

Roberta Garrett

Novels and Children: 'Mum's lit' and the public mother/author

Introduction

The women of letters is a remarkable zoological species: she brings forth, pell-mell, novels and children. We are introduced, for example, to Jacqueline Lenoir (two daughters, one novel); Marina Grey (one son, one novel); Nicole Dutriel (two sons, four novels), etc. (Barthes 1957, p50).

In one of Roland Barthes' (1957) essays on myth, the process by which ideology becomes naturalised and thus takes on the status of 'the falsely obvious', he discusses an article which appeared in the French fashion magazine *Elle* on women writers (Barthes 2000, p.11). In *Novels and Children*, Barthes notes that in the world of women's lifestyle publishing, the female writer's output is always set against her reproductive capacity. Barthes draws the conclusion that the older myth, that women cannot write, which the article nominally seeks to displace through its surface intention to pay tribute to an up and coming crop of female writers is replaced by another: women are permitted to write, even to become celebrated authors, but only if they have also fulfilled their biological destiny to create children. In such a manner, the underlying ideological belief in the primacy of biological destiny is subtly reasserted at the moment when the cultural presence of successful women writers might challenge this.

Over half a century later, the culture surrounding the 'mum's lit' comic-novel cycle works through a similar mythologizing process, in which the association between the women writer, literary creation and biological reproduction is continually reinforced. Unlike the single-girl orientated, 'chick-lit' form from which they evolved, mum's lit novels are strongly marketed as a natural extension of the writer's identity as a public author and mother, rather than distinct works of artistic endeavour. While much feminist analysis has focused on mainstream chick-lit (Whelehan 2000; McRobbie 2004; Ferriss and Young 2005; Negra 2008; Genz and Brabon 2009; Harzweski 2011), far less attention has been given to the burgeoning mum's lit form.¹ This article extends the analysis of representations of the maternal in female-orientated popular culture through a contextualised critique of the work of several high profile British mum's lit writers. It draws on psychoanalytic

Roberta Garrett, *Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author*

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

perspectives on motherhood and maternal ambivalence and recent feminist-sociological critiques of contemporary Anglo-American parenting culture. Using these perspectives, the article will examine the novels through a cultural materialist framework, looking specifically at their relationship to the extra-textual identity of the authors and dominant discourses of motherhood and neo-liberal values in contemporary Britain. It articulates two interrelated critiques of mum's lit novels. Firstly, although they are promoted as having special insight into and sympathy for their assumed readership of time-starved, overburdened modern mothers (glaringly suggested through the use of titles such as Allison Pearson's (2002) *I Don't Know How She Does It*), they actually perpetuate the cultural of maternal criticism and competitiveness that they purport to mock and undermine. Secondly, the mum's lit view of motherhood is strongly linked to the author's identity as a 'public' mother and authority on family life which works to covertly reinforce a wider neo-liberal agenda on the relationship between individual families, society and the state.

Neo-liberalism, Neo-conservatism and 'New Momism'

As many feminist critics have observed, despite the continuing overall rise in female employment and decline in family size in the US and UK since the 1980s, the hegemonic idea of the white, middle-class wife and mother, who lives through and for her family, gradually became the prevailing norm in Anglo-American public discourses on good mothering from the early 1990s onwards. The growing cultural and media trend towards the re-endorsement of motherhood and traditional female roles, against a perceived challenge from feminism, female educational achievement and women's increased employment, was initially identified by critics such as Sharon Hays in the late 1990s. Hays (1996) linked this to a pervasive socio-political culture of what she described as 'intensive mothering'. Her work was followed by a number of (initially US and later, UK) feminist critics, highlighting the same phenomena throughout the noughties. They drew attention to the intensified socio-cultural concern with child welfare, resulting in what Sharon Hays (1996) refers to as the cult of the 'sacred' child. This led to a vast increase in childcare advice and media interest in parental, and particularly maternal, behaviour. The cultural preoccupation with child welfare issues was manifested through a number of channels: government guidelines, childcare manuals, specialist parenting magazines, reality television and a prurient media interest in the habits and behaviour of famous mothers. It also produced a boom in parent-orientated consumer products (linked either to child

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

safety or cognitive development) and a growing private sector of extracurricular academic, sports and creative activities for children (Hays 1996; Wolf 2001; Douglas and Michaels 2005; Warner 2006; Asher 2012). Clearly mothers have long been subject to specific social pressures and demands, but this particular form of maternal ideology, what Hays (1996) described as ‘intensive mothering’ and Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2005) refer to as ‘new momism’, placed much greater emphasis on the emotional and educational input required of mothers and the risk of damage or failure attached to incorrect or inadequate levels of maternal care than prior twentieth-century models. The rise of the intensive parenting/new momist maternal ideology is closely aligned to an individualist, neo-liberal political and economic culture in which parents are discouraged from expecting any state or community support in raising their children but are constantly exhorted to invest considerable time and money in maximising the educational and social capital of their offspring. It reflects the pernicious combination of neo-liberal economic policies and neo-conservative attitudes towards the family discussed by critics such as David Harvey in his analysis of the social effects of Western neo-liberalism, particularly in the US and UK (Harvey 2005, p 81-84).

In more specific terms, intensive mothering/new momism is influenced by a post-feminist cultural celebration of traditional feminine skills and virtues – such as the ‘retro’ fashion for baking and traditional feminine crafts (Brunsdon, 2005), and the less often discussed phenomenon of the long term trend towards ‘therapeutically’ influenced practices in Anglo-American childcare wisdom since the 1980s.² These overwhelmingly reject an older (particularly English middle and upper class) belief in strict child management routines and the desirability of fostering dependence, placing great emphasis on the emotional fragility of the child. Such approaches are particularly concerned with bonding and levels of maternal empathy and endorse highly intensive, attachment-based childcare practices. The popularity of these approaches reflected the growing influence of certain post-war child psychologists, particularly John Bowlby (1969), who highlighted the importance of constant maternal availability in the early years. The popularised version of these theories, through bestselling childcare experts such as Penelope Leach (1977) and Miriam Stoppard (1995) in the UK and William Sears in the US, also perpetuated the view that maternal absence and institutional childcare can cause permanent psychological and emotional scars. This childcare philosophy inevitably fuelled social anxieties concerning the rise in maternal employment from the 1970s onwards, while giving little

Roberta Garrett, *Novels and Children: ‘Mum’s’ lit and the public mother/author*

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

priority to either paternal influence, extended family relations or the importance of community or state support (Leach 1977; Stoppard 1995; Sears 2001).

The context for the development of the rhetoric and practices associated with this maternal identity is therefore the confluence of these broader cultural trends: neo-liberalism, social conservatism and the prevalence of 'intensive' (mother-orientated) parenting methods.³ Given that it is both expensive and highly labour intensive, this philosophy is primarily compatible with mothers in affluent, two-parent households, in which fathers are the chief income providers. As a consequence of this, inherent bias towards particular kinds of mothers came to dominate the nominally open and increasingly vociferous community of 'mommy bloggers. For example, in the US there is the new momist voice of the affluent, educated middle-class wife and mother - a woman whose primary identity lies in motherhood and its rapidly expanding range of duties. In the UK this is also the demographic that is most strongly associated with on-line mothers forums, such as the hugely popular mumsnet, but this group is also over-represented by authors and characters in the more selective world of mum's lit novels. Unlike poorer mothers, who have been consistently demonised in the British popular press, functioning metonymically as a symbol of the underclass, this relatively privileged group of mothers are rarely at the sharp end of state and media vilification. As feminist sociologists such as Imogen Tyler (2008) and Tracey Jensen (2012) have demonstrated, the British media has encouraged and perpetuated the stereotype of the young, single, benefit-dependent mother, derogatorily referred to as a 'chav' or 'pramface' mother (Tyler 2008; Jensen 2012). The affluent middle-class mother exists at the opposite end of the social spectrum, yet her proximity to the hegemonic ideal of maternal identity does not confer the sense of self-assurance and confidence associated with the favoured. Like confessional maternal memoirs,⁴ mum's lit novels are forms which are permeated with anxiety, self-doubt and disempowerment. As the roots of mum's lit lie in popular chick-lit, a form notorious for its exploration of feminine self-abasement, this is not too surprising, but as I will explore in the next section, the evolution from chick-lit to mum's lit has been accompanied by a turn from self-criticism and a celebration of the heroine's loveable incompetency to overt 'bitchiness' and a judgement attitude towards other women.

