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‘MATRON LIT’: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY VOICE?

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I argue that matron lit gives over-forties women a voice within contemporary popular fictional texts that they have previously been denied. This genre began to emerge around the turn of the twenty-first century as a sub-genre of chick lit and is now firmly entrenched in the mainstream of popular fiction. Contemporary popular fiction aimed at the baby-boom market has established its readership steadily. For the first time older female readers of popular fiction have heroines to whom they can relate. Matron lit discusses the gains and losses that are encountered by ageing women in Western society. Cultural attitudes about ageing and gender operate together to marginalise older women. Matron lit contributes to the debate around ageing and gender by reporting and exposing gendered and ageist discourses.

In order to explore the impact of fictional narratives that represent the lives of older women, I draw on the work of Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. These theorists provide a frame of reference that assist an understanding of the constructive discourse which promotes normative cultural concepts of ageing and gender. In reporting on gendered ageist discourses matron lit exposes the repetitive linguistic process that undermines mature, female identities. While matron lit sometimes simply recites ageist discourses, it occasionally challenges them directly and frequently subverts them through irony.

The particular issues which I explore over five chapters are:

The importance of body image and sexuality, in the lives of matron lit heroines.

The effect of ageist attitudes on wellbeing.

The significance of home for matron lit heroines.

The relevance of relationships and friendships to mature women.

The pursuit of 'liminal' space where post-reproductive women can re-evaluate their purpose.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **FOREWORD**

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new sub-genre of contemporary, popular fiction, which has been branded by the media as matron lit, or alternatively grey chick lit, has been made available to older female readers. Around 2005-2006, there was a short-lived burst of media interest in grey chick lit, with several articles appearing in newspapers and magazines. There has been little scholarly discussion of matron lit beyond brief references in some academic analysis of chick lit. This appears to be changing, as academic research begins to focus more clearly on women, ageing and popular culture. Matron lit makes a specific contribution to the current debate on ageing and gender because it offers a discussion around the situations and attitudes that many women experience as they move through mid-life to old age. Popular fiction reaches a larger audience than literary fiction and is often a quick and easy read. Matron lit is readily available, at low cost, via the supermarket shelves and bargain book stores, as well as more traditional book shops; these are the kind of paperbacks which come free with women's magazines. Many are also available as e-books.

The internet has recently seen a revival of interest in matron lit with a number of authors blogging about fiction which features older heroines and debating whether it should, more appropriately, be re-labelled 'boomer lit'. Many of these authors describe themselves as 'baby-boomers' whose readers are predominately female 'boomers'. Possibly the label 'boomer lit' will eventually take precedence, because the baby-boomer women were always the target market for this genre of fiction. Tara Gavin, commissioning editor at Harlequin, which now incorporates Mills and Boon, confirms that when they launched the 'Next' series of books in 2006 'the target market were the women from the baby-boom generation' (Personal communication: 2012). Whatever its label, this genre, or sub-genre (depending on which print article or web page one reads) is part of a movement which can be detected in popular culture across fiction, television and film. Popular culture is beginning to represent the concept that the later years of people's lives are just as worthy of dramatization as any other life stage. At the London Film Festival in October 2012, seventy-seven-year-old Dame Maggie Smith grumbled 'a lot of grown-ups would like films for grown-ups about grown-ups, [...] it is a bit baffling why everyone has to be treated as if they were five years old.' But *The Telegraph's* Max Davidson disagreed with her saying:

Two or three years ago, she would have had an unanswerable case. Now, thanks not least to her own exertions, “grey cinema” is booming, with a string of successful films, many British-made, [...] their success is no accident. They have done well because they are well-written, well-acted, do not patronise their audiences and tackle serious themes in an intelligent, nuanced way. (2012)

Smith appeared amongst a mature cast in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* which was ‘a box office hit’, according to the *Telegraph*’s show business editor Anita Singh (2012). Smith’s latest film *Quartet*, was directed by Dustin Hoffman who also starred in *Last Chance Harvey* (2008). Hoffman’s role as Harvey is the personification of the transformational potential of late-life romance, a subject which has been frequently discussed in grey chick lit novels. However, matron lit authors usually discuss relationships from the female viewpoint and although not undermining the positive promise of new love, refrain from presenting romance as a panacea.

Matron lit illustrates and debates the negotiations and adjustments, both physical and emotional, which are a consequence of increased longevity, within Western culture. This holds particular expectations regarding age and gender. According to Margaret Morganroth Gullette ‘women are still aged by culture younger than men are’ (2004: 23). The cultural expectations and judgements of ageing affect the quality of women’s lives and the acknowledgement and discussion about the ‘rules’ of ageing, gender and behaviour to be found in matron lit, expose the performances demanded by society. In *Facing Age* Laura Clarke argues that ‘aging poses a huge threat to women’s sense of identity, perceived femininity, and sexual desirability’ (2010: 2). The biological changes that are integral to the ageing process are undeniable but how these changes are regarded is the product of culture. In a discussion about the rights of older people M. Gorman defines this distinction when he explains that:

The ageing process is of course a biological reality which has its own dynamic, largely beyond human control. However, it is also subject to the constructions by which each society makes sense of old age. In the developed world, chronological time plays a paramount role. (1999: 3-21)

We need to allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the ageing process. Increased life expectancy is provocation to question whether biological changes could or should be interpreted in new ways, especially when we consider Gullette’s assertion that ‘so much of life is now spent being what the cult of youth call “old”’ (2004: 9). She further argues that equating ageing with decline is ‘a devastating formula’ (Gullette, 2004: 7). It would be a pity to view increased longevity only in terms of extended decline and while grey chick lit does

discuss this interpretation, it also offers other narratives. Matron lit suggests that there are means of ‘escape’ available, even in the face of severe physical impairment, through memory and imagination. This genre also suggests that even afflictions such as senility may be ameliorated through compassionate care and therapy, which is focused on the abilities an elderly person has, rather than their deficiencies. However, the number of matron lit novels which feature extremely old heroines is limited.

The majority of this genre’s female protagonists can be classified as middle-aged or the ‘young-old’ aged sixty-plus, who still have living parents. As stated in *Old Age: From Antiquity to Postmodernity*, ‘to be 60 today is to be surrounded by the generations of one’s own parents and a kindred made up of collaterals, who are also 60 or slightly more, who are followed by one’s children and grandchildren’ (Johnson and Thane, 1998: 119). Increased longevity has an impact upon generational relationship hierarchies and places people in their sixties in a relational position to both their parents and adult children. It has been suggested that:

People moving through their fifties, may feel they are handling a three-ring medical circus. Caring for their children and parents, as the caught-between women and men commonly known as the sandwich generation, they increasingly face health problems related to their own advancing age. (Turiel, 2005: 5)

The growing number of people, predominantly women in their fifties and sixties, who are caring for parents and/or children and grandchildren, add a new dimension to the already existing narratives of ageing. David Cravit states that in Canada, the USA and the UK, ‘life expectancy at birth was under 50 in 1900; a century later, it was about 80’ (2008: 33). The media, in all its forms ranging from television documentaries to advertising, regularly remind us that we have an ageing population and that the number of people entitled to state pension and in need of medical care is on the increase.

The public is forced to consider that the cost of providing for the needs of the elderly may challenge how we all live. Cravit argues that, ‘for the most part, the aging of the population is seen largely as a matter of arithmetic — more old people, and therefore more problems associated with being old’ (2008: 2). Over the past two years, changes to the age of entitlement, to both state and public sector pensions, which will require younger people to work for longer, have been discussed in the media. The well-documented demonstrations against these changes and the strike by U.K. public sector workers on November 30th 2011

place 'ageing' and its cost to the state and tax-payer as a significant area of concern for contemporary British society. As Cravit reasons:

People are living longer, obviously, so "older people" represent an ever-increasing percentage of the population. This is expected to put huge burdens on existing pension programs, health care systems and other social agencies. Most of what's being written about the aging of the population focuses on numbers. (2008: 2)

Fictional representations of ageing counter-balance the bias that Cravit describes, by making individuals the centre of attention in any discussion about numbers and costs. It is conceivable that the increasing cost of funding pensions, providing medical services and community support for the frail elderly, and the adjustments required to meet them, could cause resentment and reinforce the concept that old people are a burden on society. The increasing size of the elderly population is perceived as both a liability and a threat and this places older people in a complex situation. The concern of the young, about the 'problem' of the old, alienates both groups and increases the pressure on young people to fear both old people and their own ageing.

Scaremongering in the media is demonstrated by the incendiary language used to describe the consequences for young people, of an ageing population. For example, *The Sunday Times* accuses pensioners of 'hoarding' housing, with 79% of them owning their own homes, compared to 14% of people under twenty-five. According to Jonathon Leake 'the income of pensioners in their sixties and seventies now exceeds those of younger working people for the first time' (2012: 14). Leake also states that 'some social scientists have become so concerned that they have set up the Intergenerational Foundation to campaign against policies it claims favour the old while piling the costs on to younger generations' (2012: 14).

Pensioners seem to attract bad press, no matter what financial provision they have made for retirement. Those who rely on state benefits are perceived to be feeding off the young and those who have paid into private pension schemes are now decried for having a larger income than younger generations. When pensioners are reliant on the state to provide care in nursing homes they are a drain on society and if they have bought houses, which may be sold to pay for such care, should they need it, then they are demonised in the press as hoarders.

According to Dr Robert Butler: 'If you're retired, the implication is that you're no longer a part of society' (Undated). In his obituary of Butler, Michael Carlson states 'in 1968 Butler coined the term "ageism" to denote the way society denied older people the opportunities to pursue life, to reinvent themselves' (2010). Ageism requires that pensioners are positioned as the enemy of the working generation and anyone whose physical appearance signals

approaching retirement becomes suspect. Mike Hepworth remarks that 'in this cultural climate it becomes increasingly difficult to conjure up positive images of middle age and later life. The biological changes associated with chronological ageing are interpreted within a powerfully negative and pessimistic frame of reference' (2003: 98). Women are sanctioned for being pensioners on three counts, because in addition to no longer being part of the work force, they are postmenopausal and are expected to be a burden on society for longer than men.

Increased longevity has presented women with particular issues because, as Soares and Warren indicate in *Menopausal Transitions*, until around a hundred years ago the majority of women did not live beyond the menopause:

Today the average life expectancy of a female in our society exceeds 80 years and, consequently, women now live more than one third of their lives during the post menopause. In addition to the obvious physical changes occurring around the menopause, this phase of life is often burdened with numerous emotional stressors. (2009: 115)

As long as postmenopausal women are regarded as having outlived their function and to be in need of care, they will be considered to be a burden on society. Laura Clarke argues that this perception of aged female bodies is part of 'ageist societal norms regarding later life and the oppressive and often dehumanizing meanings attributed to aging female bodies' (2010: 4). It appears that a woman's usefulness is not solely tied up with fertility but particularly with the 'appearance' of fecundity. Clarke further states that 'as society becomes increasingly obsessed with images, appearances, and the pursuit of youthfulness, the aged female body has the potential to become ever more disparaged' (2010: 4). She argues that because beauty is equated with youth, older women's 'social currency is increasingly jeopardized by their failure to achieve idealized beauty standards' (Clarke, 2010: 4). Any perception of dependence allows society to dismiss postmenopausal women as inferior. If a woman does not, or cannot, maintain an appearance of youth and usefulness she is at a disadvantage within Western culture. Clarke claims that 'the taken-for-granted discriminatory discourses and practices surrounding oldness combined with the scholarly silences around aging and aged bodies culminate in our authoring of our own descent into social devaluation' (2010: 3). It is important that any such 'taken-for-granted' ageism should be debated within both academia and popular culture, if the position of older people is to be re-assessed. Ageism becomes normative and taken for granted through the common cultural use of stereotypes, labels and name-calling. The crucial force which labelling and naming exert on people's lives

is expressed clearly by Judith Butler when she says ‘naming is performative [...] to some extent it brings into linguistic being that which it names’ (1997: 123). Naming postmenopausal women unattractive and redundant makes them so and it is within this cultural environment that older women are required to negotiate their position in society. Labelling requires older women to make a choice, whether to try to deny their ageing in an attempt to pass as a member of the younger generation, to become invisible so as not to attract contempt, or to flaunt old age as emancipation from convention. If and when stereotypes of ageing evolve into less demeaning forms, ageing women will have more options. Leslie Morgan and Suzanne Kunkel suggest that ‘we need to expand our ideas about what aging means and move beyond old stereotypes of age and the life course’ (2006: 327). They are optimistic that this re-appraisal will come about because ‘some scholars suggest that we will probably rethink many of our assumptions about aging and life stages as more of us survive to ages close to the century mark’ (Morgan, Kunkel, 2006: 327). This shift can clearly be witnessed within contemporary popular fiction because older female writers are creating older heroines. I am interested in the potential of fictional representations of the ageing process to influence individual and cultural perceptions. I consider how the middle-aged and elderly female characters of matron lit negotiate increased life expectancy and the impact it has on what it means to be an older woman, in a society which continues to glorify youth and denigrate the ageing process. Increased life-expectancy presents individuals with opportunities and challenges which are new and unexplored by previous generations.

A particular challenge is the self-policing ageism which anticipates the overt ageism of Western society and circumscribes the behaviour and potential of older women, even before social censorship is directed at the individual. The message which the young are force-fed through almost every facet of media representation and cultural expression, is that ageing must be feared. Women express concern about the signs of ageing long before they become visible and a Foucauldian aspect of ageist censorship and self-censorship is revealed in matron lit. In his work *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault explains that the prison system made use of established social codes which:

Had already been constituted outside the legal apparatus when, throughout the social body, procedures were being elaborated for distributing individuals, fixing them in space, classifying them, extracting from them the maximum in time and forces, training their bodies, coding their continuous behaviour, maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them an apparatus of observation. (1995: 231)

All individuals are subject to and a part of this observational apparatus, so all females are raised with an awareness of the connection which has been forged between youthful feminine appearance and perceived usefulness to society. This understanding of ageism and participation in its re-production is demonstrated from an early age by the common use, throughout all age groups, of the phrase 'too old'. The implied censure of this phrase is frequently used to police female appearance and behaviour. Even pre-adolescent females are trained to be aware of and obedient to, the cultural rules of age-appropriate dress and behaviour. This obedience becomes internalised and leads to self-policing of actions and appearance. In *Aged by Culture*, Gullette describes the impact of computer software which purported to show children what they would look like as they aged. She recalls:

One eight year old girl in the hearing of a Boston Globe reporter moaned "I don't want to get old!"[...] When I interviewed the children exiting I asked "What did you learn?" The answer in short was "I don't want to get old." They had nothing to add. (2004: 4)

While Gullette described the children's reaction as 'unisex' there is a cultural bias which allows men to retain value through other means than youthful appearance. On this point Kathleen Woodward has said:

No one can dispute the incontrovertible fact that in our society women are more disadvantaged in old age in terms of social opportunities and resources than are men. In our culture, the sexual allure of a woman, still taken to be one of a woman's most important "economic" possessions, is understood to diminish much more rapidly with age than does that of a man. All this is self-evident. (1991: 16)

Arguably, the experience of the 'ageing booth' is more detrimental for girls, when examined through the cultural lens that views female youthful beauty as currency. Grey chick lit examines the aftermath of more than forty years of social conditioning, which convinces women that ageing is a type of failure, especially when it is seen to be written on the body. Analysis of the similarities, differences, and dominant themes in grey chick lit reveals that within this genre there are narratives of decline or growth and development, narratives about past and memory and narratives that explore the impact that cultural stereotypes in conjunction with the character's personal history, have on the character's present and future expectations of quality of life. The ways that authors of popular fiction, aimed at women readers, approach the transitions into mid-life and old-age demonstrate that their heroines are, despite cultural expectations and physical changes, often able to negotiate a place in their thinking which can accommodate hope. It is in this opening up of a space where alternative fantasies of old age are imagined, that novels written for older women readers may play a

part in changing cultural expectations of female ageing. Chivers expresses the opinion that ‘narrative fiction can encourage a reimagination of social problems, such as ubiquitous negative conceptions of late life’ (2003: 99). Novels which position older women as heroines focus on the characters’ response to the cultural negativity which is aimed at them and reveal their responses to be varied and sometimes rebellious.

Grey chick lit examines the reality of the social problems that accrue with age and re-imagines the experience of ageing, through a vision of female desire for recognition. Woodward writes that ‘socially, politically, physically – the meanings of old age are changing. On the whole our literary tradition has lagged behind, continuing to produce predominantly, dark portraits of aging’ (1991: 196). Grey chick lit novels are not confined to ‘dark portraits of aging’ but offer readers a range of images of ageing, which stretch from the dark and dismal through to the light and fantastic. Gullette, in her early, optimistic discussion of mid-life ‘progress’ literature, states that ‘if the idea of adult growth is an illusion, the illusion seems to be taking over at the end of the twentieth century’ (1988: xxi). The accessibility of matron lit puts it in a position to spread the happy ‘illusion of adult growth’, far and wide. What matron lit lacks in literary value, compared to the literature analysed by Gullette, it makes up for in availability, affordability and ‘easy-reading’. In *Safe at Last in the Middle Years* (1998), Gullette discussed novels that she classified as ‘progress’ narratives of ageing, in the literature of Saul Bellow, John Updike, Margaret Drabble and Anne Tyler. The authors whose work Gullette analysed challenge the decline narrative of ageing, which offers readers only a stereotype of weak and side-lined older people. When naming ageing as progression rather than decline authors offer another perspective on ageing. Matron lit also offers narratives of progress, often alongside narratives of decline, thereby providing a more nuanced perspective on ageing than readers of popular women’s fiction have seen in the past. In her study of the ‘mid-life progress novel’ Gullette asserts that ‘life-course fiction might particularly assist personal transformation’ (1988: xxvi). However, in an article published by the *International Herald Tribune*, some years later, she expresses the opinion that cultural attitudes are still failing to ‘enable adults to look forward to getting older with hope instead of despair’ (Gullette, 2011). Authors of grey chick lit novels seem comfortable with running parallel stories of both despair and hope. Matron lit ably demonstrates that decline and growth are not mutually exclusive. This genre sifts through the many and varied ways that female protagonists confront and adapt to the changes of later life, such as early retirement and employers’ reluctance to take on older workers. The fact is that in old age cognitive

function does not necessarily deteriorate. Kaye *et al* have commented on studies which demonstrate that ‘such a decline is not common to all older people [...] some older adults can in fact enjoy optimal aging without experiencing a significant cognitive impairment’ (1994). Lindenberger and Baltes go so far as to say that ‘some cognitive functions such as those involving crystallized knowledge (e.g., vocabulary) remain preserved or even improve with age’ (1997). And according to Nyberg and Backman, ‘at least up to young-old age (younger than age 70), performance on semantic memory tests such as vocabulary and general knowledge tends to improve with advancing age’ (2002: 239). The BBC’s News at Six reports that in the United Kingdom ‘young people aged 18 to 24 are less skilled in numeracy and literacy than their grandparents’ (2013). It would seem that employers’ reluctance to hire, or even keep on, older workers is based on prejudice and grey chick lit discusses the problems that this can cause. These works of popular fiction expose ageist attitudes as social constructions and this revelation alone may offer hope and potentially transform the experience of ageing. To interrogate the power of contemporary fiction to facilitate change it is essential to consider how culture, language and narrative construct and regulate identity and the ageing process.

## **DEFINITIONS OF AGE**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), ‘although there are commonly used definitions of old age, there is no general agreement on the age at which a person becomes old’ (2013). The WHO states that ‘most developed countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of “elderly” or older person’ (2013). The WHO qualifies this statement by saying that ‘this definition is somewhat arbitrary, it is many times associated with the age at which one can begin to receive pension benefits [...] At the moment, there is no United Nations standard numerical criterion, but the UN agreed cut off is 60+ years to refer to the older population’ (2013).

The WHO quote Gorman as saying that ‘the age of 60 or 65, roughly equivalent to retirement ages in most developed countries, is said to be the beginning of old age’ (1999: 3-21). The terms ‘elderly’ and ‘older person’, used by the WHO in an attempt to define when a person is categorically ‘old’, are vague and open to interpretation. As the WHO has struggled to identify ‘old age’ it is not surprising that the term causes problems for other organisations and individuals. As early as 1978 Pat Thane wrote ‘The Muddled History of Retiring at 60 and 65’ in an effort to clear the confusion:

Age classification varied between countries and over time, reflecting in many instances the social class differences or functional ability related to the workforce, but more often than not was a reflection of the current political and economic situation. Many times the definition is linked to the retirement age, which in some instances, was lower for women than men. This transition in livelihood became the basis for the definition of old age which occurred between the ages of 45 and 55 years for women and between the ages of 55 and 75 years for men. (1978: 234-236)

It is clear that any definition of old age will change over time if it is attached to the state retirement age of a particular country. According to Allan Johnson and Pat Thane:

The terms 'old age' and 'ageing' have taken many different meanings in past societies, and the processes of change have been complex and nonlinear. Historical research over the past two decades has become increasingly aware of and informed by the changing meanings of these terms. (1998: 5)

At present, women are eligible to claim pension benefits in the U.K. between 60 and 65 (depending on their date of birth) and men at 65, making women officially 'old' up to five years earlier than men. Directgov state that 'from December 2018 the State Pension age for both men and women will start to increase to reach 66 in October 2020.' So, from October 2020 people in the UK will no longer be old at age 65. Directgov further state:

Current law already provides for the State Pension age to increase to:

- 67 between 2034 and 2036
- 68 between 2044 and 2046

However, the government announced on 29 November 2011 that State Pension age will now increase to 67 between 2026 and 2028. This change is not yet law and will require the approval of Parliament. (2013)

For as long as the definition of old age is linked to the chronological age at which a person is eligible to claim state pension then the matter of being 'old' or 'young' is at the behest of parliament, a situation which came into being in England when the 1908 pension bill was passed. In keeping with the WHO's definition of 'old' the majority of sociological texts define 'old age' as beginning at whatever the state pension age is at the time of writing. Jacquelyn James *et al* predict that 'the average person retiring today can anticipate living and being in good health at least 15 years beyond retirement' (2006: xix). They further suggest that 'society's attitudes toward old age and aging appear to be changing as large numbers of people are defying aging stereotypes' (James *et al*, 2006: xxi). Matron lit novels describe characters who defy stereotypes of ageing as well as those who conform and in the process draw the reader's attention to the ambiguity inherent in any attempt to categorise either mid-

life or old age in discrete chronological brackets. Alan Walker maintains that people over eighty are not 'old' but 'old-old' when he reports that:

The very elderly or 'old-old', those aged 80 and over, currently comprise nearly 4 per cent of the total population of the EU-15. Over the next 15 years the numbers in this age group will rise by almost 50 per cent. (2004: 3)

In *Understanding Quality of Life in Old Age* we find further definitions, with the assertion that 'the "young-old", those people aged under 70, had a much higher QoL than the "older-old", those over 70' (2005: 41). It is clear that a definition of the precise meaning of such phrases as middle-aged, ageing, elderly and old age are movable and debatable.

