SCANDALOUS TEXTS: THE ANXIETIES OF THE LITERARY

By

Alyson Miller, Bachelor of Arts (Hons.)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University

September 2010
I certify that the thesis entitled Scandalous Texts: The Anxieties of the Literary
submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

I also certify that any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any university or institution is identified in the text.

Full Name: Alyson Miller

Signed……………………………………………………………

Date: September 6, 2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr Maria Takolander and Dr David McCooey: for a beginning, a middle and the end of many green pens.

Mum and Dad: for the patient belief, the coffee, the clean washing, and ‘the’, ‘and’, ‘a’, ‘at’ and ‘with’.

James and Lisa: for pumpkins and boats, waffles and Mexico.
# Table of Contents

## Introduction

**Scandalous Texts: Haunted by Words**  
1

## Chapter One

**Unsuited to Age Group: The Anxieties of Children’s Literature**  
9

- Framing the Child: Childhood, Children and Literature
- Igniting Debate: The Scandalous Texts
- ‘Feel Yer Tits?’: Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature
- A Scandalous Absence: Controversy and Race
- Masterpieces of Satanic Deception: Transgressing the Sacred
- An Anxious Connection: Children and Literature

## Chapter Two

**Dismembering Women: Gender and Identity in Top-Notch Smut**  
39

- Femmes Fatales: Madame Bovary, The Well of Loneliness and Lady Chatterley’s Lover
- Une Complicité Libertine: Reading Political Correctness in ‘Posh Porn’
- ‘I Am A Completely Demented Misogynist’: Decoding American Psycho
- ‘This Is Not An Exit’: Re-Drawing the Boundaries?

## Chapter Three

**The Art of Persuasive Lying: Faking it in Memoir**  
76

- Fakes, Frauds and Forgery: Situating Literary Imposture
- Reimagining the Unimaginable: Victims of History
- Delusions of Domestic Tragedy: Victims of Abuse
- Ethnic Vultures: Victims of Culture
- Fake Revealing Fake: Authenticity as Effect

## Chapter Four

**From Holy Books to Satanic Verses: Confronting the Sacred**  
136

- A Question of Faith: The Politics of Critique
- Drawing the Battlegrounds: The Politics of Nationhood
- Out, Damn Whores: The Politics of Difference
The Atheist Possibility: Blaspheming Something New

CONCLUSION

This is a Story: (Re-)Narrating the World

WORKS CITED
This thesis critically examines a wide range of contemporary literary scandals in order to identify the cultural and literary anxieties revealed by controversial works. The thesis explores how scandal predominantly emerges in relation to texts which offer challenging representations concerning children, women, sexuality, religion and authenticity, and how literary controversies bring to the surface a series of concerns about the complex construction of identity, history and reality. Including works such as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1996-2007), Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991), James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), Misha Defonseca’s *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust* (1997), Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000), this thesis analyses a broad spectrum of texts in order to examine why books continue to provoke public debate and outrage, and what the arguments surrounding scandalous works suggest about literature, the literary and indeed, the world.
INTRODUCTION
SCANDALOUS TEXTS: HAUNTED BY WORDS


‘The gravest charge against poetry’, Plato argues in The Republic (360 BCE), ‘still remains. It has a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters, with very few exceptions’ (1955, p. 435). The poet, according to Plato, possesses the ability to gratify ‘the instinctive desires of a part of us’, a part without ‘adequate moral or intellectual training’, and allows the sensations better restrained in civilised man to ‘control us when we ought, in the interests of our own greater welfare and happiness, to control them’ (pp. 383-4). In a nation that celebrates poetry, Plato contends, pleasure and pain are the ‘rulers instead of law and the rational principles commonly accepted as best’ (p. 384). Poetry, Plato argues, ‘definitely harms the mind’, as it is disconnected from truth and reality and presents only enticing ‘shadows’ of the real (pp. 371, 375). In the ideal state, therefore, poetry—and the poet—ought to be banished in order to protect society from the dangers of simulacra.

Literature seems to have always occupied a problematic space. From Plato’s proposition to banish poets from the ideal Republic to recent claims that J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series will develop satanic impulses in children (Smith, 2007), literature has a long history of provoking suspicion and unease. Yet in an age dominated by media technology that allows the most daring creations—and re-creations—of self and society, the continuing recurrence of literary scandals seems somewhat peculiar. With social networking sites such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook growing increasingly candid, the limits of what is seen and produced are being constantly pushed. Innovations in computer generated imagery (CGI) and 3D methods produce complex simulacra which unsettle distinctions between the authentic and the fake. If the persuasive representations offered by poetry terrified Plato, what of the simulations made available in a film such as Avatar (2009)? Gaming culture is similarly invested in confusing the divisions between reality and fiction, as it encourages participants to construct virtual identities—avatars—that are controlled as extensions of a
‘real’ self. In this digital environment, where what is consumed is limited only by the imagination of the consumer, it is curious that literature—no longer the defining form of majority culture—retains its ability to scandalise. In a culture capable of something as radical as genetic modification, the representations made available through fiction still possess the power to motivate death threats, public riots, lawsuits, censorship and accusations of black magic. In a world of technological and scientific phenomena, it is the word that continues to haunt us.

The arguments of Plato, which express fear of the effects of literature on the minds of the public (p. 385), are instructive here, as they signal a tradition of understanding literature in terms of its unnerving ability to persuade. At its most positive, the literary experience is described by critics and writers in terms of the supernatural, and figured in the evocative language of magic and metamorphosis. Indeed, critics often represent books in a mystical way, one coupled with a romantic mythology of seductive ‘otherness’ and lyrical expositions on the near-religious experience of consuming a literary work. J. Hillis Miller in On Literature, for example, claims a text is a ‘portable dreamweaver’ capable of transporting the reader ‘magically’ to other times and places (2002, pp. 19-20), while the literary academic Jean-Pierre Barricelli contends that literature is transcendental (1995, p. 14). In How Literature Works, Kenneth Quinn argues that literary texts construct a space of enticement in which readers are seduced to submit to the reading experience (1982, p. 17). This mythologisation of literature as a ‘spiritual act’ (Hillis Miller, p. 20), ‘a kind of magic’ (Fforde, 2003, p. 50), or even a form of madness, presents an intoxicating vision of the literary experience.

This framing of the literary encounter as ‘divine possession’ (Roche, 2004, p. 82) is fundamental to understanding anxieties about literature raised in the debates surrounding scandalous texts. Indeed, despite these euphoric descriptions of the literary experience, the interest of this thesis is in the negative framing of the transformative effects of literature in the discourses of scandal. The notion of possession is at the centre of anxieties concerning controversial works, as literature is negatively linked with the potential for radical new ways of understanding the world. Despite the popularity and innovations of emergent media, which appear to reduce the significance of literary works, printed word continues to raise similar concerns to those expressed by Plato in The Republic.
The fear is that the literary text will persuade its consumers to believe and invest in new ideas that are viewed as inherently false.

It is worth noting here that critical emphasis on the transformative power of literature and literary scandal are both part of a continuing history of judging texts in terms of their ethical value. It is a tradition informed by the expectation that literature will perform a didactic or moral purpose, as evidenced by the use of religious texts such as the Bible and the Qur’an as instructional works in education, and the development of forms such as the mediaeval morality play. The contemporary ‘ethical turn’ in literary studies continues to raise questions about the moral effects of texts, as seen in the works of critics such as Wayne Booth (1998) and Martha Nussbaum (2001). Ethical debates similarly emerge in the discourses surrounding scandalous works, as critics and readers recognise the intimate relationship between language, the individual and the world.

This thesis, in its focus on literary scandals, will examine anxieties about the relationship between text and world, and it will be unique in a number of ways. To begin with, the thesis will look at literary scandals as part of a paradigm in which particular trends can be detected. Novels such as Madame Bovary (1857) and Lady Chatterley’s Lover (1922), for example, have attracted significant criticism exploring the characteristics of the trials of their authors and publishers, and the censorship of the books, yet neither work has been examined as part of a broader pattern in which literature, for instance, about sexual women provokes controversy. On the other hand, scandals involving fakes prompt encyclopaedic studies in which authors compile long lists of literary imposture. The most recent of these, Simon Caterson’s Hoax Nation (2009) and Melissa Katsoulis’ Telling Tales (2009), reveal not only a popular interest in hoaxes, but also their status as amusing cultural artefacts. As Katsoulis repeatedly notes, the stories of fakes ‘are often incredibly funny’ and ‘should be read as much for amusement…as for literary-historical edification’ (pp. 1-2). However, the reduction of these scandals to a series of entertaining quirks trivialises controversy and defuses the anxieties that are revealed in the exposure of a literary fake. There is thus a critical tendency either to focus on individual scandals and texts, or to collate details about scandalous works in a way that diminishes the revelations offered by particular controversies.
While publications such as Jago Morrison and Susan Watkins’ (eds) *Scandalous Fictions* (2007), Elisabeth Ladenson’s *Dirt for Art’s Sake* (2007), Gillian Whitlock’s *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (2007), K.K. Ruthven’s *Faking Literature* (2001), Rosa Eberly’s *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (2000) and William A. Cohen’s *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (1996) have theorised controversy and moved beyond simply recounting the minutiae of various scandals, there remains a considerable gap in understanding the overall significance of literary scandals. Further, the staging of scandal itself is inherently—and perhaps, aptly—disorganised, occurring across a variety of media forms from a multitude of discordant claims and perspectives. Controversy is an untidy affair and remains something rather random and enigmatic.

The aim of this thesis, then, is to draw together a wide range of literary scandals in order to identify key trends and connections between controversial works and the arguments they provoke. To date, there has been no research produced about controversial literature that offers a framework and analysis comparable to this thesis, which does not simply chronicle controversial events but presents a detailed examination of the literary and cultural anxieties that scandals expose. Indeed, this study reveals how the alluring conflicts of scandal bring to the surface a series of concerns about the complex creation of identity, history and reality through language constructs.

In terms of the scope of the scandals discussed, and thus the cultural anxieties that are explored, the thesis is limited to controversies which have occurred in nations that no longer retain traditional censorship legislation. The scandalous texts analysed emerge primarily from the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, democratic states that claim the right of its citizens to the freedom of expression, as opposed to nations such as China or Saudi Arabia, which maintain highly regulated controls over public speech and written material. The delineation is necessarily practical but, more interestingly, it allows the thesis to explore how a reading public responds to challenging literary works in environments where representative boundaries are reliant on subjective rather than legal appraisals. While legislative limitations do exist, such as those concerning child pornography, ideas about appropriate forms of literary representation and content emerge from public discussion, as does the attempt to circumscribe
certain works through actions such as boycott, censorship and book burning. Curiously, or perhaps predictably, the objections raised in democratic Western nations to scandalous texts are often aligned with the objections associated with more totalitarian states. Anxieties about the portrayal of sexually autonomous women, for example, were expressed in the controversy surrounding *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2004) by the Australian author Nikki Gemmell, while recent works such as Philip Pullman’s *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010) have provoked arguments about the defamation of religious figures. The appearance of ostensibly fundamentalist anxieties within the context of Western democracies suggests that concerns about the relationship between representation and the world are cross-culturally consistent.

Importantly, the aim of the thesis is not to attempt to model or define the shape of literary scandals per se. Instead, the thesis explores the anxieties underlying literary controversies. Generally, scandalous texts are contextualised in public debates in terms of a transgression of taboos, highlighted for their displacement of the status quo and the introduction of something radically ‘other’. But as the thesis contends, literary controversies are not just about content that is simply shocking or outrageous. Contemporary controversies repeatedly raise concerns about children, women, sexuality, authenticity and religious belief, with each theme persistently returning to ideas about identity construction. Indeed, scandal is infatuated with notions of the self, and the ways in which identity emerges and metamorphoses via the medium of language. Anxieties about subjectivity are consistently linked to political agendas, from the visions of nationhood expressed by the American religious right to the patriarchal interests raised in the ‘moral’ objections to works found in the ‘posh porn’ genre. With the occurrence of a literary fake, arguments about identity shift to become less ideologically centered, expressing anxieties about an ‘essential’ self and the potential for re-writing subjectivity through the constructs of language. Thus while scandals are inevitably the products of conflicting (and competing) political and ideological agendas—and while identity is implicated in these cultural narratives—controversy remains fundamentally concerned with the volatile intimacy between a reader and the written word.

As noted, scandals repeatedly occur in response to anxieties connected with children, women, sexuality, authenticity and religion, thus these themes form

Figured as the most vulnerable members of society, children are at the centre of the most vitriolic and numerous of public debates, as gatekeepers such as parents, schools, libraries, community agencies and the church contest what kind of material—and thus what kind of ideas—are most appropriate for the developing minds of the nation. Categorising scandalous children’s texts according to issues concerning sexuality, race and religion, the analysis explores how literature is utilised as a vehicle through which to prosecute both dominant and marginal agendas with the aim to protect—or transform—emergent identities.

In chapter two, the thesis examines representations of women and sexuality, tracing the anxious relationship between women and literature from the censorship trials of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to one of the late-twentieth century’s most notorious scandals, that of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991). Exploring the trials of *Madame Bovary* (1857), *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1922) and *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), the chapter highlights the historical grounding of the link between controversial literature and representations of sexual women and the female body, connecting the need to control an ‘obscene’ text with a broader desire to limit and control the behaviours of women. The section also discusses the recent emergence of the ‘posh porn’ genre, and the contemporary response to the depiction of ostensibly post-feminist, sexually liberated women in works such as Toni Bentley’s *The Surrender* (2004), Melissa Panarello’s *100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed* (2004) and Charlotte Roche’s *Wetlands* (2009). Drawing on debates about sexuality and pornography, the chapter discusses the difficulties of contesting gender stereotypes and the anxieties related to the re-narrating of traditional masculine and feminine identities.
Ideas about the slipperiness of an ‘essential’ self or meaning are the focus of chapter three, which analyses the phenomenon of the literary fake. The discussion explores false memoirs and testimonies which have appeared over recent decades, including Herman Rosenblat’s Angel at the Fence (unpublished), Binjamin Wilkomirski’s Fragments (1995), Helen Demidenko’s The Hand That Signed the Paper (1994), James Frey’s A Million Little Pieces (2003), David Pelzer’s A Child Called ‘It’ (1995), Kathy O’Beirne’s Don’t Ever Tell (2006), Norma Khouri’s Forbidden Love (2003), and Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonio, I, Rigoberta Menchú (1983). Dividing works into categories relating to the Holocaust, ‘misery memoirs’ and ethnic impostors, the chapter considers anxieties about the construction—and re-construction—of identity through the medium of language, noting the performative nature of self and the narrative quality of culture, history and society. Fakes encompass a broad range of narratives and re-visioned identities, from Misha Defonseca’s Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust (1997), the narrative of a woman surviving Nazi persecution by living with wolves, to the autobiographies of Nasdijj (2000-2004), an acclaimed Native American writer exposed as an Anglo-American author of gay sadomasochistic pornography. While the degree of faking varies, each scandal reveals a cultural anxiety about authenticity and the need to find—or feel—something that can be accepted as unquestionably ‘true’. As the chapter argues, the mimicking performed by a fake profoundly unsettles the boundaries between fact and fiction to suggest that reality is little more than an authentic—and persuasive—effect.

Finally, chapter four focuses on blasphemous texts and a defining scandal of the late-twentieth century, the outrage provoked by Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses (1988). While numerous texts have analysed the ‘Rushdie Affair’, explorations of the scandal tend to be specific and isolated from similar literary controversies. The discussion of The Satanic Verses in this chapter contextualises the event in terms of its relation to other contemporary blasphemy scandals. Examining the concept of blasphemy and the conflict between Christianity and Islam, the section analyses how sacrilegious texts are not contained within the parameters of religion, but extend to involve anxieties concerning individual and collective identities, the borderlines of nationality and

---

1 While this text proves an exception to the ‘Western’ focus of the thesis, American academics and journalists instigated the scandal provoked by the memoir, and the debates surrounding the text occurred largely within the United States.
the construction of the ‘other’. The reaction against texts such as *The Satanic Verses*, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000) are responses to the introduction of difference, be it in the form of challenges to patriarchy, nationality or sexuality. Blasphemy scandals seem concerned with protecting the status quo from the threat of ‘otherness’, and securing existing power structures from the possibilities of transformation. Indeed, the chapter argues that anxieties concerning the sacred are ultimately centred on issues of language and fear of the transformative relationship between representation and the world, with blasphemy scandals typically emphasising the sacredness of the word.

Invariably, the discourses surrounding scandals suggest a cultural need for fixed forms of knowing and behaving, for definitive modes of conceptualising identity and the world. As critics and readers react in unruly ways to unruly texts, literary controversies reveal an impetus to control representation in the interests of controlling reality. Provoking ritualistic book-burnings, death threats, boycotts and critical excoriation, transgressive works hit at the core of ideas about what constitutes self and ‘other’, the genuine and the fake, the normative and the perverse. The intention of this thesis is to look beyond the hyperbole of the scandalous moment and explore the anxieties raised by controversial texts and what these concerns reveal about literature, the literary and, indeed, the world.
CHAPTER ONE
UNSUITED TO AGE GROUP: THE SCANDALS OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

In what has come to be known as the 2007 ‘Mini-Penis Scandal’, US publishers Boyd Mills Press refused to release the German picture storybook *Winter-Wimmelbuch* on the grounds that it contained inappropriate illustrations of naked male and female bodies. Before its distribution, the publishers requested that the book, by Rotraut Susanne Berner, remove images deemed unacceptable for an American audience, namely, art gallery scenes of a cartoon nude and a seven-millimetre-tall statue of a naked man on a pedestal. The statue’s ‘mini-willy’, Franziska Bossy and Elke Schmitter contend, ‘is hardly even a half-millimetre long’, while the ‘naked woman hanging on the wall…[is] hardly a realistic depiction of the female anatomy’ (2007). When Berner argued that ‘she could maybe have lived with putting black bars in front of the problem spots, but “invisible censorship” was out’, the publishers declined to print an American version of the book (qu. Bossy & Schmitter, 2007). ‘American kiddies’, Bossy and Schmitter observe, are now ‘safe from shocking German sensibilities’, protected from a potentially harmful exposure to the ‘cartoon boobies and mini-penis’ (2007). As the German newspaper *Die Welt* declared: ‘Kein deutscher Mini-Penis für die USA’ (qu. Zammarelli, 2007a).  

The scandal of the ‘teenie weenie’ (*Deutsche Welle* qu. Zammarelli, 2007a), while focussed on an image, is situated in a long and complex history of controversy about children’s literature. Indeed, since the development of a notion of childhood and of literary works targeted specifically at the child in the late eighteenth century, children’s literature has been a site of considerable angst. As Peter Hunt notes, ‘from criticism of folk- and fairy-tales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to debates about the dumbing-down effects of the Tellytubbies in the 1990s’ (2001, p. 257), texts for children can provoke strong public reactions. The sensitivity attached to conceptualisations of the child-figure has meant that representations aimed at children tend to be carefully monitored, and are capable of attracting considerable scrutiny from institutions such as the school and church. Intimately connected with education, literature for children is viewed as a tool that will inform and socialise a child, playing a crucial role in

---

2 ‘No German mini-penis for the USA’
character development. As Kay Vandergrift observes in *Child and Story*, ‘the inward experience of story...helps a child gain what we all strive for as human beings—a sense of personal identity, a sense of control over one’s existence and a sense of connection with others in the world’ (1980, p. 2). The threefold idealisation of children’s literature as a medium for personal, social and educative growth has led to public concern with the reading material of children and young adults, and the interest of key gatekeepers—such as schools, libraries, community agencies and the church—in (in)appropriate literary content.

In considering the connections between children and literary scandal, this chapter critically examines the taboos that exist around children and their exposure to particular literary forms and content. The analysis is largely focussed on American controversies and cultural debates—firstly, because the majority of scandals are located within the context of the US, and secondly, because the aim is to explore the emergence of literary scandal in societies that no longer retain traditional censorship laws such as those found, for example, in Middle Eastern nations. Arguably, children’s literature is a form that is inseparable from concerns and debates about education, morality, socialisation and identity construction. As this chapter discusses, the scandals of children’s literature are predominantly related to representations of sexuality and religion, and are propelled by vocal minorities determined to protect or advocate a specific worldview. Scandalous events occur primarily in response to literature that deals with homosexuality and anti-Christian themes, aggravating groups such as the American religious right whilst contributing to culture wars conflicts concerned with the educative—and transformative—function of literature. The conflict about children’s literature is not a simplistic opposition of mainstream values against minority politics, but rather a complex situation in which marginalised voices use texts for children as a vehicle for wider contestations. And while these debates can be broadly thematised, it is crucial to note that scandalous literary events centred on children are highly contextual, shaped by the efforts of particular groups to prosecute specific interests via a public forum. Moreover, controversial children’s literature is characterised by a series of scandalous moments, failing to invite outrage of the size attracted by Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, for example, but appearing consistently in regular sequences of alarm. As this section explores, literature for children is a source of continual anxiety, shaped by the need for
control and the suggestion that there is something about the meeting of child and text that, alongside rapturous descriptions of how ‘story brings a special richness to a child’s life’ (Vandergrift, 1980, p. 273), is profoundly unsettling.

**FRAMING THE CHILD: CHILDHOOD, CHILDREN AND LITERATURE**

Before navigating the scandals of children’s literature, it is necessary to negotiate concepts of the child, connecting the comparatively modern rise of the category of childhood with the development of children’s texts and ideas about transformation, control and unease. According to Chris Jenks in *Childhood* (1996), while it ‘is clearly the case that children are omnipresent in human society across space and through time, it is nevertheless true to say that childhood is a relatively recent phenomenon’ (p. 52). As Philippe Ariès contends in the pioneering *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), the Western notion of childhood as a distinct stage of life did not fully consolidate until the late eighteenth century. Ariès asserts that throughout the Middle Ages, ‘at the beginning of modern times, and for a long time after that in the lower classes, children were mixed with adults as soon as they were considered capable of doing without their mothers or nannies’ (p. 395). Jenks notes that in the wake of the medieval era, children emerged ‘initially as playthings’, not yet insulated from the adult world, but a source of ‘delight or entertainment’ (p. 57). Whilst the pleasure in ‘coddling’ children that appeared in the late sixteenth century began to segregate the child from the adult realm, it remained an indulgence of the privileged classes, who could ‘afford the luxury of childhood with its demands on material provision, time and emotion and its attendant paraphernalia of toys and special clothing’ (p. 57). It was not until the late eighteenth century, assisted largely by the publication of Jean Jacque Rousseau’s *Émile* in 1762 and the ideals of the Enlightenment, that children finally ‘escaped into difference’ (Jenks, p. 58). As Priscilla Robertson notes, ‘if the philosophy of the Enlightenment brought to eighteenth century Europe a new confidence in the possibility of human happiness, special credit must go to Rousseau for calling attention to the needs of children’ (1974, p. 407). According to Robertson, Rousseau encouraged ‘interest in the process of growing up rather than just the product’, assisted by a cultural impetus that recognised the potential for social progress in systems of mass education (p. 407).
Alan Richardson, in *Literature, Education, and Romanticism* (1994), adds that while the concept of childhood ‘characteristic of the modern period is defined by educational practices and institutions’, its construction is also shaped by ‘received traditions, changing religious and political ideologies, shifts in philosophical and scientific thought, and, quite notably in the Romantic era, by literary representation’ (p. 10). The Romantic writing that solidified visions of childhood sought to position the (rather innocent) child as a creature determined by ‘the quality of its experience’ and by ‘its relation to the social world’ (p. 12). John Locke, for example, articulated an ‘environmentalist’ view of a child as being born morally neutral, a ‘white paper or wax, to be moulded or fashioned’ only by experience (in Axtell, 1968, p. 325). Similarly, in *Émile*, Rousseau constructed a ‘utopian’ image of the child as a virtuous ‘young tree’, born innocent and corrupted only through contact with society: ‘God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil’ (1969, p. 5). Childhood was thus recognised as a stage in which external influences play a crucial role in formulating subjectivity. Repeatedly, children are framed as ‘lumps of clay’ (Vandergrift, 1980, p. 3), beings to be moulded. As William Godwin described it in his ‘Enquiry Concerning Political Justice’ (1798), the child is ‘raw material put into our hands, a ductile and yielding substance, which, if we do not ultimately mould in conformity with our wishes, it is because we throw away the power committed to us.’ Children in this view are not biologically determined beings, subjectivities fixed by birth, but rather identities in process, selves in construction. Thus from the earliest conceptions of childhood, children have been situated in discourses concerned with their pliability and associated with a state of being that is impressionable and in flux. Views of the child as a plastic creature have ensured that the role of education was paramount; as Rousseau stated, ‘plants are shaped by cultivation, and men by education’ (1969, p. 6).

At the same time as the child was being conceptualised, literacy rates were spreading, systems of mass education were beginning and improvements to printing technologies were enabling the increased circulation of books. Indeed, literature played a key role in ‘shaping and effecting transformations in schooling and in the social function of reading’ (Richardson, 1994, p. xiv) and, with a vision of the child as ‘wax’, the texts chosen to serve educational, social and cultural agendas were scrupulously monitored by bodies such as the church and school.
Given the propensity to consider the identities of children as *tabula rasa*, childhood became a period of intense governance and control. The literary experience was one that could be carefully supervised to ensure exposure was isolated to the most appropriate of works, a feat made possible by the difficulty of children actually obtaining books for themselves. Jack Zipes argues that ‘children rarely bought books. They were given them as gifts on special occasions. When not reading the Bible, their major reading...they read the books selected for them’ (2001, p. 47). Zipes further notes that late-eighteenth century publishers ‘considered it their civic duty to print books for children that would improve their morals’, thus the literature produced for children through to ‘the middle of the nineteenth century tended to be overtly religious, didactic and serious’ (p. 47).

Including revised fairytales and texts such as Sarah Trimmer’s *Family Magazine* (1788-89), Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795-98) and Maria Edgeworth’s *Popular Tales* (1804), an ‘industrial’ form of literature emerged to displace street-disseminated chapbooks and broadsheets and make available an ‘instructive’ body of popular works (Richardson, 1994 p. 31). With the exponential growth of literacy and the surfacing of a ‘reading public’ in the eighteenth century, ‘it increasingly became the role of educational institutions to monitor and facilitate the proper ideological functioning of literary texts’ (Richardson, p. 33). As Terry Eagleton states in *Criticism & Ideology*, literature was recognised as a vital instrument for the integration of individuals into the ‘perceptual and symbolic forms of the dominant ideological formations, able to accomplish this function with a “naturalness”, spontaneity and experiential immediacy possible to no other ideological practice’ (2006, p. 56). The literature offered to children, then, was fastidiously controlled by institutions such as the school, the increasingly privatised family, and the church, in order to ensure that the literary experience taught the child the value systems of the society into which it was to be integrated.

Indeed, by the middle of the nineteenth century, thinkers such as Matthew Arnold recognised the cultural role that literature could play not only in terms of the individual, but also *en masse*, by educating and controlling the nation via the public school system. Arnold perceived education as a process of humanising, a ‘civilising agent’ capable of countering the ‘barbarism’ apparent in lower- and working-class communities where schooling was minimal and utilitarian (Palmer,
According to Arnold in *The Popular Education of France* (1861), the school is an ‘instrument of general civilisation’ (p. 166), and through its teaching of literature or ‘letters’, a medium capable of raising an individual to new heights of ‘greatness, high feeling and fine culture’ (p. xxxii). Importantly, Arnold understood the relationship between ‘literary cultivation’, education and social control/ transformation, seeing the school as a prime institutional means through which to effect cultural identity on a national scale. As Arnold asserted, it is education that ‘fixes and maintains the intellectual level of a people’, and literature that forms ‘the soul and character’ (Arnold, qu. Palmer, p. 79). However, as Palmer observes, ‘underlying the explicit concern for order and “civilisation”’ is an abiding ‘desire to perpetuate the values of the dominant class by superimposing those values on the class beneath it’ (p. 56). Arnold’s contention that without literature in public schools there ‘is no humanising instruction at all’ (qu. Palmer, p. 68) is thus not only related to ideas about education and a philosophy of subject development, but also to the use of literary works as a tool for social control.

Given that the concept of childhood arose in tandem with Enlightenment notions about mass education and Romantic images of the child as an empty vessel, children’s literature was (and is) inseparable from ideas about the identity-building potential of books. From the Romantic era onwards, the recognition that children are subjects shaped through language and culture has ensured that childhood literature is the source of anxiety as much as affirmations of the educative effects of the literary experience. The framing of children within debates about scandalous literature remains concerned with ideas about subjectivity, and controversial material is often discussed in terms of the possible harm—and at times even the ‘evil’—it will inflict. J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, for example, has attracted outrage from the American religious right, who argue that the texts promote the occult to children. Websites such as The Cutting Edge detail how the ‘*Harry Potter* books are superb conditioning vehicles’ for inculcating children into the tenets of ‘witchcraft and… high level occultism that [the] Antichrist will be practising when he arises’ (2008). While this response conveys an extreme approach, such discussions have drawn considerable support, with thousands of online sites, books and DVDs dedicated to unravelling the satanic messages of *Harry Potter*. Perceived as the most vulnerable members of
society, children are at the centre of arguments about the ways in which literature should function to transmit particular worldviews and inculcate particular values. Scandals about children’s texts, then, ultimately reveal anxieties about the intimate connection between children, identity and literature, and the centrality of language in determining notions of both self and ‘other’.

IGNITING DEBATE: THE SCANDALOUS TEXTS

The following analysis considers how the complex interaction between child and text is interpreted through the critical public reception of children’s literature perceived as scandalous. It examines the recurring themes of children’s literature controversies and their relation to concerns about the construction of self and other, normative cultural structures, and the transformative potential of text. With a focus on contemporary literature, the analysis includes texts such as Melvin Burgess’ Doing It (2004), the reissue of Hergé’s Tintin in the Congo (2005), Lesléa Newman’s Heather Has Two Mommies (1989), Philip Pullman’s Northern Lights (1995), Lois Lowry’s The Giver (1993), Justin Richardson’s and Peter Parnell’s And Tango Makes Three (2005), J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series (1996-2007), Paul Ruditis’ Rainbow Party (2005), and Michael Willhoite’s Daddy’s Roommate (1991). Each text serves to highlight the ways in which literature for children, including young adults, is subject to a series of volatile representational taboos, revealing not only anxieties about the vulnerable reader, but also about sexual and religious norms, and threat of the ‘other’ to dominant ways of understanding the world.

There are some notably absent themes when it comes to the scandals of children’s literature. For example, controversies relating to racial depictions are suspiciously absent and, when they do occur, are largely concerned with texts produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The texts of Enid Blyton, for example, remain a source of considerable angst, as does Helen Bannerman’s Little Black Sambo (1899) and Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn (1884). This is by no means to suggest that racist texts are no longer being circulated and produced, but that they fail to emerge within the discourses of scandal. Indeed, the majority of racist literature involved in current debates is constituted by re-issues of older narratives that are capable of being abnegated
through the process of historical contextualisation. The controversy, then, is a contradictory ‘safe scandal’, a furore that has already been rehearsed through decades of discontent. Similarly, while depictions of sex within young adult literature are often critiqued for the use of graphic detail, it is rare for texts to be excoriated for misogyny. As with the dearth of outrage provoked by contemporary racism, the near-absence of protest suggests that misogyny is sufficiently embedded within cultural practices so as to attract only minor criticism. By contrast, the exploration of sexual identities in literature for children is consistently explosive, while texts that challenge (Christian) religious orthodoxies remain prime targets for the disapprobation of conservative right-wing American critics and readers—as recently demonstrated by the upset over the adaptation of Pullman’s ‘anti-Christian’ *Northern Lights* into the popular film, *The Golden Compass* (2007).

According to the American Library Association (ALA, 2008), of the top ten books challenged in 2007, nine were directly targeted at children and young adults, eight of which were reported for concerns about sexual content. Indeed, the question of sexuality in children’s literature persistently provokes the most fervent public responses, often regardless of the degree of sexual content or its context. In 2004, for example, Robie Harris’ *It’s Perfectly Normal* (1996), a health book for young adults discussing puberty and sexuality, was described by a conservative Christian critic as ‘sex ideology for youngsters’, which would ‘not be out of place on the walls of a ruined brothel in Pompeii’ (Duigon, 2004). In 2005, Louise Rennison’s young adult novel *On the Bright Side, I’m Now the Girlfriend of a Sex God* (2002) came under attack because its title was ‘misleading, degrading and harmful to the minds and possible safety of teenaged girls’, while the book itself ‘could encourage young women to pursue older men, which would lead to statutory rape, which would lead to STDs, which could lead to suicide’ (qu. Zammarelli, 2005a). In another incident, labelled by one website as the ‘Scrotumgate’ affair (ANE, 2007), Susan Patron’s Newbery-Award-winning *The Higher Power of Lucky* (2007) was criticised for its ‘inappropriate’ anatomical detail: ‘Sammy told of the day when he had drunk half a gallon of rum listening to Johnny Cash all morning in his parked ’62 Cadillac, then fallen out of the car when he saw a rattlesnake on the passenger seat biting his dog, Roy, on the scrotum’ (p. 12). Frederick Muller argued that the choice of vocabulary indicated
‘a good case of an author not realising her audience’, school librarian Andrea Koch stated that ‘I don’t think our teachers, or myself, want to do that vocabulary lesson’, while the teacher and librarian Dana Nilsson asserted that ‘you won’t find men’s genitalia in quality literature’ (qu. Bosman, 2007).

The meeting of child and sex is indeed highly volatile territory, with the most scandalous of literary controversies often occurring in relation to texts that deal with same-sex parent families. As Judith Krug, the director of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom wryly notes, homosexuality in literature for children tends to make ‘people go a little crazy’ (qu. Lea, 2007). According to Chuck Colson in an article entitled ‘Shutting Down Opposition: The Gay Agenda and Schoolkids’ (posted on the notorious anti-gay website http://americansfortruth.com), the literature of ‘radical gays’ is striving to ‘normalise homosexuality’, a form of union that is intrinsically ‘disordered’ (2008). Colson refers to the picture storybook King & King, a Dutch publication by authors Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland that was released as an English-language text in the US in 2002. The storybook recounts the tale of a prince who is unable to find the perfect princess but meets the perfect prince, falls in love, marries and lives happily ever after. A scandal occurred when parents attempted to sue an American school district for ‘allowing a teacher to read to their 6-year-olds a book that normalises homosexual love and marriage’ (qu. Colson, 2008). The case was promptly dismissed, with Judge Mark Wolf stating that public schools ‘are entitled to teach anything that is reasonably related to the goals of preparing students to become engaged and productive citizens in our democracy’ (qu. Saltzman, 2007). Wolf also rejected claims that parents had the right to remove their children from classes that discuss and depict homosexual behaviour, arguing that it would ‘send the message that gays, lesbians, and the children of same-sex parents are inferior and, therefore, have a damaging effect on those students’ (qu. Colson, 2008). Colson, however, asserts that ‘if the school district is really committed to teaching about all kinds of families, then why not give children a story about a prince who longs for another prince, realises his longings are disordered, undergoes reparative therapy, and lives happily ever after—with a princess?’ (Colson, 2008).

Heather Has Two Mommies, as one of the first published books for children dealing with the subject of same-sex parents, emerged within a public
context that was even more hostile. While author Lesléa Newman argues that the enmity the text attracted was ‘wildly overshadowed by support’ (qu. Carroll, 2008), it remains that the picture storybook has been used to propel debates about gay marriage, the rights of homosexual couples to access artificial insemination technologies, and the long-term effects on children who live with same-sex parents. The text is thus a clear demonstration of the ways in which controversial literature acts as a mechanism through which existing cultural anxieties can be expressed. The right-wing American political columnist Alisa Craddock, for example, uses the book as a launching point for a series of homophobic arguments, claiming that if homosexual unions were legalised in the US, ‘the crumbling vestiges of our culture would not be able to withstand it’ (2006). Craddock adds that ‘free sexual activity is not a “right”. Nothing that is destructive to the general welfare of society is a right. However, if homosexuality is artificially elevated to the status of a right, it will immediately begin conflicting with authentic rights, especially freedom of speech and religion’ (2006). In 1994, American ‘anti-gay’ activists and politicians sought to remove *Heather Has Two Mommies* from public access. The notoriously right-wing, pro-censorship senators Robert Smith and Jesse Helms decried the book as ‘obscene’ and co-sponsored a bill to ban schools receiving federal funds from offering programs that ‘have the purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative’ (qu. Bussell, 2008). Further, in 2006, legislation was passed in Oklahoma to allow the state to withhold funding from schools that refused to restrict children’s access to ‘reading material with sexually explicit or gay themes’, with lawmakers criticising *King & King*, *Daddy’s Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies* as specifically menacing examples (ALA, 2007).

While such responses appear excessive—and thus easy to dismiss—it is crucial to recognise that literary scandals are public events, existing in community dialogues, and engaging in political, social and cultural tensions. Controversy is not relegated to academic analysis, but is a process that occurs in schools, on-line chat-rooms, blogs, dedicated websites, community brochures, and popular magazines and newspapers. The reactions of readers such as Colson and Craddock, then, are the very basis of scandal, and allow broader concerns and interests to be articulated. As the British author Melvin Burgess suggests, it is nonetheless important to note that criticisms against particular texts can be media
choreographed to ensure that groups renowned for oppositional stances are projected into the forefront of commentaries. As Burgess states, media debates are shaped by a ‘vocal minority who don’t have a lot of actual clout. The media…want a ding-dong, so they invite someone from Mad Bitches Against Gay People onto their program’ (qu. Lea, 2007). The question of scandal, however, is not necessarily concerned with the effects of ‘actual clout’, but rather with the idea that such debates emerge, engineered or otherwise. Indeed, it is possible to argue that even if controversy is an artful management of vocal critics, anxieties were already in place to suggest the potential for such scandal to occur. That is, an underlying current of unease or discontent must exist in order for a scandal to be produced, organically or artificially.

When Richardson’s and Parnell’s *And Tango Makes Three* was released into the US book market, for example, it was into a context with an established antipathy towards literature adopting a ‘gay theme’. Richardson and Parnell were aware of the cultural milieu, and so ensured that the factual basis of the storybook was highlighted during its promotion. The narrative, the story of two male chinstrap penguins, Roy and Silo, who adopt an egg to hatch and raise baby Tango, emphasises its origins in fact with an epilogue stating that ‘all the events in this story are true’ (p. 29), and details about the history of the chinstrap penguins living in Central Park Zoo. In an interview, Richardson describes how *The New York Times* ran an article called “The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name”, about homosexual behaviour in animals, which started with Roy and Silo’s story’ (qu. Lea, 2007). On reading the article, Richardson notes, ‘it started to sound like a children’s story’, and the authors proceeded to observe the penguins, aiming for accuracy and working ‘against the natural tendency in children’s literature to ascribe human motivations to animals, carefully removing anthropomorphism in successive drafts’ (Lea, 2007). Nonetheless, Richardson acknowledges that the storybook was intended to serve a broader cultural agenda, asserting that ‘one of the areas that parents find very difficult to discuss with their children is homosexuality’ (qu. Lea). As Krug, the director of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, adds, ‘people who complain about *And Tango Makes Three* really believe that homosexuality is wrong, that it’s against God’s commandments, that it’s harming society. The problem is that these children are growing up in a society where some of their classmates are going to come from
same-sex couples’ (qu. Lea). The ‘gay agenda’ of the text has often superseded its empirical basis, with parents arguing that the portrayal of sexual difference in the storybook is unsuitable for young readers, as is the endearing ‘naturalness’ with which the penguins’ homosexuality is portrayed. For example:

They didn’t spend much time with the girl penguins, and the girl penguins didn’t spend much time with them. Instead, Roy and Silo wound their necks around each other. Their keeper Mr. Gramzay noticed the two penguins and thought to himself, ‘They must be in love’ (p. 9).

Complaints made in several American school districts, including in Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Iowa, Wisconsin, Indiana and Illinois, requested the removal of the text from libraries, an appeal supported by the county education commissioners of these areas. The administrators of school districts in North Carolina issued a memo to principals which outlined their reasons for endorsing the ban: ‘First, it is a picture story book that focuses on homosexuality. Second, we did not feel that such information was vital to primary students. Next, we did not believe the book would stimulate growth in ethical standards, and the book is too controversial’ (qu. Boston News, 2006). Petitioners requested that the text be moved into the adult section, where it would be less likely to ‘blindside’ parents who could unknowingly select the book for a child reader. Other readers, however, refused to sustain the moral panic. As one commentator drolly remarked, the book is clearly ‘a plot by the radical homosexual penguin community to poison the minds of America’s youth’ (http://www.thecarpetbaggerreport.com, 2006). Typical of scandal, the controversy of the text grew in response to its own publicity; as the Simon and Schuster editor David Gale observed, ‘the problem is that people are responding to reports about the book rather than the book itself’ (qu. Lea, 2007). The necessity of consuming a work is made superfluous by explicit commentaries that encourage opinions to be formed in isolation from the actual text. It is a situation that recalls the infamous statement made by the Indian politician Syed Shahabuddin on his failure to read The Satanic Verses, despite his support for its condemnation and the fatwa imposed on Salman Rushdie: ‘Yes, I have not read it, nor do I intend to. I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is’ (qu. Pipes, 1990, p. 50). Or as Laurie Taylor, a key activist for the American Parents Protecting the Minds of Children, commented, ‘I don’t have to read an entire book to decide if the book is pornographic to me’ (qu. Pearce, 2008).
As with *Heather Has Two Mommies, And Tango Makes Three* proved divisive, splitting readers between those who applauded the sensitivity of the text and those who condemned its portrayal of homosexuality as normal. Similarly, Michael Willhoite’s *Daddy’s Roommate* evoked notable unease due to its domestic portrayal of a gay couple, with critics describing the text as ‘vile, sick and…against every law and constitution’ (qu. Staples, 1996). An American church minister went so far as to demand the removal of *Daddy’s Roommate* from the public library because it ‘invaded [his] privacy’ (NCAC, 2008). The picture book, which follows the day of a young boy whose father lives with ‘his roommate Frank’ (Willhoite, 1990, p. 3), has been celebrated by gay rights groups galvanized by the positive portrayal of homosexuality in mainstream literature. The text aims to posit the idea that families exist in a variety of forms, rejecting moralising dichotomies that dictate a ‘correct’ familial structure: ‘Mommy says Daddy and Frank are gay. At first I didn’t know what that meant. So she explained it. Being gay is just one more kind of love. And love is the best kind of happiness. Daddy and his roommate are very happy together. And I’m happy too!’ (pp. 22-5).

Texts that broach the territory of sexual ‘otherness’ not only transgress the conservative expectations of sexual and familial identities within literature for children, but also evoke anxieties that the child reader will be corrupted or harmed by positive images of homosexuality. As the American religious columnist David Kopp contends in the context of debates about *Heather Has Two Mommies*: ‘Let’s admit that the deeper dilemma for many Christians who oppose this book is often not a theological one, but an emotional one…We fear our kids will be indoctrinated somehow. We fear they’ll come to consider homosexuality as normal and then…the part we don’t say…become one’ (2008). The controversies emerging from literature portraying familial structures that are ‘other’ to the heteronormative paradigm are thus intimately linked to concerns about the transformative potential of text. The fear that a child will ‘become one’ (Kopp, 2008) by consuming an image of difference is an overtly literal interpretation of the persuasive effects of literature. However, it also belies anxieties that ‘otherness’ is a threat to established socio-cultural patterns and behaviours. As James Davison Hunter contends in *Culture Wars* (1991), few issues ‘generate more raw emotion than the issue of homosexuality’ (p. 189), arguing that little
else ‘challenge[s] the traditional assumptions of what nature will allow, the boundaries of the moral order, and finally the ideals of middle-class family life more radically’ (p. 189). The hostility of American conservatives towards the so-called ‘gay agenda’ is notoriously virulent, as demonstrated by the Republican Representative for Oklahoma, Sally Kern, who asserted that ‘the homosexual agenda’ is ‘the biggest threat our nation has, even more so than terrorism or Islam’ (Kern, 2008).

What these scandals also reveal is that both majority and minority groups are using literature as a means of vocalising political interests, as a vehicle through which to prosecute concerns with the transmission—or the subversion—of dominant social-cultural practices. Indeed, these scandalous children’s texts are usefully situated within the context of the American culture wars, the socio-political battle between conservative and progressive cultural values. Jonathan Zimmerman notes that the term ‘culture wars’ derives from the German *Kulturkampf*, which initially ‘referred to Protestant-Catholic battles over religion in school’ but has come to imply a social ‘struggle without end’ (2002, p. 214), an endless battle to secure ‘the hearts and minds of the American people’ (p. 208).

The politics of the culture wars are deeply implicated in the discourses of scandalous children’s literature, largely due to the propensity of such debates to occur in the educational context. A key battlefield for disputes about the family, sex education and the role of religious education, the school represents ‘America’s chief public institution for distilling and delivering moral values to its young’ (Zimmerman, p. 214). Indeed, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *King & King*, *And Tango Makes Three* and *Daddy’s Roommate* are all texts that have been challenged primarily because of their availability in school libraries and their appearance in classroom literature and discussions. Hunter observes that in the context of the culture wars, public education is not a ‘neutral process of imparting practical knowledge and technical skills’, but rather a ‘primary institutional means of reproducing community and national identity for succeeding generations of Americans. This is…where we are continually reminded…what it means to be an American’ (p. 198). The connection between children’s identity and the educative function of literature is one that remains clear, with the expectation that the child learner will be taught in accordance with a particular ‘version’ or vision of what ‘America’ is or should be.
Further, in the war for cultural dominance, Hunter argues that ‘the family is the most conspicuous field of conflict’, a ‘decisive battleground’ that invites debates over the ‘status and role of women, the moral legitimacy of abortion, the legal and social status of homosexuals, the increase in family violence [and] the rise of illegitimacy particularly among black teenagers and young adults’ (p. 176). The contest over the family, Hunter contends, is a ‘contest...over what constitutes the family in the first place. If the symbolic significance of the family is that it is a microcosm of the larger society...then the task of defining what the American family is becomes integral to the very task of defining American itself’ (p. 177).

Literature that presents same-sex families and homosexuality positively or that addresses young adult sexuality is thus perceived as a threat to an idea of the greater American community and the social boundaries it has chosen to maintain.

If both the family and education are the primary means of asserting and controlling the identity of the individual, and thus the identity of ‘America’ itself, then the scandals related to literature for children are firmly entrenched in arguments about the nation. It is, as Hunter adds, a battle ‘to define reality’, a contest for the ‘symbolic territory’ that orders and shapes lives and identities (p. 226). Debates surrounding the availability of ‘pro-gay’ literature in schools are therefore deeply connected to wider concerns about familial and cultural paradigms, about an authorised ‘version’ of the nation competing with alternative perspectives.

‘FEEL YER TITS?’: SEXUAL CONTENT IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

The representation of sex in young adult fiction is another source of persistent concern. The pubescent child is a source of considerable angst, a being requiring containment—especially, it seems, if that being is an emerging young woman. The availability of The Diary of Anne Frank (1947), for example, has been contested in American schools not because it discusses the horrors of the Holocaust, but rather because it intimately describes the female body, menstruation and female sexuality. The adolescent child is evolving physically, and is also as a subject beginning to assert control, signalling increased autonomy and a loss of the absolute nature of parental and institutional restraint. Consistent with the propensity of debates about scandalous literature to involve rather literal
interpretations of the transformative relationship between word and world, the concern attached to sexual content in young adult literature is often based on fears that the child reader will enact (or is enacting) the activities described on the page. The result, as the scandal of Paul Ruditis’ *Rainbow Party* revealed, is a deeply-embedded anxiety surrounding the availability of sexual material for young adult readers, a profound unease that at times resembles a moral panic.