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

Chick-Lit into Mum's lit

It is difficult to understand Mum's-lit without some background knowledge of the form from which it emerged: the popular, youth-orientated romance cycle in the 1990s that was rapidly and rather patronisingly marketed as 'chick-lit'. Chick-lit leapt into the gap in the romance market created by the waning popularity of traditional female-orientated romance publishing. Despite repeated attempts to rebrand the form since the 1980s, the cheap formulaic romance established by companies such as Harlequin in the US, and Mills and Boon in the UK, with its strong brand identification and signature size, length, plot lines and clichéd covers (featuring the clinched couple) were increasingly associated with charity shops, hospital library trolleys and older, poorly educated women. In contrast, the new chick-lit romance was packaged with images of lone or groups of women rather than couples - often smoking, drinking cocktails or shopping. It also shunned sentimentality and a naïve belief in true love in favour of a light, comic tone and a semi-realist depiction of the lifestyle of the urban, professional single girl. The most famous example, Helen Fielding's (1996) comic novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, evolved from her column of the same name which ran in *The Independent* newspaper in the early 1990s. Although *Bridget Jones's Diary* contained many tongue-in-cheek references to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (such as the presence of a standoffish Mr Darcy), Fielding (1996) also claimed to have developed her character after eavesdropping on the conversations of young working women in her own busy office. The Bridget Jones/chick lit brand was associated with an emerging demographic of young, well-educated, professional single women. Such women were now able to support themselves financially (in many cases to the extent that they were able to buy property in expensive urban areas) but still felt overwhelming pressure to conform to traditional gender norms regarding the emphasis placed on the body and physical attractiveness and the importance of accomplishing marriage and motherhood by their mid-thirties.

As many feminist critics have commented (McRobbie 2004; Whelehan 2000; Garrett 2007) in this respect, the Bridget Jones phenomenon was imbued with what became identified as a 'post-feminist' sensibility. Young women were placed at the centre of neo-liberal conceptions of social agency and achievement in government discourse (particularly New Labour rhetoric in the UK) and in popular culture through female-orientated novels such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* or Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2000) or US programmes such as *Friends* (1994-2001), *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). The combined influence of the much publicised phenomena

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

of rising female educational achievement, delayed childbearing, and increased employment opportunities for certain kinds of young women in the 1990s and noughties was thus reflected and reinforced in literature, film, drama and advertising through the construction of the post-feminist stereotype of a particular female type: a young woman who was presented as a contradictory mass of insecurity and aspiration, awkward and self-deprecating but still considerably more ambitious and career-minded than any heroine of the previous generation of popular romance. However, the discourse of female aspiration was also highly exclusive in that its preferred subject was consistently presented as young, white, middle-class and most definitely, childless.

Despite their narrative concerned with family, rather than single life, the socially conservative, individualist tendencies of mainstream, single-girl focused popular fiction are greatly intensified in mum's lit. Mum's lit heroines tend to be a few years older than their chick-lit counterparts (generally mid-thirties to early forties) and have already succeeded in avoiding the dual dangers to social status articulated in more general forms of popular chick-lit: early motherhood or the even more humiliating possibility of long-term spinsterhood and childlessness. Early motherhood must be avoided as this is associated with low aspiration, poverty and potential ejection from the middle-class. On the other hand, long-term spinsterhood and childlessness, though potentially favourable in career terms, is still strongly associated within both chick-lit and mum's lit with failure to conform to gender requirements. Indeed, in both cycles, fear of the crushing social stigma attached to spinsterhood and childlessness is a key motivating force in the desire for children. A small window of singleness maybe permitted in the immediate post-university years in chick-lit, but chick-lit and mum's lit heroines cower at the possibility that this could be a long term lifestyle choice and display an acute sensitivity to the humiliation still heaped on older single and/or childless women by the popular media. For example, when Amy Crane, heroine of Polly Williams' mum's lit novel, *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy*, finds herself unexpectedly pregnant in her early thirties, her strongest response to impending motherhood is entirely dictated by media discourses, particularly her relief at escaping the public shaming of childless older women. The following passage is typical of the narrative voice in mum's lit in that it satirises popular media discourses but shows little sympathy for women who are the target of such misogynistic and patronising attitudes:

No more searching for 'the one'. No more wondering when to window a baby into my career. And, I suppose, the eradication of the possibility that I wouldn't find a suitable father for my child until it was too late and my eggs had shrivelled like peas and I had turned into

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

one of those 'I forgot to have children' women featured in the Daily Mail' (Williams 2006, p.35).

The public mother as author

To explore mum's lit fiction in more detail, I will be drawing on some key novels and writers associated with the chick-lit cycle marketed as mum's lit: specifically, the work of India Knight (*My Life on a Plate*, 2000) Allison Pearson (*I Don't Know How She Does It*, 2002), Polly Williams (*The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy*, 2006), Lucy Cavendish (*Samantha Smythe's Modern Family Journal*, 2007) and Fiona Gibson (*Mummy Said the F-word*, 2008). My analysis focuses on these particular novels for three reasons. Firstly, they demonstrate the core mum's lit themes of the challenges produced by a mode of motherhood which is self-consciously defined as 'modern' and the hostility and competitiveness of other mothers, but they also include a range of more variable issues found within the cycle as a whole, such as problematic husbands and fathers and the difficulty of 'juggling' work and childcare. Secondly, they adopt a typically hard-nosed, ironic and satirical tone in their treatment of maternal behaviour and culture. Thirdly, and more importantly, this particular group of authors had already established a media niche writing as and for middle-class mothers, producing articles on family-related issues in conservative British broadsheet newspapers.

The growth in female biographical/lifestyle journalism in mainstream culture was facilitated by the expansion of 'lifestyle' sections in the broadsheet press, dealing with areas of cultural experience which, in previous eras, would have been confined to the narrower world of women's magazines. This paved the way for female journalists, such as mum's lit writers, Allison Pearson, India Knight and Lucy Cavendish, to establish themselves as high profile authorities on family issues. A number of these journalists developed columns based on their own domestic lives and became commentators on issues pertaining to children and family life. From a feminist perspective, the higher profile given to such issues in public discourse is a double-edged phenomenon. The expanding public discourse on childcare and family life gives greater cultural weight to areas of knowledge and experience long associated with women, but the predominance of female writers articulating these experiences in print and on-line mediums also reinforces the neo-conservative view that family and domestic issues are the only areas of culture in which women should be regarded as credible authorities. For example, India Knight, the author of the first novel which was widely identified as mum's lit, has been a regular columnist for lifestyle-heavy Sunday Times

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

newspaper from the mid-1990s onwards. Prior to producing the novel, she had frequently written about her domestic life, later going on to write a weekly column about the problems of having a disabled child after her third was born with a rare genetic disorder in 2004. Allison Pearson, author of work/family comic novel⁵ *I Don't Know How She Does it*, was also a well-known columnist with a particular interest in education and family life. Pearson has also written for a number of largely right-wing newspapers since the early 1990s, including the notoriously anti-feminist Daily Mail. She is particularly associated with the conservative broadsheet The Daily Telegraph, in which she initially introduced her mum's lit heroine, Kate Reddy, some years before publishing her bestselling novel featuring Reddy. Lucy Cavendish reflects this tendency particularly strongly as Cavendish had also been writing a column in the Sunday Telegraph supplement magazine Stella, entitled *Lucy Cavendish: Country Mother of Four*, prior to publishing her first novel. This featured protagonist Samantha Smythe, a mother of three, then four (after the birth Cavendish's fourth child) and living in the same part of the South West as Cavendish.

