

**Fictional Fathers: Gender Representation in Children’s Fiction**

Wendy Michaels and Donna Gibbs

For the first time in my life, I became actively interested in a book. Me the sports fanatic. Me the game freak, me the only ten-year-old in Illinois with a hate on for the alphabet wanted to know what happened next.

William Goldman’s introduction to *The Princess Bride*

Current research into the construction of masculinities rejects the notion of sex roles as ‘pre-existing norms which are passively internalized and enacted’ and seeks instead to work from the assumption that gender is constructed in social interaction, seeing both masculinity and femininity as ‘hierarchically relational concepts’ (Connell 1995, p.35; p.44). Fiction is part of the context contributing towards these constructions as it presents ideas about, and models for, the possibilities of the gendered self and the shaping of identities. What is read by children and adolescents has a potential role in this process, or as Mem Fox (1995, p.84) so clearly states, ‘Everything we read...constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, boys and men.’

In recent times, concern about boys’ literacy levels and their underachievement in school exit examinations has been the subject of government, academic and media concern. Many factors have been highlighted as explanations for boys’ inferior performance, including the view that socially constructed notions of masculinity shape boys’ attitudes to education and schooling (eg Mac an Ghaill 1996; Mills & Lingard 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, Warrington, Younger & Williams 2000; Marino and Meyenn 2001). James Moloney, author of *Touch Me*, a book shortlisted in the 2001 Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Book of the Year Awards, and a vocal supporter of the ‘Boys and Books’ movement, claims the dominant model of masculinity in our present society ‘dismisses books and reading with contemptuous disdain, and puts pressure on those who aspire to be successful men to do the same’ (Moloney 2000, p.45). Factors such as boys not liking to read as much as girls (eg Millard 1997; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998, Hall & Coles 1999), their preference for non-fiction over fiction (eg White 1996), and their avoidance of reading fiction because it is perceived as a passive act involving the affective domain (Office For Standards in Education 1993; Barrs & Pidgeon 1998; Spedding 1999) are other explanations commonly advanced. (For a fuller discussion of these factors see Gibbs & Krause 2002).

Curriculum developers in English speaking countries have responded to these concerns by adopting a broader range of texts, including more non-fiction, and introducing more ‘boy friendly books’ (*Times Educational Supplement*, April, 1999) to their text lists. But what are ‘more boy friendly books?’ Books which are about sport, competition and violence, and which include adventure and excitement, perhaps? The Boys and Books movement would seem to suggest that the solution to boys’ ‘book aversion’ is to ‘make sure the story has action, adventure and that thrill factor which boys find so compelling’ (Hawkes 2000, p.105). Moloney, in an article entitled ‘Reluctant male readers - Why and what to do for him’ also calls for narratives for boys which ‘celebrate commendable qualities’ and allow boys to identify with the hero ‘and let their imaginations become enmeshed with his adventures’ (2001, p.73). Gilbert and Gilbert (1998, p.86) point out that populist parenting guides ‘often argue for the restoration of male narratives of heroism and courage, and for the power of biology in predetermining male behaviour’.

Most of the six books short-listed for the 2001 CBCA awards in the Books for Older Readers category could be said to at least meet some of these criteria. Four of them are written by males and all except one (*Thursday’s Child*) have a young male as the central character (and even here, Tin Harper’s brother, could be said to be the central figure as it is he who is ‘Thursday’s Child’, though Harper narrates the story). The action in these books revolves around subjects such as football, boxing, hardships and disasters to be overcome, murder, arson, war, drugs, corruption, violence and rape. All the novels are also about families and relationships. But an overview of this kind reveals very little about the books’ main concerns, the ideas, qualities and behaviours they celebrate, or how these books expand the horizons of adolescents, particularly in relation to their search for their own identities.
Studies of gender in children’s fiction gained considerable impetus in the 1970s when feminist activists encouraged the interrogation of textual and visual materials published in the media and elsewhere. Much of the early work on gender and fiction aimed to expose the ‘sexist’ nature of children’s books and rested on the notion that the way sexual roles were presented both shaped and reinforced social attitudes. These early studies tended to centre on the ‘if’ and the ‘how’ of gender representation—if bias was evident in terms of the visibility/invisibility of males and females, and how stereotypical were the roles being portrayed. Methodologies underpinning this research relied mainly on content analysis with an emphasis on counting instances of the presence of the sexes as they appeared in the illustrations, the title, the story and so on, and of measuring the stereotypical nature of these representations. Picture books were the most popular fiction category subjected to analysis.

