

Fathers Know Best: *Mother's Milk*, 'Dads' Lit and the Childcare Wars of the Mid 2000s.

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While paternal figures, particularly of the sterner and more tyrannical sort, loom large in the Western literary canon, the genre of 'dads' lit, is a far more recent phenomenon. Emerging in the late 1990s/early 2000s, British male-authored novels that focus on child-rearing and family dynamics were aligned to a growing state and media preoccupation with judging and evaluating parenting and specifically *mothering* practices. As many sociologists and cultural critics have observed, the culture of performative and competitive parenting has flourished within the context of the triumph of a neo-liberal doxa of choice, self-governance, and economic and social individualism (McRobbie 119-137; Gillies 70-93; Quiney 19-40).

The subject of this article, Edward St Aubyn's booker-nominated 2006 novel, *Mother's Milk*, was written in the midst of an escalating public debate on childcare practices. Like the work of more overtly populist dads lit writers, such as Nick Hornby (*About a Boy* 1998) Tony Parsons (*Man and Boy* 1999, *Man and Wife* 2002) and John O'Farrell (*The Best a Man Can Get* 2000, *May Contain Nuts* 2006) St Aubyn's sardonic, autobiographical and nominally anti-establishment novel is strongly embedded in broader conflicts over class and gender power relations. With this in mind, the first section of the article will trace the development of an increasingly powerful and punitive discourse on childrearing in the UK in the last decade or so; the second will give a brief introduction to comic dads lit before offering a more sustained analysis of the way in which St. Aubyn's novel intervenes in and contributes to this debate at a crucial moment of conflict concerning alternative child rearing philosophies.

Family Matters: Who Cares and Why?

The size, structure and behavior of family units have certainly been of increasing interest to successive British governments since the 1960s. The 1960s witnessed the passing of key pieces of 'permissive' legislation, in the UK, such as the 1969 Divorce Act and the 1967 Abortion Act. However, family policy was largely orientated towards shoring up the nuclear family and traditional gender roles through the introduction of welfare initiatives such as tax breaks for married men and part-time nursery provision and child benefit for mothers (Peplar 26 -38). It was evident by the mid 1980s that the divorce rate was steadily rising and that family size was shrinking, particularly amongst the more educated and affluent sectors of society. This coincided with seismic shift to the right in the 1980s and the neo-liberal rolling back of state benefits in the UK implemented by a series of conservative governments.

By the mid 1990s, state concern was growing around the emergence of a benefit-dependent underclass of poorer, female-headed households. The initial government response was both legislative and rhetorical: they reduced welfare provision for single mother and forced estranged fathers to provide for their offspring while also making a number of derisory comments aimed at 'scrounging' single mothers and proclaiming the necessity for a return to 'family values' (understood as an endorsement of traditional gender norms and father-led families) (Fox Harding 119-135). This strategy only hastened the demise of the ailing and unpopular conservative government by reinforcing the widespread view that they were out of touch, anti-modern and hypocritical (following a series of sex scandals involving Conservative MPs). It nonetheless paved the way for a new era of family-focused rhetoric and biosocial policies that have continued from the late 1990s onwards. Prior to the election of the new Labour

government, Tony Blair made no secret of his determination to shoring up the traditional family once in office:

The truth is, and we know it, that the best two crime prevention policies are a job and a stable family. A young country that wants to be a strong country cannot be morally neutral about the family. It is the foundation of any decent society. Behind strong communities, lie strong families. Go to any juvenile court and you will see, because in the family people learn to respect and care for one another. Destroy that in a family and you cannot rebuild it in a country. In every area of policy, we should examine its effect on the family, seeing how we can strengthen it and keep it together (Miller 81).

Elected on a mantra of ‘education, education, education’ the new administration swiftly established a government-run institute for Family and Parenting and ushered in a number of family-orientated policies. These were part of a more progressive family agenda (such as the funding of early childcare initiatives, such as *Surestart*, based on the US *Headstart* programme) but were also aligned to a heavy-handed, expert-led approach to government guidance and intervention in family issues and childcare practices. While the New Labour project initially made some concessions towards equality of opportunity and wealth distribution (through the creation of early years education and the tax credit system) money was gradually withdrawn from childcare services but the interventionist and punitive approach to family life and child welfare continued to flourish (Bristow 67-78).