In my analysis of matron lit texts, while acknowledging the arbitrary quality inherent in any attempt to define age, when I refer to female protagonists as 'middle-aged', I will equate this with the chronological age group 40-60 and when I refer to the female characters as 'old' I will equate this with being over sixty years of age. I will refer to those grey chick lit heroines who are over eighty as 'elderly'. Matron lit authors tend to define age by referencing well-known cultural expressions such as 'life begins at forty' and other cultural markers, for example, reaching retirement age or claiming a free UK bus pass.

## **AGEING AND GENDER**

It is clear from the Directgov figures which I have discussed, that up to December 2018 women will continue to draw U.K. state pensions earlier than men, with the consequence that they are old and dependent on the state and working people at an earlier age than men, by law. From December 2018, men and women will be eligible for state pensions at the same age but this levelling will only go so far in addressing the skewed cultural perception that men remain younger for longer. This cultural bias is based not only on productivity but re-productivity, meaning that even when women remain in the workforce alongside men until 66, 67 or 68 they will still be perceived as 'past it' if and when they appear to be postmenopausal. In her philosophical discussion about longevity Christine Overall states that 'as life expectancy increases, there will be more and more older people in better and better health' (2003: 7). She further asserts that, while women generally live longer, 'men are living 93 percent of their lives and women 88 percent of their lives in good health' (Overall, 2003: 8). If women must expect to live a larger proportion of their lives in ill health than men, this may also contribute to the cultural perception of women as helpless and a burden on family and society. Writing from an evolutionary perspective, Michael Rose baldly states 'everyone deteriorates as adults. There are no exceptional patients who do not suffer from aging' (2005:

43). He also makes it clear that the ‘post-reproductive’ are at the mercy of physical decline because nature has no interest in their survival. If we accept this viewpoint then the biological process seems to provide a factual basis for the cultural rejection of post-reproductive females and offers the later-life fertility of older males as another reason for their continuing respect within society. As females also have greater life-expectancy than males they can expect to experience a larger amount of their lives labelled ‘useless’ in both a biological and cultural sense. The twenty-first century will see generations of ‘new’ old people who can expect to live significantly longer than past populations. Dr Robert Butler states that:

In fewer than one hundred years, human beings made greater gains in life expectancy than in the preceding fifty centuries [...] since the beginning of the twentieth century in the industrialized world, there has been an unprecedented gain of more than thirty years of average life expectancy from birth to over seventy-seven years of age. (2008: xi)

Carlson refers to Butler’s *The Longevity Revolution* and observes that ‘society was predictably slow to adjust to that change’ (2010). When Western women can expect to live for many years after they have produced and raised families, it is becoming increasingly unrealistic to expect them to live out these years in ways which have historically been expected of them.

It is the ageing of our population which has fuelled the requirement for popular fiction which is not only about the young. Many older women have expressed a wish to read stories about older female characters who voice their concerns and feed their imaginations. Harlequin’s Tara Gavin says ‘we conducted a great deal of research both on the editorial and the cover fronts. All of the research indicated that ‘Next’ would be enthusiastically received’ (Personal communication: 2012). Mature women are demanding a set of instructions about how to create new and healthier ways of being. The authors of matron lit novels are grappling with the difficulties women face as they try to comprehend increased longevity as an opportunity for growth.

In the twenty-first century women can expect to live a significant proportion of their lives post-reproductively and yet serious discussion regarding the lives of older women seems to have been neglected, until recently, even by feminism. In *Figuring Age* Woodward argues that ‘we need to turn our attention to older women; we need also to understand how we have “used” that figure’ (1999: 156). In *Performing Age, Performing Gender* she states that ‘we live in a time of unparalleled change for older women, yet aging has not been taken up by feminism in any sustained and concerted way’ (Woodward, 2005: 283). Dr Ros Jennings,

Director of the Research Centre for Women, Ageing and Media (WAM), expresses the opinion that academic feminism has predominantly focused its attention on pre-menopausal women (undated). Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner argue that:

Although Western societies are currently coming to a deeper realization of the probable economic, medical and health care impact of the massive demographic shift related to increasing human longevity, there is still relatively little understanding of the cultural identity formations that accompany such a change. (2012: 2)

*Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations*, edited by Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell, draws attention to this deficit in their introduction:

Despite the continuing proliferation of images of aging and old age across many forms of cultural representation from films to advertisements to TV makeover shows, it is striking that the cognate fields of film, media and cultural studies have had very little to say on this subject and that feminist theorists in particular in these fields are only now beginning to take up the issue. As long ago as 1999, in her introduction to *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Kathleen Woodward observed that “[i]n the humanities and the arts, aging is a subject that many believe holds little interest or relevance for them (xi).” Very little has changed in the subsequent twelve years. Since its publication, *Figuring Age* has thus appeared in sharp relief against a backdrop in which feminist scholarship on aging was conspicuous by its absence. It continues to be the case that even where not explicitly stated, existing scholarship implicitly assumes that cultural representations are the province of the young, and that the only bodies of interest to the theoretical gaze are young bodies. (2012: vii)

If feminists in academia are truly concerned with what it means to be female, then it is essential that the experiences of older women be examined vigorously. There is a great deal of material out there if feminist scholars are willing to look. Scholarship in this field has been broached before, not only by Woodward in 1999 and again in 2005 but as early as 1972 by Simone de Beauvoir. In her work *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir poses the question ‘what is a woman?’ She suggests that one might reply ‘woman is a womb’ (1949: 1). She then qualifies this definition by acknowledging that:

In speaking of certain women, connoisseurs declare that they are not women, although they are equipped with a uterus like the rest. All agree in recognising the fact that females exist in the human species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. Is this attribute something secreted by the ovaries? (1949: 1)

The connection which de Beauvoir establishes between the womb, ovaries and femininity indicates that post-menopausal females may find it challenging to ‘remain women’. In her later book *The Coming of Age*, de Beauvoir attempts to unravel the reasons that old people

experience partition from the wider community and refers to this as ‘society's secret shame’ (1972). Just as she asked in 1949 what it means to be a woman, in 1972 Simone de Beauvoir invites her readers to consider what it means to grow old. Dolan and Tincknell refer to the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer as an impetus to re-assess the argument that ‘postmenopausal women are rendered culturally and socially invisible’ (2012: xi). They express the belief that ‘de Beauvoir’s account of postmenopausal femininity is deeply troubling in its acceptance of abjection’ (Dolan, Tincknell, 2012: xi). Dolan and Tincknell consider that Greer’s version is less problematic because, twenty years after de Beauvoir, she designates post-menopausal invisibility as freedom from the ‘scrutiny of the patriarchal male gaze’ (2012: x). These contrasting views need to be debated within academia and increased life expectancy demands that the position of older women in society deserves discussion and analysis. It has been remarked that ‘the simple fact that more and more of us are living longer and longer is bringing profound changes to our personal identities’ (Achenbaum, 2007: xi). If the cultural situation and its effect on the identities of post-menopausal and elderly women is ignored or neglected then they will encounter a prolonged stage of life in which they remain invisible, whether they like it or not.

The ability to remain visible and enjoy a place in society presents challenges to older people. Andrew Achenbaum considers that:

The broader social fabric is aging. This often causes lags and gaps in institutional capabilities and in their capacities to meet human needs. Structures sometimes thwart men and women who want to take full advantage of the extra years before them. (2007: xi)

It seems that the structures Achenbaum refers to impede older women to a greater extent than men, in a variety of ways. Although postmenopausal women are labelled redundant, it usually falls to this group to provide care for members of the family who are in need. According to Boje and Leira ‘it is certainly clear that it is mostly women who are called upon as – more or less paid – care-givers. Therefore, this form of support might help recreate, or reproduce, the traditional gender structure of family caring obligations’ (2000: 147). For as long as middle-aged women are presumed to be natural ‘care-givers’ the role will continue to be considered insignificant and will remain as invisible as they themselves are. The uncommon instances in which older women are the centre of attention tend to position them within ‘a discourse of “successful aging” that requires women to invest considerable personal and economic resources in achieving a socially approved identity’ (Dolan, Tincknell, 2012: viii). While successful ageing and productive ageing would seem to be related there are significant

differences. Successful ageing appears to be predicated on youthful good looks and has become synonymous with the images of eternally beautiful celebrities and actresses. Productive ageing, however, seems to be more about useful activity. Jennings expresses a need for clarity when she says:

If the notions of so-called successful ageing in the media are linked to active ageing rather than cosmetic youthful ageing, then I have fewer problems with this but the extent to which this is promoted as one of the only valid ways for women to age ignores the real material constraints placed on many women's ability to do this due to poverty. (Undated)

Ilya Metchnikoff contends that there are numerous ways in which old people can be productive and that:

When we have reduced or abolished such causes of precocious senility as intemperance and disease, it will no longer be necessary to give pensions at the age of 60 or 70 years. The cost of supporting the old, instead of increasing, will diminish progressively. (2004: 98)

It has been argued that the concept of productive ageing was developed:

As a response to ageism, and has only recently received attention in academia as a useful construct. As an advocacy position, support for productive aging presupposes benefits to both the individual and society. There is evidence to support the general claim that productive involvement is good for self and others, particularly in later life. (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Sherraden, 2001: 5)

The cultural perception of their role in society (whether paid or unpaid) as productive, could improve the standing of older women in society. Yet it appears that the question of whether women are perceived as productive or not remains dependent on their willingness to care for others and/or their appearance.

A woman's appearance is the indicator which others use to ascribe value and to appear old in contemporary Western culture invites revulsion. Lilian Rubin states:

Our revulsion with aging, our flight from it at almost any cost, is deeply ingrained. Yes, I know "revulsion" is a strong word. But think about it: who wants to be old? What do you think when you look in the mirror and see the signs of your own aging? How does it make you feel? Do you want to turn away, rush off to the nearest cosmetics counter and buy up every cream that promises to remove the lines that are so distressing? (2008: 3)

While Rubin's book discusses the ageing process in relation to both men and women, it is significant that in the same paragraph where she uses the word 'revulsion' she also mentions the 'cosmetics counter'. Rubin follows this with a description of a fifty-year-old woman who longs for cosmetic surgery. Read within this context the implication is that in discussing

‘revulsion’ in relation to ageing appearance, the word and its follow-up questions, apply more clearly to women. Maybe the reason that she poses these questions is because we so rarely find positive descriptions of female ageing which are not tied to the idea of successful ageing, in the guise of youthful loveliness and celebrity. In their introduction to *Ageing Femininities* Dolan and Tincknell remark ‘it is interesting that a number of the chapters in this book identify the same pantheon of “successful agers,” mainly but not wholly celebrities, usually including Helen Mirren, who have become central to such media representations’ (2012: viii). The cultural emphasis on beauty as the only valid marker of successful ageing limits female potential. If the language pertaining to ageing women could be re-constructed in a more positive way then the ‘revulsion’ expressed by Lilian Rubin might not be so easily associated with female ageing. Matron lit could be an element of such a move to re-word the expressions used to describe older women. In this genre humour is frequently invoked to dilute the pain of ageist remarks and the use of this tactic indicates that older women, or at least older fictional heroines, are beginning to resist any assumption that they are repulsive. In the future it may be possible to age both productively and successfully without cultural pressure to strive to look like a ‘film star’.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theories of Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler offer the means to understand how language, narrative and cultural laws are implicated in the construction and policing of the ‘self’. These theorists illustrate how each individual is subject to ‘all the rules of social life’ (Lacan, 1979: 223). Lacan reveals the roots of identity embedded in language and reflection, either in the mirror, or others’ eyes. Foucault exposes the policing of the self that is enacted through cultural law. Butler proposes that restrictive laws that disempower the subject may be disrupted by the knowledge that they exist. The theories of Lacan, Foucault and Butler explain how reading fiction could have real effects on people’s lives. These theories clarify how self-identity is constituted within cultural discourse and the base need of human beings to submit to cultural norms. Though without linguistic structures life is not viable, they also restrict individuality to a damaging extent. Female old age can become particularly problematic unless ageing women are able to satisfy the cultural consensus of productivity or maintain the appearance of a re-productive woman. Failing this, they are expected to perform a living death of invisibility, until the reality finally coincides with the cultural fiction.

Lacan's psychoanalytic theories expose the connections between language and identity. His work on self-image explains the human compulsion to see ourselves through the eyes of others. On this basis it would seem that reading about older women performing their lives in the disapproving glare of society might cause readers to become aware of, and question, the power of the gaze of others to affect their sense of self. As Lacan has demonstrated, language is the source of our identity but it also separates us from ourselves. The language of 'ageing' diminishes life and reduces the 'old' to a gendered performance of decline. Cultural law demands that its subjects/objects perform in line with the parameters which have been set historically and deviance is punished. In a culture where females are of use only to breed and nurture, then women become useless and therefore invisible when this work is done. At this time of life women become particularly vulnerable to 'the gaze that surprises me and reduces me to shame' (Lacan, 1979: 84). When women become used to feeling invisible then any gaze is experienced as shaming.

Heroines of matron lit placed in such situations illustrate how this feels and expose the cultural structures that contribute to their humiliation. Alternatively, female characters who refuse to cower from the judgmental gaze of society may empower older women to be seen. We are conscious that we are being looked at by the world, from all around us, and are constantly aware that we are the subject of a gaze which pre-exists and monitors us. Lacan states that 'the gaze in question is certainly the presence of others' (Lacan, 1979: 85). He claims that the gaze 'circumscribes us' (Lacan, 1979: 75). Human beings imagine this gaze from the viewpoint of the 'other' and we are afraid of what we look like to others. Concern about how 'others' see us controls individual behaviour. Lacanian theory demonstrates that identity is intertwined with language at the mirror stage, originates from a perception of lack and that 'the human individual fixes upon himself an image that alienates him from himself' (1977: 19). In the mirror stage an infant sees its reflection as whole while feeling fragmented and as Lacan states 'I see myself seeing myself' (1979: 80). This recognition of the self in the mirror as 'other', brings realisation that the mother is 'other' and ensures 'the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development' (Lacan, 1977: 4). From that moment on the self is compelled to search for completeness outside of itself, in a relationship with others which becomes 'the dialectic that will henceforth link the 'I' to socially elaborated situations' (Lacan, 1977: 5). Zoe Brennan, in her book *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* asserts that 'scenes in which the older protagonist looks in the mirror recur throughout narratives of aging and are a

shorthand way of communicating their feelings about the process' (2005: 24). In *Freud and Other Fictions* Woodward recalls 'it was the closing party scene in *The Past Recaptured* which, with Lacan's mirror stage of infancy in mind, suggested to me the idea of a mirror stage of old age' (1991: 9). The 'mirror scene' is as common to matron lit as the more literary fiction discussed by Brennan. When the mirror moment is invoked by matron lit authors it is rarely, if ever, a moment of self-affirmation for their characters. The ageing reflection is either rejected as a 'mask' or signifies a crisis of identity. The majority of fictional characters are unable to identify with their ageing reflections positively. Woodward says 'the model of recognising one's own aging with a shock insists on aging as a crisis' (1999: 158). This shock may alienate the individual from their inner self-image, which has been constituted from Lacan's 'mirror-stage' as an ideal image. The 'I' exists in relation to the 'other', in dialogue with the 'other' and in the gaze of the 'other'. Lacan states that 'this all-seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows she is being looked at' (1979: 75). Yet female satisfaction with the gaze is depleted over time, as she becomes conscious of ageing. While most often feeling invisible the occasional gaze is perceived as judgemental. Western women are required to be mindful of how they look to others, and as Lacan asserts, this has 'complex implications in relation to femininity' (1979: 80). Without the gaze of the other they do not exist but at the same time the gaze confines them. Lacan suggests that 'we are beings that are looked at, in the spectacle of the world' and that 'the spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing' (1979: 75). It is because of this simultaneous fear of, and desire for, the 'gaze' that women perform their gender according to the rules of their society and that the power of these cultural 'norms' persist. Lacan states 'what determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside' (1979: 106). It is not possible to be free from the disciplinary gaze of culture.

Foucault's 'panopticon' principle consolidates Lacan's argument that there is 'the pre-existence of a gaze – I see only from one point of view, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides' (1979: 72). Foucault describes society as 'carceral' in its efforts to impose discipline and it could be argued that the contemporary cultural attitude towards older women functions to incarcerate them within cultural stereotypes. The label 'old' polices behaviour and people act as if they are being watched and judged because, like prison inmates, they can never be free of surveillance. People live in fear of punishment if they do not obey the rules of prison guards, or societal norms. Foucauldian theory, with particular regard to the policing of the subject, illuminates the myriad ways that fictional heroines of matron lit are controlled

through social mores. The cultural laws that police the appearance, behaviour and life expectations of older individuals are exposed as restrictive and arbitrary when viewed through the lens of Foucault's theory. Within the context of cultural law, created through the power of discourse, for the purpose of exercising that power, the individual is simply a construct of the dominant discourse and any changes to the restrictive laws of culture must happen within the frame of language. Foucault argues that 'one is always the ruler and the ruled' (1986: 87). According to Foucault the subject does not exist until it is constructed and named through discourse. Foucault argues that 'discourse does not describe the way things are; it makes the things themselves' (1972: 48). Foucault maintains that there 'are regulated ways of practising the possibilities of discourse' (1972: 70). Identity is constituted within the dominant discourse and through its compulsory enforcement and repetition it appears natural.

Cultural law quashes threats to its reproduction through the illusion that it is only policing that which is natural. As there can be no existence before or beyond cultural law then any changes sought by the subject must be generated by disruption within the law. As Foucault confirms 'one remains within the dimension of discourse' (1972: 76). A subject cannot function without becoming the receptacle of historically produced language which is internalised and perceived as natural. When individuals believe that they are free from domination, the dominant discourse has succeeded. The possibility of defying oppression and disrupting cultural laws arises only when the subject feels oppressed and rebels against restraints. It is not possible to step outside of society or destroy the rules of culture but it becomes possible to disrupt and undermine domination. According to Lacan feelings of anxiety should be heeded because they are an indication that something is wrong, 'but anxiety may be lacking' (1979: 41). By becoming aware that perceived natural conditions of identity are cultural constructions, defiance becomes possible. With this awareness comes the power to make changes within the rules of society.

The discourse analysis of Foucault requires that the validity of all truth and knowledge be questioned in the light of historical and social context. Foucault's argues that all language, including scientific language, is subject to the 'principle of dispersion and redistribution' (1972: 107). Ageist language is used to reinforce cultural law and Foucault contends that being observed by others requires compliance. He maintains that the 'apparatus' of constant surveillance 'indicated the prison institution, before the law ever defined it as the penalty par excellence' (Foucault, 1995: 231). His 'panopticon principle' is reiterated by Lacan and Butler in their discussions of the power of the 'gaze'.

Foucault's discourse analysis theory is important to the discussion of literature and has relevance to the re-thinking of female ageing, because he explores the relation between power and language. As long as people believe that ageing has to be performed according to the rules of society, then they will replicate the behaviour of the generations which have preceded them. Authors of grey chick lit who critique ageist culture or conjure up images of female ageing which do not conform to societal laws may expose reasons for anxiety and possible means to alleviate it. Foucault argues that there is no truth, but only statements which are true according to the dominant discourse. According to Foucault cultural beliefs and power construct all knowledge (1972: 192). Arbitrary structures of knowledge and power change from one age to another and possess their own cultural truths (Foucault, 1972: 192). Knowledge cannot be objective because 'Western thought has seen to it that discourse be permitted as little room as possible between thought and words' (Foucault, 1972: 227). In writing about the strangeness of beliefs that were held to be true in the past, in particular scientific and medical knowledge, Foucault raises questions about the validity of all discourse. Discourse is constructed within cultural laws and this includes fiction. Any possibility of cultural change must begin by, as Brennan says 'to use Foucault's phraseology, "fictioning" the possibilities of senescence' (2005: 34). Matron lit provides readers with 'fictions' about the lives of ageing women that are recognisable both as culturally constituted stereotypes and as inspirational 'ego ideals'. Butler says 'fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility' (2004: 28). She argues that gender identity is a performance. Not a performance acted-out consciously and with free will, but a lifetime of performativity that is so thoroughly embodied as to be perceived as natural. Lacan claims that 'the ways of what one must do as man or woman are entirely abandoned to the drama, to the scenario, which is placed in the field of the Other' (1979: 204). Gendered identity is both the first impression we present to the world, and the first impression of the cultural world with which we are presented. Butler declares that 'the moment in which an infant becomes humanised is when the question, "is it a boy or a girl?" is answered' (1990: 142). According to Butler the pronouncement of sexual identity is equated with humanity itself.