Results of these research studies invariably indicated males were winners in the visibility stakes. As Weitzman et al. (1972, p.177) claimed in their study of prize-winning picture books, ‘women are simply invisible’, and female figures greatly ‘under-represented in the titles, central roles, pictures, and stories’. In analysing the roles associated with the sexes, it became almost commonplace to find females more passive, more homebound and mentally inferior to males (eg Czaplinski 1972).

Results of more recent studies are not as dramatically different as might be expected. Many researchers have confirmed the presence of more balanced gender representation (eg Kortenhaus 1993; Ramirez & Dowd 1997; Powell et al 1998), while some have claimed there was no great improvement (eg Jett-Simpson & Masland 1993; Ernst 1995; Sugino 1998; McDaniel & Davis 1999). Others have found anomalies that are difficult to explain. For example, Graetherholz and Pescosolido in their study of ‘Easy Books’ published since 1900 found that ‘female figures were relatively visible in the early part of the century, lost visibility until the early 1950s, and have gained visibility since’ (quoted in Clark et al 1999, p.79). And McDaniel and Davis (1999) in a small research project with their students examined Caldecott winning picture books from 1972 to 1997 and found that the 1990s was the time of highest female representation.

As feminism has broadened its focus, factors such as ethnicity, class and age have shifted into the spotlight, and gendered relationships such as those of mothers/daughters or fathers/sons have come in for some attention (eg Blair 1991; Heller & Heller 1998; Heller, Maldonado and Heller 1999; Sugino 2000). Picture books remain the favoured object of study and methods of content analysis are very similar to Weitzman’s, as Clark et al (1999) point out in relation to their examination of fourteen such studies. There have been some refinements in methodologies; some researchers, for example, have incorporated more sophisticated ways of thinking about the ‘how’ of gender representation by taking an aspect such as thematic content or author’s attitudes into account (eg Berman 1998; Bradford 1998), but this is comparatively rare.

The present study

In selecting contemporary children’s texts for this study, we have chosen the six books short-listed in the Books for Older Readers category by the CBCA in 2001. The Books for Older Readers category of the book awards includes books deemed suitable for readers in secondary schools and includes young people in the age range from about 11 years to 18 years. The books nominated in 2001 were Wolf on the Fold (Judith Clarke), Dogs (Bill Condon), Thursday’s Child (Sonya Hartnett), The Simple Gift (Sonja Hartnett), The Simple Gift (Steven Herrick), Touch Me (James Moloney), and Fighting Ruben Wolfe (Markus Zusak). Fathers or father figures play a significant part in all of these novels.

In order to avoid the shortcomings of previous ways of reporting on gender representation, we developed a more complex method for analysing material in relation to fathers and father figures in the novels. Firstly we collected all the information about fathers in each book and then categorised that material. The categories were reduced by cross-referencing and synthesis until three major (overlapping) categories were established as focal points for consideration.
• characteristics of fathers or father figures (eg name, status, occupation, qualities);
• roles and relationships of fathers or father figures with others (eg nature of the actions and interactions in relation to families, others, and their fictional communities);
• moral behaviour and values of fathers or father figures (eg nature of actions and interactions in relation to value systems as established in each book).