Polly Williams, author of *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy* and Fiona Gibson, author of *Wonderboy*, *Babyface*, *Mummy Said the F-word* and *Mum on the Run*, were more fully associated with women's lifestyle, fashion and Sunday supplement magazines. Gibson had written for fashion glossies such as Marie Claire, Elle and Red, Williams for Red and The Mail on Sunday's lifestyle supplement, In Style. Gibson has also written a column based on her own family life in The Scottish Herald since 2008. Mum's lit novels are thus consciously promoted and marketed in relation to the writer-as-mother's family-focused lifestyle journalism - even to the point that the heroines generally have the same number of children as the writer mother, at the same stage of development, and of the same sex. As Daily Telegraph lifestyle columnist Lucy Cavendish states in a suffix to her novel entitled *Becoming a Novelist*,

The column generated a lot of response, I always knew there were a lot of women out there juggling their lives, I just didn't know that so many of them felt the same way I did. Something in the columns obviously resonated so when an agent approached me about writing a book, I could see it was a very exciting prospect. At first I thought I would do a guide – or a sort of polemic really – on how to bring up children. I started off writing five thousand words a day on what happens in my family life every day but as the book went on and I wrote further, it became obvious to me that I wasn't writing a guide at all but a novel with an 'I' character at the centre (Cavendish 2007).

This deliberate conflation of 'novels and children' and the mother-protagonist of mum's lit with the public mother/lifestyle columnist is another key distinction from single-girl focused chick-lit.

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

Famous chick-lit authors, such as Helen Fielding and Sophie Kinsella, were often associated with their characters by the wider media but they themselves did not cultivate this association or discuss their private lives at any length in public forums. Indeed, Fielding quickly got tired of having to point out the difference between herself and her key character to interviewers who were eager to blend the two. Fielding (1996) and Kinsella's (2000) heroines – Bridget Jones and Rebecca Bloomwood - are likeable but deliberately ridiculous in a manner which allows for a healthy degree of readerly distanciation. One of the great innovations that chick-lit brought to the previously naive and mawkish form of popular romance was humour and irony. While this was chiefly at the expense of the key character, the novels also satirised gender norms and expectations concerning appearance, female-targeted consumerism and the continuing social pressure placed on women to seek out and maintain relationships. The form therefore relies, at least on some level, on a double-discourse in which the reader can perceive and chuckle at the void between the unreliable narrator/heroine's deluded view of her life and the reader's own, for example, in Rebecca Bloomwood's ability to ignore her ever mounting debts (in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*) or Bridget Jones' belief that achievement in all areas of life will result from a successful diet plan. Despite their peccadilloes, chick-lit heroines are sympathetic figures as they cheerfully battle on in a male-dominated, male-biased world in which young women are frequently humiliated and undermined. Mum's lit novels also work through the implementation of irony and social satire in their treatment of motherhood and maternal behaviour, but the focus of critique has shifted from one in which the incompetent heroine is portrayed as struggling against the weight of sexist social discourses, to one in which the superior heroine-mother is the victim of a narrow and arduous mothering culture that appears to be generated largely by mothers themselves.

Mum's lit novels tend to be highly protagonist focused and mono-vocal. They are either written in the first person or contain the presence of a strong narrative voice which adds credence to the thoughts and feelings of the central protagonist. Given the paper-thin distance between the author and heroine and author's established public role as a trustworthy authority on family life, it is not surprising that they rarely encourage the assumed reader (who is addressed as a mother of similar age and class status) to question, critique or laugh at, the protagonist-mother. It is other mothers, rather than the narrator-heroine, who are the target of satire and ridicule in mum's lit. The overt association between the public mother/lifestyle columnist and mum's lit novels therefore

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

works to validate a particular view of motherhood which emanates from a very small pool of white, English middle-class writers. As I have argued, the cultural endorsement of intensive mothering emerged through a number of different social, media and political discourses which pre-exist the development of the mum's lit novel. Nevertheless, the emphasis on maternal performance that arises from the intensive mothering model is clearly the driving force in the creation of mum's lit and its depiction of mothering as a competitive arena in which feminine moral and social worth is established.

Mum's Lit and Other Mothers

In its exploration and critique of the social pretensions, hypocrisy and one-upmanship of the English middle-class, the mum's lit novel draws on a history of the comedy of manners that goes all the way back to the work of Jane Austen. Unfortunately, in this case, its targets are overwhelmingly female. The truth value of the novels is established by the classic realist blending of author and key character and enhanced through a hierarchy of discourses. This works to position the heroine as the standard of 'common sense good mothering' and perceived normality against which other mothers are judged and found wanting. Maternal competitiveness and the threat posed by other women is often the predominant theme in mum's lit, illustrating the way in which the cycle shifts female-orientated popular fiction away from the slapstick silliness and watered-down feminism of chick-lit into a more overtly satirical but also aggressively individualistic and socially conservative direction.

While popular chick-lit gives considerable weight to the value and importance of female friendship, the predominantly female world of mum's lit portrays other women as almost universally hostile. The narrator-mother presents herself as the victim of the spite and competitiveness which simmers beneath the surface of the all-female world of the ante-natal class, toddler group or school gate. In response to this perceived threat, the all-knowing first person or omniscient narration allows the heroine to assert power over other mothers by exposing their flaws and weaknesses and thus tearing apart their fraudulent claims to the prized status of socially-validated 'good mother'. The narrator/protagonist frames the catty and competitive remarks of other mothers with pithy narrative asides, sharing privileged knowledge with the assumed mother-reader that puts the competitive 'perfect' mother firmly in her place. India Knight's (1997) *My Life on A Plate* sets the template for the now familiar mum's lit scene in which the school gate becomes the prime location for bitchiness,

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

bullying and conformity. In the opening pages of the novel the flustered heroine Clara arrives late for the school run, noting that:

Everybody else seems to be perfectly groomed. Again. There's Carmel – too much foundation, but at least she is matt. There's Jane, looking demure in her snappy little suit and sexy demure heels. She's lost so much weight she's beginning to look like a lesbian from the 1930s. (p.7).

Following these snide and, in the latter case, homophobic observations, Clara herself becomes the target of playground bullying by the priggish Naomi. Naomi is a boorish figure whose controlling parenting style serves largely to highlight what is presented as the more laid-back character and mothering style of the protagonist:

This morning, with the hideous inevitability of Greek tragedy, is the morning Naomi chooses to corner me. She suggests we go for a coffee. Naomi has dropped off her three children, - all of them immaculate in matching duffel coats, shiny shoes, beautifully ironed chinos [...] Naomi is examining her French manicure by the gate, waiting for me. Knowing her - and I do, too well -she is secretly doing her pelvic floor exercises. Hup-two-three-four, and hooold. She has had a terror of post-partum in continence ever since a woman at her NCT class explained that sometimes she leaked when she laughed or sneezed. As a result, Naomi herself always looks slightly uncomfortable when she laughs, because she is so busy fretting about accidents'. "Clara! Darling, Don't you look fun! Pyjamas again eh? What's that on your leg?" "Jam. We were late." (p.9).

In what was rapidly to become a key motif within the cycle, the heroine-mum is portrayed as accepting the physical messiness and chaos created by motherhood with verve and good-humour, (signified here by the jam stained pyjamas) while the rival mother, Naomi, cannot. The uptight, 'perfect' mother, is depicted as vain and ridiculous in attempting to deny and resist the visceral nature of childbirth and proximity to young children through her over investment in body maintenance and the appearance of her offspring.