In October 2003, a segment on America’s *Oprah Winfrey* talkshow entitled ‘Is Your Child Leading a Double Life?’ discussed the ‘shocking’ secrets of teenage sex lives. The episode, informed by the *O Magazine* feature writer Michelle Burford, not only suggested that teenagers were sexually active, but also framed such behaviour as an epidemic threatening the wellbeing of America’s youth and the inviolability of parental authority. In the limelight of *Oprah*, Burford listed popular names for various sexual acts, including the term ‘rainbow party’, a euphemism for group sex involving girls wearing various shades of lipstick and fellating boys in sequence, thus leaving behind a series of ‘rainbow’ rings (Burford, 2004). While Burford by no means invented the term, the phrase gained further publicity at a time when a ‘teenage oral sex panic’ was reaching its speculative heights. As Cathy Young notes, in July 1998, *The Washington Post* ran a ‘front-page story with the headline, “Parents Are Alarmed by an Unsettling New Fad in Middle Schools: Oral Sex”’ (2006). The dramatic story went on to relate a controversy involving ‘a group of eighth-graders [who] would get together for parties at which boys and girls paired off for sexual activities that eventually progressed from petting to oral sex’ (Young, 2006). By the time *Rainbow Party* was released, there was significant hype surrounding ideas about the realities of teenage sexuality. Indeed, according to Tamar Lewin in *The New York Times* (2005), the novel was actually inspired by the broadcast of Burford’s ‘research’: ‘the publisher of *Rainbow Party*, got the idea for the book from an Oprah Winfrey show on which an editor…discussed adolescent code words for sexual practices.’ The text, then, was produced not in response to an abiding concern with the sexual activities of young adults, but rather as marketable reaction to a moral panic. Ruditis, the author of the novel, was thus capitalising on

---

3 The integrity of Burford’s research has been seriously questioned. Burford purported to have interviewed 50 girls, some as young as nine, yet, as Young notes, she ‘did not say whether the girls had told her they themselves had attended such parties, or if they had simply heard rumours. Nor was any proof produced of what was actually said in those interviews’ (2006).
the existence of a media-assisted cultural anxiety, and astutely exploiting the strong link between scandal and profit.

The novel itself tracks the viewpoints of thirteen teenagers who are each confronted with the possibility of attending a much anticipated ‘rainbow party’. From its portrayal of the promiscuous popular girl to the virginal leader of the school celibacy club, the text attempts to encompass a spectrum of experiences in the representation of sexual identity, including homosexuality. As *Rainbow Party* traces the doubts and expectations of its characters, it becomes increasingly clear that ‘its message…seems to be one of old-fashioned moralism: The girl who plans the party is humiliated when hardly anyone shows up, then punished with a gonorrhoea infection to boot’ (Young, 2006). Indeed, while the scandal of *Rainbow Party* was related to its alleged perpetuation of the ‘oral-sex craze’ (Young, 2006) and excoriated for its ostensibly graphic content, critics often failed to note its moralistic and conservative messages, particularly in terms of gender. Monogamy and abstinence are both heralded as models for emulation, for instance, as are relationships that involve subservient and self-sacrificial women. The novel’s ideal couple, for example, denounce the sex-party and reassuringly celebrate chastity and female passivity:

‘We are not going to the party,’ he said as they separated. ‘I’m sorry if you want to go. But I’m not sharing you with anyone. Not today. Not ever.’
‘Good,’ she said. ‘I didn’t really want to go.’
‘But you were the one that told Jade—’
‘I thought I was doing it for you,’ she explained (p. 186).

According to Ruditis, the public response was extreme given that the text merely attempts to confront issues relating to the difficult questions of adolescent sexuality. As Ruditis states, ‘part of me doesn’t understand why people don’t want to talk about [oral sex]. Kids are having sex and they are actively engaged in oral sex and think it’s not really sex. I raised questions in my book and I hope that parents and children or teachers and students can open a topic of conversation through it’ (qu. Malkin, 2005). Yet while the novel certainly plays with key themes concerning childhood sexuality and urges the line of ‘safe practice’, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the text was produced as the result of media-induced panic. As the conservative American political commentator and author Michelle Malkin observes, the marketing of the text, as well as the content itself, contradicts an image of social responsibility and suggests that the scandal was
carefully strategised: ‘The author and publisher pay lip service to the informational value of the book to families, teachers and students...The front cover and book marketing...emphasise titillation over education, overpowering any redeeming value the book might have. Indeed, according to Publishers Weekly, the bound galleys sent to booksellers carried the provocative tagline, “don’t you want to know what really goes down?”’ (2005).

Melvin Burgess’ Doing It attracted similar concerns, specifically from the British children’s laureate Anne Fine, who accused it of being a ‘grubby book, which demeans both young women and young men’ (2003). In one of the few cases where scandal has occurred as a response to misogynistic representation and outside the context of the US, Doing It provoked public conflict between a left-wing literary critic (Anne Fine) and those who defended Burgess’ portrayal of young male sexual behaviour. While Fine represents a vocal minority, it is easy to see why the novel raised her indignation. The opening page, for example, introduces us to Burgess’ three male protagonists as they issue each other with a series of hypothetical dares:

‘Ok,’ said Jonathan. ‘The choice is this. You either have to shag Jenny Gibson—or else that homeless woman who begs spare change outside Cramner’s bakers.’

Dino and Ben recoiled in disgust. Jenny was known to be the ugliest girl in the school but the beggar woman was filthy. Her teeth! (2004, p. 1)

Driven by their hormonal obsessions, the three narrators proceed to detail their sexual encounters, including adventures with a schoolteacher, a girl who is ‘a bit on the plump side’ (p. 4) and a ‘pale grubby girl’ who ‘might be a fairy’ (p. 97). According to Fine, the novel ‘will prove as effective a form of bullying as any hardcore mag passed round’, arguing that ‘no girl or young woman should ever have to read these vile, disgusting musings about themselves. The publishers may claim that they are the real thoughts of young men. But would they be pushing the ignorant, upsetting views of four racists, or four anti-semites on the grounds these four, deluded people really do think this way?’ (2003). The British Director of Family Youth Concern, Robert Whelan, adds that exposing children to ‘such an animalistic world gives them such limited horizons’ (qu. Frean, 2003), while Nick Seaton, a spokesman for the British organisation Campaign for Real Education, describes the novel as ‘pornography for boys’ (qu. Frean). Yet critical reviews for Doing It were largely positive, describing the text as ‘fresh, honest and totally hilarious’, ‘fun, peppy and unusually frank’ and ‘good dirty fun’ (qu. Holt, 2008).
It was Fine’s pre-publication review that initiated the media furor, a critique patronisingly dismissed by Burgess as ‘just a rant’ (qu. Spring, 2003) and sneered at by critics who denounced ‘society’s moral guardians’ with ‘their knickers in…a twist’ (Spring, 2003). While the explicit sexual content of the novel has ensured it rarely appears in school and public libraries, few commentators other than Fine have suggested that there are problems with Burgess’ representation of women within the text. Fine notes that not only does the novel open with a debate about choosing between two equally ‘gross’ (Burgess, p. 1) women, but also continues with increasingly degrading images. As Fine observes:

It gets worse, right down to the touching prayer, ‘Please, please make Deborah thin—but with big tits so I’d still have those wonderful bazookas to play with’…I should stop. Spare you the counting of the number of fingers a boy managed to fit inside his girl, a lad’s heavy petting before coming back to ‘make us sniff his fingers to show he’d been there’. The charming exchanges of courtship: ‘Feel yer tits?’ ‘No.’ ‘Bit of finger?’ ‘No!’ (2003)

According to the writer Paul McGuire, literature intended for young adult readers does ‘no favours by avoiding difficult issues or sanitising them. Nor does it serve them by exaggeration and exploitation. To be sure, Burgess walks this line precariously at times, but there is little here that cannot be found in modern TV soap operas or mainstream lifestyle magazines easily available and accessible to all’ (2004). While McGuire urges readers to ‘avoid the blind hysteria’, he fails to acknowledge that the women portrayed in the text are uncritically reduced to the providers of sexual favours and stigmatised for being unattractive, overweight, frigid, deceptive, promiscuous and psychotic. Instead, critics reduce the question of outrage to the excesses of Fine’s feminist indignation. Kit Spring, for instance, argues that Fine has taken the graphic sexual content ‘all out of context…Doing It is funny, honest and touching with engagingly mixed up protagonists. And it is not misogynous…Everyone knows teenage boys are gross. Now we know they’re human too’ (2003). Burgess similarly diminishes the misogyny of the text to little more than a quirk of naïve young men. As Burgess comments, ‘a lot of the attacks I got on this book I felt were very offensive about my boys because I think they’re nice lads…I think that they’re quite charming in their own way’ (qu. Pike, 2003). Burgess adds that ‘young male culture hasn’t really been written about—for reasons which are now fairly obvious!’ (qu. Spring, 2003). To clarify the phallocentrism, Burgess goes so far as to include a dedication in the novel to his
penis: ‘With thanks to Mr Knobby Knobster’ (Burgess, 2003).

The misogynistic portrayal of women within literature for young adults often fails to garner public attention, with readers opting to defend the sexual exploits of the ‘nice lads’ (qu. Pike, 2003) rather than oppose the problematic and damaging perpetuation of gender stereotypes. While concerns over sexual content in literature for young readers relate to fears for the increasing sexualisation of the child, there is a notable lack of widespread anxiety relating to the reiteration of normative gender constructs. Moreover, while the graphic nature of Burgess’ novel met with some disquiet, it was by no means as excoriated as literature for young readers that contains or confronts a ‘gay agenda’.

A SCANDALOUS ABSENCE: CONTROVERSY AND RACE

While the portrayal of sex and sexuality in children’s literature is constantly debated in the public sphere, there is a curious absence of scandals concerned with racial representation, akin to the absence of controversy about misogynistic representation. Given the plethora of adult texts noted and contested for their negative stereotyping of racial ‘others’, from Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) to Michel Houellebecq’s Platform (2002), it is surprising that there are few counterparts in books for children. Indeed, while academic criticism of children’s literature is highly attuned to racial politics and offers sophisticated analyses of issues about race, xenophobia in contemporary texts for children seems largely incapable of registering public ire. The one controversy that did arise in 2007 was related to the re-release of Hergé’s 1930 comic narrative Tintin in the Congo. Again, however, this debate occurred outside of mainstream America and involved a government-sanctioned body designed to target racial injustice, as opposed to the right-wing protagonists of US literary controversies. Also, the scandal emerged in relation to a text that has been largely neutralised through historical contextualisation. Like Little Black Sambo and Huckleberry Finn, the scandalousness of Tintin in the Congo has been lessened through an acknowledgment of its situation in a particular time and place. Nonetheless, in 2007 the British Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) complained that it was unacceptable for retailers to sell or display Tintin in the Congo, describing it as a patently offensive text that ‘features crude racial stereotypes’ (Malvern, 2007),
patronising colonial attitudes, and ignorance about cultural difference.

Patently recognised as an example of colonial ideologies that the author ashamedly—yet uncritically—reproduced, *Tintin in the Congo* has been repeatedly situated in a historical milieu (Thompson, 1992, p. 38). Hergé apologetically confessed that he was ‘fed on the prejudices of the bourgeois society I lived in’, and claimed that ‘the only things I knew about these countries were what people said about them at the time. Africans were no more than big children. “It’s lucky for them that we’re over there”, and so on’ (qu. Thompson, p. 38). As a result of such an attitude, Tintin is portrayed as a transcendent colonial master, while those indigenous to the land are stigmatised as obtuse and lethargic, requiring the intervention of superior European culture, religion and education. And certainly, with images of Tintin shooting a herd of antelope (Hergé, 2007, p. 16), removing the tusks from an elephant (p. 42), skinning a monkey and wearing its fur as a disguise (p. 17), and being declared ‘white mister…big juju man!’ (p. 20) whilst his dog Snowy is crowned as the king of a Congolese tribe, it is clear that Hergé’s cartoon transgresses both ecological and racial boundaries. But it is important to note that *Tintin in the Congo* has been connected to anxiety since its release, and has continued to garner hostility wherever it is made available—except, again, in the US, where copies of the text were placed in the adult section purely to maintain congruity with British Borders stores (CBC Arts, 2007).

Accused of peddling ‘old-fashioned, racist claptrap’ (qu. Malvern), the UK Borders Group bookstores removed *Tintin in the Congo* from the children’s section and stocked it with literature for adults, stating that ‘we believe adults have the capacity to evaluate this work within historical context and make their own decision whether to read it or not’ (qu. Associated Press, 2007). Indeed, the re-release contains a similar preface forewarning readers of the potentially offensive content of the text and acknowledging the anachronistic nature of the material: ‘In his portrayal of the Belgian Congo, the young Hergé reflects the colonial attitudes of the time. He himself admitted that he depicted the African people according to the bourgeois, paternalistic stereotypes of the period—an interpretation that some of today’s readers may find offensive’ (2005). The CRE nonetheless argued that ‘it beggars belief that in this day and age Borders would think it acceptable to sell and display *Tintin in the Congo*. High street shops, and indeed any shops, ought to think very carefully about whether they ought to be
selling and displaying it’ (qu. Beckford, 2008).

In Britain, Tintin in the Congo was long excluded from re-prints because of its controversial content, becoming so synonymous with racism, notes Martin Beckford, ‘that when a Belgian foreign minister made critical remarks about the Democratic Republic of Congo’s government in 2004, a spokesman replied: “It’s Tintin in the Congo all over again”’ (2008). In August 2007, Mbutu Mondondo Bienvenu, a Congolese student from the Université Libre de Bruxelles, took legal action against the Tintin publisher Moulinsart, calling for the book to be withdrawn from the market. Charles Dierick, of Moulinsart’s Studio Hergé, asserted that ‘proper consideration is to be due to books that were made 75 years ago. If you condemn a book…without taking into account the complex context in which it was made, you can throw in the dustbin of history every fiction work that was made before the 1960s’ (qu. CBC, 2007). Interestingly, the protest was generated by a member of a minority group and, like Fine and her critique of Doing It, was dismissed by majority culture as hyperbolic and outdated. Further, in the UK the CRE was ridiculed for their criticism of the text, while the action taken by Borders bookstores appeared to be a placatory gesture designed to appease political correctness. Moreover, the scandal of Tintin in the Congo was confined to Britain and the incident in Belgium, failing to attract the interest of a US reading audience. The American Forbes Magazine journalist Lionel Laurent even described the event as a ‘very British scandal’ (2007), suggesting that the controversy was related more to a peculiarly British sense of decorum than a justifiable reaction to a provocative text.

Contesting the release of the comic undoubtedly raises concerns about the representation of racial differences. However, it is curious that debates are not related to more contemporary publications, or indeed, that modern works are not more often challenged on the basis of racism. To return to the context of the US, the ABFFE notes that the only texts to be accused of racism in 2008 out of the 55 books challenged by the Parents Protecting the Minds of Children (PPMC) were Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn (1884), Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima (1972), Lynne Reid Banks’ One More River (1993), Howard Cruse’s graphic novel Stuck Rubber Baby (1995), Chuck Palahniuk’s Choke (2002) and, ironically, Mildred Taylor’s Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (1976), a Newbery-Medal-winning novel set in 1930s Mississippi that details the lives of a family
struggling with the effects of racial prejudice. Of note, two of the 55 books challenged by the PPMC also contain strong sexual and ‘gay themes’ (Choke and Stuck Rubber Baby) and are generally categorised as appropriate for an older audience. Moreover, these texts failed to enter popular contestations, lacking the critical excitement that the re-release of works such as Tintin in the Congo produce. The strange silences about negative depictions involving race and gender suggest that negative portrayals of women and racial ‘otherness’ are acceptable to the mainstream, particularly in America, whose ‘citizen critics’, to borrow Rosa Eberly’s term, seem largely unperturbed by the depiction of such phenomena.

MASTERPIECES OF SATANIC DECEPTION: TRANSGRESSING THE SACRED

When literature for children broaches the subject of spirituality, however, the response from the American religious right is vociferous. While misogyny and racial inequality are ostensibly beyond the range of scandal, texts that transgress the tenets of Christianity attract a backlash from right-wing religious groups and commentators. As noted earlier, picture storybooks containing a ‘gay theme’ provoked condemnation from the religious right and cultural critics who framed the texts in terms of an offence against ‘God’s law’ and promoting a form of sexuality that is fundamentally ‘unnatural’. The hostility produced in response to homosexual literature for children and young adults has garnered a number of hateful websites denouncing sexual difference, such as the notorious www.missionamerica.com, a site aimed at uncovering ‘gay agendas’ in schools and communities, and ruthlessly stigmatising homosexuality as unholy and destroying American unity. Indeed, according to Linda Harvey, the creator of the website, homosexuality is ‘a lie against all that God created a person to be’, and those who promote gay rights are ‘wolves…leading many of Christ’s sheep to be fed in fields fertile with enticing poison’ (2010). The role of religion in provoking literary scandals is, then, often paramount, spurring debates concerned with normativity and the educative value of literature for children. While scandals occurring in response to the religious sensitivities of the American right tend to be more infrequent than those relating to sexuality, debates often assume an hysterical quality and are publicly demonstrative, including book burnings and civic lectures, for example. The two largest scandals relating to questions of faith
over recent years have been those engendered by J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy. These books have inspired a gamut of extreme responses concerned with the use of children’s literature as a vehicle through which to propagate satanic and anti-Christian values.

On December 30, 2001, congregation members of the Christ Community Church in Alamogordo, New Mexico, ‘held a book burning to destroy what Pastor Jack Brock called a “masterpiece of satanic deception”: the *Harry Potter* series’ (Zammarelli, 2005b). Brock stated that ‘these books teach children how they can get into witchcraft and become a witch, wizard, or warlock’ (CNN, 2001). The American news channel CNN describes how members sang ‘Amazing Grace’ as ‘they threw Potter books, plus some other books and magazines, into the fire’, while ‘protestors chanting “Stop burning books” stretched in a line a quarter of a mile long’. One protestor dressed as Adolf Hitler, while another asserted that ‘it may be useless, but we want (the church) to know the community is not behind them’. Brock argued that ‘there are those that are doing their best to make us look bad. But because of this, I’ve been able to preach the gospel around the world’. In another incident, Reverend George Bender led the incineration of ‘objectionable material’ at a Harvest Assembly of God on March 25, 2001 (Lee, 2001). The material being burnt included CDs by AC/DC, Pearl Jam, REM and Bruce Springsteen—because ‘they promote drugs and alcohol’—the *Harry Potter* books, and the Disney animated videos *Pinocchio*, *Hercules* and *Jurassic Park II*. Bender stated that while he ‘would have liked to have seen more visitors’, the burning was a success: ‘It made us pay attention to what we’re doing. It made us think about how to focus on the Lord as we should. I hope people understand our intentions, though I know some won’t’ (qu. Lee, 2001).

It would appear that *Harry Potter* produced a rather hyperbolic response from the American religious right, galvanising archaic book-burnings, apocalyptic rants and, remarkably, even a DVD entitled *Harry Potter is REAL Witchcraft*, containing ‘well-researched information that will help you in dealing with friends or church members who feel they can read and watch *Harry Potter* and still have a good relationship with God’ (The Cutting Edge, 2008). The DVD, combined with the MP3 CD *Christian Who Knows Witchcraft Examines Harry Potter*, retails at US$29.98, and guarantees to prepare ‘people 12-years of age through Adulthood, for Antichrist’ (2008). As Amanda Cockrell observes, ‘deploring
Harry Potter is big business’ (2006, p. 25)—though minor compared to J.K. Rowling’s success. The Cutting Edge website is notorious for its proclamations that Harry Potter is ‘dangerous to the spiritual health of young children’ (2008), yet while the assertions emerge from a vocal minority, the content of such claims is not exceptional. John Murray, for example, an advocate for the conservative American Focus on Family organisation, contends that with the increase of ‘youth-oriented TV shows on witchcraft—*Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, *Charmed*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—a generation of children is becoming desensitised to the occult...With Hollywood’s help, Harry Potter will likely surpass all these influences, potentially reaping some grave spiritual consequence’ (qu. Toalston, 2008). According to Murray, Harry Potter ‘frequently—and unapologetically—lies, breaks rules and disobeys authority figures’, while the lack of ‘higher authority’ in the novels pushes ‘young readers into a morally confused world’ because there is no strict order to enforce ideas about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ (qu. Toalston). Berit Kjos, the creator of the evangelical organisation Kjos Ministries, asserts that ‘anyone who has researched witchcraft and talked with contemporary pagans will see the alarming parallels between contemporary occultism and Rowling’s seductive message to children’ (2008), while Lurlene Tyranna Shores, a contributor to the anti-Potter website www.exposingsatanism.org, interprets *Harry Potter* as an insidious perversion of the immaculate conception and the sexual purity of young women. According to Shores, the texts also contain a ‘hidden gay agenda’, promote ‘all the evils of stem-cell research’, inspire ‘confidence in the power of evil’, and represent ‘the ticket for a one-way trip to hell’ (Shores, 2008). Further, Shores condemns the merchandising of the series, suggesting that it fosters the ‘sin’ of young female sexuality. As Shores argues:

> Nothing good can come of this. Our country is now beleaguered in the Harry Potter merchandise, colourfully, festively almost announcing the arrival of the anti-Christ. The worst product available to corrupt our youth was Potter’s vibrating broomstick, now taken off the market under pressure of Christian parents because it taught young girls to abuse themselves and awoke their interest in the sins of the flesh. This is damage that cannot be undone (2008).

Philip Pullman’s *Northern Lights* (or *The Golden Compass* in the US) has also attracted significant hostility due to its anti-Christian themes. The novel is the first book in a trilogy set in a parallel reality in which the corrupt power of the church—called the Magisterium—is attempting to prevent children from growing
into adulthood by removing them from the temptations of ‘sin’. *Northern Lights* is specifically interested in ideas about female empowerment and the sexuality of young adults, and its protagonist is a girl who seeks to destroy the control of organised religion over human experience. David Yonke, the religious editor for the American newspaper *The Toledo Blade*, asserts that the narrative is ‘militantly atheistic’, ‘blasphemous’, ‘heretical’ and ‘diabolic’ (2007), while Ted Baehr, a film critic and author for the Christian Film and Television Commission, argues that the text is ‘an atheist’s *Narnia* knock-off’, and Pullman ‘an avowed atheist who has dedicated his life to undermining Christianity and the church among young readers’ (Baehr, 2007). Pullman has hardly refuted such accusations, proudly asserting that ‘my books are about killing God’, and claiming to be ‘amused that American Christians have been more critical of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books than *His Dark Materials*’ (qu. Yonke). According to Pullman, ‘I’ve been flying under the radar, saying things that are far more subversive than anything old Harry has said’ (qu. Yonke). The President of the American Catholic League, Bill Donohue, urged ‘Christians not to see *The Golden Compass* or to buy the trilogy for their children’, arguing that Pullman’s ‘twin goals are to promote atheism and denigrate Christianity—to kids’ (qu. Yonke). Pullman, however, calmly exploited the hyperbole, provocatively suggesting that parents ‘should read the book and trust the book and trust your children. If you brought them up decent, open-minded, wise, and clear-sighted, you don’t need to worry about them turning into little monsters or little atheists’ (qu. Yonke).

There is indeed a peculiar sensitivity of the American public to religious issues, an anxiety about the potential threat of literature to the values of mainstream society that is notably volatile. The visible hostility expressed in relation to texts perceived as blasphemous reveals an unease that can again be related to notions about the identity of the nation. A 2006 study examining race, religion and diversity in the US, for example, indicated that ‘Americans rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, homosexuals and other groups as “sharing their vision of American society”’ (Aquino, 2006). According to the lead researcher Penny Edgell, ‘many Americans seem to believe some kind of religious faith is central to being a good American and a good person’, given that those ‘surveyed tended to view people who don’t believe in a god as the ultimate self-interested actor who doesn’t care about anyone but themselves’ (qu. Aquino).
As Joe Foley, a commentator on the study, remarks, ‘atheists are one of the last groups remaining that it’s still socially acceptable to hate’ (qu. Aquino). While the representation of spiritual diversity has become increasingly mainstream, literature that is critical of religious institutions and dogma enters precarious territory. Again, such unease occurs in a largely conservative American context, feeding into culture wars debates about the value systems being taught to children through particular kinds of literature.

By contrast, the minor German scandal of Michael Schmidt-Salomon’s ‘Which Way To God? Asked the Piglet (2007) failed to attract accusations of atheism despite its blatant pronouncement that ‘God doesn’t even exist’. The tale of a piglet and a hedgehog who set out to discover God after reading a sign that declares ‘if you do not know God, something is missing’, the picture storybook proceeds to slur Islam, Judaism and Christianity in equal proportions. According to the German newspaper *Deutsche Welle*, the rabbi is portrayed with ‘corkscrew curls’ and ‘fanatical lights in his eyes’, the imam as a fanatic with a ‘clenched fist...condemning [the animals] to everlasting damnation through bared teeth and an unruly beard’, and the bishop as a ‘pale fat man with a clearly insinuated predilection for child abuse’ (2008). The storybook was originally charged with anti-Semitism, but dismissed by the German Federal Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons, who argued ‘that the book is equally critical of Christianity, Islam and Judaism’ (*Spiegel*, 2008). The controversy soon dissipated.

To return to the US, in 2004, Lois Lowry’s Newbery-Award-winning novel *The Giver* attracted a scandal that highlighted not only religious anxieties, but also tensions relating to gender. The science fiction narrative presents a futuristic and ‘ideal’ community in which everyone is physically similar, reproduction is strictly controlled, and human life is monitored by a group of Elders who create and enforce social rules. The initial image of perfection offered by the novel gradually exposes the dystopian nature of the community, as the protagonist, Jonas, comes to discover alternative ways of living in communities that lack the totalitarian order of his culture. The novel acts as a critique of the absolute systems of thought associated with conservative religious groups, as Jonas moves from the enclosed space of his community into a world of multiplicity and difference. In an article entitled ‘Antichrist Teaching Infiltrates Parochial and Public Grammar Schools’, the outraged parent Eleanor Ramsey...
argued that Lowry’s text is in ‘service to Lucifer’ (1999) and that it ‘should be seen as a criminal act’ for the novel to be presented to ‘anyone under the age of twenty’ (Ramsey, 1999). David Trosch, the conservative Catholic priest who maintains the website on which Ramsey’s article appeared, asserted that *The Giver* ‘is written for mentally careless or untrained people, especially for children, that can be easily led astray’ (qu. Ramsey, 1999). Ramsey’s zealotry—she calls Lowry the ‘antichrist’—illustrates the extent to which religious conventions are intimately tied to the function of social and cultural norms. While the review exploits religious terminology—those who support the novel have ‘fallen so far from the grace of God’—the attack focuses on Lowry’s deviation from patriarchal frameworks. Indeed, Ramsey objects to *The Giver* because the ‘Chief Elder is always Female’, the fictional world is ‘governed and adjudicated by women’ and the sanctity due to marriage has been eradicated by Lowry’s bleak ‘utopian’ vision wherein women hold the power, childbirth is utilitarian, and societies exist in a ‘female controlled commune’ (Ramsey, 1999). While Ramsey contends that ‘evils of the highest order are etched into the book’, it is crucial to note that she is referring less to blasphemous content, than to a subversion of patriarchal paradigms that Christian conventions can support.

**AN ANXIOUS CONNECTION: CHILDREN AND LITERATURE**

The relationship between children and literature is one of disquiet, revealing tensions between the innocence of the idealised child and the competing ideologies of the society and culture in which it is situated. While the literature discussed has been largely contextualised in relation to its hostile public reception, it is crucial to note that the excoriations by parents, churches, community groups, librarians, newspaper reviewers and politicians infuriated at sexual and blasphemous content are accompanied by claims defending the place of the works within school curricula and public libraries. In addition, while the critics and readers of scandalous texts are often split between the expectations of majority culture and the challenges made by minority interests, scandal is polyvocal, arising from various social and political sectors in order to contest the place of literature and its role as a cultural medium. In relation to children, then, the literary text is often positioned as either an educative tool supporting
normative structures of knowing and behaving or as a vehicle through which the child reader can contest convention through a politics of difference.

As controversial literature for children and young adults attests, the anxieties most commonly mobilised through scandalous discourses are those relating to homosexuality and ‘anti-Christian’ systems of belief. Scandals concerning literature for young adults also revolve around content that is highly sexualised and texts aimed at positing concepts of difference. However, the anxieties revealed by the emergence of scandal are clearly about more than the content of a particular text and its suitability for a given audience. Indeed, while the debates transpiring from the release of controversial children’s texts undoubtedly begin with a literary work, discourses soon expand to connect to a multitude of social and political arguments. This demonstrates how literature functions as a mechanism through which larger agendas can be introduced and contested. It must be noted that scandal is often a battle between the status quo and the politics of ‘otherness’, a conflict between mainstream tenets and concepts of difference that are fighting for space in the worldview of the child reader. As the constant presence of minority voices within scandalous debates suggests, literature for children is an expedient vehicle through which to contest cultural systems and present marginalised views within a majority form. Yet the idea of the ‘minority voice’ has been somewhat skewed in these arguments, for while the scandals discussed have involved traditional minorities (women and homosexuals, for example), groups such as the American religious right complicate the opposition between dominant and marginal viewpoints. The religious right, that is, cannot claim to be representative of the American mainstream, yet its defense of a traditional status quo suggests it retains an intimate relationship to majority culture and the social values it endorses.

The controversies of children’s literature are thus perhaps shaped less by a diametric opposition between the ‘mainstream’ and the agendas of suppressed or marginalised perspectives, than by a manipulation of particular groups attempting to assert a specific cultural imperative. In other words, scandals concerning children’s literature emerge in relation to discourses of difference, propelled by the tension sustained between competing minorities and their relationship to majority systems of knowing and behaving. As demonstrated, few of the protagonists involved in the controversial literature discussed could be
comfortably or accurately described as representative of the (American) ‘mainstream’, given the range of critics from left-wing perspectives advocating sexual and religious diversity to conservative right-wing commentators campaigning for censure and expurgation. Indeed, in the spirit of the culture wars, contestations often seem to emerge due to a clash between left-wing ideologies and mainstream or right-wing interests—a battle of worldviews that recognises the transformative ability of literature, and the symbolic potential of the child reader.
CHAPTER TWO
DISMEMBERING WOMEN: GENDER AND IDENTITY IN TOP-NOTCH SMUT

When Earl Adams discovered that his two sons had stumbled upon Felice Newman’s *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book* (1999) in the local library, he asked the city of Bentonville, Arkansas, to pay US$20,000 in damages to his children and ‘to fire the library director for including what he called “pornography”’ in the Bentonville Public Library collection’ (Prudenti, 2007). According to Adams, the text was not only ‘patently offensive’, lacking ‘any artistic, literary or scientific value’, but also harmful, causing suffering to his sons who were ‘greatly disturbed by viewing this material’ (qu. Prudenti, 2007). Adams claimed that his fourteen-year-old son innocently ‘found the book while browsing the library’s stacks for books about military academies’, but as the literary columnist Chris Zammarelli notes, *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book* ‘would probably be shelved in under the 613.9 section of the Dewey Decimal System. Books on military academies…are classified under 355’ (2007b). In an interview for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Newman scathingly suggested that

perhaps the book ended up in the military section because the boys hid it there. Or perhaps, having found the book in its proper section, the boys were reading it in the military section, where they had told their father they would be researching military academies. Someone catches them smack in the middle of the fistfucking chapter and they make up the story as an alibi (qu. Blue, 2007).

The advisory board of the Bentonville Public Library elected to remove the book from access while ‘a suitable book on the same topic’ was found to replace it (Prudenti, 2007). George Spence, a board member, argued that ‘a more sensitive, more clinical approach to the same material might be more appropriate for the library’ (qu. Prudenti), while Adams asserted that ‘God was speaking to my heart that day and helped me find the words that proved successful in removing this book from the shelf…Any effort to reinstate the book will be met with legal action and protests from the Christian community’ (qu. Prudenti).

While the clamour over the ‘nefarious lesbian sex guide’ (Blue, 2007) signifies a relatively minor upset in the history of literary scandals, it is demonstrative of an abiding anxiety that exists around literature that represents women and sexuality. From the perversities of the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (1791) to the confessional fantasies of Nikki Gemmell’s *The Bride Stripped Bare
(2004), there is an enduring tradition of texts seen as scandalous because of their depiction of sexual women. While the representation of sex in itself is an incendiary topic of public debate, capable of producing ‘the most scandalous scandal’ (Cohen, 1996, p. 75), there is a persistent link between controversy and narratives concerning female sexuality that suggests a deep-seated cultural anxiety about women and gendered behaviour. The scandals surrounding literature about female sexuality repeatedly frame female desire in terms of pornography, obscenity, and ideas about moral harm, which are invariably related to arguments about social stability. Indeed, whether focused on the middle-class adulteries of Gustave Flaubert’s Emma Bovary or the illicit chapters of The Whole Lesbian Sex Book, there is a history of controversy focused on the threat posed by representations of ‘lascivious’ women to patriarchy.

Examining a diverse range of texts offering controversial representations of female sexuality, this chapter demonstrates a persistent link between scandal and anxieties about sexual women. Texts from Madame Bovary (1857) to The Sexual Life of Catherine M (2001) have provoked various arguments, from debates about the need to restrain the unruly bodies of women to contestations about aesthetic merit and morality. Indeed, the scandalous literature of sexual women is distinguished by efforts to reduce its transgressions into something manageable, whether through naming and categorisation—‘chick lit’ and ‘posh porn’—textual analysis, public censure or critical excoriation. The desire to manage controversial material signifies a discourse of containment that suggests both women and literature require strict boundaries of control. As this chapter will argue, the relationship between women, literature and scandal is one marked by both intra- and extra-textual efforts to restrain not only the unpredictability and power of female sexuality, but also the unruly energies of literature itself.

This chapter is divided into three key sections. Firstly, the chapter examines the trials of Gustave Flaubert, Radclyffe Hall and D.H. Lawrence, tracing a history in which literary works trigger controversy because of the portrayal of sexually active women. This section argues that the censorial discussions surrounding Flaubert, Hall and Lawrence are characterised by a tradition of debate that attempts to remove the influence of literary works that represent sexual women, seen as threats to the security of patriarchal authority. Moreover, the section contends that female sexuality is framed within these
defining controversies as inherently problematic, a force requiring containment in order to protect society from ‘moral harm’. Further, the ‘difficulty’ of unruly women is explicitly connected in these trials with the unruly nature of literature per se, provoking ideas about the need to restrain the subversive potential of both women and words.

Secondly, the chapter explores the emergence of a genre dedicated to the expression of female sexuality, ‘posh porn’. Denoting the growing popularity of ‘top-notch smut’ (Rees, 2004) and the sexual memoir, ‘posh porn’ is a growing collection of controversial works aimed specifically at addressing the sexual exploits of women, with its largely female-authored protagonists determined to overturn male-centered economies of desire. Including texts such as Alina Reyes’ *The Butcher* (1992), Melissa Panarello’s *One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed* (2004), Christine Jordis’ *Rapture* (2005) and Charlotte Roche’s *Wetlands* (2009), ‘posh porn’ confronts representations of women and sex. While the representation of sexual women at the turn of the twentieth century differs greatly from that of the erotic literature of ‘posh porn’, this section contends that there is a continuity between these fictions and scandals that suggests a sustained unease about female sexuality and its portrayal. However, the controversy surrounding ‘posh porn’ also relates to the success—or otherwise—of its liberating conceptualisations of female sexuality.

Lastly, the chapter moves beyond erotica to explore the most volatile scandal relating to the portrayal of sexual women, the controversy of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991). Inciting concerns about misogyny and the construction of gender identity, the scandal surrounding *American Psycho* prompted heated debates about the transformative potential of representation on subjectivity. In doing so, the controversy also revealed profound anxieties about the literary, exposing in particular how the discourses of scandal—from *Madame Bovary* to *American Psycho*—provoke uncertainties relating to the reading of text and the inability to ‘fix’ literature in a framework of meaning. Indeed, this chapter explores in each of its sections how scandalous works concerned with women and sexuality have provoked an inordinate number of arguments about the interpretative difficulties presented by the literary text. Women and literature, it would seem, signify problematic cultural spaces, as the desire to definitively read or control an ‘obscene’ text relates analogously to a broader desire to control and
contain women.

**FEMMES FATALES: MADAME BOVARY, THE WELL OF LONELINESS AND LADY CHATTERLEY’S LOVER**

In order to historicise the relationship between scandal, women and literature, it is instructive to begin with three key moments of literary controversy occurring in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—namely, the censure of Gustave Flaubert, Radclyffe Hall and D.H. Lawrence. As with each of the examples discussed throughout the chapter, the trials of each of these authors are associated with debates about the status and function of literature and literary innovation. Indeed, criticism of *Madame Bovary* (1857), *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) and *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) tends to focus on ideas about literary merit, narrowing discussions of censure to technical expositions or ideas about the imbrication of literature and the law. However, the trials and discourses concerning these authors and texts clearly demonstrate an abiding unease with the portrayal of female sexuality, as well as revealing anxieties associated with literature as a medium per se.

The trial of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* proves particularly useful for examining the relationship between literature, scandal and women. The novel recounts the romantic adventures of Emma Bovary, the disillusioned wife of a market town doctor who seeks love and excitement through a series of affairs. Accused of glorifying adultery and debasing the sacrament of marriage, Flaubert was indicted with offending public and religious morals, a charge largely based on the ostensible failure of the novel to condemn the wanton Madame Bovary. According to Elisabeth Ladenson in *Dirt for Art’s Sake* (2007), the trial of Flaubert was grounded on the assumption that the function of literature was to both uphold the rules of the status quo and to affirm the ‘moral strictures governing the rest of society’ (p. 25). Indeed, the presiding judges of the hearing contended that *Madame Bovary* warranted ‘harsh rebuke, for the task of literature must be to embellish the mind, by elevating understanding and refining the morals’ (in Cohen, 2005, p. 387). The trial of *Madame Bovary* constituted an exercise in literary analysis as the prosecutor, Ernest Pinard, and the defence counsel, Marie-Antoine-Jules Sénard, engaged in a ‘disagreement not over
whether Flaubert has the right to depict objectionable truths in the service of art, but over whether or not the depiction of Emma Bovary’s adulterous liaisons serves a morally positive purpose’ (Ladenson, p. 37). Processes of reading were fundamental to determining the moral transgressions of Flaubert’s text; however, Pinard and Sénard shared the cultural assumption that sexual women required punishment and control. Certainly, neither the prosecution nor the defence interrogated the idea that the heroine was perverse, but rather focussed their arguments on the moral function of representing such a protagonist. As Dominick LaCapra notes in Madame Bovary on Trial (1982):

For Pinard, [Emma Bovary] serves as a positive identity and thus lures the reader into the same temptations and immoral forms of behaviour to which she succumbed. Emma herself is not so much a scapegoat of society as a temptress who gets her way with men…For him, the novel does not present her suicide as punishment for her immorality. One might almost say that, for Pinard, Emma should be much more of a scapegoat than she is, for she gets away with far too much. For Sénard, Emma serves as a negative identity, providing the reader with an object (and an abject) lesson in what he or—more decidedly—she must avoid. She is a scapegrace who fully gets what she deserves (p. 35).

Sénard thus frames the text as a tool of patriarchy, emphasising the ‘cautionary’ nature of the narrative and describing it as a fiction to keep the ‘most decent and purest of young women’ steadfast ‘in the fulfilment of their…duties’ (in Cohen, p. 341). Similarly, Pinard makes explicit an underlying anxiety about the unruly forces of literature and women that informed the trial, urging the need for regulation and containment in order to uphold moral and social standards: ‘Art without rules is no longer art; it is like a woman who would take off all her clothes. To impose upon art the unique rule of public decency is not to subordinate it but to honour it’ (in Cohen, p. 335).

In terms of challenging orthodox female behaviour, Emma Bovary certainly appears to flaunt the rules of patriarchal culture. As Louise Kaplan argues in Female Perversions (1991), while Emma is ‘bound by the contractual obligations of the term Madame’, her ‘adulterous passions and neglect of her motherly duties mark her as a threat, a subversive force, an underminer of the structures of the bourgeois family’ (p. 202). Like Molly Bloom of James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922), Emma Bovary is contradictory, fulfilling feminine roles from naïve child-bride to sexual rebel in her efforts to escape middle-class tedium. According to Kaplan, Emma’s transgressions emerge through ‘her refusal to
submit to the prescriptive normalities of a provincial wife’, expressed by her
determination to ‘find herself’ by masquerading or even perverting feminine
stereotypes (p. 205). Kaplan contends that in the first of her adulteries, Emma is a
woman ‘with a conviction of her own worthlessness [and] can find sexual
pleasure only in a fantasy of being part of a more powerful personality’, as the
submissive victim of ‘her Great Man, whom she has endowed with absolute
power’ (p. 222). But in a subsequent affair and transformation akin to Wanda of
Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s Venus in Furs (1870), Emma seizes power and is
the pursuer of sexual gratification, enacting her desire with a wilful abandon that
sends her racing through the streets of Rouen in the infamous carriage scene.
Kaplan suggests that Emma ‘masqueraded herself as a sexually submissive femme
évaporée to conceal from the world, and from herself, her active sexual strivings
and intellectual ambitions, which in her world were the prerogative of males’ (p.
236). But as the ‘banality of extreme submissiveness’ (p. 229) gives way with
experience, Emma reveals an ‘erotic imagination’ that explicitly questions the
gendered social proprieties of the late-nineteenth century (p. 329).
Importantly, it is not only the representation of female sexuality in
Madame Bovary that highlights the connection between women, literature and
controversy. The trial of Flaubert also illustrates the gendering of the novel as a
literary form and how anxieties about the transformative potential of literature are
persistently associated with fears for the corruption of women. Ladenson observes
that in France in the seventeenth century, the novel was a genre largely associated
with the feminine, and concerned with depicting idealistic and historical
narratives (p. 26). By the mid-nineteenth century, the popularity of the serialised
novel or feuilleton grew, appearing within major newspapers and predominantly
intended for a female readership. With the feminisation of the novel form, a sharp
divide was established to differentiate between the material aimed at male and
female audiences. The subject matter of hard journalism was not meant for the
more romantically inclined nature of women, whose role remained firmly located
within the private sphere. The idea that art should serve a morally uplifting
purpose, then, as articulated during the Bovary trial, as Ladenson contends, had
‘everything to do with gender, since women were the target audience of daily
feuilletons as of most novels…whereas the news section of the newspaper, like
history and most nonfiction, was taken to be a masculine realm’ (p. 27).
Yet the effects on women of reading novels were widely considered deleterious, a notion parodied in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and ironically exploited in *Madame Bovary*. Emma Bovary is indeed captivated by the worlds offered by literature, and is transformed by narrative: ‘She recalled the heroines of the books that she had read, and the lyric region of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voice of sisters that charmed her. She became herself, as it were, an actual part of these imaginings’ (Flaubert, 1994, p. 124). When Emma finally dies, she is, moreover, plagued with ‘the frightful taste of ink’ (p. 242), a ‘nauseous reminder’, Ladenson notes, ‘of the books that had intoxicated her’ (p. 28). Indeed, both intra- and extra-textually, the metamorphic effects of literature are repeatedly framed in reference to the vulnerability of women, as also evidenced in Pinard’s prosecution of the text:

The light pages of *Madame Bovary* fall into hands that are even lighter, into the hands of young girls, sometimes of married women. Well then! When the imagination will have been seduced, when this seduction will have reached into the heart and the heart will have spoken to the sense, do you think that a very dispassionate argument will be very effective against this seduction of the sense and the feelings? (in Cohen, p. 333).

Kaplan notes that both the prosecutor and defence lawyer ‘used the nefarious influence of romantic novels to bolster their opposing arguments’, and were ‘of one mind about the damaging effects of the literature of seduction on a sensitive, innocent female mind’ (p. 329). *Madame Bovary* clearly mimics the supposedly detrimental effects produced in women who consume novels, as Flaubert correlates the downfall of Emma with her immersion in and re-enactment of dramatic romance and historical fictions. Yet in doing so, Flaubert also ridicules himself as a writer of literature. As Erica Jong (1997) observes, Madame Bovary ‘dies because she has attempted to make her life into a novel—and it is the foolishness of that quest that Flaubert’s clinical style mocks. A novelist mocking a heroine besotted by novels? Then this must be a writer mocking himself!’ As the following example demonstrates, Flaubert ironically foregrounds within *Madame Bovary* the ‘idea that excessive novel-reading is poisonous, and should be prevented, if necessary by official intervention’ (Ladenson, p. 28):

‘Do you know what your wife wants?’ replied Madame Bovary senior. ‘She wants to be forced to occupy herself with some manual work. If she were obliged…to earn her living, she wouldn't have these vapours, that come to her from a lot of ideas she stuffs into head, and from the idleness in which she
lives...Reading novels, bad books, works against religion, and in which they mock at priests in speeches taken from Voltaire...all that leads you far astray, my poor child. Anyone who has no religion always ends by turning out badly.'

So it was decided to stop Emma from reading novels. The enterprise did not seem easy. The good lady undertook it. She was, when she passed through Rouen, to go herself to the lending library and represent that Emma had discontinued her subscription. Would they not have a right to apply to the police if the librarian persisted all the same in his poisonous trade? (p. 96)

For Ladenson, the fate of ‘Madame Bovary, like that of its heroine, was inextricably bound up with the question of fiction’s failure to perform its assigned role of providing consolation and moral uplift, of serving as an antidote to reality rather than a reflection of it’ (p. 27). Madame Bovary thus thematises intratextually the anxieties about literature raised by its own trial, incorporating cultural concern about the insidious effects of the novel, the vulnerability of women to the intimacies of reading, and the gendering of particular literary forms and content. Both the trial and the novel highlight unease about the transformative potential of literature, as the tragedy of Emma Bovary comes to signify how dangerously persuasive literature can be. Interestingly, the imagery of the idea that women are seduced by literature appears to be inherently sexual, suggesting the penetrative nature of the literary encounter in which a female reader is entered and ‘overcome’. This sexualised framing of the meeting between women and text perhaps explains the feminisation of the (passive) victim of literature, who is made vulnerable to the possessive influence—or even force—of fiction.

Engaging in discourses concerned with the function, reading, and moral efficacy of literature, as well as with questions about gender and the transformative effects of representation, the trial of Madame Bovary marks a pivotal moment in the history of the relationship between women, literature and scandal. Foremost, the trial highlighted the connection between gender and anxieties about the literary, revealing a deep concern with the potentially radical forces of women and literature in public and private spheres. In the rhetoric of the trial, the argument between Pinard and Sénard revealed a crucial interest in the need for female sexuality to be contained, and for punishment to be issued to sexual women. It is a model of containment, as we shall see, continued in the narratives of ‘posh porn’. Moreover, the fracas surrounding Madame Bovary emphasised key features of scandal itself, including arguments over the function of literature, textual interpretation, and the difficulties presented by irony within
literature that overtly transgresses mores. It is an interpretative conflict that also characterises the later censure of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*.

Indeed, the question of how to read controversial literature remains a striking legacy of the trial of Flaubert, provoking arguments not only about the moral power of the novel, but also about literature as an aesthetic category. As Jonathan Dollimore observes in *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (2001), a defence of literature on aesthetic grounds often proves pivotal in debates concerning scandalous texts, as demonstrated by the exculpation of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) in the United States. In 1933, Judge John Woolsey ruled that James Joyce’s *Ulysses* was not legally obscene, thereby ending a thirteen-year ban on the novel in the U.S. (Dollimore, p. 97). Yet the text clearly contains provocative and controversial sexual content, including scenes of transvestism, masturbation, sado-masochism and, importantly, female sexuality. The judgement of the novel drew on an aesthetic defence of art, which Dollimore suggests ‘can be summarised by two claims: first, that the truly literary work cannot, by its very nature, be obscene or pornographic; second, that its effect…is always and only aesthetic; in other words, the true work of art does not influence its readers politically, morally or whatever’ (p. 98). It is an echo of John Keats’ notion of ‘negative capability’ and claim that ‘with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration’ (Keats, 2004, p. 57). The credo is also found in the preface of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which states that ‘there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all’ (2003, p. 3). Joyce, too, evoked an aesthetic defence, declaring through Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) that

> the feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing (1992, p. 222).