Blair himself, who had a relatively young family and was the first Prime Minister to father a child when in office for a century, appeared eager to play on his status as an involved and caring father. Reports issued from the Home Office and Treasury from the late 1990s identified

the role of fathers as crucial to the success of the family and the father's rights movement (led by pressure groups such as Father's for Justice and Families Need Fathers) became increasingly visible and vocal. Yet despite the rhetorical emphasis on the importance of fathers and the adoption of the gender neutral term 'parenting' in government guidelines, a vastly unequal portion of childcare and child-related duties continued to be performed by women (Gillies 9). As the childcare publishing industry burgeoned and the media began running daily scare stories covering child care related issues, ranging from the more prosaic dangers of bottle-feeding, childhood obesity, excessive screen time and poor education to terrifying accounts of child neglect and abuse, women continued to be the clear targets of this onslaught of anxiety-provoking narratives.

The intensified public scrutiny of maternal behaviour was justified by the narratives of the 'sacred' child and child welfare, which have a much longer history. Western families have become smaller over the last century or so with the majority of children spend most of their home-based years in education. For this reason, children have become, in Zelizer's famous phrase, 'economically worthless but emotionally priceless' (57). As Zygmunt Bauman has also argued, as traditional community and social ties have been gradually undermined by the individualist tendencies of neo-liberal cultures, the parent child and specifically mother-child bond is viewed as uniquely binding (Bauman 8-13). Indeed, it comes to be regarded as the source of all comfort and security in an increasingly harsh and unstable world. In simple terms, while the new discourse of fatherhood tended to be affirmative, optimistic and focused on the assertion of father's rights (rather than duties or responsibilities) state and media attitudes towards mothers became increasingly critical and bullying. As Brid Featherstone suggests:

Certainly, it would appear that, although there has been important moves to support both mothers and fathers to work and care, the policies, in the main, support fathers as providers of cash and rather than of care. This has occurred despite the increasing consensus amongst policy makers that fathers have a vital contribution to make in children's development, beyond the provision of cash (Featherstone 3).

Popular dads lit and the 'families need fathers' message.

Suddenly I realized - two people isn't enough. You need backup. If you're only two people, and someone drops off the edge, then you're on your own. Two isn't a large enough number. You need three at least (Hornby, 53)

Given the context outlined above, it is perhaps not surprising that the crop of male authored, family-focused novels that appeared in the late 1990s to mid 2000s both reflect and contribute to culture of mother shaming and father-praising in a number of different ways. At the popular end of the dads lit scale, writers such as Nick Hornby and John O' Farrell were strongly associated with the new labour project: indeed, O' Farrell worked as a speech writer for Tony Blair, was a New Labour columnist and stood for Parliament (unsuccessfully) a couple of times. Both writers appear to endorse a mode of 'third way' centre-leftism that advocates social liberalism and embraces popular culture and consumerism. Their representations of gender roles and family life were also wholly in tune with the socio-political zeitgeist, placing both childless men and fathers in the role of observers, helpers and critical friends, rather than primary caregivers or committed co-parents. As I will demonstrate, mothers tend to be depicted as weak, narcissistic or stropky.