Mum's Lit and the Cult of the 'Slummy' Mummy

In mum's lit, the bad mother always exists in relation to her nemesis, who is described as the 'good', 'perfect' or 'Alpha' mother. Like Naomi in *My Life On A Plate*, the 'good' mother is consistently presented as neat, organised and domesticated, but woefully lacking in other qualities (such as humour and spontaneity) which the ironically termed 'bad mummy' clearly regards as a more important in establishing genuine 'good mother' credentials. Fiona Gibson's (2008) *Mummy Said the F-word* offers a particularly demeaning and sexist version of the uptight perfectionist versus lovable

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

and chaotic mother dynamic. It begins by explicitly poking fun at the cultural discourse of intensive mothering through heroine Caitlan's part-time employment at Bambino magazine - a pretentious and upmarket glossy targeted at affluent, non-working mothers. Gibson initially satirizes the patronising and hypocritical tone adopted towards mothers in such publications in the following manner:

Forget computers, gadgets and all the trappings of our modern age. The greatest gift you can give a child is the warmth and stability of a loving family. Harriet Pike, Bambino problem page, 18 February.

to which the heroine responds,

‘...Smug fuck. Caitlan Brown, newly single mother of three’. (2008, p.7)

Yet, by the end of the novel the ‘smug fuck’ Bambino agony aunt has been vindicated. Caitlan is a disorganised but good-humoured mother of three children, aged four to ten. She is abandoned by her high-earning husband for his work colleague, Daisy, a glamorous and organised mother of one well-groomed but bratty daughter. To twist the knife further, the heroine's troubled eldest son develops a germ phobia following his father's departure which results in his relocation to the fragrant Daisy's orderly and freshly smelling home. However, in typical mum's lit style, the po-faced perfectionist mother's triumph is short-lived. Daisy is punished and eventually rejected by the heroine's husband and son for displaying levels of perfectionism which dare to impinge on Jake and his father's sense of domestic entitlement. To his mother's obvious delight, little Jake castigates Daisy for being a ‘tidying maniac’. Caitlan gloats as Jake tells her that ‘she freaks out if anyone puts down a drink without a coaster’ and is suitably grateful for his return, promising to try harder to acquiesce to all his demands in future (Gibson 2008, p.281). The ‘warmth and stability’ provided by Caitlan wins out against the shallow materialism and domestic perfectionism embodied by Daisy. However, the novel contains no direct criticism of Caitlan's husband and son's old-style chauvinism regarding female domestic skills. Daisy is envied and pitied in turn by the narrator according to her rising and waning male-approval levels. Women's dependence on forms of social affirmation defined through levels of maternal self-sacrifice, appearance and domestic skills is presented as a lamentable but inevitable aspect of female existence. The stereotypical feared and hated ‘good mother’ figure is more commonly marked out as an old-style full-time wife and mother than a ‘career woman’. For example, the home-based mothers in Allison Pearson's (2002) work/family conflict drama, *I Don't Know How She Does it*, are sarcastically referred to as the ‘mother superiors’. As demonstrated in

Roberta Garrett, *Novels and Children: ‘Mum’s’ lit and the public mother/author*

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

this passage, the novel treats non-working mothers with as much mockery and contempt as Gibson treats Daisy:

I have never actually spoken to Diane Percival before, but this does not stop me going cold at the very thought of her. Diane is the mother who sends notes. Notes to invite your child to a play-date, notes to thank your child for coming to a play-date (it was nothing really). Last week, in a spectacular note of one-upmanship, Diane actually sent a note from Oliver thanking Emily for an invitation to tea [...] Deprived of office hierarchies, many of the mothers at my daughter's school have set about inventing meaningless tests whose sole purpose is that other mothers with better things to do can be seen to fail them (2003, p.221).

Kate Reddy, the narrator-heroine, displays unique human qualities, but the 'mother superiors' (such as Diane Percival – who does not appear in the narrative again) are de-individualised and appear intermittently as a chorus of female domestic superiority and spite.

Polly Williams' (2006) *The Rise and Fall of a Slummy Mummy* goes further in developing the competitive mothers theme by juxtaposing two well established media stereotypes of maternal groups: pious 'earth' mothers and shallow, spoilt 'yummy mummies'. Both are portrayed as ignorant, and competitive. The first group, encountered through National Childbirth Trust classes, are depicted as pompous and frumpy: 'Michelle, who is in her early 40s and still looks nine months pregnant, scoops what can only be described as an udder out of the neckline ' (Williams, p.56). Unlike the pristine, controlling mother so frequently demonised in mum's lit, the NCT 'earth' mothers have willingly surrendered their bodies to the visceral world of pregnancy and early infancy, but this surface denial of selfhood and individual autonomy conceals a steely core of egotism; they practice extended breastfeeding and use ecological baby products only to one-up other mothers and slavishly follow a different set of rules governing good and bad maternal behaviour. The following passage is typical of the way in which such women are depicted by Williams:

Michelle wants to be an extreme lactivist, she read about them in The Guardian (not necessarily connected, but I should point out to you – Michelle would want me to) that she uses reusable terry nappies and only buys fair trade toys from sustainable sources. This makes her a Good Parent, unlike me with all my planet-gobbling, plasticky dummies and landfill Wet Wipes that won't have decomposed in ten generations time [...] So you've stopped breastfeeding, we hear, Sue says tightly, her fine nose for petty conflict twitching (2006, p.57).

Following the barbed and clichéd presentation of ecologically aware, middle-class NCT mothers, the novel then introduces a group of appearance-conscious, wealthier younger mothers – crude literary incarnations of the ubiquitous 'yummy mummy' media stereotype. They eschew the earth mothers'

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

competitive self-sacrifice and wholesomeness in favour of paid help, smoking, drinking, tanning-salons, waxing and pilates. Rather than satirising the discourse of intensive mothering, Williams' (2006) depiction of 'yummy mummies' comments ironically on the adoption of this model by rich housewives who are too lazy and self-indulgent to perform its many associated tasks themselves. For example, yummy mummy Annabel comments: 'can you imagine full-time motherhood without any help? Who'd organise the playdates? I swear my little Cosmo's diary is busier than mine' (p.71). The heroine is seduced by the risqué and fashionable gang leader and single mother, Alice, who is distinguished from the others only by her more extreme allegiance to a consumerist and appearance-orientated mode of femininity. Alice initially appears confident and in control. She also raises cogent objections to the NCT mothers' competitive self-abasement, dismissing it with comments such as:

No one tells you this, Amy, but the less you see your baby, the less you miss her when she is not there [...] that's how working mother's cope. A natural independence develops. Those women who bleat on that it hurts the baby? She swirls the ice-cubes in her glass. Hysterical womb worshippers. Babies are hardy creatures, they adapt, so don't let Joe make you feel guilty about going out' (p.14).

Williams (2006) thus undermines the validity of reasoned arguments in favour of maternal employment and non-mother based care by associating them with the hedonism, vanity and lack of warmth displayed by Alice and her cartoonish yummy mummy pals. The friendship falters as Alice almost wrecks Amy's relationship by encouraging the pilates teacher to seduce her in order to restore Amy's post-baby confidence. As the plot unfolds, Alice is increasingly placed in the traditional single-woman/mother role as a threat to the hetero-normative order. When she confides to Amy that she struggles to cope with lone motherhood and is hoping to gain support from the father of her child, a man she met clubbing in Ibiza that she has had minimum contact with since the child's birth, she receives no sympathy. Amy shows little interest in the father's role but is quick to view Alice's need for support as a humiliating retreat which exposes her arguments in favour of maternal independence as a sham. Amy finally loses all respect for Alice when she discovers that she has secretly been taking anti-depressants since the birth of her child. This discovery precipitates her reconciliation with her partner and her embrace of a conventional family structure, culminating in marriage. By the end of *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy* (a title which primarily suggests Amy's brief flirtation with 'yummy mummy' behaviour but could just as easily refer to the more permanent and damning narrative destruction of Alice) the plucky, glamorous, single mother has been exposed as dishonest, uncaring and psychologically vulnerable.

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

Lucy Cavendish's (2007) *Samantha Smythe's Modern Family Journal* also comments critically throughout on the collective behaviour of maternal groups. Certain sections of the novel are marked out in italics and parody the style of a parenting manual. The following section advises the assumed mother-reader on how to deal with other mothers, who, once again, are portrayed as competitive and spiteful:

The Rules of the Playgroup

Rule number four: you seriously have to watch that competitive mothering thing. It's the trap I always fall into...

Om: (other mother) Is little Bennie still drinking out of a bottle?

Me: Oh yes. He keeps seeing the baby doing it and he so loves to.

Om: Oh how sweet. But isn't he a bit old to be drinking out of a baby bottle?

Me: Do you think so, I've never really thought about it.

Om: Oh yes. I've read some research that says that if babies drink from a bottle over the age of two then they do not form the correct hand-eye, eye-brain, non-sucking, non-mother-separating mechanisms that all two year olds need to develop in order to progress and not become backward and under performing at school.