As Dollimore contends, aesthetic defences such as those used by Joyce and Wilde are ‘not only counter-intuitive and implausible, but also tend to rob art of its power, suggesting…that essentially art effects nothing, least of all its readers, who, in Joyce’s terms, find themselves in an arrested, static and transcendent mode of apprehension’ (p. 99). Aesthetic arguments also protect men, as the
consumers of highbrow literary fiction, from an improper seduction and penetration by the book. What is interesting about an aesthetic defence of literature in the context of scandal, then, is not the philosophy of art per se. It is, rather, how questions about the aesthetic collide with issues of morality to reiterate an anxiety about the transformative potential of text.

The trial of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* is perhaps the best demonstration of a literary scandal that confronts not only issues relating to women and sexuality, but also discourses concerned with the persuasive influence of literature. The novel follows the life of Stephen Gordon, a wealthy English woman whose ‘sexual inversion’ is made apparent from an early age and who consequently battles to find social acceptance because of her ‘otherness’. The scandalousness of Radclyffe Hall, who refused to apologise for her ‘sexual inversion’ or for challenging heteronormativity in literature, was further compounded by her eloquent description of lesbian sex in *The Well of the Loneliness* as a positive experience. As Chief Magistrate Sir Chartres Biron notes, it gives ‘these women extraordinary rest, contentment and pleasure; and not merely that, but it is actually put forward that it improves their mental balance and capacity’ (2002, p. 43). Indeed, the scandal of the text is not only that it alludes to women having sex, but women who have sex with other women—a sexual economy that precludes male power. In 1928, the British government attempted to censor *The Well of Loneliness* largely due to fears that ‘it would encourage or legitimate lesbianism’ (Dollimore, p. 99). In a *Sunday Express* editorial that precipitated the trial, entitled ‘A Book That Must Be Banned’ (1928), James Douglas claimed that sexual perversion was ‘a pestilence…devastating the younger generation’ and that he would rather give ‘a healthy boy or girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul’ (2002, p. 38).

Indeed, according to Douglas, ‘in order to prevent the contamination and corruption of English fiction it is the duty of the critic to make it impossible for any other novelist to repeat this outrage’ (p. 38). Certainly, the literary merits of *The Well of Loneliness* also added to ideas of its threat. The Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Archibald Bodkin, for example, argued that the book is ‘a subtle and insinuating one and more dangerous because of its literary character’ (qu. Dollimore, p. 103), while Douglas stated that ‘the adroitness and cleverness of the
book intensifies its moral danger…it is seductive and insidious’ (p. 38). The Well of Loneliness, Douglas contended, therefore ‘forces upon our society a disagreeable task…the task of cleansing itself from the leprosy of these lepers, and making the air clean and wholesome once more’ (pp. 36-7). The idea of sex between women enraged and disgusted censors who objected not only to the homosexual content of the novel but also to Hall’s appropriation of Christianity to ‘validate lesbian love’ (Dollimore, p. 101). The protagonist of the novel, Stephen Gordon, repeatedly empathises with Christ, likening their suffering and ‘otherness’ in a world that fails to understand difference: ‘Stephen…turned to the Child’s Book of Scripture Stories and she studied the picture of the Lord on His Cross, and she felt that she understood Him…[S]he fell asleep, to dream that in some queer way she was Jesus’ (1949, pp. 24-5). The Well of Loneliness thus uses, according to Dollimore, a ‘religiose and romantic ethic to make lesbians attractive and objects of admiration’ (p. 103), which had the potential to destroy Christianity and ‘the civilisation it has built on the ruins of paganism’ (p. 38).

The trials in question thus demonstrate a concern with texts that actually reinforce, to varying degrees, traditional gender ideologies. Madame Bovary and Stephen Gordon are, for example, made punishable for their indiscretions: Emma suffers from the realisation that her fantasies offer no escape from the tedious roles allotted to women and commits suicides in an ignoble death, while Gordon cannot evade her otherness, as she is progressively stripped of those she loves and forced to live on the social margins. In Lesbian Images (1975), Jane Rule notes that Radclyffe Hall appears to worship ‘the very institutions which oppressed her, the Church and the patriarchy’ (qu. O’Rourke, 1989, p. 106), while Ladenson adds that ‘the world of The Well, strangely enough…is one where men should be men and women women: the former are ideally strong, taciturn, and virile; the latter fragile, emotional, and feminine’ (p. 110). Indeed, while Gordon challenges the assumptions of heteronormativity, The Well of Loneliness not only asserts conservative gender expectations, but also repeatedly positions sexual difference as inherently unnatural. In representing Gordon as ‘other’, gender norms are simply inverted, suggesting that lesbianism is stereotypically—and performatively—masculine. Gordon as a child, for example, persistently dresses as Lord Nelson and repeatedly muses on the possibility of transforming into a man: ‘Do you think that I could be a man, supposing that I thought very hard, or
prayed, Father?’ (p. 29). Gordon’s opposition to conventional femininity is also conveyed in terms of her physical strength and size, athletic ability, impatience with female clothing, inability to tolerate the domestic realm and exaggerated masculine gestures, such as ‘rubbing her chin’ (p. 72) and an appetite considered less than ‘dainty’ (p. 55). The contrast between Gordon and normative expectations of female behaviour is made increasingly apparent as she engages with other children:

She stood there an enraged and ridiculous figure in her Liberty smock, with her hard, boyish forearms. Her long hair had partly escaped from its ribbon, and the bow sagged down limply, crooked and foolish. All that was heavy in her face sprang into view, the strong line of the jaw, the square, massive brow, the eyebrows, too thick and wide for beauty. And yet there was a kind of large splendour about her—absurd though she was, she was splendid at that moment—grotesque and splendid, like some primitive thing conceived in a turbulent age of transition.

‘Are you going to fight me, you coward?’ she demanded, as she stepped around the table and faced her tormentor.

But Roger thrust his hands deep into his pockets: ‘I don’t fight with girls!’ he remarked very grandly. Then he sauntered out of the schoolroom (p. 59).

The incongruity of Gordon’s masculine behaviour is repeatedly noted throughout the text, as various acquaintances describe her rejection of feminine traits as ‘queer’ (p. 22), ‘horrid’ (p. 59), ‘all wrong’ (p. 60) and ‘unnatural’ (p. 81). In a climactic moment of vitriol, Gordon’s own mother describes her daughter as ‘a sin against creation…vile and filthy…against nature, against God who created nature. My gorge rises; you have made me feel physically sick’ (p. 226). Yet while Gordon refutes the expectation that women must be innately feminine and ‘naturally’ attracted to men, the novel represents less a blurring of gender boundaries than a celebration of patriarchy—as demonstrated by the respect bestowed upon the figures of the father and Christ. Indeed, despite the vilification of Gordon due to her inability to conform to cultural ideas about women, it is the feminine that is most demonised in The Well of Loneliness, while the masculine remains a site of privilege. This is rather ironic given the fears of prosecutors who believed that Hall was threatening the patriarchal status quo.

The ambiguity of Madame Bovary and The Well of Loneliness in terms of their transgression of patriarchy is also present in D.H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover. Set in the period following the World War I, the narrative describes the life of a young married woman, Lady Chatterley, whose husband
has been paralysed during his wartime service and rendered impotent. The sexual frustration of Lady Chatterley leads her into an affair with the gamekeeper, Oliver Mellors, who teaches her that she cannot live with the pleasures of the mind alone. The novel is explicit in its reiteration of normative (hetero)sexual relations, imposing a masculine economy of desire that is made most apparent in the euphemistic language used to capture various sexual encounters. Phrases such as ‘her mound of Venus’ (p. 221), ‘a little bud of life’ (p. 219), ‘the keeper of the bright phallos’ (p. 141) and the notorious ‘Lady Jane’ and ‘John Thomas’ (p. 220) contrast with the unapologetic portrayal of the ‘obscene’ in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and align Lawrence with a patriarchal system of sexual coding. Nonetheless, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was a daring publication for the early twentieth century, representing not only graphic sex scenes but also intimately describing the female body—a feature that has come to characterise scandals involving representations of female sexuality. Lawrence makes natural the desire of Lady Chatterley to possess a sexual identity, and refuses to deny the female body but rather celebrates it as a site of experience and pleasure. Indeed, the portrayal of Lady Chatterley repeatedly emphasises the reality of the body, ranging from an unflattering description of her ‘rather small, and dropping pear-shaped’ breasts (p. 72) to the gamekeeper’s exaltations about her physicality, giving her a corporeal place in the novel that resists romanticism and abstraction:

Tha’rt real, tha art! Tha’rt real, even a bit of a bitch. Here tha shits an’ here tha pisses: an’ I lay my hand on ‘em both an’ like thee for it. I like thee for it. Tha’s got a proper, woman’s arse, proud of itself. It’s none ashamed of itself, this isna (p. 232).

Lawrence’s representation of the sexual exploits of Lady Chatterley provoked volatile arguments about pornography, and the moral value of representing the graphic details of adultery. Like *Madame Bovary* and *The Well of Loneliness*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was also scrutinised for its artistic merit. However, unlike these earlier trials, it brought to the courtroom the expert opinions of literary critics, including E.M. Forster, Dame Rebecca West, Helen Gardner and Raymond Williams. Indeed, unlike the outcry typical of controversial children’s literature, wherein a spectrum of critics and readers participate in debate, the scandals surrounding the representation of sexual women are notably ‘literary’ in character. Involving social commentators, industry professionals (such as publishers and editors) and specialist critics, discussions
about the portrayal of female sexuality tend to emerge within the arguments of the ‘cultural elite’, and focus on questions about art and transgression that often directly avoid the source of anxiety. That is, protestations against J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series or Lesléa Newman’s *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989), for example, explicitly state concerns with the blasphemous or homosexual content of the texts and express unambiguous unease about the influence of such material on children. Scandals relating to the depiction of female sexuality, however, struggle to articulate the anxiety of representing women, their bodies and their sexual proclivities. Instead, discussions are framed in culturally appropriate phrases about art and morality, and concerns about ‘pernicious literary influences’ (Ladenson, p. 57) on the delicate female mind. With the provocative emergence of ‘posh porn’ literature, discourses have begun to widen, but there remains a reluctance to confront the taboos surrounding sexual women.

As evidenced by the trials of Flaubert, Hall and Lawrence, the representation of female sexuality is consistently placed in conflict with patriarchy, whether through a transgression of sanctified institutions such as marriage and the church, or a subversion of ‘natural’ sexual desire. The control of women who attempt to challenge male power, such as Emma Bovary, Stephen Gordon or Lady Chatterley, occurs not only within the punishments issued by the text, but also extra-textually through public and legal censure and ‘correct’ readings of the literary work. Moreover, the inevitable unease that accompanies the representation of women and sex means that female sexuality is consistently framed as problematic—imbricating the difficulty of ‘uncontrollable’ female sexuality with questions about controlling the literary text itself. As Douglas suggests in his attack against *The Well of Loneliness*, works that transgress socio-sexual norms compromise ‘literature as well as morality…Fiction of this type is an injury to good literature. It makes the house of literature fall into disrepute…It should keep its house in order’ (p. 38).

**Une Complicité Libertine: Reading Political Correctness in ‘Posh Porn’**

Undoubtedly, there is a considerable gap between representations of female sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century and those emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first. Rejecting the euphemistic strategies of Flaubert, Hall and
Lawrence, ‘posh porn’ is characterised by its penchant for unmitigated physical detail and a sensationalist drive to confess the most shocking sexual ‘deviancy’. Asserting a liberatory credo that unsettles not only cultural but also literary norms, the genre aims to reject the ‘soft’ consolations of romance fiction and ‘chick lit’, proclaiming a political agenda concerned with celebrating female sexuality. Yet while ‘posh porn’ appears radically removed from the comparatively moderate transgressions of Madame Bovary, The Well of Loneliness and Lady Chatterley’s Lover, a connection remains. Indeed, it is the emphasis of ‘posh porn’ on the socio-sexual roles of women that links it most markedly to the trials discussed. For all the daring of ‘posh porn’ literature, its scandalous confessions often belie conservative narrative underpinnings, reiterating a masculine order that contains women within the expectations of patriarchal culture. A core connection remains: ‘posh porn’, like Madame Bovary, The Well of Loneliness and Lady Chatterley’s Lover, manifests anxieties concerned with the containment of both unruly women and unruly texts.

According to Louise France, ‘posh porn’ is essentially a genre ‘about women who seem to like getting down to it and see no reason to justify their behaviour’ (2006). A ‘new kind of graphic literature’ that explores ‘women’s fantasies and shows them to be acceptable’, ‘posh porn’ makes available an erotic body of texts focussed on female desire (France, 2006). The initiation of the phenomenon is commonly attributed to the publication of Catherine Millet’s The Sexual Life of Catherine M (2001), the confessional narrative of a Parisian art critic who recounts her many and varied sexual encounters: ‘Today I can account for 49 men whose sexual organs have penetrated me. But I can not put a number on those that blur into anonymity’ (p. 11). While the works of Anaïs Nin, Pauline Réage and Erica Jong demonstrate that graphic sexual fictions and memoirs are hardly new, an explicit female-centred erotica is beginning to emerge within a mainstream focus. France further notes that recent publications indicate a provocative transgression of traditional mores, given the release of ‘a memoir by a winsome-looking ballet dancer with a predilection for sodomy; a semi-autobiographical novel by an anonymous Muslim woman about her sexual coming of age; a confessional account of teenage proclivities in Catholic Italy; a candid career guide to life as a Manhattan prostitute; and a novel centred on a single act of fellatio’ (2006). Indeed, ‘posh porn’ is renowned for its detailed
explorations of subversive sexual behaviours, a feature that has ensured it is a genre increasingly marked by controversy and unease.

The anxieties surrounding the genre, however, are less related to the graphic representation of sex itself than to questions about ideology. Indeed, while the release of texts such as Jane Juska’s *A Round-Heeled Woman* (2003), Emily Maguire’s *Taming the Beast* (2005) and Hitomi Kanehara’s *Snakes and Earrings* (2005) have been celebrated as an exciting development in the erotic fiction aimed at and authored by women, the radicality of the genre is debated by critics who suggest that its ‘pro-sex feminism’ (Rees, 2004) is more indicative of financial than political interests. As Danuta Kean argues in *The Independent*, ‘in publishing, where there’s muck there’s brass. Robust declarations that match literary aspirations with taboo-breaking feminism are a tried-and-tested publicity ploy’ (2009). According to Kean, pretensions of a feminist agenda are part of a trick to attract a female audience, while the genre panders to male fantasy under the guise of a liberating sexual credo for women—a credo that has proved economically advantageous. Indeed, Kean argues that the scandal of ‘posh porn’ is not its penchant for pornographic representations of female sexuality, but the ways in which it disguises the objectification of women as emancipation (2009). As Lennie Goodings, the editorial director of *Virago* adds, ‘it isn’t feminism. It’s just shocking’ (qu. Kean, 2009).

While France argues that the genre uses pornographic images as a means of undermining repressive sexual economies, the editor of *Front & Centre* magazine, Matthew Firth, suggests that modern sex writing for women is ‘not about embellishing sexual activity, about depicting sexual situations most of us can only dream of. Sex fiction is writing about sex by accurately portraying how people fuck. The goal is authenticity’ (qu. France, 2006). The ‘authenticity’ of the genre is an image in part created by the number of memoirs that make up ‘posh porn’, as authors such as Melissa Panarello, Catherine Millet, Toni Bentley and Jane Juska claim to write about real experiences and encounters, and often present their works in the form of a confessional diary. But if the aim is indeed to truthfully replicate ‘how people fuck’, the difficulty encountered by ‘posh porn’ is

---

4 Melissa Panarello’s *One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed*, for example, sold 850,000 copies in Italy alone and has been translated into 24 languages (Todaro, 2004), while *Belle de Jour’s Diary of an Unlikely Call Girl*, originally an on-line blog, was bought by publishers for ‘a six-figure sum’ (France, 2006).
its ability to liberate female sexuality—which it claims to do—from the cultural frameworks in which it is produced. As a result of the propensity of ‘posh porn’ fictions to involve narratives of violence and exploitation alongside explorations of desire, the genre has come under scrutiny from readers conflicted about whether its representation of women provides sexual liberation, or simply another medium for (female-perpetuated) misogyny and abuse. The Serpent’s Tail publisher Pete Ayrton, for example, has named the trend a ‘continuation of feminism’ (qu. Rees), while the critic Louise Kaplan has commented on erotic literature that pornography cannot offer women sexual emancipation until society itself transforms. As Kaplan contends, pornography ‘depends for its vitality on the gender stereotypes that support the fundamental structures of our social order’, thus until the systems of the order itself are reformed, ‘erotic literature, pornography, the erotic life itself will be what it has always been—a reflection of those structures but never a potential underminer of them’ (p. 343).

Certainly, despite appearing to engage with the social construction of female sexuality and the repressive effects of patriarchy, the content of ‘posh porn’ fictions is more aligned with the conventional structures of romance and ‘chick lit’ texts than with a radical feminist vision. While ‘posh porn’ clearly favours an emphasis on intimate physical detail, lacking a sustaining narrative framework other than the episodic recollection of sexual experiences, its works often conform to key elements of romantic fictions. ‘Posh porn’ fictions tend to frame women, for example, as passive objects who are made ‘real’ only through their encounters with men, and to structure sexual discovery around the need to gratify male lust. Women rarely obtain the autonomy they appear to seek, but are more often abused, exploited and returned to positions of weakness and uncertainty. Nikki Gemmell’s The Bride Stripped Bare, for instance, a modern retelling of Madame Bovary, contextualises the sexual liberation of its protagonist—a wife who is disenchanted with her marriage and so seeks pleasure in a series of affairs—solely in terms of her desire for acceptance by men. Melissa Panarello’s 100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed, the diary of a promiscuous teenager, readily embraces the fairytale myth, evident from the title itself—a link to an idea about the grooming habits of princesses—to the heart-warming conclusion that neatly provides Prince Charming. Toni Bentley’s The Surrender (2004) even manages to make a narrative concerning a ballet dancer’s predilection
for sodomy a ‘romantic’ exercise, a search for the great ‘A-Man’ (p. 71) who will ‘complete’ the narrator, albeit with an alarming degree of masochism. Indeed, while the processes of courtship differ, the basic framework of ‘posh porn’, ‘chick lit’ and romance novels remains comparable: the subordination of women within a patriarchal status quo and the bringing to order of female sexual desire. *The Surrender*, for example, repeatedly emphasises how freedom, fulfilment and even spiritual understanding can be achieved through complete submission to men:

If you can let a man ass-fuck you...you will learn to trust not only him but yourself, totally out of control. And beyond control lies God...It is through this physical surrender, this forbidden pathway, that I have found my self, my voice, my spirit, my courage—and the cackle of the crone. This is no feminist treatise about equality. This is the truth about the beauty of submission. The power in submission (pp. 9-10).

The women of ‘posh porn’ continually succumb to the demands of male desire, finding gratification through subordination, and their ideas about female subjectivity remain firmly situated within the expectations of a masculine culture. Perhaps most disturbingly, the genre utilises violent and abusive encounters in its efforts to proclaim a ‘liberatory’ agenda, framing the masochistic endurance of pain as an aspect of sexual autonomy. If ‘posh porn’ has taken a leap from its *fin de siècle* predecessors Flaubert, Hall and Lawrence, it is in the use of violence as a natural component of female sexuality—homage, perhaps, to the brutality advocated in Pauline Réage’s 1954 erotic classic, *The Story of O*. Bentley, for example, asserts that ‘pain and pleasure...are inseparable’ (p. 145) and advises women that ‘receptivity [is] activity, not passivity’ (p. 7). These narratives relate experiences of physical pain that are textually framed as moments of liberation, positioning sexual violence as a means through which to achieve emancipation. Panarello, for instance, paradoxically demands to be raped (p. 127) and proudly claims that she wants ‘violence, violence beyond endurance...Violence kills me, wears me down, dirties me and feeds on me, but with and for it I survive, I feed on it’ (p. 129). What is particularly perverse about these texts is that they contextualise violence as a masochistic desire of female sexuality, rather than as a control mechanism within patriarchy (to punish sexual women). The violence of ‘posh porn’ thus provokes the question of whether it is possible for representations of sexual women—even when authored by sexual women—to evade patriarchal norms. Like Emma Bovary and Lady Chatterley, the women of
‘posh porn’ are astounding, with daring and irreverent sexual appetites, but like their predecessors, they remain trapped within a framework that violently maintains the status quo.

As the scandal surrounding the publication of Panarello’s 100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed attests, ‘posh porn’ is clearly a genre provoking anxieties about the context in which female protagonists celebrate their sexual liberation. A confessional memoir, the text attracted significant controversy among Italian audiences when publishers revealed not only the autobiographical nature of the explicit content, but also the age of the author—a nineteen-year-old student whose sexual exploits (and exploitation) began at the age of fourteen. With the release of the ‘erotic diary’ (Rees, 2004), critics engaged in debates about the age of the author/narrator, and the shocking scenarios in which Panarello offers herself as both provocateur and prey (Rees, 2004). Constructed as a diary, 100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed describes two years of Panarello’s amorous encounters, from her degrading loss of virginity to her participation in a sado-masochistic affair. The lurid novel has been framed by Panarello as an honest portrayal of sexual awakening, a de-romanticised exposé that represents a frank exploration of the sexuality of a young woman. Indeed, Panarello forces the memoir into daring territory, combining a discomforting element of youth with sexual experience akin to the transgressive confessions of Catherine Millet or Anaïs Nin. Panarello argues that ‘I don’t think of sex as intellectual or philosophical. I believe sex is flesh and blood’ (qu. Lawless, 2004). She also firmly situates the text in the genre of literary pornography. As Andrew Lawless notes, Panarello ‘considers her own book pornography. She has quite a different conception of pornography, though, from that of any so-called “moral majority”’ (Lawless, 2004). Indeed, Panarello claims to find ‘a sincerity in pornography…and purity of intent. Not everything that is pornographic is by definition superficial or vulgar. When pornography has an idea behind it, it can be profound and introspective, as much as any other work’ (qu. Lawless, 2004).

Yet the sincerity and ‘purity of intent’ that Panarello claims to observe in pornography is undermined by the text itself, which recounts an endless narrative of sexual degradation, phrased in what the literary critic Lenora Todaro describes as ‘cringe-inducing euphemisms’ (2004). Indeed, the language employed by Panarello is a tribute to Lawrence, with its use of coded terms such as lance,
stake, scepter, Secret, River Lethe and erupting volcano. Yet despite moments of coy elision, as the Complete Review observes, the novel does not recoil from the details of sexual exploit, noting that ‘we get all the permutations…Oral and regular sex, group sex, man-on-man…woman-on-woman, sado-masochistic and prop-sex fun, as well as one man who wants to install her in an apartment as his mistress and a tutor thrilled to act out his Lolita-fantasies’ (2004). Lawless asserts that ‘there are different layers at work in the book, and different questions raised in relation to sex and identity—for example, to what extent is the degradation of her body a degradation of her identity. It paints a complex picture of sexual politics and sexual identity’ (2004). However, like other works in the genre, it is difficult to avoid questions about the extent to which ‘posh porn’ narratives reiterate harmful stereotypes. Indeed, the problematic relationship between feminist and patriarchal discourses is one that Panarello appears to delight in perverting, claiming to be ‘a pure maschilista, a shining knight, a defender of the masculine world that’s mistreated and misunderstood, and at the same time envied by those women that don’t have any real conception of the word “liberty”’ (qu. Lawless). While Lawless reduces the assertion to an amusing effort by Panarello to ‘come across like a young Johnny Rotten of the literary world—intelligent and thoughtful, but also ready to provoke on cue’ (2004), it is a disturbing reminder of the tendency of ‘posh porn’ to support male-defined norms, and to position subordination as an enviable model for behaviour that promises women sexual liberation.

Yet it is not simply the vivid anti-feminist descriptions of promiscuous sex that motivate the anxieties surrounding ‘posh porn’. Equally controversial is the attention given to the female body, ranging from anatomical detail to ruminations about the joys of onanism. Interestingly, female-authored erotica is characterised by its fascination with the body and a language to describe it, combining the euphemisms and clichés that denote ‘chick lit’ and romance fictions with an intimately photographic—if not pornographic—approach. Millet, for example, explicitly recounts being aroused at an art exhibition, describing ‘the slimy patch on my tights alternately against the lips of my vagina and the swell of my inner thigh, shifting as I walk’ (p. 76), while Bentley details how ‘a pussy is a wild and watery landscape of hills and valleys and ravines and mighty holes that suck one in like quicksand’ (p. 56). Yet there is nothing particularly feminist about the
descriptions offered by Millet and Bentley, which fit with patriarchal discourses that figure female genitalia as alien or threatening. Important, too, is how ‘posh porn’ echoes the interest in the female body offered by authors such as Lawrence and, indeed, how the genre tends to use language similar to *Lady’s Chatterley’s Lover* in its descriptions of female sexuality. Panarello, for instance, vacillates between euphemistic and explicit language, telling of an orgy in the phrases of a Harlequin fiction: ‘When a finger slowly slipped inside my Secret, I felt a sudden warmth and realised that reason was abandoning me. I surrendered to the touch of their hands’ (p. 52). Masturbation is a dominant feature of these texts, an element which, as with the lesbian affairs of *The Well of Loneliness*, displays a rare evasion of male economies of desire. Like *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which revels in detailing the female body, ‘posh porn’ fictions delight in confronting physical taboos.

An emphasis on the bodily is a feature particularly notable in Roche’s controversial *Wetlands* (2009), a novel that confronts notions about women and the abject by fusing sexual desire with a ‘fetishisation of filth’ (Kean, 2009). Kean notes that in Roche’s text ‘every orifice is explored, every fluid tasted, leaked or smeared…Dirty toilet seats are rubbed against, avocado seeds pumped out of her vagina like Thai ping-pong balls and her labia…stretched in a way guaranteed to make women want to cross their legs’ (2009). Indeed, Decca Aitkenhead (2009) claims that ‘people have fainted’ at readings of *Wetlands*, given its uncensored approach to the female body and its candid discussion of subjects such as masturbation, genital depilation, vaginal fluids and excrement. The narrative begins in unflinching terms—‘As far back as I can remember, I’ve had hemorrhoids’ (p. 1)—and continues on to graphically describe the relationship between the protagonist, Helen Memel, and her body. After announcing that ‘hygiene’s not a major concern of mine’ (p. 12), Helen proceeds to instruct the reader on the ‘all-important flora of the pussy’ (p. 12), why ‘the smell of plain old shit or piss is better than the disgusting perfumes people buy’ (p. 13), how to savour the joys of ‘smegma’ (p. 20) and the benefits of using pre-loved tampons (p. 114). According to Helen, she is her ‘own garbage disposal’ (p. 121), and there is little that she has not—or will not—explore, taste or share with others. Arguably, the graphic confrontation with the body in *Wetlands* is a means of breaking down cultural conventions that have proscribed the physical in public
discourse, most particularly in terms of women and menstruation. Critics such as Anis Shavani, for example, describe the hyperbole employed by Roche as a technique with which to subvert polite discussions about women and to confront the reality of the body. As Shavani argues, ‘novelists, germ-phobics all, sell us ethical narratives, as clean as hospital rooms. We need the Helen Memels to mess up the joint’ (2009).

Yet while *Wetlands* offers challenging representations of the physical realities of female sexuality and the body, it is again caught in the crossfire of feminist arguments about sexual liberation versus a reiteration of patriarchal norms. *Wetlands* and other ‘posh porn’ fictions clearly eschew the distaste associated with the female body. However, by appropriating the language of ‘muck’, as Kean describes it, there is the risk of reinforcing the association of women with the abject and the obscene. Nonetheless, as it dares to confront the physical realities of women, ‘posh porn’ highlights a cultural anxiety about the female body and the impetus for women—and society—to control the distasteful self. The critical response that urges Roche to restrain the unruly body of her unhygienic protagonist is one often issued to the graphic writings of ‘posh porn’. It is a call to reign in unseemly texts in feminine contexts that echoes James Douglas’ demand that literature keep its house in order.

Interestingly, for all its radicality, ‘posh porn’ is keen to attain a literary cachet and to reject suggestions that its fictions are the equivalent to the narratives found in *Hustler* and *Penthouse* magazines. As the ‘posh’ suggests, the genre aims to achieve a ‘high-brow’ class status, to add ‘a gloss of sophistication’ to the ‘relentless repetition of sex act after sex act’ (Kean, 2009). In this way, publishers of ‘posh porn’ attempt to use literary status to mitigate controversial material, a strategy—as demonstrated by the trial of Radclyffe Hall—that merely provokes anxieties about the category of literature. Nonetheless, the literary pretensions of the genre have bolstered the idea that a text from this category represents more than just ‘common’ pornography. As the publisher Patrick Janson-Smith notes, ‘the people walking into shops to buy a book like *Catherine M* feel a bit less concerned about being seen buying an explicit book if it has a literary cachet’ (qu. Kean, 2009).

It is difficult to ignore the efforts of ‘posh porn’ writers to attain literary respectability. Gemmell’s *The Bride Stripped Bare* pays homage to *Madame
Bovary, for instance, while Bentley’s book describes her understanding of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kirkegaard, as well as the writers D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann and Henry Miller. Panarello repeatedly refers to Homer, Dante, Sylvia Plath and Vladimir Nabokov, while Millet, the Parisian art critic already gifted with cultural credibility, describes complex and abstract connections between art, space and the body with meticulous, analytical—and pornographic—detail. In a self-conscious effort to demonstrate their cultural capital, the authors of ‘posh porn’ fictions and memoirs arguably work to cultivate ‘literariness’, flaunting complex metaphors and literary allusions whilst mocking Oedipal complexes, Lolita fantasies and feminist anxieties. At times overly contrived, the link that ‘posh porn’ appears to seek with ‘Literature’ is nevertheless reminiscent of the trials of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wherein aesthetic defences of art sought to mitigate charges of obscenity and offence to public decency.

Yet the scandals surrounding the publication of ‘posh porn’ literature also display a curiously literary character, primarily involving, like the trial of Lady Chatterley’s Lover, critics from the social elite. Indeed, the antagonists contesting the ideological frameworks and subversive strategies of ‘top-notch smut’ (Rees, 2004) are largely comprised of cultural commentators and literary critics—unusual, given the propensity of scandal to involve voices from a wide social spectrum. As noted in the context of the trials Flaubert, Hall and Lawrence, there remains a considerable unwillingness to address representations of sexual women in terms that confront the subject matter. Criticism of ‘posh porn’, however, marks a departure. Indeed, as this chapter demonstrates, critical explorations of ‘posh porn’ narratives engage in debates explicitly about the representation of female sexuality. But these discussions, relegated to the analyses of a cultural elite, fail to engage broader public participation, suggesting that while discourses have widened, the literature of sexual women remains deeply problematic.

The controversies surrounding the publication of ‘posh porn’ literature thus signal both a continuation and a departure from the discourses emerging from the trials of Flaubert, Hall and Lawrence during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In its graphic confrontation with female sexuality, ‘posh porn’ is in many ways a descendent of earlier scandalous texts, interested in women, their bodies and the ideological interests associated with their sexual identities.
However, contemporary erotic fictions and memoirs also mark a significant departure from past portrayals of sexual women. Involving a post-feminist political spin that claims ‘posh porn’ texts are attempting to free female sexuality, the genre is keenly attuned to sexual and gender politics. While the censure of Flaubert involved a defence proclaiming the loyalty of *Madame Bovary* to a patriarchal norm, ‘high-brow’ erotica celebrates its rejection of a status quo—often regardless of how blatantly its narratives maintain normative roles. Thus while ‘posh porn’ confronts female sexuality in unflinching terms, its portrayal of sexual women remains problematic. Indeed, while contemporary illustrations of female sexuality may have become more adventurous, the complexity of depicting sexual women has intensified—a ‘problem’ of representation that is made increasingly synonymous with a ‘problem’ with women.

‘I Am A Completely Demented Misogynist’: Decoding *American Psycho*

If there is one controversy able to encapsulate the anxieties about sexual women and literature raised by the trials of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as well as by ‘posh porn’, it is the ‘literary bloodbath’ (Love, 1991, p. 45) of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. Indeed, while the text is renowned for its graphic sexual violence towards women, it is equally as infamous for its inability to be satisfyingly decoded, thus aggravating fears of its potentially radical influence and fuelling the need for analysis, censure and containment.

Other than Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988), it is difficult to name a contemporary novel that has attracted more controversy than *American Psycho*. Indeed, it is a text whose reputation has had a significant effect on its commercial and critical history. As Rosa Eberly observes in *Citizen Critics* (2000), ‘it could be said that publicity almost kept the novel from being published, then resulted in its being published, and then resulted in its being boycotted; ultimately, publicity resulted in the novel’s becoming a best-seller’ (p. 106). According to the *Rolling Stone* journalist Robert Love, four months after Ellis submitted the final manuscript to the publishing house Simon and Schuster, *American Psycho* began to encounter controversy (1991, p. 45). Despite early warnings from staff who refused to work on the novel, Simon and Schuster approved Ellis’ publication, supported by the editorial board and company
lawyers. Early release copies were distributed to reviewers with the expectation that the text would be provocative, but nonetheless gain favourable critical attention. Robert Zaller notes that ‘all proceeded well’ until the prepublication reviews were, ‘uniformly, of so negative and hostile a character that the anticipated coup became a public relations disaster’ (1993, p. 318). *Time* magazine printed an excerpt from a particularly violent chapter in which a woman is skinned alive, *Vanity Fair* published a lengthy section in which a homeless man is brutally attacked, while *Spy* reproduced a passage in which the narrator of the text has oral sex with the decapitated head of one of his victims. As a hoax, *Spy* also sent out sections of *American Psycho* to pornographic magazines such as *Hustler* and *Penthouse*, who ostensibly ‘turned [them] down on the grounds that the scenes depicted were too violent’ (Manguel, 1991, p. 46). The result, remarks Love, was that

suddenly the book had the attention of Richard E. Snyder, the chief executive officer of Simon and Schuster...Apparently unaware until then of the growing public-relations disaster on his hands, Snyder speed-read the 400 pages over a weekend. Early the next week...Snyder informed Ellis’ agent...that he was rejecting *American Psycho*, thereby forfeiting the $300,000 advance...Snyder made the formal announcement, explaining the decision was a ‘matter of taste’ (p. 45).

Within two days of the rejection, Sonny Mehta of Alfred A. Knopf purchased the novel for the Vintage Contemporary paperback line (Love, p. 45). By this point, the novel was at the centre of a full-blown controversy. Feminist organisations such as the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organisation for Women (NOW) launched a campaign to boycott the book, a crusade which involved, for example, establishing a hotline tape with recorded passages from *American Psycho* and pleas to the public to protest against the perpetuation of violence against women (Eberly, p. 114). The radical feminist Tara Baxter attracted notoriety by making ‘friendly visits to five different bookstores in San Francisco’ and ‘pouring blood on every copy of *American Psycho*’ available ‘(twenty-seven, to be exact)’ (Baxter, 1991). Ellis himself received ‘13 anonymous death threats, including several with photographs of him in which his eyes had been poked out or an axe drawn through his face’ (Cohen, C18), illustrating a recurring response to the book as a description of real actions performed by a rampant serial killer. American Express joined the fray when it learned that the protagonist of *American Psycho* uses his platinum card to ‘pay for
prostitutes and lift cocaine to his nose’ (Love, p. 46) and unsuccessfully attempted
to have the business name removed from the novel. Authors, critics, librarians and
publishers scrabbled to decry or celebrate Simon and Schuster’s ‘censorship’,
Mehta’s opportunistic purchase and the public availability of the text. Ellis,
however, persistently avoided providing an exegesis on the nature and meaning of
his text, openly scorning the responses of outraged audiences: ‘I would have to
say I don’t care what some women think or feel about this book, and I would have
to say I don’t care whether they find it offensive or not. That’s not my problem’

*American Psycho*, the first-person narrative of the Wall Street yuppie
Patrick Bateman, is an episodic compilation of monologues on designer labels,
gym routines, elite restaurants, popular music, technology and beauty regimes that
collides with a series of brutal murders and psycho-sexual perversion. A
juxtaposition of extreme tedium and sexual horror, *American Psycho* is a text
manufactured to elicit a response. Ellis raises anxieties concerning not only the
function and social implication of literature, but also questions the nature of
reading a literary work and the role of the public sphere in contesting the
relationship between literature and society. Primarily, the subject of unease
persistently returns to Ellis’ portrayal of women and the context of pornographic
violence in which the female characters of *American Psycho* are systematically
reduced to the victims of male power. While Ellis’ unremitting irony has added an
inordinate degree of instability to efforts at textual analysis, it has also created a
dual lens through which to argue for the implications and effects of the text. That
is, while *American Psycho* has been accused of perpetuating and celebrating a
culture of misogyny, critics have also lauded the novel as an astute parody and
critique of those very same cultural elements. As Carol Iannone claims (1991),
Ellis’ critics are ‘missing the point, refusing to see the connection between what
they denounce in him and the cultural values they themselves usually celebrate
and defend’ (p. 54). From either perspective, the implications are provocative and,
like ‘posh porn’, raise contentious issues about the reading of narratives that
appear to subvert the status quo.

As with the scandals of ‘posh porn’, the controversy of *American Psycho*
emerges from a critical perspective that is considerably different from that of
*Madame Bovary, The Well of Loneliness* or *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Indeed,
while Flaubert, Hall and Lawrence provoked the ire of conservative literary critics and courtrooms, the controversy of *American Psycho* is largely the result of scathing feminist critiques, particularly those issued by NOW. According to Tammy Bruce, president of the LA chapter of NOW, *American Psycho* ‘is not art’ and ‘Mr. Ellis is a confused, sick young man with a deep hatred of women who will do anything for a fast buck’ (qu. Cohen). Calling for a boycott of the novel, Bruce asserts that the text ‘will invariably contribute to violence against women’. Baxter contends that Ellis himself not only rejoices in ‘the recreational killing of women’ but that he has also trespassed ‘onto women’s most basic right to live without the constant threat of hate crimes and femicide’ (1991). Lorrie Moore adds in the *New York Times* that if ‘a work of art depicting sexual violence also fails at eloquence, authority and intelligence, if it seems fake and masturbatory’, then in ‘a national climate where women are raped and murdered daily’, it stands to reason that readers will ‘cry out’ about the violent images offered by *American Psycho* (1990, p. 27). These responses indicate how representation is acknowledged as a medium that not only reflects but also engenders social realities. Thus critics such as Baxter, Bruce and Moore form an argument for the real violence of symbolic violence, claiming, as Andrea Dworkin argues in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1989), that there is continuity between physical and representative harm—a relationship recognised, for example, in racial vilification laws concerning prejudicial language. While Bruce and Baxter offer a radically causal relationship between world and word, a perspective that allows little space for the ambiguities of parody or irony, it is a position that makes clear the transformative possibilities of text.

Critics such as Linda Kauffman, however, contend that the text ought to be approached in less absolute terms. Indeed, characterisations of *American Psycho* are divided into those who assert that the text advocates brutality against women (and children and homosexuals and ethnic ‘others’), and those who suggest the novel is deeply ironic. According to Kauffman, *American Psycho* is not only an allegory for the greed of the Reagan administration, but also a critical examination of the effects of mass consumerism on notions of self and other, subject and object (1998, p. 244). The treatment of women in the novel is thus for Kauffman not a reflection of Ellis’ disturbed mind but of a culture that reduces women to dumb meat, to goods for the tastes of the male consumer. In as much as
American Psycho is a pastiche of ‘the Pepsi generation, the heart of America, and so on’, Kauffman argues that it is also an extensive detailing of the social construction of gendered identities and the implications of patriarchal ideologies that deny female subjectivity and power (p. 244). The interpretation of the novel as allegory suggests that the text is less a celebration of misogynous violence than a critical literalisation that makes apparent existing social norms concerning the reduction of women to sexual objects.

The reading of American Psycho as a satire that parodically re-creates and thus deconstructs ideologies of sexuality and power allows for a provocative understanding of the text in terms of the cultural construction of gender and identity. While the sadistic cruelty of the novel remains problematic, to immediately accept that this represents Ellis’ gruesome celebration of misogyny is to curtail interpretations of the role the violence plays within the text. Women are indeed reduced to meat and bone. They are the victims of power in bestial acts that remove them of subjectivities as well as bodies. The chapter ‘Girl’, for example, provides a typically prolonged description of dismemberment:

After a minute or two of watching the rat move under her lower belly, making sure the girl is still conscious, shaking her head in pain, her eyes wide with terror and confusion, I use a chain saw and in a matter of seconds cut the girl in two with it. The whirring teeth go through skin and muscle and sinew and bone so fast that she stays alive long enough to watch me pull her legs away from her body—her actual thighs, what’s left of her mutilated vagina—and hold them up in front of me, spouting blood, like trophies almost. Her eyes stay open for a minute, desperate and unfocussed, then close, and finally, before she dies, I force a knife uselessly up her nose until it slide out of the flesh of her forehead, and then I hack the bone off her chin. She has only half a mouth left and I fuck it once, then twice, three times in all (1991, p. 329).

According to an allegorical reading of the text, such grotesque mutilations are the hyperbolic equivalent of a culture that systematically endorses the hatred of women.

The visceral and repulsive scenes of Bateman’s murderous sexual exploits also relate to abject ideas of the female body—the connection of women with the unclean, the distasteful—and the need to expel or sanitise the feminine from public discourse. This is a notion further alluded to in Bateman’s desire to ‘keep the men’s bodies separate from the women’s’ (p. 249). Mark Storey notes that the deeply misogynistic elements within the text reveal a fundamental aspect of the way that the ‘normative masculinity represented by Bateman and friends view
women: a wish to objectify women in purely aesthetic terms and to deny them any interiority or authority that might threaten masculine superiority’ (2005, p. 66). The association of sex with death—illuminated in the novel through a peculiar theory of sexually transmitted diseases—is particularly revealing in this context:

‘Diseases!’ he claims, his face tense with pain. ‘There’s this theory out there now that if you can catch the AIDS virus through having sex with someone who is infected then you can catch anything, whether it’s a virus per se or not—Alzheimer’s, muscular dystrophy, haemophilia, leukaemia, anorexia, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, for Christ sakes—you can get dyslexia from pussy (Ellis, p. 5).

As Storey states, sex compromises the integrity of the self, and ‘becomes the source of death—the biggest danger to the safety of men’s health becomes “pussy”’ (p. 66). Women’s bodies, therefore, are the ultimate threat to the stability of men, ‘the location of their downfall’ (p. 66). This validates the destruction of women through extreme violence because ‘their interiority in a literal sense, their bodies, threatens the existence of men’ (p. 66). Storey contends that this fear of the female body and its potential for devastation explains why Bateman does not simply murder women, but obliterates them: ‘[He] cuts them open, carves them up, eats their brains, makes nipples into necklaces, ties ribbons around vaginas. Normative masculinity’s objectification and fear of women’s bodies achieves its ultimate expression in Bateman’s fantasy of turning them into meat’ (p. 66). Once annihilated, the women Bateman dissects are containable. They can be ‘stuffed…into a Hefty garbage bag and [left]…with the rest of the trash on the curb’ (Ellis, p. 249). Reduced to fetishised parts—vaginas, nipples, legs—the female body is rendered harmless.

Yet it is not only the construction of cultural attitudes towards women that is critiqued within American Psycho. The novel also, Storey contends, engages in an examination of gendered identity per se, including the fiction of masculinity, revealing what Judith Butler describes in Gender Trouble as a ‘discursively conditioned experience’ (1999, p. 13). Indeed, while the narrative ‘I’ of Patrick Bateman creates an illusion of self, a consistent and stable subjectivity, his identity is as material (and thus as immaterial) as the Armani he touts. He is a site of discourse, an artificial and ‘uneasy collage’ that ‘exists only as an exemplar of traditionally male language systems (violence, pornography, the media, fashion, commerce) taken to their extremes’ (Storey, p. 59). ‘A representation of
representations’, Storey asserts that the constant blurring between Bateman’s identity and the language in which he is described undermines a stable idea of self and questions the ‘reality’ of his atrocious acts. As Storey observes, Bateman ‘cannot decide on a restaurant without consulting his trusty Zagat guide, and he cannot offer an opinion on something without first having read a review of it…The constant listing of brands, makes, and models is unmistakably evocative of catalogue-speak or a consumer guide’ (p. 61). As the text spirals into a series of explicit sexual and violent acts, the division between the pornography he watches and the deeds he enacts is obliterated. His depiction, for example, of Inside Lydia’s Ass (Ellis, p. 97) is detailed in the same uninflected prose of his own ‘real’ sex, which is likened to a ‘hard-core montage’ (p. 303). Bateman is inseparable from the media representations he consumes: his speech, behaviour and appearance are all directly linked to a cultural form. The literary academic Berthold Schoene adds that there are few ‘characters in American Psycho who are not primarily reflections or imaginary extensions of Patrick’s self’ (2008, p. 382). There is thus no idea of Patrick Bateman that has not evolved from a ‘conglomeration of other, male-authored, sources…each one representing elements of a dominating masculinity’ (Storey, p. 61).

According to Sylvia Söderlind (2008), the hyperbolic play on the stereotypes of a masculine order is tied not only to a politics of patriarchal identity, but also to a specifically American context that positions Patrick Bateman as a product of national as well as gendered norms. Söderlind argues that the ‘national “we” too often gets conflated with the general “we” of humankind’, and suggests that rather than approaching American Psycho as ‘an existential examination of the human condition at the end of the millennium’, it is more pertinent to ‘attend to the modifier of its title’: ‘Bateman is explicitly American and his aberrant behaviour must therefore be looked at in a national context’ (p. 65). Indeed, Söderlind contends that while the novel participates in a ‘spiritual (Dantesque) and an existential (Sartrean) investigation into the human condition’, the text is ‘marked by specifically American modes of exchange, where “humanity” is defined by particular inclusions and exclusions’ (p. 74). As Söderlind notes, the ‘rights to the city…are reserved…for those who look the part and wear the right logo. Interiority has become inverted—literalised—into being “in”, in a state of belonging assessed exclusively by external, or superficial,
attributes of appearance and performance’ (p. 74). Because those slaughtered by Bateman are not ‘inside his world’, they are judged ‘not fully human, or not American—which amounts to the same thing’ (p. 74).

According to these readings, then, the notion that Bateman is inherently immoral is a reflection not of Ellis’ fictional creation but rather of American cultural discourses that dictate models of identity and exclusionary paradigms of the national self. The novel presents us with an American psyche confused for an American psycho, perhaps. The misogyny, homophobia, greed, narcissism and wilful abandon of conscience displayed by Bateman are based on the assumptions and norms of white male hegemony. As Storey argues, the ‘murderous insanity of Bateman… [is] merely the ultimate realisation of normative masculinity’s internal logic’ (p. 63). It is a logic heavily defined by an opposition to ‘otherness’ and a struggle to maintain dominance as the ‘other’ is increasingly seen in the masculine sphere. Schoene thus suggests that ‘Patrick’s ultraviolent killing spree is a desperate battle for the self, a battle for the survival of the self-contained, authoritative, masculinist self of modernity’ (p. 383). Indeed, the psychosis of Bateman seems to result from his awareness of the degree to which he is culturally contingent rather than absolutely real. It is a theme repeatedly emphasised by Ellis as he frames Patrick Bateman as a montage of products, labels, associations, class-based speech patterns and acts. Beyond the façade, Bateman is non-existent. He is nothing without the performance of the social rites that define his place. The comedic inability of Bateman and his colleagues to identify one another correctly, for example, as they repeatedly confuse who is who, suggests that subjectivity is merely an illusion of appropriate social ‘stories’. As Butler argues in the context of gender, identity is, then, simply an effect of the repetition of acts that are culturally determined as biologically ‘real’:

[W]hen the subject is said to be constituted, that simply means that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantialising effects (p. 185).

The performative nature of self is a concept of which Bateman is powerfully aware. As he observes: ‘There is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though
I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours… *I am simply not there… I am a noncontingent human being*’ (p. 377).

