

Australian Patriography

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Australian Patriography

How Sons Write Fathers in Contemporary Life Writing

Stephen Mansfield



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No one is ever able absolutely to erase himself from his criticism, but in researching autobiography the posture of critical distance seems especially fraught, particularly for one examining family memoirs. This book is not ficto-critical, nor will the critic's life story intrude upon his examination of the lives of others. Nevertheless, I am a son and, in the course of writing this book, have become a father.

Therefore I wish to acknowledge my mother and father, Helen and David Mansfield, and my sisters, Jenny Franke and Kimberly Reid, for shaping my understanding of what it means to be a son and a brother. My daughter Patience was born early in my research, and her demand for care and reflexive love have given me a glimpse of the joy and anxiety of being a father. My twin sons Asher and Lucas were born towards the end of this project, amplifying this joy and anxiety in equal measure, and causing a friend to remark, 'that will teach you for writing a book about patrimony'.

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Introduction

WRITING PATRIMONY: THE SON'S BOOK OF THE FATHER AS A SUB-GENRE

There was once a father and a son. A son is like a mirror in which the father beholds himself, and for the son the father too is like a mirror in which he beholds himself in the time to come. [...] And the father believed that he was to blame for the son's melancholy, and the son believed that he was the occasion of the father's sorrow – but they never exchanged a word on the subject.

Then the father died, and the son saw much, experienced much, and was tried in manifold temptations; but infinitely inventive as love is, longing and the sense of loss taught him, not indeed to wrest from the silence of eternity a communication, but to imitate the father's voice so perfectly that he was content with the likeness. So he did not look at himself in the mirror [...] for the mirror was no longer there; but in loneliness he comforted himself by hearing the father's voice [...] For the father was the only one who had understood him, and yet he did not know in fact whether he had understood him.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *The Parables of Kierkegaard*

A Modern Parable

A man has a son. Overjoyed at his son's arrival, this father goes to work as usual. This is Australia in the 1950s, after all, before the era of shared care and involved dads. Maternity wards were not places for men.

As his son grows, this father goes about his business. He works hard, comes home to eat and sleep, to snore most likely, and rises to do it all again. He leaves early and arrives home late. And on the weekend there is golf or some other manly pursuit that keeps him out of the house, and then drinking with the other men at the pub. To his young family he is an itinerant. They remember strong arms and moments of tenderness, but mostly a father who was half there, his focus and intent on the world outside.

And the father? He worries for his son; he occasionally feels mildly embarrassed about some aspect of his young boy's demeanour, and tries to teach him what he can about staying out of trouble in the world of men. Even more occasionally he is knocked sideways by a gesture or a minor achievement of his progeny: a mixture of simple pride and something like self-recognition – though he would never call it that. In his weaker moments he is unnecessarily stern, competitive. Perhaps he envies his son his place in his mother's heart. But for the most part he is a good father; as good a father as anyone expects him to be.

Then this father gets old and frail, and eventually he dies. If they were on speaking terms before his death, this son delivers the eulogy at his father's funeral. Describing a man he realises he hardly knew, the son uses broad brush strokes, tries to avoid platitudes, manages to not cry in public. Then the father is buried, and the son, according to Freud, experiences an existential crisis both quiet and disassembling: he is the next in line; he is one step from the grave.

This is where most fathers' stories end. But not the fathers detailed in this book. For the sons of these fathers grew up to be writers. More importantly, they grew up to write a book of Australian patrimony. Whether one should consider such fathers fortunate or unfortunate for being immortalised in literature is in part the focus of this study.

Australian Patrimony as a Sub-genre

This book explores representations of patrimony by male authors in Australian memoir and autobiography. More specifically, this book will analyse an author's construction of a masculine self in life writing through his formulation of various modes of paternal inheritance. The central focus will be how sons portray fathers, though as we will discover, these writers cast wide their nets in attempting to account for what has been passed down to them.