Me: Oh really? Well, I've read that if children are allowed to develop at their own rate then they are far more likely to develop hand-eye, brain-leg, mouth-reflex, reeces-pieces, Gerheim Fluutlich technique, which, apparently, puts them in the top 5 per cent of educationally challenging – note, not 'challenged' – children in the 5 to 6 year old bracket.

Rather organised Margot: I mean, other mother: Well I've never heard that. Never. Surely you can see that drinking out of a baby bottle at the age of two and a bit is, to be frank, ridiculous, childish and thoroughly out-of-kilter with his age group (Cavendish 2007, pp. 254-56).

As this exchange indicates, the well-educated, affluent mothers portrayed in Samantha Smythe's *Modern Home Journal*, and mum's lit more generally, are depicted as over-invested in the ever-expanding barrage of professional advice aimed at them, but the source or legitimacy of this discourse is only ever questioned as a tactic in the on-going battle between mothers. The heroine mother is shown as superior in her attempt to avert conflict ('I've never really thought about it') but is driven to compete by a rival mother who is portrayed as little more than a conduit for the nagging voice of the childcare expert. Female rivalry and hostility in motherhood is presented as an inevitable and unquestioned outcome of biological sexual difference; humour comes at the expense of other mothers rather than the child advice industry.

Mum's lit and Compulsory Motherhood

The misogyny and biological essentialism which lies behind such assumptions is given additional

weight by the negative presentation of non-mothers in mum's lit. Even in a novel such as *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy*, in which the largely female cast of characters display an extraordinarily diverse range of negative characteristics, the infertile Kate is the obvious villain. Portrayed as a jealous, unrepentant harpy, Kate is so envious of the narrator-heroine's fecundity that she attempts to steal the father of her baby. Having gone to live in the country with the fantasy of becoming of rural wife, Kate complains to Amy: 'I feel like a useless Friesian Cow. The chicken that can't lay an egg. It offends the rural natural order'(p.80). The validity of Kate's sarcastic dig at the narrow-minded attitudes of her rural neighbours is undermined by the surrounding narrative's presentation of her behaviour as selfish and unwomanly. In the same scene she puts Amy's baby's life in danger by almost letting her pram slide into a busy road while distractedly ranting about her inability to become pregnant:

You are too hard on yourself. On average it takes many couples – “over a year to conceive”, snaps Kate. “Don't. It's been two.” Her Fingers, A-frame up, about to lift from the pram handle. I immediately grab it. She glares at me and puts her gesticulating hands back on the pram. A silent bicker. We cross the road safely (p.81).

In demonstrating her inability to show adequate concern for the safety of Amy's child, the narrative does indeed imply that Kate is a freak of nature - and worse - that this is not just a physical defect. Her carelessness implies that her infertility is a just punishment for her self-centred and anti-maternal nature. Women who are childless by choice, such as Maxine, in *Samantha Smythe's Modern Family Journal*, are also presented as selfish and odd. The narrator's is shocked to find out that that the childlessness of a local couple is not caused by infertility (which she automatically attributed to Maxine, rather than her partner, Dougie) stating that:

I often wondered about Dougie and Maxine's marriage. They didn't have children and, for ages, I didn't ask them why. I always assume that everyone in the entire world wants children so I assumed they couldn't have them, that maybe something was wrong with Maxine (Cavendish 2007, p.59).

Samantha's discovery does not cause her to modify or question her view of what 'everyone in the entire world' should want. The happily fecund narrator, who announces to the reader that she produces so much breast milk that she is able to donate the surplus to the local hospital ('My milk fed all these other babies whose mothers had little non-milky breasts') is quick to condemn Maxine for failing to give her husband a child (p.171). She deliberately fuels Dougie's resentment towards his wife and reasserts traditional notions of female reproductive duty: 'You know how much you

love children. It was cruel and mean of her not to let you have any. You may have loved her, but if she'd really loved you she would have given you what you wanted' (p.259). Cavendish satirises the competitiveness of other mothers through one-dimensional characters such as 'rather organised Margo' yet the heroine's belief in compulsory parenting and judgemental attitude towards non-mothers is not framed by the same critical and ironic counter-narrative. The reader is invited to marvel at the narrator's copious production of breast-milk and share her horror and outrage at women who decline motherhood. In their biologically-based, essentialist view of women's natural role as mother and homemaker and women as natural rivals and competitors, such novels are clearly limited in their critique of the dominant ideologies of femininity and motherhood. They are promoted as offering comfort to the assumed mother-reader by questioning the ideology of maternal perfectionism, but there is no attempt to identify the wider source of these pervasive and oppressive attitudes or to blame their existence on anyone other than the demonised and feared 'other' mother(s). For all its surface pluckiness and sniggering at 'mother superiors', 'earth mothers' and 'yummy mummies', mum's lit never dares to question why the ideology of motherhood should be so central in defining the identity of all women: mothers and non-mothers alike. In her analysis of the form, Heather Hewitt argues that:

The speaker exposes her own shortcomings while simultaneously suggesting that it's more sensible (and quite possibly more fun) to be an inferior mother. After all, who wants to spend all her time aspiring to an impossible ideal? This use of self-deprecation is powerful; it links the narrator and the reader together in a kind of complicity. Humour works as a coping device: when we suddenly realise that we aren't alone, we begin to view our own behaviour as less shameful and possibly even normal (2006, p.128).

The problem with this generous, 'all in it together', interpretation of the genre's appeal and function, is that mum's lit heroines are never truly presented as inferior in any other terms than those which the novels make clear are outmoded and stuffy. The complicity between narrator and reader is one that comforts not through self-deprecation or mutual confession, but through the sole tactic of attacking other mothers who failed to have fully grasp and internalise the basic tenants of the Bowlby influenced, child-orientated/intensive mothering script that the majority of childcare experts have been forcefully promoting for the last twenty years.

Mum's lit and Maternal Ambivalence

Mum's lit novels, even those that proudly proclaim their affiliation to the 'bad' mother cause (such

as *Mummy Said the F-word*), do not deconstruct the bad mother/good mother binary: they simply reconfigure the terms in which this age-old misogynist division has been understood in relation to a mothering ideology which privileges the twenty-four hour mothering culture and the psychologist/cheerleader/comedienne maternal role over the outmoded form of mid-twentieth century domestic perfectionism associated with the previous generation of mothers. Far from laughing off maternal pressures in a self-deprecating manner, the heroine-mothers portrayed in these novels have fully internalised an unforgiving and starkly polarised view of good and bad mothers and attempt to throw off their culturally enforced sense of perpetual failure only by hurling the bad mother label at others and attacking childless women as cruel or freakish. The deep-seated psychic internalisation of mothers in these terms is inextricably linked to the normalisation of almost exclusively mother-based infant care in patriarchal society.⁶ It is given further power by a neo-conservative culture which is increasingly intolerant of any degree of maternal ambivalence. The intensive mothering model is strongly influenced by child development theories that view maternal ambivalence as a symptom of maternal malfunction: a dysfunctional, negative response that is highly damaging to the child (such as the work of John Bowlby). In contrast, feminist psychoanalytic critics, such as Barbara Almond (2010) and Rosika Parker (1995), understand maternal ambivalence as a more complex phenomenon. For Bowlby and Winnicott (1949), maternal ambivalence is understood largely as rejection or dislike of the child, whereas Almond (2010) and Parker (1995) stress not only the inevitability and normality of maternal ambivalence, but also the importance of understanding it as the coexistence of conflicting feelings, rather than just the predominance of maternal hostility and resentment. For Parker (1995) in particular, maternal ambivalence is productive and creative – a crucial element in the on-going psychological and emotional development of both mother and child:

Maternal ambivalence is not a static state but a dynamic experience of conflict with the fluctuations felt by a mother at different times in a child's development, and varying between different children. However ambivalence itself is emphatically not the problem; the issue is how a mother manages the guilt and anxiety that ambivalence provokes. (Parker 1995, p.7)

Parker (1995) highlights the way in which the current intensive mothering model exacerbates the guilt, shame and anxiety produced by the existence of negative feeling towards children or the mothering role. Barbara Almond's (2010) recent analysis of maternal ambivalence, in cultural forms and her own clinical practice, also emphasises the way in which the high levels of stigma and shame

attached to even small degrees of maternal ambivalence can be a factor that prompts women to adopt the persona of what Almond describes as ‘the too good mother’. This identity has much in common with ‘new momism’ and the intensive mothering model in that the ‘too good’ mother conceals her shameful feelings of maternal ambivalence in an excessive performance of socially-sanctioned ‘good mother’ skills and behaviour. She states:

Part of the unconscious self-expectation of the too-good mother is that she has no ambivalence. Since this is impossible her ambivalence takes very subtle forms, often masquerading as deep concern to do the best for her child, to do motherhood the absolute right way (Almond 2010, p.38).