From the moment of gender assignment the social actor learns how to perform that gender. Butler proposes that 'the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence' (1990: 33). The infant inherits the discourse of the culture it is born into and gender identity is a performative construction

developed and naturalised by repetition, within the boundaries and constraints imposed by cultural discourse. Lacan contends that 'the human being has always to learn from scratch from the Other what he has to do, as a man or as a woman' (1979: 204). This is not a role that the social actor is free to accept or reject because society enforces the performance of gender identity through rewards and sanctions. If a person performs gender in accordance with society's expectations, then he or she receives approval from the family, peer group, and culture. When gender is performed 'incorrectly' then the subject is punished through cultural discourse. Butler argues that the process of producing gender is never complete because gender is not what a person is, it is what a person performs, so that no gender can pre-exist its expression. Subjects are compelled to repeatedly act out and up-date their gender role, as to stop would be to cease to exist in the social world. As cultural discourse constitutes its subjects as gendered beings it requires those subjects to age within gendered boundaries. By exposing the construction of gender identity as a product of cultural law Butler facilitates disruption within the law.

Butler's theory takes into account Lacan's explanation of how a sense of self is established and sustained throughout the life cycle. She also considers Foucault's concept that the socially constituted 'self' is policed by 'others' in accordance with contemporary cultural rules. By refusing to discount the power of the social structures that enable and sustain 'identity' Butler opens up possibilities for change within and at the boundaries that construct and constrain individuals. She argues that gender identity is performative and that this is not a performance acted out by individual choice but imposed by cultural law and so deeply ingrained as to be perceived as natural. It could be extrapolated from this argument that old age may be as gendered as the preceding life stages and thus also performative. Identity is bound inextricably with language and the theory Butler outlines in *Undoing Gender* is useful for an analysis of possibilities for change that can be detected in the novels which comprise my primary sources. She considers that 'the experience of a normative structure becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater liveability as its aim' (Butler, 2004: 1). It is possible that contemporary popular fiction may contribute to the 'undoing' of ageism. Butler's theories are not only useful in unravelling the performative aspects of ageing but also offer a way forward. The processes required to 'undo' ageing, in literature and culture, may be similar to those Butler proposes implementing, to 'undo' gender. Butler expands Foucault's theory that cultural rules, though not breakable, are nevertheless malleable. With regard to gender she advocates

the exposure and pushing of boundaries. The restrictive rules of ageing also invite such challenges.

The theories of Lacan, Foucault and Butler are fundamental to my thesis as they explain how the subject is constituted and policed by culture. These theorists also allow the possibility of historical change to social laws. I have also drawn heavily on sociological theories. My rationale for this is concerned with how sociology reveals the important links between critical theory and lived reality. 'Disciplinary cross-fertilization' has been advocated by Aagje Swinnen and Cynthia Port, who argue that 'the work of both social scientists and humanities scholars would be enriched by greater familiarity with the valuable work on aging being done in other fields' (2012: 10). Studies by sociologists and health sector scholars allow an analysis of matron lit to be placed in a cultural and political context. I have referred to the World Health Organisation's definition (2013) and evolutionary theory to identify the parameters that are commonly used to define old age. The culturally established connection between youth and beauty has been examined by Gimlin (2002) and Clarke (2010). Their work provides a framework in which to analyse matron lit heroines' fears that ageing must be equated with loss of attractiveness. Hennessy and Walker (2005) establish and explain the connections between age, health and wealth, connections that permeate grey chick lit narratives. Woodward (1991, 1999, 2000, 2005) and Gullette's (1988, 1995, 2004, 2011) analyses of ageism document the actual consequences of Foucault's concept of social policing and inform a reading of matron lit as a medium for discussion about the prospect of change.

This discussion of matron lit draws on a range of ageing studies from theoretical to 'self-help' texts to demonstrate how literature, both fiction and non-fiction, can assist an understanding of the social mores which hamper 'productive' ageing. Dr Robert Butler's vision of old age, as a life stage ripe with possibility for personal growth, is central to my thesis (1975, 2008). The concept of life review is a dominant theme in matron lit that illustrates how essential it is to the process of undoing outdated constructs, as a prelude to fashioning a more fitting self-image. Brummel-Smith (2005) advocates the benefits of personal engagement in the ageing process. This concept is repeatedly explored in matron lit, in ways that illustrate the diversity of active ageing. These fictional texts express the potential that Arber and Attias-Donfut (1999), Davis (2006) and Victor and Scambler (2007), have identified in redefining cross-generational relationships. Sociological studies and concepts

indicate that there is room to manoeuvre a redefinition of old age within contemporary cultural boundaries. Critical theory is used across many disciplines and I have taken advantage of such rich cross referencing in my thesis. For example, Timothy O’Leary (2009) sheds light on Foucault’s concept of the ‘experience book’ and Susan Sellers (2001) quotes Judith Butler in support of her contention that the narration of alternative scenarios may facilitate change. The work of Herst (1999) and Fingerman (2001) on mother and daughter relationships enables an understanding of the undercurrents that fuel the fictional situations discussed repeatedly in grey chick lit. Green’s idea of re-defining the mothering role then highlights the difficulties encountered by fictional heroines in their efforts to ‘undo’ their position as pre-dominantly nurturing (2010). Sociological theories assist an understanding of the ways that matron lit may inform and contribute to the concept of agency proposed by Foucault and the idea of ‘undoing’ restrictive constructs, put forward by Butler. Grey chick lit is actively engaged in the cultural work that is required for a reconsideration of the ageing process.

The social expectations of women have been defined by Maguire (1995) and the power of cultural expectancies is articulated throughout grey chick lit. If a woman’s value to society is principally to reproduce then at the menopause she ceases to be a member of society and becomes a burden on society. An old woman has little value so she must become invisible or risk becoming an object of hate and ridicule. According to Clarke:

Ageist societal norms regarding later life and the oppressive and often dehumanizing meanings attributed to aging female bodies may be further elucidated, challenged, and transmuted. As society becomes increasingly obsessed with images, appearances, and the pursuit of youthfulness, the aged female body has the potential to become ever more disparaged. (2010: 4)

Men do not have such a clearly defined point in time at which they must take on the label of being old, so they retain some flexibility to negotiate their cultural redundancy. Woodward tells us that ‘for Freud a woman of fifty was “elderly”, dysfunctional in reproductive (sexual) terms and therefore virtually unrepresentable – sexually invisible’ (1999: 150). According to Greer post-menopausal women are deemed ‘sexually repulsive’ because ‘the corollary is that when the ovaries die the woman dies with them, but this is clearly not the case’ (1992: 38). If Western cultural thought, as described by Greer, categorises old women as somehow having outlived their usefulness only to become repulsive then a woman’s only way of remaining valuable is to attempt an appearance of a female who might still be fertile. For as long as possible women are instructed to ‘fight the signs of ageing’. Brennan discusses ‘passing’ as

one of a number of risky strategies ‘evolved by older individuals to cope with ageist discourses’ (2005: 24). She uses the term ‘passing’ to describe the creation of the illusion of the appearance of youthfulness. Clarke argues that ‘women are simultaneously required to engage in beauty work interventions and are held in contempt for doing so’ (2010: 3). This cultural contempt is compounded when an older woman has demonstrably engaged in ‘beauty work interventions’ but still fails to look youthful.

When a woman loses even an illusion of youth she forfeits her right to be seen and is expected to perform as an ‘old’ woman. Many women accept their exclusion and perform as ‘old’ because they know that they will be sanctioned if they do not comply. When women continue to behave, speak and dress like a young woman once their physical body no longer presents (or at least gives the illusion of) the appearance of a fertile and therefore productive woman, they are punished through cultural discourse. Even women who have defied cultural expectations of feminine appearance become ‘more painfully aware of the difficulties in breaking rules as they grew older’ (Holland, 2004: 121). According to Samantha Holland the participants in her study of *Alternative Femininities* believed that ‘older women are expected to begin to “dress down”, perhaps even take less trouble and care with their appearance, or to dress more carefully and restrainedly’ (2004: 117). She says that:

In order to more accurately judge how far they can safely go, the participants stepped back from their own reflection and watched other women. I call this ‘policing’ other women (and themselves) because the boundaries they were setting were stringent and the connotations negative. (Holland, 2004: 121)

No woman can escape these sanctions, which are imposed through hate speech of the kind discussed by Butler in *Excitable Speech*. She says ‘hate speech is a kind of speech that acts’ (Butler, 1997: 96). Such speech is not only heard by the subject but experienced as an attack. Even the most famous, wealthy, and physically fit, are not exempt. Commenting on an advertisement which features Madonna in a provocative pose, The *Mirror*’s Polly Hudson taunted ‘put it away, granny Madonna - you’re too old’ (2009). The same insult has been repeated so many times in the press and online, as to seem contagious. No doubt Madonna will not ‘put it away’ anytime soon, but the majority of women will censor themselves in an attempt to avoid hurtful words and the disapproval of society. The women who participated in Holland’s discussion of unconventional femininity were well aware that ageing would require them to conform.

Cultural language both constructs gender identity and polices it. It is never enough to perform the assigned gender; one is expected to perform age-appropriate gender. When social expectations are not met to the satisfaction of society there are consequences but such challenges may create a disruption to the cultural law and create a space within which older women can negotiate. When an individual breaks the cultural law, is sanctioned through language yet still refuses to conform then a possibility for social change occurs. When heroines of grey chick lit behave badly and talk back, then, as Butler points out ‘the utterance has become a scene of conflict’ (1997: 91). It is in this climate of disturbance that a redefinition of what it means to be ‘old’ may be phrased. For any re-writing of the role of old women to infiltrate society, the language of defiance and disobedience will need to be performed by many women. It will have to come into common usage and become ordinary, everyday, cultural language. Butler expresses the opinion that:

Indeed, as we think about worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible, the opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable become part of the very “offence” that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival. (1997: 41)

If older women decide that they no longer want to be silenced and excluded then instead of fighting those ‘signs of ageing’, that they have been instructed to regard with fear and dread, they will have to fight the cultural law that defines ageing as ugly and a catastrophe.

The prominent aspects of the theories of Lacan, Foucault and Butler, that are most relevant to my discussion of popular fiction about older women, are particularly concerned with the constitution and policing of the subject, with the aim of ‘undoing’ these constructions. When we accept the arguments of Lacan, Foucault and Butler that the gendered body is a cultural construction then this carries implications for the consideration of a connection between the literature that people read and how they act. Butler advises that we ‘consider the efficacy of written or reproduced language in the production of social effects and, in particular, the constitution of subjects’ (1997: 32). According to Butler ‘the task of cultural translation is one that is necessitated precisely by that performative contradiction that takes place when one with no authorization to speak within and as the universal nevertheless lays claim to the term’ (1997: 91). This is where matron lit may play a part. Now that it is possible for authors to create heroines who are middle-aged or even old, and still get their work published, a space has been created for dissent. If some readers of this genre respond with hope to the concept that ageing may not be the failure that they had been given to believe, then that hope might allow them to imagine a future society that would not exclude them.

For as long as old people are regarded as a burden on society then people will dread and fear old age. While individuals are defined by gender then the ageing process will be gendered and will require different performances from males and females. It is within this context that fiction which portrays mature women as heroines could make a difference to the way in which females see themselves ageing. Fiction engages with contemporary societal attitudes to older women and may influence readers' perception of their own place within culture as they choose to accept or resist attitudes expressed in novels. Changes in cultural images of female identity are negotiated between authors and readers. By imagining alternative realities novels create a space in which to consider other means of perceiving and performing identity and ageing. Matron lit has taken its place within popular culture and is in a position to engage with readers in a re-imagining of the lives of ageing women and their situation in Western society. Popular culture is a powerful element of change.

### **READING POPULAR CULTURE**

It may be that matron lit has received little academic scrutiny because it is considered to be 'low-brow' but as Steve Padley points out 'genre' fiction, like 'literary' fiction, can discuss and delineate social structures and 'cultural processes of change' (2006: 91). He also claims that 'postmodern ideas challenging cultural and literary categories' have resulted in distinctions between popular and literary novels being blurred. He explains that as categories of low and high culture began to merge contemporary 'genre' fiction has attracted academic scrutiny. According to Padley:

Academic literary study in the 21st century addresses a wider and more diverse range of textual practices, taking account of categories other than the so-called literary, and recognising that those categories overlap and intersect to a far greater extent than had been the case earlier in the post-Second World War period. (2006: 91)

Padley proposes further reasons for 'the decline of elitist perceptions of literariness' (2006: 90). He refers to the innovation in the 1960s, of paperback books, introduced principally by Penguin. This revolution reduced the cost and placed literary titles alongside the popular fiction which comprised most of its market. This juxtaposition resulted in readers and writers being alerted to the variety of fiction available. The paperback revolution also made the practice of reading for pleasure more egalitarian and increased the demand by people from varied backgrounds for novels that in some way reflected their experience of life.

Popular culture has been historically designated as low culture but in recent years academics have begun to champion the wealth of creativity and artistry to be found within texts that are

enjoyed by a large readership. Clarence Karr states that it is a 'myth' that 'readers of popular fiction are less serious than readers of "literature",' and argues that 'legitimate assessment can begin only when we dispense with all pejorative value judgments about the purchasers and readers of popular fiction' (2000: 154). It has been recognised that the textual representations found in mass culture cannot be dismissed as 'trash' simply because popular fiction has meaning for the majority, but not the minority. Scott McCracken says that he is 'wary of clear boundaries between so-called "high" and "low" cultures.' (1998: 5) The terms 'highbrow' and 'low brow' do not literally describe quality literature and inferior literature, but are, as a whole 'literature' (McCracken, 1998). Popular, contemporary texts have direct links with the way people perceive their world. Readers see their own concerns mirrored in the lives of fictional characters and recognise the culture that those characters inhabit. Fictional characters may perform according to the rules of society or disrupt them. When a protagonist defies cultural norms a fissure is created which allows an alternative viewpoint to be explored. Popular fiction can be an efficient vehicle for the introduction to society of new ideas. It is the movement out of the rarefied arena of literary culture into the wider popular culture, which propels an initiative and allows it to permeate the mainstream way of thinking. Without this spread outwards new ideas cannot become the 'norm'. Once an alternative viewpoint has been considered, it exists and has entered both the author's and the reader's worlds.

To ignore popular culture is to limit understanding of culture as a complete entity and even of 'high' culture in isolation. In a discussion of *High Theory/Low Culture* Mikita Brottman observes that:

A text is part of popular culture if it fits in with a phase of general understanding, if it is familiar to the most widely shared manners and tastes prevalent in Western culture today, and if it affects and is ordinarily understood, shared and enjoyed by a large proportion of the general population. (2005: xiii)

McCracken puts it more succinctly in *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* when he says 'I define popular fiction simply as fiction that is read by large numbers of people' (1998: 1). If large numbers of people appreciate a particular narrative, the sheer volume of its fans cannot lessen the text's power to entertain, educate and inspire its audience. But as Erin Smith explains in *Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*:

The challenge in studying popular culture is taking seriously and examining carefully narratives that surround us more or less continuously and to which we seldom give much conscious thought. The close, careful reading that advanced training in literary

and cultural theory makes possible does not mirror the kinds of attention readers customarily give to texts that our culture labels "trash." Nonetheless, the popular narratives of a culture do shape the plots, characters, and language available to us to give meaning to our experience. These modes of critical reading give us tools to see the ways in which popular narratives shape which questions are imaginable and which plots seem possible. (2000: 12)

‘High’ culture can be questioning and inspirational, and so can ‘low’ culture. Popular culture is influential, spreads new ideas and reaches a wide audience with its sheer volume of sales. It affects and is affected by the people it communicates with. According to Philip Fisher ‘popular forms colonize entirely new terrains. They enter what are only temporarily exotic configurations of experience as a necessary practice for a transformation of moral life that is approaching’ (1986: 20). Popular culture is dynamic and its fast production, quick turnover and throwaway elements can be seen as an advantage in its ability to interact with, and comment on, contemporary society. Narratives which are perceived to be ‘knocked out’ may not have the gravitas of texts that are toiled over but they are topical and influential. The power of popular texts to influence public opinion could be viewed as manipulation but it has been said that:

Notions of popular texts as manipulation of the masses by those in control of the means of cultural production also overlook the role of audiences in shaping mass culture. Although these texts were produced by a small group of writers, publishers, and editors, they had to appeal to popular needs and desires to be profitable. (Smith, 2000: 6)

Without popular texts, interaction with new ideas would be restricted to academics but there are deep thinkers and revolutionaries from all walks of life. Fisher refers to popular texts as ‘kitsch’ and argues against the claim that: ‘art invented patterns of feeling while kitsch with its stereotypes and familiar feelings played to the appetites already in existence’ (1986: 19).

He claims that ‘when we look back candidly we can see that often the popular forms, while stale in detail and texture, were massing small patterns of feeling in entirely new directions’ (Fisher, 1986: 19). If this is the case then it would appear that fiction which seems familiar to its readers may in subtle ways suggest new ways of thinking about the mundane. McCracken argues that ‘narratives read by large numbers of people are indicative of widespread hopes and fears’ (1998: 2). Such ‘hopes and fears’ deserve consideration and the interaction between author, text and reader may offer, beyond the comfort of sharing in expression, new thinking and possibly solutions to problems concerning ways to express oneself. In this context it is productive to consider that ‘contemporary popular fiction exists in the context of the matrix of texts and codes from which a self must, somehow, be created’ (McCracken,

1998: 11). Popular texts can offer the reader an opportunity to 'try on' different selves in an attempt to discover a more comfortable fit. McCracken claims that 'popular fiction can supply us with the narratives we need to resituate ourselves in relation to the world' (1998: 17). The potential of contemporary popular fiction to expose the effects of cultural discourse and assist the reader in her quest for a 'self' who is at ease in her world cannot be underestimated.

An understanding of how readers 'read' a text is essential to understanding how any text may affect a reader or have any effect on cultural perceptions. In his work on *Authors and Audiences* Karr states that 'texts do influence readers. Some scenes invite the reader to shed tears; some characters require loving; some incidents demand outrage; and some settings become so real that the readers actually experience a feeling of being there' (2000: 160). In empathising with characters, as subjects constructed within and experiencing the consequences of cultural politics, the reader may engage with the empowering or debilitating effects that cultural rules have on the heroine's sense of self-worth. Until cultural norms are clearly articulated and questioned they can only be experienced as a natural consequence of gender relations and hierarchies. Reading offers an opportunity for clarification and comprehension of the systems at work which 'naturalise' society's regulations.

Readers react to characters in ways that may interpret their actions differently than the author intended. As Nancy Roberts argues in *Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification through the Novel* 'we cannot look at heroine or reader in isolation; our roles and our desires are complex, intertwined and mutually interdependent' (1997: 9). By occupying the heroine's position a reader may vicariously experience that character's ambition and empathise if her vision is restricted because she is imprisoned within strictly gendered and ageist frames of reference. Karr suggests that sympathy helps 'to forge the relationships between readers, texts, and authors' (2000: 157). The reader may have experienced similar situations and 'this provides reassurance of the collective nature of conflicts and dilemmas often experienced as personal and isolated' (Holmes, 2006: 140). Fictional narratives can articulate women's position in society and in doing so set out the condition which the reader may or may not choose to challenge. According to Roberts 'stereotypes can be invoked only to be overturned' (1997: 117). The reader, in sympathy with the heroine and enthralled by the reading experience, is in a position to fantasise the methods that the author could employ to save or free the character. As Kris Pint argues 'imagination is capable of overcoming the enormity of "being", and manifesting itself as possibility' (2010: 13). In anticipatory contemplation about

‘what happens next’ the reader may devise her own rebellions before she engages with the novel’s resolution of the heroine’s situation. While contemplating various scenarios for the heroine the reader may at the same time consider her own position. Karr claims that for many readers in the early twentieth century ‘reading provided significant assistance in their understanding of and integration into an ever-changing modern society’ (2000: 156). Reading still offers such assistance in early twenty-first century, post-modern society. In the realm of the imagination the reader becomes ‘free’ to fantasise new options, both for the heroine’s future and her own. According to Karr:

This phenomenon of becoming lost in a book is sometimes interpreted as losing touch with the real world as well as with one’s critical faculties. Yet in his study, Victor Nell defines and analyses this reading for pleasure as a complex experience involving attention, comprehension, and absorption, in which the readers acquire peace, while at the same time, they become more powerful and feel braver and wiser in the ways of the world. (2000: 159)

Karr explains the importance of pleasure in transporting a reader into a new world of possibility for both the character and themselves. He also addresses the concept that reading popular fiction and romance can be dismissed as escapism when he argues that:

Although many read to escape boredom, homesickness, loneliness, stress, depression, and problems, it is incorrect to use the idea of escaping from the world. If the term must be employed, escaping into or journeying to another world in a book is a more appropriate concept. Although readers may temporarily suspend their consciousness of the real world and its problems, they are never far removed from reality. Far more important is the life-affirmation and life-transformation experienced by readers, who conquer their loneliness, relieve their stress, cure their depression, and find new direction in life from their reading. (Karr, 2000: 159)

Popular fiction reflects society and reinforces conventional modes of behaviour, yet encourages debate by offering alternative scenarios for consideration. Novels play a part in changing attitudes by calling attention to neglected subjects. The debate around ageing, which has been heard in academia and serious literature, has now gone mainstream. Popular novels that depict the lives of ageing women are contributing valuable insight into how things are and how older women would like them to be. The reality of the situation may be disturbed by the fantasies of both the authors and the readers. The reality is that post-menopausal women are usually expected to be invisible. *Matron lit* demonstrates that some heroines will not accept this.