What kinds of texts are these books of Australian patrimony, and what should we call this sub-genre? They are undoubtedly a form of life writing, though this umbrella term has been broadened to include so many disparate forms of artistic self-representation that we need to be more exact. In their dual focus on the self and other, these texts fall somewhere between biography and autobiography, although they tend towards the latter's awareness of subjectivity – hence the usefulness of the term *auto/biography*.¹ The currency

1 The term *auto/biography* itself has a short but complex history. Susanna Egan and Gabrielle Helms emphasise the fluidity of the genre, the slash signaling 'the broad continuum of life writing discourses that range from writing about the self (auto) to writing about another (biography)' and may include 'the collaborative work or the family memoir, the art installation, the film, or the web site that combine performance

of this compound term in literature studies today is part of a major shift in autobiographical theory and its conception of identity formation over the past 25 years: the turn towards relational approaches to life writing. Broadly speaking, this mode complicates notions of self-representation in autobiography by challenging the genre's claims of autonomy by giving precedence to intersubjectivity over individuality, foregrounding the self's contingency on others.

Crucially, the shift has its origins in feminist approaches to autobiography: the term 'relational autobiography' was first used by Susan Stanford Friedman to define the notion of the self in women's autobiography as being a 'sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identification that exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness' (in Benstock 44). Similar but more radically demarcated is Domna C. Stanton's mode of 'autogynography', claimed as the alternative for 'autobiographical writing by women' (5) and linked the splitting of a woman's subjectivity to her 'different status in the symbolic order' (15). In Australia, Joy Hooton's *Stories of Herself When Young: Autobiographies of Childhood by Australian Women* (1990) highlighted the way female autobiographers, as opposed to their male counterparts, have eschewed notions of an autonomous self and often written life stories that are also the stories of communities of women.² As she asserts: 'in the language of criticism there is no name for the female autobiography [...] it refuses to be defined by male standards' (102). Hooton's important study, along with Gillian Whitlock's *Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* (1999) has contributed much to our understanding of female autobiography in Australia. However, there has to date been no study of Australian relational autobiography that has focussed exclusively on male writing – this study seeks to redress this gap.

For John Paul Eakin has countered such demarcations, claiming, 'the criterion of relationality applies equally *if not identically* to male experience' (*Our Lives* 50, emphasis in the original). Nancy K. Miller supports Eakin's assertion, showing how a number of male-authored texts exhibit 'precisely the structure of self-portrayal through the relation to a privileged other that

of identity with sophisticated levels of irony and full consciousness of theoretical implications' (6–7). When my discussion is relevant to the broader field of 'life writing' I will use this umbrella term or 'autobiography'. When within the narrow focus of autobiographical texts that focus on a significant other, I will use 'auto/biography'.

2 Hooton emphasises that the father in women's autobiography in Australia is a 'weak' or failed paternal figure (135–98): he is represented as either 'the austere, distantly severe father' who fails his daughter emotionally (136), or 'fathers are exposed as weak in that they are improvident, uncertain providers, failures in their chosen way of life' (141). For women's autobiography focussed on mothers, see also Barbara Johnson's *A World of Difference*.

characterizes most female-authored autobiography' (3). For Eakin, the male and female autobiographical 'I' is 'truly plural in its origins and subsequent formulation' and modern autobiography's dominant mode demonstrates 'the extent to which the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – its relations with others' (43), primarily what he terms the 'proximate other' (86). This most common of relational life narratives tells 'the self's story [...] through the lens of its relation with some other key person, sometimes a sibling, friend or lover; but *most often a parent*' (86, emphasis added). In such instances, claims Eakin, the ordinary power-relationship is inverted, and the parent is placed at the mercy of the child turned adult-narrator (181).

The criterion for relationality, however, extends beyond an attempted focus on others. Some authors may write within an explicitly relational frame, yet their construction of selfhood and a simultaneous retreat to the language of autodidacticism constantly undercuts their claim to relational identity formation. This paradoxical construction of selfhood would seem a characteristic unique to the sub-genre discussed here – life narratives by sons writing about fathers – and seems to challenge the notion that relationality applies equally to the male experience. This book will explore the distinctive conception of relational identity within the particularly masculine frame of patrimonial life narrative. Further, this study recognises and illustrates the way recent theorising about this sub-genre – undertaken almost exclusively by male critics – exists in an uneasy tension with the (unacknowledged?) debt it owes to feminist theories about relationality, autobiography and 'writing the body'.³

Recent Theorising of Patrimony

Relational life writing about fathers has indeed received a great deal of attention in the past decade, predominantly from male critics, though there is no general agreement on the name of the form. David Parker introduces the term 'intergenerational auto/biography' ('Narratives of Autonomy' 140)

3 Of particular relevance is the way feminist theorising has forced into the open an exploration of the male body in literature. Eve Sedgwick's work on homosocial relations (1985) and Judith Butler's on gender as a performative act (1990) has helped to render masculinity 'visible' as a gender construction. Building on such work, Peter Schwenger observes: 'The maleness of experience, at a primary level, must mean the infusion of a particular sense of the body into the attitudes and encounters of a life' (102). This desire to 'make visible' continues to exist in conflict with a discomfort about writing the male body, or of men writing at all. In *Male Matters*, for example, Calvin Thomas explores 'the social construction of masculinity, the representation of the male body that is necessary to that construction, and the way that writing – as a corporal and material process, a way of putting the body on the line – can disturb or subvert that repression' (2).

for narratives of parents by children, while G. Thomas Couser argues for his term ‘narratives of filiation’, insisting that ‘filiation’ takes on a double meaning in this context:

First, it refers to ‘the condition or fact of being the child (not necessarily the son, though the root is the Latin *filus*, son) of a particular parent’ (not necessarily a father); second, in law, it refers to ‘judicial determination of paternity’ [...] By calling the texts in question narratives of filiation, rather than merely memoirs of fathers, I seek to highlight their relationality, their rootedness in a sense of entitlement and their intent to enact some kind of engagement with the father, whether living or dead. (‘Genre Matters’ 635)

Couser’s second point is aptly expressed, for the books examined here typically display a dynamic relationality, an engagement often manifesting as a struggle with the father, and even in some cases, as an address *to* the father. Couser has more recently revised his terminology, coining the terms patriography for memoirs of the father by sons and daughters and matriography for books of the mother (‘My Father’s Closet’, 891). While the stylistic simplicity of these terms will most likely see them emerge in the critical lexicon (thanks in part to the title of this book), their limitation for the present discussion is that they do not designate the gender of the author who constructs him or herself in relation to the parent.

For male-authored texts of patrimony, C. Martin Redman has introduced the term son–father auto/biographies, insisting that ‘the hybridity that is implicit in the compound term “auto/biography” is an essential component of this form of life writing’ (129). Redman sees his sub-genre as broadly conforming to Lejeune’s oft-cited definition for autobiography as ‘a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality’ (Lejeune 4), but observes, ‘Publishers’ lists and library catalogues generally categorise [son–father auto/biographies] as “memoir”, presumably because of the sub-genre’s dual focus whereby the author, narrator and co-protagonist are one and the same person and because the son is as much a focus as the father’ (129–30). This ‘mis-categorisation’, according to Redman, is ‘a response to the fact that though these volumes contain a quasi-biography of the father they are too personal and too much given to authorial self-revelation to be designated “biography”’ (130). In fact, memoir would seem to me equally valid a categorisation as autobiography for son–father auto/biographies, having more to do with the scope of the lives narrated than the balance between self and other, and when discussing texts described by their authors as memoir, I will employ this term.

While the present discussion will not be overly involved with the semantics of generic markers, my study will argue for the term ‘patrimonial life narratives’ as a further alternative for categorising the texts I explore in this book. Importantly, my term focuses attention on the narratological components of this form, whilst broadening the ‘father’ frame to encompass males within or beyond the family structure who may act as surrogate figures for the writer-son of the text. While the term implies a patrilineal conception of heritage, this is not always necessarily so. As we will discover in Chapter Four, the ‘afterlife’ of Richard Freadman’s text has included his daughter’s acknowledgement of her part in a patrimonial line, suggesting that the concerns of patrimonial life narrative do not necessarily entail (or provoke in a reader) gender exclusivity.

This leads me to acknowledge and introduce the critic and his term that were the inspirations and initial reference guide for the present study. The Son’s Book of the Father was coined in 2003 by Freadman in his memoir *Shadow of Doubt: My Father and Myself*. Freadman traces the sub-genre at least as far back as the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Pointing towards precedents for his memoir, the author quotes from John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography* (1873) and Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907), but singles out the latter as ‘the paradigm case of the sort of book I’m trying to write: the Son’s Book of the Father’ (*Shadow of Doubt* 177). Within the narrative, he expands on his conception of the sub-genre, stating:

It is hardly surprising that such patterns [of the father’s centrality] should be so widely occurring: after all, they reflect common aspects of male identity formation and parenting in patriarchal cultures, not least those of British origin. In fact, so many men have followed Gosse’s example that the Son’s Book of the Father now constitutes a substantial sub-genre of life-writing. (86–7)

Freadman outlines modern British and American examples of the Son’s Book, such as J. A. Ackerley’s *My Father and Myself* and Philip Roth’s *Patrimony*, before turning his attention to the situation in Australia: ‘In the current narrative I’m trying to relate my father’s life, and the meaning of that life, to its Australian cultural context. As has often been noted, the figure of the father looms large in life-writing by Australian men’ (287). This study examines some texts Freadman lists as examples, such as Raimond Gaita’s *Romulus, My Father*, Peter Rose’s *Rose Boys* and of course his own Son’s Book. In addition, I incorporate works that post-date Freadman’s. I also follow Freadman’s lead in placing these texts simultaneously in relation to their literary forebear of *Father and Son* and in their uniquely Australian cultural context in order to make observations about fathers, sons and masculinities in this country.

At first glance, not all of the works discussed here could be categorised as Sons' Books of the Father. Bernard Smith's *The Boy Adeodatus*, for example, features an absent father who abandoned his family when the author was young. Hal Porter's *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* portrays a father who remained but is for the most part absent in other ways – a shadowy, indistinct, ineffectual presence who is denounced by his more feminine, artistic son as a mere stereotype; a cardboard cut-out of a man who taught his son little of any real value. However, as we will discover, the figure of the 'absent-present' father in Australia is surprisingly common and enacts a powerful authority over the author-son. A recurring pattern in works discussed is the author's struggle to adequately depict the father in life writing: to give him 'voice' or 'presence' in literature – an especially remarkable phenomenon in those texts where the father is the ostensible focus of the narrative. The father of the Australian Son's Book is for the most part reticent, laconic, indistinct. The fact that this figure occurs so frequently raises important questions about the difficulties of representing certain versions of Australian masculinity in life writing. This problem is largely a literary one, revolving around the demands of autobiographical narrative modes, but is informed also by sociological notions of masculinity, particularly that of hegemonic masculinity. This study therefore engages at various points with theorists from the burgeoning field of masculinity studies, notably R. W. Connell, Michael S. Kimmel and David Buchbinder.⁴

'The Child is the Father of Man'

Writing about and even 'back to' the father is intrinsically linked to notions of authority⁵: of acknowledging, challenging or even denying the paternal

4 A related but not necessarily allied development in popular literature is the so-called men's movement, which has caused a revision, and in some cases a reassertion, of traditional or essentialist notions of masculinity. In North America the origins of this movement are typically traced back to Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990). A more understated influence in the Australian context can be traced through Steve Biddulph's popular works on masculinity, such as *Manhood: A Book About Setting Men Free* (1994). Within evangelical Christianity and even (pop) psychology, this movement has fostered notions of the 'father wound'. Gordon Dalbey writes for the man 'who has been wounded by his father [...] who has dared to consider his dad's human limitations and has begun to sense that neither Dad nor any other man can now fulfill his deep and persistent father-longing [...] who is ready to [...] surrender his wound at last to the Father God who defines and shapes all men' (xxi).

5 As Roger Porter describes of his 'Childs' Books of Parental Deception', 'we could regard them as akin to the discourse of formally colonized figures in the empire who "write back" against the power and threat of nullification, insisting on the right of self-representation and regained authority' (*Bureau* 6–7).

influence. Redman describes the task of the son–father auto/biographer in the following way:

In writing the life of his father, the son cannot but write his own self. Indeed, it may be argued that it is in part through the writing of his father that the son forms his own identity. However, in locating himself in relation to his father, the son in effect gives textual birth to the parent – a rather neat literalizing of Wordsworth’s ‘The Child is the father of Man’. Of course, given that the father transmits to the son his own understanding of maleness and fathering, the son’s revision of his father is necessarily belated: it always looks back, as it were, to the example of the Father. (129)

This dialogic (and dialectical) relationship between self and other captures well the way the writer-son must necessarily travel two ways simultaneously: from his father to himself, by demonstrating the extent to which he has taken on or rejected the masculine exemplar of the father; and, in the act of representation or literary creation, from himself (his worldview, his biases) to his father. However, the balance between the two – self from other, other from self – does not function equally in every book. As G. Rocio Davis notes, the direction one travels is largely guided by each author’s autobiographical impulse: ‘sons often write about their fathers in an attempt to discover or learn about a person who was either largely physically or psychologically absent or whose presence was so overwhelming that the autobiographical act becomes an attempt to control the influence of that person on the author’s life’ (231). This book seeks to plot these conflicting motivations along two spectra. In order to do this, we must come to some conclusion about how present (or absent) the self of the author-son and the other of the subject-father is in each text, as well as to what degree the self can be read as growing out of, or being contingent upon, the other.

At one end of the first spectrum stands the towering presence of the father, the ‘fully realised’ biographical subject of the text through whom the autobiographical self of the son is formed. The identity of the author is created out of his depiction of the father, even when, as in the case of *Father and Son*, it is drawn against or in opposition to the father. In such cases, the father is the enduring presence of the narrative and a reader may favour him over the son, regardless of the author’s intentions. At the other end of that spectrum one encounters the dominant presence of the author-son, the more realised subject of the narrative through whom the author attempts to construct an image of the father. In many cases, even when the portrait is a sympathetic one, the device of foregrounding the autobiographical self seems to be adopted reluctantly, as perhaps the only way to give birth or shape to the reticent figure of the father. In Freadman’s *Shadow of Doubt*, although the

author sets out to describe his father's influence (both positive and negative) on him, the 'absent-presence' of his father in the text and his own fully realised autobiographical self become so pronounced that the son can be read as birthing the textual father, echoing the Wordsworthian adage.

Such talk of birthing may cause us to wonder: where is the mother in this paradigm? Can the maternal be expunged so easily, as if the last half-century of feminist theory never took place? The question of the presence (or at times the telling absence) of the mother in my texts will also be addressed in time. Yet since the focus of this book is father-son relationships, the key figure to be explored here is paternal. Most autobiographers who choose to write extensively about parents tend to represent only one at the expense of the other, though there are exceptions – *The Land I Came Through Last* and *The Idea of Home* being two that are discussed here.⁶ I will return to the difficult question of imbalance in 'honouring' both mother and father in autobiography in my conclusion.

A second spectrum for plotting Sons' Books involves the manner in which the father is represented – the extent to which the son's portrait is primarily positive or negative. This may be termed the eulogy-denouncement continuum, and according to Redman encompasses 'texts that range from nostalgic eulogies for loved "Dads", at one end of the spectrum, to bitter denunciations of the monstrous "toxic" Father, at the other' (130). Our discussion will cover the full spectrum of modes in the Australian context, from elegiac to denunciatory, in order to come to some conclusions about which is the dominant mode in the Australian Son's Book over the past 15 years.

The Ethical Turn in Life Writing

In reading my texts within the genre of 'relational autobiography' and assessing my authors' conceptions of relationality, I am already situated within an approach to literature that has been termed 'the ethical turn'. Gathering momentum in the 1990s as a reaction against the dominant theory paradigms of postmodernism and its so-called 'constructivist antihumanism' (Freadman and Miller 194), the turn to ethics in literary studies is defined in part by 'a systematic approach, grounded not in Theory as it is normally understood in literary studies, but in moral philosophy' (Parker, *The Self* 3). Whilst an 'ethics of autobiography' can be glimpsed within the burgeoning field of autobiographical theory written in

6 Rarer still is the author who writes a book of the father and a book of the mother. A notable exception is British author Blake Morrison, who followed up *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* with *Things My Mother Never Told Me* nearly ten years later. In the Australian context, Gabrielle Carey has written memoirs of both parents – *In My Father's House* and *Waiting Room*. It is worth noting that in both cases the impulse to write the father precedes the impulse to write the mother, making the secondary act seem somewhat belated.

the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly from the 1980s onward, and while it is implied in Lejeune's conception of the 'autobiographical pact' to 'tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth' (22), it is essentially in the last decade and a half that the turn to ethics in life writing has progressed apace. The questions Wayne Booth asked of fiction in *The Company We Keep* (1988) – 'What are the Author's Responsibilities to Others Whose Lives Are used as "Material?"' (130) and 'What are the Responsibilities of the Author to Truth?' (132) – have since been applied, perhaps even more stringently, by critics of autobiography. It is, arguably, not until *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999) that Eakin began explicitly engaging with the ethics of the autobiographical act, bringing interdisciplinary approaches from neurology and developmental psychology to bear on questions of truth in life writing, and focussing on the consumption of autobiography in the marketplace to ask serious questions about notions of privacy and representing others. Likewise, Couser's *Recovering Bodies* (1997) and especially *Vulnerable Subjects* (2004) saw a shift in his approach from an earlier engagement with post-structuralist questions of subjectivity to ethical questions of representing illness and disability in life writing. Other important studies that mark this new focus on ethics, and specifically on agency, include John Barbour's *The Conscience of the Autobiographer* (1992), Freedman's *Threads of Life* (2001), and Parker's *The Self in Moral Space* (2007). Each of these critics, along with other important figures such as Nancy Miller, contributed to the collection of essays *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004), in which editor and colloquium convener Eakin proclaimed that 'ethics [is] the deep subject of autobiographical discourse' (6). Though wide ranging in their approaches and interests, these theorists all engage with the ethical in autobiography, with what Parker calls 'the question of what it is right for a life writer to do' (*The Self* 2).

In posing Parker's query to son–father auto/biographers an important subset of questions emerge, for example:

- How does one decide what an ethical representation of the father is? As Barbour finds, 'When we are troubled by or take issue with the memoir writer, it is usually for ethical reasons that focus on whether their judgements are fair, that is, consistently made' ('Judging' 96–7).
- What are some of the ethical complexities that must be negotiated when representing the reticent-laconic father in auto/biography?
- How does the desire to judge or not to judge the father, to condemn or to celebrate, complicate the act of representation? In making a judgement of the father, as Barbour finds, 'the writer may reflect on the limits of moral agency in another person, integrating moral judgements of a parent and interpretation oriented toward understanding the determining influences that made the parent who he or she was' ('Judging' 91).

- If the father is deceased (as is the case in the majority of the texts discussed in this book), how do notions of regret or debt affect the task at hand? How does the father's death impact upon a reader's judgement of whether an author's representation is ethical? As Eakin observed (and sought to rectify), 'The other's right to privacy is frequently assumed to terminate at death' (*Our Lives* 182).

Such questions form the basis of my exploration.

Focal Texts

The focal texts of this study are Richard Freadman's *Shadow of Doubt* (2003), Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father* (1998), Robert Gray's *The Land I Came Through Last* (2008), John Hughes's *The Idea of Home* (2004) and Peter Rose's *Rose Boys* (2001). These five texts represent the full spectrum of the Son's Book, from the elegiac mode of *Romulus, My Father* to ambivalent representations such as Hughes's, to the denunciatory mode of *The Land I Came Through Last*. The close readings of these texts are designated as 'case studies' of this sub-genre, though neither the fathers nor sons of these texts are offered as 'representative' or 'exemplary' Australian lives. I will argue that, for the sons at least, the very act of writing often disqualifies these sons from being 'exemplary' males.

It should be noted from the outset that not all fathers explored here are of Australian origin. Smith's and Gaita's fathers grew up in Europe, for example, with Raimond Gaita arriving in Australia as a 4-year-old boy. While Freadman's father was born in Australia, *Shadow of Doubt* demonstrates that he retained a strong connection to his Jewish ancestry. As a consequence of this, and more generally as an increasingly common feature of the Australian condition, the authors here do not often conceive of purely Australian heritages, but rather lay claim to and explore diverse (though admittedly largely 'White' European⁷) cultural ancestries, including Jewish, British,

7 I do not discuss Australian indigenous autobiography in this study, as I believe attempting to also cover this tradition in one book would be impossible and result in a tokenistic representation at best. Two examples of aboriginal patriography are Rosemary van den Berg's *No Options, no Choice: The Moore River Experience, Thomas Corbett, an Aboriginal half-caste* (1994) and Bill Cohen's *To My Delight: the Autobiography of Bill Cohen, a Grandson of the Gumbangari* (1987). Besides this omission, the relative hegemony of the 'White' European-Australian authors detailed in this study can be in part explained by my focus on the baby boomer generation of auto/biographers, who have largely taken up the project of writing the father as they have reached middle age during the past 20 years. These authors are the sons of pre-World War I or inter-war migrants, who for the most part emigrated from Europe. In my conclusion I will speculate on how this picture may change with the next wave of Australian patriography.

German Romanian, Irish, and Welsh Ukrainian.⁸ However, all writers engage with notions of Australian masculinity in their representations of patrimony, allowing us to draw some wider conclusions about men in contemporary Australia.

I have chosen to focus almost exclusively on patrimonial life narratives by writers who are authors by profession. While studies of autobiography are typically egalitarian, analysing literary works alongside ‘trade’ publications and even self-published family memoirs, I have restricted myself to Son’s Books by professional writers for two reasons. First, as one key focus is questions about what is enabled and disabled by generic frameworks in patrimonial life narratives, I wish to critique authors who are (or should be) attentive to such concerns. Secondly and more importantly, I want to consider writing as a masculine pursuit in this country. Is there a place within the Australian conception of idealised masculinity for the heroic writer?

This book is a study of *contemporary* Son’s Books of the Father: therefore, the chosen focus texts were all published in the past 15 years. However, portions of my analysis, particularly in Chapter Two, will engage with works published before 1998 that are relevant to the current discussion. These texts include David Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street* (1986), Alan Marshall’s *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955), Hal Porter’s *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963) and Bernard Smith’s *The Boy Adeodatus* (1984). Besides the Marshall classic, none of these works could be categorised as Sons’ Books of the Father, yet their representations of largely absent fathers set important precedents for the later works discussed, and also help to frame the discussion of the reticent-laconic Australian father and other versions of Australian masculinity.

Chapter One will focus on *Father and Son* as the ‘paradigm case’ for son–father auto/biographies, investigating how it can be read as a model for many later Sons’ Books. I engage with the significant body of contemporary criticism on Gosse’s autobiography before briefly examining the most explicit engagements with *Father and Son* in Australian literature generally. Chapter Two will read Porter’s *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* and other ‘classic’ Australian texts back to *Father and Son*, arguing for them as examples of ‘deconversion narratives’ in the Gossian mode, and exploring their representations of early- to mid-twentieth-century ‘absent’ Australian fathers.

Chapters Three to Seven present close examinations of five contemporary Sons’ Books. These texts are ordered in two ways. First, they are placed in

8 Based on the few studies of patriography internationally, the sub-genre is by no means confined to a ‘White’ European demographic. See for example David L. Dudley’s *My Father’s Shadow: Intergenerational Conflict in African American Men’s Autobiography* (1991), and Davis’ ‘Writing Fathers: Auto/biography and Unfulfilled Vocation in Sara Suleri Goodyear’s *Boys Will be Boys* and Hanif Kureishi’s *My Ear and his Heart* (2009).

approximate chronology of publication, providing a passage through this sub-genre over the past 15 years. Secondly, my analysis moves from more positive or elegiac accounts, through ambivalent portrayals, to a denunciatory or 'supremely ambivalent' representation. Chapter Three offers a reading of *Romulus, My Father* and the contentious criticism it has inspired, revealing how paying tribute to the father is not without its pitfalls. My own examination will focus on the problems of representing the virtue of self-denial in autobiography. Chapter Four continues this examination of the difficulties of celebrating self-denial in *Shadow of Doubt*. I will argue that Freadman enacts an inversion of the father-son relationship in order to bring his father textually into being.

Chapter Five examines *Rose Boys* as an instance of a unique sub-branch of son-father auto/biography: the Brothers' Book of the Father. Though the text is sole authored, I will argue that Peter Rose attempts to speak *for* his brother, and I will contend that the text is a performance of sonship for the father, who is also the addressee of the text. Chapter Six analyses John Hughes's performance of masculinity in *The Idea of Home*, contending that the author must choose between competing patrimonial performances in his act of self-writing. Chapter Seven develops the theory that son-father auto/biographies often embody this act of choosing one's patrimony, examining Robert Gray's portrayal of numerous father figures in *The Land I Came Through Last* alongside the 'toxic' father of his text. I will argue that Gray's objective 'neither to vindicate nor vilify' leads the author to enact a textual becoming of his father. Gray's auto/biography also returns us in some surprising ways to *Father and Son*, demonstrating how erecting a textual 'monument' to the father is very often a supremely ambivalent autobiographical act.