The collated information was interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of the main ideas, issues and ideologies of each novel. This involved a close examination of each novel's structures, techniques and themes, and the multiple ways each of the texts positions the reader in relation to its ideologies and values (through, for example, narrative viewpoint or resolution). It enabled moving beyond the noting of instances of paternal reference, or the listing of examples of paternal behaviour and dialogue, to an analysis of the meanings of these events and exchanges in the novel's own terms. It also allowed us to recognise patterns and trends in relation to the representation of fathers across the six novels.

In discussing our findings we begin by providing a detailed account of the portraits of fathers/father figures in two of the novels—Dogs and The Simple Gift. These novels offer examples of 'fathers' from opposite ends of the moral continuum, and represent different narrative forms and different styles of narration. While we begin the discussion of each novel with what is seen through the eyes of the narrators we are concerned to position this discussion in the wider context of each novel's value system as conveyed through its various narrative devices. Having demonstrated this approach with two of the novels, we then present our findings in relation to the six texts offering an analysis of the patterns that emerge in the books short-listed for the CBCA award.

Representation of fathers in Dogs and The Simple Gift

The story of Dogs by Bill Condon is seen through the eyes of Stephen, a boy who lives alone with his father, a house painter, in a down-market suburban area of Sydney. The narrative deals with two boys, Stephen and John ('Hangan'), and their fathers, Ray and Monk, who fall into an uneasy set of shifting relationships as they train and race John's greyhound, Monster. Eventually Monster is shot by Monk in a horrifying domestic scene. This action serves as a catalyst in the relationships the boys have with each other and with their fathers.

When Stephen introduces us to his all-male household, we are very quickly initiated into the semi-dysfunctional relationship between father and son. Stephen sees his father Ray as someone who makes occasional clumsy attempts to reach out to him but who, for the most part, is content to lapse into what Stephen describes as a 'simmering war'. He blames this war on his father's failure to talk to him about the mother who left when he was five. Stephen is quite self-critical about winding up his father and rejecting his advances ('I pulled back' p. 5; 'Not even half trying I could get to him' p.26) but seems to accept this as his inevitable right.

Stephen represents Monk, the other father in the story, as an abusive, violent, taunting, irrational, and senselessly cruel figure. In other relationships Monk behaves in...
similar ways but relies more on threats and cunning because others are less vulnerable than his son John. As an onlooker recounting these details Stephen interprets the world as a rather threatening place—a world where fathers are uncommunicative at best and morally corrupt, even evil, at worst.

The build-up of tension and hope as Monster’s abilities are tested in the shady underworld of greyhound racing is mirrored in the escalating fear created by Monk’s persistent threats to kill Monster if he doesn’t win. Stephen repeatedly evokes pity for the pain and fear Monk forces his son to endure (‘I’d never seen anyone look so lonely’ p.19; ‘His body hunched over like he already had the weight of a dead dog in his arms’ p.22). John’s rare use of the word ‘Dad’ when pleading with his father not to shoot his dog stands as a stark reminder that Monk’s actions are the antithesis of fatherly behaviour. Stephen regularly calls his father ‘Dad’—it is the first word of the novel—and Stephen’s comment that ‘He [John] never called him that’ (p.38) brings home forcefully the poignancy of John’s appeal to his father. Monk gets his revenge for their betrayal of him to the authorities by kicking his way into Stephen’s living room in a drunken rage and shooting Monster dead. He is jailed—precisely why remains unclear—and the friendship between Stephen and John falters and fades, with John taking off up north with his girlfriend to get away from his father. Stephen reflects that ‘it was never the same’ (p.132) after that night and he leaves us with an image of John concealing his tears in the dark for the dog he has lost.