At least part of the appeal of mum’s lit novels to ‘ordinary’ mothers must surely be that they appear to be wise to this trick and delight in exposing the underlying ambivalence of what they eagerly identify as ‘too good’ mothers; yet in their inability to openly acknowledge any ambivalence on the part of the heroine-mother or seriously critique the contemporary demands and expectations of mothers, mum’s lit novels implement the very same strategies of denial and repression. One of the many paradoxes of the mum’s lit form is that relationships between mothers and children are rarely described in any detail. Children appear mainly as the shadowy figures through whom the competitive war between mothers is conducted (through tactics such as the sending of unnecessary thank you notes in the school bag). The overwhelming concern of mum’s lit is the public performance of motherhood rather than mother/child relationships. Indeed, narrative interest in relations between children and mothers is so minimal that the question of maternal ambivalence might be regarded as irrelevant. However, Almond (2010) and Parker’s (1995) work also provides a potential explanation for both the absence of children in mum’s lit and its vitriolic presentation of other mothers. The intensive mothering model demands a complete suppression of any feelings of maternal hostility. This clearly presents problems in mum’s lit, it as it works through an ironic and critical frame that is incompatible with the idea of the child as sacred, fragile and malleable that justifies the practices of intensive mothering. It would be difficult to offer anything approaching a realistic depiction of the emotional complexities and demands of plausible, fully-rounded, evolving child characters without subjecting them to mum’s lit’s withering gaze. Instead, any hostility or aggression that might surface towards children, or the socially-validated mothering role, is safely diverted in the direction of other mothers. The covert presence of maternal ambivalence as an underlying tension and driver in mum’s lit is also suggested by the difference in levels of misogyny in

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: ‘Mum’s’ lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

mum's lit novels.

The more fully the novels are immersed within the marginalised 'feminised' world of full time mothers and children – as opposed to world of work and men - the more intensely the theme of good mother/bad mother and female bitchiness rises to the surface. Allison Pearson's (2002), *I Don't Know How She Does It*, the only mum's lit novel which depicts a heroine-mother attempting (initially at least) to hold down a high-earning full-time job, contains the standard mum's lit jibes at smug, home-based 'mother superiors' but is generally far less critical of other mothers and more attuned to the specific difficulties they encounter in the workplace. It contains several astute observations regarding the double standard in which men are applauded at work for becoming fathers while mothers are viewed as a liability who must disguise their child-rearing activities from senior colleagues if they want to progress. Although its attitude to non-working mothering groups is still relentlessly hostile, it also depicts genuine friendships between women outside of that world. Thus, Kate Reddy relies on the support of a long established friend (herself a working mother) and her strongest work ally is a young, childless female colleague. In contrast, Polly Williams' (2006) *The Rise and Fall of Yummy Mummy*, a novel set in the first year of motherhood and thus more fully immersed in the non-working, mother and baby world, is the most extreme in its descriptions of maternal competitiveness and the most damning in its portrayal of a childless woman. Unlike the other novels, it contains little in the way of work or man-related subplots.

The threat posed by childless woman, single mothers and the cruelty of collective maternal groups is the novel's only consistent theme. While this difference is partly a matter of authorial emphasis, it also highlights the combination of cultural triggers and unconscious forces in producing this defensive and misogynistic mindset. The cultural pressures placed on childless, single, professional women have been the subject of much feminist commentary, but the depiction of such women in chick-lit and film shrugs indulgently at aberrant 'bad girl' behaviour – such as smoking, heavy drinking, promiscuity and falling foul of credit card debt. In contrast, Mum's lit adopts a much more punitive attitude to its female characters, reflecting and endorsing the much tighter range of socially enforced restrictions on female behaviour after childbirth and the public stigma attached to long term childlessness. Its enthusiastic denouncement of maternal failure and inadequacy mirrors the hectoring tone which is particularly prevalent in advice towards mothers of babies and very young children.⁷ The petty and seemingly ridiculous skirmishes that break out in mum's lit over

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

issues such as childbirth, breastfeeding, organic and non-organic baby food are an index of the escalating moral discourse which has accompanied the new hegemonic mothering ideal. From a broader cultural perspective, the binary between the mum's lit 'good' and 'bad' mothers seems highly contrived and superficial as all the mothers depicted in mum's lit share the same ethnic background, educational level and class outlook. They are all white, between the ages of thirty and forty, are property owners living in the richer parts of the country, rarely need to work full time and have only moderate amounts of contact with siblings and grandparents. Perhaps more significantly, serious (but not uncommon) problems connected with childbirth and family life, such financial hardship, domestic abuse, suffering from post-natal depression or having a child with physical or behavioural problems, are never addressed. The levels of defensiveness and anxiety concerning even relatively privileged women's fears as to how their mothering will be judged is indicative of the excessive level of contemporary cultural investment in and critical scrutiny of maternal behaviour more generally.

Mum's lit and work: Mum entrepreneurs and Kitchen-sink Tycoons

In mum's lit modern motherhood is portrayed as a solitary state. The absence of grandmothers in particular – traditionally the strongest source of support for a new mother – is indicative of the mum's lit embrace of the neo-liberal vision of the atomised, mother-centred nuclear family and its rejection of what is presented as the controlling, overtly resentful and emotionally inept style of the previous generation of much parodied 1950s housewives.⁸ As I have suggested, the mum's lit critique of domestic perfectionism, far from indicting a rejection of traditional female roles, is actually aligned with a strong reinvestment in motherhood as central to women's identity. The post-feminist resurgence of polarised gender roles – in which women are automatically assumed to be the primary carers of young children – is the invisible net that surrounds these texts. The heavy burden placed on women by the neo-liberal withdrawal of state support for families combined with the intensive mothering script, is never seriously questioned. Men play little part in most mum's lit narratives. In popular romance men tend to fall into two categories: the superficially attractive but villainous bad boy and the outwardly standoffish but inwardly warm and caring hero. The mum's lit novel also draws on these well-known cultural archetypes. In certain novels, such as Allison Pearson's (2002) *I Don't Know How She Does It* or Polly Williams' (2006) *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy*, the heroine has wisely married and produced children with the caring suitor who turns out

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

to be – in the very limited terms provided in these novels - an equally caring and responsible father. In *My Life on A Plate*, *Mummy Said the F-word* and *Samantha Smythe's Modern Family Journal*, the mother-heroine has foolishly married and produced children with the villainous suitor. In which case, she has either subsequently married and had children with a 'decent' man (*Samantha Smythe's Modern Family Journal*), or is in the process of extricating herself from the former and seeking the latter (*My Life on a Plate*, *Mummy Said the F- Word*). However, the entry qualifications required for male admission into the good parents club are pitifully low in comparison to those for mothers.

Rooting out and exposing the smallest of maternal failings is an underlying theme of mum's lit which is carried through into every aspect of the mother-narrators experience. In contrast, 'bad fathers', such as Samantha Smythe's first husband, John, Robert in *My Life on a Plate*, or Martin in *Mummy Said the F-word*, find babies and small children so annoying, messy and/or tedious that they abandon their wives and children without appearing to register much regret or incurring serious social penalties. 'Good' fathers, such as 'John the second', in *Samantha Smythe's Modern Family Journal*, are merely required to stick around, earn money and show a level of tolerance towards the domestic chaos produced by childrearing. Neither the good or bad father is expected to participate in housework or childrearing to any serious degree: their role is relegated to either willing or unwilling helper rather than genuine co-parent. For example, in *I Don't Know How She Does It*, Kate Reddy heaps praise on husband Richard for being a loving and committed father, but at no point considers the possibility that the answer to the work/childcare problems caused by her high-powered, high-paid city job might lie with him. With the exception of one rather sad and feminised single dad (Sam in *Mummy Said the F-word*) mum's lit shows no awareness of, or interest in, men's increasing involvement in childcare. Children are either cared for by mums or female nannies. The petty but constantly emphasised opposition between good and bad mothers, and the admittedly larger difference between the mum's lit conception of good and bad fathers, therefore pale into insignificance in comparison to the oblique, naturalised chasm of culturally inscribed sexual difference that such distinctions work within.