Interestingly, it is through an analysis of *American Psycho* as an ironic deconstruction of gender identity that arguments about the novel return to the anxieties expressed by NOW. For if, as critics such as Kauffman and Storey suggest, the novel demonstrates how identity is constructed via a multitude of cultural discourses, then *American Psycho* might be seen as contributing to those cultural influences that help shape and persuade the subjective self. The unease surrounding *American Psycho* demonstrates such concerns not only through the protestations of NOW, but also through connections to ‘real-world’ events. When the American serial killer Ted Bundy, for example, was charged with horrific acts of rape and murder, much was made of his vast collection of pornography and claim that he needed a ‘bigger buzz’ than ‘hard porn and [so] went beyond that to actually raping young women’ (Bradford, 1997). Similarly, Wade Frankum’s Sydney murder spree in 1991 encouraged Robert Manne, the editor of *Quadrant*, to suggest that Frankum’s ownership of *American Psycho* proved a link between depicted and actual violence: ‘An open copy of the extremely violent misogynist fantasy *American Psycho* was found on his bedside table. The psychiatrist who assisted the coroner thought that Frankum’s exposure to “detailed descriptions of sexual murders and tortures” in *American Psycho* and elsewhere may have “tipped the balance” in his case’ (Manne, 1997). It was a literary possession that boosted the censorial arguments surrounding the text, yet claims that the novel not only inspired but actually created a killer are problematic, suggesting that literature can perform the greatest of all magical tricks: materialisation.

Debates about pornography which acknowledge ideas concerning the transformative potential of literature have implications both for the ways in which text is read, and for how literature is made available. As Wendy Kaminer and Nadine Strossen assert in *Defending Pornography* (2000), arguing for a metamorphic link between representation and reality has profound consequences for the legislative regulation of media production, as well as for notions concerning free speech. Kaminer contends that ‘censors exaggerate the presumed harm of speech by focusing on its instrumental value or effects: Antiporn feminists accuse pornography of causing rape; denizens of the therapeutic culture
(including advocates of political correctness) view words as actual weapons that inflict actual wounds...cybercensors claim that children are...forever corrupted by encountering sexually explicit speech and images on the Net’ (p. xi). For Strossen and Kaminer, then, the transformative potential of representation equates to right-wing politics of censure, and reduces art to questions about social efficacy and moral instrumentality. According to Strossen, it is not representation but an intrinsic human flaw that poses the greatest threat to women, stating that ‘even if we could wave a magic wand and eliminate all explicit sexual images from our culture, our social environment would still be pervaded by sexist and violent images. Thus, to end the purported “cause” of misogynistic discrimination and violence, we would have to ban virtually all communications’ (p. 142).

While Kaminer and Strossen criticise literal understandings of the relationship between word and world, their response nonetheless highlights the transformative potential of representation, as it locates misogyny as a phenomena embedded within mediums such as image and language. Indeed, as empirical research into the imagery offered by video games, television and advertising suggests, there is a correlation between repeated exposure to representative media and behavioural and attitudinal patterns. Judith Vessey and Joanne Lee, for example, in a study of the effects of video games on the behaviour of children, found that ‘playing violent video games resulted in an increase in short-term aggressive behaviours, with children tending to imitate those behaviours portrayed in the theme of the game, such as martial arts master or jungle hero’ (2000, p. 607). According to Vessey and Lee, ‘learning and repeatedly practicing aggressive situations may alter children’s basic personality structures, leading to more hostile thoughts and untoward changes in social interactions’ (p. 607). The medical researcher Joe McIlhaney also argues that the ‘powerful messages in mass media (advertising, movies, music lyrics and videos, radio, television, video games, and the Internet) influence the way children perceive their environment, their relationships, their bodies, and various risk behaviours. Media-consumption habits in children and adolescents predict risk behaviours and adverse health outcomes as diverse as...obesity, violence and aggressive behaviour, tobacco and alcohol use, and early sexual debut’ (2005, p. 327). Concern has also been expressed about the impact of advertising and popular magazines on gender and sexual identities, particularly in terms of the child consumer. An Australian...
Senate report (Shanahan, 2008), for example, has argued that children are ‘more visibly sexualised in terms of the media to which they are exposed’, targeting in particular the popular teenage girls’ magazines Dolly and Girlfriend. According to the report, children are indeed significantly ‘influenced by the amount of sex-related content throughout such magazines…as well as the stereotypical images of girls and young women in advertising and content’ (qu. Shanahan). The contestations over pornography demonstrate a long history of the connection between representation and behaviour, and it is indeed difficult to deny the transformative effects of representation in regards to this category: pornography is, after all, a genre of arousal.

Anxiety about the transformative potential of cultural forms, then, ought not to be dismissed as hyperbolic or excessive. In terms of literature, regardless of how a text is read, the power of the text is one of seduction and alteration. Derek Attridge is a literary critic who has attempted to theorise the transformative effects of literature in regards to the intimacy of the reading experience. In The Singularity of Literature (2004), Attridge argues that through literary works, a multitude of emotional and intellectual episodes are vicariously lived and accepted by the reader as their own. In terms oddly compatible with commentaries of American Psycho, Attridge posits a concept of ‘other’ that is able to emerge only as a version of the familiar, strangely lost, refracted, self-distanced. It arises from the intimate recesses of the cultural web that constitutes subjectivity, which is to say it arises as much from within the subject as from outside it—and in doing so blurs the distinction between that which is ‘inside’ and that which is ‘outside’ the self (p. 76).

The ‘otherness’ brought into existence by a work of literature allows the reader to experience a shift of ‘mental and emotional gear that make it possible for what was other to be apprehended, now ceasing to be, at least momentarily, other’ (p. 76). As Maria Takolander also notes, this is, ‘quite simply, a new way of imagining or thinking that has repercussions for the subject’s sense of self and vision of the world’ (2007, p. 42). By surrendering to the intimacy offered by literature, it is thus possible for subjectivity to be altered—a notion, interestingly, that was of concern to the critics of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, who were suspicious of fiction and its effects on women who consumed literature in the private spaces of the home. As Takolander remarks, ‘with the experience of literary haunting, intimate things are done to the soul, that word-
hoard at the centre of our being’ (p. 42). It is an idea that is made hyperbolic or even perverted in *American Psycho*, whose psychopathic protagonist perfectly reflects the media he consumes, from the pornography that dictates his sexual experiences to the news headlines that provide a façade of political correctness. At a dinner party where the subject of national politics arises, for example, Bateman offers a neat summary of the actions required to save America from its consumerist excesses: ‘We have to encourage a return to traditional moral values and curb graphic sex and violence on TV, in movies, in popular music, everywhere. Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people’ (Ellis, p. 17). The novel thus also—in its creation of a psychosexual killer—likens notions of transformation to a frightening kind of madness or possession, suggesting that the subjective self is defined by the commands of various representations in a mindless obedience to the status quo. As Bateman wonders, ‘If I were an actual automaton, what difference would there really be?’ (p. 343). Curiously, it is a sentiment also expressed by Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness*, whose brief attempt at conventional femininity in early adulthood provokes the realisation that there is no such thing as ‘real’ or abiding self: ‘I’m lost, where am I? I’m nothing—yes, I am, I’m Stephen—but that’s being nothing’ (p. 79).

‘THIS IS NOT AN EXIT’: RE-DRAWING THE BOUNDARIES?

Whether Ellis’ novel is read as a parodic critique or as an endorsement of misogyny, the arguments provoked by *American Psycho* highlight the anxiety aroused by the ability of literature to act as a medium of subjective and social transformation. Continuing on from the debates of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the scandal of *American Psycho* explicitly highlights a deep-seated cultural anxiety not only about the portrayal of sexual women, but also about representation itself. From Flaubert to Ellis, the controversies surrounding literature and female sexuality reiterate concerns about the social position of sexual women and the threat they pose to the status quo—concerns that have been repeatedly voiced and debated in relation to the function and responsibilities of literature as a cultural medium. Both intra- and extra-textually, the literature and scandals discussed seek to place boundaries around the representation (and thus,
perhaps, the reality) of female sexuality. Interestingly, within these debates, literature itself is rendered curiously female, a form that requires strict guidelines in order to meet expectations of its socio-cultural role. Indeed, ideas about the literary are repeatedly caught up with anxieties about women, from the feminisation of the novel form to a connection between arguments about the aesthetic value of literature and the unruly nature of the female body. It is a link evident, to repeat a quote, in the comment made by Pinard in the trial of Flaubert: ‘art without rules is no longer art; it is like a woman who would take off all her clothes. To impose upon art the unique rule of public decency is not to subordinate it but to honour it’ (qu. Cohen, p. 335). In this framework, both literature and women need to be controlled and contained, made to adhere to the rules for fear of disorder and change.

As the literature of ‘posh porn’ suggests, there remains significant unease attached to sexual women. Indeed, while feminist arguments about the efficacy of the genre in over-turning traditional sexual economies and critiquing male-defined norms are of utmost importance, the scandals of ‘posh porn’ remain fascinated with the representation of sexual women and the shock-factor of their public accounts. Undoubtedly, ‘posh porn’ attempts to challenge ideas about female sexuality. It is, perhaps unsuccessful, but in its own terms—to provide a female-authored, literary pornography—it is an exciting and provocative development of erotica for women. But there remains, it would seem, a reluctance to accept the sexual behaviour displayed by women, whilst social norms exult in the sexual rights of men. It is an imbalance demonstrated, for instance, by the ridicule of a figure such as Paris Hilton, but the public celebration of the playboy promiscuity of Hugh Hefner.

Novels such as American Psycho cannot evade discussions relating to the cultural construction of women, and the capacity of literature to inform social ideas about gendered identity. By linking the subjective self to a consumer-driven culture of greed, Ellis attempts to portray a critical account of identity as a conglomeration of socio-political forces. Indeed, for all its involvement in debates about pornography and violence, it is as a commentary on identity that American Psycho is most interesting. Yet it cannot be ignored that novels like American Psycho, and perhaps even Panarello’s 100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed, evoke anxieties that go beyond the intellectual explanations offered by a particular
reading or critical approach. These texts treat the massacre and mistreatment of women with the flat prose style used to describe a gym routine, a restaurant selection, the habits of school and study. Episodes of submission and humiliation are even made, at times, comedic. This is a technique perfected in *American Psycho*, whose protagonist, in one example, delivers a ‘chocolate-dipped urinal cake’ in a Godiva box to his delighted girlfriend, who chokes down the gift with exclamations that ‘it’s just…so minty’ (Ellis, p. 337). While there is an impetus to read these texts as allegories, to decode surface and symbolic meanings, there is, nonetheless, something profoundly disturbing about the sexual violence of these novels. Indeed, perhaps it is the claims to irony and subversion that heighten the anxiety induced by works such as *American Psycho*, as the reader is left only with ambiguity and conflicting nuances that refuse the condolences of clear meaning.
CHAPTER THREE
THE ART OF PERSUASIVE LYING: FAKING IT IN MEMOIR

When the Dublin University student Shane Fitzgerald posted a ‘poetic but phoney’ quote on Wikipedia in 2009, he argued that he was ‘testing how our globalised, increasingly internet-dependent media was upholding accuracy and accountability in an age of instant news’ (The Age, 2009). After the death of the French triple-Oscar-winning composer Maurice Jarre, Fitzgerald added a false statement to the online encyclopaedia, claiming that Jarre had once stated: ‘One could say my life itself has been one long soundtrack. Music was my life, music brought me to life, and music is how I will be remembered long after I leave this life. When I die there will be a final waltz playing in my head that only I can hear’ (qu. The Age, 2009). Creating the fake quotation, Fitzgerald claimed, took ‘less than 15 minutes’, and while Wikipedia quickly removed the fabricated material, it nonetheless ‘flew straight on to dozens of US blogs and newspaper websites in Britain, Australia and India’ (The Age, 2009). A month later, few had recognised the ‘editorial fraud’, so Fitzgerald kindly alerted ‘several media outlets’ to the ‘experiment’ (The Age, 2009). Fitzgerald asserted: ‘I am 100 per cent convinced that if I hadn’t come forward, that quote would have gone down in history as something Maurice Jarre said, instead of something I made up’ (qu. The Age, 2009). The Wikipedia spokesman Jay Walsh announced it was ‘distressing to see how quickly journalists would descend on…information without double-checking it’ (qu. The Age, 2009), while Fitzgerald claimed shock at the success of his hoax. As Sylvie Barak notes in The Inquirer, Fitzgerald ‘didn't expect it to go that far’ and expressed ‘surprise at the grave mistake made by so many publications in reprinting the quote: “I expected it to be in blogs and sites, but in mainstream quality papers?”’ (qu. Barak, 2009).

With the advent of the internet, imposture has become increasingly problematic. Indeed, anxiety about distinguishing between truth and fiction in the virtual world is regularly expressed in public debates concerned with the possibilities of the cyber-realm and the creative opportunities it offers. Yet the history of literary fakes is as old as literature itself, and reveals a long tradition in which the unsteady boundaries between the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’ are readily transgressed. As Anthony Grafton notes in Forgers and Critics (1990), ‘for 2500
years and more, forgery has amused its uninvolved observers, enraged its humiliated victim’ and ‘flourished as a literary genre’ (p. 5). Indeed, Grafton traces the incidence of literary hoax back to the fourth century BCE, when the philosopher ‘Dionysius the Renegade’ ostensibly ‘forged a tragedy, the *Parthenopaeus*, and ascribed it to Sophocles in order to discredit his learned rival, Heraclides of Pontus, who promptly quoted the work as genuine’ (p. 3). Whether a ‘practical joke’ or a wilful deception, literary forging, faking and hoaxing has been ‘widespread in time and place and varied in its goals and methods’ (p. 5), ranging from the pranks of classical scholars to the false Wiki-quote of a ‘cheeky paddy’ (Barak, 2009). Fraudulent literature is certainly an intricate and varied genre, involving a long and detailed history, a spectrum of complex subgenres, and convoluted narratives of motivation and intent. As acts of amusement or as targeted attempts to reveal cultural and institutional faultlines, fakes unsettle ideas about ‘genuine’ literature and ‘real’ authors, and disturb the boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. Provoking concerns about the relationship between representation and authenticity, fraudulent texts unveil a series of public anxieties about the construction of the real, and a critical interest in the function of literature as a vehicle through which the imaginary becomes the actual.

Examining a diverse range of fake memoirs, this chapter argues that fraudulent life narratives reveal a series of anxieties relating to the construction of identity, and the connection between representation and the real. While other controversies discussed in the thesis so far relate to specific areas of subjectivity, such as sexuality and religious belief, the scandals of fake memoirs are concerned with identity *in toto*. Analysing the contexts and characteristics of fraudulent autobiographies, the chapter assesses how authors and audiences become complicit in fuelling visions of the unreal, and explores the processes through which the ‘real’ is transformed into a function of the marketplace. In doing so, this chapter focuses on the tendency of fake memoirs to recount experiences of trauma and victimhood, and their imbrication with minority and majority politics. Interestingly, while the controversies of children’s literature show minority voices using text as a vehicle for wider contestations, impostures skew the binary between the margins and the centre. The discourses of marginality are used to access the attention and sympathies of the majority, manipulating cultural sensitivities and stereotypes in order to execute a (temporarily) convincing fake
and to highlight the complicity of readers in the objectification of minority identities. Explicitly linked to concerns about the Holocaust, religious conservatism in the Middle East, ethnic identity in Australia and South America, and systematic abuse in church establishments, the fraudulent memoirs examined here capitalise upon existing social narratives in order to make credible autobiographical stories. In the process, fakes provoke discussions about how the public engages with certain forms of trauma, and the interests and investments of a literary culture per se.

Focussing on the most controversial memoir scandals of recent decades, this chapter engages with debates about literature, representation and authenticity, and their relationship to anxieties about identity. Firstly, the chapter examines the nature of fraudulent memoirs, exploring their implications for ideas about the self and the imbrication of the fake with concerns about literature and literary culture per se. Then, in accordance with the penchant of fake memoirs for narratives of trauma, the texts discussed are divided into three key categories: ‘victims of history’, ‘victims of abuse’ and ‘victims of culture’.

In the first category, the chapter explores fraudulent Holocaust memoirs, including Misha Defonseca’s *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust* (1997), Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence* (unpublished), Binjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* (1995) and Helen Demidenko’s *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1994). The analysis of the ‘victims of history’ highlights anxieties about the integrity of history and ‘fact’, and explores issues concerning the commercialisation of the Holocaust as a product for public consumption. Further, the discussion in this section reveals the radically transformative effects of re-narrating identity, and the opportunities fakes offer for understanding ‘postmodern’ ideas about an (in)authentic self.

In the second category, the chapter addresses the increasingly popular ‘misery memoir’, a genre dedicated to descriptions of appalling suffering. Examining James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), David Pelzer’s *A Child Called ‘It’* (1995) and Kathy O’Beirne’s *Don’t Ever Tell* (2006), the discussion of ‘victims of abuse’ illustrates how anxieties about the inability of representation to provide a direct access to truth are mitigated via an emotional connection with the text. Indeed, the scandals surrounding ‘misery memoirs’ reveal a public
investment in an undisturbed effect of the real, a willingness to accept a blurring of fact in the interests of the sensational experience of literature.

Finally, the chapter moves to the controversies surrounding memoirs that have appropriated the identity of an ethnic ‘other’, including the autobiographical trilogy produced by Nasdijj (2000-2004), Norma Khouri’s Forbidden Love (2003), and Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonio, I, Rigoberta Menchú (1983). Drawing on narratives of post-colonial America and the rule of Islam in Jordan, these memoirs use the experiences of minority groups and the language of rights discourses to sell the exoticism of ‘otherness’. Targeting the sympathies of a privileged Western audience, ethnic fakes reveal the susceptibility of reading communities to particular kinds of fraudulence, and expose anxieties about the relationship between the centre and the margins. Indeed, as impostors occupy minority voices in order to present the mainstream with a vision of the ‘other’, they adopt the stereotypes and prejudices that denote the Western ‘subject’ and the exotic ‘object’, commodifying narratives of ‘otherness’ for the interests of reading audiences. In this context, fraudulent memoirs expose anxieties about the role of literature in perpetuating cultural myths and stereotypes in order to fulfil the expectations of readers. However, while the popularity of these memoirs suggests something about the commodification of oppressed minorities for a literary market, there is also an underlying anxiety revealed by the scandal surrounding a fake about the need to bridge the gap between the majority and the minority. That is, while readers are complicit in the transformation of marginality into a value of the marketplace, they are also concerned with shifting the balance between dominant and minority privileges.

Essentially, and unsurprisingly, the scandals surrounding the revelation of a fake memoir are focussed on issues of authenticity, the desire to find—or feel—something true. But while the ousting of a forgery compels a search for the real, all that appears is more complexity and spuriousness, from the performative nature of self to the artifices of literature. As fakes mimic cultural and generic conventions, the boundaries between fact and fiction are profoundly unsettled and reality becomes little more than an authenticity effect. The scandals surrounding the revelation of a fraudulent memoir thus provoke concerns about the relationship between representation and the real, and expose anxieties about the ability of literature—and literary culture—to provide access to the truth.
In order to clarify the key characteristics of contemporary fake memoirs, it is instructive to begin with a brief discussion of the terms that delineate fraudulent literature. As K.K. Ruthven notes in *Faking Literature*, ‘coming to terms with literary forgery involves thinking about the overlapping descriptors that constitute our understanding of it’ (2001, p. 34). While it is not the aim of the chapter to provide a lexicon for literary fakes, differentiating between various pseudopegraphia is useful in determining the motivation and intent of the creators of forged texts. Ruthven observes that the terms of ‘literary spuriousness’ tend to be ‘chaperoned by a predictable adjective’, arguing ‘successful “hoaxes”, for instance, are usually called “amusing”, because hoaxing is not regarded as a serious offence. This makes them unlike “forgeries”, which are regarded as “scandalous” or “outrageous.” And in the nineteenth century, when such things were called “impostures”, the preferred adjective was “impudent”’ (p. 35). Critics such as Hunter Steele (1977), Anthony Grafton (1990) and Julia Abramson (2005) have discussed at length the subtleties defining phenomena such as faking, forgery, mystification and hoaxing, and offer complex definitions of categories which often denote much of the same thing. Ruthven describes this overlapping of terms as a ‘synchronic problem of definition’, caused when ‘contemporaries choose different words to describe the same phenomenon’ (p. 37). Noting the various descriptors applied to the pseudo-medieval poetry of Thomas Chatterton, Ruthven observes the variance in describing literary fakes: ‘Chatterton is an “impostor poet” to Louise J Kaplan, a “hoax-poet” to Marjorie Levinson, but a “literary forger” to Ian Heywood’ (pp. 36-7). The language of fraudulent literature, Ruthven concludes, seems to lead ‘a social life quite independently of our Humpty-Dumptyish desire’ to ‘taxonomise fake literature…to make it mean exactly (and therefore only) what we want it to mean’ (p. 36).

Recognising the fluidity of terms associated with fraudulent literature, this chapter employs the words fake, fraud, forgery and imposture rather promiscuously. In the context of memoirs, however, the term ‘hoax’ is consciously rejected, as a number of its key features are incongruous with the character of fake life narratives. Critically, hoaxes represent ‘culture-jamming’ exercises that involve, as Ruthven and Abramson have observed, impostors whose
practice in faking is short-term and specifically targeted. Crucially, a hoaxter plans for revelation to occur, often within a short period of time following the publication of the falsified work. Moreover, a hoax is a stunt consciously designed to act as a piece of cultural criticism directed at a specific figure or institution of power. The authors of fraudulent memoirs, however, publish with the full intent to deceive, as evidenced by both the public performance of an assumed identity and the near-absence of justificatory claims after the fake has been revealed. The writers of false life narratives often disappear entirely once discredited, or stubbornly maintain that the text represents a truthful account of lived experience. While a hoax is motivated by the desire to critique a paradigmatic gap or flaw, the issues raised by fraudulent memoirs are merely a consequence of revelation, an accidental, albeit interesting, side-effect. As fraud, fake or forgery, the false memoir is arguably a much more complex occurrence, refusing to provide an etiology or account of its methods, purpose or inspiration. Finally, while hoaxing can be an aggressive and cynical tool, belying ideas of its ‘amusing’ qualities, its agenda in misleading an audience is usually made explicit, and publicly analysed in the interests of maximising its effect. By contrast, the faking of self in memoir is an act that attempts to remain hidden, obscuring the agenda of the fake, as well as raising profound questions about the interplay between the constructed and actual selves of the authors who create such texts.

Given the tendency of authors who produce fake life narratives to maintain an enigmatic silence about their work, the discourses surrounding fraudulent memoirs are often infatuated with locating the fake in ‘hard’ reality. In the initial stages of scandal, much of the interest is in detecting, quite simply, how the fraudulent memoir was able to emerge. Certainly, controversy only occurs after the publication of an exposé. Thus the scandal about I, Rigoberta Menchú emerged after the historian David Stoll published Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans (1999), a book which scrutinised the inconsistencies of Menchú’s internationally acclaimed testimonio of the suffering of Mayan Indians. The public sense of outrage at being duped fuels thecompulsion to gather information about the truth ‘crime’ that has been committed. The life of the author is systematically examined, as in the Australian case of Helen Demidenko, the author of The Hand That Signed the Paper (1994). Demidenko not only constructed a false family history but also claimed to be Ukrainian, faking cultural
heritage, language and appearance in an effort to deceive. The defrocking of Demidenko was particularly vitriolic, including the details of her ‘boringly English extraction’ to her own later confession that her ‘father managed to kill himself off “on the job” in a local brothel’ (Malcolm, 2006). In the tradition of *le pacte autobiographie* offered by Philippe Lejeune in *L’Autobiographie* (1989), readers accept that ‘the author, the narrator and the protagonist’ of an autobiography ‘must be identical’ (p. 5). In the event of imposture, the public which once authorised a life narrative seeks to claim other truths, to sort the real from the unreal as compensation for a false investment. Indeed, it is a process that is often marked by intense hostility. As Andrew Stafford, a journalist and friend of Demidenko, claims, aside from media attacks, the ousted author was ‘spat on in the street, threatened repeatedly with rape and death, and had dog shit sent to her through the post’ (qu. Mendes, 2009). Such hostility reveals a public enraged by being duped, suggesting the arousal of deep-seated anxieties, which this chapter will argue revolve around a stable notion of identity, and the relationship between representation and authenticity.

Indeed, the often hostile search for the truth of the author highlights questions about the autobiographical nature of identity per se and provokes interest in the symbiotic connection between life and narrative. In *Living Autobiographically* (2008), John Paul Eakin argues that the controversies surrounding fake memoirs expose how the narrative rules of autobiography ‘also function as identity rules’ that feature ‘truth-telling’ as ‘both generic marker and identity requirement’ (p. 34). According to Eakin, ‘when the public responds to rule-breaking autobiographers’—authors who do not comply with Lejeune’s *pacte*—the primacy of ‘identity issues’ and ‘truth-value’ for a reading audience is revealed (pp. 34-5). Citing the scandals of Menchú and Binjamin Wilkomirski, ‘rule-breaking’ controversies involving the fake memoirs of a Guatemalan Native Indian and a child survivor of Nazi concentration camps, Eakin contends that ‘the autobiographer’s character supplanted the accuracy of the text as the primary concern, with the identity-function of the truth-telling rule overriding its generic, literary function’ (p. 39). As interest shifts from text to author, scandalous fakes illustrate the cultural investment in notions of an abiding self, a stable subjectivity that is as it is represented. As Eakin notes of Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* (1995), ‘if the book could not pass muster as autobiography, why not simply repackage it as
a novel? Because it is not generic status that is at issue; it is not the text but the person’ who has threatened ideas of an essential self (pp. 39-40). The problem, as Susanna Egan posits, is the notion of ‘authentic identity, whether it exists and whether or how it matters’ (2004, p. 19).

Arguably, much of the outrage that occurs in response to a fake memoir is connected to anxieties about the transformative nature of identity and the notion that the self lacks an ‘essential’ form. Narrative theories of identity have long contended that subjectivity is constituted by language and by the stories told about self. Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, for example, argue in Narrative and Identity (2001) that the idea of human identity is connected to the ‘very notion of narrative and narrativity’ (p. 16) and that the self, like story, is a process of narration: ‘The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others structure our sense of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related’ (p. 10). William Lowell Randall in The Stories We Are (1995) also contends that the ‘narratory principle’ is a ‘root metaphor’ for the ways in which human experience is not only made meaningful, but actually made (p. 91), claiming that the creation of narratives of self has ‘transformative powers’ for subjectivity (pp. 5-8).

Similarly, Jerome Bruner posits in ‘Life as Narrative’ (2004) that identity is formed via narrative, arguing that the culturally defined ‘cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organise memory, to segment and purpose-build the very “events” of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives’ (p. 694).

This notion of subjective life as not only visualised but also constructed through narrative modes and tropes is central to anxieties about fake memoirs. Indeed, the idea of identity as a story open to transformation is both liberatory and deeply unsettling. However, while frauds expose the radical potential for what Brockmeier and Carbaugh term the ‘options of identity’ (p. 8), fake memoirs also disturb the effect of genuine and cohesive selves, and suggest to readers that it is not only the impostor who is faking it. It is a revelation that is profoundly disturbing, and which has significant implications for understanding both individual and collective realities. As Egan observes, if autobiography as imposture is able to produce ‘either the interior life or the public effect of that life by virtue of its narrative claims, is the impostor, cut loose from reference to the
real world, not only able but actually welcome to produce *that which was not*?’ (2004, p. 21). As will be discussed in relation to fake Holocaust memoirs, creating false life narratives entails ‘real’ consequences for the lives and histories that have been appropriated, for as authors begin to re-narrate the terms and possibilities of self, they also begin to re-narrate the terms and possibilities of others.

Indeed, arguments about the construction of identity vis-à-vis fake memoirs do not occur in a vacuum, but are situated in—and have effects on—highly specific cultural contexts. As Ruthven states, fraudulent literature is a ‘symptom of the culture into which it intervenes’ (p. 193), a sign of an institutional or paradigmatic gap that allows existing social narratives, generic conventions and literary establishments to be exploited. In this way, forgery provides a mechanism through which cultural faultlines are revealed. Abramson similarly notes that the revelation of a fake ‘draws attention to the conditions under which deception was allowed to transpire’ (p. 25), arguing that forgery is ‘an illusion, but one that points insistently to that which makes illusion possible’ (p. 145). As noted, recent scandals involving fraudulent memoirs have primarily related to the fictitious lives of Holocaust survivors, victims of sexual and drug abuse, and the marginalisation of ethnic ‘others’. Capitalising on histories of trauma, fake life narratives have been acerbically denounced for a lack of moral and political conscience. Robert Manne observes, for example, that the detractors of Demidenko’s *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1994) ‘see in it little but moral vacuity, vulgarity, historical ignorance and overt anti-Semitism’ (2007). However, as perverse as the topical interests of fake memoirs have been seen to be, each fraud reveals a public interest in particular kinds of authors and suffering, reflecting an uncomfortable series of social and literary vulnerabilities, political interests, and prejudices. Gillian Whitlock, for example, asserts that the ‘commodification of life narratives by Arab and Muslim women is a well-established circuitry’ that offers ‘privileged readers the pleasure of empathic identification’ with traumatic experience as well as providing the sense that the public is supporting the ‘interests of social justice’ (p. 118).

Thus while fraudulent life writing is a ‘parasite’ travelling ‘on a dominant testimonial current’ (Whitlock, p. 119), it serves as a critical mirror to a culture industry that has already commodified—or made generic—narratives and identities of the oppressed. Moreover, the cultural specificity of false testimonies
illustrates how a Western reading public seeks an experience of authenticity. As Graham Huggan argues in relation to ethnic autobiographies, discourses of ‘otherness’ have been commodified by a dominant culture suffering from ‘the fear of loss or alienation; of being or having become somehow “inauthentic”’ (2002, p. 39). According to Huggan, the ‘interpolation of the authentic Other’ into majority forms of literature serves as a ‘redemptive or compensatory strategy’ designed to ameliorate a Western sense of inauthenticity and, perhaps, boredom (p. 39). Huggan suggests that ‘the invocation of native spirituality’, for example, has been appropriated by postcolonial societies ‘as a necessary antidote to a Western culture rendered inauthentic by its attachment to material excess’ (p. 39). Further, the preoccupation of fraudulent memoirs with Native ‘otherness’ provokes complex questions about how ‘images of the indigenous other are created, manipulated and controlled by the dominant culture’ in the ostensible interests of ‘multicultural openness’ (p. 40). Sonia Kurtzer contends, for instance, that the growing attention to Aboriginal literature in Australia is less a sign of cultural inclusivity than a ‘desire of hegemonic culture to hear “authentic” tales of the “other”’ (qu. Huggan, p. 41); preferably, Huggan adds, ‘in accordance with those tales and images of otherness already possessed’ (p. 41). The controversy of the literary fake, then, is not only about the transgressions of a fraud, but also the interests of a reading (and critical) audience whose anxieties about their own cultural identity are exposed in the process of being duped by an impostor.

Yet it is not simply cultural interests and identity anxieties that are questioned in the incidence of a fake memoir, but also the authenticity of literature and literary institutions. Maria Takolander and David McCooey argue that literature has been positioned historically in terms of authentic experience despite being ‘often about—perhaps fundamentally about—successfully faking it’ (2004, p. 57). Indeed, since Plato, literature has been conceptualised as a medium that is both false—constituted by imaginative creations—yet powerfully and transformatively ‘real’. It is a form that has been endowed with the ability to impart ‘a transcendental moral truth’ about human nature (Takolander & McCooey, p. 58) even though its truth-telling capacity relies entirely on the construction of persuasive artifices. Ruthven similarly asserts that the ‘relationship between literarity and spuriousness is framed as a binary opposition, in which literature is valorised as the authentic Self and literary forgery disparaged
as its bogus Other’ (p. 3). But fraudulent texts, Ruthven maintains, are less ‘the disreputable Other of “genuine” literature’ than a ‘demystified and disreputable Self’ (p. 3). In these terms, the genuine and the fake are less in a diametrical opposition than in a dialectic relationship. As Abramson contends, ‘the discovered fake has the added interest of pointing dramatically toward the spurious or forged nature of all texts,’ asserting that forgery is the ‘stunt double’ of literature (p. 22). The public desire for literature to function as a medium for ‘truth-telling’—though complicated by the required ‘truth-value’ of forms such as autobiography—is thus made ironic when considering that literature itself is ‘a kind of fake’ (Takolander & McCooey, p. 57).

As suggested, literary culture is also compromised by the revelation of fraudulent texts. In the context of contemporary fake memoirs, the ‘guardians of cultural institutions’ (Ruthven, p. 2) have been both questioned and undermined by the emergence of frauds validated by literary authorities such as publishers, critics, prize committees and funding bodies (Takolander & McCooey, p. 57). Ruthven further observes that as ‘a creative way of judging the judges, literary forgery is the bête noir of a literary awards system’, whose expert critics, particularly in Australia, endure a defrocking akin to that of the original fake (p. 190). As Ruthven notes, when fraudulent literature is granted a prestigious prize, the ‘major casualty…is neither the prize nor the hoaxer but the literary awards system as represented by its judges. For whenever a literary forgery wins a literary prize it becomes clear that some other agenda than the putative one of recognising “literary merit” is being implemented’ (p. 190). Thus when Demidenko was awarded the 1993 Miles Franklin award, it was described by Peter Goldsworthy as a ‘kind of multicultural affirmative action prize’ (1998, p. 2). The exposure of a fake, then, reveals anxieties about the authenticity of literary culture in its mistaken validation of texts that clearly fulfill agendas other than (or alongside) that of artistic merit. Ruthven concludes that forgeries are therefore ‘even more anarchic than literature because they question those institutions which identify and process the “genuine” article’, exposing the ‘weaknesses in those publishing, reviewing and prize-giving practices which constitute the literary world’ (p. 198).

The anxious relationship between fake memoirs and the marketplace is also one of particular interest in contemporary scandals, given the propensity of
recent frauds to achieve extraordinary popular and market success. Indeed, literary authority is conferred not only by ‘elite’ institutions, but also by the marketplace, which commodifies and packages ‘the literary’ as a desirable item for purchase. In the American context, profits have been largely due to the daytime television mogul, Oprah Winfrey. While the role of Winfrey in publicly endorsing an embarrassing series of frauds—including James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence* (unpublished) and Margaret B. Jones’ *Love and Consequences* (2008)—has seen the media mogul dismissed as easily ‘suckered’ (Flaherty, 2009, p. 40), the ‘Oprah Effect’ is a well-documented phenomenon that describes the catapulting sales of literature promoted by the talkshow queen. As Edward Wyatt notes in the *New York Times*, Winfrey has ‘championed a diverse group of modern authors…whose members saw sales of their books grow exponentially, as hundreds of thousands of loyal viewers rushed out in search of the latest selection’ (2004). The involvement of star figures in sanctioning select literature points to a culture that commodifies both the text as a desirable product, and the identity of the author as a literary celebrity. Feeding into a ‘larger obsession with celebrity and identity that is apparent in public culture’, Takolander and McCooey argue that a book marketed in terms of its author ‘offers the seductive possibility’ of allowing the ordinary person privileged access to the celebrity (2004, p. 59). The book, Takolander and McCooey contend, ‘more than any other commodity, seems to offer the possibility of penetrating through to the authentic identity of the author. It seems to offer the possibility of an exchange of interiorities’ (p. 59). In terms of memoir, this potential for exchange is made even more intimate. However, with the revelation of fakery, audiences are left not only with the sense of having engaged with a façade, but also of having made a poor emotional investment.

The cult of the literary celebrity also signals the various cultural investments bought by—and sold to—reading audiences. The literature promoted by Winfrey has a tendency to represent authors on the cultural margins, such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Gabriel García Márquez and Elie Wiesel. In line with Winfrey’s penchant for texts representing triumph through adversity, the book club not only feeds a public demand for narratives of trauma, but also highlights how minority voices are marketed for majority culture—an interplay further complicated by Winfrey’s position as a member of both the mainstream
(in her celebrity) and the marginal (as a black woman). Moreover, as Winfrey celebrates the prize-winning literature of writers who have suffered under colonialism, racism and religious persecution, she reveals a public culture keen to be associated with the ‘high aesthetic value and moral seriousness’ accorded to ‘literary’ texts (Carter, 2001). As David Carter notes in the context of Australian literary culture, ‘good books and good reading are lifestyle and identity “accessories”’ that have the power to endow readers with aesthetic and ethical integrity (2001). As celebrities help to package moral and aesthetic seriousness as desirable commodities, particular authors and texts—those associated with the suffering minorities—are connected with a particular kind of prestige, as are the readers who support and consume them. It is a circuitry of cultural value that fakes have astutely exploited, recognising the commodification of marginality for mainstream audiences, and the pretensions, perhaps, of literary culture per se.

To summarise the arguments of the chapter so far, the revelation of a fake memoir exposes the investments of a public culture in notions of the real—firstly, in terms of an authentic identity and secondly, in relation to a genuine literary experience. Indeed, fraudulent memoirs reveal complex debates relating to identity construction, mainstream and minority politics, and the relationship between literature and the public sphere, bringing to the surface a series of anxieties about the distinction between the real and the unreal. Constructing whole new lives and histories, the ‘fake authors’ of fake memoirs unsettle the integrity of ‘authentic selves’ in ways that can have consequences beyond infuriating a duped reading audience. Jewish communities, for example, recognise how fake texts about the Holocaust give credence to historical ‘revisionists’ who seek to deny its atrocities. Indeed, as the following discussion of Holocaust fakes argues, while fraudulent memoirs reveal that there is no axiomatic relationship between representation and truth, they also highlight the profound consequences for the lives and histories that have been co-opted and transformed.

**REIMAGINING THE UNIMAGINABLE: VICTIMS OF HISTORY**

As noted, recent fakes have increasingly sought to capitalise on the popularity of narratives of trauma. The sociologist Frank Furedi argues that before critics condemn these ‘fantasists as simple literary hustlers’, it is important to
acknowledge that contemporary culture has created powerful incentives for those who claim a position of victimhood (2008). Furedi notes that narratives of trauma satisfy a ‘cultural sensibility that encourages us to celebrate the survival of abuse’ and, indeed, rewards those who confess their suffering—as well as those who read their memoirs—with ‘moral authority’ (2008). The privileged status of the victim emerges, Furedi argues, from a therapeutic ethos that condemns the questioning of traumatic experience, suggesting that mantras of “Believe the child,” “Believe the patient”, “Believe the abused” both sacralise the claims of victimhood and create a double-standard that implies a victim has ‘privileged access’ to the truth (2008). In a culture that treats the confessions of victims as a ‘transcendental “truth” of abuse’, those who interrogate the veracity of trauma claims are thus framed as complicit in the act of victimisation (Furedi, 2008). In addition, in the market of fraudulent memoirs, suffering is prime stock, capitalising on a public unwillingness to doubt victim testimony as well as a cultural ethos that confers identity via association with social and historical injustice. Furedi suggests that ‘society’s intense sensitivity towards the history of individuals, and of communities, is informed by the idea that the afflictions of the past directly shape contemporary identity’ (2008). In a milieu thus catering for the confessions of the ‘historical victim’ (Furedi, 2008), it is perhaps no surprise that the greatest trauma of the twentieth century, the Holocaust, has inspired a gamut of memoir fakes.

The Holocaust has come to symbolise the most traumatic of human events. Denoting suffering on an unthinkable level, survivors such as Elie Wiesel have argued that the Holocaust is simply unrepresentable. As Wiesel contends, ‘just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz…Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so’ (1989). Positioned as the defining standard for victimhood, the Holocaust has been sacralised, in the words of Wiesel, as ‘a universe outside the universe’ (1989). As the exceptionalist arguments of survivors and writers such as Wiesel suggest, the Holocaust has been positioned as a trauma that is incomparable to all others, a phenomenon of suffering that can be represented—if it can be represented at all—only by those who experienced it. The moral authority awarded to the accounts of Holocaust survivors is thus profound, granting memoirs and testimonies a status of publicly recognised ‘truth’
that is beyond doubt—providing disturbingly fertile ground on which to construct a fake memoir.

However, John Frow observes in *Time and Commodity Culture* (1997) that the Holocaust has been ‘constructed and reconstructed as an object of public memory within the play of present interests, fears and fascinations’ (p. 243). No longer simply ‘history’, the Holocaust is an ‘event’ which has been appropriated by popular media and transformed into a product that can be easily accessed by mass culture. Refigured as a commodity, the real and the unreal begin to slide uncomfortably into one another. Due to the release of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993), for example, it is possible to visit the ghettos of Krakow on a ‘*Schindler’s List* Tour’, which ‘not only includes the main landmarks and features of this terrible period, such as Schindler’s factory and the old Ghetto walls, but also visits locations from which the movie itself was filmed’ (2009). The excursion, offered alongside vodka tasting, a Krakow ghost tour and a 4 x 4 off-road challenge, packages history as a holiday adventure and uses the commodity of the film to sell Holocaust tourism. Indeed, Auschwitz is commonly listed as the primary ‘tourist attraction’ of Poland. As the boundaries between truth and product begin to blur, and as Holocaust narratives grow increasingly familiar for reading audiences, the genocide is treated as an object of entertainment that invites co-option and exploitation. Constructing a fraudulent memoir about the Holocaust is, then, a savvy choice. If, as Furedi argues, critics and readers are already inhibited about questioning the veracity of trauma memoirs (2008), the sacrilisation of the Holocaust adds even greater deterrence, particularly in the context of contemporary debates concerning historical revisionism and the politics of denial. As a result, testimonies that might have been otherwise deemed absurd are—however temporarily—accepted as credible.

The scandal of Misha Defonseca is illustrative of the public’s willingness to believe. The memoir of a girl who was adopted by wolves after escaping Nazi oppression, *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust* (1997) was a European bestseller, translated into eighteen languages, glowingly endorsed by the Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, and adapted into a French feature film, *Surviving with Wolves* (2007). According to the memoir, Defonseca wandered across Europe as a seven-year-old after the deportation of her parents in 1941, sheltering with wolves, killing a German soldier, creeping into and out of the Warsaw
Ghetto, befriending Polish and Russian partisans, and escaping and witnessing numerous massacres before walking home at the end of the war. Sharing one of the more dramatic narratives of survival, Defonseca capitalised on a public reluctance to question Holocaust witnesses even by survivors themselves, as she gave ‘gripping talks’ to Jewish organisations and shamelessly pursued the considerable profits resulting from the marketing of her miraculous tale (Mehegan, 2008).

Details of the fraud emerged in the wake of a trial involving the ghostwriter of the text, Vera Lee, and its publisher, Jane Daniel. According to Defonseca and Lee, Daniel failed to fully promote the memoir and concealed revenue from the co-authors in a breach of contract that awarded Defonseca $7.5 million and Lee $3.3 million in damages, an amount later tripled ‘by a judge who found Daniel…had misled both women and tried to claim royalties herself by rewriting the book’ (Associated Press, 2008). David Mehegan notes that even in its earliest stages as a manuscript, Holocaust scholars dismissed the work after uncovering numerous historical and geographical errors (2008). Deborah Dwork, the director of the Strassler Family Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University, reported the incongruities to Daniel, who simply ‘kept finding ways to get around’ the objections, fearful the memoir—a likely market success—would be discredited by experts (Dwork, qu. Mehegan, 2008). Indeed, Daniel initially excused any discrepancies in Defonseca’s narrative by emphasising the problematic relationship between memory and history: ‘Of course, she was a young girl at the time…This is a memoir—people make mistakes on details and dates all the time’ (qu. Mehegan, 2008). But later bankrupted by the court battle, Daniel decided to follow evidence suggesting the narrative was fraudulent. She attracted the assistance of a genealogical researcher, Sharon Sergeant, by detailing the controversy on an online blog. Shortly after, it was discovered that Misha Defonseca was baptized Monique de Wael in a Brussels Catholic church in 1937, was enrolled in a local primary school in 1943-44, and her parents were not Jewish but resistance fighters arrested and executed by the Germans (Mehegan, 2008). Defonseca/de Wael thus not only transformed the care of grandparents into the care of wolves, but also transposed a Catholic upbringing with a Jewish heritage.

The journalist Blake Eskin notes that Defonseca’s memoir was not only
published despite expert scholarship questioning its authenticity, but was available for over eleven years before the truth of its falsification fully emerged (2008). The acceptance of the memoir as an authentic testimony raises concerns not only about the reliability of other Holocaust accounts, but also about the processes through which history is constructed. The Holocaust expert Lawrence Langer argues that the imposture contrived by Defonseca is an ‘insult to those who went through it’ and claims that producing a fake is ‘as bad as saying the Holocaust never happened’ (qu. Mehegan, 2008). Indeed, as false testimonies are incorporated into the body of knowledge that bears witness to the Holocaust, both the genocide and history are perceived as distortions or corruptions in ways that have far-reaching consequences for the construction of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’.

Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman contend in Denying History (2000), for example, that the issue of Holocaust denial has widespread implications for understandings not only of specific events, but also of the world—and thus reality—per se:

If people can be convinced that the Holocaust never happened, perhaps they can also be persuaded to believe that slavery is a hoax perpetrated by blacks to coerce Congress to institute affirmative-action programs. Once we allow the distortion of one segment of history…we risk the possible distortion of all historical events. For this reason, Holocaust denial is not just a Jewish issue. It is an attack on all history and on the way we transmit the past to the future (p. 16).

In response to suggestions that fake memoirs sustain the theories of Holocaust deniers, Susan Rubin Suleiman (2000) argues that history is not exclusively reliant on survivor testimonies, ‘and even less so on a single testimony’, in producing a public record of the Holocaust (p. 549). Suleiman notes that in the writing of history, historians rely upon multiple sources and ‘confront various kinds of documents in constructing their versions of events. The construction of all narratives, including historical narratives, does not—as some people fear—undermine the historical existence of past events’ (pp. 549-50). According to Suleiman, it is crucial to distinguish between the ontological and the epistemological, to separate questions concerned with the reality of the event from the means through which access is gained to it. ‘To admit the constructedness of all narratives’, Suleiman states, is not to reject the ‘distinction between invention and truth claim’ but rather to acknowledge that ‘even if every memoir about the Holocaust were to prove inaccurate in some details, that would still not negate the
Holocaust’s existence’ (p. 550). In highlighting the gap between the actuality of the Holocaust and the memoirs which represent it, Suleiman reveals the disconnection between representation and the ‘real’, observing that a memoir ‘provides only a single mediated perspective on reality, not a direct, immediate apprehension of the “thing itself”’ (p. 551). Yet the ‘thing itself’ is only available through representation, through what Linda Hutcheon terms in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) ‘narrative emplotments of past events that construct what we consider historical facts’ (p. 92). Thus history, like fiction, is a discourse, a ‘human construct’ that creates the past as it is textualised via official documents, eyewitness accounts and archival material (p. 93). So while Suleiman correctly notes that the reality of the Holocaust is not put into doubt by the revelation of a fake, it is an event that is accessible only through the slippery medium of text and, as such, is open to transformation.

Indeed, while a fake memoir does not negate the reality of the Holocaust, it does begin to re-frame the context in which it is read and alter how it is rendered as an historical event, a concern expressed by Shermer and Grobman in relation to the ramifications of denial. As Hutcheon argues, history, like fiction, is a discourse that constitutes ‘systems of signification by which we make sense of the past…In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past “events” into present historical “facts”’ (p. 89). As frauds compromise the integrity of historical knowledge by fabricating alternate ‘systems’ through which the Holocaust is understood, they render ideas about the construction of history unstable and raise questions about the ‘natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction’ (Hutcheon, p. 93). Fake memoirs thus not only radically disturb ideas of Holocaust representation as sacrosanct, but also undermine conventional notions of history as constituted by ‘known facts’ and offering a privileged representation of truth (Hutcheon, p. 94).