Condon’s authorial approval for Stephen’s version of events is strongly in evidence, though he does suggest Stephen’s naivety and youthfulness means that he doesn’t always see the whole picture. The violent ending, for example, is repeatedly foreshadowed without Stephen quite realising it is coming—he protects himself with dreams of a future where he and John go away together with their greyhound. There are too, occasions, when Stephen reports ideas without appearing to realise their significance in the pattern of the story. When, for example, John says to Stephen ‘If he [Monster] can show he’s not hopeless—that’s all I want’ (p.34), his words carry the idea that he is unconsciously using the dog to prove himself to his father—an ambition doomed to failure. Stephen’s own accusation that John is ‘as big a con artist as your old man’ (p.121), is later metaphorically retracted, but the resolution of the novel suggests this judgement is not so very wrong. John plans the murder of his father and just before he leaves for up north he fools around tormenting Ray and Stephen about what he will do with his car in a way that is reminiscent of his father’s finding pleasure in torment. He may never be as cruel as his father but it is as if his father’s behaviour has somehow been imprinted on him and has damaged him irreparably. On the whole, the authorial comment mainly serves to reinforce the portraits of both fathers as inadequate and misguided figures.

There is no doubt that this book has all the ingredients many claim appeal to boys: blood, guts, violence, crime, shooting, cars, sex, competition and a strong story-line. A kind of sick horror is built up as Monk sinks into depths of corruption and violence that are hard to stomach. Glimpses of loyalty and courage from some of the other characters are fleetingly present as a counter to the deranged energy that seems to be released by Monk’s actions and by the macho behaviour that permeates the novel. It remains difficult, however, to know why Condon has presented such an ugly and dispiriting account and whether there is anything much in the story that he sees as redeeming this bleak picture.

The Simple Gift is a verse novel that tells its story through multiple narrators. Stephen Herrick focuses the story on Billy, a sixteen-year-old adolescent who has run away from home and drifts into a comfortable and comforting relationship with Old Bill, an apparently homeless hobo. Old Bill takes on the role of a father figure as the two males doss down in deserted railway carriages in the country town of Bendarat. The third voice in the narrative is that of Caitlin, a Bendarat Grammar School girl who is drawn into their developing friendship. The problem of Billy’s homelessness is brought to a head when he is questioned by police and faced with the choice of either having to leave town (and Caitlin) or front up to the Welfare with evidence of a real place of abode. This crisis point enables Old Bill to make his ‘Simple Gift’ of the key to the house which he had abandoned after the tragic loss
of his daughter and wife—cementing his father-figure relationship with Billy and to some degree, also with Caitlin.

We are told about Billy's biological father as he departs the motherless home in the working class suburb that he names ‘Nowheresville’ (p.4). Billy represents his father as an alcoholic. While trying, unsuccessfully, to hitch a ride on the Great Western Highway he contemplates returning home, but rejects the idea even though his father would be ‘sober’ (p.7) since he had stolen his beer and champagne. Billy's perception of his father also includes memories of his physical and emotional abuse. He recounts a time when, as a ten year old, his father gave him 'one hard backhander/ across the face' (p.15) and 'slammed the door on my sporting childhood' (p.16), and another occasion when, at twelve years of age his father had chased him 'out of the house/ with a strap' (p.55) and he had hidden in a 'neighbour’s/chookshed' (p.85).

Herrick's use of multiple narrators allows us to hear Old Bill's story in his own words. He presents himself to us initially as a 'bum' with a 'stumbling memory' (p.72). The flicker of memory that he reveals is of his 'darling Jessie' (p.59) although we are not immediately enlightened as to who this female is or was. It is only gradually that we come to know about Old Bill and indeed readers actually learn more than Billy himself. Readers learn of Jessie’s fall from a tree, the long period in which she lay in a coma, his signing of the permission form to turn off the life support machine and his feelings of 'rage and pain' (p.97). Old Bill relates how he 'fell with her' (p.98) and that he had been 'falling/ever since' (p.98). He also explains the loss of his wife who died 'one year/to the day after Jessie' (p.99) that led to his fall, although he never attempts to excuse his alcoholic hobo existence.