The genre's reproduction of highly traditional conceptions of sexual difference in the domestic sphere is also evident in its treatment of the contentious issue of maternal employment. The contemporary ideology of intensive mothering demands a level of engagement which is essentially incompatible with full time employment outside the home – particularly in the highly

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

competitive long-hours work culture created by the pursuit of neo-liberal economic policies. The idealisation of a particularly demanding mode of full time motherhood was also, in part, a response to the expanding gulf between rich and poor and the increase in the salaries of those working in certain privileged sectors of the economy – such as the financial services. This enabled the expanding ranks of the super-rich to reinvent the post-war figure of the financially dependent full-time wife and mother as a cultural ideal – a stereotype which quickly acquired the media moniker ‘yummy mummy’ (the group of mothers overtly parodied in *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy*). Yet, the ideological re-endorsement of the affluent, leisured stay-at-home wife and mother comes into direct conflict not only with women’s raised educational and career aspirations since the 1960s, but also the need for both halves of the increasingly ‘squeezed’ middle-class couple to contribute to the household finances. Two, or at least one and half salaries are required in order to achieve the standard of living deemed necessary to raise children successfully i.e. within a sizeable house, near a good state school or with sufficient funds to send them private and with the added income necessary to provide for a range of extra-curricular activities. For the families depicted in Mum’s lit, who are predominately middle, rather than upper-middle class, such a lifestyle is difficult to achieve or sustain on only one income. Referring back to the circular association between mother-author and mother-heroine, mum’s lit offers a comforting but illusory solution to this problem through the entrepreneurial figure of the mother-author. In *My Life on a Plate*, Samantha Smythe’s *Modern Home Journal* and *Mummy Said the F-word*, the mother/ heroine’s employment is presented as a natural extension of their mothering identity. Like the mum’s lit author or columnist, they are paid to provide advice to other mothers or recount their own domestic experiences. At an intra and extra-textual level, mum’s lit endorses the idea that women can and should be able to earn a decent living through home-based labour that requires no paid or institutionalised childcare, no assistance from fathers and that is intimately connected to their primary identity as mother and homemaker.

The mother-author who earns an honest crust by writing only of her children also complies happily with the cosy neo-liberal fantasy of the ‘mum entrepreneur’ or ‘kitchen table’/‘kitchen sink’ tycoon. This figure is much admired in the right-wing newspapers that many mum’s lit authors produce columns for. The mum entrepreneur/kitchen sink/table tycoon turns her back on the complicated and guilt-inducing world of juggling work and childcare by cannily turning her traditional female craft skills, such as jewellery-making, baking or sewing, into a successful modern

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: ‘Mum’s’ lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

day cottage industry via internet promotion⁹ (Barrow 2006; Kelly 2007; Eccles 2002). Allison Pearson (2002) provides a perfect fictional example of this comforting patriarchal fantasy when her stressed hedge-fund manager and guilt-ridden mother of two, Kate Reddy, throws in the city job and moves to the country. After a few months of provincial boredom, the ‘can do’ Reddy is providing advice to a failing local business which makes hand-crafted dolls houses – a plot development which is not presented with any conscious sense of irony or Ibsenesque pathos. Indeed, Pearson (2002) presents Reddy’s ‘choice’ to plough her considerable energy and business acumen into a more suitably feminine and child-focused project as sensible and morally commendable rather than craven or defeatist. As in the fictional Reddy’s case, the mum entrepreneur/kitchen table tycoon’s new home-based work should not only be linked to traditional feminine skills and interests, but, more importantly, must be flexible enough to allow mothers to perform a multitude of unpaid duties, such as volunteering for school based activities and ferrying children to and from a range of educational extra-curriculum classes. Despite the high profile given to a handful of successful mum entrepreneurs (in which the precise amount of childcare required to establish these ventures is rarely discussed in detail) all the available evidence, such as that conducted by Tim Leuring (2006), concludes that while increasing numbers of mothers are developing home-based business’, they have very high failure rates. Perhaps more significantly, those that do succeed experience the same conflicts between work, childcare and domesticity that they abandoned their prior careers to avoid (Leuring 2006). Yet the appeal of such an ideological fiction is obvious: it conflates the neo-conservative endorsement of female identity as primarily driven by domestic and maternal concerns with a neo-liberal celebration of transferrable skills, flexible work practices, entrepreneurship and can-do attitudes. The mum entrepreneur/kitchen table/sink tycoon fantasy, both in fiction and the popular media, conceals and glosses over the well-documented discrimination and conflict of identity that mothers of young children face in the workplace. Mum’s lit perpetuates the myth that mothers can be economically self-sufficient and creative without demanding either affordable state childcare or a serious shift in the balance of childcare and domestic labour in the home, thus allowing men to retain their superior earning power and placing no demands on the state or wider community.

Conclusion

Like most forms of female-orientated popular fiction, mum's lit novels are marketed as essentially trivial: silly, playful and individualised. Yet such novels enjoy a prominent place in female popular culture and, as I have argued, draw on the longer history of the English social realist novel by ruthlessly and, at some points, effectively, satirising the affectations and manners of the female English middle-class in the late twentieth and early twentieth-first century. However, unlike the Austenian comedy of manners which such texts draw on, the heroines of mum's lit show little sign of self-reflection or moral growth. Throughout, they remain convinced of their essential 'niceness' and superiority to the groups of competitive mothers who attempt to outdo and undermine them. The merest hint of controlling behaviour towards children or an overt concern with domestic order is heavily satirised, but the rules of intensive mothering and the new hegemonic gender ideology: that all normal, decent women desire multiple children, that being a mother should be their primary identity and that mothers should be constantly available for their children from babyhood well into the teen years is perpetuated throughout. Indeed, through a clever sleight of hand, the 'bad mummy' proves her superior devotion to her children precisely through her neglect of domestic trivia and obsessive child-monitoring routines. The 'good' mother creates an outward show of domestic perfection but is actually cold, selfish and driven only by the shallow desire for cultural approval of her feminine skills; the 'bad' mother nobly puts aside her personal vanity and desire to tame her offspring in favour of a child-orientated culture of fun and spontaneity. Their surface appeal lies in their apparent rebellion against the traditional constraints on maternal behaviour, drawing on the chick-lit stereotype of the scatty/clumsy/undomesticated protagonist. However, this is replaced by what is, in many ways, a more oppressive, all-consuming maternal role which places less emphasis on practical and domestic tasks, but forcibly revives the conspiracy of silence governing the public ideology of motherhood by extending its reach into the shadowy, less tangible realms of maternal feeling and policing and punishing maternal ambivalence in the harshest and most unforgiving manner. In this sense, mum's lit doesn't just reflect, but participates in and reinforces, the policing of other mothers and the associated neo-liberal view of individual families and individual mothers in competition with each other.

Roberta Garrett, *Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author*

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

¹ Heather Hewitt (2006) and, more recently, Imelda Whelehan (2012) have written on the Mum's lit form. Hewitt's entertaining analysis tends to view the cycle much more positively than myself in terms of its approach to mothers. Whelehan (2012) also argues that mum's lit reinforces the ideology of intensive mothering. Her work provides a general overview of mothers in popular fiction since the sixties which looks briefly at the current form.