Interestingly, the difficulty of determining the true from the false was explicitly evoked by de Wael in the weeks following the exposure of her imposture. In interviews after the revelation that Misha was a fake, de Wael admitted she had created a false memoir, but she attributed blame to Daniel, claiming that she had been persuaded to publish the narrative against her judgement: ‘There are times when I find it difficult to differentiated between reality
and my inner world. The story in the book is mine. It is not actual reality—it was my reality, my way of surviving. At first, I did not want to publish it, but then I was convinced by Jane Daniel’ (qu. Mehegan, 2008). The antipathy normally directed at the author of a fake is mitigated by de Wael’s confession of psychological instability, the admission that her distinction between the real and the unreal has been skewed due to experiences of extreme trauma. The producer of *Surviving with Wolves*, for example, describes being ‘a little annoyed’ at the deception, but recognises that de Wael ‘concocted this tale in order to stop herself from falling apart. So I have a little bit of pity in my heart for her’ (Belmont, qu. World News, 2008). As the scandal developed, de Wael repeatedly returned to ideas of her otherness, insisting on her position as a victim and a cultural outsider. In a statement made via a legal attorney, for instance, de Wael claimed to have been mistreated by the family who protected her during the war. Her parents were members of the Belgian resistance who were shot by Nazis, after which de Wael lived with her uncle’s family who, she argues, ostracised her as ‘the traitor’s daughter’ (qu. Eskin, 2008). Claiming to have always ‘felt “other”’ and to have experienced an affinity with Jewish communities in the post-war period (qu. Sasportas, 2008), de Wael uses victimhood in order to capitalise on the tensions between majority and minority interests, recognising the increasing importance of the marginal in the dominant sphere. Indeed, fake memoirs such as *Misha* reveal not only the potential to manipulate a minority status, but also the commodification of marginality as the majority seeks to appease cultural anxieties about the suffering endured by an oppressed ‘other’.

The Defonseca affair thus not only highlights anxieties about the construction of history and ‘fact’, but also raises questions about the marketing of narratives of suffering and marginality. With the commodification of the minority voice, the identities that impostors co-opt tend to be extreme. Victim narratives need to ensure market viability, provoking the curious phenomenon whereby ‘ordinary’ experiences of suffering are no longer authentic or traumatic enough to capture the public imagination. The notion of market value also points to anxieties about the integrity of the literary establishment in supporting the publication of ‘authentic’ literature. Indeed, in justifying her fraud, de Wael astutely points to the processes which made the memoir possible, displacing controversy onto the indiscretions committed by an unscrupulous publisher. Daniel was heavily
implicated in allowing the publication of the fake to occur, held responsible both for persuading de Wael to expose the narrative and for initially refusing to accept evidence of its spuriousity. According to Lee, the ghostwriter of the mémoire, Daniel’s complicity in the fraud is a simple question of profit: ‘I think [Daniel] went along thinking she had a blockbuster and she didn’t want to hear anything about it not possibly being true’ (qu. Associated Press, 2008). Yet Lee, too, is complicit in the fake, acknowledging that while ‘she warned Daniel several times during the writing of the book that some aspects of Defonseca’s story were incredible’, she failed to withdraw from the project (Associated Press, 2008). The imposture executed by de Wael thus raises questions about the processes through which the ‘real’ is displaced in the interests of the marketplace—or, to shift the terms, it reveals how a commodity culture creates an effect of the ‘real’ in the interest of the marketplace.

In a second example of Holocaust imposture, the scandal concerning Herman Rosenblat’s Angel at the Fence demonstrates that genuine experiences of suffering are disregarded by faking authors in the interests of catering to an audience demand for narratives that are fabulously real. Proclaimed by Oprah Winfrey to be the ‘single greatest love story…we’ve ever told on air’ (qu. Bone, 2008), Angel at the Fence ignited imaginations with its tale of blossoming romance in a Buchenwald concentration camp. The memoir recounts the narrative of the 11-year-old Herman Rosenblat who, interned in the sub-camp Schlieben, was sustained by a young, nameless girl who threw him apples and bread over the perimeter fence. After liberation in 1945, Rosenblat emigrated to New York where, twelve years later, he was miraculously reunited with his ‘angel at the fence’ on a blind date. Rosenblat instantly proposed and the couple claimed a miraculous happy ending. According to Elizabeth Day, the story was initially an anecdote shared only ‘with friends or new acquaintances’ (2009). However, in 1995, Rosenblat ‘wrote it up and entered a newspaper competition to find the best Valentine’s Day-themed short story. He won and his story was featured on the front page of the New York Post’ (2009). From that point, the narrative escalated. As Gabriel Sherman notes, after Rosenblat revealed the love story, he appeared twice on The Oprah Winfrey Show, featured on the Hallmark Channel, Lifetime Television and CBS News, was the subject of newspaper articles and ‘inspirational mass-email chains’, assisted in the production of a $25 million film,
and released a children’s book, *Angel Girl* (2008). The publishers of the memoir, justifiably convinced it would hit bestseller lists, described *Angel at the Fence* as ‘the true story of a Holocaust survivor whose prayers for hope and love were answered’, adding that ‘it makes a perfect Valentine’s Day gift’ (qu. Sherman, 2008).

In the commercialisation of the Rosenblat memoir, few were willing to question its Disney-like qualities. However, as with the Defonseca affair, expert scholarship eventually investigated the veracity of the tale. Doubts about the memoir first circulated on the internet and were posted on the blog of the eminent Holocaust historian, Deborah Lipstadt. Soon after, Danny Bloom, a ‘60-year-old expatriate Jewish American living in Taiwan’, began to doubt the plausibility of the narrative and started to email academic experts, urging them to examine the veracity of Rosenblat’s account (Day, 2009). Bloom claims: ‘I just remember thinking, “How could this humanly be possible?” My challenge was to prove it wasn’t kosher’ (qu. Day, 2009). Victims imprisoned with Rosenblat also began to raise suspicions. As Sidney Finkel, a lifelong friend of the Rosenblat brothers and a fellow Buchenwald prisoner, states: ‘All the survivors thought it was improbable. There was not a single one of us who believed it. But we didn’t want to make any judgment because we didn’t think it would go any further’ than the initial flurry of media attention (qu. Day, 2009). Bloom proceeded to contact Professor Kenneth Waltzer, the director of the Jewish Studies program at Michigan State University who had voiced concerns about the premise of the narrative whilst researching a book about child prisoners at Buchenwald and its sub-camps (Sherman, 2008). Waltzer questioned the ability of Herman to conceal the meetings with Roma from fellow prisoners as well as the likelihood of accessing the perimeter fence. Drawing on maps of Schlieben, Waltzer discovered ‘that the only external fence was down by SS barracks and that civilians had been banned from the road that ran alongside it since 1943, so there was no way Herman and Roma could have had a rendezvous’ (qu. Day, 2009).

With the memoir’s history thus rendered impossible, the Rosenblats retreated, silenced by the fury of thousands of readers, critics, historians and survivors concerned about the consequences of falsifying Holocaust testimony. For Lipstadt, Rosenblat had ‘instrumentalised the Holocaust. This is the worst possible thing you can do on so many levels’ (qu. Sherman, 2009). Sherman
observes that ‘selling the Holocaust as Hollywood kitsch sanitises its horror’ (2009), while Waltzer argues that ‘there are no redemptive endings in the Holocaust. In this case, the dark truth was hidden to spin a story of romance, to portray the universe as an orderly and just place and that, to me, is a denial of the substance of the Holocaust’ (qu. Day, 2009). Buchenwald survivors such as Finkel became ‘concerned and angry’ with the attention received by the memoir because, Waltzer contends, ‘there was a real fear that Herman Rosenblat would be adding a fraudulent written record to Holocaust history’ that would serve to ‘discount the quality of other, true memoirs’ and give further ammunition to Holocaust-deniers (qu. Day, 2009). Yet in line with Frank Furedi’s argument that victimhood is culturally fostered, Waltzer suggests that the popularity of the text and its ensuing scandal evolved ‘because of enticements in culture and the active intervention by culture-makers who helped sponsor and generate new opportunities for Herman’ (2009). According to Waltzer, ‘our culture underwrites this sort of mythmaking. The culture and the culture-makers work to turn traumatic stories into narratives with a happy ending’. The result, Waltzer suggests, is that Rosenblat fashioned the memoir ‘with help from others like ready-wear clothing for market’, as ‘the camp and real camp experiences were airbrushed as backdrop for a love story’ that abandoned the true—and remarkable—narratives of both Herman and Roma (2009).

Certainly, the most curious element to the Rosenblat scandal is that it concealed a true Holocaust survival story. Unlike de Wael, who lived through the war in relative safety, Rosenblat and his three brothers were transported in 1942 from the ghetto in Piotrkow, Poland, to Schlieben, where their mother—along with 90 per cent of the inhabitants of Piotrkow—was immediately sentenced to a death camp. Encouraged by his brother Isidore to lie about his age, 11-year-old Herman claimed to be 16, escaping the gas chambers by his labour value. The television producer Debi Gade recounts that Rosenblat ‘told me that he was once beaten so badly by the guards that he was blind for several days and couldn’t tell them because they would have killed him’ (qu. Day, 2009). While Day acknowledges that since he ‘lied about one aspect of his experience, the natural inclination is to question what else Rosenblat may have been tempted to exaggerate’, an ‘authentic’ experience does seem to have been rejected in preference for a more saleable commodity. As Day rather sympathetically
concludes, for ‘all the fabrications and lies’ that Rosenblat constructed, perhaps the most revealing aspect of the scandal is that he ‘did not believe his own survival story was enough’ (2009).

Indeed, these examples of fake memoirs are interesting to consider in light of what postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* would describe as a ‘triumph of superficial form’ (1994, p. 87) or the ‘hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself’, a process in which reality is replaced by simulation, ‘the production and reproduction of the real’ (p. 23). Baudrillard claims that contemporary society has exchanged ‘true’ reality and meaning for symbols and signs, and that human experience has been reduced to a simulation of the ‘real’ in which ‘the object and substance have disappeared’ (p. 4). In these terms, Baudrillard argues that authenticity is nothing more than a slippery illusion, as capitalist societies have replaced reality with commodified versions of the ‘real’. These representations saturate our existence until they construct understandings of reality and make meaning meaningless by being endlessly mutable and transformative. Baudrillard contends:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes (p. 2).

If the ‘real’ itself is only an effect of the symbols and signs of representation, then the relationship between literature and reality is an intertextual one that holds no promise of the ‘truth’ or, indeed, as Baudrillard suggests, the existence of anything at all (p. 5).

The notion that the ‘real’ is constituted by a series of images and narratives accepted as true is exemplified by the scandal evoked by Binjamin Wilkomirski. The memoir of a child surviving the Nazi concentration camps Majdanek and Auschwitz, Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* (1995) was internationally celebrated as a narrative of profound importance. As a critic for *The Nation* adoringly wrote, ‘this stunning and austerely written work is so profoundly moving, so morally important, and so free from literary artifice of any kind at all
that I wonder if I even have the right to try to offer praise’ (qu. Maechler, 2001, p. 114). In *The Guardian*, Anne Karpf described *Fragments* as ‘one of the greatest works about the Holocaust’ (1998), while Wolfgang Benz, the director for the Berlin Centre for Anti-Semitic Research, certified that the narrative possessed ‘not only authenticity, but also literary importance’ (qu. Maechler, p. 116-7). Ranked among the testimonies of Elie Wiesel, Anne Frank and Primo Levi, *Fragments* portrayed an image of the Holocaust that convinced renowned scholars and emotionally engaged a worldwide reading audience. The memoir was rapidly translated into twelve languages, and won the National Jewish Book Award in the US, the *Jewish Quarterly* Literary Prize in the UK, and the French Prix de Mémoire de la Shoah in 1997. Wilkomirski himself enthusiastically participated in and contributed to interviews, newspaper articles, radio presentations, readings throughout Europe, and a fundraising tour of American cities for the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., where he gave a video interview for the Holocaust remembrance authorities, Yad Vashem and the Survivors of Shoah (Maechler, p. 117).

As with *Angel at the Fence*, the popularity of both *Fragments* and Wilkomirski prefigured a hostile public downfall in the wake of revelations that the memoir was fictitious. While doubts about the veracity of the narrative were tentatively circulating from an early stage, these concerns were often ameliorated. Stefan Maechler observes, for example, that Gary Mokotoff, a board member of the Jewish Book Council, wrote to the jury for the National Jewish Book Award questioning the authenticity of the memoir. Mokotoff, notes Maechler, ‘found it unbelievable that a three- or four-year-old child would have survived for more than a few days in a camp’, yet also offered an explanation for the construction of memories belonging to someone other than the implied author: ‘If you take each of the events he describes, they seem to be the sum of the experience of all survivors’ (Mokotoff, qu. Maechler, p. 115). But, as Fiachra Gibbons and Stephen Moss narrate in *The Guardian*, another critic did pursue his scepticism about the authenticity of the text:

Wilkomirski toured the world relating his life story, breaking down as he told it, moving interviewers, audiences, hard-bitten journalists to tears. Except one: Daniel Ganzfried, a young Swiss Jew who was sent to interview Wilkomirski by a magazine called *Passages*. The interview should have been a routine piece for a regular column about a creative person who has achieved success in another discipline (Wilkomirski was a musician being feted as a writer). But Ganzfried,
who had written an account of his father’s experiences in Auschwitz, didn’t believe Wilkomirski’s account, and dug a little deeper (1999).

Ganzfried’s exposé revealed that Wilkomirski was not a Latvian Jew who had spent his childhood in Majdanek and Auschwitz, nor was he brainwashed, which the memoir also claims, by his adoptive Swiss parents to believe that he did not experience the Holocaust. Instead, Binjamin Wilkomirski was the pseudonym of Bruno Dössekker, the child of an unmarried Protestant woman and adopted by a prosperous Swiss family in 1945 (Gibbons & Moss, 1999). Ganzfried obtained a birth certificate and other documents that indicated Dössekker spent the war years in Switzerland and started school in 1947, a year before Wilkomirski says he arrived in the country. Ganzfried thus argued that Wilkomirski could never have been in a concentration camp except, perhaps, ‘as a tourist’ (qu. Gibbons & Moss, 1999). As Gibbons and Moss so eloquently conclude, ‘while “Binjamin” watched rats gnaw at the dead and dying in Auschwitz and babies suck their fingers to the bone in Majdanek, Bruno was being taught the clarinet in the comfort of his wealthy adoptive parents’ villa in neutral Zurich’ (1999). When Ganzfried’s accusations were later officially validated by the historian Stefan Maechler, Dössekker refused to answer to accusations of fraudulence, stating that it was the responsibility of the reader to discern the truth of the memoir: ‘It was always the free choice of the reader to read my book as literature or to take it as a personal document. Nobody has to believe me’ (qu. Gibbons & Moss, 1999).

What is interesting about the imposture committed by Dössekker is the refusal of the author to acknowledge the fraudulence of both Fragments and his ‘adopted’ self, despite detailed evidence that conferred a ‘real’ identity. Indeed, according to Gibbons and Moss, when confronted by his ‘agent with 100 pages of documentary evidence proving he was not Binjamin Wilkomirski at all but Bruno Dössekker, he stood up and shouted, “I am Binjamin Wilkomirski!”’ (1999). Unlike Rosenblat and de Wael, who eventually admitted to constructing false identities and experiences, Dössekker continues to assert the authenticity of his memoir, raising complex questions about the psychological consequences of identity appropriation, as well as leading to some provocative suggestions about narrative and the construction of self.

However, despite Dössekker’s refusal to confess to imposture, Fragments repeatedly alludes to issues concerning the construction of history, memory and
identity. Indeed, the memoir begins with an acknowledgement of the instability of historical truth in terms of the experiences of the individual. It also frequently refers to the gap between representation and reality. Dössekker describes his earliest memories, for example, as a ‘rubble field of isolated images and events’, a ‘chaotic jumble’ resisting the ‘orderly grain of grown-up life and escaping the laws of logic’ (p. 377). The very title of the memoir is a suggestion of the fragmentary relationship between memory, history and truth, and a caution or reminder, perhaps, of the impossibility of a cohesive, unproblematic vision of the ‘real’. History as told through Dössekker is consistently framed as ‘murky, a blur’ (p. 452), while motifs of dreaming and haunting are used to heighten the surreal nature of the text and to further obfuscate the relationship between narrative and ‘fact’: ‘I fell asleep, and dreamed the terrible dream again about the dead world, the black sky, the insects eating me, and the iron cars going up the mountain in their endless chain and disappearing into the yellowish brown jaw under the helmet’ (p. 472). By situating the memoir in the hazy recollections of a nightmare, Dössekker emphasises the sensational effects of the narrative and defamiliarises notions of space and time in order to blur distinctions between the real and the imagined.

Arguably, the constant references made by Dössekker to the unreliability of the memoir are simply a recognition of the limits and problems of the genre. *Fragments*, however, also uncannily focuses on anxieties relating to subjectivity and the re-construction of self. The memoir recounts the identity growth of Dössekker through stages of acculturation, from the acquisition of language to the self-conscious recognition of the systems that determine socially normative behaviours. Indeed, the memoir describes the processes through which Dössekker erases his former identity as a victim of the Holocaust and gradually adopts an alternate persona as the son of Swiss parents as a journey akin to rebirth, beginning with a disorienting entry into a world which lacks logic and order: ‘Everything seemed to be dissolving…I didn’t know enough to make sense of it, the constant changes confused me. The days suddenly had no set order, none of the regular timetable they’d had before. There didn’t seem to be any rules anymore’ (p. 452). Progressively, as Dössekker becomes aware of the various spaces he occupies, such as the camp for Holocaust orphans and Switzerland, he develops a notion of self as an entity distinct from others. When first introduced
by his full name to his adoptive parents, for example, Dössekker discovers a sense of identity that begins to situate him more fully in the cultural realm: ‘I was very surprised and proud that I now had two names’ (p. 464). As Dössekker struggles in school to internalise the rules and nuances of language, he remains a being in flux, detached from the activity of the social world and ‘baffled by what was going on around me’ (p. 475). But with the eventual acquisition of complex language skills, Dössekker emerges as a subjectivity self-consciously aware of the performative nature of identity. Believing that he is being brainwashed into forgetting the experience of the Holocaust, for example, Dössekker acquiesces—if only temporarily—to the need to conform to social expectations and disguise his ‘otherness’: ‘I’ll learn the rules of your games, I’ll play your games, but that’s all I’ll do—play them’ (p. 493). The memoir thus thematises intratextually the anxieties about identity raised in response to the revelation of imposture and, indeed, goes so far as to preempt both accusations against his authenticity and a defense of the narrated self. As Dössekker states in the conclusion to *Fragments*: ‘Legally accredited truth is one thing—the truth of a life another’ (p. 496).

As Dössekker reveals the possibility for a radical re-visioning of identity, he provokes anxieties about the potential loss of an authentic self by exposing the intimate connection between language and subjectivity. Indeed, it is a theme also embraced by Defonseca, who describes a transformation to animality during her time in the forests of Europe and a loss of self in which she is entirely ‘other’: ‘Though I began life as a human being, the forest had changed me and now I was no longer human. The only part of my former self that remained was my outside shell, my girl’s form. Everything else about me, everything inside, was like an animal’s: my reactions, my sensibilities, my very soul’ (1997, p. 205). But with her re-entry into society at the end of the war and the use once more of language, de Wael—like Dössekker—re-appropriates a civilised self and regains her humanity, albeit in a radically altered form: ‘The soul of an animal; the body and desires of a human being—that was me’ (p. 222). Takolander argues that language ‘lies at the core’ of self and society, a radical force that ‘provides us with not only a personal identity but also a social environment’ (2009, p. 15). In the context of the reading experience and the connection forged by a reader possessed by a text, Takolander contends that language is a source of ‘virtuality and possibility’, of ‘freedom and potential’ that is liberating yet deeply unsettling.
Indeed, while the transformation of Dössekker into Wilkomirski illustrates what Jens Brockmeier and Rolfe Harré might term the ‘plasticity of the human being’ (2001, p. 56), the idea that a reader has intimately related to an identity that is not ‘real’ is profoundly unnerving—a notion that will be returned to in the context of ‘misery memoirs’.

The Australian scandal of Helen Demidenko similarly illustrates the possibility for identity to be re-narrated, and engages with ideas relating to the question of an ‘authentic’ and performative self. Characteristic of fake life narratives, The Hand That Signed the Paper (1994) was a literary tour de force, receiving the 1993 Vogel Prize, the 1995 Miles Franklin Prize and the 1995 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. The text, while not strictly a memoir, purported to be an autobiographical account of a young Australian woman, Fiona Kovalenko, who discovers that her father and uncle joined the SS in the Ukraine during the Second World War, and that her aunt married a German SS officer in charge of an Einsatzgruppe—a mobile killing unit dedicated to murdering Jews en masse throughout eastern Europe. According to the narrative, Kovalenko’s father participated in the massacre at Babi Yar, while her uncle—soon to face trial—worked as a guard at Treblinka and committed acts of horrific barbarity. The Australian journalist David Marr described Demidenko as ‘astonishingly talented…with the true novelist’s gift of entering into the imagination of those she is writing about’, while the Miles Franklin judge Jill Kitson called the memoir a ‘searingly truthful account of terrible wartime deeds that is also an imaginative work of extraordinary redemptive power’ (qu. Middlemiss, 2006). While these reviews already highlight the complex relationship between The Hand That Signed the Paper and categories of truth and fiction, the scandal surrounding the text was associated less with the controversial contents of the novel, than with the public performances of its faking author.

Winning the Vogel Prize when she was only 22-years old, Demidenko was a striking public figure and, in the weeks before the revelation of fraudulence, a media darling. Anthony Daniels observes that when appearing in public, Demidenko was ‘stridently self-confident and opinionated’, chose to adopt the Ukraine national costume and ‘rarely lost an opportunity to break into a Ukrainian folk dance’ (1999, p. 4). Increasingly, however, The Hand That Signed the Paper attracted criticism for its anti-Semitic content, while questions about the validity
of Demidenko’s Ukrainian identity began to emerge. With the final revelation that Demidenko was a fake, the text was excoriated by critics who had previously expressed suspicions about the author and, at the same time, steadfastly defended by the judges of the Miles Franklin Prize. Demidenko unapologetically confessed to being Helen Darville of ordinary English extraction, and claimed to have taken a Ukrainian name ‘in empathy with the characters I was creating…This was my creative world…The persona adopted for my writing took over my life—this is the way I write’ (qu. Mendes, 2009). According to Daniels, Darville was a ‘chronic fantasist’ who variously claimed to be of French, Czech and Belgian origin (1999, pp. 5-6), while Philip Mendes notes her various claims to be a lecturer of English, a student of mathematics, a physics tutor, a lawyer, a ballerina, a model and a champion gymnast (2009). While the scandal surrounding the imposture was complicated by the classification of the work as fiction, the behaviour of Darville and the narratives she related outside the text confirmed its contents as autobiographical. Mendes notes, for example, that when Darville received the Miles Franklin Award, she explicitly claimed to be of Ukrainian origin, wearing a ‘peasant blouse and delivering part of her acceptance speech in Ukrainian’ (2009). Further, in an earlier presentation at the Sydney Writers Festival, Darville ‘spoke about her grandmother’s poor English, her childhood involvement in Ukrainian youth organisations, and her embarrassment at her parent’s foreign behaviour and appearance’ (Mendes, 2009).

Unlike the imposture adopted by Dösseker, when exposed as a fraud, Darville unhesitatingly confirmed that she had purposefully misrepresented her ‘real’ identity. Indeed, Darville actively engaged with anxieties relating to the authenticity of subjectivity, asserting that the furore occurred because ‘some people are conflating “credibility” with “authenticity”. There’s been a perpetual search on lately for this or that “authentic” voice…with almost no appreciation that authenticity is entirely culturally constructed…I freely admit my inauthenticity, but since authenticity doesn’t exist, I’m not particularly worried’ (qu. Westbury, 2007). Similarly, in an interview with the ABC journalist Lynne Malcolm (2006), Darville argued that identity is ‘more of an issue for other people than it is for me’. Whilst admitting to ‘feeling trapped’ and tiring of performing a ‘very silly little dance’, Darville proudly recounted the simplicity of co-opting an ethnic identity:
I can pull the wog accent, and sound like Effie and do the Ukrainian-Australian accent really well. It’s not hard to do. I grew up around these sorts of people...People seem to have some idea in their head that you have to be authentic to do all of that. Anyone who’s got any sort of acting skill, and I don’t believe I have very much, can pull that off. And completely convincingly (qu. Malcolm, 2006).

Demidenko reveals here the ways in which cultural identity is not only performative but also commodified. Indeed, Demidenko’s parody of a Ukrainian identity arguably exposes race as culturally rather than biologically inscribed. It is a revelation that is supported by scientific research. As the American-based Human Genome Project announced in 2009, race is a social fiction with no basis in biology, as ‘DNA studies do not indicate that separate classifiable subspecies (races) exist within modern humans’ (qu. Holland, 2009).

Unperturbed by the political and historical implications of faking a Holocaust narrative, Darville rejected notions of a stable self, claiming to be ‘persuaded by Gayatri Spivak’s argument that there’s “no possibility of knowledge on identity” and that writing cannot be linked to any sort of “real” identity position’ (qu. Westbury, 2007). Finding ‘the idea of identity oppressive’ (qu. Westbury, 2007), Darville thus exemplifies a fluid subjectivity that is transformative and cultural, unable to be definitively fixed. Moreover, in line with Butler’s arguments about gender, Darville highlights the extent to which the self is ‘tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts’ (Butler, 1999, p. 179). Indeed, impostors such as Darville displace and reveal identity as a ‘stylised configuration’ (p. 179), undermining notions of a stable self by creating a gap between the genuine, and the effect of the genuine—both of which, however temporarily, are accepted as ‘real’. According to Butler, the possibilities of identity ‘transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation’ between a performed and an authentic self, ‘in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmic effect of abiding identity’ (p. 179).

Interestingly, de Wael, Dössekker and Demidenko each represent a sense of being removed from their own identities, of being distant from their imagined and performed selves. Dössekker, for example, often describes a disconnection between the conversations and behaviour in his mind and those that are occurring in reality. On moving from an orphanage in Krakow to a foster home in Switzerland, for example, Dössekker experiences a splitting of consciousness in
which his internal and external selves appear to exist in alternate spaces:

I yelled and struggled. But to my complete astonishment, there wasn’t a sound. And in the middle of the silence, I heard a voice saying quietly and clearly, ‘Yes, I’ll come too.’

This unknown voice! Or was it my voice? I heard myself wondering. I was horrified. I tried again. I took the deepest breath I could manage. I wanted to scream so loud that everyone would hear!

‘No—I belong here! I live here! I don’t want to go away!’ And again I heard the unmistakable sound of my own voice, as if it is was someone else’s, loud and clear:

‘Yes, I’m coming too’ (p. 384).

As each of these scandals illustrates, impostors expose the tenuous boundaries between ‘true’ and performed identities, and suggest the possibility for a transformation of self via the medium of language. In doing so, fraudulent authors reveal that the relationship between representation and the truth is little more than an effect of the ‘real’, an artifice that promises only other constructions and illusions. Indeed, as Baudrillard radically suggests, the ‘real’ has disappeared ‘to make room for an image, more real than real’ (p. 144) and endlessly open to re-configuration as other images, and thus other truths.

Exploiting the Holocaust in order to perpetrate a fraudulent memoir is precarious territory. However, as the cases of de Wael, Rosenblat, Dösserker and Darville suggest, it represents a potentially lucrative risk. Indeed, while the fakes constructed by these authors signify an astounding moral transgression, Misha, Angel at the Fence, Fragments and The Hand That Signed the Paper have all enjoyed considerable popular and critical success, reaping financial benefits as well as recognition from various literary and cultural establishments. Provoking questions about the commercialisation of the Holocaust, the public investment in narratives of suffering and the performative nature of identity, these frauds reveal a series of complex anxieties about the tension between representation and authenticity, and the role of culture industries in the marketing of the real. Indeed, firstly, these scandals reveal a commodity—and literary—culture which appropriates trauma narratives and marginal identities in the interests of market values. Secondly, these impostures expose concerns about the integrity of historical ‘fact’, suggesting that history, like fiction, is constructed by textual representations and, because of this, open to re-inscription. Finally, and most importantly, these ‘victims of history’ expose anxieties about the possibility for identity to be re-configured as something radically ‘other’, highlighting the link
between language and self, and the possibility of re-narrating the terms of identity. As audiences demand victim identities and narratives of trauma that are more fabulously real, the authentic is commodified as a product that can evolve according to demand—transforming ‘reality’ into a mere function of the marketplace that can entail, nonetheless, significant consequences for ideas of self.

DELUSIONS OF DOMESTIC TRAGEDY: VICTIMS OF ABUSE

In the contemporary literary market, the immense popularity of a genre termed the ‘misery memoir’ most explicitly demonstrates a public infatuation with confessions of trauma. Described by Furedi as the ‘pornography of emotional hurt’ (2007), these memoirs focus on the outpourings of authors who have endured childhoods of horrific abuse, describing in agonising detail histories of domestic violence, incest, poverty, institutional cruelty, drug addiction and sexual abuse. The market success of the genre points to the lucrative opportunities for authors and publishers in satisfying the voyeuristic fascination of readers with narratives of human degradation. As Brendan O’Neill notes, ‘these memoirs sell in numbers that many mainstream novelists can only dream about’ (2007). According to O’Neill, of the top 100 best-selling UK paperbacks in 2006, eleven were memoirs about surviving abuse, and with combined sales of 1.9 million copies, ‘misery memoirs’ generated £24 million for the British publishing industry (2007). Capitalising on a cultural ethos that celebrates the public confession of victimhood, ‘misery memoirs’ are marketed as both part of the recovery of the abused survivor, and inspiration for the enamoured reader. But as Furedi argues, the notable success of these narratives is perhaps less connected to their cathartic or motivational function than to their ability to allow readers the vicarious and voyeuristic experience of the most appalling suffering (2008). Furedi argues that ‘misery memoirs’ characteristically ‘confess to so much that they take on the character of a literary striptease’, providing pornographic accounts of traumatic pain which ‘actually turn readers into voyeurs’ (2007). And, Furedi notes, ‘as in real porn, there is a lot of faking going on’ (2007). Indeed, the genre is most notable for its sensational effects, and the engagement of readers with traumas which feel authentic—and are accepted as truthful—despite
A considerable number of recent literary scandals have involved the debunking of spurious ‘misery memoirs’ which astutely exploit a predilection for public confession. The revelation that James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) was an artifice, for example, enraged audiences invested in the heartrending narrative of a ‘raging, drug-abusing’ teenager (qu. TSG, 2006). Promoted on an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* entitled ‘The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake At Night’, *A Million Little Pieces* was touted by Winfrey as a ‘gut-wrenching memoir that is so raw and…so real’, a tale of survival ‘like nothing you’ve ever read before’ (qu. TSG, 2006). In a tearful interview with Frey that resulted in the sale of more than 2 million copies of the text, Winfrey acted as the vehicle through which *A Million Little Pieces* became a publishing phenomenon. She authorised its truth claims by proclaiming an intimate emotional connection with the narrative: ‘I know that, like many of us who have read this book, I keep turning to the back of the book to remind myself, “He's alive. He's okay”’ (qu. TSG, 2006). Indeed, Winfrey helped shape a celebrity author who played upon an identity that transformed a few incidences of petty crime into a sordid history of drug addiction, alcoholism and violence.

The revelation of fraud emerged after the publication of an exposé on the investigative website The Smoking Gun (TSG), in which a comprehensive report concluded that Frey had grossly embellished key details of ‘his purported criminal career, jail terms, and status as an outlaw wanted in three states’ (2006). According to TSG, Frey ‘appears to have fictionalised his past to propel and sweeten the book’s already melodramatic narrative’, whilst convincing readers of his ‘malevolence’ as a social deviant. As Frey asserted in the interview with Winfrey: ‘I was a bad guy. If I was gonna write a book that was true, and I was gonna write a book that was honest, then I was gonna have to write about myself in very, very negative ways. I am an Alcoholic and I am a drug Addict and I am a Criminal’ (qu. TSG, 2006). An incantation repeated numerously throughout the memoir, Frey went to great lengths to emphasise the authenticity of his self-abuse and criminal history, dismissing assertions that elements of the memoir were radical fabrications. As with the Dössekker affair, despite evidence detailing the life of the ‘real’ Frey, the author refused to acknowledge the fraud, yet nonetheless sought to legally expunge court records relating to his criminal
history. Frey stated that he ‘wanted to put up walls as much as I possibly could…to keep people away from my private business’ (qu. TSG, 2006). As TSG notes, there is an obvious irony about proclamations of privacy in the context of publishing a graphically detailed bestselling memoir: ‘Why would a man who spends 430 pages chronicling every grimy and repulsive detail of his formerly debased life…need to wall off the details of a decade-old arrest? When you spend paragraphs describing the viscosity of your own vomit, your sexual failings and the nightmare of shitting blood daily, who knew bashfulness was still possible’ (2006).

In line with Dössekker, Frey refuted accusations of fakery, affirming the truth-value of his narrative by indignantly declaring to readers: ‘let the haters hate, let the doubters doubt, I stand by my book and my life and I won’t dignify this bullshit with any sort of further response’ (qu. TSG, 2006). Initially, Winfrey continued to authorise the memoir, stressing that the ‘underlying message of redemption in James Frey’s memoir still resonates with me, and I know it still resonates with millions of other people’ (qu. O’Rourke, 2006). Shortly following this declaration, however, Winfrey was forced to recant when audiences argued that her support of Frey represented an indifference to truth (Eakin, 2008, p. 19). Winfrey then staged a talkshow episode in which she excoriated Frey in simple terms: ‘You lied’ (Winfrey, qu. Eakin, 2008).

Ironically, one of the most notable features of Frey’s memoir is its insistence on absolute authenticity and its aggressive derision of romanticised narratives of victimhood. As Meghan O’Rourke contends, the Frey affair is made farcical by the canny criticisms in the memoir of ‘the “bullshit” stories that shape our interactions with people, politicians, and the media, especially the stories that are billed as the most raw and honest’ (2006). According to O’Rourke, ‘Frey’s claim to be a truth-teller in an age of emotional mountebanks who savvily manipulate public sympathy’ is partly what distinguishes A Million Little Pieces from ‘other recovery memoirs’. By cynically rejecting the ‘pieties of being an addict and victim’, Frey constructed a narrative that appeared ‘newly real—or authentic—in an age of packaged sound bites’. In addition, A Million Little Pieces explicitly critiques the commodification of trauma stories and a therapeutic culture in which damaged individuals are made heroic through declarations of (self-) abuse. Foremost, Frey repeatedly returns to notions of individual
responsibility, rejecting ideas about the role of socio-cultural dynamics in shaping the suffering of the addict and victim. As Frey argues: ‘Somehow I always knew that I would kill myself with drugs and alcohol. I knew each time I took a drink, I knew each time I snorted a line...It is nobody’s fault but my own. I knew each and every time. I could not stop’ (p. 85). Further, the memoir engages with the terms through which victimhood is transformed in order to function as a validating narrative for reading audiences. Frey, for instance, in imagining the writing of his obituary, notes that ‘the truth of my existence will be removed and replaced with imagined good. The reality of how I lived will be avoided and changed and phrases will be dropped in like Beloved Son, Loving Brother, Reliable Friend...People will change their view of me, from reckless Fuck-Up to helpless Martyr, from dangerous Fool to sad Victim, from addicted Asshole to unfortunate Child’ (p. 85). In order to combat the formula of victim memoirs, Frey thus purports to be offering readers nothing but the truth, an unflinching exposé that presents a ‘hard’ vision of the ‘real’. As Frey contends: ‘No happy lies, no invented memories, no fake sentimentality, no tears’ (p. 86). By self-consciously exposing the generic conventions of ‘misery memoirs’ and aggressively rejecting cultural prescriptions for victimhood, Frey appears to be resisting the status quo. The irony, of course, is that Frey is capitalising precisely on those trends that he seeks to excoriate and diminish.

Unlike the authors of fraudulent Holocaust memoirs, Frey does not intratextually map the transformation of self into an imagined ‘other’, nor acknowledge the transformative gap between representation and reality. By contrast, Frey positions *A Million Little Pieces* as the most authentic account of suffering available to readers, a narrative marked by its refutation of artifice and pretence. Interestingly, Frey draws upon two key representational strategies in order to emphasise the truth-value of the memoir, and to set the text apart. Firstly, the memoir regularly adopts the tone of a police file, documenting details of his addiction as perfunctory and indisputable ‘facts’: ‘James Frey. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, September 12, 1969. Started stealing sips from drinks at seven. Got hammered for the first time at ten...Smoked dope at twelve. By thirteen was smoking and drinking regularly’ (p. 86). Assuming the stylistics of a legal report provides Frey with representational credibility. Mimicking a form axiomatically linked to the ‘truth’ is a kind of confidence trick. Secondly, Frey explicitly
condemns the inability of the media to portray an accurate vision of reality. For example, the memoir provides a detailed explanation of a television drama in which a heroin addict is admitted to hospital after an overdose (p. 216). Frey observes the constructed nature of the narrative—‘She wears dirty clothes that are ragged in a glamorous way’ (p. 216)—and after its happy conclusion, rails against the writers of the show:

If I could, I would hunt down the Creators of this utter bullshit fantasy fairy-tale piece of crap and I would lock them in a room and feed them drugs until they were profoundly and chronically Addicted to them...I’d ask them if their experience has in any way whatsoever resembled the experience they presented to the Public...After I received their answers, no no no please what I do now no fuck me I’m fucked no please help me no no no, I’d ask them how they were going to present addiction to the Public in the future. I’d ask them if they were going to romanticise it, glorify it, make light of it, or portray it in a way that is wholly inaccurate. No no no please what I do now no fuck me I’m fucked no please help me no no no. That’s what I thought, you Motherfuckers. No (pp. 216-17).

The aggression expressed by Frey in relation to inauthenticity seems to be a calculated façade that aims to distract readers from the fictitious nature of the memoir. His self-righteous arrogance makes doubting the text appear entirely unreasonable. Frey’s performance is aided by the forceful language and the belligerent assertions of credibility, but also by the emotional engagement of reading audiences and the positioning of author-victims as messiahs able to lead readers to the ‘truth’. Indeed, the popularity of the ‘misery memoir’ has often been attributed to its inspirational qualities, evidenced by the marketing of the genre as a source of motivation for readers interested in changing their lives. In this way, these memoirs construct self-help gurus from the survivors of traumatic experience. By doing so, narratives such as A Million Little Pieces seek to gain authority by offering the sense of something ‘real’. They offer a literary experience, for example, that is felt to be genuinely capable of changing the life of the reader. Indeed, recent fakes have explicitly eschewed the status of victim, electing, rather, a position of martyr-like responsibility. As Frey writes in A Million Little Pieces: ‘I’m a victim of nothing but myself, just as I believe that most people with this so-called disease aren’t victims of anything other than themselves...I call it being responsible. I call it the acceptance of my own problems and my own weaknesses with honor and dignity’ (p. 276). Transforming trauma into a motivational ethos, these authors thus capitalise on a self-help trend
that uses suffering as a means of personal development through access to the ‘true’.

In a second example of a fraudulent ‘misery memoir’, the phenomenon of David Pelzer reinforces how the marketing of trauma is a lucrative vehicle through which victims can benefit from the injustices of childhood abuse. The author of a trilogy of memoirs—*A Child Called ‘It’* (1995), *The Lost Boy* (1997) and *A Man Named Dave* (1999)—Pelzer has enjoyed considerable success, selling 3.5 million copies of the books in the UK alone while appearing on the *Times* bestseller list for a combined 448 weeks (Jordan, 2002). According to the memoirs, Pelzer suffered a childhood of physical and mental abuse as the result of an alcoholic mother intent on torturing her bewildered son. *A Child Called ‘It’*, for example, recounts incidences where Pelzer is forcefully burned on a gas stove, starved then made to eat faeces, a bar of soap, ammonia and a ‘bowl of regurgitated hot dogs’ (1995, p. 34), stabbed, whipped with a dog chain, and made to sleep on the garage floor. Following the extraordinary popularity of the trilogy, Pelzer sought to help others learn how to ‘feel good about themselves’ (qu. Jordan, 2002) and transformed personal suffering into an industry of self-help advice. With an appearance fee of US$7000 and over 270 confirmed public presentations a year, Pelzer is a high-earning celebrity victim, a status in which he readily invests. As Pelzer claims, the allure is ‘not about the books. My fans are buying the DNA of Dave’ (qu. Jordan, 2002). Asserting that ‘there’s a lot of Dave mania when I speak’ (qu. Jordan, 2002), Pelzer is a tireless advocate of his own talent, allegedly purchasing tens of thousands of copies of his work to re-sell at speaking engagements while declaring that the memoirs are ‘taught at Harvard’ and are Pulitzer Prize nominees (qu. Jordan, 2002). Indeed, according to Pat Jordan in *The New York Times*, to watch Pelzer work ‘is to be put in mind of those itinerant preachers of the early part of last century…He is the Elmer Gantry of the 21st century, selling his books, his abuse, his platitudes, the DNA of Dave, an afternoon of laughter, some praise’ (2002). And, Jordan argues, like Gantry, the Pelzer industry has roused a band of devotees committed to little more than a myth:

I spoke with one of Pelzer’s younger brothers, Stephen…[who] denies his mother abused David or burned him or forced him to eat dog faeces. ‘Please!’ he says. ‘That never happened.’ As a witness to the stabbing incident, Stephen says: ‘I saw mom cutting food when David grabbed her arm and got a small cut from the
knife. There wasn’t even any blood, yet he screamed, ‘Mommy stabbed me!’… Pelzer’s grandmother, Ruth Cole… remembers him as a ‘disruptive kid… with big ideas of grandeur… His books should be in the fiction section’.

Yet according to the responses of readers, verifiable ‘facts’ are not necessarily crucial in determining the authenticity of a text. As ‘misery memoirs’ encourage readers to empathically connect with the traumas of the author, the genre highlights how an emotional link suggests an authentic literary experience that transcends the simplistic binary of true and false. Indeed, the controversies involving Frey and Pelzer reveal how anxieties about the inability of literature to provide something ‘real’ are mitigated via an emotional connection with the text. In Winfrey’s initial defense of Frey, for example, she asserted that the memoir retained its resonance regardless of issues concerning its factuality, while readers of Pelzer have rapturously described how his works have profoundly altered their sense of self (Jordan, 2002). The empirical truth-value of a text is certainly no measure of its capacity to captivate and transform reading audiences. Indeed, unlike fake Holocaust testimonies, which were comprehensively rejected by a reading public in light of their implications for historical fact, the memoirs produced by Frey and Pelzer have yet to be fully renounced by readers who remain enthralled by the narratives of abuse. A reader review of *A Million Little Pieces* on www.james-frey.com, for instance, states:

I am probably not the only one very touched by this book. I’ve read it (*sic*) when I was in rehab for the second time…[and] after that in every fucking rehab I’ve been since. And every time, that book made me feel better, it made me laugh and cry and—most important—it made me feel content with the fact that I’ve got to fight. I don’t give a shit whether the facts in that book were true or not. As long as it touches me, as long as it makes me laugh and cry and fight, it’s bloody well enough.

What is interesting about the arguments surrounding these fakes, then, is the willingness of audiences to relax, if only temporarily, the demand for absolute authenticity—in terms of ‘fact’—in the interests of the sensational effects provided by the text and the intimacy of the reading experience. While Holocaust impostors were excoriated for their inauthenticity, Frey and Pelzer seem to offer readers a connection that is deemed authentically ‘real’ despite critical evidence to the contrary. The gap between representation and reality is sufficiently blurred to allow an effect to possess truth-value. What is the difference, readers question, in the ‘laughter and tears’ produced by a fake and those by a genuine article?
Reality, then, is reduced to little more than a sensation of the ‘real’ produced by a simulation. It is a notion again in line with the arguments of Baudrillard, who claims that human experience is of a simulation of reality, a ‘network of artificial signs’ (p. 20), rather than the real itself.

It is important to remember that as the simulations produced by Frey and Pelzer ‘threaten the difference between the “true” and the “false”, the “real” and the “imaginary”’ (Baudrillard, p. 3), on a personal level broader social narratives begin to be re-scripted and formulated as something ‘other’. Indeed, unlike fraudulent Holocaust memoirs, which draw upon a well-documented historical trauma to validate experiences of suffering, fake confessions of domestic abuse have contributed to the construction of an entirely new version of family reality. As Furedi argues, false ‘misery memoirs’ ‘do more than merely stretch the boundaries of truth. They set out to demonstrate that, whatever the facts might be, there is a higher truth out there—namely that the horrendous degradation of children is a normal…occurrence’ (2007). While there are authors of the genre who represent experiences of trauma without a context of childhood victimhood—such as Frey—an increasing majority relate to the sadistic abuse or mistreatment of children. Furedi asserts that the family, ‘once idealised as a haven from a heartless world, is now widely depicted as a vile and abusive institution’, as ‘misery memoirs’ suggest that tragedy, violence and degradation are a hidden social ‘norm’, the “reality” of childhood and family life’. In a culture which encourages individuals to seek meaning through degrading experiences, reading audiences no longer invest in ‘stories of happy and purposeful childhoods’, Furedi contends, ‘since such stories must surely have been written by people “in denial” who cannot face the bitter truth about just how badly their parents hurt them’. Further, child victims represent a voice which is as sacrosanct as that of the Holocaust survivor. The profound consequences of falsely doubting a child witness have ensured that reading audiences largely refrain from explicitly accusing even the most incredible ‘misery memoirs’ of fraudulence, revealing tensions about the relationship between children, truth and trauma. Indeed, due to the focus of ‘misery memoirs’ on children and childhood, critics are often unwilling to condemn these works as false. Indeed, for example, the literary editor of The Independent, Boyd Tonkin, resolutely rejects evidence of the spuriosity of Pelzer’s memoir, arguing that there is ‘no strong reason to consider Pelzer as
anything other than a survivor of prolonged abuse whose elaborate scapegoating may have disguised much suffering from other family members’ (2004). In his defense of Pelzer, Tonkin highlights anxieties about the subjective nature of truth and the capacity of one vision of the ‘real’ to be considered more valid than another. Given that the trilogy recounts incidences from childhood and claims a unique position of victimhood—Pelzer was the single recipient of the abuse—its assertions can be neither proved nor disproved. In this scenario, the genuine and the fake are indistinguishable, leaving the reading public to decide where the boundaries of the real and the unreal occur.

In a third example of a fake ‘misery memoir’, the scandal surrounding the publication of Kathy O’Beirne’s Don’t Ever Tell (2006) explicitly demonstrates anxieties about the inability to differentiate between authentic and fabricated versions of reality, as the text has struggled to secure a consensus regarding its claims to truth. In line with the remarkable market success of other frauds, Don’t Ever Tell sold 350,000 copies in the UK alone on its release, attracting the attention of Oprah Winfrey and sparking rumours about a sequel and potential film deal. Gene Kerrigan observes in The Independent that the text is a suitably graphic example of the ‘misery memoir’ genre, indefatigably describing the psychological and physical horrors of ‘parental viciousness and institutional brutality’ (2007). O’Beirne relates a vividly traumatic childhood in which she was regularly beaten by her father and brothers, incarcerated in a series of institutions for delinquent children, and raped by a priest in the grounds of a convent. She was transferred to numerous psychiatric hospitals before being finally relegated to a Magdalene laundry, a workhouse for ‘at risk’ women in which she suffered frequent assaults. O’Beirne states that she wrote the memoir in order to begin a cathartic process of justice and to make public the harm inflicted by specific individuals and institutions: ‘I feel my story had to be told. It was like a volcano inside me, always ready to explode. So much evil was done there, and there was a voice inside me shouting “Justice!”’ (qu. Clarke, 2006).