The relationship between Old Bill and Billy develops slowly through a series of reciprocal gestures that revolve around such quotidian things as food, drink, clothes, work in the Golden Crest Cannery, and finally the gift referred to in the title—a home. An interesting aspect of their relationship is Billy's perception of the need to help Old Bill. Billy actually explains it:

I help Old Bill
Because of Ernie
And Irene
And their friendliness.
(p.85)

Ernie, the train driver, and Irene, the librarian, both nurtured Billy when he was in need—as indeed Old Bill helps Billy later in the story. By the time that Billy learns Old Bill’s story, readers already know it, but they are encouraged to be moved by Billy’s compassion and understanding for ‘the saddest man in the world’ (p.105). The rest of Old Bill’s story is mediated through Billy—particularly the regrets about the way in which his work in the legal profession had dominated his life.

Gradually we see the surrogate father/son relationship blossom as they share the simple pleasures of life: food, conversation, memories, swimming in the river as they wash their clothes, sitting in the sun. Gradually, too, the way in which Old Bill nurtures Billy is developed. Old
Bill is replenished as a human being and consciously relinquishes the alcohol 'For the kid's sake' (p.137), signalling his acceptance of Billy as a surrogate son. The ultimate decision to give the house in which Jessie had lived and died is not easy for this father-figure:

...what I must do is so obvious
and so simple
and so unbearably painful
my whole body shakes
with the thought
(p.149)

Old Bill reaches the point where he experiences a sense of 'pride' (p. 160) as he looks at his surrogate son, Billy. The climax of their affectionate relationship comes in the hugging incident outside the Welfare meeting in Main Street where Billy describes how on-lookers saw the 'big grey-haired man/wrap his arms around the teenager' (p.172).

Caitlin's father appears briefly in the story, although like Billy's father we only see him through his offspring's eyes. He is represented as a kind of distant, indulgent father ('He buys me anything I want' p.36) who has aspirations for his daughter that don't include working at McDonald's. Caitlin describes him as 'too rich for his own good' (p.36). Although aware of the spiritual hollowness of her father's indulgence of her material comforts and critical of his materialistic approach to life, she grudgingly admits that:

Sometimes being rich
And having a dad who
Spoils you and buys you
Completely stupid
Unnecessary crap like
A gold watch
And a mobile phone
Has its advantages.
(p.60)

Herrick's authorial approval of Old Bill's surrogate father/son relationship is established through the contrasts with the other father/son, father/daughter relationships. Old Bill, despite his self-criticism of the dominance of work in his own family life, was clearly an affectionate loving father. This comes through not only in his recalled memories of his daughter but also in the discoveries that Billy and Caitlin make in the house once Billy moves in. For instance, they find markings on a bedroom door that show the height of Old Bill, his wife and child over several years with Jessie's annotation 'I've grown 13 centimetres in 2 years/lots more than Dad!' (p.187). While readers are culturally situated to judge his alcoholic state sternly, they are also invited to understand and forgive him, particularly when he takes control and accepts the challenge to overcome the addiction. Thus readers cannot escape Herrick's approval of the nurturing relationship that Old Bill develops with his surrogate son—the more so since the reciprocity of the relationship is instrumental in ensuring his own recovery.

This book does not have any of the surface characteristics that have been claimed as appealing to male readers: there is little by way of an action packed thrilling tale for example. But the novel does present the reader with a reflective, lyrical story about loving and giving. It celebrates the power of reciprocal relationships across generations and between people not bound by ties of blood or duty. Old Bill in giving his simple gift to Billy is given back his self-esteem and a purpose for living. The concentrated language of the poetry of this verse novel illuminates some striking contradictions. What is apparently a simple gift is in fact a generous life giving gesture, and the father figure who looks to be a drunken failure is revealed as a human being with true generosity of spirit and an ability to nurture and care for others. Herrick's play with verse and voices in the novel suggests a moral system that values the transformative power of deep human connections.

Patterns in the representation of fathers in the six short-listed novels

The authors of the six short-listed books generally do not choose to foreground sustained, successful, father-child...
relationships in their novels. Apart from the relationship between Old Bill and his daughter Jessie, which takes place before the novel begins, the only really successful father/daughter relationships are those of Kenny with his two daughters, Clightie and Frances (Wolf on the Fold), and these are not explored at any length. Similarly, the only really sustained exploration of a successful father/son relationship is that between Billy and Old Bill.