² Although there have been recent examples of bestselling childcare books which advocate a 'tougher' approach e.g. controlled crying and placing some limits on parental attention, these have tended to meet with fierce resistance from the more numerous promoters of intensive and attachment parenting. The best known example of the public outrage provoked by old-style child-management routines occurred when Gina Ford, author of *The Contented Little Baby Book*, was subjected to a barrage of vitriolic abuse on Mumsnet which resulting in Ford mounting a libel case against the on-line mothers forum. Popular television programmes, such as *Supernanny*, may appear to be mounting an old-style counterattack on what are presented as foolishly over liberal parenting styles but nonetheless advocate highly intensive routines of mother-led child-management. Frank Furedi's discussion of the influence of 'therapeutic' approaches to childcare in *Paranoid Parenting* (2001) and *Therapy Culture* are extremely interesting and relevant to this discussion.

³ The term 'new momism' refers specifically to North American culture, in which levels of state-provided childcare and facilities have always been lower than in the UK and the cultural circulation terms associated with the intensive mothering culture, such as 'soccer mom', preceded the use of similar labels e.g. 'pushy parent', 'helicopter mother' or 'yummy mummy' in the UK by at least a decade.

⁴ I refer here particularly to the autobiographical work on motherhood produced by novelists such as Rachel Cusk, Julie Myerson and Ann Enright. Unlike mum's lit, the maternal memoir tends to be both self-critical and sceptical towards the intensive parenting culture. Significantly, it is often criticised by mum's lit authors for its negative portrayal of motherhood, for example India Knight and Gill Hornby (both journalists and mum's lit authors) produced scathing reviews of Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* in broadsheet newspapers.

⁵ *I don't Know How She Does it* was made into a mainstream Hollywood film in 2011. Enhancing the notion of mum's lit as grown up chick-lit, heroine Kate Reddy was played by *Sex and the City* star, Sarah-Jessica Parker, and the story transferred from London to New York.

⁶ I have not had sufficient space to consider the many feminist-psychoanalytic accounts of the infantile roots of binarism in attitudes towards mothers in this piece. For further analysis of this issue, see Ruth Quiney's (2007, pp. 23-24) discussion of Melanie Klein and the good mother/bad mother divide in contemporary maternal memoirs.

⁷ As many feminist critics and writers have noted, pregnant women and mothers of young babies are subject to particularly intense levels of social scrutiny and subject to severe of disapproval if their lifestyle or method of feeding or sleep-training their offspring do not conform with current childcare advice or government guidelines. Rachel Cusk's maternal memoir, *A Life's Work* is particularly astute in highlighting the culture of moral disapprobation which circles around pre-and postnatal women.

⁸ The only positive representation of a mother-daughter relationship occurs in Allison Pearson's (2002) *I Don't Know How She Does it*. Heroine Kate Reddy adores her mother (who is also supportive of her career) but she is strongly signified as

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

both 'northern' and working-class, the antithesis of the petty, middle-class '1950s' style housewife/mothers who are the target of Pearson's ironic narrative.

⁹ The recent media interest in and celebration of 'ordinary housewife' Julie Deane, who began making brightly coloured old-style school satchels in order to pay her daughter's private school fees, typifies the media construction of this figure. Interviewed in the Daily Mail, Deane stated that: 'Emily was eight when it became really apparent that she was being badly bullied by a group of girls. I told her, "You will not go back to that school next year. We will find you a new one and you will be so happy." I had promised my child I would deliver and I couldn't let her down. It was the trigger for me to start my own business.' (Eccles 2001).

References

- Almond, B., 2010. *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*. California: University of California Press.
- Barthes, R., (1957) 2000. *Mythologies* (trans, Lavers, A.) London: Vintage.
- Barrow, B., 2006. *Working Mum's in Kitchen Sink Tycoon Boom*. Daily Mail, 15 September. Available at <http://www.mobilitytechzone.com/news/2006/09/15/1898821.htm>, accessed 28 November 2013.
- Bowlby, J., 1969. *Attachment: Attachment and Loss*, New York: Basic Books.
- Brabon, B and Genz, S. 2009. *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Brunsdon, C., 2005. Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella, *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp.110-116.
- Cavendish, L., 2007. *Samantha Smythe's Modern Family Journal*. London: Penguin.
- Cusk, R., 2001. *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Cusk, R., 2005. *Silly Old Mum: Confessions of a Bad Mother, Stephanie Calman*. New Statesman, September 26,. Available at www.newstatesman.com/writers/rachel_cusk, accessed 20 March 2013.
- Cusk, R., 2012 *Aftermath*. London: Faber and Faber.
- De Beauvoir, S., (1949.) 2000. (trans, Borde, C.) *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage.
- Douglas, S and Michaels, M., 2004. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealisation of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined All Women*. New York: Free Press.
- Eccles, L. 2012. *Mother Who Couldn't Afford School Fees Makes 12 Million a Year Selling School Satchels*. Daily Mail, 10 September. Available at www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2245651/Cambridge-Satchel-Company-mum-afford-daughters-school-fees-makes-12m-year.html, accessed 20 March 2013.
- Ford, G. , 1999. *The Contented Little Baby Book*. London: Random House.
- Ferriss, S. and Young, M. 2005. 'Introduction', *Chick-Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, London: Routledge.
- Friedan, B., 2010 (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*, London: Penguin Modern Classics.
- Garrett, R., 2007. *Postmodern Chick-Flicks: The Return of The Woman's Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Gibson, F., 2008. *Mummy Said the F-Word*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Hanson, C., 2013, The Book of Repetition: Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity, *E-rea. Revue électronique d'études sur le monde Anglophone*, 10, 2.

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

- Harvey, D., 2005. *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hays, S., 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Mothering*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Harzweski, S., 2011. *Chick-Lit and Postfeminism: Cultural frames, Changing Culture*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Hewitt, H., 2006. You Are Not Alone: The Personal, The Political and the New Mommy lit. In: *Chick-Lit: The New Women's Fiction*, eds Ferris, S., and Young, M., London: Routledge.
- Kelly, T., 2007. *Mothers of invention*. Daily Telegraph, 17 March. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/3631740/Mothers-of-invention.html>, accessed 20 March 2013.
- Knight, I., 2000. *My Life on a Plate*. London: Penguin.
- Leach, P., 1977. *Your Baby and Your Child*. London: Knopf.
- Leuring, T., 2006. *'Kitchen table tycoons' identified as new brand of female entrepreneurs*. Available at www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/news/archives/2006/YellowPagesResearch.aspx, accessed 20 March 2013.
- McRobbie, A., 2004. Post-feminism and Popular Culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4 (3), 258-264.
- Merritt, S., 2003. *Mum's the Word: Granta has named Rachel Cusk as one of our best young novelists, Stephanie Merritt finds out why*. The Guardian, 30 March. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/mar/30/fiction.stephaniemerritt>, accessed 30 March 2013.
- Negra, D., 2008. *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Post-Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Quiney, R., 2007. Confessions of a New Capitalist Mother; Twenty First Century Motherhood as Trauma. *Woman: A Cultural Review*, 18 (1), 19-40.
- Parker, R., 1995. *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. London: Virago.
- Pearson, A., 2002. *I Don't Know How She Does it*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Rich, A., 1977. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. London: Virago.
- Sears, W., 2001. *The Attachment Parenting Book*. Little, Brown and Company: New York.
- Stoppard, M., 1995. *Complete Baby and Childcare Book*. London: Dorling-Kindersley.
- Tyler, I., 2008. 'Chav Mum Chav Scum': Class disgust in contemporary Britain. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8 (1), 17-34.
- Warner, J., 2006. *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*. London: Vermillion,
- Whelehan, I., 2000. *Overloaded: Popular Culture and The Future of Feminism*. London: Woman's Press.
- Whelehan, I., 2012 'Shit and String Beans', Boredom and Babies: Bad Mothers in Popular Fiction Since 1968. In: *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Podnieks, Montreal: McGill Queens University Press.
- Williams, P., 2006. *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy*. London: Sphere.
- Winnicott, D. W. 1979 (1949). 'Hate in the Countertransference', *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Warner, J., 2006. *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*. London: Vermillion, 2006.
- Wolf, N., 2001. *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and*

Roberta Garrett, Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood. London: Vintage

Roberta Garrett, *Novels and Children: 'Mum's' lit and the public mother/author*

Studies in the Maternal, 5 (2), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk