view (2010, 61). Drabble does not choose this strategy. In contrast, Drusilla Modjeska constructs imaginary conversations for Poppy, the mother, who is the subject of *Poppy* (1990). Modjeska’s mother was silent for much of her life, we are told, but the writer views her mother’s silence as a gift that confers freedom on her as a storyteller (1990, 12). Drabble’s decision to avoid giving Bessie a voice precludes a connection between reader and character. It is congruent with positioning readers to view Bessie as a specimen or an example of women in that era. One piece of dialogue resonates with verisimilitude, “Bessie would ring her daughter of an evening and say, ‘I wish I were dead, but what’s going to kill me?’” (2000, 297). The colloquial phrase “of an evening” seems to signify a conversation remembered by the writer. This short conversation gives credibility to the character of Bessie and renders her a little more understandable.

Wagner-Martin believes that a writer/daughter’s work can impart identity to the mother (1994, 94). In Lessing’s *Alfred and Emily* the identity of the mother is created through a combination of the imagined mother and the biographical Emily. The identity of the mother in Drabble’s novel is overshadowed by a commanding narrative voice and frequent authorial insertions. These strategies form an overt presence in the work indicating the control of the writer/daughter. A comment on mothering, “Bessie didn’t seem to like it. And her two children, the fruits of her maternal gift, felt themselves to be a useless and unwanted by-product of it, rather than its fulfillment,” echoes feelings the writer describes in interviews (2000, 183). Janet Beizer refers to double stories or “bio-autobiography” where the biographer’s quest towards the subject’s life leads to an inclusion of their own story (2009, 26). *The Peppered Moth* can be viewed this way, except that daughter/writer is not predominant in telling her own story, but in the manner of the narration. This creates an unbalanced portrait of the mother but gives clarity to the opinions of the narrator.

Daughters writing of mothers are “seeking to work out the complex matter of subjectivities: their own and that of their mothers” argues Suzanne Juhasz (2000, 157). She believes a writer needs to see the mother as a woman, as a separate identity, rather than viewing her relationally. The *Afterword* of Drabble’s work describes her confusion, “I encountered great difficulties. The worst was the question of tone. I find myself being

harsh, dismissive, censorious. As she was” (2000, 390). Bessie is presented through a prism of harsh, narratorial disapproval, thus, “She believed in her own superiority. And on one level, her confidence in her own self worth was so great that she believed that everything that belonged to her or was associated with her was special and remarkable” (2000, 181). She has a “bitter, caustic, nagging” tone (2000, 170) and on her death her fictional daughter is “suffused with an extraordinary sensation of lightness” (2000, 316). Virginia Woolf believed “the novelist is free; the biographer is tied” (1943, 1). The narrative voice and authorial intrusions of *The Peppered Moth* demonstrate Drabble’s struggle between the freedom of a novel and the restrictions of biography. The real mother of the dedication, Kathleen Bloor, lived a “hidden life,” as Juliette Atkinson has referred to ordinary lives (2010). Drabble’s fiction re-hides the mother’s authentic existence. The writer/daughter is concealed too, since the narrative voice is dominant, but we cannot be certain who speaks.

Conventional biographies of the past sought to edit out those aspects of a subject’s life deemed to be flaws. Contemporary female writers, in their wish to understand and re-envision the past, are willing to reveal the blemishes and vicissitudes of a parent’s life (Wagner-Martin 1994, 94). To balance such revelations writers frequently demonstrate reparation of a kind within the narrative, positing explication, empathy or resolution of a kind. Lessing offers narrative redemption for her parents through the lives she imagined for them. Drabble creates Faro, Bessie’s granddaughter, to provide some purpose for Bessie’s sad life. Faro symbolises the progress Bessie was unable to achieve. The narrative importance of a Faro is elucidated by the denouement of *The Peppered Moth*: Faro imagines Bessie sitting next to her, “For she can see Grandma’s happy face smiling, as Faro cries out and unwraps the silver treasure”(2000, 389). The narrator, through Faro’s imagination, gives Bessie a final moment of pleasure.

Suzanne Juhasz makes the point, that in writing, a daughter may offer empathy that was never extended to the real mother (2000, 178). Drabble is clear about the conflicted nature of her relationship to her mother, “I think about my mother a great deal, uncomfortably” (2000, 390). The conclusion to *The Peppered Moth* is a narrative equivalent of an olive branch. The writer hoped to feel “pure” after writing but instead upset herself, “I have made myself smell of dead rat, and I’m not sure how to get rid of the smell” (2000, 392). We presume that the struggle to comprehend her mother leaves frustration in its wake—or that the novel is an unsatisfactory mode for telling a mother’s life.

A writer teasing out the complications and contradictions of a mother/daughter relationship is drawn into working against the reverence traditionally accorded to mothers (Wagner-Martin 1994, 97). Contemporary writers are less likely to feel constrained by this and engage in a narrative questioning and challenging as Drabble has done (Metta 2010, 60). Ultimately this may not be as fulfilling as a writer hoped. Arguably, a writer's emotions at the post-writing stage may depend on the complexity of their original relationship with the subject. The works of Lessing and Modjeska are imbued with a sense of the daughter/writer's acceptance and concord with the mother. *The Peppered Moth* leaves a lingering impression of the daughter/writer's annoyance with the mother.

Lessing and Drabble both present images of a mother's physical incapacity and lack of voice. Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* focuses more particularly on this aspect of a woman's life. Poppy speaks little and suffers from a mental breakdown. The characterisations of the mothers: Emily, Bessie and Poppy appear to corroborate a stereotype of female weakness. Contemporary women's narratives recognise this as a manifestation, often psychological in origin, of the social restrictions placed on women. Bessie is regularly unwell and unable to face, "the struggles and humiliations that lay ahead of her..." (2000, 106). Lessing wrote of Emily as "the mother I knew, always ill, long suffering, dutiful, attending the needs of others like an Edwardian lady..." (2008, 174). The colloquial expression 'took to her bed,' often applied to women, is used to explain Bessie's frequent retreats from life, "...two weeks into the summer term of her second year she took, decisively, to her bed" (2008, 116). These descriptions are testimony to the debilitation of a generation of women and demonstrate how life narratives of women act as social history and offer a contemporary explication of those lives. The placement and experience of illness in the narratives shows it to be pivotal in many lives. It is a manifestation of the diminution felt by those women and was often the only aspect of control left in their lives.

The presentation of female incapacity is particularly relevant to this research as my grandmother Kate, the subject of *Kate Annie*, was frequently described by her family as inadequate. Research and reflection clarified for me how pervasive dismissive descriptions of my grandmother had been, and still are, and what they might indicate. Family anecdotes re-iterate Kate's general deficiencies; her long crying bouts and inability to make decisions. I am told that Kate refused to name the father of her illegitimate child or to discuss anything she did not wish to face. Apparently, she used



silence and tears regularly to the annoyance of her brothers and the chagrin of her daughter. Her family declared this a sign of incapacity and vacillation, especially when she refused to attend her own wedding but would not give a reason.

I required a strategy that could incorporate this aspect of Kate's life into my narrative, yet would contextualize it, and offer some degree of explication. I chose Modjeska's *Poppy*, the third work examined for this thesis, to discover how a narrator might re-envision a woman's silence and apparent inadequacies. I also undertook further research into British Victorian and Edwardian social history and accounts of medical and psychological treatments of women. These insights impelled me to re-shape, both my opinion of Kate and the writing of *Kate Annie*, to avoid perpetuating the demeaning judgments of her. As a narrator of her story I had to look behind family assessments of her and comprehend the underlying implications. More importantly, I had to make a decision about whether I would allow her to remain narratively silent, as both Lessing and Drabble had chosen to do with their subjects. This strategy would, I believe, have re-enforced Kate's powerlessness rather than explaining or reversing it.

I chose to give her a voice, in accordance with memory work as described by Annette Kuhn (*Family Secrets* 1995). This is, she writes, like detective work, a "working backwards – searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence" (1995, 4). Using this technique I constructed a voice for Kate, thus allowing her to narratively explain the things that in life she could not talk about. Drusilla Modjeska, in an interview with Bronwyn Rivers, discusses relying on a similar method when information from her mother was unavailable, "The fact that there was so little from her, so few words, meant that I had to find them in myself" (1997, 320). Similarly the writer Frances Sherwood explains her creative engagement with her subject Mary Wollstonecraft, "That was a life that spoke to me" (Prenatt 1995, 1).

The indignity of silence is only one diminution of women in the past who were rarely portrayed as themselves, instead being shown as someone's daughter, wife or mother (Wagner-Martin 1994, 1). Bessie in *The Peppered Moth* is seen as daughter, mother and wife, as well as a specimen. The real Bessie, like Lessing's mother Emily, is an unknown woman. Both live "hidden lives" (Atkinson 2010, 1) and only through their relationship to a daughter/writer do they become biographical subjects. Interestingly neither Lessing nor Drabble attempt to validate the lived experience of the mother. Both writers look back and see little value in Emily or Bessie's existence. Arguably, this demeans those

lives further by the implication that the lives *were* worthless. Drabble might argue that this was how her mother judged her own life. The past lives of women are liable to suffer by the comparison with contemporary female lives unless the life was quite remarkable, or judged by the terms of reference from the era in which they existed. A portrait of a mother, whether fictionalised or not, is complicated by the educational and professional status of the daughter/writer. Drabble, and Lessing are writing of unknown women from their own positions as career professionals and feminists.