In the midst of the early successes of the memoir, questions were raised about the reliability of O’Beirne’s narrative. Natalie Clarke notes in the Daily Mail that several members of O’Beirne’s family publicly denied the authenticity of the text, refuting most vociferously the representation of their father as a cruel

---

5 Initially published as Kathy’s Story (2005).
and violent man. O’Beirne’s sister, Mary, for example, asserts ‘my father never once lifted his hand to us…It was a normal, happy childhood…He was a very proud, good man and it breaks my heart to see the terrible lies Kathy has written about him’ (qu. Clarke, 2006). Kerrigan observes that while ‘one of Kathy’s brothers supports part of her story and claims to be writing his own book’, the remaining seven siblings ‘are furious about her claims’ (2007). Moreover, while O’Beirne alleged to have been abused in a Magdalene laundry managed by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, the Order released a declaration to ‘categorically state that Kathy O’Beirne never spent any time in our laundries or related institutions’ (qu. Kerrigan, 2007). As further evidence emerged, the journalist Hermann Kelly began to collate the discrepancies appearing in O’Beirne’s claims of victimhood, listing the ‘lies’ of the memoir in a book titled Kathy’s Real Story (2007). The report issued by Kelly provides clear and concise evidence that explicitly disproves the assertions made in the memoir. Interestingly, however, accusations of the fraud remain contested, by both critics and O’Beirne alike, leaving public audiences, as in the case of Pelzer, to decide about the authenticity of the truth-claims made in the text.

Certainly, the author continues to proclaim the credibility of the text, declaring ‘I’m not a liar. I’m a truthful person’ (qu. Addley, 2006). Like Dösserekker, O’Beirne defends the authenticity of the confession, and asserts she is capable of producing police documents that support occurrences of rape and physical assault. The journalist Esther Addley notes that in reference to the refusal of the Sisters of Our Lady to recognise her institutionalisation in the Magdalene laundry, O’Beirne highlights ‘well-publicised cases in which religious orders have been exposed as having destroyed or failed to keep proper records’ (2006). Indeed, accusations against members of the clergy render the text particularly volatile in an era that is only just coming to terms with church suppression of incidences of sexual abuse. It is perhaps this key element which ensures the memoir is caught in a tension of doubt, with readers unwilling to condemn O’Beirne absolutely in a milieu where victims have been so often ignored. As Kerrigan states, if ‘Kathy’s story is false, a whole lot of people…have been done an injustice. If her story is true, the pain she suffered has been compounded by the persistent denials of her story’ (2007). Thus despite the testimonies—and attempted court injunctions—of the O’Beirne family and mounting evidence
demonstrating the spuriousness of *Don’t Ever Tell*, O’Beirne, like Pelzer, has played upon social narratives of trauma successfully enough to be considered an authentic victim of domestic and institutional abuse.

Curiously, even when memoirs are rendered suspect—or debunked by family members—there remains a public readiness to suspend disbelief. Frey, Pelzer and O’Beirne, despite being denounced as impostors, remain popular with reading audiences and continue to produce sequel memoirs which are received with as much zest as the scandalous original. There is, further, unlike the outrage provoked by fake Holocaust testimonies, no consensus of hostility with the revelation that a ‘misery memoir’ is an artifice. While some readers and critics condemn these fakes absolutely, others attempt to explore the potential for redemption, highlighting, for example, the inspirational function of the narrative, or the ability of the memoir to draw attention to the plight of real victims. The result is an ambiguous vacillation between sardonically critiquing the text for its exploitation of trauma, and acknowledging a story that is vividly heartrending. The *Slate* magazine editor David Plotz, for instance, in a review typical of the Pelzer trilogy, disparages the memoirs as ‘snuff literature’ which is ‘suspicious’ and lacks ‘prose ambition’, while labelling Pelzer a ‘child-abuse entrepreneur’ (2000). Concluding, quite simply, that ‘the point is suffering’, Plotz nonetheless goes on to praise Pelzer for his imaginative efforts, claiming ‘he really does inspire abuse victims’ and that ‘he deserves credit for publicising physical abuse’ and encouraging ‘other troubled kids to be resilient and stop wallowing’ (2000).

The interpretative ambivalence associated with critiques of these memoirs engages with a series of anxieties about representation and its connection to ideas about truth and reality. For Baudrillard, the difference between the real and the unreal is already false, given that contemporary visions of reality are constituted by an infinite configuration of signs that no longer bear reference to an authentic original (1994, p. 2). But the capacity for images of the ‘real’ to be re-configured as something ‘other’ nonetheless entails profound consequences not only for the terms of the self, but also for the terms of the ‘other’. As has been observed in the context of Holocaust testimony, re-visioning history and identity is radically liberating, but it is a process that does not occur in a vacuum. The memoirs of both Pelzer and O’Beirne implicate a series of specific individuals in their confessions of abuse, from immediate family members to representatives from
institutions such as the church, and in doing so begin to re-construct the narratives, and even identities, of others.

Perhaps, then, efforts to accept the dubious claims made by ‘misery memoirs’ are linked to a need to ameliorate anxieties about the connection between representation and truth. By insisting that some element of these texts is authentically true, readers find a way of securing representation, of grounding textuality in something that is determinate and fixed. Baudrillard argues that ‘it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them’ (p. 5). The public investment in the authenticity of representation is thus perhaps an effort to resist the potential for ‘nothing’, to bestow meaning in order to combat the anxiety that the image does not ‘conceal anything at all’ (Baudrillard, p. 5).

In order to secure the truth-value of fake ‘misery memoirs’, audiences insist on the powerfully sensational effects of the reading experience. As with the scandals surrounding Frey and Pelzer, the readers of O’Beirne continue to assert the emotional authenticity of the memoir regardless of contestations concerning its factual veracity. Indeed, as an Amazon.com reviewer reveals in response to the traumas endured by O’Beirne, textual legitimacy is conferred via the emotional engagement of a reading public:

I find it very difficult to believe that someone would make up such horrific lies about their past. I got drawn into this book after reading the first page and found it very difficult to put down. I don’t believe that Kathy made some parts up or exaggerated to gain the sympathy of others, because what she goes through from a young child I don’t believe anyone would make up (2007).

According to the journalist Tim Adams, in the context of ‘misery memoirs’, the ‘real’ is a notion that exists only in relation to the emotional investment of readers with the presented text (2006). The authors of these texts, Adams argues, consciously manipulate the feelings provoked in readers during the intimacy of reading, and seek to encourage an empathic connection that is difficult to break. In line with critics such as Frank Lentricchia (1996), J Hillis Miller (2002), Mark Roche (2004) and Takolander (2005, 2009), who have figured the aesthetic experience of literature in the tropes of haunting, readers frame their relationship to these ‘misery memoirs’ in the context of possession, of being indescribably moved—if not transformed—by something beyond ‘hard’ fact. As one reviewer claims of a Pelzer memoir, it is ‘a book that will touch your soul forever’ (qu.
Adams, 2006). Takolander argues that the ‘literary fake is ultimately disturbing for readers because it highlights the reality of the literary experience—one’s possession by a spectre rather than a real person—and what that reveals about the self as a porous and spectral entity’ (2005). Indeed, perhaps the anxieties surrounding the faking of childhood trauma—as suggested by the insistence of readers on the sensational effects of the texts—relates to conceding that audiences have been profoundly moved, and even altered, by something ghostly, not real. The reluctance to confess to the fraudulence of these memoirs, then, signifies a hesitancy to acknowledge that readers are not only deeply engaged by the unreal but also, under the power of the literary experience, unable to distinguish between the genuine and the fake.

Thus while fraudulent Holocaust memoirs provoke vitriolic arguments about the primacy of truth, the scandals surrounding fake ‘misery memoirs’ begin to blur ideas about what constitutes an authentic telling. The veracity of victimhood is, in these instances, less in the ability of authors to validate their reliability than in the capacity of reading audiences to forge a genuine connection with the text. O’Rourke therefore argues that the new ‘reigning ethos’ determines that ‘if a book moves you, it’s true’ (2006). In this scenario, the ‘real’ is little other than a persuasive effect. Indeed, the genre of the ‘misery memoir’ reveals how anxieties about the inaccessibility of literature to provide access to truth are mitigated via a sensational connection with text, an emotional ‘real’ and the suggestion that behind the image there is something more than a ghostly void.

ETHNIC VULTURES: VICTIMS OF CULTURE

In 2005, Nasdijj, a prize-winning Native American author touted as ‘one of the most celebrated multicultural writers in American literature’ (Fleischer, 2006), was revealed to be a ‘middle-aged white writer of gay pornography named Tim Barrus’ (Chaikivsky, 2006). Like Herman Rosenblat, Nasdijj came to prominence with the publication of a harrowing short story about the death of his adopted son in a 1999 issue of Esquire magazine. A year later, the narrative was shortlisted as a finalist for a National Magazine Award, competing with authors such as Tom Wolfe and Oliver Sacks (Chaikivsky, 2006). Publishing a trilogy of memoirs—The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams (2000), The Boy and the Dogs
Are Sleeping (2003) and Geronimo’s Bones (2004)—Nasdijj enjoyed considerable success, and while failing to sell in figures comparable to other fakes, was acclaimed as ‘a new and powerful American Indian voice’ (Chaikivsky, 2006). Winning the PEN America Centre’s Beyond Margins Award in 2004, Nasdijj was hailed as a writer whose prose style was ‘raw, poignant, poetic, and painful’, ‘gifted’ and ‘refreshing’, vividly capturing the suffering of Native Indians in modern America (Moore, 2000, pp. 100-101). And, as Andrew Chaikivsky notes, the more Nasdijj wrote, ‘the more awful a life he revealed’, detailing narratives of domestic abuse, sexual violence, social inequity, depression and death. As Matthew Fleischer observes, ‘Nasdijj knows how to pull the heartstrings’ (2006). But with the public revelation that the suffering of Nadijj was the construction of an author of ‘gay leather porn and sadomasochistic novels’, the former literary celebrity was viciously denounced as a ‘liar, a natural impostor and a sleazy, unstable’ exploiter of minority culture (Chaikivsky, 2006).

The scandal surrounding Nasdijj—known as the ‘Navahoax’—is illustrative of a number of recent memoir fakes that co-opt the identity of an ethnic ‘other’. Appropriating a voice from the cultural margins, identity impostors such as Barrus explicitly manipulate the tension between majority and minority groups, playing upon the politics of ‘otherness’ in order to garner the support of popular and critical audiences. In doing so, Barrus, akin to Helen Darville, raises questions about the vested interests of a reading public, and the complicity of literary institutions in validating fraudulent works. Moreover, the faking of ethnicity provokes anxieties about the effects of cultural misrepresentation, and the role of colonialism in co-opting an oppressed ‘other’ for exotic value. The author Sherman Alexie, for example, notes that the appropriation of minority voices by majority groups is linked to issues of power, arguing that ‘the last act of colonialism is for the dominant culture to completely supplant the Native one. Nasdijj is disappearing people. With every book he writes he makes Indians disappear’ (qu. Fleischer, 2006). Described by Vernon Bellecourt as ‘culture vultures’ (qu. Miller, 2006), authors who appropriate ethnic subjectivities with the aim of attracting public attention have been accused of ‘cultural genocide’, as they commodify the identity of the ‘other’ for financial gain and literary celebrity (Miller, 2006).

Fleischer further argues that in successfully executing an ethnic fake,
writers such as Barrus not only misinform reading audiences, but also make ‘it harder for genuine work to come forward’ (2006). Indeed, in receiving the 2004 Beyond Margins Award, Barrus ‘accepted money and prestige specifically earmarked to help Native Americans share their story’, thus silencing a voice already struggling to speak (2006). Gillian Whitlock observes in Soft Weapons that the autobiographical narrator in ‘minority genres speaks on behalf of a collective, a subordinate speaking truth to power’ (2007, p. 20). But in the case of imposture, the speaker compromises the integrity of both the self and the collective, further alienating the margins from the centre. The appropriation of the ethnic ‘other’ is, then, implicated in complex issues relating to cultural identity, highlighting anxieties about the extent to which ethnicity—and identity, more generally—is performative rather than biologically imparted. It is an anxiety that implicates the faking potential of literature in its ability to create a convincing effect of the real, again raising provocative questions about the relationship between representation and reality, and the consequences of blurring the distinction between the genuine and the fake.

The scandals surrounding ‘culture vultures’ also serve to comment critically on the culture that has made these narratives popular. According to Whitlock, ethnic autobiography is ‘highly valued for its exotic appeal and educational value’ and for ‘the status it confers on the consumer as an enlightened, sympathetic, and politically correct individual’ (p. 15). With the increasing commodification of the ‘alterity industry’, Whitlock argues that ‘local and oppositional discourses and cultural products from the periphery circulate and are contained by metropolitan and capitalist systems of production and consumption’ (p. 15). In this context, life narrative is a commodity sold to ‘powerful reading communities’ that range from the ‘metropolitan intelligentsia’ to ‘the fans of the best-seller’ (p. 15). It is, moreover, an object capable of assuaging the guilt of the privileged Western reader, while allowing access to the intimacy of trauma and providing a ‘comforting narcissistic recognition that denies differences across cultures’ (p. 15). Indeed, Whitlock suggests that ethnic autobiographies are an ‘agent’ through which concepts of self and other are both constructed and revealed, exposing extant notions of an essential ‘Western’ subject and the enigmatic ‘other’ (p. 7). The scandals surrounding the outing of an ethnic fake thus highlight ‘the social, political and ethical investments of
narrators, readers, and publishers in life narrative’, and the capacity of fraud memoirs to function as a diagnostic tool of cultural trends and attitudes (p. 110).

In a second example of a ‘culture vulture’, the controversy surrounding Norma Khouri’s *Forbidden Love* (2003) suggests that while the memoir of an ethnic impostor parasitically exploits a position of victimhood, it exists only because of the biases of a public attempting to bring the margins to the centre. A memoir detailing the ‘honour killing’ of Khouri’s lifelong friend Dalia, *Forbidden Love* was embraced by a reading community outraged by the treatment of women under patriarchal Jordanian and Islamic laws. With Australian sales approaching 200,000 copies, Khouri’s tragic tale of oppression ‘stole readers’ hearts and triggered an international outcry’ (Knox, 2004b). As the journalist Malcolm Knox describes, Khouri quickly ‘became a best-selling author in the same league as J.K. Rowling and Michael Moore. She petitioned the United Nations personally, was published in 15 countries, and Australians voted her memoir into their favourite 100 books of all time’ (2004b). In a post 9/11 climate, the emergence of Khouri was politically timely; as Whitlock notes, ‘Muslim life narratives have been taken up variously in the recent past, in a time of crisis when the recognition of viable speaking subjects in the public sphere has become an urgent issue’ (p. 12). Indeed, as Khouri offered Western readers a narrative about the totalitarian barbarity of Islam, she neatly exploited volatile anxieties concerned with the cultural norms of the Middle East and the role of the West in advocating for democratic human rights. Further, as the memoir was marketed as a testament of lived experience, Khouri engaged in a publication tour noted for its capacity to ‘reduce listeners to tears and anger’ (Knox, 2004b), convincing readers of the ‘reality’ of the narrative because of its capacity to elicit an emotional response. In terms of meeting market and reader values, then, Khouri’s extra-textual narrative savvily contextualised *Forbidden Love* within cultural and political discourses that guaranteed its popularity as a literary commodity.

However, as the popularity of the memoir increased, suspicious readers posted concerns about its accuracy on internet websites, until the text was eventually investigated by the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW). *Forbidden Love* was confirmed as fraudulent and Khouri’s proclaimed identity as a refugee of Shari’a law was debunked. Media investigations revealed that Khouri was an American citizen who had fled her Chicago-based family in
2000 to construct an entirely new reality. Obtaining an Australian permanent residency visa under a Department of Immigration category for ‘Distinguished Talent’, Khouri re-formed her identity as the victim of repressive Islamism and embraced the performance of an ethnic ‘other’, transfixing audiences with a powerful narrative of cultural difference, misogyny and death. But in line with impostors such as Dössekker, Pelzer and O’Beirne, Khouri refused to confess to fraudulence, despite evidence that invalidated *Forbidden Love* and her newly assumed identity. Indeed, when confronted by the JNCW about the errors present in the memoir, Khouri stated: ‘I stand by what I wrote. I refute the allegations that you are making’ (qu. Knox, 2004b). Accused of propagating gender stereotypes about Muslim men and women, Khouri was excoriated for perpetuating damaging myths about the cultural barbarity of the Middle East. As an editorial in *The Australian* observes, Khouri appeared to be bravely ‘standing up for the rights of women in a brutal sexist society. In presenting Middle Eastern men as violent bigots, she had a plot custom-made for our times’ (qu. Whitlock, pp. 111-12). The director of the JNCW, Amal al-Sabbagh, similarly argues that Khouri ‘ruined the reputation of Jordanian women…Jordanian women have excellent levels of education that are gradually being translated into participation in the workforce. Her tone is that all Jordanian women live under these traditional practices, which is wrong’ (qu. Knox, 2004a).

Astutely—albeit unsuccessfully—Khouri attempted to deflect criticism of the memoir by referring to female suffering: ‘I am angered to see that you are more concerned for the “image of Jordan” than for the many innocent victims of honour killings each year in your country’ (qu. Knox, 2004b). Efforts to regain public support via the plight of women in the Middle East reveal how the imposture was tailored to the anxieties and interests of a Western—and largely female—reading audience. Indeed, the Khouri scandal exposed how Muslim life narratives are a lucrative commodity directed, Whitlock contends, at ‘a Western feminist reader or spectator’ and drawing on ‘rights discourse’ to ‘trigger empathic identification, benevolence and a response to trauma in terms of a liberal set of values that are held above and beyond cultural difference’ (pp. 19, 118). As Whitlock asserts, in this context, the controversy of Khouri’s ‘faddish fibbing’ (p. 110) thus reveals the ‘susceptibility of the reading public to a certain kind of fakery’ (p. 121). As Andrew Bolt cynically commented in the *Daily Mail*, the key
to publishing success is to ‘trade as a woman...who is from some tribe or oppressed minority, and has survived the cruelty of whites/colonialists/right-wing thugs/rich guys. And if you aren’t any or all of the above, then fake it’ (2004). Thus while Khouri was criticised for romanticising victimhood, the scandal was pivotal in exposing a public infatuated with testimonies of minority suffering. Bolt adds that as writers display the ‘most sacred marks of victimhood, and particularly that ethnic thing’ (2004), audiences celebrate the courage of the confessor whilst self-righteously adopting the cause advocated by the memoir. Whitlock notes, for example, that the final chapters of Forbidden Love, an ‘Afterword’ detailing a ‘factual’ context to the issues raised in the memoir and urging Western readers to action against honour killings, are ‘strategically important’ (p. 117). ‘The autobiographical Norma’, Whitlock contends, ‘elicits the empathic response of a powerful, gendered, secular and humanist readership in the West: those who identify with democracy, feminism and modernity and who are susceptible to the evangelical appeal to promulgate these values elsewhere’ (p. 117).

The authenticity of Forbidden Love was authorised by epitexts and peritexts that ratified the narrative and highlighted its ethical profundity for a morally ‘serious’ reading audience. As with the use of an endorsement from Elie Wiesel to support the veracity of Dössekker’s Fragments, the publishers of Forbidden Love drew upon the authority of Jean Sasson, author of the Princess trilogy of memoirs about Muslim women, to advocate the legitimacy of the text. According to Sasson, ‘this extraordinary true story is well told, worth telling and impossible to put down’ (qu. Khouri, 2003). The back cover of the memoir declares that Khouri ‘is donating a portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book to international women’s and human rights charities’ (Khouri, 2003). Moreover, the blurb also calls specifically to a female readership and a solidarity of women that extends beyond cultural differences: ‘Forbidden Love will strike a chord with women everywhere and is a testimony to the courage and strength of women who are prepared to defy generations of male dominance’. Framed within a context of activism, Khouri thus elicits the ‘empathic response of a secular humanist readership in the West’ (Whitlock, 2004, p. 169), while positioning herself as the advocate for repressed women worldwide. These epitextual endorsements also feed into the rehabilitation of a public book culture in which
reading is restored as a morally serious ‘recreational and communal activity’ for the middlebrow consumer (Whitlock, p. 167). The pithy comment offered by Sasson indeed evokes the language of a book group review, and signals the moral value offered by the text. Whitlock notes that memoirs such as Forbidden Love bestow a certain status on book clubs and their members, reflecting the ‘group and the accomplished reader back to themselves in the most flattering terms imaginable’ (p. 169). According to Whitlock—and evidenced by hosts such as Oprah Winfrey—ethnic narratives are regularly featured in the lists and discussions produced by book groups, and work to suggest that ‘reading the right books is a sign of aesthetic taste and cultivation, individual integrity and sensitivity’ (p. 169).

Carter further notes how the popularity of the victim memoir signals how ‘literariness, as a value, has been transferred from “everyday” kinds of fiction to these new, rarer “non-fiction” modes, at once highly aesthetic and highly marketable’ (2001). In the context of Australian book group culture, Carter observes that the preference for authors such as Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje and Murray Bail suggests a ‘taste for books that deal (stylishly) with “issues” or, as one reader puts it, “deep moral or political questions”’. Narratives such as Forbidden Love exploit a reading culture that strives to demonstrate ‘literary or writerly sophistication’ and a degree of ‘ethical seriousness’, Carter contends, in an act of ‘self-fashioning’ for the reader: ‘[Memoirs] act as occasions for ethical reflection. They address, as they constitute, readers who want “history”, moral and intellectual sophistication, cultural context, authenticity, and structures for self-reflection’. Arguably, the ethical proclivities of these book clubs is a reflection of the traditional notion that literature ought to perform a moral purpose, to somehow inform or improve the enamoured reader and the culture in which they exist. The consumption of morally-centred literature thus reveals not only an interest in the self, but also in the community. As public and private ‘groups’, book clubs are invested in ideas about ‘civic virtue’ and bringing to the centre an interest in ‘issues’ deemed ethically vital.

The infatuation of reading audiences with narratives of the foreign ‘other’, however, provokes anxieties about how Western readers attempt to empathise with cultural difference whilst perpetuating the racial stereotypes and power
structures that maintain negative ideas about ethnic ‘otherness’. The notion of seeking to ameliorate difference via representation—as these memoirs purport to do—is one that is fraught with political tensions. Critics such as Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), for example, have argued that the West seeks knowledge of the ‘other’ in order ‘to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it”…since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it’ (p. 32). According to Said, as the West constructs a mysterious vision of ‘otherness’, it not only denies the ‘other’ agency, but also entrenches cultural stereotypes. These stereotypes ensure that when an authentic voice is able to speak, it does so against a series of ethnic myths that it must first unravel. Certainly, the memoirs of both Nasdijj and Khouri have been accused of replicating narratives of ‘otherness’ which subscribe to established Western notions of difference, as their texts peddle images of the ‘other’ that do not threaten conventional expectations.

Arguably, one of the consequences of commodifying the minority voice, as Said has suggested, is the transformation of a single experience—authentic or otherwise—into a representation of the collective. Critics of Khouri, for example, attacked her imposture on the grounds that it created a false understanding of Jordanian culture, and perpetuated myths about Islamic social codes. Typically, the ‘culture vulture’ (Bellecourt, qu. Miller, 2006) constructs an image of an ethnic group which conforms to the assumptions of the mainstream. In *Forbidden Love*, for example, Khouri presents an image of gender relations in Islamic Jordan as a strict dichotomy that does not allow room for difference or diversion. Repeatedly, Khouri emphasises the inordinate degree to which women are controlled by a religious and cultural regime linked to an archaic past. The prologue of the narrative establishes the framework for the inequities that are to follow:

Jordan is a place where men in sand-coloured business suits hold cell phones to one ear and, in the other, hear the whispers of harsh and ancient laws blowing in from the desert. It is a place where a worldly young queen argues eloquently on CNN for human rights, while a father in a middle-class suburb slits his daughter’s throat for committing the most innocent breach of old Bedouin codes of honour (p. 1).

The notion of a split between the image and reality of Jordan is one frequently evoked by Khouri, as she offers to provide the Western reader with a privileged
glimpse into the ‘true’ and alien nature of the ‘other’. Indeed, this division between a civilised façade and the brutal ‘truth’ is used to argue that the cultural and religious ‘otherness’ of the Arab world fits exactly with the stereotypes the reader has imagined, and warns against being persuaded by more complex representations of difference. Khouri categorically states, for instance, that ‘Islam is a totalitarian regime operating under the guise of a religion’ (p. 60), and describes the ‘typical young Arab man’ as a tyrant who ‘expects everyone to treat him as if he’s a god’ (p. 51). Warning the reader not to be ‘deluded’ by the image of modernity presented by Jordanian men—such as their ability to ‘wear blue jeans and go to a bar’ (p. 57)—Khour reiterates the ancient Bedouin customs that circumscribe the lives of women under a repressive patriarchal order: ‘If a woman breaks any of the rules she’s required to follow, she is not granted the luxury of forgiveness. She must be punished’ (p. 57). The tendency of Forbidden Love to delineate all men and women in terms of gendered caricatures suggests a static vision of the identity of the ‘other’ that allows no room for the nuances and complexities of cultural difference. Further, the demonisation of Islam colludes with popular notions of Middle Eastern fundamentalism and affirms ideas about the moral sophistication of the dominant West. Khouri thus offers Western readers validation of damaging narratives of ‘otherness’ and the reassurance, perhaps, that the divisions between the civilised West and the barbaric East are indeed true.

The stereotypical nature of the representations offered by authors such as Khouri has provoked anxieties about the homogenisation of ethnic identities, and the ethical implications of packaging stereotypes for Western readers. Suzan Shown Harjo argues of the Nasdijj scandal, for example, that ‘Native people who read Nasdijj’s work did not believe he was a Native writer because there was nothing familiar about the content’, while ‘non-Native’ readers embraced the content ‘because of its familiarity’ (2006). As one reviewer wrote of Geronimo’s Bones in an article entitled ‘Nasdijj: The Phenomenon’, the memoir ‘derives its special power’ from the ability of Nasdijj ‘to capture the universal emotions that we all share’ (2009). This sense of the familiar, asserts Harjo, ‘allows pseudo-Indians to rise so far so fast in circles controlled by non-Indians. They write with what non-Indian reviewers like to call “universal appeal”, meaning that they appeal to other non-Indians because they are non-Indian’ (2006). Ethnic fakes,
then, occupy the cultural margins in order to provide the mainstream with a vision of the ‘other’ that is not ‘brutally honest’—as critics initially claimed of Nasdijj—but a repetition of already established images. Indeed, as Whitlock argues, by reducing the complexity of ideas about ethnicity and ‘otherness’ through the use of stereotypes, fakes refuse to engage with the ‘cultural dialogues and exchanges’ that might actually help to further the agendas of genuine rights campaigns (p. 130).

The scandal surrounding Nasdijj and Khouri highlights anxieties about the images of the ‘other’ perpetuated through literature, but also contentiously exposes the performative nature of ethnic identity. The imposture executed by Nasdijj presented a vision of Native Indians which was considered misrepresentative by members of that ethnic group. However, what is interesting about this controversy is that suspicions emerged because the memoirs appeared too consistent with existing narratives. Sherman Alexie, for instance, notes that while reading the work, ‘I was thinking, this doesn’t just sound like me, this is me. At first I was flattered, but as I kept reading I noticed [Nasdijj] was borrowing from other Native writers too. I thought, this can’t be real’ (qu. Fleischer, 2006). While the memoirs never drew on more than ‘a similar phrase here and there’, the connection of the work to writers such as Alexie, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko and Michael Dorris suggested Nasdijj was, paradoxically, too authentic to be genuine (Fleischer, 2006). Importantly, the fraudulence of the memoirs were recognised only by authorities such as Alexie, who was capable of noting the failure of the works to ‘mention specific tribal members, clans, ceremonies and locations, all of which are vital to the concept of Indian identity’ (Alexie, 2006). As Harjo contends, to non-Indian readers of Nasdijj, the works appear genuine, suggesting that ethnicity, or identity more generally, is a performance that requires a series of specific characteristics, which are accepted as ‘real’ or rejected as inauthentic. By mimicking the expected conventions of Navajo identity, incorporating details about mythology, tribal practices and social inequities (albeit imperfectly), Nasdijj replicates a narrative of ‘otherness’ that implies the ethnic self is little more than a cultural act. Indeed, in *The Boy and the Dog Are Sleeping* (2003), Nasdijj describes his ethnicity as in part the result of acculturation:

I believe in the power of the mythology I grew up with. Even if I am not entirely an Indian. My father was an Anglo. With skin as pink as peaches. Mythology is
oblivious to blindness of race. When you grow up surrounded by language and stories, you become the stories and the languages you know. The desert does not care who your parents were. Only people care about genetic pedigree. I am a desert mongrel who howls at midnight moons (p. 2).

In the vein of fraudulent Holocaust testimonies, the controversy surrounding Nasdijj raises anxieties about the consequences of propagating fabricated narratives of injustice and reducing ethnic identity to little more than a performance staged for the interests of Western readers. Critics such as Harjo (2006), for example, argue that impostors trivialise the suffering of genuine Native Indians and re-construct the historical context of trauma by casting doubt on the legitimacy of true narratives and perpetuating ethnic stereotypes for profit. Alexie similarly argues that the fraudulence committed by Nasdijj matters ‘because he has cynically co-opted as a literary style the very real suffering endured by generations of very real Indians because of the very real injustices caused by very real American aggression that destroyed very real tribes’ (2006). Moreover, as ‘culture vultures’ gain publicity and attract cynicism, there is a fear that ‘authentic’ tellings will be in some way ‘diluted’, rendering all tales of ethnic difference suspect. As ethnic impostors are accused of engaging in a form of colonialism that eradicates the voice of the marginal, they thus raise anxieties about the effects of ‘false’ representations of the ‘other’ in constructing visions of the ‘real’.

Yet, in a third example of an ethnic fake, the scandal surrounding Rigoberta Menchú’s I, Rigoberta Menchú (1983) reveals how manipulating an idea of self can function to promote a political agenda associated with the ‘other’. In the case of Menchú, fraudulence moved specifically from the singular to the plural, as the author claimed to speak not only as an individual, but also as the voice of the Quiché-Mayan Indians of Guatemala. In her testimonio, Menchú makes explicit the assumption underlining all ethnic memoirs that the author speaks on behalf of a collective, stating: ‘My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people’ (p. 1). It is a claim endorsed by the ghostwriter of the memoir, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who reiterates that Menchú ‘speaks for all the Indians of the American continent…Rigoberta Menchú allows the defeated to speak. She is a privileged witness’ (p. xi). Indeed, the right to represent the experiences of the ‘other’ was also validated by literary and cultural institutions as the testimony of Menchú
received international acclaim for its portrayal of the Quiché-Mayan people and the civil war in Guatemala. Receiving the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for work on behalf of Guatemalan Indians, Menchú emerged as a powerful voice from the margins, advocating the rights of the oppressed and the fight against social injustice. Dinesh D’Souza notes that on winning the prize, Menchú ‘suddenly received worldwide recognition as a leftist icon—a modern-day Saint Sebastian, pierced by the arrows of racist discrimination and colonial exploitation’ (1999).

Awarded several honorary doctorates, Menchú was also nominated as a United Nations goodwill ambassador in 1992, as a ‘special representative of indigenous peoples’. The *testimonio* was celebrated as a ‘first-person account of Guatemalan bigotry and brutality against native Indians’, and ‘spread from the cutting-edge curricula’ of Stanford University to ‘become part of the canon of required and frequently assigned readings in high schools and universities around the globe’ (D’Souza, 1999). Described by the conservative American commentator David Horowitz as the ‘international emblem of the dispossessed peoples of the Western Hemisphere’, the life constructed by Menchú was, however, nothing but ‘a tissue of lies’ (1999).

As a result of the investigative efforts of the anthropologist David Stoll, the *testimonio* was revealed to be a patchwork of true and invented narratives (Horowitz, 1999). Stoll discovered that a number of key traumas represented in the memoir were fabrications or major elaborations of relatively minor events. As the journalist and critic James Poniewozik notes, the report produced by Stoll revealed that ‘numerous Guatemalans say that the central land dispute in Menchú’s story—painted as an effort by wealthy landowners and the government to drive her father off his land—was actually a long-running family feud; that Menchú, who claimed to be self-taught, in fact had a middle-school education; and that she described, movingly, witnessing the death by starvation of a brother who in fact died years before she was born’ (1999). Critics such as Horowitz excoriated the *testimonio*, describing the narrative as ‘a piece of Communist propaganda designed to incite hatred of Europeans and Westerners, and the societies they have built, and to organize support for Communist and terrorist organizations at war with the democracies of the West’ (1999). According to Horowitz, Menchú is a ‘fraud’ whose work ‘legitimises’ the Third World fantasies of left-wing academics and commentators. Indeed, Horowitz goes so far
as to conclude that the fabrications issued by Menchú constitute ‘one of the greatest intellectual and academic hoaxes of the twentieth century’, representing a piece of Marxist propaganda seeking to discredit the capitalist West (1999).

The discussions surrounding the scandal, however, tended to focus on the capacity of the memoir to represent the suffering of the Quiché-Mayan Indians despite the spuriosity of Menchú’s own experiences. Critics such as Greg Grandin and Francisco Goldman, for example, argue that while the text is not technically accurate, it is representative and successfully highlights the atrocities committed by the Guatemalan military. As Grandin and Goldman assert, ‘Menchú’s book cut through [a] veil of silence to reveal a hidden history of pain, death and terror. Her story was a call to conscience…designed not to mislead but rather capture our attention’ (1999). The memoir, Grandin and Goldman suggest, relies upon a ‘Dickensian technique’ of synthesising ‘individual experiences into one character’s heart-rending story. Such distortions were probably necessary to break through the wall of media indifference’ (1999). The academic Mary Louise Pratt similarly argues that ‘however problematic’ the testimonio is in terms of its construction, it remains a ‘powerful book. Its capacity to enlighten and move’ derives not ‘from the fact that the book is the testimonio of a young Guatemalan indigenous woman who has suffered many painful experiences’ but rather from ‘its expressive power, its coarticulation of aesthetic, narrative, ethical, and emotional dimensions, and also a cosmos’ (2001, p. 40). The sensationalism of the testimonio thus surmounts its credibility, and the text becomes authentic—as with the narratives offered by ‘misery memoirs’—through its capacity to offer something that is felt to be ‘true’.

Yet the confidence trick executed by Menchú ought, arguably, to expose a number of representational anxieties similar to those revealed by the controversies discussed so far. Unlike Nasdijj and Khouri, whose memoirs were complete fabrications, the narrative created by Menchú enters the provocative territory of synthesis and hybridisation, merging the ‘factual’ and the ‘fictional’ in order to forge a powerful representation. In doing so, the testimonio contradictorily reveals history as a narrative ‘consciously composed’ and whose constructed order, as Hutcheon argues, is neither natural nor totalising but imposed by a narrating figure (1989, p. 63). Further, as Menchú, in line with other ethnic fakes, claims that the conditions and experiences of her identity are ethnically representative,
she conveys a plurality of self that rejects a unified centre of meaning and embraces a subjectivity that is fragmented, performative and open to transformation. In previous scandals surrounding fake testimonies, the notion that there is no abiding self has been the source of considerable anxiety, yet in the case of Menchú, the socio-political function offered by the memoir appeared to mitigate the consequences of its artificiality.

Ironically, while other fakes have been excoriated due to the publication of historical counter-narratives, in the case of Menchú, it was the anthropologist David Stoll who attracted widespread disdain for claiming to offer factual ‘truth’. The Uruguayan writer and journalist Eduardo Galeano argues in *La Jornada*, for instance, that the account produced by Stoll created a ‘smoke screen’ to ‘repudiate the indigenous resistance movement that [Menchú] represents and symbolises’ (1999, p. 100). According to Galeano, Stoll’s work functions to ‘hide forty years of tragedy in Guatemala, magically reduced to a guerilla provocation and to family quarrels, those typical “Indian things”’ (p. 100). The Guatemalan writer Dante Liano contends that the denial of Menchú’s narrative is a strategy designed to maintain the ‘otherness’ of ethnic minorities, and argues that the history offered by Stoll is prejudicial (1999, p. 122). Liano also claims that Stoll ignores the relationship between ‘historical narrative and fictitious narrative’ and dismisses questions about the nature of truth provided in complex forms such as the testimonio (p. 123). The denunciation of Menchú by Stoll, Liano suggests, is inherently more problematic than the representative narrative offered in the testimonio because, like Holocaust denial, it begins to re-vision the past ‘real’: ‘For [Stoll], Rigoberta’s lies are the lies of all poor Guatemalans…To say that she lied means that no genocide ever occurred in Guatemala’ (pp. 123-4). W. George Lovell and Christopher Lutz add that Stoll exhibits the ‘same selectivity in constructing his text as Menchú does in constructing hers’, and note that the anthropologist refused to contextualise the testimonio in terms of its political agenda or its generic qualities (2001, p.195). Lovell and Lutz observe that ‘Stoll appears to believe that, unless Menchú’s version of certain events and circumstances can withstand being subjected to the magnifying glass of social-science inquiry, any flaws or inconsistencies uncovered…discredit the testimony in question, cast doubt over its authenticity and thus render it suspect’ (p. 171). Arguing for an emphasis on the ‘primacy of larger truths’ (Lovell & Lutz, p. 195),
critics such as Galeano, Liano, Lovell and Lutz thus privilege the ethical nature of the narrative above the specificity of ‘fact’, and indeed suggest that the *testimonio* is all the more authentic for its complex understanding of historical truth and the transformative potential of literature.

Menchú also garnered the support of readers willing to accept the text held the promise of a reality more authentic than simple ‘fact’. As the Guatemalan writer Carolina Escobar Sarti argues, ‘the important thing is not the small details, but the big themes revealed by the text, which undoubtedly form part of a real history’ (1999, p. 128). The acceptance of the *testimonio* regardless of its blurring of fact and fiction perhaps also suggests that general ethics are more important to readers and critics than truth-specifics. In line with Carter’s notion of the ethically serious reader, if the memoir maintains a relationship with profound moral or political ‘issues’, reading audiences seem hesitant to condemn an ethnic life narrative for its creative use of ‘fact’. Indeed, the imposture committed by Menchú did not involve the disintegration of her identity following the debunking of the text, but simply the analytical recognition that the narrative was based upon multiple and disordered lives, rather than a singular, chronological experience. As Grandin and Goldman observe—akin to the scandals of Rosenblat and de Wael—while Menchú fabricated the context of her suffering, the ‘undisputed facts’ are ‘horrible enough’: ‘She *did* have two brothers who died of malnutrition at an early age; her mother and brother were kidnapped and killed by the army; and her father was burned alive’ (1999).

While Menchú did not co-opt an ethnic identity, she capitalised on a Western fascination with the plight of the ‘other’ in order to promote a political cause. In a process of self-elevation akin to Pelzer’s, Menchú secured the authority to speak on behalf of the oppressed and in doing so, sought to advocate the concerns of the Quiché-Mayan in mainstream spheres of influence. While critics such as Grandin, Goldman and Poniewozik argue that authors who fake positions of marginality with the aim of publicising socio-political concerns have the potential to be powerfully transgressive, others have expressed anxiety about how culturally distortive such representations can be. Nasdijj and Khouri, for example, have both been accused of manipulating images of ‘otherness’ in the interests of catering to the demands of literary markets, raising concerns about the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes. Yet the impostures discussed here also
suggest that fraudulence can be curiously productive in terms of realising a political agenda. As the controversy surrounding *I, Rigoberta Menchú* attests, fakes can serve as a vehicle for a greater cause, constructing a scenario in which the ethical reasoning of the fake outweighs or transcends essentialist anxieties about the representation of truth.

**FAKE REVEALING FAKE: AUTHENTICITY AS EFFECT**

For all their scandalous disrepute, fraudulent memoirs function critically to highlight issues relating not only to literature and authenticity, but also to the construction and performance of self. As impostors create whole new lives and histories, their fabrications raise questions about the cultural construction of identity and the capacity for subjectivity to be dismantled and re-narrated as something other. Arguably, much of the outrage generated by a fake memoir is connected to anxieties about the absence of a stable self. Importantly, this anxiety is regularly expressed in relation to the reader, who has intimately connected with an identity that is not ‘real’, revealing the unnerving potential to be radically affected by something that is ‘false’. ‘Fake authors’ have also self-consciously commented on this process. Tim Barrus, for example, in detailing the emergence of his Native American alter ego, describes browsing through ‘an old Navajo text from back in the 1890s. I found the word *nasdijj* and it meant “to become again.” And that confirmed it for me’ (qu. Chaikivsky, 2006). As with the Ukrainian persona of Helen Darville, Barrus argues that posing as *Nasdiij* was a response to an intimate connection with a narrative construct, a case of word transforming world. And while the performances of the faking authors discussed in the chapter appear retrospectively absurd, it is crucial to note that these facades were publicly accepted as credible and, in some instances, adopted by the impostor as an entirely new subjectivity. Memoirists such as Bruno Dössekker and Norma Khouri continue to assert the veracity of their fictional constructions despite evidence to the contrary, blurring understandings of the real and the unreal, and revealing the profound implications of re-narrating the subjective self.

Yet it cannot be ignored that fake memoirs can entail serious consequences for the lives and histories that have been appropriated. As suggested by fraudulent Holocaust testimonies, imposture compromises historical representation or, to acknowledge ‘revisionist’ perspectives, history itself.
Similarly, the architects of fraudulent ‘misery memoirs’ implicate a series of specific others, from immediate family members to the representatives of cultural institutions such as the church. The peculiar critical ambiguity surrounding the genre arguably attests to the sensational ability of fake memoirs to implant alternate versions of the real, and to put into doubt the veracity of others. Finally, ethnic fakes compromise representations of ‘otherness’ as memoirs reproduce stereotypes and prejudices which entrench the divide between minority and majority cultures. Additionally, as the margins are co-opted by members of the privileged mainstream, minority voices are silenced, contained by the dominant centre in a process akin to colonisation. The creation of fraudulent selves thus impacts upon ‘authentic’ lives in ways that cannot be regarded as harmless or mischievous. Indeed, as authors re-narrate the terms and possibilities of self, they also begin to re-narrate the terms and possibilities of others.
CHAPTER FOUR
FROM HOLY BOOKS TO SATANIC VERSES: CONFRONTING THE SACRED

While poetry readings are not generally known for attracting headline news and crowds in the hundreds, the controversial 2008 performance by Patrick Jones at the Welsh Assembly did both. Jones, a Welsh poet, was invited by the Liberal Democrat member Peter Black to speak at the Assembly after the religious group Christian Voice forced the cancellation of an earlier reading. Jones’ appearance at the Assembly was arranged by Black as a comment on democracy, and attracted over 250 activists protesting against the ‘obscene and blasphemous’ content of Jones’ most recent collection, Darkness Is Where The Stars Are (2008) (BBC News, 2008). The National Director of Christian Voice, Stephen Green, claimed that the cancellation of the initial reading was a ‘triumph for the Lord’ and demonstrated that ‘Christians won’t tolerate insults to Jesus’ (Grew, 2008). Throughout the reading at the Assembly, members of the Christian group protested outside by singing hymns and praying (Flood, 2008). One of the most incendiary poems in the collection, ‘Hymn’, was described by the Ebbw Vale vicar Reverend Geoff Waggett as ‘disgusting and perverted’ (qu. Rhys, 2008), as it refers to sex between Jesus and Mary Magdalene—‘just like mary magdelene/i fucked jesus’—and explicitly confronts the misogynistic elements of organised religion (Jones, 2008, p. 34). Black, however, described the reading of Jones’ poetry as a ‘good day for democracy’, noting that the protest is ‘what democracy is about...[F]reedom of speech is also the freedom to offend—once you start trying to limit [speech] on the basis that you find the view offensive, you start on a slippery slope towards dictatorship and losing your rights’ (qu. Flood, 2008).

The uproar surrounding the controversial use of religious figures and values in Jones’ poetry is situated in a social and political history of blasphemy that is as old and as complex as organised religion. Confrontation involving the sacred has been—and arguably still is—fundamental to the development of not only religious values and practices, but also the creation of national, political and socio-cultural ideologies. Indeed, the earliest records of blasphemy highlight the imbrication of religion with government. Leonard Levy (1993), for example, observes the easy confusion of the political and the religious in fifth century Athens, where ‘treason against the gods was close to treason against the state’,
and employed as a charge to limit the intellectual freedom of its citizens (p. 7). Similarly, David Lawton argues that throughout history, blasphemy is frequently identified and defined as ‘an active threat to the body politic’, a criminal action relating to sedition that seeks to unsettle the ‘legal process itself’ (1993, pp. 9-10). Blasphemy, then, is an act that works to challenge not only the perspectives offered by a given religious framework, but also how the world is ordered and understood. As Lawton and Levy contend, scandals centered on issues of blasphemy are socially and culturally embedded and as a result, blasphemy is always ‘something else’, a rhetoric exposing the meaning systems that construct a particular society, and the anxieties that threaten the balance (Lawton, pp. 2-3). Indeed, unlike other literary controversies, in which concerns are explicitly stated in the discourses of scandal, the outrage surrounding blasphemous texts is curiously coded. The offence of blasphemy is often merely an entry into more intricate debates, a vehicle through which volatile concerns about nationhood, migration and otherness can be discussed. As Virginia Hench and William Richardson assert, blasphemy has ‘historically served as a convenient proxy for the offenses of political and social unorthodoxy’, a vehicle through which to express greater cultural contestations (1996).

As mischievous acts or targeted critiques, contemporary scandals involving blasphemous literature highlight the persistent volatility attached to notions of the sacred and the profane, and radically question the boundaries between representation and religion. The emphasis on the metamorphic and sacred power of words is central to both Islamic and Christian faiths, resulting in a series of anxieties concerned with controlling the ways in which spiritual narratives and doctrines are represented to the public. Indeed, this chapter will explore how authors such as Salman Rushdie and Dan Brown provoke conflict because of their treatment of religious tracts as literary material, as texts that can be unravelled and re-written in order to offer something new. As religious teachings and practices rely on the authority of text to convey a particular worldview, blasphemous works act as counter-narratives, re-visioning doctrine and opening ‘sacred’ stories to the transformative opportunities of literature. The history of blasphemy, then, is a narrative of controlling representation in the interests of controlling a worldview, and thus political authority and social order.

Focusing on the most vitriolic blasphemy scandals in recent decades, this
chapter engages with debates about literature, representation and faith, and their connection to anxieties about national identity, otherness and social processes of meaning-making. In accordance with the tendency of these controversies to use the sacred as a means to express greater cultural concerns, the chapter is divided into three key categories: ‘politics of critique’, ‘politics of nationhood’ and ‘politics of difference’. Each section will focus primarily on an analysis of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) but will also include a consideration of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000). While the thesis has already considered some of the arguments surrounding Pullman in relation to children’s literature, the focus on blasphemy in this chapter allows for a positioning of these scandals in a broader spectrum of similar texts and, indeed, the context of literary blasphemy.

The first section, the ‘politics of critique’, briefly discusses the history of blasphemy, examining what constitutes a blasphemous offence and the tradition of hostility between Christianity and Islam, the two religions most regularly associated with controversy in contemporary literary scandals. This section explores how outrage provoked by literary ‘attacks’ on the sacred is focussed on the distortion of works such as the Bible and the Qur’an, and a determination to protect sacred documents from re-visioning. The analysis thus reveals anxieties about freedom of speech and absolute truth, and highlights concerns about the radically volatile nature of the literary text. Indeed, while critics have suggested that blasphemous works expose the fraught position of religion within contemporary society, this chapter argues that the anxieties surrounding critical approaches to the sacred are centred on issues of language, a distrust and fear of the relationship between word and world that urges the need for censorship and control. As critics and readers of blasphemous texts seek to contain the unruly effects of literature, they reveal concerns about how the slipperiness of text allows for the possibility of difference, and a plurality of meaning that denies a singular ‘truth’.

The second section, the ‘politics of nationhood’, discusses how blasphemous works expose social anxieties about multiplicity and difference, and the need to secure a singular vision of national identity. Exploring ideas about assimilation and cultural ‘purity’, this section examines ideas about an ‘essential’ (British) identity and a fear of the cultural implications of ‘otherness’, raising
questions about the effects of imperialism and migration on the construction of self and ‘other’. Further, the analysis examines the imbrication of political and religious values in debates about blasphemous works, as ideas about faith and the nation state collide in arguments about spirituality, nationality and power.