On the other hand, the serious flaws and shortcomings of father-child relationships are a central concern in most of the novels. In addition to those identified above in Dogs and The Simple Gift, there is Cable's relationship (Thursday's Child) with his surrogate daughter, Audrey, whom he misleads, ill-treats and sexually abuses—acts which are strongly condemned in the novel's terms. The relationship of Da Flute and Tin in the same novel is treated more ambiguously. The bond that develops after Da and Harper become accomplices after the murder of Cable is not enough to override the view of Da as a failure in relation to both of his daughters. He fails to prevent Audrey's rape, fails to provide financially for his family, squanders their resources, pursues dubious schemes based on his own wild desires, and ultimately his children and his wife have to suffer the consequences of his excessive behaviour. Yet in a very literal sense, Da gives space to Tin to do what he wants, and what he wants is to dig tunnels. Da seems to have an understanding of, and compassion for, Tin's peculiar needs, perhaps because of his own experiences in the trenches of France in World War I. In the novel's terms, Tin repays this understanding, both through the revenge killing of Cable after Cable's rape of Audrey, and by providing the gold nugget that allows his two sisters to escape from the cycle of poverty on the farm. Ultimately, the reader's credulity is tested by many of these events and to some extent this undermines the impact and importance of the compassionate response displayed by the father.

Other examples of unhappy father-child relationships abound in these novels, though they are less extreme cases than those discussed above. A typical example is that of Nuala and her unnamed father in Touch Me, a relationship of convenience rather than affection, with the few interactions that we see between them suggesting the relationship is more of an economic transaction, a 'bargain', than anything deeper.

The moral values held by the fathers, as revealed in their actions and words, as well as through what other characters say about them, can be described in terms of a continuum ranging from morally worthwhile to utterly reprehensible. Only Kenny (Wolf on the Fold) and Tom (Alex's father in Touch Me) are clearly established as having sound moral values in terms of those endorsed by the novel as a whole. There is only one father figure in these six books—Old Bill (The Simple Gift)—who, in spite of the limitations in his own value system, is depicted as able to rise above personal flaws and establish a reciprocal relationship with his surrogate son.

Nearly all of the fathers are positioned at the lower end of the moral spectrum. The worst examples include Monk (Dogs), and Cable (Thursday's Child) both of whom are punished for their actions. Cable's punishment is a revenge killing for the treatment of Audrey while the reason for Monk's punishment (a prison sentence) is somewhat more ambiguously presented. Other fathers presented as morally flawed include Mr Watson (Scott's father in Touch Me), a self seeking, competitive barrister who uses money and power to get what he wants, and Mr Wolfe (Fighting Ruben Wolfe) who both condone criminal actions.

The notion of space in these novels is represented as a significant factor in relationships with fathers. Some fathers provide physical space for their own children or their surrogate children: Old Bill gives his house to Billy so that he has a refuge from the authorities and Tin is supported by his father in his underground burrowings. In both cases the space is provided unconditionally and without restrictions. However, there are many instances of fathers who do not provide a nurturing physical space and indeed there are instances of those who invade the space that their off-spring seek to establish around themselves, with the worst instance of this being the rape of Audrey. The metaphor of space is also evident in a psychological or emotional sense. Few fathers in these novels provide psychological space for their off-spring. In fact, most of the real fathers in these novels are
depicted as incapable of allowing their children such nurturing spaces—either physical or psychological.

The high proportion of novels in which mothers are absent is also worthy of comment and may possibly be another oblique way of implying paternal failure as well as commenting on the failure of society to nurture its young. In several of the books the wives and mothers have left their spouses and children apparently without regret (eg Dogs, The Simple Gift); some of the mothers contemplate suicide as a way out of family difficulties (eg Wolf on the Fold); while the remainder tend to be silent, or ineffectual and long-suffering in the face of the hardships their husbands visit upon their families (eg Thursday’s Child, and Fighting Ruben Wolfe).

Another pattern detected in the representations of fathers in these novels is the appearance of the surrogate father as a more effective father figure than many of the real or biological fathers. It is interesting to speculate as to authors’ motivations for this kind of deflection. With the exception of Cable, the surrogate fathers tend to be more able than ‘real’ fathers to understand and respond to the needs of the young people whom they take under their wings. Old Bill is a classic example of a successful surrogate father, as is Tom (Touch Me) who adopts a nurturing relationship with Xavier as he faces the loss of his own son to cancer, while Kenny’s role as surrogate father (Wolf on the Fold) even extends beyond his own lifetime. He is a surrogate father to Kanti and Raj, as well as to his own great-grandsons. Here the relationship is presented metaphorically as existing beyond the grave as the image of Kenny’s nurturing presence gives strength to his grandson. None of the real fathers in the stories is portrayed as having this kind of strong relationship with his offspring. An interesting parallel of this phenomenon occurs in the roles ascribed to wicked step-mothers in many fairy tales.

Some readers may hold the view that these representations of fathers is simply a realistic ‘reflection’ of widespread and deep-seated social and cultural problems. And it is not altogether unexpected to find fathers being portrayed in this way as there has been quite a long tradition of cruel, morally corrupt fathers in children’s literature, and in fiction more generally. But to uncover this pattern of the representation of fathers strongly entrenched in books being acclaimed as the best in their category, particularly at a time when there is public awareness about the need to attract boys to reading, deserves attention. Ironically, it seems, books currently being acclaimed for young adult readers are presenting views of masculine behaviour that reinforce the very cultural stereotypes from which many educators seek to emancipate them. It is not the purpose of this study to suggest to authors how they should be writing, or what they should be writing about. However, the repeated representation of fathers as figures of failure and contempt suggests the need for raising awareness in publishers, parents and educators about this phenomenon. Young adult readers should be helped towards an understanding of the subtle processes at work in the fiction they are reading, so that they may develop critical awareness about what is occurring, and how it relates to the way they view themselves and their world. In Mem Fox’s terms, these representations are complicit in constructing the identities of their young adult readers.

Conclusion

The analysis of the representations of fathers and father-figures in the six novels short-listed for the Books for Older Readers’ Category of the CBCA Book of the Year in 2001 exposes patterns of failure that are deeper and more entrenched than was anticipated, and reveals a rather bleak picture. While there is a small number of fathers who are portrayed in a more favourable light, the general picture is of men, from all levels of society, who are either ineffectual as fathers or morally bankrupt as human beings—or both. Often effective fathering is directed at surrogate children rather than biological children, as though a happy paternal relationship is somehow more feasible in this context. These findings have implications for those concerned with issues related to boys and the reading of fiction, and for those who believe that books read by adolescents have a potential role in the shaping of values and the ways in which identities are constructed.
The Children's Book Council of Australia is an organization that aims to foster children's enjoyment of books through a range of activities including annual awards for the Book of the Year. The first book of the year award was made in 1946 for a single category of children's books though since that time the categories have been expanded considerably. Awards for each category are decided by a representative committee from all the Australian states. Details about the criteria for selection for an award are available at the CBCA website (http://www.cbc.org.au) and the awards handbook is at http://www.cbc.org.au/awards1.htm#judging.

The breadth of the Books for Older Readers category poses problems when considering the content of books that might be suitable as 'critics of the young adult novel often claim that teenagers should really be reading adult fiction'. This issue is highlighted in the publication of Sonya Hartnett's novel, Thursday's Child, (shortlisted in the Books for Older Readers category in 2001) in the Penguin adult list, rather than in the Young Adult list.

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
Dr Wendy Michaels lectures in Children’s Literature, Creative Writing, Artistic Representations and Education in the School of Humanities at the University of Newcastle. Her current research interests are in gender representations in young adult fiction, representation of adult issues in picture books and Shakespearean performance.

Donna Gibbs is a lecturer at Macquarie University.