While researching the lives of Victorian and Edwardian women I discovered a text that did not re-cast a woman's life or present it as oppressed drudgery. Alice Mullen, who lived in the same area and era as my subject, wrote a diary that became *Alice from Tooting* (1997). Her version of life in the late 1800s and early 1900s is certainly bleak yet she does not depict herself as a victim nor is she unduly distressed by her life. Alice gives a personal account of events and experiences. Her life is full of misfortunes, if viewed from a modern perspective, but is written in a plain, informative prose that forestalls sympathy. Alice lived through wars and economic depressions within a patriarchal society, as do the female subjects of Lessing and Drabble's work, but those writers are re-evaluating, retrospectively judging social history. They construct narratives intended for a reading public. Alice is merely filling her diary with opinions and descriptions. She comprehends social history only in terms of the minutiae of her family and working life. Alice's diary tells us that lives have many versions, according to when they are written and who writes them.

*Alice from Tooting* is an invaluable insight into a woman's life. It is an example that an ordinary past life, told plainly and factually, can resonate with contemporary readers and has an inherent worth. Alice Mullen's story strengthened my intention to develop *Kate Annie* by integrating archival evidence, social history and anecdotal information—but to fictionalise when I could not rely on facts or anecdotes. Kate's life, as I discovered, is intriguing and a completely fictional work would negate the uniqueness of that life. Unlike Drabble and Lessing I was not writing to understand my subject, even though reflection and research does give me a greater comprehension of Kate's motives and behaviour. I wrote to re-claim my relationship with my grandmother, to memorialise her life and to offer a balanced portrait of a shamed woman. The strategies I chose reflect this.

Theorists of women's writing note how often biographies are also autobiographical and this is the intention with *Kate Annie*. It is *my* story of Kate, and of the long years

searching for her, including the involvement of my sisters. The stories my mother told me are a significant element, so it is partially her story too. I have become a family historian of sorts and this is a task to be undertaken carefully. I recall a short section of Kim Chernin's memoir *In My Mother's House* (1983) that acknowledges the implications and importance of women sharing stories:

My mother and I were storytellers. It was an old line, it ran far back. 'Don't you believe her,' my grandmother used to say about my mother, who said it to her sisters about me. 'That girl is always telling stories.' 'Keep an eye on them,' my mother used to say, 'just when you least expect it a story will tell the truth' (1983, ix).

Carolyn Heilbrun also believed oral storytelling was an essential way for women to see themselves collectively, and that it provided an impetus for written narratives (1988, 44). *Kate Annie* originated in oral storytelling and the narrative retains the flavour of this by including conversations, anecdotes, memories, discoveries and emotional turmoil. My quandary was dealing with the fragmentary nature of Kate's story, which remained even after years of research. Chernin's last sentence, "just when you least expect it a story will tell the truth" echoes women writers' use of memory and imagination and this was my experience. Annette Kuhn refers to how a similar practice of "bringing the secrets and the shadows into the open allows the deeper meanings of the family drama's mythic aspects to be reflected upon" (1995,7).

Drusilla Modjeska echoes this when she describes writing *Poppy* "I expected that I would keep to the evidence. In the writing of it, however, I found myself irresistibly drawn into dream, imagination and fiction. The result is a mixture of fact and fiction, biography and novel" (1990, 317). Modjeska's use of imaginative writing within a framework of authenticity interested me. *Poppy* provides insights into generic strategies that differ from those used by Lessing and Drabble. The next chapter explores Modjeska's complex narration of a mother's life. *Poppy* shows another way a mother and a daughter's life might be written. The work was informative and influential in the development of strategies for writing *Kate Annie*.

## Chapter 4

### Imagination and Memory

“I don’t think I can call it truth but it is related to truth” (Modjeska 2002, 74).

Contemporary articles and reviews note the innovative style of feminist writer Drusilla Modjeska’s *Poppy* (1990). I was intrigued by her acknowledgement of the work’s “strange shape” and her comment that although she expected to keep to the evidence of her mother’s life she found herself, “drawn irresistibly into dream, imagination and fiction” (1990, 317). Modjeska’s choice of generic strategies; such as frequent shifts in point of view and in temporal reality ensured that examining *Poppy* would strengthen my research. Modjeska’s views on the writing process, given in interviews and articles, were also enlightening.

*Poppy* is an “untold mother’s story” as are many life writings by women (Rivers 1997, 328). My own work *Kate Annie* is the story of a mother figure, my grandmother, whose life was not one of great achievements. Early twentieth century morals deemed Kate a disgrace and I felt compelled to find a balanced way to narrate this, and the unknown episodes in her life. Divorce, infidelity and a nervous breakdown designate the mother in Modjeska’s work, according to the values of her times, as a failed wife and mother. *Poppy* is the narrator/daughter’s story told in tandem with that of the mother and since I intended to include my own story within *Kate Annie* I wanted to see how this is achieved in Modjeska’s work. The writer’s intriguing reference to the use of both “imagination *and* fiction” confirmed my belief that imaginative writing is not the same as fictionalising (1990, 317). These points are discussed in this chapter and, as with the work of Lessing and Drabble, I also explore the writer’s rationale and how this shapes the text, the construction of the narrative voice and the negotiation of the daughter/writer’s investedness.

Lekkie Hopkins views *Poppy* as intrinsically a woman’s tale which “foregrounds the process of storytelling” (1995, 52). This can be seen in the conversational style Modjeska employs to “unearth the story or stories that were underneath” and to create an “act of remembrance” (2002, 72-78). Her work subverts the traditional biographical mode in several ways: in the use of a non-linear temporality, through the inclusion of fictional elements and by refusing to delineate the female subject as a victim or failure. Modjeska’s generic experimentation offers a reading of the social constraints on women

in the past, as well as particularising the mother/daughter relationship. The innovations of “self analysis and “treating feelings as information” situate *Poppy* as an example of contemporary women’s writing (Long 1999, 118). This is particularly suitable for this research as it is quite unlike the works of Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble

I note that Modjeska does not like the term “woman writer” since gender is only one way, among many, to classify a writer (Modjeska 1987,115). For Linda Wagner-Martin, “women’s writing is writing as individual as the women themselves” (1994, 30). I accept both points but for ease of discussion in this thesis, in common with writers quoted, I will use the term.

Life writers make choices, especially in blurring genres, writes Linda Wagner-Martin (1994, 159). Modjeska originally intended, “to write a biography of my mother” but decided that keeping to the facts, “...seemed to deny the fictional paradox of truthfulness” (1990, 317). She sees *Poppy* as an “A narrative interrogation of a life” and might have added, from a specifically female perspective (2002, 72). Contemporary feminist writers often interpret female lives “with one focus on the subject’s interior life and another on the external values and conflicts they, as women, recognise” (Wagner-Martin 1994, 4). Modjeska’s choice to combine generic strategies positions the reader uneasily. Is the work to be read as biography or fiction? The first person narration encourages a belief that the work is a memoir but the inclusion of Poppy’s diary and Modjeska’s dedication, “For my mother who died in 1984 and never kept a diary...” are a reminder that in this work “Nothing should be taken simply as literal” (1990, 317). Modjeska employs the “terrific freedom” of fiction and yet “wanted to attach Poppy’s life to the movement of history and to the debates and interpretations I understood” (1997, 320; 1990, 12).

Modjeska’s intention to accentuate the social circumstances of women is signaled clearly in the first chapter. This begins by presenting successive female births as an un-individuated line of insignificance, “When China was born to Pauline, Pauline wept and China was taken away. When Poppy was born to China, China wept, and Poppy was taken away.” The crib’s blue ribbon symbolises the parents’ disappointment at Poppy’s gender and the origin of her insecurity (1990, 3). The reader is directed to the narrator’s perspective on women’s lives by words that are suggestive of pain: *wound, cutting, rain, alone, wept, inconsolable, chill, blood, and danger*. The birth of the narrator, Lalage, is juxtaposed with historical images embedding her in an essentially male world, “I was born to Poppy in 1946, the year the Bank of England was nationalised and the press

reported from Nuremburg details of crimes that had occurred...” (1990, 4). The line of births ends abruptly with the phrase, “And blood. It’s a common enough story,” situating the tale as ordinary yet resonant of the existence of many women. The narrative’s underlying theme is a gendered reading of female lives, as in the comment on the succession of family births, “That is how we mark a woman, by her kin and progeny. But it doesn’t tell me who she was”(1990,12).

For Modjeska, the interweaving of contextual history is what makes sense of a female life, yet the personal and domestic details are “not just the accompaniment to the real story. Nor were they the real story, nor separate from it, rather part and parcel of the inheritance, and the responsibility I’d stepped into...” (1990,12). Modjeska’s work explicates the lives of the mother and daughter within the social and political history of the times with observations such as, “Where Poppy lived, divorce still bore the stigma of disgrace. To be a *divorcee* meant condemnation to a marginal existence. On what grounds could she have sued for divorce?” (1990, 85). As Linda Wagner-Martin notes that women writers need “to understand both their subjects’ cultures and their own and to provide their readers with a bridge back into history...” (1994, 29).

Modjeska’s choice is to retell the mother’s past with the insights of a contemporary woman. She re-envision the mother’s life, not as Lessing does in *Alfred and Emily* by creating a completely new life, but by re-evaluating the circumstances surrounding Poppy. She writes, “All any of us saw was the family, cure and poison both” (1990, 9). Her task is to create three stories: Poppy’s tale, Lalage’s *and* a retrospective analysis of Poppy’s life. Modjeska writes, “My story forces itself across hers and although I acknowledge my memories as a determining factor, they are in a sense irrelevant, and not a reliable guide to understanding the life of a woman named Poppy” (1990, 40). With these words she defines the responsibility of a daughter/writer since merely recounting the remembered life of a mother without analysis or reflection has little value. If I had developed *Kate Annie* by relying on my mother’s recall of Kate she would have been rendered exactly the way she was adjudged by her own times, feckless and lacking independence. If I add my own memories and explore how the times shaped Kate’s life she emerges differently. Similarly, Poppy portrayed without revision would be seen as a failed wife and mother. Modjeska’s strategies do not hide traits that might be counted as flaws; instead she shows them as part of the mother’s struggle against the limitations on her life.

Leonie Rowan suggests that Poppy's experience in a patriarchal society "is far from unique" and that "*Poppy* demonstrates explicitly a woman's ability to move beyond the constraints of private life—and the silence associated with it—into spheres where she can demonstrate independence, competence and critical analysis" (2001, 50, 57). Rowan details the signifiers of Poppy's oppression: her father's disapproval of a female infant who survives when the male twin dies, the repression caused by her marriage and the discontent leading to a mental breakdown. Rowan sees Poppy's silence as a method of resistance. In previous chapters on Lessing and Drabble I have discussed women's silence, noting that only the fictional mother in the first section of Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* speaks fluently. Lessing imagines Emily, the mother, as an independent, confident woman who does not need a method of resistance. The biographical mothers in *Alfred and Emily* and in Drabble's work are both, for the most part, without a narrative voice. Modjeska's work foregrounds the dilemma of an unvoiced female character. She notes that the mother's silence was a problem for the writing, "on every occasion, in each encounter, Poppy is silent," and in her diary Poppy writes, "Silence ... is my only weapon" (1990,19). Modjeska constructs a mother who uses silence as many women in the past have done. Novels and biographies have frequently depicted female silence, equating it with passivity, illness and instability. Such portrayals form stereotypes of female dependency and Poppy's silence is shown as symptomatic of her lack of autonomy in the early part of her life. The construction of Poppy's voice signals her transformation to health and independence while Modjeska's in-text comment expounds the dilemma of the narrative voice, "Gerard Genette says it is where most of the drama's excitement is. Is the drama of Poppy's life to be found in the way she told it? Or in the way I tell it?" Who speaks in whose name?" The narrator comprehends that "my struggle with her is also a struggle with myself, and my attempt to speak"(1990, 94). I suggest that this challenge engenders the decision to construct the distinctive voices necessary for dialogic negotiation. The voices of both the narrator and Poppy are creations of the writer and in giving Poppy a voice Modjeska heightens the "drama's excitement." The voices embody the empathetic bond of narrator and subject while giving the reader a greater understanding of Poppy.

The narrator's thoughts on Poppy's silence introduce a chapter titled *Voice*; "I don't know how she recovered... The best I can do is to say that Poppy recovered because she found her voice." The rhetorical question, "What does it mean when a woman finds her voice?" is answered within the narrative by Poppy regaining her identity and leading an

independent life (1990, 93). By providing the fictional mother with a voice Modjeska reclaims self-hood for the real mother. She creates “an act of remembrance” that narratively challenges the view of Poppy as a failure (2002, 72-89). The paradigm of a resistant/silent woman is altered in this work through the subject having narrative space to speak as she gains autonomy. In the sanatorium after a nervous breakdown Poppy, “...found her voice, and took her first uncertain steps towards a different future,” a phrase that positions the event as a re-birth (1990, 97). Poppy does not actually speak at this point. Perhaps the narrator is avoiding a clichéd moment, instead her voice is recalled by a daughter as “...grainy, perfectly pitched, full-bodied and without vanity” (1990, 93). Poppy resumes her place amid female dialogue through the words of her diary. The addition of Poppy’s voice creates a polyphonic work that highlights the importance of women’s voices and conversation. The mother, by being given dialogue, becomes a woman with identity who can participate in the storytelling of *Poppy*. Within a feminist narration the mother, if left unvoiced, is doubly repressed, once in life and again, narratively, by the writer/daughter. The narrator describes her strategy to her father—and to the reader, “...I tried to explain how I’d set out to tell Poppy’s story, and had concluded by bowing to the story that is told through her. I talked about patterns of thought that brood rather than argue, and of the fictional paradox of truthfulness” (1990, 308). For Janet Beizer, the purpose of women’s biography is to recover a woman’s life, to bring into the open that which was hidden, to identify with the subject and see through her (2009, 25-27). She would agree with Modjeska’s approach. In the same way, I reasoned that constructing a voice and letters for my grandmother in *Kate Annie* allowed her to be heard. Kate, or my manifestation of her, could tell her story better than I could. The construction of a voice by a daughter/writer is very likely to be resonant of the subject’s real voice and unlike that of the narrator. A ‘silent’ woman’s dialogue can give voice to thoughts the subject could not utter in her lifetime.

It could be argued that Modjeska usurps the mother’s identity by constructing fictional diaries and letters. Conversely, she can be seen as respecting her subject since Poppy’s character and identity are elevated by these creations. In choosing to write “through her,” the narrator asks herself, “Who was she?” In searching for Poppy, Modjeska becomes, “in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation” (Smith & Watson 2010,1). Modjeska’s creation of the mother is an “imaginative impersonation,” writes Sidonie Smith (1994, 518). The phrase



captures the fluidity and interiority used to shape Poppy whose dialogue, interior voice, and diaries embody the interconnectedness between writer and subject.

Early in *Poppy* Modjeska foregrounds an intention to delve deep into herself *and* the mother/daughter relationship, “My mother had died and it was true what I’d said, I did not know her, and that night, under a sky weighted down in memory by all that had gone before, I knew that by not knowing her, I could not know myself. It was frightened selfish grief” (1990, 5). Modjeska's method of “knowing” the mother is to fashion an intimate portrait from “dream, imagination and fiction” (1990, 317). Molly Andrews suggests that a daughter/writer’s identification with a mother/subject has a synergy that engenders imaginary writing. She argues that narrative and imagination are inextricably linked and that the human psyche moves between these states daily. The meaning of memory, even if recalled accurately, is dependent on the perceptions of the self who does the recalling (2014, 1-3). Modjeska’s phrase “imagination and fiction” implies a distinction between the terms that is exemplified by Andrews’s argument (1990, 317). I see *Poppy* as a literary dreamscape where the writer wanders at will, following the dictates of the subconscious, as when we dream. Poppy refuses to talk about her life and tells the narrator that she should, “Use your imagination.” The narrator does so, and explains, “The clues she was leaving were in the gaps and holes I was busily bricking up” (1990, 12).

The words of Modjeska and Andrews describe an approach that differs from conventional fiction while working within the text in a way that is comparable. The strategy has a “lyrical quality” writes Hopkins, which can be seen even in a description of the cancer killing Poppy, “Though she didn’t know it, and nor did we, hard white nodules were already casing the ovaries that had produced the slippery eggs that had swum inside her, tiny fishes that turned, bit by bit into May, Phoebe, and me”(1995, 2; 1990, 290). Modjeska’s use of imagination is informed by her wish to create emotional authenticity. This way of working embodies a “witnessing” and “healing” which Margaretta Jolly views as typifying women’s writing (Jolly 2005, 153). The writing process becomes empathic, a working from the inside, as the writer inhabits the identity of the subject and strives to comprehend that life.

The interrogative style of *Poppy* is part of that struggle and signifies the writer’s acceptance of the uncertainty of any biographical account. This creates a narrator who, Rowan suggests, “problematizes the text’s authority even as she produces it” (2001, 54). A reader expecting narratorial certainty is destabilised. Reflections such as, “Would she

have left a new born child alone in a cold room,” and culminating in, “How did Poppy feel when Nanny died? Did she go to the funeral?” encourage “the reader to look behind the final version of an event and to continually ask questions of the text” (Modjeska 1990, 52-53; Rowan 2001, 54). *Poppy* is a conversation with the reader *and* the mother (Malin, 6). The narrator asks, “Who was she, this woman whose death we would register in the morning? A life completed and signed for, a body handed over”(1990, 5). Her grief is conveyed by plain phrasing and the pathos of her reasoning, “Is it in the nature of families that we know least those who affect us most? ... Was I mourning the mother who held out her arms and fed me, folded me into her skin? Or the woman I didn’t know, who’d grown out of that young mother?” (1990, 5). These unanswered questions enable a “different reader,” one who accepts the partnership of narrator, reader and subject, and is drawn to ponder the conundrums posed by the narrator (Judy Long 1999, 3).

Female readers, I suggest, relate easily to a conversational style which foregrounds the rhythms and purposes of oral story telling. Jeanne Baker-Nunn views the oral stories passed from mother to daughter as the origin of women’s written stories (1987, 56). Storytelling includes asides, re-tracking to earlier events, changes of tense, and insertion of new characters as the story progresses. Spoken conversations elicit questions from the listener who is unsurprised when the teller reviews or queries their own narrative in response. In written narratives these techniques operate similarly, as in the narrator’s philosophical musing on the nature of the writing:

Daughter and historian I oscillated, neither one nor the other, tethered to notebooks and boxes of papers as if, with no further effort on my part I’d find her there, fully formed and acquiescent, until at last it dawned on me that if I kept on checking and double checking, worrying over events that have gone and can’t be undone, I ran the risk of searching for the wrong thing, battenning down a life anyone could see needed to lift lightly from the page (1990, 67-68).

Modjeska’s purpose is to dispense with the “old protocols of memoir” and to “play with time.” Her strategies exhibit the “messiness” which, in 1999, Judy Long saw as “an emerging feminist praxis”(1999, 118). The writing will be a pulling “at the threads of memory” and “a kind of thinking aloud” (Modjeska 2002, 72-85). This process tracks reflection and recall rather than sequential events. An episode may begin with thoughts

on a photograph, “I look at Poppy in her wedding dress,” then comment on Poppy’s illness, “The cure she took became the malady, and as she struggled with one, she succumbed to the other.” Memories of Port Moresby in 1968, “I sat on the wall between the club and the car park,” move to Poppy reminiscing on the past, “The event I really hated in the fifties... was the electrocution of the Rosenbergs” (1990, 66-67). This is followed by the narrator’s recall of a conversation with her father, “He asked me if I’d have enough evidence. It was a serious question.” A reader is never quite certain who speaks, where they are, or in which era. These sudden shifts with no signal of change can necessitate re-reading. Linda Wagner-Martin refers to this as a “circular pattern” engendered by the interconnectedness of experiences (1994, 29). Such temporal ordering may make bumpy reading, yet is mimetic of the emotional journey of a daughter/narrator reaching back into memory and inviting the reader to accompany her on a tour of family history thus, “What I remember is inside: a house full of walls. Open the door and there is Richard working, briefs and papers tied in pink ribbon piled around him” (1990, 106). Descriptions of photographs create a shadowy sense of the past, akin to memory. “She’s lying in long grass. In the background I can make out a fence” (1990, 132). The reader does not see the image; we rely on the narrator’s impression from the photograph. We accept what we are told, but are distanced from the image, just as the narrator is from her past.

I found this temporal and narrative complexity did require frequent re-reading and was initially perplexing. I came to understand Modjeska’s work as a conversation with the reader necessitating re-visiting characters and re-evaluating opinions. I decided that, to avoid similar confusion, I would tell Kate’s story in the past tense yet recount my search for her in the present tense and I would alert the reader to the change by giving dates at the start of each chapter. In this way I hope to ease the reader’s journey but I feel the complexity of *Poppy* like elaborate musical compositions, films or paintings, benefit from being experienced more than once.

Jack Bowers likens the intricacy of *Poppy* to a complex fabric. He writes, “Lalage gives the impression that the tapestry of *Poppy* is woven together from a number of voices” (1999, 58). The reader may easily assume that Lalage, the narrator, is Modjeska the writer but Bowers suggests that we view their identities as separate and yet inextricable from each other, as having “a relational identity” (1999, 59). The work is a “woven plait, and Modjeska is the weaver” (1999, 61). This metaphor is used in *Poppy* to highlight the nature of women’s lives. The mother plaits “scraps of wool, cotton thin

strips of material, hair ribbon... anything to hand” and says it is how she lived her life, “with a ball of twine in her hand so that other people could find their way”(1990, 15-16). The same metaphor forms a debate on women’s lives, “Is that the feminine condition, always a life-line to other people’s lives and therefore split from our own? Who holds the thread for us? Who held it for her? Does this explain the dreams women have: the perfect husband, the perfect lover: priest, guardian, father. Failing that, Or perhaps most of all: the perfect mother” (1990, 16). Modjeska’s work performs a narrative bonding of mother and daughter akin to the metaphoric wool plaiting. Voices and time interweave in *Poppy*, producing a narrative shape that depicts women’s lives as primarily of connections—the most intense of which is that of the mother and daughter.

The telling of a mother’s life by a narrator/daughter poses a conundrum regardless of whether or not Lalage represents Modjeska. If women’s stories originate with those told to the child by the mother what is to be understood by a daughter telling the mother’s story, in the voice of that mother? (Barker-Nunn 1987, 56). Margaret Henderson, in a feminist reading of *Poppy*, sees fictionalising the mother as a role reversal in which the daughter/narrator, in effect, becomes the mother and in doing so grows in self-knowledge (1998, 11). Modjeska constructs or ‘mothers’ the text—it is she who gives birth to the characters. This stratagem is deepened when she writes of the imaginary diaries, “I can no longer avoid the diaries, or the voice (abrasive, powerful, scratching) that comes with them, a voice that disturbs the smooth surface of my narrative just as it had my childhood disguises, and leaves me feeling the way as if I were the one in the maze” (1990, 101). The narrator is “feeling the way” through the interiority of a character she is creating. It is a maze constructed from an embeddedness—the mother is an “intersubject” or vehicle for the narrator’s negotiation of their relationship (Malin 2000, 2).

Jo Malin reasons that the textual evidence of *Poppy* problematises the idea of separation between mother and daughter (2000, 4). Only one narrator exists yet the narrative fiction constructs a conversation—one voice interrogates voice, while the other calmly replies, as in this debate on Poppy’s marriage breakdown:

“‘Why didn’t you go to London when Richard left?’ I asked Poppy. ‘There was nothing stopping you then, and you’d once wanted to go.’  
‘I felt in place here,’ she said. ‘It was my home. With everything else in doubt it was reassuring.’

‘But I’ve heard you say that once Richard left, there were people who cut you.’

‘That’d have been true anywhere,’ she said.’” (1990, 234).

Modjeska constructs the “voice” of the mother to narrate conversations she never had in life (Malin 2000, 81). The ultimate question is whether the interwovenness of mother and daughter is a difficulty for the reader or whether their trust is maintained. Arguably one does not negate the other; the duality of narrative voices provides intimacy with both characters. We know from the narrator’s words that “this account of Poppy’s life” is “an act of faith” and that the character of Poppy may be, for the most part, imagined (1999, 293). The subject/narrator integration is a “deliberate exercise of empathy, a feminist writer’s method of participating in another’s identity” (Long 1999, 121). For women readers the construction resonates with our lived experience of the relational nature of women’s lives. *Poppy* is the practical application of Modjeska’s intention to “get inside, not her shirt but her skin”(2002, 89). The portrait of the mother is quite unlike the works discussed in previous chapters. Lessing’s mother is re-fashioned, observed and remembered. Drabble contextualises, wrapping the mother’s life in metaphor whereas Modjeska inhabits an inner world and from there imagines and produces an intimate telling of a mother’s life.

The representations of the mother in *Poppy*, and in the works Lessing and Drabble, assisted in my selection of strategies for developing *Kate Annie*. I had drafted wholly fictional chapters to solve the problem of the unknowable episodes in Kate’s life. Modjeska’s strategies clarified the advantages of imaginary or fictional elements. *Poppy* is not a re-envisioning of the mother’s life, as is the first part of Lessing’s *Alfred and Emily*. Modjeska uses fiction by integrating imaginary dialogue, diaries and scenes with “the facts, and the serious pleasures of history and geography...”(1990, 317). Completely fictionalising Kate’s life would have ignored the mass of intriguing factual and anecdotal material already gathered. I saw how imaginary writing could act as a counterpart to what I already knew of my grandmother. I am unaware of the extent to which Modjeska fictionalises her actual family but I assume that her comment on the “pleasures of history and geography” indicates that *Poppy* is not wholly imagined.

I settled on a writing process similar to building a facial reconstruction from a skull. The framework of bones is the evidence to be followed. The face is slowly built using physiological information and an understanding of the circumstances of the subject’s life.

A degree of imagination allows the final fashioning of the reconstruction. A face rebuilt from a skull cannot be an exact likeness just as women writers accept the uncertainty of ever knowing or narrating the truth. The finished work is a version of life that is faithful to the writer's comprehension and interpretation combined with an analysis of the relevant social history.

The works discussed in this thesis illustrate how little sense can be made women's lives if the constraints and expectations of the era when they lived are not explored. My research focused on the social history of women in Edwardian London, in particular the effects of the Great War and the changes that came afterwards. Kate's story is that of a single female living in the 1900s and represents the life of many "surplus females" who existed after the Great War (Nicholson 2007, xvi). These "surplus" women, as the newspapers and books of the time called them, were rendered husbandless by the deaths of so many young men. The women were deemed unable to fulfill their true function of marrying and bearing children. Although Kate was already thirty-one when the war began, and appears to have chosen not to marry, she fell into this category. In addition, she epitomises the single women who were judged to have besmirched their reputations by giving birth to illegitimate children. The mother in *Poppy* represents a group of women equally demeaned by social constraints. Modjeska's detailing and analysis of authentic history blended with memories and imagination shows how such a life might be narrated.

*Poppy* explores female experience in different eras through the story of a mother and daughter. The contrast between the two lives highlights the constraints on Poppy. More significantly the work interrogates the mother/daughter bond. I had previously discarded the idea of narrating my own story in *Kate Annie* as self-centred. However, Modjeska's work and Lessing's indicated how the narrative could benefit from autobiography. My relationship to Kate, and my memories of her, impelled the work and the search, of my sisters and myself, to discover more of her life made the work possible, so the inclusion of my part in her story strengthened the narrative. The inclusion of my sisters, and myself, provided a comparison to Kate's life. Her granddaughters acted as a traditional chorus to comment, foreshadow and explicate events. The final structure and strategies of *Kate Annie* are informed by my original rationale for writing and of my knowledge of the relational nature of women's lives and writing.

This examination of women's family narratives indicates that writers seek pathways for telling their stories that are as individual as the lives they write about. The

development of *Kate Annie* was enriched and informed by the theoretical research undertaken. To this I added an instinctual sense of how Kate's story, and mine, should be told to convey an emotional authenticity. The selected works of Lessing, Drabble and Modjeska demonstrated much about the generic strategies used by women writers and made clear the value of such writing. The relational nature of women's life experiences, in particular the mother/daughter connection, and the distinctiveness of female identity positions life writing as important social history. An acceptance of this significance reasons that we should consider the responsibilities of the writing. Narratives may not fall easily into a distinct genre and can be difficult to assess, especially when fictional material forms part of the narrative. Life writers may have access to intimate family information and wish to disclose previously hidden material. These concerns, and others, form an overview of the ethics of family writing considered in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

### Writing Family

“We should take care with the stories we tell, they become part of our lives, part of our history”  
(Modjeska 2010, 121).

Developing family biography such as *Kate Annie* necessitates balancing diverse responsibilities: to the subject, to family members and to the integrity of the narrative. The ethics of life writing can be complicated, yet it is possible to untangle the confusion by implementing relational ethics as used by ethnographers. This perspective is particularly suited to contemporary women’s life writing, which is often innovative and encompasses disparate generic strategies. The ethics of narrating family are discussed in this chapter with a focus on the depiction of a mother figure and the repercussions of revealing family secrets. I examine how the inclusion of fictional material alters the ethical position of a writer.

Initial research concentrated on the texts of Paul John Eakin, G. Thomas Couser and William Zinsser. In particular, I evaluated the three areas proposed by Eakin for defining the ethics of “self-narrators” and this chapter begins by considering those issues (Eakin 2001, 113-114). As my research progressed it was obvious that if contemporary women’s writing is “different” any discussion of ethics should bear in mind that difference (Judy Long, 121). Linda Wagner-Martin writes that many of the works by women do not fit the “the personal success story” shape of much biographical work by men (1994, 6). She suggests that “women’s lives are a tightly woven mesh of public and private events” and that those interconnected parts tell the complete story of a woman’s life. These accounts re-envision women’s history using innovative generic strategies and for this reason I argue that relational ethics, those used by ethnographers, are applicable to women’s life writing (1994, 6). The work of Marilyn Metta, Carolyn Ellis, Claudia Mills and others will be examined to further this hypothesis.

An overview of Eakin’s ethical philosophy allows for a constructive comparison with the concept of relational ethics. Eakin focuses on autobiography but his ideas are pertinent to life writing in general. He argues that authors have the right to create their own life stories, but there should be tacit moral constraints (2001, 1). His main concerns are (i) the need to avoid “misrepresenting biographical and historical truth,” (ii) the “infringement of the right to privacy” and (iii) a “failure to display normative models of



personhood”(2001, 113-114). The first injunction seems straightforward. Readers of conventional biography are positioned to expect factual narratives but the majority of modern readers understand that “A writer can only write their own truth” (Zinsser 1998, 6). Zinsser does not suggest that writers play fast and loose with dates and events. He refers to the inevitability that “facts” of any kind offer versions of events which renders Eakin’s phrase “misrepresenting biography and historical truth” ambiguous unless the word *deliberately* is added.

Historian E H Carr maintains that written histories reflect a way of thinking and writing that is specific to our own times and customs (1961, 2). He cites George Clark who suggests that historians recognise that “knowledge of the past has come down through one or more human minds, has been 'processed' by them, and therefore cannot consist of elemental and impersonal atoms which nothing can alter” (1961, 2). Contemporary re-envisionings of history frequently disagree with accepted facts. Indeed, one of the fascinations of these works is the re-framing of supposed truths. For example, few accounts of Australia written a hundred years ago give voice to the experiences of Australian Aboriginal peoples, yet relatively recent autobiographies such as *My Place* by Sally Morgan (1987), or Jack Davis’s *A Boy’s Life* (1991), reveal an alternative history to the one told by white history books (Craven, Dillon and Parbury, 2013, 21-23). A re-shaping of history does not imply that earlier narratives were untrue. Both versions are truths—different truths. Disparate observations or opinions of an era need not present an ethical issue. They are a presentation of fresh insights.

Similarly, family narratives can produce altered explications of a life. The works by Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Drusilla Modjeska, discussed in earlier chapters, offer reappraisals of the parents’ lives. As contemporary feminists, the writers depict the mothers as oppressed by social constraints. The works do not narrate new events or information but instead present a re-appraisal of a female life. Modjeska captures this when she writes of Poppy, the character who exemplifies her real mother, “But they misjudged her, as they always had, and Poppy was not the failure they wished on her. There were other forces moving in her, even then...”(112). Modjeska’s portrait contextualises Poppy’s experiences in specific social history. The writer’s connectedness to the subject and a willingness to interrogate the supposed facts provide a nuanced and credible portrait. The obscurity of historical and biographical ‘truth’ and the opportunity for contemporary analysis refutes the logic of determining life-writing ethics by an

emphasis on authenticity. Few facts are unequivocal and it is the deliberate misuse of data that is unethical, not the scrutiny of events or people from an altered perspective.

An early draft of *Kate Annie* relied on family myths with a framework of verifiable dates and events. As with many family stories repeated over generations, fragments of truth were buried within those myths and only discovered after considerable research. An example is the story of my grandmother giving birth to several illegitimate children before my mother. Lengthy investigation exposed the distinct possibility that these children had existed, exactly as mythologised, except that they were almost certainly the children of my grandfather—but not my grandmother. I narrated the story of these ‘lost children’ by incorporating the new information with the original *and* my hypothesis. Including the reader in the search and conclusion is, I believe, an ethical way to use unverifiable information. Historical and biographical details pertaining to family can prove difficult to confirm and *how* the material is presented is of greater significance when attempting to write responsibly.

Eakin’s second proposal is that writers avoid invading the privacy of others. For family biographers this can be the cause of profound apprehension. Constructing a narrative according to the writer’s imperative yet maintaining the privacy of family members can produce conflicts. An absolute determination to ensure privacy for those living, or deceased, might mean the work is never published. Robert McGill argues that all writing is a “betrayal,” even of the author themselves, since the words used can psychologically betray a writer’s unconscious mind (2013, 3). Such inevitability illustrates the imprecision of avoiding hurt to others.

Claudia Mills argues that we “need both to tell stories and to hear stories told” and suggests fictionalising to minimise harm. The origins of a story should be disguised and “only the emotional core” retained to allow the “distinctive and irreplaceable value of sharing ‘real stories’ ” (2004, 107-119). I assume that she sees changing the original names and places as essential too. Real stories, for Mills, originate from authentic life experiences and underpin our understanding of the human condition. She sees sensitivity as an essential ingredient for a writer (2004, 113, 119). I agree, yet this is a vague dictum. A writer may believe they *are* being sensitive but a more suitable arbiter of any violation of trust is the subject of the work. Alison Summer defines how strongly a privacy infringement can be felt. Peter Carey’s *Theft: A Love Story* (2006), a novelistic version of their broken marriage felt, “like he fictionalised me, and the fact that he feels free to do so is a kind of intimidation. It’s emotional terrorism” (Goldenberg, 2006,).

Work such as Carey's grants an equivocal privacy. A work of fiction implicitly claims that the narrative does not depict real people, yet it is unlikely that a writer is unaware of how easily a supposedly fictional subject can be recognised. Conversely, it could be claimed that this *is* an ethical way for writers to use their own experiences since the genre of the novel is, by definition, a fiction, not a biography. Similarly, although less vehemently, the writer A S Byatt disagreed with Margaret Drabble's fictional depiction of their mother in *The Peppered Moth* (2000). In an interview Byatt said, "I would rather people didn't read someone else's version of my mother" (Gussow, interview 2001). This seems a fair comment, especially considering that one reviewer referred to the mother of the novel as "something of a domestic monster" (Merkin 2001). A writer may "minimise the cost" by fictionalising, but it is difficult to be sure of avoiding hurt (Mills 2004, 119). The question remains as to which takes precedence, the story—however disguised, or the subjects?

To be certain of completely protecting my immediate and extended family I would have had to alter the names and the majority of events in *Kate Annie*. The specific circumstances of Kate's story—her pregnancy at a late age, the loss of her home, her brothers' behavior and the identity of her lover—are pivotal to the narrative. The story becomes meaningless, or an entirely different story, without them. Kate's story represents social history and has value as a paradigmatic women's story. "Women must turn to one another for stories; they must share the stories of their lives and their hopes and their unacceptable fantasies," writes Carolyn Heilbrun (1988, 44). I concur with her sentiments, and those of Mills and Long, that these stories, orally told or in print, have an important social and emotional function. Does this imply an entitlement to write whatever an author wishes? (2004, 107; 1999, 121). I would argue that it does not. Doris Lessing chose to mitigate concerns of family and friends by removing potentially disturbing details. She explains the modifications made to her autobiography *Under My Skin* (1994):

I did change the names of some people – particularly in Volume Two. Because when I did Volume One I was fascinated by the children and grandchildren who wrote to me and came to see me and they had no idea about a lot of their parent's lives... so I thought, 'Well I don't want to tell on my old comrades, I shall shut up because it's very upsetting for the grandchildren.' Some of them, you know,

they don't know about close friends their parents had, all kinds of adventures their parents had, let alone lovers. So I left a lot out about other people (Daymond 2000, 9).

Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* raises complex issues of privacy. She appears to reveal intimate parts of her mother's life, such as diaries and letters, but these are imaginary. Are they a double invasion of privacy—fictional artifacts constructed to disclose a mother's thoughts through a writer's assumption of that identity. Modjeska complicates the ethics by stating that the diaries “seemed to me one of most truthful parts of the book” (2002, 89). She clearly does not feel she has violated her deceased mother's privacy. Her purpose is to narratively inhabit the person of the mother to, “get inside, not her shirt, but her skin” (2002, 87). This is either a comprehensive invasion of privacy, a betrayal of the mother's identity or, I would argue, the very opposite. Modjeska's way of working is similar to that of the writer Frances Sherwood who, when writing the life of Mary Wollstonecraft (*Vindication*, 1994), said, “That was a life that spoke to me” (Prenatt 1995, 1). Modjeska and Sherwood describe an empathic writing process, a working from the inside, as the writer inhabits the identity of the subject. This embodies the “ethics of care,” a “witnessing” and “healing,” which Margaretta Jolly views as exemplifying women's writing (Jolly, 153). Such a way of working alters privacy infringements, slants the ethics of the writing and is an approach embodying relational ethics.

Eakin's third life writing “transgression” is the “failure to display normative models of personhood” (2001, 113-114). He quotes psychologist John Shotter's contention that the practice of narrating our lives is inured within us through a process of “social accountability.” We validate ourselves through our talk and later through writing, however mundane it may be. That writing is then a manifestation of personhood and “telling the truth” is a primary principle (2001, 115). Eakin views Norma Khouri's fabricated biography, *Forbidden Love* (2003), not as a literary issue but one of ethics. The case is straightforward; Khouri deliberately creates a false narrative and, in naming the work a biography, knowingly misleads publishers and readers alike and transgresses against her own identity. Conversely, a writer of an authentic autobiography, for example, British politician Alan Johnson recalls his life as accurately as possible

in the memoir *This Boy* (2014). The narrative accords with his terms of reference at the time of writing and we assume there is no intention to deceive. Johnson describes an episode with a girlfriend, “It was on one of these country walks that Edna and I kissed, and that’s when she told me she loved me. Addresses were exchanged and promises made to write and meet again; promises that were never kept” (2014, 158). If, at a later stage, this is discovered to be an error of recollection the writer does not violate his identity in the way that Eakin claims Norma Khouri has done. I argue that the decisive point is the writer’s intention, which according to Eakin, is impossible to know and, “this very unknowability can make any enquiry into the author’s intention seem fruitless if not impertinent” (1999,149). For Judy Long a writer’s account of their rationale greatly assists our understanding of the work (1999, 103). Marilyn Metta agrees, arguing that a writer’s intentions are always at the core of their ethics (2011, 59). In previous chapters of this thesis I argue that a writer’s rationale shapes the strategies used. Metta’s comments are congruent with this contention, which is fundamental to my examination of selected writers, and to this deliberation on ethics.

The generic strategies employed by contemporary women writers do not necessarily seek to present inviolate authentic details of a life. These writers pursue emotional clarity using techniques that evidence uncertainty and embrace multiple perspectives. These strategies point to the dissonance that is created if Eakin’s ethical concepts are applied to women’s narratives. By foregrounding interrogation and inquiry the work of women can nullify issues of historical or biographical misrepresentation. Lalage, the narrator of *Poppy* (1990), says of her mother, “I misunderstood her not yet seeing that the inner histories that absorbed her were not just the accompaniment to the real story...”(1990, 12). A reader understands the work as a writer’s investigation that is open to interpretation. Modjeska reflects that in searching for evidence of her mother she did not realise “that the effort it would demand would be as much of heart as of will” (1990, 12). *Poppy* makes visible this unfolding comprehension, for example, “Perhaps I’m asking the wrong questions, battering at the painful episode of Poppy’s breakdown when the answer I want is not to be found in the wound, but in the way it is healed” (*Poppy*, 93).

Doris Lessing, in *Alfred and Emily* (2008), also shares uncertainty with the reader, “I wonder, did someone cut down the old *mawonga* tree? Was it really that old? Did it fall down? (2008, 231). Such ruminations create a connectedness, highlighting the partnership of subject/narrator/reader (Judy Long 1999, 3). The reader’s participation in the work mitigates issues of misrepresentation. The strategies of questioning, authorial intrusion and commentary on the writing process in contemporary women’s work may constitute uncertainty, yet they position the reader to view the work as a writer’s perceptions and insights, not a definite truth. The contemporary female praxis of life writing is less concerned with temporal, geographical, historical or biographical certainty. At the heart of these works is a striving for emotional reliability (Long 1999, 118-121).

Jo Malin reasons that our stories emanate from the mother and are entwined with the mother/daughter relationship (2014, 72). We re-enact that first storytelling and maternal bond through the tales we tell other women during our lives. These stories are a fusion of characters, relationships, personal insights and events. They confirm our connectedness as women and are often used to initiate relationships with strangers. Women’s life writing embodies the intentions, patterns and emphases of storytelling. The responsibilities of oral storytelling have always been understood, if unspoken. My creative work, *Kate Annie*, originated from oral stories told by my mother. The saga of my grandmother is only one of many family stories I share with friends, as most of us do to varying degrees. In turn friends relate their stories. We participate in a commonplace transmission of information and communication. These rituals have few ethical boundaries unless the topic is a profound secret, in which case a listener is warned that the information should go no further, yet experience tells us that most stories *are* re-told but with due care to omit names or any identifying clues. This does not point to women as thoughtless repeaters of confidences. It attests to women as disseminators of familial and social history—whether in an oral or written form. Just as oral stories are shaped through the teller’s input *and* the audience participation, so women’s written narratives are produced through a connectedness of narrator/subject and reader. The similarity of oral and print stories, in respect of intention, function and shape, suggests a re-positioning of any ethical consideration of written family narratives.

The partnership of narrator/subject/reader in women's life writing is similar to the relationship an ethnographer hopes to reach with a subject. This affiliation is achieved through the practice of relational ethics, an approach that is particularly suited to the responsibilities of narrating family stories. If, as Metta argues, relational ethics originate contiguously with the rationale for writing, which in turn engenders the strategies, it follows that ethics are embedded within the fabric of the work rather than being a separate consideration. Metta's suggested questions, "Why am I doing this?" and "What are my real motivations?" instigate ethical reflection and place it at the thinking/planning stage of the work (2011, 59).

Similarly, Carolyn Ellis encourages writers to act from their "hearts and minds" (1999, 4). Metta and Ellis focus on an affective paradigm thus situating relational ethics as looking inward, as opposed to Eakin's notions of privacy or misrepresenting evidence which looks outward, away from the writer, to the effect on a subject, or subjects, and the reader. The work of Metta and Ellis is primarily concerned with auto-ethnographical writing but their insights complement the sensibilities of contemporary women's writings in emphasising relationships and feminist philosophies (Ellis, 8). Family ethnography requires a "new" relationship Metta writes, and this is equally applicable to family life writers. In both disciplines the writer becomes a researcher in order to narrate a life and in doing so is involved in a close association with a subject (2011, 58).

If, as Malin argues, daughters' stories originate from the mother and shape a daughter's writing, we are imbued with an imperative to negotiate the story of that connection. Therefore the underlying rationale for family writing becomes an understanding of self, as well as of the mother, and a reflection of that connectedness. This is ultimately a working out of identity, which seems analogous with Eakin's idea of normative personhood. In *Poppy* this search for identity is interwoven through the narrative and is demonstrated in this example of the narrator's self-enquiry: Lalage, destabilised by being back in her country of origin and the fading life of her mother, reflects on her own identity, "It's easy enough to say I am the visitor, it's me who's changed. But it doesn't answer the question. What I want to know is whether it's the same sky, that sky that you see on a clear day? Does it stay in the same place when the earth moves

or does it move with the earth, taking us with it? (1990, 242). Later Modjeska, through Lalage, articulates the bonds that exist between women:

Whatever has happened to me, or has not, with lovers and husbands (de facto or de jure), continuity and security have built on the excellence of friendship... and when I look at Poppy's life I can see that this was so for her too. Yet these connections between women are taken for granted, a backdrop to the real business of life: husbands, children, jobs. It takes only the slightest change of focus to see that these neglected intimacies, independent of more passionate demands, can offer the terms on which we best learn to be ourselves (1990, 309).

Metta cites such self-reflection as vital to relational ethics (2011, 59). *Poppy* is a literary working through of the primal mother/daughter bond. It makes visible a daughter's struggle to understand the mother and is an example of "ethics in practice" (Ellis 1999, 3).

Stories of mothers by daughters may cast aspersions on the mother and if so how then can "ethics in practice" function? Biographer and academic, Lyndall Gordon, suggests a writer should, "exercise empathy even in ambivalence" ("Writing Family Memoir" 2014). Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* provides an example of this. In the Foreword Lessing indicates her intention to narratively give her parents, who "were remarkable, in their very different ways," the lives they might have had if World War One had not occurred (2008, viii). The fictional novella achieves this but the biographic section is a different matter. Lessing recounts her mother's disconcerting behavior, yet places it in context and includes her own response. When Emily informs the daughter's employer that she is a communist and, "a danger and threat to public order," Lessing tackles Emily, "Mother do you realise you could have lost me that job." She writes, "Now she crumpled. She was suddenly flustered, guilty and even panicked"(266). Arguably, Lessing is demonstrating Gordon's "empathy even in ambivalence." She delineates the vagaries and unpleasantness of a mother whom she admits to hating as a child, yet by detailing the mother's response, she ameliorates the harsh judgment (Daymond 2000, 12).

My dilemma in drafting *Kate Annie* was to present her fairly. Much of the information about her originated from my mother and showed Kate in a negative light, yet this was not my understanding of Kate. The first drafts included my mother's perceptions but my



closeness to Kate caused me to add judgmental comments on my mother's opinions. To moderate this un-evenness I sourced other views of Kate from my extended family, not to disprove my mother's stories but to provide disparate narrative voices. Constructing a balanced portrait of Kate prompted my decision to give her a voice. I reflected on the incongruity of the mothers' silence in the works of Lessing and Drabble. The real mothers may have spoken little in life but perpetuating this narratively diminished the characters. The mothers in both *Alfred and Emily* and *The Peppered Moth* are defined solely by the voice of the narrator. Modjeska's decision to give Poppy a voice, albeit one constructed by the writer is, Judy Long argues, a "deliberate exercise of empathy, a feminist writer's method of participating in another's identity" (1999,121). I had already drafted several fictional chapters for what became *Kate Annie* and I could now see how imagining Kate's letters and conversations would give depth to the characterisation and also signify my relationship with her. Modjeska wished to "unearth" her mother's life and having little information fashions a portrait employing "some of the imaginary, symbolic, fictional, metaphorical world" (Modjeska 2002, 72; Rivers 1997, 320). To find Kate I looked inward and discovered her within myself.

The process that Modjeska describes as "a line between fact, fiction, between imagination and evidence" was, for me, a kind of narrative acting (2002, 72). I was not an outsider guessing at what my grandmother might have said, I wrote as if I had become Kate. Whether I instinctively re-created the cadences of her speech and used words she would have done I cannot tell but I did feel sure that it was a fitting way to create her portrait. In life Kate had rarely spoken for herself on important matters. She did not refute accusations of promiscuity or defend her reasons for not marrying the father of her illegitimate child. By assuming her voice I tried to rectify this. The 'evidence' I had accumulated about Kate's life and social context, as well as my own memories, built a framework to support the words I gave to her. It is, I argue, an ethical way to write when there is a strong connection between subject and narrator. Joan Sangster writes that oral histories are able to put "women's voices at the centre of history" and redirect "our gaze to overlooked topics"(1994, 55). Women's life writing can perform similar tasks if the voices of women are heard in the narrative. Inherent in constructing these voices is an understanding of the context of the subject's life.

Comprehension of the socio-historical milieu of female subjects assists in explaining their life choices and behaviour. Modjeska provides a framework for Poppy's life by describing the optimism of England after World War Two, a place where the slums were

pulled down “and replaced by the spanking new council houses that were to give every Englishman his castle and every woman a solid lounge suite...” (1990, 64). Poppy is depicted as stifled by a society that assumes all a woman needs is good furniture. It is not surprising that she says, “I was ashamed that I always wanted so much more...” (1990, 64). Without the social context women’s lives, written in retrospect, have no validity. There is integrity in the work of a daughter/writer who re-evaluates a mother’s story.

How is such a writer’s ethical position altered if the mother is fictionalised in any way, as the writers discussed in this thesis have done? Drabble make sit clear that her work, *The Peppered Moth* is “a novel about my mother” (2000, 390). Lessing chooses to fictionalise the lives of her parents in the first part of *Alfred and Emily* (2008). Modjeska, in her own words, creates “a mixture of fact, fiction, biography and novel” (1990, 317). Her construction of fictional diaries and letters gives the reader a sense of Poppy’s thoughts, such as the entry on November 1965: “Living with growing girls is no joke. Their hands are so big. I remember when they were soft and tiny and slipped into mine. Even May is too big to come into bed with me any more” (1990,107). The diary is a construct of the writer, as is the whole text of *Poppy*, nevertheless this strategy creates an impression of the mother’s feelings. I argue that depicting a parent fairly is not necessarily negated by the use of fiction and Lessing, Drabble and Modjeska all disclose this fact. What is significant is the writer’s rationale for using fiction that, in many cases, is a desire to interrogate the essence of a life (Long 1999, 121).

Women writers are “soaked in family lore and dreams,” contends Lyndall Gordon (“Writing Family Memoir” 2014). This suggests that they may access insights from subconscious depths. Linda Wagner-Martin quotes writer Beryl Markham for whom women’s stories open “the corridors to the heart” (1994, 169). Modjeska thought that the imaginary diaries in *Poppy* were “one of the most truthful parts of the book” (2002, 89). She was influenced by the Australian writer and academic Dorothy Green’s belief in the morality of “putting thinking and feeling together, the heart and the soul...”(Rivers interview, 1997). This suggests that the fictional components of *Poppy* rather than diminishing the integrity of the work, demonstrate the writer’s determination to construct a faithful portrait of the mother. This approach offers respect, dignity and connectedness to the subject, particularly since the imaginary and novelistic nature of the writing is disclosed by the writer, and follows the dictums of relational ethics (Ellis 1999, 4).

Jo Malin views *Poppy* as a conversation between mother and daughter, not a daughter telling the mother’s story (2000, 6). *Poppy* negotiates, reflects and explicates the

selfhood of the narrator, the mother *and* their relationship. Relational ethics asks that a writer “act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others and to initiate and maintain conventions” (Ellis 1999, 4). Modjeska’s strategies make this process visible to the reader. A question remains; does the openness make revelations of confidential family material in *Poppy*, or in any work, acceptable?

“A family without secrets is rare indeed,” writes Annette Kuhn and those secrets “...haunt our memory-stories, giving them pattern and shape” (2002, 2). The implication is that family stories are less accomplished without them and Margaret McNay reasons that family secrets may be part of a larger social history (2009, 1185). The disclosures in *Poppy* of the mother’s nervous breakdown and affair, although specific to the narrator’s family, are not uncommon in the lives of women. Modjeska generalises the difficulties of marriage in *Poppy*’s diary entry, “How many of our husbands have kept their vows in spirit as well as in name?” and “How many of us come to that.” Lalage, the narrator, answers, “Most of us have daughters who will be marrying soon. Which men are we going to trust with them? Will they believe their vows?” (1990, 119). Similarly, the story of the mother’s mental illness achieves a wider significance by the use of relevant medical information such as, “I presume her state would have been considered depressive. The standard treatment for depressive states described in British and American textbooks ... a combination of electroconvulsive therapy, ataractic drugs and psychotherapy where possible” (1990, 80-81). Modjeska writes “Lily thought it was better for her, having a breakdown in the seventies, because by then psychiatric disorders were regarded as illness rather than lunacy” (1990, 79)

Kuhn suggests that revelation, “allows the deeper meanings of the family drama’s mythic aspects to be reflected upon, confronted and understood at all levels” (1995, 7). Marilyn Metta’s suggested reflection on who may be hurt is a reminder that any possible gain from disclosure should be a secondary concern if the benefit Kuhn refers to cannot be assured (1995, 59). Metta does view the “breaking of silences” as integral to telling the life of a woman (2011, 5). Revelations may be of a cathartic value to families and society but each decision to disclose has different ramifications. The family secrets revealed in *Kate Annie* modify the reputations of my grandparents, even though neither of them are alive to be affected by this. If I had written twenty years ago the anger or embarrassment that would be caused to my mother by these discoveries might have made me less keen to reveal all.

Jeremy Popkin reasons that hiding information may have a protective function and that those involved might prefer a secret to remain that way. This raises the issue of who has the right to tell a story especially since anecdotes containing secrets are often related without any thought of future publication (2010, 178-180). In many cases the secrets are narrated by a participant—and telling our past can be “a key moment in the making of our selves” (1995 Kuhn, 2). Claudia Mills separates secrets into “good secrets” which are fun and “bad secrets” that hurt. This is useful but it is not always easy to tell which is which, especially if a writer feels that telling a “bad secret” may achieve a good outcome (2004, 107). Auto-ethnographer Christopher Poulos argues that disclosure is ethical if telling the story leads to healing. He writes, “The power of story trumps the power of the secret” (2008, 53). This is a bold statement and, in general terms, I agree with Poulos however discerning the value of revelation may only be possible retrospectively and by then it is too late to avert any harm.

The family secrets revealed in *Kate Annie* were previously unknown to any of my family, including me, yet I rarely hesitated in believing that it was responsible to include them. I was catapulted, by default, into becoming the family historian through my relationship with Kate and an abiding need to discover why so much of her life was hidden. At the start of my research Kate’s secret appeared to be the birth in 1919 of an illegitimate daughter and rumours of other illegitimate children. The bare facts of the birth of one child were known since the child existed and was brought up in the family home. The identity of the child’s father was hidden from everyone, and it was he who turned out to be a bigger secret. Throughout her life Kate had steadfastly refused to name him. Research revealed a man who suffered from an incapacitating mental illness and was, in personality and life choices, quite unlike the myths of him that had evolved. Illegitimacy and mental illness were secrets kept by many families in the early twentieth century when social mores deemed them shameful. Hiding these disgraces protected a family whereas now such matters carry little, if any, dishonour. My grandmother Kate lived with the shame, as did her child. Her family and community made their judgments very apparent and mother and daughter became victims. Family life writers may choose, as I did, to tell the hidden stories by contextualising and analysing which can, in many cases, reveal a very different story. I present Kate as unconventional rather than a family disgrace. My grandfather, had he lived today, would receive appropriate treatment for his mental illness rather than incarceration. By making visible the iniquities of family shame life writing can resurrect family members from discredited positions to those of

understanding and commiseration. *Kate Annie* is intended to provide a nuanced perspective on the life of two people who were misjudged—not by sanitising their lives but by illustrating the prevailing social and historical circumstances.

Inherent in detailing and fashioning a life is the writer's evaluation. Responsibilities to the subject and material, especially if fictional writing is included, suggest that Metta's reflection "What are my real motivations?" is useful (2011, 59). Bringing Kate's unknown life into view required careful assessment and selection. Every new piece of information, each discovered anecdote or socio-historical fact had to be assessed within the framework of facts already available. Collating these fragments necessitated leaps of faith, conjecture and imagination since there was no way now, more than a hundred years after Kate's birth, to verify information. In a sense I was involved in an act of detection, conjecture, collation and imagination. The narrative could not delineate what actually took place. I can only speculate on what might have happened. My approach was to articulate the process and decisions *within* the narrative. I disclose what is fictional and what is not and attempt to moderate any bias by including the perceptions of members of Kate's family whose opinions of her in life and in death differ from mine.

A writer's responsibility to a subject is not necessarily negated in the case of a deceased subject, such as Kate. Living descendants might argue for the right to be considered. Family or friends may wish to protect the reputation of a subject, even one with no public profile. Couser argues that a deceased person is a "vulnerable subject" and argues that death "entails maximum vulnerability to posthumous misrepresentation because it precludes self-defense" (2004, 16). In law the dead do not have a right to privacy, rendering only the moral responsibilities operative (Ellis, 12). My grandmother, the subject of *Kate Annie*, died many years ago but narrating her story involves the life of her daughter and other family members including myself. Kate's daughter, my mother, is the most vulnerable subject and she is still alive. Significant parts of the narrative material originate from her, yet she professes no interest in the project. Can her indifference be construed as a tacit permission? Couser suggests that, in such a case, since a writer and vulnerable subject are analogous to patient and doctor, the principles of bio-ethics could be followed (2004, 17). He writes, "respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice—seem pertinent to life writing," attributes, which are similar to the relational ethics of respect, dignity, connectedness and of doing no harm (2004,17).

Couser's rules of vulnerability, if applied to my mother's position, indicate that she does have autonomy. At any time during the writing of *Kate Annie* she could request changes or omissions. I have tried to ascertain her wishes but she refuses to discuss the work. I have no intention of harming her, or Kate, in the writing. By delineating the contextual influences and difficulties of their lives I think I depict them both in a balanced way. A writer cannot know the wishes of subjects unless they are willing to voice them but we can act from "our hearts and minds" and continually reflect on our intentions (Ellis 1999, 4). Originally I wrote to create a memorial of sorts to my grandmother. An overarching motivation was to understand Kate's life and my relationship to her. Untangling family connections may be the way we gain a clearer sense of our own identity. Working with such intimate material instinctively led me to update my family on any changes, inclusions and discoveries as the research developed. Sometimes my sisters participated by sharing anecdotes and searching archives. Before they read *Kate Annie* I want to explain the genesis of the work, especially the imaginary writing, in the hope of forestalling upsets. I have chosen to retain the names, places and events of Kate's life, even in the fictional episodes, since I am writing to commemorate the life she lived. If, in the future, my family request that names and identifying features are changed I will do so. I intend to maintain the integrity of the material *and* keep faith with those included in the story.

This chapter proposes that it is appropriate to determine the ethical position of contemporary women's writing by relational ethics rather than those recommended by Eakin. Relational theorists concur on significant points; writers should avoid making assumptions of a subject's life and always challenge pre-existing notions. A life is better written through engagement with that life, with empathy and a delineation of the subject's struggles (Metta, 57-60). Writing a mother/daughter relationship may offer compassion that a daughter was unable to extend to the living mother (Juhasz 2000, 178). The various generic forms of women's writing offer greater understanding of the previously unacknowledged experiences of women. In balancing the personal with the socio-historical and in disclosing narrative strategies such life writings embody relational ethics.

My exploration of the generic strategies used by Lessing, Drabble and Modjeska indicated the ethical strengths and weakness of those techniques. Ultimately I chose to follow the principles of relational ethics in developing *Kate Annie*. It was particularly clear that the processes of developing family narratives has similarities to ethnographic

writing and could comfortably utilise the same guidelines. I believe strongly that disclosure, in whatever form, is essential to responsible family writing and, above all, the efficacy of the self-directed questions; “Why am I doing this?” and “What are my real motivations?” (Metta 2011, 59).

## Chapter 6

### On Looking Back

The intention of this practice led research was to discover ways in which archival evidence, fictional strategies, and memory could combine to narrate little known family history from an invested position. The thesis consists of a creative component, *Kate Annie*, which explores the life of my grandmother and recounts the search to recover her story. This work makes a contribution to knowledge in the field of writing by delineating an unknown life and thereby highlighting the social circumstances for women in the past. The work demonstrates a way of interweaving historical investigation, memories, social context and fiction to explore a life. This life writing is informed by the research undertaken concurrently and recorded in *Circles of Meaning: Reading/Writing a Mother's Life*, an exegesis examining a range of narrative strategies and ethical frameworks for developing family history.

Having chosen to focus on the life trajectory of a single individual it was essential for me to understand the genre of biography. I determined that the necessary research direction was a selective overview of biographical writing from the eighteenth century onwards with an emphasis on coming to an understanding of the social contextual implications of gender. This overview clarified my perception that most writers were men who wrote of notable public figures, usually also men. The works purported to be objective truths and were read as definitive records of a life. I noted the beginnings of narrative conventions similar to those now thought to represent contemporary women's writing, such as the use of a conversational style in the narrative voice. This review of biographical history formed the first chapter of the exegesis and concluded by introducing the developments occurring from the 1970s onwards occasioned by social changes and increasing numbers of biographical narratives written by women.

My immersion in the theory and practice of contemporary women's writing involved examining the work of three writers who use disparate generic strategies to construct family portraits and who particularly focus on the mother. Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* is an example of fictional *and* biographical narratives in consecutive sections of one work. As a narrator/daughter Lessing includes elements of her own story within the biography; a component I saw as an essential inclusion for my own work. *Alfred and Emily* contains authorial judgments, asides and commentary on the chosen strategies giving the work a conversational style and immediacy. *The Peppered Moth* by Margaret



Drabble demonstrates the fictionalising of an actual family as the basis for the narrative. The work was informative and assisted in my decision to move away from a wholly fictional account of Kate's life since much of the authentic material I had uncovered was too fascinating to discount. Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* shows how an empathic and responsible portrait of a mother could be achieved by constructing a dual narration of both mother and daughter. Working in this way Modjeska creates a more intimate narrative connection with the mother than either Lessing or Drabble achieve. I concluded that there were diverse ways to construct a family stories and that writers choose strategies according to their rationale for writing. My understanding of contemporary women's writing was enriched by many women's stories other than those selected and discussed.

Ongoing research gave me an awareness of the complex responsibilities of writing about family. Although the works of P J Eakin, G Thomas Couser and William Zinsser are insightful—in this context I required an understanding of how contemporary women theorists view the ethics of family writing. Marilyn Metta, Carolyn Ellis, Claudia Mills, Kim Chernin and Nancy Miller informed my work in this regard. Their work gave me an introduction to relational ethics, which consider relational responsibilities and a writer's intention. Family life writers, such as myself, are involved in relationships and negotiations akin to those between an ethnographer and subject. Theorists suggest that a writer act from the heart and mind, forming a connection with the subject thus creating empathy (Ellis 1999, 4). I related more strongly to this intuitive approach rather than those suggested by Eakin. My decision was to follow relational guidelines in writing *Kate Annie*, to negotiate with those written about, to protect their privacy and to disclose the fictional elements and processes of the work within the text. I suggest that in this way a writer is acting responsibly to the subjects, and is ensuring the integrity of the work.

*Kate Annie* was originally a fictional account with a single narrative voice. Subsequently I drafted chapters as a memoir without the inclusion of my search to find Kate, the involvement of my sisters, or the peripheral search for our unknown grandfather. It was soon clear that strategies of conventional biography or memoir did not suit my rationale. As I have argued previously, the intention of the writer prompts appropriate generic strategies. I deliberated deeply on my original impetus for writing using Marilyn Metta's questions, "Why am I doing this?" and "What are my real motivations?" (2011, 59). My answers were that I wished to understand Kate's life,

especially the unknown parts and that I wanted to fashion a tribute to Kate and restore her reputation.

*Kate Annie* is the story of the search for my grandmother, a mother figure—using memories, anecdotes from my immediate and extended family as well as contextual social history to explicate her life choices. I created scenes for the little-known parts of Kate’s life using imagination supported by the framework of my knowledge of Kate and her times. The dialogue of my grandmother is constructed from a pastiche of memory, primary source speech patterns, the grammar and spelling of the era, and anecdotes and imagination. I re-envisioned Kate from a contemporary perspective. I saw her, and other women in her position, not as victims but as women managing within the social mores of their times. I was well aware that many of them strove valiantly, often to their detriment, to overcome the constraints.

As a teenager I was excited by what I perceived to be Kate’s glamorous life, while at the same time knowing she was judged to have shamed her family. Her daughter, my mother, did not think well of Kate and this was a stumbling block for me as a child who was mothered by them both. At times my writing and research resembled detective work—would I find a different Kate from the one my mother had told me about? Would I be able to craft the Kate I could see in my mind’s eye? How could I do this? Ultimately the work encompasses social history, family history and the investigative struggles of Kate’s granddaughters. My hope is that it has a resonance and interest for any who read it. Women like Kate deserve to move out of the shadows of the past, and to have their stories re-told. The search to discover my grandmother and to find a way to write about her has been an enriching adventure through labyrinthine circles. I emerged able to tell the story from my heart and mind (Ellis 1999, 4).

Lewis Carroll’s memorable words from *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* (1982) are woven through *Kate Annie*, which is the beginning of this thesis, so it is appropriate that they have a place at the conclusion: “‘Begin at the beginning,’ the King said, very gravely, ‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop’” (*The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* 1982, 109). The essence of this work began when, as a child, I spent most of my days with Kate, subconsciously collecting memories of her. This research has come to an end but Kate’s story continues—there will always be more to find. This has been a journey of learning, analysing—and of collating new understandings. I will go on, as the King suggests, with a new focus and fresh insights.



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