Finally, in the third section of the chapter, ‘the politics of difference’ discusses anxieties about otherness raised by blasphemous works, noting how oppositionality extends into ideas about patriarchy, women, sexuality, and atheism. Importantly, this section contends that blasphemous texts are as much cultural as theological, highlighting the powerful influence of religious doctrine on social norms. Because of the relationship between religion and society, blasphemous authors have frequently used literature as a means of combating oppressive cultural ideologies, most particularly in regards to patriarchal myths about gender and sexuality. By doing so, the writers accused of producing blasphemous works highlight how spirituality—like literature—is not only culturally embedded, but also powerfully constructive, creating the narratives that function to determine social relations and behaviours. The concerns expressed in the discourses of scandal, then, about women, ‘anti-religious’ belief and sexuality, in fact reveal deep-seated anxieties about maintaining the status quo, and protecting existing power structures from the possibilities of transformation.

Unlike the scandals discussed so far, the controversies surrounding blasphemous literature are based on a complex series of anxieties relating to the construction of a worldview via the medium of language. Raising issues concerning individual and collective identities, systems of faith, national borders and concepts of the ‘other’, profane texts are mired in debates that extend well beyond writing against religious doctrines. As blasphemous works unsettle theological frameworks, provocative gaps of meaning are opened, revealing the potential for difference and transformation. The scandals emerging from arguments about profane literature thus again reveal concerns about the relationship between representation and metamorphosis, and expose anxieties about the ability of literature to posit radical new possibilities for thought and meaning.

A QUESTION OF FAITH: THE POLITICS OF CRITIQUE

In order to provide a background to the controversies sparked by profane texts, it
is instructive to begin with a brief history of blasphemy, and an exploration of the relationship between Islam and Christianity, the two key religions associated with controversy. While this chapter argues that the most potent anxieties revealed by sacrilegious works are those relating to socio-cultural and political issues, as well as to concerns about the transformative and creative forces of language and literature, the religious context of these scandals obviously cannot be ignored.

In terms of the Christian tradition, the anthropologist Richard Webster argues that while blasphemy can be traced back to the earliest moments of religious organisation, its formal conceptualisation has existed in Western nations only for the last three centuries, developing from the much older law of heresy. Legislation concerning heresy was designed to protect the Christian church against dissidence and traces back to the scriptures of the New Testament (Webster, 1990, p. 22). Webster argues that because early Christians viewed themselves as ‘possessors of the One Truth, they were constantly wary of those who, by teaching false doctrines, or by insulting God or Christ, threatened to defile this truth’ (2002). ‘False’ representations of Christian teachings provoked vitriol in defenders of the faith and an antagonism towards religious dissidents that is recorded in the narratives of the Bible. In the second letter to the Corinthians, for example, Paul condemns those who oppose him, describing his detractors as ‘false apostles’ and ‘deceitful workmen’ and consigning those who do not share his doctrine to the fires of hell: ‘Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds’ (2 Corinthians, 13-15). By the middle ages, the notion of heresy escalated into the persecution of pagans, witches, Jews, Muslims and dissenting Christians, and emerged in its most extreme form in the thirteenth century with the establishment of the Inquisition, an organisation controlled by the Dominican order and known as ‘Domini canes’ or ‘the hounds of the Lord’ (Webster, 2002). A ‘travelling ecclesiastical court’, the Inquisition encouraged Catholics to denounce ‘unbelieving’ Christians, even persuading parents to ‘betray their children and children their parents’ (Webster, 2002). Suspected heretics were forced to confess their treason and submit to the absolute authority of God and church, or be cruelly tortured; in either case, the result was often a barbaric death.

The force of the Inquisition represents what Webster describes as the
‘greatest engine of ideological conformity ever devised by the West’, and highlights the inextricable relationship between the values of church and state. Indeed, after the Reformation in England made the monarch the head of the established church, religious and political interests were forged to create an explicit symbiosis between national and spiritual agendas. The ‘sacredness and supremacy of church and state were maintained’, Webster argues, ‘by prosecuting dissidents for two related crimes—on the one hand for heresy and on the other for treason and sedition’ (2002). From the seventeenth century onwards, Webster notes that the notion of heresy in England and colonial America was progressively overtaken by the concept of blasphemy, a term describing those who ‘made disrespectful references to God or Jesus or the Church’. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies argue in Distorted Imagination (1990) that the Western ‘experience of Church authority was that it formed a total society’, wherein ‘every new ideological movement was seen as a dangerous opening of the floodgates of social chaos’ (p. 16). The intimate and often anxious link between politics, religion and cultural life, then, is rooted in a complex history of the relationship between faith and social control. It is a tension evidenced in the capacity of blasphemy to be applied to a spectrum of offenses and to transform according to the agenda of the plaintiff. As John Wright, a Unitarian minister charged with blasphemy in 1817, bemoaned: ‘Blasphemy is a word of such terrible sound that it frightens men of weak minds and weak nerves. It has been applied so variously, that all who make use of it attach their own signification’ (qu. Lawton, p. 3).

In its mission to ensure the absolute power of the Christian faith, the church, Webster notes, at times ‘actively encouraged’ its followers to use blasphemy as a ‘weapon with which to insult and humiliate rival faiths’ (1990, p. 34). The traditional victims were Jewish and Muslim communities, with prejudices validated by the scriptures of the New Testament. As Webster contends, not only the writings of Paul but also the gospels reveal a ‘clear and consistent’ anti-Jewish bias, while hostility towards Muslims stemmed from an ancient struggle for geographical control of Europe, and the military and political threat posed to Christianity by Islam (pp. 35-7). According to Webster, when Islam emerged in the seventh century with the power to challenge Christendom, Christian fears became apparent in a cultural demonisation of ‘Muslims in general, and Muhammad in particular’ as ‘satanic beings’ (p. 37). During the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries, secular thought and Orientalism transformed demonic fantasies about Islam into ideas about race. However, the crux of ancient stereotypes remained, figuring Muslims as ‘medieval, against science, rationality, progress and liberty’ (Sardar & Davies, p. 32). Thus Islam was considered a heretical faith that challenged Christian authority not only by its physical presence—via military and political strength—but also by its ideological difference.

Islamic notions of blasphemy are similar to those of the Christian faith, comprising of irreverent references to God, Allah or the prophets. Religious tracts are upheld as sacred objects, but while the Bible is viewed in Christianity as a representation of the laws and values of God as interpreted by divinely inspired writers, the Qur’an in Islamic belief is the direct word of God, or Allah, channelled through the prophet Muhammad. The detail is significant. As Webster asserts, the Qur’an is ‘the essential and only sanctuary of God and of the Prophet Muhammad, and any attempt to tamper with that sanctuary or to abuse its holiness is seen as an attempt to destroy religion itself’ (p. 30). The relationship between textuality and sacredness in Islamic traditions is thus intimate, and concepts of blasphemy often focus on ideas about linguistic transgression. Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed note in Freedom of Religion (2004) that while early Muslims did not possess a ‘clear-cut idea’ of blasphemous offences, by the second and third centuries of the Islamic era, scholars and leaders of the faith constructed detailed statements of what constituted a sacrilegious act (p. 44). The development of ‘apostasy lists’ clearly defined offenses against Allah, the prophet and Islam, and formed a set of ‘laws’ for proponents of the faith. While there are numerous lists in existence, ranging from fundamentalist to moderate versions of Islamism, there are key overlaps which relate to issues of both spoken and written language. The pre-modern scholar Ahmad Naqib al-Misri, for example, explicitly expresses anxiety about the dangers of representation in his commandments against prostrating ‘oneself before an idol’, speaking ‘words that imply unbelief’ or are ‘sarcastic about Allah’s name, His command, His interdiction, His promise or His threat’, and denying ‘any verse of the Qur’an or anything that by scholarly consensus belongs to it, or to add a verse that does not belong to it’ (qu. Saeed & Saeed, p. 44). Contemporary ‘apostasy lists’ have echoed such concerns, with scholars such as Abu Bakr al-Jaza’iri and ‘Ali al-Tamimi condemning the
‘slandering’ of ‘God or a prophet or an angel’ and the ‘rejection of a chapter of the Qur’an or a verse, or even a letter, of it’ (qu. Saeed & Saeed, pp. 44-6). The emphasis on the textual sanctity of the Qur’an as well as dictates against blasphemous utterances highlights how intimately—and anxiously—notions of faith are bound up in the slippery and transformative nature of narrative.

Indeed, in both Islamic and Christian traditions, anxieties about language and representation are central to ideas about blasphemy. As Lawton argues, blasphemy is a ‘linguistic act’ that involves illustration through text, language and performance (p. 17), reflecting the early transmission of religious doctrine via public speech. The distrust of speech—both written and verbal—is embedded in the etymological development of the word ‘blasphemy’ itself. Lawton notes that ‘blasphemy’ combines two roots—‘to hurt’ and ‘to speak’—hence, to ‘harm by speaking.’ In Greek, it functions as the opposite of the common religious word ‘euphemein’, meaning to ‘use words of good omen’ and ‘to avoid unlucky words during religious rites’ (p. 14). Thus ‘euphemy’, the root of ‘euphemism’ and the opposite of blasphemy, has an etymological root of ‘speaking well’ but an actual religious use of ‘not speaking’. Blasphemy, Lawton states, is therefore defined by its antonym not only as harmful speaking but also, in the religious context, speaking at all. Lawton thus argues that ‘all speech is risky when confronting the sacred’ and ‘goes far to explaining how Christianity went on its way for nearly one and a half millennia without placing its Bible into the hands of those…unable to read Latin, and how strong the resistance to democratic enfranchisement—giving people a voice—in such a tradition must be, when the “voice” is just what is most discouraged’ (p. 14).

The scandals surrounding blasphemous literature continue to engage in arguments about the right to speak and the freedom to represent Christian and Islamic themes and figures. In contemporary debates, both public and religious critics of profane works have attacked the ways in which authors such as Salman Rushdie and Dan Brown have used the Qur’an and the Bible as fictional narratives, viewing their appropriation of scripture as abusive, parasitical and, ironically, ignorant of the transformative connection between literature and society. Peter Mullen, for example, condemns the controversial use of the Qur’an in The Satanic Verses and the refusal of Rushdie—and the writers who defended both book and author—to consider its extra-textual consequences:
What is there in Rushdie’s mediocre satire which can compare with the spiritual and moral authority of the Koran? But the fashionable, avant-garde writers—literary peacocks—are actually not much good even at their own job: for they undervalue the weight and seriousness of language. They do not understand that the word is truly made flesh: that when you say something, you do something; that the great religious texts, the scriptures, are an index to humankind’s commitment to what is deepest in us (1990, p. 34).

Indeed, as this section of the chapter contends, blasphemy scandals are infatuated with issues of language and representation, revealing a series of anxieties about the instability of the written word. Moreover, questions are raised about the interpretation of both literary and religious texts, as scriptures are revised to produce alternative versions of Christian and Islamic histories. The taboo associated with such re-narrations is powerful, explaining the volatility of reactions in controversies such as The Satanic Verses, and suggesting a stark opposition between approaches to sacred and literary works. While outrage is often positioned explicitly in relation to faith—the notion that contesting scripture is a blasphemy against the religion it dictates—scandals actually reveal the literary (that is, constructed) nature of works such as the Bible and the Qur’an, and expose their writings as a product of human, rather than divine, agency. Anxieties about the capacity of literature to transform are thus made potent, for if a whole system of belief can be sustained by a text, it might also be unravelled, or even replaced.

The notion that literature critical of religious frameworks is capable of undoing the social order is made explicit in the outrage surrounding the release of The Satanic Verses. Much like the furore that characterised the scandal of American Psycho (1991), protests against and anxieties about The Satanic Verses emerged before its official British publication. Pre-release copies of the novel in India prompted reviews that expressed serious concerns about Rushdie’s transgressive representation of Muhammad and the history of Islam. The journalist Madhu Jain, for example, predicted in India Today that the text was ‘bound to trigger an avalanche of protests from the ramparts’ (in Appignanesi & Maitland, 1990, p. 30), while Kushwant Singh, a respected novelist and journalist who acted as an editorial advisor for Penguin Books India, ‘was positive it would cause a lot of trouble’ and advised against the Indian publication of the novel (Malik, 2009, p. 1). Despite the warning issued by Singh, The Satanic Verses was released, only to be placed—less than a week later—on a list of proscribed books.
by the Indian Ministry of Finance, under a ruling of the Customs Act (Pipes, p. 20). The prohibition of the novel was largely due to the efforts of two Muslim members of the Indian parliament, Syed Shahabuddin and Khurshid Alam Khan, whose vehement objections were based on excerpts of the text. Questions about reading *The Satanic Verses* were a constant theme of its scandal. Shahabuddin, for instance, defiantly asserted, ‘I have not read it, nor do I intend to. I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is’ (qu. Pipes, p. 20). It is a statement often repeated in reactions against the novel, used to heighten the distaste associated with its (imagined) content, but also suggesting a fear of knowing precisely what that content might reveal. Further, protestations against *The Satanic Verses* involving detractors who failed to read the text expose how the novel was hijacked as a vehicle through which to prosecute political and cultural agendas. Indeed, as critics such as Shahabuddin incited public fury against Rushdie and the British government on the basis of carefully selected extracts, the novel came to signify how scandals about blasphemy are always, as Lawton notes, ‘something else’ (p. 3).

The controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses* moved to Britain when Aslam Ejaz of the Islamic Foundation in Madras wrote to his associate, Syed Faiyazuddin Ahmed, at the Leicester chapter of the organisation. Ejaz informed Ahmed of the furore developing in India, and urged him to ‘do God’s work in Britain’ (Malik, p. 3). As Kenan Malik notes in *From Fatwa to Jihad* (2009), Ahmed dutifully bought the book, photocopied the offensive extracts ‘and mailed them to other Islamic groups in Britain and to the London embassies of Muslim countries. Soon afterwards, the Saudi-backed weekly Islamic magazine *Impact International* published a selection of the most controversial passages from *The Satanic Verses*, and Ahmed was invited to Saudi Arabia,’ where he galvanised government support for the campaign against Rushdie (p. 3). Several Saudi-sponsored international institutions were mobilised, and the Union of Muslim Organisations petitioned the British government to ban the novel and prosecute Rushdie for blasphemy. The request was denied by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who asserted that there were ‘no grounds on which the government could consider banning the book’, as British blasphemy laws apply only to Christianity and, even then, only rarely (Pipes, p. 22). As hostility against both novel and author increased, petitions grew to civil unrest, with threats made
against publishers and distributors, mass protests in Britain, India, South Africa, Pakistan and Iran, the infamous Bradford book-burning in 1989 and, finally, the *fatwa* issued by the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini:

I inform all zealous Muslims of the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*—which has been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet and the Qur’an—and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its contents, are sentenced to death.

I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they may be found, so that no one else will dare to insult the Muslim sanctities. God willing, whoever is killed on this path is a martyr (qu. Malik, p. 8).

In the decade-long battle that was to follow the *fatwa*, Rushdie went into hiding with the protection of British special forces, tens of people were killed—including the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*—trade partnerships were disrupted, and issues ‘about freedom of speech and the secular state that had seemingly been settled decades or even centuries earlier’ were made the intense focus of arguments about Muslims ‘living in the West and their relationship to the civilisation around them’ (Pipes, p. 16). The novel, as Daniel Pipes argues in *The Rushdie Affair* (1990), ‘stirred powerful emotions on a global level’, including ‘censorship, protest, riots, a death edict, a break in diplomatic relations, even a confrontation of civilisations’, and had a ‘fantastical quality…more appropriate to the world of magical realism found in Rushdie’s novels than to the sober world of politics’ (p. 16).

The nightmarish quality of events—curiously thematised in *The Satanic Verses* itself—was compounded by the stubborn refusal of Rushdie to publically acknowledge the capacity of literature to actively transform cultural and political environments or, indeed, to have any effect beyond the purely intellectual. It was a position that directly opposed previous statements. In a 1984 essay, for example, Rushdie insisted that ‘works of art…do not come into being in a social and political vacuum…Politics and literature, like sport and politics, do mix, are inextricably mixed, and…that mixture has consequences’ (qu. Asad, 1993, p. 273). Yet shortly before the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie claimed in an interview that ‘it would be absurd to think that a book can cause riots. That’s a strange sort of view of the world’ (qu. Malik, p. 1), and later stated: ‘you write a book and government falls—that never happens’ (qu. Akhtar, 1990, p. 23). Rushdie’s insistent negation of the relationship between word and world is, as
Malik has suggested, either ‘extraordinarily naïve or piquantly ironic’ (p. 1). It is, in either case, patently at odds with the exploration of the connection between language, narrative and metamorphosis in The Satanic Verses and, most obviously, the events that were triggered as a result of the publication of the novel.

Indeed, one of the most controversial examples of blasphemy in the novel involves ideas about the mutability of words and how language, rather than divine instruction, works to construct notions of faith and culture. The blasphemous moment is based on a disputed incident in Islamic history involving Muhammad, the prophet who founded Islam by preaching the revelations spoken to him by Allah through an intermediary, the archangel Gabriel. According to the Qur’anic historian Al-Tabari, during Muhammad’s struggle to win converts, he is unknowingly spoken to by Satan, who orders the Prophet to tell the people of Mecca that he will acknowledge the pagan goddesses Lat, Uzza and Manat as angels in return for their recognition of Allah as the Supreme Being. The prophet publicly recites the verses of the devil, and the words are dutifully recorded in the Qur’an. The archangel Gabriel, however, reveals the deception to Muhammad, who is then forced to recant and remove the inclusion of these ‘satanic verses’ from the Qur’an (Pipes, p. 58; Erickson, 1998, p. 101). The incident of the ‘satanic verses’, in which Muhammad is duped into compromising the absolute power of Allah, has provoked a long tradition of debate among Islamic scholars such as Muhammad ‘Abduh and Muhammad Husayn Haykal (Pipes, p. 61). Following the arguments of ‘Abduh and Haykal, who contest the legitimacy of the event, scholars and historians generally agree that the ‘satanic verses’ are apocryphal and largely dismiss the possibility of their original existence. Rushdie, however, ignited Western popular interest in the history of the verses in a critique of Islam, Muhammad and the Qur’an. Haykal notes in The Life of Muhammad that the story of the ‘satanic verses’ feeds into Orientalist fantasies about the trickery of the Middle East and Islam, and is reminiscent of the polemics of medieval Christian writers who sought to discredit the authenticity of Muhammad’s revelations (2005, pp. 100-102). The decision to evoke the narrative in The Satanic Verses, Pipes argues, has thus meant that Rushdie is framed by critics of the text as a ‘provocateur intent on discrediting Islam’ and the ‘divine source of Qur’an’ (p. 62).
While the incident of the ‘satanic verses’ has ostensibly been dismissed by Qur’anic historians and academics, the narrative remains problematic in terms of what it suggests about the character of Muhammad, the development of Islam, and the nature of the divine revelations. According to John Erickson, the ‘satanic verses’ are ‘profoundly heretical because, by allowing for the intercession of the three pagan female deities, they eroded the authority and omnipotence of Allah’ (p. 140). Moreover, the proposed concession to the pagan Gods suggests that the dictates from Allah were not divine, but rather the strategic imaginations of a prophet seeking to secure authority. Indeed, by offering to compromise, Muhammad softened the threat that Islam posed to paganism, and thus earned the popular support of the people of Mecca, who were initially unwilling to convert to the new religion. The narrative of the ‘satanic verses’ is thereby rendered into a political event that figures Muhammad as both human and fallible. As Pipes notes: ‘Had Satan leaped onto and then off of Muhammad’s tongue? Or had the Prophet tried to ingratiate himself with the city leaders, then regretted the effort and recanted? Or, worse, had the Prophet tried to win their favour, been rebuffed, and changed the text accordingly?’ (p. 59). That is, were the revelations received by Muhammad interrupted by satanic whisperings, or was the prophet simply an imposter who claimed to receive ‘divine’ messages as a means to obtain leadership and control? Unsurprisingly, critics of Islam and religion per se have been profoundly influenced by interpretations of Muhammad as a savvy politician, while Muslim devotees are anxious about the implications of the apocryphal text for their faith.

Already a volatile and highly contested narrative, the re-interpretation of the ‘satanic verses’ by Rushdie proved explosive, as it both confuses the boundary between good and evil, and suggests that ‘the Voice directing the Prophet is not that of Allah through the intercession of the Archangel Gabriel’ but in fact Muhammad’s unconscious desires (Erickson, p. 141). In The Satanic Verses, Rushdie creates a dream sequence in which Gibreel Farishta, an Indian star of theological films who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, assumes the role of the archangel Gabriel and finds himself bound to the prophet, ‘navel to navel, by a shining cord of light’ (p. 110). Gibreel provides Mahound—a contemptuous name for Muhammad used by Rushdie throughout the novel—with sacred revelations and offers the prophet guidance on issues of leadership and faith. In line with the
history of the ‘satanic verses’, Mahound recites to the people of Mecca the verse revealed to him by Satan, or in this case, Gibreel: ‘Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other...They are exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed’ (p. 114). The twist comes with Gibreel’s confession within the dream that ‘there’s a bit of a problem here, namely that it was me, baba, me first and second also me. From my mouth, both the statement and repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing’ (p. 123). Gibreel is thus both god and devil, uttering the sacred and the blasphemous to Mahound the prophet, who is unable to tell the difference. Moreover, in a further complication, Gibreel claims ‘we all know how my mouth got worked’ (p. 123), and suggests that ‘God knows whose postman I’ve been’ (p. 112). Indeed, it is here that Gibreel reveals that there is no divine force at work—he doesn’t even exist—but just Mahound, who in a trance-like state is imagining and controlling the voice of ‘Allah’. As Gibreel describes, the revelations are thus the result of ‘his old trick, forcing my mouth open and making the voice, the Voice, pour out of me once again’ (p. 123). In Rushdie’s re-visioning, both the ‘satanic verses’ attributed to the devil and the divine messages from Allah are little more than an expression of Mahound’s unconscious desire to appease potential converts and secure the power of Islam.

As Pipes notes, the offense of the re-narration is less about the idea that Muhammad was a political strategist than the notion that the ‘entire Qur’an derived not from God through Gabriel, but from Muhammad himself, who put the words in Gabriel’s mouth’ (p. 61). If the Qur’an is merely a human artefact, then ‘the Islamic faith is built on a deceit. There is nothing left’ (p. 61). Erickson observes that Rushdie has turned ‘the very reliability of the authorised divine discourse of revelation against itself’, for in the focus on ‘Mahound as the probable source of the satanic verses, he throws doubt on the reliability of the medium...and underscores the arbitrariness out of which the authorised version comes’ (p. 142). Further doubt is created by the character of Salman the Persian, a figure who doubles the position of Rushdie the author in his role as the scribe of Mahound. In order to test the validity of the revelations, Salman begins to alter the transcription of the ‘sacred’ messages: ‘So there I was, actually writing the Book, or rewriting it, anyway, polluting the word of God with my own profane language’ (p. 367). Salman, whose ‘poor words could not be distinguished from
the Revelation by God’s own Messenger’ (p. 367), highlights not only the constructed nature of religious texts but also the capacity for change to occur with only a ‘bit of a slip’ (p. 368). It is a sliding of words that creates entirely new systems of meaning and, indeed, undermines existing schema.

*The Satanic Verses* is certainly profoundly interested in highlighting the relationship between representation and the real. Indeed, the post-modernism or post-structuralism of the text is central to anxieties about absolute truth and the authority of systems of meaning-making, as Rushdie playfully challenges the connection between language and reality. The language of the novel is a complex tapestry, moving swiftly between first- and third-person narration, shifting from proverbs to story-telling to songs, and sliding from playful sequences to careful parodies of political and religious speech-making. This collision of linguistic forms occurs vividly in the opening pages of the novel, as the voice of an omniscient narrator frames those of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, the protagonists of the novel who, while falling from the sky after their aeroplane has been exploded by terrorists, engage in a singing contest:

Mr Saladin Chamcha, appalled by the noises emanating from Gibreel Farishta’s mouth, fought back with verses of his own. What Farishta heard wafting across the improbable night sky was an old song, too, lyrics by Mr James Thomson, seventeen hundred to seventeen forty-eight. ‘…at Heaven’s command,’ Chamcha carolled through lips turned jingoistically red-white-blue by the cold, ‘arooooose from out the aaaaazure plain.’ Farishta, horrified, sang louder and louder of Japanese shoes, Russian hats, inviolately subcontinental hearts, but could not still Saladin’s wild recital: ‘And guardian aaaaangels sung the strain.’

Let’s face it: it was impossible for them to have heard one another, much less conversed and also competed thus in song. Accelerating towards the planet, atmosphere roaring around them, how could they? But let’s face this, too: they did (p. 6).

The impossibility of their speech collides with the impossibility of their fall through space, and as language becomes a dislocated and chaotic jumble of voices and forms, so too do understandings of the ‘real’. The unsettling of the relationship between representation and the real is enhanced as locations constantly change from the past to the present, while dream and reality soon become indistinguishable. Processes of doubling ensure characters in different times and spaces share names but opposing characteristics, while historical events are mimicked in contemporary versions that may or may not be the imaginings of a madman. As the boundaries of logic and order are overturned in a carnivalesque realm of possibility, language becomes a transformative force that creates new
and radical visions of reality.

The consequences of the fall are crucial, as it not only transforms Gibreel into an angel and Chamcha into a horned-beast, but also situates their metamorphosed identities in Britain during a period of complex socio-political tensions. Indeed, as the fall signifies an opening of meaning to the possibilities of transformation, the fantastical forms of Gibreel and Chamcha also act as a commentary on issues concerning racism, migration and religious difference. The physical representation of Chamcha as a satanic being literalises anxieties about ethnic and religious otherness and comments, as Stephanie Jones has observed, on concerns about British national identity. As Jones notes, the novel ‘floats above Britain…and a groundswell of racism promoting a pure national identity’ (2004, p. 257). Indeed, on landing in London, Chamcha is arrested by British police as an illegal immigrant and relegated to the hospital ward of a Detention Centre. There Chamcha is surround by a number of animal-like beings, including a creature with ‘an entirely human body’ but the head of ‘a ferocious tiger’, a woman who is ‘mostly water-buffalo’, a ‘group of businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails’ and ‘holidaymakers from Senegal who…were turned into slippery snakes’ (pp. 167-8). When Chamchaasks a manticore how such transformations occurred, he is told: ‘They describe us…That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct’ (p. 168). The power of authority—in this case, the dominant West—‘defines, outlines and fixes’ (Erickson, p. 137) the threatening ‘other’ in order to alienate and control its subversive potential. The transformation and containment of the ethnic ‘other’ into monstrous beasts offers an unambiguous comment on racism and the power of representation in creating ‘otherness’. Indeed, as these outsiders ‘succumb to the pictures’ (p. 168) constructed of their identities, Rushdie reveals that while language is a force of liberation and plurality, it is also a tool of the powerful used to create the conditions of a specific worldview.

Moreover, the use of religious figures as symbols that are in opposition to their conventional significance (Gibreel as archangel becomes a maniacal killer, for example) highlights how Rushdie radically undermines notions of a fixed and stable relationship between representation and meaning. The result of blurring the boundaries of meaning, Erickson observes, is a levelling of differences in which ‘no one truth or order remains’, as ‘norms, established under privilege,
prohibitions, tautological systems, completedness—all leading to hierarchising differences—are bracketed, placed in suspension’ (p. 153). The chaos within The Satanic Verses thereby suggests a ‘new discourse’ in which ‘hesitation, contradiction and incompleteness’ dismantle dominant views and structures, but do not offer a redemptive solution. Alternatively, to borrow Erickson’s terms, a process of ‘equalisation’ occurs in which opposing worldviews exist on the same level of possibility. In such a scheme, established orders are no longer granted an axiomatic sense of authority, and sources of meaning-making, from religion to national politics, are subject to the de-centering effects of deconstruction. In this framework, even pop music can be sacred, as in the revelations made to the butterfly-girl, Ayesha, who leads a pilgrimage to Mecca under the instruction of Gabriel/Gibreel: “The archangel sings to me,” she admitted, “to the tunes of popular hit songs” (p. 497). The language and narrative strategies employed by Rushdie thus reject the absolutism of sacred texts in favour of multiplicity, ambiguity and difference. The instability of word and meaning in The Satanic Verses suggests language is not a ‘well-defined, clearly demarcated structure’, but ‘much more like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through everything else’ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 129).

The vulnerability of all narrative creations—including religion and identity—is constantly alluded to throughout The Satanic Verses, figured through fragile characters and constructions that are prone to ‘dissolution, shattering, cracking’ (Erickson, p. 132). Rosa Diamond, the woman who rescues Chamcha and Gibreel after their fall, is described as a ‘creature of cracks and absences’ (p. 130), and Chamcha, during his flight to London, dreams of a ‘man with a glass skin’ (p. 33). In the Detention Centre in which Chamcha is consigned, there is a woman, ‘Glass Bertha’, whose ‘skin turned to glass’ (p. 169), while the city of Jahilia, Gibreel’s dream vision of Mecca, is a place ‘built of sand’, with glass windows and ‘silicon gardens’, that fears the presence of water (pp. 93-4). Indeed, Jahilia—the centre of Islam—is created out of ‘the very stuff of inconsistency—the quintessence of unsettlement, treachery, lack-of-form’ (p. 94), and always threatens to dissolve. These creations populate the novel as a metaphor, perhaps, of the fragile nature of reality and meaning, constantly threatening to break or re-
configure into something new. Indeed, the narrative is populated by figures and constructs that are ‘incessantly dissolving and recombining into new forms, throwing off shards and fragments’ which turn into ‘new episodes and situations’ (Erickson, p. 133). The transformative nature of the text is disarming, as its post-structuralist strategies of deconstruction, ‘web-like complexity’ (Eagleton, p. 132) and plurality undermine the authority of representation that religions such as Islam rely upon.

Anxieties surrounding the text, then, are entrenched in concerns about the mutability of narrative and the threat of literature to existing systems of knowing, behaving and believing. Traditions of Qur’anic scholarship interested in the ‘satanic verses’ on which the novel is based already reveal an anxiety about the precision of words and literature, and acknowledge the centrality of text in the formation of whole (and specific) ways of life. Rushdie’s emphasis on the instability of words is thus a direct challenge to religious discourses, as it reveals the fragility of structures that constantly resist their basis in story. Erickson observes that the relationship between language and meaning has ensured that religions such as Islam need to fight against the inclusion of unwanted discourses in narratives that define belief (p. 142). Erickson contends, for example, that the attempt by ‘authorities to strike the satanic verses from the record reflects the operation of a magisterial discourse of exclusion that lies at the heart of Islam, indeed of all monotheistic religions, for it is in the nature of magisterial discourses to seek and require protection against the intrusion of external discourse such as those apocryphal verses attributed to Satan’ (p. 142). While the story of the ‘satanic verses’ may survive, it will only be as an ‘outside, unreliable, institutionalised variant’, barred from the ‘inner precinct’ of ‘true’ narratives that constitute Islam and the Qur’an (p. 142). In this framework, plurality is rejected: there are only sanctified texts and blasphemous perversions. It is a position that is antithetical to the discourses of contrariety and challenge found in The Satanic Verses, which actively seeks to undermine structures of absolute authority.

This idea is also acknowledged in the link between promiscuity and language, a theme that is explored in the novel in the events surrounding the poet Baal and the twelve whores of The Curtain. Baal, pursued for mocking the prophet’s recitations, seeks refuge in a brothel in which each prostitute assumes the identity of one of Mahound’s wives, much to the ‘clandestine excitement of
the city’s males’ (p. 381). When The Curtain is eventually raided by soldiers of Mahound, Baal spends the twelve nights of arrest singing love poetry which is dedicated to the whores and nailed to the wall of the jail after every recitation, in the vein of Martin Luther posting his Ninety Five Theses on a church door in Wittenburg in 1517. Before being beheaded, Baal shouts to Mahound: ‘Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can’t forgive’. Mahound’s response is revealing: ‘Writers and whores. I see no difference here’ (p. 392). In their transgression against social rules and conventions, the writers and whores of The Satanic Verses are a threat to the political order, undermining the status quo through a daring parody of its pretensions and structures. The words of the writer are likened, in the discourses of the novel and its scandal, to the cultural position of the whore: subversive, with the power to unsettle a civilised veneer, and approached with a mix of fascination, distaste and horror. And like sex, the words of a writer must be controlled to protect moral value and the integrity of the state.

A BATTLE OF FACTS: THE NEW RELIGION OF THE DA VINCI CODE

It is not only Islamic scripture that has been challenged by blasphemous texts. Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code (2003), for example, drastically re-visions the life of Jesus Christ. According to the narrative, a detective fiction about the identity of the Holy Grail, Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute but the wife of Jesus and pregnant with his child at the time of the crucifixion. After the death of Christ, Magdalene supposedly escaped to Gaul, where she was sheltered by the Jews of Marseille and gave birth to a daughter. The bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene became the Merovingian dynasty of France, protected by the Priory of Sion and the Knights Templar, fraternal organisations created to defend Christendom and its interests. Brown’s novel suggests that the church suppressed the truth about the bloodline because it feared the power of the sacred feminine (a notion that will be returned to later in the chapter), and blasphemed against the purity of Christ. The mimicking of historical discourses in the novel, combined with persuasive ‘evidential’ arguments, succeeded in convincing readers of the veracity of the claims made by the narrative. Indeed, some critics and readers have regarded the alternative Christian history proposed by Brown as genuine, with a considerable body of scholarship now devoted to proving the likelihood of
Interestingly, while Rushdie uses literature as a means of provoking discourses of absolute truth, Brown employs narrative as a vehicle through which to reveal what he claims is ‘absolutely…historical fact’ (qu. Calvert-Koyzis, 2006). Indeed, both the novel and the author work to blur the boundaries between truth and fallacy. The first page of The Da Vinci Code, for example, asserts a list of ‘facts’ that frame the following narrative as true and claims that ‘all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate’ (2003, p. 16). Further, Brown repeatedly asserts in interviews that the history he presents is valid and accepted: ‘The secret described in the novel has been chronicled for centuries, so there are thousands of sources to draw from…It is not my own. Admittedly, this may be the first time the secret has been unveiled within the format of a popular thriller, but the information is anything but new’ (2003).

Christian reactions to the novel, however, contest the legitimacy of the information used by Brown, and argue, as Marion Horvat does, that the ‘preposterous fiction’ is both blasphemous and ‘bad history’ (2010). In line with arguments about Rushdie’s controversial portrayal of the Prophet in The Satanic Verses, Horvat criticises the representation of Christ as ‘only a man’, and the suggestion that the church propagates false history in order to maintain its power. Horvat refutes the evidence supplied by Brown on the basis that it is ‘either fabricated or grossly exaggerated’ and concludes that the novel is little more than a ‘grand mishmash of revelations and conspiracies intended to titillate the public and sell books’. Similarly, the theological historian Nancy Calvert-Koyzis accuses Brown of misrepresentation and poor research (2006), while the religious commentator James Patrick Holding (2003) argues that the novel uses beguiling ‘cheap tricks’ to convince readers of its historical veracity:

The novel is based on such flimsy fabrication that if it used any other setting—an ethnic neighborhood, a police investigation, an environmental conservation movement, for example—no one would be able to suspend disbelief long enough to enjoy the story. That millions of people are not turned off by the lack of authenticity in The Da Vinci Code is more than surprising—it is sad. That critics and even news media are so gullible is more than revealing about the state of our culture—it reveals the tragic truth that our culture is in need of rediscovering Truth.

As in The Satanic Verses, Brown uses ideas about the unreliability of language and text in order to propose a provocative new telling of orthodox
Christian history. The book constructs a counter-history by first challenging the authority of sacred texts, then proposing an ‘authentic’ re-telling that explains the ‘gaps’ in current historical accounts. The religious ‘lesson’ provided by The Da Vinci Code begins by addressing the revelations offered by Leonardo da Vinci, who warns—ironically, perhaps—against being persuaded by false representations: ‘Many have made a trade of delusions and false miracles, deceiving the stupid multitudes’ (p. 312). The art of da Vinci functions as the means through which ‘truth’ may be understood, as opposed to religious documentation. The narrative thus proceeds to highlight the constructed nature of the Bible, stripping it of divinity and, as Rushdie does with the Qur’an, locating it within the realm of history and human invention. As Sir Leigh Teabing, the religious historian who unveils the truth about the Holy Grail in the novel, comments: ‘The Bible is a product of man…Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book’ (pp. 312-13). Teabing presents Christianity as an organisation that evolved according to political interests and compromises, including the concessions it made to pagan rituals, and the decision, led by the Roman emperor Constantine the Great, that Jesus was divine (p. 315). Indeed, according to The Da Vinci Code, ‘Jesus’ establishment as “the Son of God” was officially proposed and voted on’ by a council seeking to strengthen the Christian tradition (p. 315). It is at this point that the novel explicitly engages with ideas about the malleability of historical records and the ability to create new realities by revising narratives. As Teabing reveals:

‘The twist is this,’ Teabing said, talking faster now. ‘Because Constantine upgraded Jesus’ status almost four centuries after Jesus’ death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history…Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.’

‘An interesting note,’ Langdon added. ‘Anyone who chose the forbidden gospels over Constantine’s version was deemed a heretic. The word heretic derives from that moment in history. The Latin word haereticus means “choice”. Those who “chose” the original history of Christ were the world’s first heretics’ (pp. 316-17).

Yet unlike The Satanic Verses, which suggests an unshackling of absolute ideas
about meaning, *The Da Vinci Code* proposes a more authentic vision of the ‘real’ and claims to expose a genuine ‘truth’. The irony, of course, is that such a revelation occurs in the factitious genre of a detective fiction, but as both the popularity of and the furore over the novel suggest, literature is a powerfully effective medium capable of radically altering perceptions of reality. As the text challenges the discourses of religion and history by offering a convincing counter-narrative of the Christian tradition, Brown reveals how tenuous narratives of truth can be, and how the ‘real’ can be simply an effect of a persuasive artifice.

Charged with creating false religious history, the novel provokes concerns about the relationship between fact and fiction but, more intriguingly, reveals the openness of discourses of truth to contradiction and change. Indeed, the supposed veracity of Brown’s fiction is less interesting than the anxiety it exposes about the instability of historical reality, as demonstrated by the determination of critical readers to correct the re-visioning offered by the novel. The desire for history to signify a fixed narrative of ‘truth’ is explicitly expressed by critics such as Horvat, who resists ideas about plurality and difference in her denunciation of such ‘post-modern’ techniques:

*The Da Vinci Code* is not difficult to refute historically, simple because the data Brown presents in numerous places are not true. To believe Dan Brown’s version of history, one first has to throw out everything recorded in the chronicles and documents of the past. Why? Because they were written by the ‘winners’, the ones in power, who only write history to serve their hegemonic, privileged, masculine interests. The revisionist history Brown bases his novel on is called *postmodern history* which denies the reality of the past except what the historian wants to make of it (2010).

As Horvat further accuses Brown of possessing ‘no sense of absolute truth and reality’ (2010), she exposes the insistence of religious frameworks on singularity and anxieties about the corrupting influence of difference. While Baudrillard argues in *Simulacra and Simulation* that ‘history is our lost referential’, a myth requiring constant editing and re-construction (1994, p. 43), absolutist discourses, such as those surrounding *The Da Vinci Code* and the Rushdie affair, reject the possibility for multiple understandings of the past. It is a refutation predicated on real fears of transformation and the loss of power. As Horvat contends: ‘It is my opinion that *The Da Vinci Code* was intended primarily to shock a novelty-craving public and destroy the stability of the Catholic faith’ (2010). It is an extraordinary claim to make of a detective thriller, and at odds with Horvat’s final
suggestion that readers reject the novel as ‘an irrelevant inanity’. Yet it reveals how anxieties about the preservation of history are imbricated in concerns about the preservation of faith and, more importantly, it manifests the symbiosis between narrative and belief. By highlighting the volatile relationship between representation (historical or literary) and religion, authors such as Brown and Rushdie suggest that religion and sacred texts are human rather than divine constructions and, as such, open to the possibilities of critique and metamorphosis. The conflict, then, is a battle of narratives, with each version promising to offer a persuasive telling of the ‘real’.

While the transgressions committed by Rushdie and Brown take different forms and contexts, each text raises clear anxieties about the relationship between literature, history and religious belief. Indeed, concern about the power of language to radically transform is given credence in these scandals, both in the reactions against Rushdie’s meddling with the Qur’an and the belief of readers in Brown’s version of Christian traditions. As the chapter argues, the history of blasphemy reveals anxieties about language and its capacity to both create and creatively undermine entire systems of knowing and being. While it could be suggested that the controversies surrounding blasphemous texts are about the dichotomy between sectarian and postmodern understandings of language and meaning, the anxious relationship between religion and representation is related, as in all scandalous literature, to a much deeper concern with the world-building power of language. The resistance to narrative re-visioning, as the following section will explore, is not simply about preserving faith, but about maintaining systems of power.

DRAWING THE BATTLELINES: THE POLITICS OF NATIONHOOD

The anxieties provoked by blasphemous texts such as *The Satanic Verses* and *The Da Vinci Code* do not only occur at a semantic level or, indeed, purely in the context of faith. As noted, arguments about blasphemy provoke complex questions about culture and society, as issues of faith act as a vehicle through which to articulate concerns about national and collective identity. The scandal surrounding the Rushdie affair, for example, rapidly escalated from contestations about sectarian and secular worldviews to the implications of religious difference
for ideas about the nation state. Indeed, as the controversy engaged with notions of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, it raised anxieties in Britain about the place of the Muslim migrant community, who feared a loss of cultural identity as their ‘national’ stories were increasingly challenged. As Tal Asad asserts in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), the novel antagonised tensions concerning the position of Muslims within England and the politics of assimilation (p. 266), raising anxieties about cultural boundaries and national identities in the context of the relationship between East and West. As a young radical in *The Satanic Verses* declares, the grand narratives of religion are an indication of other divisions: ‘Battle lines are being drawn up…Secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on’ (p. 537).

As discussed, the release of *The Satanic Verses* enraged the Islamic community in Britain, who protested against the publication of the novel and petitioned for a government ban. As the intensity of Muslim opposition to the text grew, British media unanimously condemned the ‘fundamentalist’ response of the protestors and ‘warned Muslims not to isolate themselves from their host community’ (Asad, p. 239). The Home Secretary Douglas Hurd, for example, delivered a speech to a gathering of Muslims ten days after the declaration of the *fatwa*, in which he ‘emphasised the importance of proper integration for ethnic minorities, the need to learn about British culture without abandoning one’s own faith, and the necessity of refraining from violence’ (Asad, p. 239). Similarly, John Patten, the Minister of State at the Home Office, reiterated ideas about peaceful assimilation in an open letter addressed to ‘a number of leading British Muslims’ (qu. Asad, p. 239), while in an article entitled ‘Dangers of the Muslim Campaign’ (1989), the influential newspaper *The Independent* argued that ‘the present Government does not often forcefully represent the views of left-of-centre intellectuals…But the recent observations of John Patten…on the need for the Muslim community to integrate with British society, have broadly echoed the views of liberal opinion’. The article threateningly concludes that ‘if Britain’s more extreme Muslims…continue to adopt hardline positions, they are likely to turn educated, as well as popular, sentiments against them’ (p. 24). Given that ‘no arrests or injuries occurred as a result of the demonstrations against the book’, the resolve of figures such as Hurd and Patten in preventing ‘Muslim violence’ is intriguing, and exposes an underlying anxiety about the position of the Islamic
community within Britain (Asad, p. 240).

As Muslims fought against the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, representations of the controversy promptly evoked a dichotomy between Islam and the British state as a battle that re-enacted ancient hostilities. Anxieties about the threat posed by Muslims to Western civilisation were thus often manifested in a recycling of archaic stereotypes. As Bhikhu Parekh asserts, in the discourses of the scandal, Muslims were labelled as “‘barbarians’, “uncivilised”, “fanatics” and comparable to the Nazis. Many a writer…openly wondered how Britain could “civilise” them and protect their innocent progeny against their parent’s “medieval” fundamentalism’ (1990, p. 76). Parekh notes how, as discourses of religion, history and nation intertwined, the ‘legitimate rage against the Ayatollah’s murderous impertinence and outrageous Muslim support for it escalated step by even sillier step to a wholly mindless anger first against all Bradford Muslims, then against all British Muslims, then against all Muslims, and ultimately against Islam itself’ (p. 80). The writer Fay Weldon, for example, was particularly vitriolic in her response to the Muslim protests against *The Satanic Verses*, arguing in the pamphlet *Sacred Cows* (1989) that British society must reject radical cultural difference and insist on broad liberal truth, thus banning Islam from social integration. The issue, Weldon suggests, is one of national unity: ‘The uni-culturalist policy of the United States worked, welding its new peoples, from every race, every nation, every belief, into a whole: let the child do what it wants at home; here in the school one flag is saluted, the one God worshipped, the one nation acknowledged’ (p. 32). According to Weldon, Christianity remains superior, for ‘the Bible, in its entirety, is at least food for thought. The Koran is food for no-thought. It is not a poem on which a society can be safely or sensibly based. It forbids change, interpretation, self-knowledge, even art, for fear of treading on Allah’s toes’ (p. 6). Questions of faith are thus used to prosecute a national agenda: to protect the homogeneity of the state and ensure the containment of the subversive ‘other’.

Commentary on the Rushdie affair in Britain tended to vilify Muslim demonstrators—and arguably Islam in general—as a disruptive ‘other’ threatening the security of the state and a ‘cultural hierarchy organised around an essential Englishness’ (Asad, p. 241). Asad argues that, in political terms, British identity at the time of the controversy was already under siege, with concerns
growing about the integration of the state into the European Union, the ‘demands of Welsh and Scottish nationalists, and the unresolvable civil war in Northern Ireland’ (p. 241). According to Asad, ‘it was too much to be confronted in addition by immigrants from the ex-colonies (a vanished empire) trying to politicise their rights in England itself’ (p. 241), thus explaining the government emphasis on assimilation and cohesion in its response to Muslim unrest. The notion of national unity was repeated in particular by Patten, whose article ‘On Being British’ (July 18, 1989) clearly outlines the expectations held of migrants settling in Britain. Patten asserts that British identity is related to ‘those things which…we have in common. Our democracy and our laws, the English language, and the history that has shaped modern Britain’ (qu. Asad, p. 244). At the centre of that history is the ‘freedom to choose one’s faith, to choose one’s political allegiance, to speak and write freely, to meet, argue and demonstrate, and to play a part in the shaping of events’. The idea of freedom, Asad contends, is framed by ‘two interconnected ideas, tolerance and obligation’, requiring an acceptance of diversity and the impetus to respect the differences of others (p. 244). But it is the individual and not the collective who is the subject of tolerance and rights, as ‘participation includes playing one’s part in the economy, playing one’s part as a neighbour, making a contribution which goes beyond one’s own family or indeed community’ (Patten, qu. Asad, p. 245, emphasis added). The assumption, as Asad argues, is that migrants will conform to an ‘agreed cultural script’ that defines the role of British individuals, a script that suggests only ‘family and community’ are the groups which have a place in the public sphere (p. 245). But, Asad contends, as this is patently false (the public sphere is occupied by a complex array of business institutions, professional bodies, trade unions, social movements, and opinion groups representing each of these), Patten’s formulation must be read as intending to discourage cultural minorities from establishing themselves as corporate political actors. As far as cultural minority members are concerned, they must participate in Britishness (the quality that makes them part of the essential culture) as individuals (p. 246).

Thus while the individual is encouraged to assimilate across cultural hierarchies, collective identity must be relinquished in order to cooperate with the norms of English society.

While assimilationist policy is an established component of immigration legislation in numerous countries, its evocation in the context of the Rushdie affair is revealing. As protests against The Satanic Verses are repeatedly framed in
reference to British cultural values, Muslim demonstrators—regardless of their social background—are figured as migrant hordes attempting to corrupt the ‘very specific economic, political and ideological conditions’ of the nation state (Asad, p. 254). More interestingly, the notion of freedom described by Patten appears to shift in relation to migrant communities, as the campaign against the novel becomes an infringement, rather than an exercise, of the right to speak. The hyperbolic response of both the government and the British public to Muslim opposition to *The Satanic Verses* thus suggests an anxiety about the ability of authorities to assert a fixed view of British life (made synonymous with a Western worldview), to protect an idea of ‘Englishness’ that has begun to shift and change. The fear of losing cultural authority is also compounded by the other’s co-option of ideas about ‘rights’ within the nation state. As Asad notes, the fear aroused by the Rushdie affair is in part ‘generated by the fact that people who do not accept the secular liberal values of the governing classes are nevertheless able to use the liberal language of equal rights in rational argument against the secular British elite’ and, moreover, to ‘avail themselves of liberal law for instituting their own strongly held religious traditions’ (p. 266). Increasingly, Muslim communities and immigrants assert the right not only to be included in political activity, but also to make ‘detailed demands of the state to enable them to live out their lives in a culturally distinctive manner’, including rituals of worship, methods of burying the dead, and systems of education (Asad, p. 271). The notion of an essential nation state, then, is compromised by the suggestion of ‘otherness’ and its demand to be included, legislatively as well as socially, in the body politic. Thus, again, anxieties return to ideas about plurality and difference, and the need to maintain cultural purity.

The policies of assimilation and exclusion were made explicit to Muslim protestors in their encounter with British blasphemy law. As Peter Weller argues, while Christians maintain the ‘legal right to seek redress in the courts when they feel that their faith is being maligned, Muslims were denied this opportunity of recourse to law’ (1990, p. 40). Clearly, ‘ethnic minorities’ do not possess the authority to provoke legislative change, or to unsettle the traditional synthesis between church and state, regardless of issues of citizenship and the ostensibly liberal nature of Western democracies. Fittingly, arguments concerning discourses of assimilation and otherness are central to *The Satanic Verses*, as Gibreel and
Chamcha are ‘born again’ (p. 3) and forced to re-discover (or re-create) their identities during and after their ‘fantastical migration’ to London (Morton, 2008, p. 69). According to Stephen Morton, the crisis of the two protagonists ‘mirrors the novel’s preoccupation with migration as an ontological condition of postcolonial modernity’ (p. 69). If migration, Morton argues, is viewed as a ‘way of inhabiting a place one does not feel entirely at home in while also nostalgically imagining a homeland somewhere else’, *The Satanic Verses* can be understood as a complex staging of this condition through the figure of the double (p. 70). As the unnamed and omniscient narrator of the novel describes, Gibreel and Chamcha are ‘conjoined opposites…each man the other’s shadow’ (Rushdie, p. 426). But whereas Chamcha seeks to ‘be transformed into the foreignness he admires’, Gibreel prefers ‘a state which…we may describe as “true”’ (p. 427).

Morton argues that the relationship between the two could thus be read in terms of a dialectic, in which two antithetical notions of identity struggle for recognition—‘one based on continuity, homogeneity and purity, the other based on discontinuity, heterogeneity and impurity’ (Morton, p. 70). The redemption of Gibreel and Chamcha (that is, their return to human selves) depends, as Jaina Sanga argues, ‘on making connections between things, realising that the world is not homogenous, and believing that they are not ultimately, exclusively, Western or Eastern’ (qu. Morton, p. 70). Their redemption is, in line with the poststructuralist philosophies of the novel, a process of breaking down absolutes and allowing for the possibility of new meanings, in terms of both individual and national identity.

The journey of Saladin Chamcha is particularly useful in exploring oppositional notions of national identity, as Chamcha embraces both assimilation and a notion of self as plural and transformative. Chamcha, an Anglophile who rejects his Indian homeland for the refinements of London, is an archetype of self-construction, re-creating his identity in order to become a proper English gentleman. From facial expressions to the intonations of language, Chamcha wholeheartedly adopts a British cultural identity, sacrificing even his true name, Salahuddin Chamchawala, for a simpler sound. ‘England,’ according to Chamcha, ‘is a great civilisation’ (p. 39), and he relentlessly strives to be ‘a goodandproper Englishman. Yes, an English’ (p. 43). Zeeny Vakil, a former lover, abuses Chamcha for his cultural aping, arguing: ‘You know what you are, I’ll tell you. A
deserter is what, more English than, your Angrez accent wrapped around you like a flag, and don’t think it’s so perfect, it slips, baby, like a false moustache’ (p. 53). Indeed, Chamcha constantly struggles against gaps in the performance of his English self, fighting to control instances of colloquial speech and superstitious actions, such as the ‘magic trick of crossing two pairs of fingers on each hand and rotating his thumbs’ to ensure aeroplanes rise safely into the sky (p. 33).

The aping of English culture by Chamcha suggests something of the performative nature of national identity. In the same vein as Butler’s arguments about gender as performance, critics such as Homi Bhabha have proposed a ‘cultural construction of nationness’—that is, the creation of nation and nationality through ‘a range of social and literary narratives’ (Bhabha, 1990, p. 292). The idea of the ‘nation as narration’ (p. 297), as Benedict Anderson has argued in *Imagined Communities* (1983), reveals the nation state as an imaginary entity comprised of the narratives that describe and define it. These narratives are constructed and policed by the dominant members of that national group, which discloses how nationality is both performative and culturally inscribed, as the process of storying relies on repetition in order to entrench an image of the nation state as ‘truth’. Importantly, controlling the narratives that define the nation protects its sanctity—much as the preservation of religious values relies on protecting sacred texts. The control of ethnic and religious otherness through policies of assimilation into British values and behaviours thus signals an attempt to maintain the purity of ideas about the nation state by converting narratives of difference into those of ‘sameness’.

During Chamcha’s assimilation into what he regards as an archetypical British identity, he is trapped in an opposition that forces the rejection of all things Indian, for Chamcha cannot be, in a framework of purity and fixity, both centre and ‘other’. After his post-fall metamorphosis into ‘Beelzebub’ (p. 167), Chamcha is reminded of the dangers of ‘otherness’ in a state of cultural singularity. Arrested by British immigration officers, Chamcha is beaten and ridiculed by the police, made to eat ‘the soft, pellenty objects’ that ‘his natural processes’ have left on the floor and removed of a voice, as the officers refuse to acknowledge his pleas for understanding (p. 159). In his disgust, Chamcha reveals his contempt for the animal he has become and links it to the Indian identity he has rejected: ‘Such degradations might be all very well for riff-raff from villages in Sylhet or the
bicycle-repair shops of Gujranwala, but he was cut from different cloth!’ (p. 159). Indeed, it is the loss of his acquired English sophistication that Chamcha considers most degrading, as he is excluded by the society to which he assiduously conformed. As Chamcha is told by police: ‘Look at yourself. You’re a fucking Packy billy. Sally-who?—What kind of name is that for an Englishman?’ (p. 163). The humiliation Chamcha endures represents a brutal confrontation with the politics of assimilation, suggesting that regardless of how dutifully the ‘other’ works to integrate with the hegemonic centre, his difference still remains. The figure of Chamcha as a monstrous being in the immediate days after the metamorphosis is thus a striking literalisation of a migrant identity conflict, as he struggles with the impossibility of reconciling physical ‘otherness’ with both existing ideas of self and the expectations of the new culture. Yet only sameness and unity will suffice, which is why Chamcha the Englishman is forever fighting against a splitting of self, constantly watching to suppress ‘that black fellow creeping up behind’ (p. 53).

However, the ‘slips’ that Chamcha experiences during assimilation are revealing, suggesting that cultural purity is a fiction constantly struggling against the urge for metamorphosis. His inability to contain childhood speech patterns, for example, highlights a breaking through of alternative systems of thinking and behaving that corrupt an image of continuity and stability. The novel suggests that to strive for complete assimilation is a delusion that presumes ‘otherness’ can be eradicated or, more importantly, that the centre was total to begin with. Indeed, the London that Chamcha discovers as a horned beast is a sprawling and chaotic metropolis, lacking a unified vision of the nation state and the national subject. Chamcha’s efforts to comply with British narratives of self prove futile, for despite efforts to conform, he remains ‘an animal’ (p. 159). The journey towards ‘Englishness’ does not lead to unity but to discontinuity, and the realisation that national identity, like the subjective self, is necessarily plural. As the narrator of the novel argues: ‘an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogenous, non-hybrid, “pure”—an utterly fantastical notion!—cannot, must not, suffice’ (p. 427). While Gibreel accuses Chamcha of being false, ‘a creature of selected discontinuities, a willing re-invention’ (p. 427), it is the unwillingness to adapt and evolve that is presented as problematic. Gibreel, for example, in his ‘wishing to remain, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man’ (p. 427), is unable to accept
transformation as desirable and natural. Fixity is connected to fundamentalism, and as Gibreel struggles to read the space between extremes, his dedication to singularity results in confusion, madness and ultimately, death.

The Satanic Verses thus specifically undermines myths of national identity, arguing that narratives of nationhood are, like religions, stories that construct a hegemonic vision of the ‘real’. While Chamcha continues to insist on the superiority of British civilisation, his English wife, Pamela Lovelace, forces him to acknowledge the discrepancies between image and ideology, and the discourses of power operating beneath a surface of proud tradition and ‘cherished identity’ (p. 398). Chamcha, spouting exultations about the glory of Britain, claims to have been ‘striving, like the Bengali writer, Nirad Chaudhuri, before him…to be worthy of the challenge represented by the phrase Civis Britannicus sum’, to give ‘his love to this city, London, preferring it to the city of his birth or to any other’ (p. 398). Rushdie’s reference to Chaudhuri is revealing. The author of The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian (1951), Chaudhuri raised controversy in India with the memoir due to a facetious dedication which proclaimed ‘all that was good and living within us/Was made, shaped and quickened’ by the power of British rule. What was supposed to be a mock-imperialist rhetoric condemning the Empire was severely misinterpreted by the Indian government, leaving Chaudhuri vilified, unemployed and socially marginalised. The salute to Chaudhuri by Rushdie, then, indicates a double play in which Chamcha’s adulation of Britain contradicts the hostility he has encountered as the ‘other’. Alternatively, Pamela, who makes ‘incessant efforts to betray her class and race’ (p. 398), is alert to the issues of power inherent in Chamcha’s desire to align with the hegemonic centre, and resists cultural totalisation. Instead, Pamela celebrates difference and multiplicity, and rejects ‘tradition’ as a stultifying means through which ideological dominance is maintained. Frustrated by Chamcha’s desire for an authentic ‘Englishness’ that never existed, Pamela calls for the destruction of the values of so-called national identity: “These are museum-values,” she used to tell him. “Sanctified, hanging in golden frames on honorific walls.” She had never had any time for what endured. Change everything! Rip it up!’ (p. 399).

Given the anxieties raised by the Rushdie affair about nation and religion as discourses resisting their basis in story, it is perhaps unsurprising that debates
often turned to fundamentalism. Indeed, the issue of fundamentalism in discussions about *The Satanic Verses* can be linked to a resistance against shifting national and religious narratives, and a fear of the transformations threatened by literature. According to Pipes, hardline Islamism is intimately tied to issues of representation and power. Pipes argues that fundamentalist Muslims are hyper-alert to the portrayal of Islam in Western media, compelled not only by the taboos inscribed within the faith itself, but also by a ‘powerful brew of religious animosity and political mistrust’ (pp. 106, 123). Islamic fundamentalism, Pipes contends, is based on a ‘view of history as syllogism: Muslims were once strong, but are now weak; when Muslims were strong, they lived fully by the precepts of their faith; therefore, Muslims are weak because they do not live up to these precepts’ (p. 123). The fundamentalist perspective, in its natural animosity towards the West, suggests that Western life has ‘been luring Muslims away from strict adherence to the requirements of their faith’; thus if Islam is ever to ‘regain the lead’ it enjoyed in the medieval period, it must ‘engage in a self-conscious battle against Western civilisation’ (Pipes, p. 124). The battle includes resisting the kinds of narratives and images presented by *The Satanic Verses*, which explicitly undermine the authority of the Islamic worldview and were perceived to be supported by the West. The historical imbrication of religion and government thus ensured the opposition of faiths was synonymous with a conflict of nation states. As Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a speaker of the Iranian parliament, argued, ‘this is not about the book and reader, it is over the West trying to dictate to Islam’ (qu. Pipes, p. 129).

The reaction of the West against fundamentalist Muslims is often figured as a modern and democratic resistance to an archaic and extremist worldview. The evocation of fundamentalism in the discourses of the scandal, however, is not confined to the hardline Islamic responses. Arguably, the British response to Muslim communities and migrants, and its assertion of ‘fundamental’ cultural values throughout the controversy, is as rigid and unbending as the extremists the critics purported to defy. The British reaction against Islam is perhaps not so far removed from the Islamic opposition to Rushdie, as each collective sought to protect their cultural identities by controlling the narrative discourses of nation and religion.

The tension between narratives of nationhood and the stories introduced
by the ‘other’ is vividly re-enacted in *The Satanic Verses* in the riots provoked by the death of Dr Uhuru Simba in police custody. Accused of committing a series of ‘Granny Ripper’ murders, Simba, a black militant leader, is falsely imprisoned and ‘accidentally’ dies after the ‘malign influence’ of a dream causes him to fall from bed and break his neck (p. 449). The death of Simba sparks volatile protests from both the centre and the ‘other’, as ‘groups of young blacks and Asians’ gather to resist the ‘quadruple…police presence’ asserted in their communities, while ‘attacks on black families on council estates’ and the ‘harassment of black school children on their way home’ are events which occur with increasing violence (p. 451). As the ethnic ‘other’ rises against the vilification of migrant difference, British authorities move to contain the ‘corrupting’ elements and affirm the dominance of the white centre, viciously suppressing the place of ‘otherness’ in the public sphere:

At the Pagal Khana a rat-faced youth and three of his cronies spat over many people’s food; as a result of the ensuing affray three Bengali waiters were charged with assault and the causing of actual bodily harm; the expectorating quartet was not, however, detained. Stories of police brutality, of black youths hauled swiftly into unmarked cars and vans belonging to the special patrol groups and flung out, equally discreetly, covered in cuts and bruises, spread throughout the communities (p. 451).

When the actual granny murderer is arrested, the reversal employed by Rushdie powerfully highlights the prejudicial attitudes of British citizens, and their backing by government authorities such as political representatives and the police. Indeed, the killer is caught by a ‘group of seven large young Sikhs’ who on ‘hearing a cry…and hurrying to the scene…found a bland, pale man of medium height and build, fair hair flopping forward over hazel eyes…scalpel in hand and rushing away from the body of an old woman’ (p. 453). The realisation that not only was Simba murdered because of his defence of the rights of ethnic communities but the killer was in fact ‘purely’ English, prompts a riot in which the ‘other’ fights physically for a place in the body politic. The violence of the scene replicates similar ‘real’ events occurring in Britain during the 1980s, however, it also symbolically manifests the volatility of a state struggling to assert a singular narrative of national identity in an environment that has become irrevocably plural. Yet while the hostile dichotomy between ethnic difference and the white majority is represented in the novel as irreconcilable, a gap suggesting the possibility for transformation remains. As Simba’s lawyer states at the end of
the mass rioting: ‘What has happened here...tonight is a socio-political phenomenon. Let’s not fall into the trap of some damn mysticism. We’re talking about history: an event in the history of Britain. About the process of change’ (p. 469).

As the scandal surrounding *The Satanic Verses* raised anxieties about narratives of nationhood, the British public worked to propagate ideas of a ‘fundamental’ or pure national identity. Commentators such as the sociologist Olivier Roy argue that concerns about socio-political change have also shaped the behaviours of Islamic radicals. According to Roy, the illusion ‘held by Islamic radicals is that they represent tradition when in fact they express a negative form of Westernisation’ (qu. Malik, p. 25). Contemporary Islamic radicalism, then, as Malik contends, ‘far from being an expression of ancient theological beliefs’, is actually a reaction against social and political disjunction: ‘the loss of a sense of belonging in a fragmented society, the blurring of traditional moral lines, the increasing disenchantment with politics and politicians, the growing erosion of the distinction between our private lives and our public lives’ (p. 25). As Britain emphasised the notion of an ‘essential’ identity to combat the transformation of narratives about national character, so radical Islamists have responded to cultural and religious changes by returning to the tenets of the Qur’an and ‘taking literally its strictures’. As cultural plurality is seen to threaten established ‘social networks, institutions of authority and moral codes’, traditional centres of power work to assert ideas about ‘strong identities and moral lines’ (p. 26) by returning to the narrative forms that confer their worldviews. It is a resistance to transformation that can be likened to the stubborn refusal of Gibreel to embrace the notion of subjectivity as open to the possibilities of change. But also like Gibreel, who ‘fears above all things...altered states’ (Rushdie, p. 427), the insistence on continuity produces only discord and a loss of absolute power, as discourses of ‘otherness’ begin to reveal the gaps in hegemonic systems previously regarded as closed and unassailable.

The anxieties provoked by blasphemous texts are thus embedded in issues relating to the construction of a national self, and a resistance to the politics of multiplicity and change. Just as religious critics fought to maintain the purity of sacred works such as the Bible and the Qur’an, so state leaders and cultural commentators struggled to secure the narratives of nationhood. Importantly, in the
Rushdie affair, issues of cultural purity were not isolated to the extremism of Islamic radicals, but were also exposed in the attempts of British commentators to highlight—and reject—the subversive influence of the ‘other’. Indeed, as the liberal secular culture of Britain reiterated arguments about social conformity whilst condemning Muslim radicalism, notions of who was perpetrating fundamentalism became confused. The scandal of *The Satanic Verses* revealed anxieties about the narrative condition of the nation state, and concerns about the possibility of transformation due to representations of difference. As nationality is exposed as a discourse, literature is framed as a medium capable of radically unsettling the very shape of a nation.

OUT, DAMN WHORES: THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

Repeatedly, the scandals surrounding blasphemous works such as *The Satanic Verses* return to anxieties relating to the ‘other’ and concerns about the threat of difference to existing systems of knowing and behaving. While the conflict between East and West provoked by the Rushdie affair has been the most visible over recent decades, arguments about blasphemous literature also often focus on the representation of women and the subversion of patriarchy, revealing the centrality of the masculine to ideologies of power in both Christian and Islamic traditions. Certainly, the ‘issue’ of women and female sexuality is present in a number of key blasphemy scandals, including *The Satanic Verses*, *The Da Vinci Code* and the *His Dark Materials* series, suggesting a strong cultural concern about the relationship between women and religion and, moreover, an anxiety about gender in broader socio-political terms. Yet it is not only questions of gender that gain entry into blasphemy debates. Outrage concerning atheism has also been present in a spate of recent scandals anxious about the growth of ‘anti-religious’ thought. Raising anxieties about the ‘death of God’, the works of authors such as Philip Pullman have been accused of promoting spiritual poverty in a world desperate for the unifying effects of religion. However, as the chapter argues, calls for a reassertion of religious values and frameworks are often ideologically motivated and reveal socio-political agendas which bear little relation to questions of faith. Indeed, as the presence of the ‘other’ in profane texts suggests, the anxieties raised by blasphemous literature are less concerned
with protecting ideas about the sacred, than with preserving a cultural status quo in which traditional power structures remain secure.

Interestingly, while numerous critics have commented on the complex political agendas of writers who critique the sacred, few have noted how ideas about blasphemy connect with the representation of transgressive women. Yet a number of texts accused of blasphemous content focus on questions of gender and a subversion of masculine discourses of power. For authors such as Rushdie, Brown and Pullman, the imbalance between male and female agency in religions is a key thematic interest, revealing the socio-political function of faith in perpetuating a male-centred hegemony. Scandals of blasphemy thus suggest an anxiety about women as a threat to systems of power, figuring the feminine as an unruly force—not unlike literature—that must be subjected to ‘rules, rules, rules’ (Rushdie, p. 364). As the episode of the ‘writers and whores’ in The Satanic Verses (p. 392) reveal, religious frameworks frequently urge the containment of women in order to protect male authority, suggesting that female ‘otherness’ will compromise the stability of state and radically unsettle the ‘divinity’ of patriarchal systems of thought.

The idea that women pose a threat to the stability of hegemonic power is figured most powerfully in the scandal surrounding Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials, a trilogy which self-consciously writes against the demonisation of female sexuality and the privileging of the masculine in religious and cultural discourses. As noted in the analysis of scandalous children’s literature, His Dark Materials rejects a Christian framework in which an unquestioning obedience to God is celebrated, and posits a re-visioning of the otherworldly in which there is no ultimate or absolute figure of power. While the novels have been the focus of controversy largely due to concerns about Pullman’s critical representation of the church, anxiety persistently returns to how the series provocatively re-visions the narrative of the Fall. The storyline of His Dark Materials concerns a girl, Lyra Belacqua, who is a Christ-like figure destined to reverse the curse of the Fall and free the world from original sin. Satan is figured as a female physicist who speaks of love and science as a means of true enlightenment, referring to Christianity as ‘a very powerful and convincing mistake’ that suppresses other ways of experiencing the world (2000, p. 442). The novel also undoes the Edenic curse by figuring the relationship between sex and knowledge as natural and desirable
rather than shameful and forbidden. The harmony between the two is, moreover, what restores stability in the world, as an acceptance of the sexual body allows for the unravelling of cultural constraints. In this framework, original sin is divested of guilt and becomes ‘the thing that makes us fully human’ (Pullman qu. Mohler, 2007), as well as freeing culture from the limitations of religious orthodoxy.

It is crucial to note the impact of religious stories such as the Fall on the construction of gendered identity and, indeed, the importance of this narrative to Christian theology. As Lisa Sowle Cahill argues in *Between the Sexes* (2001), the history of Christianity is one in which the roles of men and women have been specifically defined, authenticating the assumption that ‘biological sex entails specific gender roles that go beyond reproduction and child care to include significant differentiation in most domestic and social roles’ (p. 113). Indeed, Christian orthodoxy, Cahill contends, has entrenched notions of female passivity, as its narratives constantly affirm that ‘women were created primarily for reproduction, and are in all other ways weaker than men’ (p. 113). The inferior nature of women is rooted in the creation myth of Genesis, for as ‘God created Adam first, then took Eve from his rib’, women are figured in a ‘subordinate state that God in fact confirms by pronouncing Eve to be Adam’s “helpmeet”’ (p. 115). Further, as Eve’s ‘intellectual and moral weakness’ leads her to be ‘deluded’ by the serpent and eat of the forbidden fruit, sin and death enter the world ‘through the misdeed of a woman’ (p. 115). The patriarchal and patrilineal structures of the Bible continue to affirm the supremacy of men, while the only escape permitted to women is the convent, in which virginity and the glory of a male god are worshipped as a sacred duty.

David Gilmore argues in *Misogyny* (2001) that ‘virtually every faith, monotheistic, polytheistic, apostolic, or animist’, displays hostility towards women, most particularly in terms of ideas about the ‘abject’ nature of ‘menstrual blood and female reproductive functions’ (p. 79). Gilmore contends that in the majority of messianic religions, ‘it is always First Woman, never First Man, who, because of innate character flaws, capitulates to the devil’s blandishments’, a motif in which women are represented as ‘the primum mobile of evil’ that can be found in ‘practically all…origin myths’ (p. 79). The connection of women with sin is based on ideas about sexual transgression and the taboo of flesh. As Gilmore notes, ‘ecclesiastical misogyny is a product of the formal association
made by the founding clerics between sin and woman’s nature’ and ‘their belief that carnality originates in the woman’s genitals, which are viewed as a trick or a trap in which the devil ensnares the innocent male’ (p. 85). The Augustinian emphasis on bodily shame established a dichotomy in which women exist ‘in the flesh’ as opposed to the ‘world of the spirit, which is both pure and male, “virtuous and godly”’. The Manichean opposition between ‘man (spirit) and woman (flesh)’, Gilmore argues, is ‘God’s intention: unquestionable and immutable’ (p. 85). The transcendental quality of masculinity thus ‘naturally’ situates men at the centre of power, as ‘divine right’ decrees the sanctity of the male body, and the impurity of female physicality.

Pullman, however, rejects traditions that locate women as the source of sin, refuting notions that the sexual body is unclean, and that female sexuality is a device to lure men into downfall. In the final book of the trilogy, The Amber Spyglass (2000), for example, Lyra’s discovery of sexual identity is framed in terms of an awakening through which greater possibilities for meaning and understanding are opened, without shame or need for remorse: ‘She felt as if she had been handed the key to a great house she hadn’t known was there, a house that was somehow inside her, and as she turned the key, deep in the darkness of the building she felt other doors opening too, and lights coming on’ (p. 445). Like Eve, Lyra is given access to hidden knowledge, but unlike her biblical counterpart, the shedding of ignorance is neither catastrophic nor sinful. Because there is no longer a transcendent male authority defining meaning, the power of the centre dissolves along with the separation of spirit and flesh, thus freeing both knowledge and women from sin and masculine privilege.

The sexual taboo inscribed in the Christian tradition is explored in some detail throughout His Dark Materials and, indeed, forms a major theme in the de-mythologising of religious anxieties about gender. Pullman focuses on ideas associating puberty with temptation, and the efforts of the church to suppress the adolescent discovery of sexuality. Interestingly, His Dark Materials makes manifest the idea of a soul, as each character in the series possesses a ‘dæmon’, an animal companion which reflects the personality, thoughts and feelings of its human counterpart. The dæmons of children are, like their identities, constantly in flux, changing shape and form at will until the arrival of puberty, when individual subjectivities begin to emerge, settle and fix. Church authorities discover,
however, that if a child is severed from its daemon, adolescence occurs without sexual temptation and the possibility of being drawn into sin. Thus it seeks to divide the two in a process described as ‘intercision’. Lyra’s mother explains:

All that happens is a little cut, and then everything’s peaceful. For ever! You see, your daemon’s a wonderful friend and companion when you’re young, but at the age we call puberty, the age you’re coming to very soon, darling, daemons bring all sort of troublesome thoughts and feelings…A quick operation before that, and you’re never troubled again! You’re daemon stays with you, only…just not connected. Like a…like a wonderful pet, if you like (1995, p. 283).

Lyra reacts to the process with revulsion, as the procedure of intercision literally seeks to cut a child from its soul in order to prevent the normal growth into adulthood via sexual experience. It is a manifestation of the separation of spirit and flesh—or the masculine and the feminine—in Christian orthodoxy. This idea is further accentuated by the gendering of the relationship between body and soul in the series, as women possess male daemons, and vice versa.

As the process of intercision seeks to control sexual and thus gendered identity, it is perhaps unsurprising that the ‘cutting’ also evokes ideas about genital mutilation. Indeed, as Lyra’s father, Lord Asriel, argues, the barbaric separation of a daemon from a child is made less shocking by a tradition of church rituals using ‘cutting’ to control physical development: ‘Do you know what the word castration means? It means removing the sexual organs of a boy so he never develops the characteristics of a man. A castrato keeps his high treble voice all his life, which is why the Church allowed it: so useful in Church music’ (1995, p. 372). It is a practice that is also critiqued in the second book of the series, The Subtle Knife (1997), as opponents of the church—or Magisterium—recount the crimes committed against children in the interests of controlling the subversive potential of the sexual body: ‘For all its history…it’s tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can’t control them, it cuts them out…There are churches…that cut their children…cut their sexual organs, yes, both boys and girls—they cut them with knives so that they shan’t feel’ (p. 50). Anxieties about sexuality are thus linked to notions of containment and control, of suppressing the potential for transformation in order to protect religious ideas about purity and innocence. Yet that such ideas require enforcement via physical harm exposes the constructed nature of these ‘truths’, and suggests a religious agenda that is less spiritually than culturally and politically motivated.
The link between oppression, the church and sexuality in *His Dark Materials* infuriated Christian readers, who argued that the series not only kills god—a point that will be returned to shortly—but also posits sexual identity as the key to human awareness and understanding. Rupert Kaye (2003), for example, a writer for the British-based Association of Christian Teachers, warns of the ‘spiritual harm’ that will befall young readers in their ‘blissful ignorance’, while the American evangelist Albert Mohler suggests that the series is primarily concerned ‘with sex. Surprisingly graphic and explicit sex’ that acts as a ‘seductive medium’ through which to deliver a ‘subversive message’ of Christian oppression and ‘destroy all transcendent value’ (2007). Certainly, the preoccupation of critics with the sexual awakening of Lyra and thus her suitability as a heroine highlights concerns about the re-writing of the place of women within the grand narratives of religion. Indeed, Pullman plays on anxieties about the threatening influence of women on hegemonic systems of power, as he positions a pubescent girl as the ultimate downfall to church authority. With an ironic twist, religious frameworks are indeed collapsed because of the actions of a woman (fittingly lured by a female satan), but rather than provoking chaos and disillusionment, Lyra brings unity and enlightenment across cultures and political borders. Moreover, the authority of patriarchy is no longer framed as absolute and sanctified, but as a system open to the possibilities of change.

The protests of religious advocates such as Mohler, who views *His Dark Materials* as focussed on ‘graphic and explicit sex’, reveals concern about the effects of representations that promote the naturalness of sexual desire, but more importantly, women as sexually desiring. An awareness of the powerfully transformative potential of such imagery is made all the more potent in the context of religion, given the role of the Bible as a foundational text for society. Indeed, as readers such as Mohler reject and condemn narratives which allow for the play of difference, they reveal an anxiety about the storied nature of all monolithic discourses, and the realisation, perhaps, that nothing is sacred.

The representation of women has also been central to other blasphemy controversies, including Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993) and *The Da Vinci Code*. As scandalous authors reject the paradigms prescribed by religious doctrines, the patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies that are embedded within religious myths are challenged and overturned. *The Giver*, for example, posits a world in which
women dominate and has been described by critics as ‘in service to Lucifer’ (Ramsey, 1999) because of its radical inversion of the patriarchal status quo. Similarly, *The Da Vinci Code* was also attacked by readers for its re-writing of Christian history in terms of the ‘sacred feminine’ and the power of Mary Magdalene. The conservative American cultural commentator Don Feder, for example, describes Brown’s proposition as ‘disgusting’, ‘offensive’ and ‘insensitive’, arguing that the novel denies ‘the divinity of Jesus and his mission’ because of the ‘mumbo jumbo’ possibility of a ‘female deity’ within the Judaeo-Christian tradition (2006). Marian Horvat is even more explicit, describing the ‘feminist ideology’ of the text as an ‘hallucinatory fable’ that is blatantly ‘blasphemous’ (2010). The notion that a woman is not only divine but also superior to men is thus figured among the worst kinds of transgression, but perhaps more tellingly, also framed as the most ridiculous. As Feder argues, *The Da Vinci Code* is ‘blasphemous, defames the Catholic Church and promotes neo-pagan Goddess worship…The best response to *The Da Vinci Code*—besides derisive laughter—is a boycott’ (2006).

*The Satanic Verses* also engages in a critique of the role of women within Islamic society, tracing how gender equality diminishes as each set of revelations becomes increasingly totalitarian. As the scribe of the prophet, Salman the Persian, recounts, Mahound produces ‘rules about every damn thing… It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free’ (p. 364). Former traditions in which women speak freely, own property and control the conditions of marriage are abolished, as Gibreel ‘starts pouring out rules about what women mustn’t do…forcing them back into the docile attitudes the Prophet prefers, docile or maternal, walking three steps behind or sitting at home being wise and waxing their chins’ (p. 367). Even ‘sexual positions…received divine sanction’, with the ‘forbidden postures’ including all ‘those in which the female was on top’ (p. 364). Another subversive episode is in the brothel, The Curtain, where the whores take the names of the 12 wives of the prophet. Unsurprisingly, Muslim protests against *The Satanic Verses* voiced concern about the blasphemous identities of the prostitutes. Sardar and Davies write, for example, that the inclusion of the brothel and prostitutes in the text constitutes a ‘major perversion’ in which Rushdie effectively calls ‘all faithful Muslim women whores’ and suggests that Islam turns its women into ‘the slaves of men’s pleasures’ (p. 182). Shabbir Akhtar further
contends that ‘Rushdie’s speculations…reinforce a stereotypical and false picture of Muslim sexuality…as exotic and untamed’ (1990, p. 15), and contribute towards an orientalising vision of the Middle East that demeans both men and women.

The emphasis in *The Satanic Verses*, however, is on the image of the prophet as sexually voracious, rather than the critical representation of the subjugation of women under Islamic rule. Indeed, the oppressive control of ordinary women appears of little concern to critics condemning the novel, while the presence of the prostitutes is an offence because, as Marina Warner notes of the novel, they ‘are an insult against the purity of women’—they are, that is, sexual women who consciously reject the behaviours imposed by the prophet (in Appignanesi & Maitland, p. 191). The names of the whores and the brothel are thus significant, making ironic emblems of female holiness and propriety. *Al-hijab or The Curtain*, is the veil traditionally worn by Muslim women, but is no longer a symbol of physical segregation; indeed, as the name of the brothel, it signifies quite the opposite. Similarly, as the prostitutes take on the names of Mahound’s wives, the brides of the prophet are made synonymous with the whores, while the privileges accorded only to the messiah are made available to any paying customer. The execution of the whores in the novel is thus essential if the authority of Mahound is to remain absolute, as *The Curtain* undermines moral laws in a process of ironic doubling that allows the prostitutes to subvert the impositions on women within the fundamentalist regime of the prophet.

Arguments about the representation of female sexuality in both Christian and Islamic contexts points to how anxieties about gender are written into discourses of the sacred, but also highlights how both women and literature are positioned as unruly forces which require containment. Like Christianity, Islamic traditions reveal anxieties about the freedom of women and repeatedly represent female sexuality as a threat to the security and discourses of the family and the state. Lamia Rustum Shehadeh notes, for example, that in fundamentalist regimes, the presence of the *hijab* is figured as symbolically vital, functioning as a ‘safeguard of the Islamic state, the implication being that greater rights for women and increased socio-political interaction of the sexes would lead to immorality and anarchy’ (2003, pp. 42-43). The use of the *hijab*, Shehadeh argues, has been justified by fundamentalist regimes as a way of controlling women in order to
protect the virtue of ‘their feminine nature and innate delicacy’, and ensure ‘peace and tranquillity’ in the nation state (p. 43). Indeed, practices such as purdah, clitorectomy and ‘honour killings’ mark how fundamentalist sects of Islam are particularly anxious about female sexuality and the containment of women. The dictates of Shari‘a law have mobilised international movements campaigning for the emancipation of women within strict Islamic societies, and raised outrage in the liberal West. But as Haideh Moghissi argues in Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism (1999), Western indignation about the position of women within Islam is somewhat ironic given how the Judaeo-Christian tradition similarly positions women as ‘other’. As Moghissi argues, ‘female domesticity, and sexual purity and chastity, deemed appropriate in Europe and aggressively promoted at home, [are] presented for Muslim women as “evidence” of sexual slavery and signs of a peculiar moral and religious deficiency of the Other’ (p. 15). The point, Moghissi contends, ‘is not whether the imagery of Muslim women’s role and status correspond to the reality, but rather that female “sexual slavery” and domesticity [are] not completely out of tune with Western Christian values, explicit in the writings of men of literature and philosophy’ (p. 15).

It is not only women who represent the threat of sexual ‘otherness’ to patriarchy and religious values. Pullman has also been criticised for the depiction of two gay angels in His Dark Materials, whose passionate relationship is portrayed as a natural economy of desire that does not require mediating or explaining (Kaye, 2003). The censorship of James Kirkup’s ‘The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name’ is another example of a text deemed blasphemous for mixing homosexuality and religion. The poem, narrated by a Roman centurion who describes his love for Jesus during an act of necrophilia, was banned under British blasphemy laws in 1976, and remains legislatively censored in the UK. Originally published in the iconic newspaper Gay News, the poem claims that Jesus was not only homosexual, but also rather promiscuous. As the centurion writes: ‘I knew he’d had it off with other men—/with Herod’s guards, with Pontius Pilate,/With John the Baptist, with Paul of Tarsus/with foxy Judas, a great kisser, with/the rest of the Twelve, together and apart./He loved all men, body, soul and spirit’ (1976). Explicitly provoking the traditionally hostile relationship between Christianity and sexual difference, the poem outraged public ideas about ‘the standards for decency’ and evoked concerns about the character of national identity (Beyer qu.
As John Beyer, the director of the censorial Mediawatch, states in support of banning the poem: ‘Freedom comes with responsibility otherwise we may end up with anarchy. The law of the land applies to everybody’ (qu. in PinkNews, 2008). The sexual ‘other’, then, whether in the form of women or homosexuality, is rejected as blasphemous and a threat to religious, social and national frameworks. As Feder contends:

The Bible does not begin with one man and several women, one woman and multiple men, two men, two women…or any combination thereof. It does not say a man shall leave his parents and cleave to his civil-union partner…The Patriarchs and kings of Israel may have gotten some things wrong, but at least there was no gender confusion (2008).

The Atheist Possibility: Blaspheming Something New

Inarguably, the most radical challenge posed by blasphemous texts is that of atheism. Anxieties concerning the representation of atheism are repeatedly cited during blasphemy scandals, as authors such as Rushdie and Pullman explicitly question the notion of god and reject the grand narratives that have determined understandings of the world. The effect of ‘deleting’ god is an opportunity for visioning and re-visioning the world from multiple and changing perspectives. Blasphemous literature, then, is a powerful, anxiety-inducing threat, as it provides a medium for metamorphosis, revealing that everything is a story and, as such, nothing is sacred.

The notion of atheism in blasphemous literature, however, is much more complex than the accusations of religious critics—and the warcries of authors—tend to suggest. Indeed, while Pullman has boasted of the death of god in *His Dark Materials*, neither the trilogy nor other works labelled as atheistic have gone so far as to obliterate ideas of faith. Admittedly, the critiques issued by writers such as Pullman and Rushdie are extensive and dramatic, de-centering and de-familiarising religious norms, myths and tenets in order to offer the possibility of difference and to highlight the inequities supported by theological assumptions. Yet, in a seeming paradox, the emphasis on the constructed nature of religion and the divine does not eradicate the cultural place of faith, but re-visions spirituality without organised and hierarchical systems of authority. As the chapter argues, religious frameworks are symbiotic with socio-political power structures which
define ideas of self and ‘other’ through narratives that have become, through repetition and violent enforcement, sacred ‘truth’. The critical strategies of Pullman and Rushdie, then, as Mark Morford contends, ‘have nothing to do with rejecting faith or destroying the spirit or inhibiting the exploration of what it means to be divine’ (2007). Rather, the ‘nefarious thing’ (Morford, 2007) their works seek to extinguish is the sanctified notion of religious authority and doctrine. As Morford asserts of *His Dark Materials*, the series is not about the death of religion per se but ‘about the death of dogma. It’s about power, about who wants to control and manipulate life…[I]t is about blind, ignorant, even violent adherence to insidiously narrow codes of thought and belief and behaviour’ (2007). Thus the tag of atheism is falsely used to describe texts which defy the exclusionary practices of organised religion and absolute ‘truth’, and which posit the potential for difference within systems revealed as human constructs. The anxiety ostensibly provoked by atheism is therefore less about the suggestion of a godless society, than the proposition of radically re-imagining the place and influence of religion in culture.

In this context, the death of god in *His Dark Materials* is not used to support an atheist manifesto, but to rather symbolise the destruction of an orthodoxy which is about power. Indeed, as Donna Freitas observes, the ‘“God” who dies in *The Amber Spyglass* is not a true God at all’ (2007), but an impostor who falsely assumed power. As an angel in the novel explains: ‘The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were all names he gave himself. He was never the creator’ (pp. 31-2). In the universe created by Pullman, the first angel of the world convinced all others that he was god, and dedicated eternity to ‘building a corrupt empire for the purpose of hanging on to absolute power’ (Freitas, 2007). The impostor god, Freitas argues, is a ‘tyrannical figure who uses his power to deceive, to conceal, and to terrorise. His death not only liberates all beings, but reveals the true God, in which and in whom all good things—knowledge, truth, spirit, bodies, and matter—are made’ (2007). Crucially, the revelation of a ‘real’ god is no longer singular, absolute or even embodied, but multiple and changing, a spirit-form that is ‘dependent on creation for its sustenance’ (Freitas, 2007) and unable to be contained within institutions such as the church and state. Further, as Freitas notes, the ‘divine fabric of the true God’, what Pullman refers to as ‘Dust’, is also
made feminine, in line with the sanctification of women within *The Da Vinci Code*. Moreover, while Dust is a spirit which transcends creation, it is not ‘all-powerful, all-knowing and immutable’, but fallible, evolving and subject to human desire.

Similarly, the critique of Islam and the prophet offered by *The Satanic Verses* is, arguably, concerned with debunking the absolute nature of religious power rather than denying the existence of faith itself. While the specific term ‘atheism’ is rarely used in reference to Rushdie, numerous synonyms expressed equal disdain for the ostensible ‘godlessness’ of the author and text. Syed Ali Ashraf, for example, describes *The Satanic Verses* as ‘nihilistic’ with ‘no positive norm’, while Rushdie is a narcissistic ‘practitioner of black magic’ who preaches ‘anti-Islamic theory in the guise of a novel’ (in Appignanesi & Maitland, pp. 18-20). As with the controversy surrounding Pullman, critics express anxiety about the lack of absolute meaning in *The Satanic Verses*, as the endless metamorphoses of the text resist certainties, including strict definitions of good and evil. As the literary critic D.J. Enright observes, few religious figures in the novel are ‘treated with very much respect; gods, angels, demons, prophets, they are all of them all too human, and most of the time unable to distinguish between good and evil. If they can’t, how can we ordinary mortals be expected to?’ (in Appignanesi & Maitland, p. 10). It is an anxiety shared by Gibreel, who in the post-fall transformation struggles to insist on religious truth as whole and impregnable: ‘There is no God but God…No compromises. I won’t do deals with fogs’ (p. 335). The implication is clear: religious frameworks require—if not demand—absolute borderlines, inclusion or exclusion, not a blurring of word and meaning, but fixed truth and stable values. As Gibreel shouts out, ‘No more of these…Biblical-Satanic confusions!—Clarity, clarity, at all costs clarity!’ (p. 353).

Suitably, the metamorphic power of literature is a persistent issue in blasphemy scandals, as literature is positioned as a subversive threat to the capacity of religious frameworks to sustain their authority. It is a notion that authors such as Dan Brown have ridiculed, stating that ‘a very wise British priest noted in the press recently: “Christian theology has survived the writings of Galileo and the writings of Darwin, surely it will survive the writings of some novelist from New Hampshire”’ (qu. Carbone, 2006). Yet the idea that organised
belief can be underwritten—or re-written—by narrative is a repeated anxiety, as religious commentators recognise the basis of theology in stories which are sanctified as doctrinal ‘truth’. As the controversies surrounding the appropriation of both the Bible and the Qur’an suggest, religions rely on the stability of stories in order to preserve the absolute nature of ‘truth’, and their social and political authority. Texts such as *The Satanic Verses*, however, highlight how the discursive basis of religion means that transformation can always occur. This dismantling of the authority of religious texts has ignited anxiety, as blasphemous works illustrate how faith is used to disguise questions of power and the interests of the hegemonic centre. Indeed, as the arguments concerning immigration and assimilation, or women and atheism assert, accusations of blasphemy are rarely simply about the preservation of tradition or the protection of sacred works or ways of living. Consistently, anxieties return to issues of power, of maintaining the absolute authority of the centre, and of controlling the unruly threat to a naturalised order. But if, as profane literature suggests, such paradigms are only narratives, then nothing is truly sacred and whole new worlds can be imagined. As Saladin Chamcha muses at the conclusion to *The Satanic Verses*:

Childhood was over, and the view from this window was no more than an old and sentimental echo. To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born (p. 547).
ONCLUSION

THIS IS A STORY: (RE-)NARRATING THE WORLD

On the back cover of Philip Pullman’s latest novel, the controversial *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), there is a sentence in large gold letters: ‘This is a story.’ It might be read as an ironic comment for critics who would condemn the text as blasphemous and fear of its consequences for understandings of the Christian faith. Yet the statement could also be an effort to undermine the significance of the narrative, to suggest that literature can be just a story. The latter argument, however, while perhaps consoling for some readers, is less than satisfactory and, in relation to the content of the novel itself, certainly less than persuasive. Indeed, Pullman’s narrative is primarily concerned with the transformative effects of storying, as it describes how Christ, the twin brother of Jesus, is given the divine task of recording Christian history and the miracles of the messiah by writing the Bible. Christ, agonising over the relationship between representation and the truth, understands the imaginative capacity of words and the impossibility of securing meaning:

As Christ sat and watched the stranger eating his bread and pouring himself more wine, he couldn’t help thinking of the story of Jesus, and how he could improve it. For example, there could be some miraculous sign to welcome the birth: a star, an angel. And the childhood of Jesus must be studded with charming little wonder-tales of boyish mischief leavened by magic, which could nevertheless be interpreted as signs of greater miracles to come. Then there were matters of more profound narrative consequence. If Jesus had known about his execution in advance, and told his disciples that it was going to come about, and gone to meet it willingly, it would give the crucifixion a far more resonant meaning, and one that would open depths of mystery for wise men to explore and ponder and explain in the times to come (pp. 242-3).

As Christ begins to manipulate the ‘real’ in order to create a greater notion of truth, notions of fact and history are rejected, and representation is revealed as a force capable of producing an imagined worldview. The sacred narratives and figures of Christianity are, moreover, exposed as literary artifices, as Christ constructs and manipulates the shape of a religion with close attention to literary craft. The epitextual assurance that the novel is only ‘a story’ is thus profoundly loaded; a provocation, even, given the radically powerful abilities of narrative that is the very theme of Pullman’s work.
The simplicity of ‘this is a story’ neatly belies the complex and transformative character of literature, yet it also acts as a pithy summary of the anxieties explored in this thesis. Arguably, literary scandals are about little else than stories, representations that offer a particular vision of the individual and their relationship to the world. However, the process of storying, as Christ discovers in Pullman’s novel, is powerful, as it not only re-writes the past but also has the potential to re-envision the future. Such transformations are profoundly unsettling, and as the discourses surrounding scandalous texts disclose, a source of considerable anxiety. Indeed, contemporary literary controversies reveal that despite the technological investment in replacing reality with simulacra, the curious and archaic distrust of language and representation remains potent. The shifting potential of words is mysterious and magical, but also dangerous and unknowable—as Pullman suggests, if a narrative can construct an accepted vision of ‘real’, there is no such thing as ‘just’ a story.

Scandalous literature is about more than representing themes that are shocking or taboo, such as the death of God or promiscuous teenagers or fake Holocaust testimony. As scandalous texts generate arguments about children, women, sexuality, authenticity, nationality and spirituality, they expose how defining aspects of ‘being’ are inscribed through the tenuous medium of language. In exposing the discursive nature of self and, indeed, ‘other’, controversial literature raises anxieties about maintaining power. Persistent reactions against representations of sexual women, for example, expose the investments of patriarchal culture in reasserting authority, while protests against the portrayal of homosexuality in literature for children suggest something about the needs of the religious right to protect heteronormativity. Yet anxieties about the constructed nature of self through language are not always politically focussed. As fake memoirs suggest, unruly texts also compromise the authority of forms such as history in ways that can have radical consequences for both individual and collective realities. Indeed, scandalous texts are uncannily attuned to those faultlines and gaps in ideas of the ‘real’, as they consistently suggest plural versions of reality, other stories that have the potential to be just as valid as those generally accepted as ‘true’. Perhaps this is where the crux of anxieties provoked by literary scandals about gender, identity, authenticity and spirituality truly lies—in the notion that there are multiple rather than singular worldviews,
numerous narratives through which self, ‘other’, truth and history can be constructed as ‘real’.
WORKS CITED


Banks, Lynne Reid 1993, One More River, Avon, New York.


Clarke, Natalie 2006, ‘Author of Child Abuse Memoir Accused of Fabricating Her Past’, *Mail Online*, September 22, retrieved June 3, 2009,


Jones, Patrick 2008, Darkness is Where the Stars Are, Cinnamon Press, Gwynedd.


LaCapra, Dominick 1982, Madame Bovary on Trial, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

Ladenson, Elisabeth 2007, Dirt for Art’s Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.


Lawrence, D.H 1960, Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Penguin, Ringwood.


Wilkomirski, Binjamin 2001, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, in