In contrast, men – irrespective of whether they are fathers themselves – are seen to bring a welcome note of sanity and detachment to the world of women who are either too emotionally fragile or too pushy and controlling to cope successfully with the demands of parenthood. For example, in Nick Hornby's *About A Boy* (the best known of the comic dads lit novels due to a successful film adaptation) the boy in question, 12 year old Marcus, is essentially rescued from his unhappy, self-absorbed 'hippy' single mother by a wealthy, single man who becomes a friend to the ailing family. Although Will is presented as a selfish, spoilt character that preys on vulnerable single mothers, he is still depicted as a far more credible parental figure than Marcus' mother, Fiona. One of the central ironies of the novel is that while Fiona prides herself on being a spiritual and sensitive person, she has no real understanding of her growing son's needs. In particular, she appears blind to the misery she inflicts by forcing him to adopt what are presented as embarrassing 'feminine' cultural tastes (such as vegetarianism, folk music and handmade clothes) that make him a target for playground bullies. *About A Boy* follows a classic oedipal pattern in which, in order to flourish in the wider world, Marcus must renounce his mother and join forces with Will in treating her (and her femininised counterculture) with pity and contempt. If the reader is still left in any doubt as to the transparent 'families need fathers' message of the novel, ¹Hornby introduces a second mother and son unit which is equally dysfunctional. Unlike the hapless and mentally unstable Fiona, single mother Rachel is a tough, attractive, professional woman and is therefore of sexual interest to Will. However, her son Ali (who is also 12) is far more damaged than Marcus, displaying inappropriate aggression towards both Will and Marcus and exploding in a jealous rage over their proximity to his mother. By befriending Marcus and (eventually) becoming a stepfather to Ali, Will ends up saving not one, but two, failing female-led families: one in which the boy has been weakened and 'overfeminised' and the other in

which, in the absence of any identifiable father figure, he has taken on a prematurely masculinized and aggressive role.

If *About A Boy* reiterates neo-traditionalist warnings against the psychological and social dangers of women raising boys alone, O' Farrell's *May Contain Nuts* (which was also adapted for the screen) draws humor from exploiting the reader's familiarity with another popular maternal folk devil: the pushy, 'helicopter' mother. Although it is subtitled, 'a novel of extreme parenting', once again, the target of satire is not parents, but mothers. Unlike Hornby's single mothers, who are portrayed as chippy underdogs (Will meets them by joining a group named SPAT 'single parents alone together') the affluent and privileged middle-class mothers in O' Farrell's satire suffer instead from an excessive desire to succeed at 'good motherhood' in the terms that Sharon Hayes defined as 'intensive mothering' (97-131).

Predictably, this is depicted through a neurotic and highly competitive interest in their children's health and education that culminates in the heroine, Alice, posing as her 11 year old daughter and sitting an entrance exam in order to insure that her daughter gains a place at an exclusive, fee-paying school rather than the feared local comp. Although all families in the novel are 'intact', fathers are reluctant to take up arms against other parents and largely hover in the background, attempting to curb and contain the more damaging and excessive competitive impulses displayed by their wives. O' Farrell's novel shows some sympathy towards his heroine and comes out strongly in favour of a more community, ethically driven approach to parenting. For example, although Alice passes the test she eventually offers her daughter's place to a more deserving scholarship girl. However, there is little sense that the mothers' actions and behaviour is motivated by anything other than their own personal demons. The general context of state and media policing of maternal behavior or the fear of educational failure created by the existence of

a highly stratified education system and considerable job insecurity through the implementation of the (albeit softened) neo-liberal politics of the new labour era is not in evidence. More significantly, maternal ‘overinvestment’ is rarely linked to the novel’s depiction of paternal distance. Indeed, paternal laziness is not only normalized but is presented as a healthy contrast to collective maternal madness.

This Won’t Affect My Reference Will It? Attachment Parenting, Mothers and ‘Others’ In *Mother’s Milk*

Mother’s Milk is the fourth novel following the life journey of Patrick Melrose, an upper class, male protagonist who is closely based on St Aubyn himself. The first three novels chart Melrose’s early life and the path of self-destructive and hedonistic behaviour that dulls the pain of his economically privileged but emotionally deprived and physically abusive childhood. In *Mother’s Milk*, Melrose is now married and has two young sons: a preternaturally intelligent five year old (Robert) and a new baby (Thomas). St Aubyn’s work contrasts with the more populist, journalistic form of the dads lit novels mentioned above in that the highly acclaimed *Mother’s Milk* was received and evaluated as a serious neo-modernist ‘literary’ novel rather than a book-group or beach-orientated read. As an unapologetically upper-class writer, St Aubyn’s follows in the footsteps of caustic English social critics, such as Evelyn Waugh while also adopting the world-weary and misanthropic stance associated with curmudgeonly US male literary legends, such as Philip Roth. Like Roth, St Aubyn’s complex, multi-vocal first person characterisation also draws much from dominant psychoanalytical views of child/parent dynamics and the formation of selfhood. Yet it is in this respect that his novels have more in common with popular dads lit than may initially seem apparent.

As demonstrated earlier, from the late 1990s onwards, parental and particularly, maternal behaviour became the subject of intense state and media scrutiny, accompanied by an explosion of childcare advice magazines, book and television programmes. During the specific timeframe in which St Aubyn's novel was published (mid 2000s) a particularly acrimonious public debate was taking place concerning alternative childcare methods. In broad brush terms, this was divided between those who advocated routine-led, discipline-orientated methods e.g. controlled crying and punishments such as 'the naughty step' (such as presenter of the popular US/UK television show, *Supernanny*, Jo Frost and child care expert, Gina Ford, author of the highly successful 1999 *Contented Little Baby Book*) and the primarily mother-centered therapeutically informed, Bowlby-influenced methods associated with William and Martha Sears and the attachment parenting movement. It is very clear from the first paragraph – in which Melrose's five-year-old son's remembers and describes his own birth – that a strong belief in the latter, mother-centered approach is embedded in every page of St Aubyn's treatment of human development. Indeed, much of the novel specifically endorses the discourse of 'infant determinism' in which events in infancy are viewed as having long-lasting and irreversible effects on adult mental health:

Why had they pretended to kill him when he was born? Keeping him awake for days, banging his head again and again against a closed cervix; twisting the cord around his throat and throttling him; chopping through his mother's abdomen with cold shears; clamping his head and wrenching his neck from side-to-side; dragging him out of his home and hitting him; shining lights in his eyes and doing experiments' taking him away from his mother while she lay on the table, half-dead. Maybe the idea was to destroy his nostalgia for the old world. First the confinement to make him hungry for space when he got it, even this loud desert, with only the

bandages of his mother's arms to wrap around him, never the whole thing again, the whole warm thing all around him, being everything (St Aubyn, 3).

The passage, which presents a routine C-section as a damaging and traumatic event for the baby, sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Infants and young children – particularly Melrose's children, who are presented as unusually gifted and sensitive – are largely defined in terms of their susceptibility to damage by a cruel and indifferent world. *Mother's Milk* features a very wide range of biological mothers and mother substitutes figures (such as nannies and servants). These comprise Mary (his wife) his own mother, his mother-in-law, his ex-girl friend, a mother of his son's classmate and her best friend, a female servant and two nannies. All but one of these female characters is exposed as having little real empathy with or enthusiasm for children. Chief amongst his maternal targets is Melrose's own mother, a victim of rape and domestic violence, who Melrose's nonetheless despises for failing to protect him from his abusive father. Her self-serving philanthropic efforts, which involve disinheriting Melrose and handing their estate in *province* over to a new age spiritual foundation, initiate a series of negative reflections on her many maternal failings. By critiquing Melrose's wealthy mother, St Aubyn might appear to buck the trend in which parenting norms undermine poorer mothers and validate forms of labour intensive parenting which are the preserve of the affluent middle-classes. However, the repudiation of prior modes of frosty, distanced English upper-class parenting has become a well-established trope within both comic mums lit and the more interrogative maternal memoir which only serves to give greater emphasis to the emotional expertise and round-the-clock parenting required of modern mothers (Garrett 2013).

If Melrose's wealthy mother and mother-in-law epitomise the emotional ineptitude of the pre-Bowlby generation, the remaining bad mothers/mother figures hail, more predictably, from

the ranks of the lower classes. Following the traumatic birth of Melrose's second child the family enlist a maternity nurse, Margaret, who appears to be a fairly direct caricature of reality television 'supernanny', Jo Frost. She is portrayed as overweight, egotistical and vulgar. She brags of expensive gifts bestowed by grateful parents, uses patronising 'baby' words (such as 'botty') and sneers at Melrose's attempts to recognize and think through his son's experience of the Lacanian mirror stage. An adherent of routine and discipline orientated childcare methods, Margaret stomps on Mary's finer maternal instincts by 'growling' at her for refusing to place the infant in a cot overnight. The reader is invited to collude with Melrose and his precocious eldest child, Robert, in laughing at the vulgar, insensitive and ignorant Margaret:

Robert had stuffed a cushion under his T-shirt and was tottering about the room pretending to be Margaret. Once his head was jammed full of someone's words he had to get them out. He was so involved in his performance that he didn't notice his father coming into the room.

'What are you doing?' asked his father, half-knowing already.

'I was just being Margaret.

'That's all we need, another Margaret. Come down and have some tea'.

'I'm that stuffed already,' said Robert, patting his cushion. 'Daddy, when Margaret leaves, I'll still be here to give Mummy bad advice about how to look after babies. And I wont charge you anything.'

‘Things are looking up,’ said his father, holding out his hand to pull Robert up. Robert groaned and staggered across the floor and the two of them headed downstairs sharing their secret joke (20).

Shortly after this incident, Margaret drops the infant while apparently ‘tipsy’; again, we are informed of this incident from the child’s point of view.

He sprinted round the corner of the terrace and met his father running out of the front door. Margaret was lying on the lawn, holding Thomas sprawled on her bosom. ‘It’s all right dear, it’s all right’, said Margaret. ‘Look, he’s even stopped crying. I took the fall, you see, on my bottom. It’s my training. I think I may have broken my finger but there’s no need to worry about silly old Margaret as long as no harm has come to the baby’.

That’s the first sensible thing I’ve ever heard you say’, said his mother, who never said anything unkind. She lifted Thomas out of his cot and kissed his head again and again. (24)

After putting her in her place, the Melroses immediately dismiss Margaret, causing her to ask, ‘this won’t affect my reference, will it?’ ‘What reference? Asked his father’. ‘Oh I see’, said Margaret, half-wounded, half angry, all dignified’ (31).

The peremptory severing of Margaret’s contract is presented as a blow to those who seek to harm precious infants, rather than the unfair dismissal of a servant by wealthy and time-rich parents who have chosen to employ others to assist in the care of their children while on a luxury holiday. Margaret’s departure is shortly followed by a scene in which the family visit the wealthy parents of one of their son’s classmates who are also resident in the south of France for the summer. Once again, the episode serves largely to highlight the family’s superior parenting

abilities by presenting another jumbled assortment of emotionally insensitive mother and mother figures. We are told that:

Josh's parents were very rich, so he often had amazing new toys before anyone else had even heard of them. For his last birthday he had been given a real electric jeep, with a DVD player and a miniature television. He drove it around the garden, squashing the flowers and trying to run over Arnie, his dog. Eventually, he crashed into a bush and he and Robert sat in the rain watching the miniature television. When he came round to Robert's flat he said how pathetic the toys were and complained that he was bored. Robert tried to make up games with him but he didn't know how to make things up. He just pretended to be a television character for about three seconds, then fell over and shouted, 'I'm so dead'. (47)

Following this unflattering introduction to the chubby and neglected Josh, we are left in no doubt that his lack of imagination and brutish behaviour are the fault of his mother Jilly, a greedy, vulgar woman who, unlike Mary, is more than happy to delegate her childrearing duties to others, stating that:

I don't know what I would do without Jo, she has only been here a week and she is already part of the family. You can dump your lot on her, she's marvellous.'

'We quite like looking after them ourselves' said his mother'. (51)

Another couple, Christine and Roger, accompanies Jilly's family. They have left their two year old in the UK to come on holiday. Christine is pregnant with another child but, in the terms established by the novel, is failing to respond with appropriate enthusiasm or sensitivity:

‘I think we are in major denial about it, said Christine ...’ The other day Roger said, ‘do you want to go skiing in January? I’ve got to be in Switzerland anyway on business anyway’, and I said, sure, why not? We had both forgotten that’s the week I’m supposed to give birth.’

Jilly hooted with laughter and rolled her eyes skywards.

‘I mean, is that absent-minded or what? Said Christine ... ‘look at them, said Jilly, pointing to Robert’s mother, they are absolutely gobsmacked – they are loving parents’ (50).

As is evident from the above, the aptly named, Mary, who is wholly wedded to mother-centric, attachment parenting methods, is the only maternal figure who escapes St Aubyn’s scathing prose. Although certain chapters are written from her perspective, we get little sense of her personality other than as a woman who has willingly subsumed her character into full-time childrearing and heroically resists any assistance. Mary clearly finds this arduous and emotionally draining, but we are nonetheless encouraged to admire her resistance to non-mother based childcare, her superior attitude towards nannies (and other women who employ them) and her whole-hearted embrace of intensive mothering. Protesting to her friend Sally against childcare methods that introduce boundaries or discipline, she states:

‘Why would you want to break your child’s will?’ That’s what our mothers wanted to do. That’s what it meant to be good – being broken’. Sally, Mary’s American friend, was her greatest ally; also a mother showered in useless advice, also determined to give her children uncompromised support, to roll the boulder of her own upbringing out of the way so that they could run free. This task was surrounded by hostile commentary: stop being a doormat; don’t be a slave to your children; get your figure back; keep your husband happy; get back ‘out there’; go to a party, spending your time with your children drives you literally mad; increase your self-

esteem by handing your children over to someone else and writing an article saying that women should not feel guilty about handing their children over to someone else; don't spoil your children by giving what they want, let the little tyrants cry themselves to sleep, when they realise that crying is useless they will stop; anyway, children love boundaries.' (159)

Conclusion: Dads Lit and the New Parenting Orthodoxy.

Through the adopted voice of 'good mothers' such as Mary and Sally, St Aubyn's *Mother's Milk* disingenuously presents highly normative and oppressive expectations on mothers: that they should relinquish work, abandon their social lives and devote themselves wholly and completely to their children, as brave rebellions against a widespread culture of child neglect and indifference. The support and assistance that study after study has suggested that new mothers long for (and few can afford) is presented as overtly damaging for children, intrusive to family life and desired only by women who have callously rejected their role as caregivers. Childcare methods that seek to transfer a measure of control to mothers and may make it easier for them to continue to pursue careers and independent lives are condemned as selfish and cruel.ⁱⁱ In keeping with more popular forms of dads lit, St Aubyn subjects his female characters parenting to ruthless scrutiny, yet protagonist Patrick Melrose is still presented as a caring and sensitive father, despite being an alcoholic and a philanderer who does little hands-on childcare.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which cultural forms, such as the novel, contribute to broader movements in thought and behaviour, but there is little question that the popular routine and discipline-based childcare methods of the mid 2000s eventually lost ground to the more mother-focused, child-centred attachment approaches that have gradually become the accepted norm in childcare wisdom. As family-focused novels are read predominantly by women, it seems

reasonable to assume that both high and lowbrow ‘dads lit’ formed part of a broader neo-liberal culture, neo-traditionalist cultural backlash in which father still knows best.

¹ Marcus’ recovery through his emotional and cultural separation from his damaged and damaging mother is signified at the close of the novel when Will suggests that he plays a Joni Mitchell song on the piano and Marcus announces that he hates her music.

¹The more routine and discipline led approaches to childcare advocated by popular childcare experts such as Gina Ford or Jo Frost are also labour intensive but are less overtly gendered and seek to establish boundaries. Gina Ford was subject to much sexist media vilification over her methods, culminating in her defamation case against mumsnet. While all childcare experts tend to patronize parents and aim their advice specifically at mothers, the specific defamation of childless or working class female childcare gurus (particularly those who question the dominant post-Bowlby, exclusively mother-centered paradigm) contributes to more general culture of the neo-liberal reinforcement of traditional class/gender power relations.

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