## **FEMINIST LITERARY CRITISISM OF CHICK LIT AND ROMANCE FICTION**

Following on from an interest in feminine texts such as romance fiction, feminist literary

criticism of chick lit has revealed much that is relevant to and compatible with an analysis of matron lit. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Mosely argue that in the late 1970s:

Feminist media and cultural studies began to take forms of feminine culture seriously. These approaches demonstrated that feminine texts such as soap operas, romantic fiction and women's magazines were worthy of analysis, arguing that their readers could not simply be dismissed as the passive 'dupes' of patriarchal culture and that popular forms and practices could offer possibilities for resistance. (2006: 6)

Matron lit is worthy of feminist literary criticism because the genre has inserted the important element of ageing within discussions around 'women's place' that are found in chick lit and romance fiction. Hollows and Mosely make the bold claim that 'apart from women actively involved in the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, most people's initial knowledge and understanding of feminism has been formed within the popular and through representation' (2006: 2). If this is the case then matron lit provides an obvious arena in which to redress the deficit of feminist analysis of ageing to which Woodward has called attention. My research has shown that though little feminist thought has been directed toward the literary criticism of grey chick lit, the analysis of its predecessors chick lit and romance fiction is applicable to my thesis.

Although Radway's *Reading The Romance* is based on reader-response methodology I will discuss it here because her depiction of what 'romance' literature 'does' is relevant to an analysis of chick lit and also to grey chick lit. Janice Radway argues that when women read romance fiction they 'read ironically' (1994: 128). She observes that 'romance reading [...] addressed needs, desires, and wishes that a male partner could not' (1987: 13). Radway interviewed a group of women living in Smithton who regularly read romance novels. She observes that 'the Smithton women apparently felt an intense need to be nurtured and cared for' (Radway, 1987: 13). They preferred novels where the hero showed tenderness, was nurturing, protective and showed interest in the heroine's life. Radway concluded 'The hero's ministrations were nearly always linked metaphorically with maternal concern and nurturance' (1987: 13). In identifying with the idealised relationships portrayed in romantic fiction these readers were better able to endure their own imperfect reality. As Radway remarks 'romance fiction must be an active agent in the maintenance of the ideological status quo because it ultimately reconciles women to patriarchal society' (1987: 217). But these readers did not see it that way and used reading to take time and pleasure for themselves. Reading gave them a sphere of their own and allowed them to refuse to attend to the needs of others, 'for them, romance reading addresses needs created in them but not met by patriarchal

institutions and engendering practices' (Radway, 1987: 211). Some of the Smithton women believed that by reading about strong independent women they became empowered and that reading romance novels enabled them to 'thwart common cultural expectations' (Radway, 1987: 211). They said that the satisfying relationships they read about encouraged them to improve their own position within the family. When change was not a possibility reading provided them with escape and comfort. 'The Smithton readers believe very strongly that romance reading changes at least some women' (Radway, 1987: 218). It would appear that escape, comfort and inspiration toward change are as much elements of chick lit and matron lit as they are of romantic fiction. Many middle-aged women have continuing attachments to adult children, some responsibility for the care of their grand-children and often overwhelming responsibilities for the care of elderly parents. I argue that they need to be able to escape in much the same way as the Smithton women. Matron lit offers fictional possibilities of a new life in a different place, with a partner who will see them as mature, experienced women and not as a worn-out parody of their younger selves. Grey chick lit offers its consumers hope, inspiration, fantasy and time away from the demands of others. Alternatively, it may be argued that this genre perpetuates women's place in society as subordinate and therefore 'natural' carers, because so many matron lit novels fictionalise women in mid-life as being in exactly those situations. However, as Hollows and Mosely state 'when feminism is refused within the popular, this does not necessarily imply a conservative agenda' (2006: 3). This argument has been applied to chick lit and I argue that it also applies to its descendent: grey chick lit.

Feminist analysis of chick lit leads me to believe that matron lit is also conflicted in its remit, with its mundane portrayals of ageing women dealing with domestic responsibilities, financial difficulties and ill health, as opposed to its fantasies of escape, freedom and empowerment. But this may not be an either/or dilemma, and there may be much that is valuable and useful in the inherent ambiguity of chick lit and grey chick lit. Ambiguity can function as a bridge between conservative and revolutionary ideas. Writing about the fundamental difference between chick lit and romance fiction, Ferriss and Young comment that 'both fans and authors of chick lit contend the difference lies in the genre's realism' (2006: 3). They also argue that 'ambiguity lies at the genre's core' (Ferriss and Young, 2006: 9). A question hangs over debates about chick lit, concerning its purpose and whether the genre offers strong feminist role models or if it perpetuates the subordination of women in the 'same patriarchal narrative of romance' (Ferriss and Young, 2006: 9). To work as exclusively

utopian narratives, these genres would be required to abandon their realistic credentials, which would undermine their strength and appeal. I think that it is precisely the imaginative, yet mundane, nature of these characters' stories which qualify grey chick lit to be considered a significant contribution to discussions around ageing and gender.

### **DEFINITIONS OF 'MATRON LIT'**

I have found very little academic analysis of matron lit but research into gender, ageing and genre fiction is now underway, both in the Britain and Australia. Australian PhD candidate Sandra Antonelli asks:

Where are the fortysomethings back on the dating scene after a divorce, or the woman who regrets putting her career before love and marriage? And what about the girl who's made it to forty—or fifty—without finding Mr Right?' (2013) Antonelli explains that for her Master's Degree 'I identified the age gap that lay between romance fiction and Women's Fiction, and indicated there was an audience who felt like I did—they also asked, 'hey, where are all the romance older heroines?' For my PhD [...] I explore the possible reasons for why this drought of older romance heroines age gap exists. (2013)

In Britain, Joan Brenda Walker of Loughborough University has recently completed her PhD thesis. Walker's area of interest is 'Love and Relationships over 65. Do British Contemporary Novels Reflect the New Reality?' (2012). Antonelli and Walker's work provides insight into how older women are represented in the romance genre but very little has been said about grey chick lit.

There has, however, been discussion about it in popular media. According to Wikipedia, matron lit, 'is a literary genre which focuses on older women as protagonists'. The online encyclopaedia explains that the genre is an 'offshoot' of chick lit which is popular with female 'baby-boomers' who want to read about characters they can 'identify with'. The heroines are usually divorced or widowed and living alone. The subject of these novels, it suggests, is usually, though not always, romance. The entry on Wikipedia claims that the genre often has feminist themes, some more obvious than others, and that the authors of matron literature are frequently mature women themselves. While I do believe that matron lit is a voice for mature women, which deserves academic analysis, I do not see these novels as overtly feminist texts.

Matron lit can be defined as Western, contemporary, popular fiction, which features middle-aged and elderly women as main characters. Grey chick lit discusses the events, both large and small, that accompany the ageing process. Matron lit debates subjects such as changing

relationships with family, home life, work and finances and reminds middle-aged and elderly women that they 'are not dead yet'. These novels acknowledge the difficulties that ageing women experience and explore the emotions that are aroused in various situations. While 'romance' and chick lit offered comfort to the women and girls who could not find a 'significant other', matron lit acknowledges that getting older has its problems. Like its precursors, this genre provides comfort, companionship, entertainment, distraction and hope.

Rochelle Hollander Schwab echoes a sentiment that has been voiced frequently in the media, about the label matron lit, when she complains that 'it's a terrible name, but there's plenty of good reading in it' (2005). According to Chris Hastings, 'publishers on both sides of the Atlantic are abandoning "chick lit" in favour of a new breed of romance reflecting the experiences of the older woman' (2005). Hastings says these novels are written to a formula which reads: divorce or death of spouse, struggle to recover from the change of circumstances and status, unexpected romance, culminating in a 'happy ending'. He argues that the reason these novels have now been made available is because publishers are 'keen to cash in on the grey pound.' (2005) Hastings quotes Jenny Haddon, speaking for the Romantic Novelists Association, who claims that mid-life women have time to read books and money to buy them, therefore they have become the target audience. In this article he also quotes Nikki Read, the founder of 'Transita', who claims that mature authors are tired of writing about young heroines and are relieved to be allowed to write about older protagonists. Hastings reports that Read informed him that a common response to the remit is 'thank God' (2005). Writing for *Newsweek* Alice Fishburn discusses Harlequin's line of novels for older women readers. In her article 'chick lit Goes Grey', she reports that because many female readers are tired of the usual stories about young love, Harlequin launched 'Next', making novels available which 'deal with more identifiable situations like failed marriages' (Fishburn, 2005). Fishburn quotes Tara Gavin, the editor of 'Next', who claims that 'this is a new power demographic – women at a critical stage of life who are willing to say "What's next?"' (2005). Kira Cochrane, writing for *timesonline*, remarks that 'this market is providing an alternative for grown women who like commercial fiction but are tired of reading (and writing) about young heroines' (2005). According to Cochrane publishers of commercial fiction are now marketing middle-aged female protagonists, alongside the 'twenty-something' heroines of chick lit. Like Hastings, writing earlier the same year, Cochrane also quotes Jenny Haddon who predicted many more books about female mid-life experience reaching the bookshelves. If, as Read and Gavin claimed in 2005, matron lit has come into

being to inspire older women who were contemplating what might be next, then it appears that they have gone some way to fulfilling their remit, even though the 'Transita' and 'Next' publishing lines have closed down. When I asked Gavin if Harlequin still publish novels with older heroines, she replied 'yes, but they are seen more in the 'mainstream' part of the business' (Personal communication: 2012). It would appear that matron lit is no longer considered a novelty that requires a separate imprint in order to be published. The full transcript of the interviews with Tara Gavin and Nikki Read can be read as appendices.

There is considerable disagreement within the literature about precisely which age group grey chick lit is appealing to, or exactly what age a main character is likely to be. I would suggest that the heroines of matron lit are, at their youngest, confronting their fortieth birthday, the oldest may be over eighty but the majority are more usually aged between fifty and seventy. However, in *Chick Lit; The New Woman's Fiction* matron lit is defined as 'chick lit focused on women over forty' on page 5 but also 'for the over fifty reader' on page 31 (Ferriss and Young, Eds., 2006). Schwab says that 'the youngest a protagonist can be for a book to be classified as matron lit has been variously stated as starting at forty to forty-eight' (2005). According to Marilyn Gardner 'in this new genre, no heroine can be younger than 48' (2005). While Hastings, the arts correspondent of *The Telegraph* declares that 'love begins at 40 for the new heroines of matron lit' (2005). Other sources have placed the age marker at forty, forty-five or fifty. It appears, so far, to be fluid and open-ended and in keeping with this I have chosen to focus on novels that express 'concern' about ageing, with the youngest heroine aged thirty-nine at the beginning of the novel and turning forty a few pages before the end, in *Life Begins* (Brookfield, 2008). I have set no upper age limit on my primary sources.

My research has shown that until recently, it was unusual to find popular fiction in which older women were the main protagonists. Until the late 1990's middle-aged and elderly women were often found in supporting roles but were rarely the central character. Alison Lurie's mid-life heroine in *Foreign Affairs* bemoans the fact that she has no literary role models because women of her age have only bit-parts: 'In the world of classic British fiction, the one Vinnie knows best, almost the entire population is under fifty or even under forty' (Lurie, 1998: 206). According to Vinnie, the only characters over fifty, that she can find in literature, are 'pushed into minor parts' or are someone's relative and she has no relatives. Consequently, Vinnie feels as if she is a minor character in the novel of her own life. In this new genre it is no longer difficult to find fiction in which the heroine is a female of advanced years, with all the experience and baggage that a woman of that age may have accrued. My

research, regarding what has been said about grey chick lit by publishers and the media, suggests that this change has come about partly due to the interest of older women in reading about women of their own age, writers who were tired of writing exclusively about young heroines and publishing houses who realised that there were profits to be made from giving 'baby-boomers' the reading material they wanted.

Despite the increased availability of popular novels that have mature women as main characters, it is unclear whether this type of fiction simply contemplates their situation in society or points in a new direction. Matron lit, while not side-lining older women or portraying them as 'extras' to the action, often portrays middle-aged women as care-givers. Yet there are exceptions and fiction that depicts older women rejecting this role, walking out on their families and refusing to conform despite sanctions, appears to be a popular fantasy. Elderly women are often, though not always, shown to be in need of care, due to deteriorating physical and mental capacities but there are some contemporary novels that depict old women who insist that they do not need to be cared for or they demand the type of care that they actually need. Such rebellions challenge cultural stereotypes of gender and ageing. Where there is conformity to cultural expectations, the intrinsic value is in reporting the situation as it is. Grey chick lit provides readers with a point of reference with which to compare their own situations. On one level this kind of novel reproduces familiar cultural rules but on another it expresses a challenge to restriction and conformity.

These narratives are almost always placed in a contemporary setting and reference commonplace routines, practices and consumer brands with which readers are familiar. By locating these stories in the mundane, at least at the outset of the novel, the author welcomes readers into familiar territory. Even if the main female character shops for food at Waitrose or Selfridges, while the reader is more often picking up her magazines, novels and groceries in Asda or Aldi, the experience is recognisable and normal. So when the heroine expresses dissatisfaction with her tedious existence it may connect with similar feelings in the reader. When the main female character experiences a crisis it is very often something that the reader might have experienced herself, like divorce or children leaving home. Matron lit is a genre of the mundane, the every-day, the recognisable, but it is still fiction. So when the heroine is in crisis she is able to respond creatively, to make plans to overcome her problems or walk away from them, or to reinvent herself. When the reader has identified with the main protagonist and that character then makes a change in her life, it becomes easier for the reader

to contemplate making a change in her own life. It is the initial familiarity of the heroine's situation that allows readers to imagine change in their own lives.

Matron lit discusses what happens when the marriage breaks down or the children leave home, or are financially unable to leave home, even when 'Mum' is weary of the very existence she longed for back in her youth. These are novels about what happens when it is time to retire or how women cope when their husbands are made redundant, about what happens when there is not enough money coming in to repair the rotting roof and there is no prospect of a promotion or bonus to save the situation. Some of these stories allow their characters to cut their losses and run. The mid-life women are able to have an adventure, to behave with abandon, defy the disapproval of other people and possibly find romance.

Elderly heroines often return to the place of their childhood, come to terms with past traumas and make new, younger friends who value them in a way their adult children do not. After these adventures have facilitated change in the characters they often return to their homes and families with an inner strength and hard-earned wisdom that was previously absent and their situation is subtly changed for the better. Although it is often the case that the character decides to return to the old situation, she is always somehow enriched by the experience of escape. Even when the novels end in compromise it usually results in the characters being somewhat happier than they were before.

In another variation on this theme mid-life women are punished for their defection and realise that they have been self-centred and unappreciative of the charms of home and family. But it is only by breaking the rules of convention that these characters are enabled to appreciate what they have lost, or more usually, might have lost. While this can be read as a warning to older women not to grasp at freedom and fun it can also be read as planting a seed of rebellion in readers' minds and encouraging them to break out of their own restrictive existence, if only to achieve the wisdom to value what they have left behind. This convention only applies when the woman leaves her husband, children and home. If the woman is wronged by her husband she gets to start again with some success. The husband invariably wants to return and pick up where they left off but in the meantime the heroine has 'grown', become independent, found a new man or discovered that she does not 'need' a man.

Matron lit does not invite or encourage women to walk away from unhappy or stale relationships but it does discuss what might happen if they did. Even the mid-life characters who are disciplined for being feckless get to have a good time for a while, before it starts to

dawn on them that they have risked losing everything that is really important to them. 'Leaving' is 'big fun', it is exciting, it is about being a 'new you' in a new place, dressed in new outfits, developing new careers, interests, hobbies and basking in the attention of new friends and lovers. Readers get the fantasy of the exotic, the promise of the 'new' but are then reminded to be grateful for what they have. Alternatively, a reader might imagine 'regret' to be a price worth paying, or be so desperate for change that they are willing to take the risk of losing their old life, of having no-one to come home to or even no home to return to. After all, it is only possible to come home if you leave in the first place. It appears that even though matron lit returns its wayward women to the home and mature responsibility, it 'rocks the boat' just enough to send the message that 'anything is possible', even for the most down trodden, frumpy, bored and/or boring, middle-aged women. Matron lit novels explore familiar territory, stir things up a bit, and then return to the status quo. Readers are not necessarily empowered by this fiction to pursue, in mid-life or later, the perfect life, but the fantasy, once considered, exists. Butler argues that all change begins in fantasy and if this supposition is correct then the themes, issues and ideas explored in matron lit novels give fantasy a kick-start. What readers choose to do about their fantasies is personal. Readers are not passive and may engage actively with the text to reject or accept whatever suits them. Just because a story tells a cautionary tale about the dangers of abandoning the domestic sphere does not guarantee that readers will heed it.

Like its forerunner chick lit, matron lit has an aura of authenticity and in its descriptions of flawed heroines, daily minutiae, familiar routines and spaces, it provides fertile ground to plant the seeds for a multiplicity of scenarios. I concur with Chivers' assertion that 'narrative fiction can go a long way toward reinforcing negative attitudes toward aging and can also defy such attitudes' (2003: xv). Readers of matron lit are offered ageing female protagonists, who move within familiar cultural boundaries but who, quite often, choose to 'push' those boundaries or even cross them. In *Figuring Age* Woodward argues that 'under the concrete pressure of the demographic revolution in longevity, we need new models' (1999: 155). While she was referring, in this instance, to academic and literary models, the ageing female characters created by writers of matron lit may be contenders for the position. The authors of matron lit sometimes remove their heroines from their native culture and place them somewhere exotic. In these foreign surroundings it becomes possible to visualise a new situation where being an older woman would not get in the way of doing what they want, whilst escaping the censure of their own society. In this way, these novels demonstrate that it

is possible to escape from cultural norms and imagine fantastical worlds for the future.

Johnson and Thane assert that:

For each media tale of hardship in old age there is one of wayward abandon— the bungee-jumping octogenarian, the parachuting granny. But these are, of course, no more than images, views from without. They give little indication of whether the experience of old age has changed from within, from the perspective of the ageing individual. (1998: 222)

The fictional accounts provided by matron lit, of older female protagonists who disturb or are disturbed by cultural rules of ageing, offer insight into how it might feel to be a ‘rebellious’ older person. Such ‘rebellion’ may not always appear successful or productive, as some older female characters are, in one way or another, reprimanded or even punished for attempting to refuse the ‘decline model’ of ageing. Hepworth argues that ‘the reason for the resilience of the decline model is the appeal it makes to realism’ (2003: 103). In some ways grey chick lit adheres to the ‘decline model’ with its heroines’ concerns about looking old, yet counteracts this by vocalising the distress and anger of its protagonists.

The fictional tales about how these protagonists deal with these problems ensure the idea of looking at age differently is being put ‘out there’ on a scale that is unprecedented. It is through the imaginary experiences, successes and failures of fictional characters that readers are able to contemplate, consider, adopt or discard templates of behaviour for their own futures. When matron lit novels begin by describing the female characters’ relationships to their families, homes and belongings, a sense of normality is established. This contrivance ensures that however unusual the heroines’ stories become they never seem completely outside the realm of possibility. Fiction is an effective and subtle way to debate serious subjects and as Chivers says ‘narrative fiction offers a vast potential for rethinking social problems’ (2003: xxxvi). Popular contemporary novels that deal with everyday yet challenging, situations, such as ageism, contribute to the possibility of change in cultural attitudes.

## **CHAPTER STRUCTURE**

The chapter structure is based on the critical theory as outlined in the ‘theoretical framework’ of this introduction. Chapters 1 and 2 look at how the subject is socially constructed and the effect of this on wellbeing. Chapters 3 and 4 both deal with how the socially constituted subject is policed and illustrate Michel Foucault’s theory of social policing as the model for

the state-sanctioned punitive system. Chapter 5 specifically discusses the possibilities of ‘undoing’ the restraints imposed on older women by ageist cultural norms, through acts of subversion and disruption.

The first chapter is a discussion of grey chick lit heroines’ feelings about body image and sexuality. Matron lit narratives depict heterosexuality as normative and it is within this matrix that sexual and romantic relationships are described. While some of the mature female characters may be alone through choice or circumstance, this situation is usually considered to be temporary. Within this context matron lit novels discuss their characters’ distress about the loss of youth and beauty. Despite a few exceptions within show business, Western culture excludes older women from the arena of beauty and sexuality. According to Kathleen Woodward older women are ‘sexually invisible’ (1999: 150). Grey chick lit recognises this situation and discusses how characters’ lives are affected.

In chapter 2, I discuss how the concept of wellbeing is explored in matron lit. This genre exposes the detrimental effects of ageist attitudes on mental and physical health. The heroines of grey chick lit demonstrate that it is possible to rebut the decline scenario and live active healthy lives well into old age. These characters model a healthy lifestyle, yet temper this example by indulging in whatever gives them pleasure. Most importantly, they show that even ill health may be accepted and managed in a way that does not preclude the joy of living. On pages 95 and 96 I set out the case of a ‘life review’ as a pre-requisite for progress and any possibility of the concept of ‘undoing’ cultural ageism, as extrapolated in the last chapter of my thesis. There is a subtle tone of hope in matron lit novels that plays against cultural attitudes which imply that ageing is synonymous with deterioration.

In chapter 3 I explore the significance of home in matron lit, and how ageing affects women’s relationship with their homes. The characters’ connection with home is shown to be intricately implicated with their feelings about significant relationships. An ageing woman’s level of attachment to her home has a clearly demonstrated link to the level of ‘shelteredness’ she experiences within that space. Grey chick lit novels illustrate the power of loss to render home a barren space.

Chapter 4 describes the important role that relationships within and across generations play in the lives of many women. Matron lit provides a rich variety of representations of generational relationships with its depictions of familial conflict and cooperation. There is also an abundance of examples of cross-generational friendships that I consider in this chapter.

Matron lit novels allow characters to articulate their despair when they realise that they are expected to remain in a caring role indefinitely. These heroines often rebel against familial and social expectations in an entertaining fashion, usually aided and abetted by their friends.

Chapter 5 is a discussion of the exploits and journeys undertaken by those grey chick lit heroines who are compelled to leave home when they review their lives and acknowledge that they remain unfulfilled. Matron lit explores how its heroines may choose to abandon homes and families in an attempt to adapt to life changes and respond to new challenges. When children leave home a number of female grey chick lit characters reject domesticity. The prospect of never-ending nurturing becomes so daunting that they have no choice left but to abscond either metaphorically or physically.

Matron lit offers representations of older women living in contemporary Western culture that are recognisable. Mature female readers can relate to older heroines whose experiences reflect the reality of their own lives. This genre enters the debate around ageing and gender by recording the ageist rhetoric and norms that its heroines try to negotiate. In search of a positive position in society, matron lit protagonists must encounter the gendered and ageist discourse which exclude post-reproductive women. In his book *Foucault and Fiction* Timothy O'Leary sets out the case that for Foucault 'an experience book' is a book that acts upon the reader in the 'making and re-making' of both past and future (2009: 2). The anguish experienced by grey chick lit heroines, as a result of historic ageist attitudes, is clearly articulated. Matron lit functions as a voice within contemporary popular culture that older women have never had before and assists the reader in a possible re-working of the future.

## Chapter 1: Body Image and Sexuality

Matron lit novels consistently raise the issue of their central character's distress over a perceived loss of beauty, as a consequence of the ageing process. John O'Donohue states that 'no-one would desire not to be beautiful' (2003: 12). If his statement is accurate then it would improve the quality of life for all human beings if they were allowed to consider themselves beautiful. Yet this is not possible because, culturally, certain groups of people find themselves positioned outside socially sanctioned parameters of beauty. Western society has rigid rules regarding what is considered to be beautiful and old women are categorically excluded. According to Liz Byrski we live 'in a culture that advocates the pursuit of endless youth and physical beauty' (2012). The ageing female body, and a character's perception and valuation of its attractiveness, is a theme that is explored repeatedly in grey chick lit novels. In this chapter I will consider the ageing female body and its appearance, as discussed in Western, contemporary, popular fiction which features middle-aged and elderly women as the main protagonists. Grey chick lit provides an arena for discussion about women's concerns around ageing and appearance while it also verbalises societal expectations and cultural norms. Kathleen Woodward argues that older women are considered to be 'sexually invisible' (1999: 150). During her presentation at a conference at Brunel University in 2011 Pat Thane expressed the opinion that post-menopausal women 'are considered ugly and useless.' Germaine Greer puts it even more bluntly in *The Change* when she states that 'old women are commonly assumed to be sexually repulsive' (1992: 337). Grey chick lit acknowledges this assumption, describes how characters respond to it and explores ways of dealing with it. In *Body Work* Debra Gimlin argues that 'it is unlikely that a woman living in contemporary Western society could ignore her physical appearance. If she did, she would be stigmatized as unfeminine or socially unaware' (2002: 4). Gimlin reinforces Jacques Lacan's observation, which I discussed in the introduction, that awareness of the 'gaze' has serious repercussions for women's sense of femininity. Matron lit sets out the cultural 'norms' about appearance and ageing and describes the pain some characters experience because of ageist attitudes to attractiveness.

These narratives also detail the lengths some female characters go to in an attempt to avoid looking, or maybe more significantly, being regarded by others, as old. In their writing about the politics of beauty Lakoff and Scherr say that the pain caused by not feeling beautiful is 'a real interference with productive living' (1984: 15). Many matron lit heroines articulate the belief that their productive lives are over when they have lost their youthful beauty. The

misery experienced by these characters is clearly the product of cultural attitudes around gender and ageing. Frances Trotman and Claire Brody argue that:

The sources of our negative perceptions of older women derive from our cultural and religious heritage. Older women, in particular, have suffered denigration of their minds and bodies simply because of their age — and older men have not been put down in the same way. (2001: 6)

The varied ways in which the female protagonists of grey chick lit attempt to deal with this gendered ageism and its ensuing threat to their identity may give readers cause to wonder if prolonged youthfulness is the only goal worth pursuing. Matron lit sheds light on the thought processes and emotions that women experience because of the changes to their bodies brought about through ageing. Literature which details how characters' body image, emotions and behaviour are influenced and controlled by cultural laws, through discourse with others, expose the power structures involved in judgements about the body, beauty and ageing. Butler asserts that 'the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations' (1990: 117). The power-play and language of its enforcement are disguised by the familiarity of its creation. Deborah Tannen argues 'dominance relations and cultural influences of all types (gender-related as well as other influences, such as geographic region, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and profession) are at play at every moment of interaction' (1999: 222). When people are alerted to the concept that assessments about the value and attractiveness of the body (including the ageing body) are subject to cultural law, and are not natural, then it becomes clear that change is possible. Butler argues that we need to 'cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law' (1990: 119). Older women freed of this illusion may be empowered to engage in alternative discourses about their body image and identity. Susan Sellers, writing in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* argues that:

Theorist Judith Butler offers a convincing account of the mechanisms whereby we construct our identities through our repeated performance of cultural norms, an operation which I believe is often cast and internalised in the form of a narrative we tell ourselves and to which the widespread currency of myths contributes. Butler's work also crucially indicates that our telling of alternatives is a viable force for change. (2001: 131)

Matron lit suggests alternatives, which may encourage readers to seek change, in the same novels that repeat and possibly reinforce conservative societal attitudes. This genre appears to be conflicted in its message but this conflict is the real strength of matron lit because it places its heroines in the real world of the present day, with all its gendered ageism on display. By

fantasising alternative narratives which suggest the possibility of a more promising future, readers may become more aware of the language-based societal construction of Western culture's distaste for the visible signs of female ageing.

Grey chick lit novels offer readers the opportunity to engage with characters who accept cultural judgements and those who participate in subversive scenarios. As Baba Copper clarifies in *Over the Hill* 'aging is a real process which takes place differently in each individual. Ageism on the other hand is a constriction which re-arranges power relationships' (1988: 83). The power of ageism to restrict the autonomy of ageing women is laid bare by grey chick lit. The language used by society to make both the young and the old afraid of ageing, is clearly set out in black and white. By exploring the constraints imposed on older women and the effect of these limitations on their characters' lives, fictional narratives are able to expose the cultural rules that dictate behaviour and consequently inhibit an authentic expression of individual identity. Yet in doing so, matron lit may be perpetuating conservative attitudes about ageing and encouraging readers to conform to those conventional views of 'successful ageing' which support cultural laws and indicate that the only way to be considered attractive is to strive to look younger than one's years. However, matron lit manages to do more than this because in setting out all the old and familiar rhetoric concerning the appearance of older women it reveals the 'rules' for what they really are; cultural constructions which are enforced through language. At the very least, authors of matron lit are exposing 'the underlying perceptions' that render ageing particularly painful for Western women. The heroines of grey chick lit are not required to break the rules themselves (although some do) as it is enough to see the pain they experience in their efforts to conform and acquiesce to the demands of society: this reveals to readers the arbitrary quality of cultural 'norms'.

As the first genre fiction to focus on the lives of middle-aged and old women, matron lit reveals a vivid picture of the pressure placed on older women to try and look younger. The heroines of grey chick lit demonstrate the recognisable challenges faced by older women to function in a culture that values youth so highly and disparages age. Older female readers of matron lit may identify with the heroines' distress at finding themselves in this situation and understand their desperate attempts to remain valuable by trying to look younger. It is encouraging to see that the struggle of ageing women to retain some value and power in an ageist society is no longer being ignored by authors of popular fiction. In matron lit ageing women characters are not hidden away at the side-lines of the narrative and merely used to

provide support and comfort for the young heroines of romance and chick lit novels. In this chapter I will discuss how the ‘threat of ageing’ is explored in *The Adultery Diet* (Cassady, 2007), *the gap year for grown ups* (Saunders, 2008), *Busy Woman Seeks Wife* (Saunders, 2007), and *Homecoming* (Kelly, 2011). All four novels feature female characters who express concerns about their appearance and its value to them as social currency. Although the heroines of both *The Adultery Diet* and *the gap year for grown ups* are relatively young, their worries about their appearance are the crux of their problems and they both believe that if they looked and felt, not simply better, but younger, they would receive the male approval which they equate with social value. In her essay Royda Grose argues that:

A woman's attitude about her body in old age usually represents the way she has experienced her body throughout her life. If she has been a beauty and traded on that in her youth or if she has an insensitive sexual partner, she may have difficulty with the changes that age brings. (2001: 18)

The older female character in *Busy Woman Seeks Wife* experiences ageing as a loss of the currency she used in order to gain the adulation which made her feel that life was worthwhile. For this character, in particular, the fading of her youth and beauty precipitates an identity crisis and a loss of her sense of ‘self’ and purpose, which she attempts to buy back through such ‘conspicuous consumerism’, that she threatens her daughter’s livelihood. Viewed exclusively as a drain on her daughter’s finances this elderly character’s extravagance can be seen as one example of the ‘problems’ that the old cause for the young. Yet when the situation is explored further in this novel, it becomes clear that the problem stems from cultural attitudes toward consumerism, ageing and gender.

In *The Adultery Diet* and *the gap year for grown ups* the main protagonists are in their early forties, while the character which I discuss, in *Busy Woman Seeks Wife*, is one of an ensemble cast of characters and is the ageing mother of the ‘busy woman’ of the title. I will also discuss the attitude of the elderly main protagonist of the novel *Homecoming* with regard to ageing, appearance and sexuality. What links all these characters’ concerns is their expression of the cultural value placed on ‘youthfulness’ and their longing for the attention that they associate with youth and beauty. The principle source of this attention is male but failing that, attention from the younger generation assumes increasing value. It is significant that the forty-something heroines of *The Adultery Diet* and *the gap year for grown ups* are both entering the so-called ‘empty-nest’ stage when they first experience their ageing as a cause of deep concern. These novels discuss the cultural norms which hold that romance and sex are the province of attractive people alone and that only the young can be attractive. According to

Bonnie Berry, in her book *The Power of Looks*, the idea of a normative form of attractiveness became established at the beginning of the nineteenth century and this cultural ‘norm’ led to a division of power along the lines of appearance. Berry argues that ‘the portrait of the attractive person is white, tall, thin, with Northern European features, free of disabilities, and young’ (2008: vii). The matron lit novels which I look at in this chapter articulate the power of societal rules and norms to cause deep distress to women as they age and fail to meet Western society’s criteria for beauty.

*The Adultery Diet* is the fictional memoir of the forty-four-year-old heroine Eva. This novel borrows from the genre of chick lit, in particular Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (1996). Eva is a middle-aged Bridget Jones and *The Adultery Diet* is an inter-textual nod to her ‘diary’, which echoes Fielding’s own tribute to Jane Austen. In this novel Eva chronicles her ultimately successful battle with her weight and self-image. Each section of the novel is divided by season and year and each chapter title displays Eva’s weight in pounds. The story purports to be a record of her rediscovery of youthfulness by improving her appearance and discusses her life and feelings in such a way that many readers have posted reviews of the book affirming its ‘realism’. The first-person narrative used in *The Adultery Diet* performs the same function as the first-person narratives commonly used in chick lit in that the ‘I’ of the novel encourages a sense of rapport between reader and heroine. Daphne Atkeson comments on goodreads.com that this is a ‘lovely piece of light reading that finesses the cliché of a woman’s mid-life crisis’ (2009). According to a review posted by Charlene Martel on theliteraryword.com ‘it could quite easily be the true story of so many women’ (2008). However, the fact that this work of fiction claims to be auto-biographical playfully hints that the narrator may not be entirely reliable. This novel articulates one woman’s distress as a consequence of ageism and society’s rules about who can be considered attractive. It also speaks to the cultural ‘norm’ that holds that it is not possible for a woman to be satisfied with life unless she can attain the minimum standard of beauty prescribed by society. *The Adultery Diet* encapsulates the genre’s preoccupation with appearance and details the motivation, method and consequences of the make-over fantasy, while questioning its intrinsic value.

Eva’s personal success is linked irrevocably with her banishment of ‘middle age spread’ and as readers are informed from the beginning that she eventually succeeds, the story resembles a self-help guide. Gullette argues that there are not enough representations of female mid-life characters in fiction and that without such resources women have no one to look to for examples of ageing. According to Gullette readers need ‘manuals of instruction in fictional

form' (1998: 169). *The Adultery Diet* may qualify but the instruction offered in this novel is couched in conventional terms which comply with current cultural values about how ageing women are regarded by society and the limited ways in which they may manoeuvre to regain some sense of personal and public power. Initially, Eva tells readers that she looks and feels great and she is going to reveal the secret of her success. She offers herself as an example of 'a younger woman emerging from under the weight of the years like a flower growing from a snow bank' (Cassady, 2007: 2). Eva has felt weighed down both literally and figuratively by her years of domesticity and child rearing because while she has been involved with these homely pursuits she has not successfully dealt with the creeping escalation of her weight or paid much attention to the waning interest of her husband. When she does pay attention to the unhappiness that these gradual changes have wrought she perceives them as the 'weight of the years' which she believes she must discard in order to feel that life is fresh and holds the warm promise of her remembered youth. Once she has thrown off the weight and its associated attitude of old age and misery, Eva is triumphant in her youthful appearance and she tells readers that they can do it too, if they 'want it'. She uses the reduced size of her body as a statement of who she is.

Eva perceives her longing for youthful adventure as being at odds with the size and condition of her body, so by losing weight Eva has written on her body the message that she 'wants it' and that she has the strength of character to 'get it'. As Robyn Longhurst states 'the body has become the ultimate vehicle for writing one's identity. Bodies are means of self-expression – various meanings are attached to being fat, thin, muscular, blond, tattooed, pierced, wrinkled, tanned and so on' (2000: 19). Eva's hard-earned slender figure also expresses her belief in the cultural law which decrees that being thin looks youthful and that unless a woman can manage to retain an illusion of youthfulness she will relinquish her cultural value, which is demonstrated most strongly through male desire and the approval of the youthful gaze. In *The Body Myth* Maine and Kelly argue that 'the more lacking we feel, the more we may blame our bodies and try to solve our problems by changing our shape' (2005: 155). When the heroine of *The Adultery Diet* perceives a lack of attention and desire from her husband, she blames it on the size of her body and it becomes her goal to lose weight and regain her youthful appearance. Joanna Frueh states 'youthful is the matron's readjustment to society's age dread, her redemption after falling into the wayward gracelessness of midlife' (2000: 64). Eva redeems herself through weight loss and her story is representative of the concerns of many older female characters in grey chick lit.

*The Adultery Diet* enters into dialogue with and critiques the situation of middle-aged Western women who are conditioned to believe that they are no longer considered desirable and therefore valuable. In order to regain youthful status they are instructed to shed the pounds and this novel offers a mischievous guide to motivation and success. This narrative begins with a crisis which is typical of much matron lit, in that Eva is facing the prospect of an empty nest. As Eva watches her daughter Chloe packing her case for Paris she observes that 'for her, the future's all possibility: college, Paris, career and yes, sex' (p. 8). Eva is confronted with the awareness that while her child is just beginning her life as a woman, in comparison, her life may be over. Eva's opportunities for romance and sex with her husband David appear to have ended when he began an exhausting exercise regime in the hope that this would increase his level of testosterone. Eva cries 'what's he need all that testosterone for? I couldn't help wondering. Certainly not for me' (p. 37). Eva feels that she has lost her husband as a lover and admirer and asks herself 'is the story really over at forty-four?' (p. 8). Eva's uneasiness is less about her chronological age than about the post-maternal stage of her life as she cries 'I'm sobbing. My baby's gone forever' (p. 12). The loss of her maternal role prompts her to consider that she has also lost the role of desirable and valuable woman. According to Sarah Terry, ageing women are considered to be 'less productive than men once their childbearing years are over, and suffering from "empty nest" syndrome - with little to do once children leave home' (2000). Writing in *Feminist Studies* Gullette argues that between 1898 and 1927 the post-maternal woman 'came to be seen by feminists, other women, and most mainstream spokespeople as a problem to herself, her family, and to society "idle" and "out of a job," superfluous and unloved' (1995: 221). Gullette indicates that this construction of the post-maternal years as 'surplus' was persistent and difficult to disrupt. Eva's distress is the result of cultural opinion which condemns post-maternal women as useless and it is reaching this particular life stage which is the trigger of her discontent, rather than her chronological age itself.

*The Adultery Diet*, in common with other matron lit, chick lit and romance novels, indicates that success for women belongs in the realm of heterosexual romance, marriage and family. As these are the prescribed goals for women, once they have been achieved and the family raised to adulthood there appears to be little left to live for. Writing in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, Alison Umminger asserts that 'women who now had the right to vote, to build careers and identities of their own, were frittering away these advantages in pursuit of eternal youth and thin bodies' (2006: 239). Although Eva is older than the women Umminger

refers to she still dismisses all of her advantages as inferior to being young and thin. Sitting on the bed in their 'nice apartment' while she waits for David to vacate the shower, she contemplates that although they have 'a child in college' and successful careers in publishing 'the story might be simply more of the same or, even worse, a slow decline' (p. 8). Eva has fulfilled her goals and finds it 'hard to think' that her life has ceased to hold promise and she asks 'when did life stop being about hope?' (p. 8) In *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf argues that 'the more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us' (1991: 10). For Eva, the loss of hope outweighs her successful life because she has been trained to believe that hope is only for the young and beautiful. Gullette argues that 'the midlife image has primarily taken for granted a despicable or pitiable persona or an ironizing plot of decline' (1988: xviii). Eva's fear of decline is precipitated by her daughter leaving home, her husband's supposed loss of interest and awareness that because she is no longer young and slim she is not considered attractive or of any value within her culture. This particular matron lit heroine identifies her main problem as being excess weight and believes that the only way she can improve the quality of her life is to lose weight. According to Grose 'a universal finding in studies on body image and weight satisfaction is that women want to weigh less' (2001: 24). Eva is representative of the majority of women in Western culture who want to be slimmer. Brooks Bouson argues that 'to be fat in our fat-phobic culture is to be publicly shamed and marked as someone with an undesirable identity' (2009: 107). Eva has internalised this culturally constructed shame and clearly believes that for as long as she remains overweight she does indeed embody an 'undesirable identity'.

The word 'fat' is commonly considered to be an insult and used as a weapon to demean people; consequently the description of a female character as 'fat' indicates that she is undesirable. According to Charlotte Wright:

Ugly and repulsive female characters are fat. In fact, not only is the word "fat" often used as a buzzword to communicate ugliness to the contemporary reader, but its use also necessitates an explanation on the author's part if he/she does not mean to imply that the character is ugly. (2006: 17)

She also comments that 'one ugly-woman novel is even titled *Fat Woman*, and its main character expends most of her energy berating herself for being overweight' (Wright, 2006: 17). The heroine of *The Adultery Diet* similarly berates herself and constantly blames her unhappiness on being fat. Umminger argues that the female characters of chick lit texts express 'the self-imposed and culturally sanctioned tyranny of hating their own bodies'

(2006: 240). It is also rare to find a matron lit character that has moved away from, or even become consciously aware of, the cultural construction of such tyranny. Even in the rare matron lit novels where an older female does not agonise about being overweight, her weight is still used as a weapon by others. In *Hidden Talents* the character of Dulcie is dismissed by her love rival on the grounds that ‘she’s certainly not slim. Dumpy isn’t far off the mark, I’d say’ (James, 2002: 337). On first learning the identity of her husband’s mistress, the wife laughs and mocks sixty-three-year-old Dulcie by remarking ‘but she’s old’ (p. 337). At the beginning of *Hidden Talents* Dulcie looks at her reflection in the mirror and tries to ‘see beyond the stocky roundness of her body and the burst of lines around her blue eyes.’ (p. 4) But it appears that what Dulcie sees in the mirror is all that another woman rates as significant, when assessing attractiveness. Dulcie’s age and weight make the idea that she could have anything to offer anyone simply laughable. It appears that even when an individual makes a conscious decision to look beyond physical appearance others will use ‘hate speech’ to reinforce cultural rules. As Gullette states ‘age epithets do not emerge in common speech without malice aforethought’ (2011: 5). Dulcie is a character who attempts to transcend the cultural rules about appearance. She is sanctioned through language, yet still refuses to conform. Such an example encourages the possibility for social change because there is ‘a contestation of universality at its already imagined borders’ (Butler, 1997: 91). Dulcie’s attempt to override the tyranny of the ‘mirror moment’ at the start of the novel is undermined by the revelation of how her appearance is regarded by the younger woman. Yet Dulcie’s mirror scene remains valid. She sees more than her old and fat reflection. As I have previously discussed in the introduction to this thesis the ‘mirror scene’ is common to both matron lit and literary narratives of ageing and functions as an indication of the protagonist’s feelings with regard to their own ageing (Brennan, 2005: 24). In *The Adultery Diet* Eva recalls that she was ‘standing in front of the mirror putting on my makeup - trying to create a convincing illusion that my eyes were really open,’ when David suggests that her pants are too tight (p. 17). According to Lacan ‘the mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world’ (1977: 3). Eva feels unable to step across that threshold with self-confidence because she is intensely aware of the cultural value she has lost, with her advancing years and increasing weight. Eva contemplates her ‘saggy-eyed’, overweight reflection in the mirror and regrets the loss of her youthful appearance. Youthful beauty is so closely equated with feminine value that its loss signals the end of useful life. Lillian Rubin reports a conversation with a fifty-year-old woman who told her:

“I try not to look at myself when I put my lipstick on, but sometimes I can’t help it. Then I think: That can’t be me. It’s disorienting. I don’t recognize that person in the mirror as me; she’s not me, or at least not the image I have of me. And I want that one back. I want the outside to match the inside.” Rubin asks ‘I want the outside to match the inside. What is that about? Why, when we’ve lived through so many years, overcome so many trials, does our internal image register only our younger selves? Why do we want it to?’ (2008: 3)

While Rubin poses the question and Lacan’s theory reveals the basis of this longing, the fictional Eva Cassady explains why she wants her reflection to be trim, youthful and beautiful. Eva’s explanation reveals the source of her anguish about her appearance to be internalised gendered ageism. According to Malcolm Sargeant ‘women are perceived as being “older” at a much younger age than men and a greater proportion are likely, therefore, to suffer from age discrimination related to their sex’ (2007: 167). Although, in this instance, Sargeant was remarking specifically on age discrimination in the workplace, his statement may be applied to every area of society. Rubin, (2008: 3) invites readers to consider how they feel about their reflection. When Eva Cassady looks in the mirror she feels fat and old. As a direct consequence of society’s distaste for overweight, ageing women, Eva feels unhappy.

Eva weighs 176 pounds at the beginning of her story and describes herself as a ‘frump’. She imagines going out with her daughter on Chloe’s visits home and says ‘I’ll look like a frump next to her when we walk down Broadway, just another Upper West Side hausfrau out with her lovely daughter’ (p. 13). For Eva, Chloe has grown to represent the epitome of beauty and potential. Eva is fearful of the unfavourable comparisons that people will make about her. It is this fear of what other people, even strangers whom she may never meet again, might say or think, that demonstrates the power of language and cultural rules to regulate the way individuals think and feel about themselves. According to Allan Johnson ‘the human self is highly relational in the sense that who we think we are and how we experience ourselves can’t be separated from how other people mirror and treat us’ (2005: 201). Eva’s awareness of the ways other people will compare her unfavourably to her daughter affects how she regards herself. This discussion of Eva’s anguish about her age and appearance exposes the origin to be, not her weight or her date of birth, but the value judgements attached to these facts by cultural language.

Thoughts of her husband also make Eva aware of her ageing and decline because they no longer share a love life and she believes this is the direct result of her unattractive appearance. Eva is aware that David has aged, although she says that she can still perceive

the younger man 'hidden beneath the middle-aged editor' and she wonders 'does he think the same when he looks at me' (p. 7). Eva is concerned that when David looks at her he only sees her outward appearance and fails to comprehend that the woman he loved still exists, merely concealed by what she experiences as a 'mask' of ageing. Hepworth *et al* argue that physical signs of ageing are 'seen to be characteristically defined as a mask which conceals the essential identity of the person beneath' (1991: 379). They emphasise that this mask conceals 'the essentially youthful self beneath' (Hepworth *et al*, 1991: 379). When David remarks that her robe looks worn, she tells him that it was a Mother's Day gift from Chloe and he reminds her "you'll still be her mother, even if you get a new robe" (p. 6). Their exchange reveals Eva's longing to cling to memories of Chloe's childhood, a time when she felt needed and wanted. David's remark also suggests that he considers Eva to be mired in a post-maternal role, even if she buys new clothes. Eva suspects that David is not attracted to her anymore and regards her only as the mother of his child and she believes that even that role is now ending with her daughter's departure. According to Trotman and Brody women internalise ageism 'as an aspect of their gender definition' and as a consequence 'many feel that life is all but over' (2001: 13). Eva is representative of many matron lit heroines who equate being desired and needed to their reason for living; she suddenly fears that her life might be over. These emotions are strongly linked to the cultural perception of post-maternal women as redundant and therefore a problem for society, rather than an asset. Eva does not feel that her employment in publishing defines her as productive because she believes that if she is no longer needed by her child or as an object of desire, then she has nothing to live for.

The opportunity to meet up with an old boyfriend, who has not seen her since she was young and slender, compounds Eva's desire to be desired. Nothing has motivated her to stick to her diet and exercise regimen until she reaches a crisis of confidence, as she waves goodbye to her daughter and e-mails 'hello' to her old flame. She writes 'Dear Michael, I don't know if you'll remember me' (p. 33). Eva thinks that although David does not appear to want her, maybe Michael will, but only if she is slim. During her online flirtation she keeps deferring the date of their meeting until she has fulfilled her goal. Eva believes her only chance of being seen as youthful and desirable is if she can rejuvenate herself through diet, exercise and a younger style of dress. Eva's concerns illustrate that 'in affluent Western societies, slenderness is generally associated with happiness, success, youthfulness and social acceptability. Being overweight is linked to laziness, lack of will power and being out of control' (Grogan, 1999: 6). Eva becomes convinced that if she can gain control of her body

she may be able to regain some power over male desire and consequently control of her life. This novel has echoes of fairy tales in which the initially unattractive heroine is transformed into a beautiful woman who captures the heart of the hero. This scenario is universally popular with both young and old female readers because many women feel unattractive if they do not meet normative measures of beauty. Their only hope is for a magical transformation but as Umminger argues 'the battles women have with their bodies are hardly limited to sojourns in the escapist Cinderella fantasies of chick lit novels' (2006: 251). Eva's fairy-tale fantasy, positioned in a narrative which mature female readers can identify with, indicates both a real problem with body image and an ingrained longing for a particular type of 'happy ending' which seems to be reserved for pretty young women. The 'happy ending' that Eva longs for is the conventional scenario typical of the genre fiction of romance, chick lit and grey chick lit, in that it consists of 'getting a man'. It further confirms that to age successfully a woman must be dedicated to the banishment of signs of ageing and perform as a young woman. Brennan argues that such a performance is a strategy which she calls 'passing' and explains that this is a 'ruse particularly used by older women to counter the hostile reactions with which their undisguised body would be greeted' (2005: 24). Trotman and Brody, however, express the opinion that 'older women in our society have learned to "pass" as younger, ever since they were little girls' (2001: 3). Whether the desire to 'pass as younger' is a ruse that is acquired through ageing or a feminine ploy learnt in childhood, the pressure to 'pass' increases with age.

Eva is desperate to 'pass' as younger and through a combination of strict diet and exercise she eventually achieves her goal. Her decision to eat healthily and exercise daily is her choice but that choice is influenced by her relationships with her spouse, child, ex-boyfriend, peer group and a culture which allocates blame for not appearing young and fit. To feel successful Eva must create the illusion that she is a younger woman. Yet, Judith Phillips *et al* observe that 'cultural norms and values, which vary from one society to the next, make a universal definition of successful ageing problematic' (2010: 210). In Western society successful ageing requires women to remain desirable 'objects' for men, to be slim, fit and youthful. According to Gimlin, in her discussion of the compulsory nature of 'body work' this definition of successful ageing is so deeply ingrained that even hairdressers 'try to convince their clients to undergo procedures (such as hair colouring) that will diminish the signs of aging' (2002: 142). She further argues that 'women in modern society face particular and intense pressures to meet certain ideals of beauty' (Gimlin, 2002: 4). Western culture

demands that women should strive to be taken for younger than they actually are if they hope to be considered attractive and valuable. While *The Adultery Diet* gives older women a voice with which to discuss the concerns of mid-life about age and appearance, it still conforms to cultural norms by confirming the view that the only way to deal with the decline stereotype is for its main character to re-invent herself as a thinner, firmer, sexier, woman. To reiterate, in order to achieve a ‘happy ending’ she must be able to ‘pass’ as younger.

Eva pulls this off in spectacular fashion when she reaches her target of 119 pounds and attends a party in Chloe’s ‘red silk cheongsam’ (p. 293). Eva’s ‘ex’, Michael, winks and asks “how could I resist the dress?” (p. 293). As Eva has achieved the weight loss that allows her to fit into this dress, she wears it as a symbol of youth and beauty. According to David Cravit, both young and old people ‘wear substantially the same clothes’ (2008: 12). Yet it remains clear from the common usage of the phrase ‘mutton dressed as lamb’, that for women, concerns about clothes being ‘too young’ persist. Although this rule constrains some women, others are defiant. In *Blowing It* the main female character Lottie informs her husband Mac, who has just received a ‘bus pass’ application form, that “the uniform for men and women is beige coats, woolly hats” (Astley, 2007: 25). When Mac responds by saying that Lottie is being “ageist” she retaliates “our generation didn’t fail to die before it got old just so it could wear beige. At least not me and you. I shall totter to my dotage in Vivienne Westwood” (p. 25). Julia Twigg points out that:

The neutral colours traditionally associated with age draw their meaning in part from what they are consciously not: bright, attention-grabbing colours. Indeed such colours, particularly red, are often presented as ‘unflattering’ or unsuitable for older women, suggesting as they do an overt sexuality, a brazen, vivid quality that is well conveyed by the word scarlet, with its multiple moral and social referents. (2011)

Jan Keessen, in his work on discriminatory words, argues that ‘the word scarlet is that red colour with a bad reputation’ (2009: 32). He poses the question ‘we might wonder, why associate the colour scarlet with sin and sex— why the scarlet woman?’ (Keessen, 2009: 33). Keessen answers his own question by informing readers that ‘the Bible associates the word scarlet not only with adultery, but also with drunkenness, blasphemy, and possibly even murder’ (2009: 34). Eva embraces the colour scarlet in both its symbolic and literal sense. In taking on the role of ‘scarlet woman’ and wearing a scarlet dress Eva makes the statement that she is desirable and that as such she is once again powerful, even though adulterous.

Eva’s rejuvenation has enabled her to reclaim an ideal image of herself and this achievement is flagged by wearing a dress bought for a younger woman, significantly her daughter, which

she would never have considered wearing before. For a while Eva revels in the male attention and re-kindling of her marriage that ensues from her performance of youth. But after her husband discovers that she had a brief affair with Michael, he leaves her and she is forced to re-assess whether her efforts were futile. It seems that the part of ‘scarlet woman’ which Eva was so eager to accept has now revealed its negative aspect. After spending some time alone Eva realises what she has really lost and when she and David are finally reconciled, she is content because he sees her as desirable again, even though he was disturbed by her infidelity. Although this novel expresses the feelings of an older woman who craves the power of desirability, it somewhat undercuts the message by exploring the aftermath of her ‘success’ and as such is a poignant reminder of what Umminger refers to as ‘the dangers of treating the surface without finding a cure for the poison that remains’ (2006: 249). The ‘poison that remains’ is not only emotional discontent that diet and a new dress cannot touch but a cultural consensus that beauty equals lovable and old equals ugly. Grey chick lit is a genre of literature which has evolved within a culture which denigrates any perceived flaws in female bodies and especially the ‘flaw’ of ageing. Clarke argues that the ‘social currency’ of older women is threatened by the:

Societal privileging of youth, health, and independence. In this way, the ongoing tendency to ignore older women and older women’s bodies within society more broadly, as well as in sociology and feminist theory specifically, combined with the continued privileging of youthfulness mirrors the intense discomfort with which aged femininity, physicality, and sexuality are regarded. (2010: 4)

*The Adultery Diet* presents a challenge to gendered ageism simply by focusing on a forty-four year-old female protagonist and wittily telling Eva’s story (albeit a clichéd one) in her ‘own’ words. This novel exposes Eva’s thoughts and emotions about her body to be the consequence of culturally constructed language and laws. Eva does not defy these rules; she attempts to work within them to improve her life. Matron lit examines the lives of heroines who are subject to the same societal rules about appearance and ageing as its readers.

Whether or not the characters comply with convention is of less significance than the exposure of the ageist and gendered boundaries that older women are expected to live within.

In matron lit concern about appearance is usually brought to the forefront when a character reaches some kind of a crisis or turning point in their personal narrative. The tipping point may be the result of other people’s actions or it may be the recognition of reaching a significant life stage. Consequently, the main protagonist may consciously make a decision to change their life and in the wake of such a decision re-assess their appearance and its value to

new circumstances and relationships. This is the pivotal moment in Annie Saunders *the gap year for grown ups* (2009) when the main character Sarah decides that she wants a break from her mundane life. The story begins on Sarah's fortieth birthday when she is given a baggy sweatshirt by her husband David and he takes her and their twins Claire and Tom for a celebratory meal at the same pub they have been going to for over a decade. As Sarah hangs up the despised sweatshirt she avoids 'looking at herself in the mirror' (Saunders, 2008: 3). Such fear of the ageing reflection has been commented on earlier in this chapter with regard to the contribution that a fifty-year-old woman made to Rubin's study (2008) and in *The Adultery Diet* (2007). The women discussed in these earlier texts, one factual and the other fictional, both attempt to avoid their reflection. In *the gap year for grown ups*, we have a character even younger employing the same avoidance tactic. Matron lit novels such as *The Adultery Diet* and *the gap year for grown ups*, enable readers to explore the reasons and motivations which render women as young as fifty, mid-forties, or even forty, afraid to confront their own reflection in the mirror. The most common reasons for the characters to turn away from the looking-glass is because they think they look either fat or old. Naomi Wolf (1991), argues that the twin female 'stains' are fat and age and Charlotte Wright states that 'like "fat," another word guaranteed to conjure up the image of ugliness is "old"' (2006: 18). According to Wright these 'buzz' words are commonly used in fiction to denote ugliness. Likewise, these words are used in Western culture to demean and invalidate women who are not considered 'beautiful'.

Cultural horror of the appearance of the ageing female body is internalised by women to the extent that they literally cannot bear to look. Wolf states that 'women's identity must be premised upon our "beauty" so that we will remain vulnerable to outside approval' (1991: 14). The questions that must be asked are, if an individual is so traumatised by the anticipation of their own appearance that they must avoid their reflection, what havoc does this wreak with Lacan's 'ego ideal'? And what shelf-life does the female ego-ideal have? I would argue that when a woman's reflection becomes so horrifying to her in later life that she must avoid it, this act of avoidance becomes a denial of the self. Gimlin suggests that:

Because men and women alike value women in accordance with their appearances, what women look like becomes symbolic of their characters— indeed, of their very selves. The link between the body and identity is more explicit among women because for them, more than for men, the body is a primary indicator of self to the outside world. (2002: 4)

In *the gap year for grown-ups* the heroine, having flinched from her reflection, tries months later to assess her naked body realistically and with acceptance, at the urging of a self-help book given to her by her friend Trish. As Sarah looks at her reflection she gasps ‘it’s all going south’ (p. 10). Sarah is convinced that she cannot accept her ageing body and hurls the book at the bedroom wall in anger. Even though this character does not believe that she can appreciate her forty-year-old body, the scene in which she makes this failed attempt indicates that there is an alternative way of thinking. It appears that at forty years of age it is too late for Sarah to love, or even accept, her ageing body. She does not question why her body’s response to gravity must be viewed as bad and it seems that ‘going south’ can only have negative connotations. That the ageing body is unacceptable seems to be taken as a ‘given’ by Sarah. This apparent acceptance of her bodily appearance as unacceptable, while simultaneously arousing discontent, calls into question exactly how far this character is convinced by the cultural narrative of female ageing as ‘ugly’. As Clarke states

Beauty and gender norms place a premium on women’s looks and establish an impossibly narrow and elusive standard of feminine physical attractiveness that oppresses and excludes older women. Therefore, beauty ideology underscores and reinforces women’s tendency to be dissatisfied with their bodies and to experience the process of growing older as one of progressive loss and decay (2010: 7).

It is clear that both Eva in *The Adultery Diet* and Sarah in *the gap year for grown ups* are victims of the ‘beauty and gender norms’ that position the ageing female body outside the criteria of ‘acceptability’, yet they both instinctively rage against this cultural law when, in their own ways, they question why their lives should feel over at such a young age.

With her children at university Sarah tries to focus on her work as a music teacher and her role as David’s wife but as time passes she becomes ever more resentful of her life and her appearance. Devastated by her encounter with her naked reflection, Sarah is ‘convinced now that no amount of power walking or running upstairs could hold back the ravages of time’ (p. 14). Sarah decides that the one action she can take is to get a ‘younger’ hairstyle but even this hope is quashed when her hairdresser, Andre, indicates that she looks too old to ‘go urchin’. As Andre starts to comb through her wet hair ‘Sarah tried to avoid her own eyes in the mirror, knowing this was when she looked her ugliest’ and she reflects that ‘age wasn’t very kind to women’ (p. 15). It is when her gaze is focused on her face, that she feels the worst and as Virginia Blum states: ‘the face is where the object relation is felt to be located and experienced. In terms of attachment behaviour, then, the face assumes symbolic priority in governing how other people, including one’s own parents, respond to one’ (2003: 141). In

Sarah's case, as she takes ever more drastic and expensive steps to regain a youthful appearance and persona, she becomes most concerned with how her peers and her children judge her appearance.

This character demonstrates how difficult it can be for a woman if she does try to appear younger. Disillusioned by her trip to the hairdresser Sarah takes matters into her own hands and decides to tint her hair auburn. She informs Trish that she has decided 'it was about time I held back the alarming onslaught of grey' (p. 36). The result of this attempt to look younger is that her hair takes on an orange tinge which makes her a laughing stock amongst her family and friends. Her friend Sheila screams 'Oh Sarah, what the bloody hell have you done? You look like a clown!' (p. 39). Sheila's reaction to Sarah's attempt to appear younger illustrates the dilemma that women place themselves in when they engage with 'body work'. As Gimlin observes 'women in modern society face particular and intense pressures to meet certain ideals of beauty' (2002: 4). Yet when they try to attain these ideals and fall short they become the butt of jokes from partners, peers and the young. Clarke contends that 'women are simultaneously required to engage in beauty work interventions and are held in contempt for doing so' (2010: 3). Sarah feels that her grey hair is shameful yet her failed attempt to disguise it is ridiculed. This episode comically illustrates the bind that older women are placed in: if they make no attempt to disguise their age they are dismissed as unfeminine but if their 'beauty work' does not meet society's standards of subtlety and artifice then they become absurd.

While trying to cope with the reactions to her hair colour, Sarah receives an e-mail from her friend Nathalie, who has bought a new home in France, on the same day that David suggests booking a trip to celebrate their up-coming twentieth anniversary. Sarah realises that she does not really want to go anywhere with him and she would rather be alone. The next time that David raises the subject Sarah experiences a 'wave of what she could only describe as dread' (p. 41). As a result of this revelation she informs him that she is unhappy with her life and her appearance and that she wants "to change everything but I don't know where to start" and David responds with the comment that "it's probably perfectly normal for your age" (p. 45). Sarah does not care about whether or not her feelings are normal because a label of normality does not make them any less painful. In *Backlash* Susan Faludi posits that the distress women experience may in part be 'the result of the signals they picked up from their culture and the way these signals conflicted with the real circumstances of their lives' (2006: 460). Like the heroine of *The Adultery Diet* Sarah looks around her and wonders why life feels so empty (p.

45). Unlike the heroine of *The Adultery Diet*, who quietly decides to contact her ex-boyfriend, Sarah tells David ‘I want out’ (p. 46). Sarah packs her suitcase with ‘sensible skirts and T-shirts’ and leaves for France (p. 92). Sarah explains to her family and friends that although she and David are separating it may simply be what she terms a ‘sabbatical’ or a ‘gap year’ or as she more revealingly states ‘a gift to herself for twenty years of hard labour’ (p. 78). Sarah has reached a crisis point and has to get away from her own life and the perceptions of those around her, who expect her to continue performing a role which she can no longer bear. Drinking coffee with Natalie, at a table outside a cafe in the town of Sauzils, Sarah struggles to communicate her reasons for leaving her home in Birmingham, her husband, children, extended family and friends. She eventually sums up the crisis by explaining “I want to find out who I am other than someone who’s great at ironing and knows the layout of Tesco like the back of her hand” (p. 106). Nathalie’s response is straight to the point of all reinvention myths “if you are beginning a new life, we need to create a new Sarah” and follows this comment swiftly with “and that hair! Christ, woman, what have you done to it?” (p. 107). Nathalie immediately picks up her mobile phone and makes an appointment for Sarah with her own hairdresser for the following afternoon. Once again the solution to unhappiness is flagged up as more and better quality ‘body work’.

Nathalie proceeds to hustle Sarah out of the cafe and around the corner to the Rue de Bac, where she introduces her to Sylvie, the owner of a shop filled with an eclectic mixture of beautiful clothes, accessories, jewellery, stationery and trinkets. Sarah is overwhelmed with delight as ‘everywhere she looked was something beautiful to covet; she could almost feel her mouth water’ (p. 108). The delight that Sarah experiences in being surrounded by beautiful objects is compounded by her belief that if she purchases some of this beauty it will become hers, that in some way she will embody beauty and that by owning something new she will become new herself, or at least less old. Nathalie explains Sarah’s ‘dilemma’ to Sylvie who then regards Sarah ‘as if she were some tragic heroine’ (p. 108). As Sarah undresses in order to try on various outfits her audience ‘gasped at her dreadful underwear’ and Sylvie exclaims “Sarah, the bra. It simply must match les culottes” (p. 108). Sylvie’s manner reinforces Sarah’s perception that she has failed to retain either attractiveness or style, even in the eyes of other women, and this feeling of inadequacy makes her even more desperate to purchase a new look. In less than an hour Sarah waves goodbye ‘to about three hundred quid’ for ‘two skirts, three tops, a delicious floating velvet jacket and matching scarf’ which make Sarah feel ‘suddenly elated and feminine’ (p. 108). One day later and three

hours in the hands of Nathalie's hairdresser leave Sarah 'barely able to recognise herself or wipe the smile off her face' and she is so enthralled by her new look that she becomes desperate to 'text Claire and Tom about her new image' (p. 109). Sarah so obviously longs for the approval of the young that Nathalie pleads with Sarah to 'leave it' and deduces from this blatant longing that 'David never made you feel sexy' (p. 109). Sarah jokily brushes this observation aside, yet it is clear that Nathalie has struck a nerve. It seems that the supreme accolade of approval comes in the form of male desire and failing that, approbation may be granted through the youthful gaze. Nathalie tells Sarah that 'you need to feel good from within' (p. 109). Yet, it is clear that for Sarah her 'make-over' is not enduring or sufficient in itself, to perpetuate this good feeling, as she still craves outside recognition of her improved appearance.

In an earlier novel Saunders describes the way that lack of appreciation, from men or younger people of either sex, has on women's sense of value. In *Busy Woman Seeks Wife* the heroine's sixty-eight-year-old mother, nick-named 'The Bean' in her younger days, because of her slim figure, is a pivotal character in the story but it is her need for attention which drives the plot, rather than the more obvious problem of a broken arm which necessitates her move to her daughter Alex's home. Grose argues that:

In a youth-oriented society that values women for their beauty, older women fear the loss of their looks as a marketable commodity. Indeed, once a woman begins to notice wrinkles, a thickening waistline, and greying hair, she can experience a loss in vitality and assertiveness, especially if she has relied on beauty to attract people in either her personal or work life. (2001: 21)

Indeed it is such a loss of vitality that Frankie, the young male 'wife', hired by Alex to care for her mother, perceives in the older woman's demeanour when she returns to her own home and he observes that 'sitting there with no make-up, watching crap TV, she had atrophied again' (Saunders, 2007: 156). He reflects that 'all that had been wrong with her when she first moved in with Alex was that she had been starved of company, and preferably admiring company. With even a little attention, she had blossomed' (p. 156). In both of these narratives Saunders makes it plain that women of all ages require approval from outside in order to feel good inside. When such admiration is not forthcoming the female characters' only recourse appears to be to embark on spending sprees, which in both novels eventually lead to financial problems for their families. Jessica Lyn Van Slooten, writing about the predilection of chick lit characters to spend beyond their means, argues that 'the actual products are not as important as the fantasies that revolve around the products' (2006: 222). Both of Saunders'

novels explain the motivation for the protagonists to spend money on trying to look younger that they cannot afford, but implicitly blame them for succumbing to cultural and consumerist pressure. These narratives imply that there might be better (and less expensive) ways to deal with women's fears about ageing but leave it to the reader to imagine what these might be.

For Sarah, the main protagonist in *the gap year for grown ups*, it seems that her lack of contentment with her appearance is the result of her husband David's failure to make her feel appreciated, or 'sexy', as her friend puts it. Sarah attempts to overcome this lack by shopping for a 'new look', but the products themselves fail to deliver the lasting satisfaction she craves and she proceeds to fantasise about the response of her children to her purchases and their perceived effect. The elderly mother who powers the action in *Busy Woman Seeks Wife* attempts to deceive her daughter about the scale of her purchases but Alex discovers a pile of unpaid bills at 'The Bean's home and 'between the envelopes were two more receipts for a pair of Russell & Bromley shoes and a dress from Jaeger for £230' (p. 215). Alex explodes with "what the hell are these? What are you expecting me to do? Bail you out again? Even if I could why should I, Mum, why should I?" (p. 215). Her mother's response is "it's over isn't it? My time is over, I mean. All those glorious days. The parties. The adoration. It's gone hasn't it? I'm nothing now, am I?" (p. 216). It seems that it is not the actual dress, or shoes, or any other product she buys that support her fantasy that she is still adorable but rather it is in the act of acquiring products associated with beauty, at whatever cost to herself or her daughter, which promises to extend her youth. Both of Annie Saunders' novels which I have discussed support the persistence of the feminine fantasy: that buying beautiful new products equals buying a beautiful new self and that the more beautiful self will experience a better life. Alison Umminger argues that 'beauty means power, beauty means happiness, and beauty means success in family, work and love. The problem, of course, is that beauty (even the most carefully manufactured) has a shelf life' (2006: 252). According to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* it is generally understood that chick lit articulates an association in the minds of women under forty with beauty, self-worth and consumerism. Matron lit illustrates that this association does not weaken once the 'sell-by date' has passed but rather, strengthens the desperate urge to fantasise that it may be possible to purchase youth and beauty. And this genre has yet to provide its readers with convincing reasons to opt out of the fantasy that it is possible to buy back cultural value.

For women, a place in society as a person of value is largely predicated upon being considered sexually desirable. Female desire for romantic attachment and sexual activity is

dismissed as repugnant or ridiculous when a woman is no longer perceived by others as desirable. Dr Ros Jennings, Director of the Research Centre for Women, Ageing and Media (WAM) observes that in films ‘the theme of postmenopausal desire is nearly always problematic (either the object of humour or pity – or both’ (undated). In contrast, the authors of matron lit demonstrate that it is not unusual for women to want romance and sex throughout middle and old age.

In Cathy Kelly’s *Homecoming*, eighty-three-year-old Eleanor Levine returns from New York to Dublin after over seventy years’ absence. When she moves into an apartment in Dublin she unpacks her belongings and reminisces about the contents of a shoebox that had once contained a pair of Dior shoes. In the box now:

There was the shell-like gold compact she’d been so proud of when she was twenty-five, the gold paint tarnished now and the pinky powder nothing but a dusty remnant on the inside rim. There was red lipstick in its black-and-gold case. Manhattan Red. It had been all the rage in 1944, a colour to brighten lips and hearts (Kelly, 2011: 3).

Siegfried Wyler comments that as children we learn that ‘one does not eat berries when they are green (which means “not yet ripe”) but only when they are red (which stands for “ripe”)’ (2007: 115). It seems that Eleanor has made a keepsake of her Manhattan Red lipstick because it arouses memories of a time when she was ‘ripe’. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the colour red also has associations not only with sex but with sin, so it is understandable that Eleanor would believe it to be unacceptable for an elderly woman to actually wear red lipstick. Indeed, a common cultural visual clue to female senility is a caricature of badly applied scarlet lipstick, which overshoots the boundaries in more ways than one, paired with red-rouged cheeks. Eleanor is not that type of ridiculous (or ridiculed) old woman but while she keeps her mementos of ripeness and sex hidden away she indulges her memories of a man she loved and made love with and ‘even sixty years later, she could still remember the sheen of his skin and the way her fingers had played upon the muscles of his shoulders as they lay together in a cocoon of love’ (p. 6). Eleanor reflects that ‘it wasn’t something she could share with anyone now. People tended to be scandalised if an octogenarian mentioned sex. Ridiculous, really. A bit like being shocked at the notion that a vintage Ford from the 1930s had ever driven on the roads. She smiled’ (p. 6). Eleanor is clearly aware of the cultural sanctions which she would expect to be subjected to if she reminisced about sex and romance in public, so while she obeys the rule, she also undermines it through her amused observation that it is ‘ridiculous’. In a study about memories of sexual experience, Elina Haavio-Mannil *et al* observed that ‘both the middle generation and the

youngest generation wrote about physical passion, while they were depicted less in the oldest generation' (2002: 154). Despite describing the older people's recollections of passion only as being 'less' than other respondents, not one was reported in this research study of *Sexual Lifestyles of the Twentieth Century*. When it is not possible to find any reminiscence of pleasurable sexual experience by an elderly person of either gender quoted in an academic report, then it seems unusual, if not ground-breaking, to find such an expression of fondly remembered sex in a work of popular fiction. The significance of the passage quoted from the grey chick lit novel *Homecoming*, while not shocking in its content strikes the reader as remarkable when expressed as the thoughts of a respectable, eighty-three-year-old female character. Eleanor has had a long and successful career as a psychotherapist, which lends gravitas to her opinion that for the elderly to be made mute on the subject of sexuality is absurd. This short passage which describes the pleasure of a remembered sexual and romantic episode, is part of a process of normalising the sensuality of elderly females in which matron lit is involved. As Suzan Collins argues:

It is important to remember that anyone and everyone can have sexual feelings and may want to have sex. There is no upper age limit to having sexual feelings and wanting sex. Some people may think that people older than themselves should not have sex 'at their age' and may think of even the possibility as a joke. (2010: 79)

By discussing sexual desire and memory in old age, matron lit demonstrates that such feelings are not ridiculous, embarrassing or pitiable.

*Hidden Talents* is another example of grey chick lit, which explores the sexual desire of an older female character as a natural aspect of her life and not some abnormality about which she should feel shame. When Dulcie recollects her first meeting with her lover at the age of sixty she explains that her attraction to him had been so strong she had allowed desire to overrule her own tenet that 'married men were to be avoided at all costs' (p. 30). With the exception of Jenny Walker in *The Last Resort* all of the sexual relationships of the main female protagonists in the matron lit novels which I have read, are heterosexual. Jenny becomes involved with a woman when her husband Wilkie is cold and distant because he is deeply concerned about his health. When Wilkie finds out that he is not dying and treats Jenny with renewed affection, it is too late. Though Jenny will not leave him she will not end her new relationship. It may be worth noting here that *The Last Resort* is more 'middle brow' than the majority of the novels which comprise my 'primary sources'. Popular fiction aimed at the mature female engages with the debate around ageing, gender and sexuality by revealing the desire of the over-forties woman to be legitimate and not society's 'dirty joke'.

The ageing heroine of grey chick lit may be a latter day ‘Mrs Robinson’ offering herself up to be cast aside in favour of a younger version of herself but her desire is demonstrated to be real and not some H.R.T.-induced aberration. The older woman’s search for love is valid and equal to any chick lit protagonist or romantic heroine. Matron lit pushes age boundaries by giving voice to female protagonists who say ‘I want, I need, I am not fulfilled, and I am not “past it”’.

The novels on which I have commented in this chapter set out the conventional arguments about how old equates with ugly and only the young can be beautiful and how only the beautiful can be desired and that only women who are desired have any value. They discuss how ageing women can try to re-claim power and value by improving their appearance in a way that makes them appear younger. They also argue that if this is what women want then they have the right to try to get it. And that if they can achieve it, this will constitute a form of successful ageing. The novels I have discussed in this chapter describe protagonists who search for love and adventure. The desire of older women is not dismissed as absurd. But these novels do tend to reinforce the cultural idea that it is only going to happen if a woman appears youthful and grey chick lit does equate youthful good looks with slenderness. Indeed, the only novel I have come across in which this was not the case is *Toppling Miss April*, which can only be described as a farce and could have been alternatively titled ‘Carry on Matron’. It is a story in which a blowsy, fat, alcoholic, middle-aged woman, suffering from gout, wins the affections of an eighteen-year-old man. He prefers her not only to the pretty teenager he works with but eventually to the Miss April pin up of the title whom he has lusted after since puberty. This comical tale is so tongue-in-cheek that by the end the reader can only be reinforced in thinking that it would not happen in real life. Indeed, according to Grose ‘the personal dating ads typically exclude any women who are above average weight or over the age of 40, no matter the weight and age of the man who is advertising for a companion’ (2001: 22). Gordon Patzer indicates that the preference of men for younger women is not a product of Western culture. Patzer comments that ‘in virtually every culture, men find younger women more attractive than older ones’ (2008: 7). A number of matron lit novels reflect this bias and temper the hopes they raise by telling readers that they are entitled to want romance but that they are unlikely to get it without making an effort to look younger. Grose confirms that ‘because women live longer than men, and since men tend to marry younger women, the majority of older women live out the final years of life without an intimate companion’ (2001: 29). Even when a grey chick lit character does find a sexual

partner she does not always gain happiness or approval but may have to accept rejection, ridicule and in the end compromise, much like a chick lit heroine. The message matron lit offers readers is conflicted. It tells readers that just because Western culture indicates that postmenopausal women are too old for adventure, new experiences, or romance, they do not have to accept that rule. Matron lit confirms that it is acceptable to want more of all the exciting experiences of life. But, in Western society a woman's attractiveness and value do decrease with age and if women are postmenopausal then they are considered to be 'out of the game'. Grey chick lit discusses women's anger about these cultural rules and in doing so grants women permission to want more romance and a more fulfilling life. Yet, matron lit narratives explain that to get more, to become entitled to more, women must conform to other 'rules' such as the 'look youthful' rule.

It is not possible to escape the cultural laws and sanctions altogether, but once it becomes possible to imagine a brighter future, then it also becomes possible to weigh and balance which rules to flout and which ones to work within. Butler's theories of performativity and the power of imagination to influence, adapt and make plastic those culturally constructed performances, provide us with a tool to make incursions both within and at the limits imposed on us by society. Foucault's discourse analysis theory reveals that cultural laws are in play and are enforced through punishment and sanctions, such as ridicule. None of these laws are natural or pre-ordained but are societal, language and power-based constructions and changes may be made at the boundaries. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault discusses the ways that the 'machinery of power' functions to break down the human body and rearrange it to render it obedient and useful to society. Foucault argues that discipline forces the body into subjection and that 'discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, "docile" bodies' (1995: 138). He goes on to outline the way that timetables are strictly enforced as an effective tool to encourage disciplined and repetitive behaviour and argues that the timetable has 'three great methods – establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition' (Foucault, 1995: 149). According to Foucault, in order to ensure that time was used efficiently these 'docile' bodies were subject to 'constant supervision, the pressure of supervisors, the elimination of anything that might disturb or distract' (1995: 150). While Foucault is writing here about specific power structures such as the military or the workshop, his concept of discipline and timetables may be applied to enforced life stages. The 'docile' female body is disciplined to be useful in particular ways during her lifespan, according to a timetable which is imposed by society and monitored by the supervision and pressure of

others, who discourage any consideration of alternative scenarios which might upset the status quo. Foucault argues that ‘time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power’ (1995: 152). While there are undeniable changes within the body caused by the passage of time, such as the menopause, much of the experience of time and life stages are imposed on the body through the ‘machinery of power’. Societal power structures benefit from women performing their allocated roles to a strict timetable, which ensures that ‘caring’ for the young and eventually the frail elderly remains principally ‘women’s work’. Jennings states:

In mainstream media forms, representations of actual older women and also their fictional representations have tended to reduce them either to negative stereotypes (which act as a cultural warning to younger women of the traumas of ageing for women – often manipulating ideas of disgust or fear) or to functions such as care givers (rather than rounded human beings). (Undated)

If post-maternal women begin to imagine that they might still be young enough for adventure they may leave a gap in the care continuum. Popular novels that explore the anguish of women whose bodies have been permeated by time and enslaved by cultural power into a belief that they are ugly and therefore useless may be regarded as disruptive.

Matron lit novels are disturbing because they bring to light the source of older women’s grief about their body image and offer fantasies of escape. Foucault states that in workshops, telling stories and any talk about adventures was forbidden and the imposition of such a rule implies the threat to discipline that unruly imaginations pose. According to Timothy O’Leary, Foucault approached fiction ‘as a form of language which is subject to discontinuities and transformations’ (2009: 40). O’Leary contends that Foucault ‘engaged in an attempt to think through a series of fundamental questions about literature. What powers does it possess? What threat does it pose to our world? And what, precisely, is its relation to language, fiction and transgression?’ (2009: 40). He says that ‘what is important about literature is not that it offers us reflections of our world, but that in some sense it shapes our world’ (O’Leary, 2009: 39). As I have mentioned in the introduction, it is O’Leary’s contention that Foucault has established a link between an ‘experience book’ and the possibility of change. Grey chick lit may be regarded as an ‘experience genre’ and the novels I have discussed in this chapter all contribute in some way to a negotiation, however limited, regarding issues about age, sexuality and bodily image. Western women who do not want to be considered ‘past it’, have to ‘pass’ as younger. In this context grey chick lit confirms the notion that it is unlikely, if not impossible, for a woman to retain value in the realm of romantic relationships if she looks

old. However, grey chick lit articulates older women's discontent about this cultural rule and in doing so makes it possible to consider alternative situations, where women might be considered attractive in old age or where women's attractiveness might not be predicated solely on current estimations of physical beauty.

## Chapter 2: Ageism and Wellbeing.

In this chapter I will explore the negative impact of ageism on mental and physical wellbeing and how this process is reported, replicated, exposed and sometimes contested in matron lit novels. The ageing female characters of popular women's fiction frequently demonstrate how and why ageist attitudes, behaviour and speech undermine wellbeing and encourage an acceptance of a decline prognosis. In his book *Biology of Aging* Robert Arking contends that 'the detrimental effects of the biological damage caused by senescence can be ameliorated to some extent by various behavioural, social, and cultural practices' (2006: 505). By modelling aspects of a healthy lifestyle the heroines of matron lit novels promote the expectation that it is possible to maintain good health into later life. The fundamentally hopeful attitude of matron lit functions to prioritise this view, in contrast to the cultural stereotype that ageing is almost entirely about decline. However, while the predominantly positive stance taken by this genre is commendable, it writes out the experience of many older people. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs make it clear that the concept that wellbeing in old age is the personal responsibility of the older individual can have negative repercussions. They argue that ageing is beginning to be viewed as 'a third age arena, where agency and effort are always expected' (Gilleard and Higgs, 2013: xii). Gilleard and Higgs argue that 'no longer viewed as a process through which the subject becomes an object to be managed by others, bodily ageing has emerged as (another) arena for self-care' (2013: xi). This attitude places older people who are infirm in an uncomfortable position where an aura of blame surrounds their difficulties and this 'blame culture' is a further example of Foucault's theory of 'policing'. As Gilleard and Higgs point out 'as desires for self-expression, self-care and self-betterment provide a common rationale behind most forms of body work, old age becomes increasingly invalid, even as an alibi' (2013: xii). The message of self-care needs to be tempered with an awareness that numerous life events may undermine this course of action. Nevertheless, matron lit is efficient in its exposure of the negative effects of ageism on wellbeing.

Unpleasant associations with ageing are so numerous, persistent and comfortably familiar that they seem to be natural and therefore are absorbed, accepted and replicated, often without being challenged. Todd Nelson contends 'that age prejudice is one of the most socially condoned, institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world' (2004: ix). Kite and Wagner maintain that unease with ageing is everywhere and people in Western society are so accustomed to ageism and negative stereotypes of old age that these messages become 'so well learned that people respond to them below the conscious level' (2004: 130). To be part

of the group labelled 'old' is to be part of the group labelled 'useless' because there are so few connotations of ageing that are positive. Yet, according to Kite and Wagner 'when age is the social category into which they are grouped, people should be motivated to view their own age group positively' (2004: 148). Ageist beliefs are firmly entrenched in Western society, to the extent that older people accept them and live out their lives accordingly. People of all age groups play a part in perpetuating the negative stereotypes of ageing. Sarit *et al* propose that clinging to the stereotype of the helpless, weak and absent-minded old person, by the elderly themselves and others in their culture, may be just 'as disabling as actual physical and mental deficits, or even more so' (2004: 292). The usefulness of matron lit novels is rooted in how these toxic messages are reported and exposed. The antagonism of Western culture toward ageing women is literally written down in black and white, time and time again. In the process of interrogating ageing stereotypes both elderly and young people may be freed from mindlessly repeating and fulfilling them.

Matron lit novels demonstrate the insidious effects of ageism, on older women in particular. The female characters struggle against cultural expectations in an effort to continue to thrive. Post-menopausal women are expected to fade into the background but a number of matron lit protagonists display a measure of resistance to cultural pressure. In Western society, at the present time, it is very difficult for older people and especially older women, to perceive the ageing process as positive: 'For the most part the elderly struggle to exist in an inhospitable world' (Butler, 1975: 3). Grey chick lit does not offer its readers exclusively positive characterisations of older women, but it does articulate the problems caused by contemporary Western cultural attitudes of attributed value, delineated by age.

When women are no longer perceived as useful they are relegated to the margins of society and this demotion is injurious to their wellbeing. According to a review carried out by the World Health Organisation 'women's health is inextricably linked to their status in society. It benefits from equality, and suffers from discrimination' (2005: 17). Post-maternal women are frequently excluded from Western society unless they are willing and able to continue caring for other people in a bid to prove their usefulness. Wilkinson and Marmot argue that the consequences of social exclusion are 'socially and psychologically damaging, materially costly, and harmful to health' (2003: 16). A subtle manifestation of social exclusion is revealed by the assertion of many post-menopausal women, that they feel 'invisible'. Although Germaine Greer has said in her book *The Change* (1992), that she experiences this invisibility as a freedom from excessive male attention, not all women seem to feel the same

way. Heroines of matron lit novels express a need to be seen. The need to be noticed is understandable in light of the comment by Nishitani Osamu that ‘all individuals are alter egos of others’ (2005: 140). According to Jacques Lacan, if we cannot see ourselves in others’ eyes we have no self-identity and he argues that desire for the attention of another person places ‘the subject in a certain position of dependence’ (1977: 11). The gaze of the other is more than a signifier of desire or a reflection of being. The internalisation of the need to be seen is fundamental to our existence and not simply a longing for human relationships. So to lose the sense of being visible within their own culture, not only in the male gaze, is a momentous loss to older women which may undermine emotional wellbeing.

Women have been trained up in a patriarchal society to accept that the trade they make with society, for a place as a valued member of that society, is to reproduce and nurture. For Lacan, whether we think that this is right or wrong does not preclude such an experience of trade from being commonplace. Lacan states that ‘being the object of a deal is not a rare situation for an individual, [...] each of us at any moment and at any level may be traded off’ (1997). He argues that ‘without the notion of exchanges we can have no serious insight into the social structure’ (1977). If we are aware of the deal we make for a place in society then this knowledge enables us to comprehend how society is structured. Grey chick lit recounts the losses and gains which may be attributed to women’s deal with Western society and engages with the ethics and myths around gender and ageing which may have consequences for emotional, mental and physical wellbeing.

It would seem that the most persistent myth around ageing is that it is exclusively about decline and deterioration of physical and mental capacity. This particular myth is demonstrated and discussed in matron lit novels in ways which cast some doubt on its validity and expose its injurious effect on personal vigour. According to Donald Kausler *et al*, research has been able to discredit a number of myths about ageing. They claim that ‘research has provided an enhanced understanding of how aging, both normal and abnormal, affects our health, our mental abilities, our personalities, and our social behaviours’ (2007: xi). However, Kausler *et al* observe that ‘a sizable percentage of people age sixty-five or older do perceive their health to be less than good (that is, average or poor)’ (2007: 210). Matron lit novels depict a number of elderly protagonists who do not consider themselves to be in poor health. This portrayal can offer positive, imaginative scenarios for readers to aspire to. In *Homecoming*, Cathy Kelly’s main character, eighty-three-year-old Eleanor Levine, a retired psychotherapist, is suffering from depression as a result of bereavement but she is adamant

that this is an illness that she can overcome with self-care. Eleanor has high blood pressure but she takes her prescribed drugs and attends her doctor's surgery for regular blood pressure check-ups. Eleanor has successfully managed this medical problem for years. Grey chick lit heroines who are elderly, living rewarding lives and overcoming illness and/or successfully managing chronic complaints help to alter pre-conceptions about the universal frailty of the old. Wellbeing in later life is as much connected to expectation and social value as at any other stage of life.

The less that people are valued the more difficult it becomes to feel good and engage with ideas for healthy living. Carol Wilkinson contends that 'inequality in society is a major cause of suffering' (2000: 8). In Western society older women are not equal in status with other members of society. They are judged as less valuable and if this estimation is internalised unquestioningly it may undermine self-worth. Dworkin and Wachs suggest that 'women do not frequently critique larger cultural norms as problematic' (2009: 109). If this is correct then it is hardly surprising that older women perceive ageing as failure and loss. Socially induced lack of self-esteem may contribute to mental and physical decline. To the extent that the cultural construction of ageing and health can be exposed, women may be freed of the restrictions that belief in their own failure to remain youthful places on their sense of self and ability. Emotional and physical wellbeing may be undermined through the culturally sanctioned language and ageist attitudes employed in the dismissal of older women.

Ageism is a product of language and culture that seeks to disempower older people and render them more amenable to social control. According to Kausler *et al*:

Some young people feel that elderly people [...] are so incompetent that they have to talk baby talk (elderspeak) to them. That is, they speak loudly and in a high pitch, and they use words and expressions they would use with children. (2007: 55)

Although the younger characters in matron lit do not resort to 'elderspeak' they do appear to be inclined to infantilise their parents' behaviour, in an attempt to more easily devalue and dismiss their opinions and life choices. Cuddy and Fiske observe that 'today, in America, we no longer see our elders as sources of wisdom but as feeble yet lovable, doddering but dear' (2004: 4). This attitude to older people is not confined to America but is demonstrated explicitly in the language used by younger characters in a number of British grey chick lit novels. Although none of the main female protagonists have a mental illness and even the heroines aged over eighty are all mentally competent, the younger characters joke that these women are 'mad' or 'crazy', simply as a consequence of no longer being young. Judy Astley,

the author of *Blowing It*, has the heroine's children repeatedly questioning her mental capacity, in jest, just because she is nearly sixty and her future plans are not typical for a woman of her age. In *Hidden Talents* Beth's son Nathan jokes that he wants Beth to be "hooked up to the Net and best friends with it before I leave home. How else will I be able to keep an eye on you?" (James, 2002: 43). Although Beth is only in her early forties, her teenage son is beginning to treat her like a child. When Nathan kids around about her needing to take a thesaurus to her writing group, Sarah reprimands her son "Don't tease me Nathan" (p. 43). She explains her discomfort by adding "I'm nervous enough" (p. 43). Matron lit novels make it clear that ageism, even when voiced by one's own children in so-called 'harmless' banter, is not really useful. Heroines who are positioned as members of the 'sandwich generation' are guilty of this behaviour themselves as is clearly demonstrated by the novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*. Both of Nikolai's daughters mock his interests and make him sound foolish. Nadezhda's account of her struggle begins, 'Two years after my mother died, my father fell in love with a glamorous blonde Ukrainian divorcee. He was eighty-four and she was thirty-six' (Lewycka, 2005: 1). Nikolai's other daughter Vera sums up the situation by saying "he's just mesmerised by her boobs. He talks of nothing else". Nadezhda replies "He talks about tractors a lot." To which Vera retorts, "Tractors and boobs. There you have it" (p. 64). Dismissive language such as this is used to position an older generation as inferior but has consequences for the perpetrators, as they themselves age. Sarit *et al* argue that 'in addition to their impact on the way older adults are viewed or treated, age-related stereotypes are often internalized by the elderly' (2004: 277). In the novel *Homecoming*, one of Eleanor's neighbours, Connie, unhappily contemplates 'her diminishing chance to have a baby' (p. 70), as she describes herself as 'a mad old lady' (p. 71). Connie's association of mental health with fertility demonstrates that she has internalised the cultural link between menopause and madness. In its own mildly amusing way the genre of matron lit flags up how the female reproductive biological function has been seized by culture as a definition of women's worth. Eleanor and Connie's neighbour Rae recalls the physical symptoms of the menopause with distaste. 'She'd hated the sweats [...] but she'd found the loss of fertility even harder. Menopause was one of those words she winced at. The end of fertility. There was something horribly final about it' (p.87). Specific mention of menopause is not typical of grey chick lit novels, so although the negative impact of 'the end of fertility' is usually implicit in this genre, *Homecoming* is unusual in this respect. The female characters' perception of the high value placed on female reproductive function causes Rae to flinch at the word menopause and for Connie to perceive menopause as a loss that may result

in madness. Apart from the predictable negative impact on the wellbeing of the individual, the internalisation of such ageist rhetoric may sometimes result in a kind of peer bullying.

The elderly can be guilty of insulting other elderly people by questioning their sanity if they dislike someone or it is to their own advantage to discredit them. Seventy-nine-year-old Amber in *Scandals* is not above insinuating that another female character, Cassandra, is senile, in an attempt to get the better of her in a family dispute about money. In order to cancel a business transaction for which another family member will be held responsible, Amber lies about Cassandra's mental health. Amber begins her deceit by saying "well, the fact is that poor Cassandra isn't, what shall I say [...] quite normal mentally, if you know what I mean. These things happen when one grows old" (p. 251). Even though it is clear that Amber is unkindly and ruthlessly fabricating the myth of Cassandra's mental decline, Cassandra is portrayed as a consistently manipulative and unpleasant woman, who deserves to be out-witted by the wily, and usually much more likeable, Amber. Amber confronts Cassandra directly:

That's the desperately sad thing about elderly people when their mental powers fail and they become confused: they can't see for themselves that they are becoming mentally senile, even though those around them can. They say things that simply don't make sense [...] you know, Cassandra, the more I listen to you the more I wonder if it is actually safe for you to be living here on your own. I think I should have a word with Dr Phillips. (p. 258-259)

Amber's threat, that Cassandra could be sectioned and lose her liberty, is at the heart of ageist remarks that imply insanity or senility and are used by society and individuals to keep older people in line. Although Eva in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* is only fifty years old, she has to protest her sanity from the beginning to the end of the novel. Eva's actions are interpreted as aberrant because they are unexpected and therefore reacted to with shock and distaste. Both her husband and mother attempt to relate her behaviour to her life stage by agreeing that Eva is suffering from 'empty nest syndrome'. Those around her neatly compartmentalise Eva's eccentricity as mental illness, in a similar way to those concerned with the much older Nikolai, in *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*. Finally, it is only the impending threat of incarceration that forces Eva to agree to leave her bed. When the same threat is directed at Cassandra, she responds by arguing "there's nothing wrong with me. You're the one who's crazy, telling lies about me, trying to make out that I'm losing my mind" (p. 259). Cassandra is right about Amber's lies, but Amber is delighted with her manipulation. Amber gloats 'Cassandra was blustering, panicking [...] she could see it in her

eyes and hear it in her voice. She ought to be ashamed of herself, Amber knew. What she was doing was manipulative and even cruel' (p. 259). While the unpleasantness of Amber's attack on Cassandra is not typical of the way older women speak to each other in matron lit novels, it is however a stark reminder that hate speech is used within age cohorts, as well as by younger generations. Stereotypes which help position eccentricity as illness or more specifically as senility are dangerous. These novels all demonstrate how inaccurate labels of madness can be used to manipulate people if their behaviour is disliked or deviates from the norm.

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* reveals how unthinking ageist attitudes colour the daughters' attitude to their father's lifestyle. Nikolai, the father of the heroine Nadezhda, begins to display signs of erratic behaviour, which because of his age are interpreted by his relatives as deteriorating mental capabilities. This novel functions as a warning to old people to enact normative behaviour or suffer familial pressure to accept the label of senile and surrender their independence. At the same time this novel demonstrates the dilemma of adult children who are unsure of how best to care for elderly parents. Nadezhda feels that it is her responsibility to look after Nikolai but she is unsuccessful in her attempts to monitor and rein in her father's exploits. In her confusion and exasperation it begins to seem as though Nadezhda would welcome a diagnosis of dementia for her father. Her hopeless efforts to cope with the fall-out from her father's perceived decline reveal a comic undertone that somehow emphasises the difficulty of the situation. In the narration of her predicament this hapless heroine speaks to the reality of such testing family circumstances, yet indicates that there is always hope and raises the question that Nikolai's odd behaviour may simply be eccentricity, rather than illness. Nikolai is referred to a psychiatrist who expresses the opinion that 'Mr Mayevskij is of sound mind, with no evidence of dementia' (p. 320), making clear that Nikolai's actions are being misinterpreted by his relatives as signs of mental illness. Nevertheless, the psychiatrist complies with Nadezhda's request for the letter that secures Nikolai the sheltered housing he has finally agreed he wants. In order to advance the application the psychiatrist expresses concern that 'living in isolation without regular social contact may cause his mental condition to deteriorate' (p. 320). While this may or may not be accurate it is the diagnosis Nadezhda needs to secure sheltered accommodation for Nikolai. Nadezhda warns him, "In your own flat you can do what you like, but when you are with the others, you must try to behave in a normal way" (p. 322). When she visits her father and finds him practicing yoga in 'all his

shrivelled, aged, joyful nakedness' (p. 323) it is clear that no matter where he lives Nikolai will not conform. Nadezhda and Vera's interpretation of Nikolai's behaviour, as a problem in cognition connected to his advanced age, is an example of how eccentricity in old age is less tolerated than at other life stages and likely to be diagnosed by others as senile dementia. In spite of the psychiatrist's pronouncement that Nikolai is sane, his daughters, especially Nadezhda persist in treating him as a problem to be solved, by removal to a place where his behaviour will be supervised. An interesting aspect of this novel is that throughout Nadezhda is portrayed as a loving and caring daughter who only wants what she considers best for Nikolai. It may be that Nadezhda's preoccupation with her father's lifestyle and her constant questioning of his mental capabilities is a result of her position as a woman of the sandwich generation. Nadezhda assumes responsibility for her aged father without his consent. In *Reading in Bed*, Maud, the elderly aunt of sixty-year-old Georgia, becomes increasingly senile and Georgia rather flippantly describes Maud as suffering from 'galloping dementia' (Gee, 2007: 300). Despite the dismissive language Georgia uses to describe Maud's state of mind, like Nadezhda, she goes to great lengths to ensure that her elderly relative is properly cared for. *Reading in Bed* is a further example of how older heroines are 'allowed' to use ageist language against the very elderly without being censured. It is significant to note that it is only the relatives of the heroines who show signs of dementia and never the heroines themselves, even when they are in the highest age group, for a matron lit heroine. This distancing of senility from the heroines of matron lit is a device which allows the heroines to consistently experience hopeful, if not always happy, endings. By portraying all the sixty-something protagonists as reasonably competent under stress and responsible for making decisions on behalf of the 'old, old' generation, grey chick lit positions these heroines as 'not old', even as they are subjected to ageism. The idea that it is acceptable to use belittling language when addressing the elderly, is a consequence of ageist attitudes. And Kite and Wagner argue that 'ageist attitudes stem from cultural beliefs about older adults' (2004: 129). Grey chick lit documents the distress that this viscous circle of ageism causes and the effects this kind of negative stress has on emotional, mental and physical wellbeing. Yet ageist attitudes seem almost inevitable if we consider the evolutionary literature about ageing.

When ageing is viewed from an exclusively evolutionary biological perspective it may seem understandable that human beings lose cultural value as they age. As Michael Rose states in the *Evolutionary Biology of Aging* 'aging can be taken to refer to the autonomous process of deterioration that the adults of most species seem to undergo with increasing chronological

age' (1994: viii). Such a stark view excludes advantages accrued with age and positions all ageing people as deteriorating. According to David Waters 'when it comes to age-related deterioration and disability, two tenets of evolutionary theory would suggest that humans [...] are indeed hard-wired for post reproductive calamity'(2006: 60). Waters goes on to express the opinion that 'an organism is not built with any regard for optimizing aging' (2006: 61). In this context, the concept that some people might improve in both physical and mental health with old age, seems unlikely. However, Robert Butler contends that 'the potentials for satisfactions and even triumphs in late life are vastly unexplored' (1975: 3). Yet any such endeavour is difficult in the face of persistently ageist attitudes.

By dismantling ageism all generations would benefit as they age, because they would not so easily assimilate the debilitating and limiting effects of stereotyping to which past and present generations of elderly people have been subjected. Sarit *et al* describe the process by which ageing stereotypes may be acted out:

Information about the elderly tends to be accepted uncritically, mainly because it seems irrelevant to us at the time of encoding. Later, when that information becomes salient, we use it as if it were true to guide our behaviour. Having blindly accepted that old people walk more slowly, we end up walking more slowly as soon as cues in the environment make our more advanced age salient. We then take the reduced walking speed as further proof of both our age and the truth of the stereotype. (2004: 288)

The above quotation demonstrates how the self-fulfilling prophecy of diminished function works on the elderly to diminish their abilities. Sarit *et al* contend that 'stereotypes regarding the negative consequences of old age are widely known and almost unconditionally accepted, at least in the West' (2004: 277). Negative stereotypes about ageing are not useful to either individuals or society in general. Kite and Wagner argue that 'people's attitudes toward aging might affect their own aging process in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy' (2004: 152). While the young may experience some fleeting satisfaction in dismissing older people, the effect in later life of internalised ageism will become detrimental. If old-age began to be valued as a positive life stage, the consequence of such a turn in social thought might result in all generations being able to enjoy their lives more fully.

A number of matron lit protagonists seem aware of the restrictions imposed by ageist language and cultural rules. According to Sarit *et al*, as people age they are expected to relinquish control and allow the younger members of society to guide them in their life choices. They speculate that 'at its most extreme, the expectation that adults over a certain

age will (or should) begin to “act like old people” can become oppressive’ (Sarit *et al*, 2004: 278). Some ageing female characters of popular fiction reject this oppression and make their own decisions regarding their wellbeing. Eleanor, the pivotal character in *Homecoming* contemplates her decision to leave her daughter and grand-daughter and concentrate on the restoration of her mental health:

They would manage without her. She was too broken, too wild with grief to be a proper mother or grandmother any more. Worse, in her present grieving state, she might be a burden. It was an odd feeling. All her life Eleanor had worked and strived, both for her family and in her professional life. She solved problems, she didn’t create them. In an instant of loss all that had changed. She had changed. Which was why she’d turned her back on New York and returned to Ireland. Here she might find the answer, find out what she had to do. (p. 13)

Eleanor’s grief at losing her husband Ralf has plunged her into depression and she makes a decision that she hopes might help her to heal and recover. Aware of her own needs, Eleanor is willing to defy the expectation of normative behaviour as mother, grandmother and elderly woman, in order to prioritise her mental health.

Eleanor demonstrates the necessity of self-awareness and she regards her own wellbeing as her priority. She is described as an ‘old white-haired lady’ and ‘fiercely determined and straight-backed’ (p. 8). The juxtaposition of these two phrases implies that while someone may present particular aspects of old age they might also display characteristics of someone much younger. This single sentence is enough to disrupt the association between old and frail. Eleanor presents the reader with a positive image: that of the strong and upright old woman. Eleanor’s straight-backed posture and determined attitude do not, however, prevent a young letting agent from concluding that ‘she must be a little mad’ (p. 8). It may be that the dismissal of Eleanor as a bit crazy is a contrivance which eases the confusion wrought by her unusual demeanour. Although Eleanor is in mourning for her husband Ralf and wonders whether she will ever recover from her depression, she is physically fit, apart from her high blood pressure, and she is determined to remain in good health for as long as possible. Within days of moving into her new apartment Eleanor visits her new doctor and chiropodist. Eleanor observes ‘well, she’d had to introduce herself to the doctor, it made sense at her age’ (p. 10). Although Eleanor is clearly aware that her advanced age may require more vigilant health care she resents being addressed as ‘ma’am’, because that particular form of address ‘always made her feel as if paramedics were shadowing her with an oxygen mask’ (p. 9). Eleanor is a retired psychotherapist who is still in the business of analysing the people around her, even though she no longer takes clients. While Eleanor sits in a cafe watching a younger

woman, she concludes from the way the woman carries herself, that ‘perhaps she had never been told that she was in any way attractive’ and Eleanor observes that ‘the lessons people learned in youth sank in so deep, they became almost part of a person’s DNA’ (p. 10). Judy Wright says that ‘words can be deadly weapons or protective layers of love. They can bruise and batter a person, no matter how old, in the heart and spirit just like physical blows can cause damage to the outside of the body’ (2008: v). Eleanor’s wisdom about the way that words can affect how people feel and behave is interesting in the context of ageing and health. Eleanor is a complex character in that she frequently conforms to and disrupts conventional attitudes to health care and ageing stereotypes. That the word ‘ma’am’ has such a profound effect on her sense of wellbeing is notable because although Eleanor is highly educated and self-assured, she is not immune to the power of social language to wound and weaken.

Ageist attitudes have a negative influence on capacity and wellbeing. Viewed through the lens of ageism any physical or mental changes are interpreted as natural consequences of ageing, linked to the ‘endpoint of death’ as Eric Juengst (2004: 4) phrases it. The destructive consequences of this way of thinking are revealed and discussed in grey chick lit. In *Separate Beds* Hermione’s enforced removal to a small room in her son’s home results in broken sleep and night terrors. Tom is woken by Hermione’s sobbing and cries for help, to find her ‘sitting bolt upright in bed, terror written all over her face’ (p. 202). ‘Tom read her thoughts *she was a prisoner ... she ached to take flight ... she ached to be young*’ (p. 203). Tom’s conclusion can be questioned, as Hermione’s distress may be a consequence of her loss of personal space and power, rather than a specific longing to be young. This is an example of how a desire for autonomy is simply equated with a desire for youth, when the explanation may be more concerned with wellbeing.

Readers may empathise with matron lit heroines when they intimate that they are losing the will to live *because* increased longevity can only be perceived in Western culture as a prolonged decline. The heroine of *The Adultery Diet*, Eva, is only forty-four years old when she contemplates that the rest of her life might be nothing more than ‘a slow decline’ (Cassady, 2007: 8). She expresses the fear that the remainder of her life might be nothing but a prolonged period of monotony and deterioration. Eva compares her hopeless future to ‘dust settling in an empty house’ (2007: 8). In the wake of her fortieth birthday Sarah, the main female character in *the gap year for grown ups*, tells her husband: “I don’t know what’s wrong with me David. I just don’t feel right. Nothing seems comfortable anymore”

(Saunders, 2008: 45). When matron lit heroines in their early forties express such extreme weariness about their lives, it does not seem surprising when Mimi Cattan informs readers that older people have a 'higher risk than any other age group worldwide of completed suicide' (2006: 177). Fifty-year-old Eva Beaver, the main protagonist of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, is so disillusioned with her life, she reflects that there is nothing left for her to do except 'sort out her memories, and wait to see who will keep her alive. [...] She wants to be a baby and start again' (Townsend, 2012: 420). The attitude of Western culture regarding the value of post-reproductive and particularly post-nurturing women is detrimental to their emotional, mental and physical health.

A specific example of the detrimental effect on wellbeing of culturally enforced dismissal and invisibility is demonstrated in the novel *Coming Up Next*. Penny Smith, herself a newsreader, fictionalises the real life struggles that ageing female television presenters face, if and when their employers deem them too old to be seen. Emine Saner reports that Miriam O'Reilly, sacked from *Countryfile*, 'was not the first woman to have fallen foul of television's obsession with youth, but at 53, she was the first to win a landmark claim of age discrimination against the BBC over it' (2011). Remarking on the difficulties faced by 'older women working in television and film', Jeannette King points out that 'the issue of older women's visibility is clearly newsworthy' (2013: xii). The fictional Katie Fisher reflects the real life difficulties, experienced by older women who are in the public eye. When her employers decide that they want a younger woman on view she loses her job on *Hello Britain!* Katie laments that no one will invite her out ever again, so she can drink whisky as much as she likes 'until I die alone in a shed and get eaten by cats' (2010: 13). In her moment of despair Katie feels utterly redundant. Katie imagines that in the future she will 'talk about how I used to be famous, as I pick hairs out of my chin and dribble egg on my saggy jumper' (p. 8). Katie 'burst into tears. She cried as she put the washing on and cried while she was watching television, [...] she ran a bath [...] and cried some more. She cried until the bath was cold' (p. 8). Katie's distress is the result of what one grey chick lit protagonist, Annie in *Separate Beds*, refers to as 'society's inherent ageism' (Buchan, 2010: 197). Annie claims that once this 'kicks in' women are 'relegated' to all that is dull. Annie's remark is interesting because although she names and shames ageism for its debilitating effect on women's lives, she appears to concede that it is inevitable. In much the same way, Katie accepts her employers' assessment that her ageing appearance is unacceptable and uses this incident as reason to consume conspicuous amounts of alcohol, as she contemplates her decline and

death with ironical humour. While Katie uses ageist stereotypes for comic effect this does not entirely undermine their power to make her feel miserable. Matron lit documents the prevailing myths around ageing, the effect these myths have on the physical and mental health of ageing women and the practical realities of ageing. The consequence of ageist cultural attitudes toward female appearance is clearly demonstrated, in the novel *Coming Up Next*, to be detrimental to the heroine's emotional, mental and physical health. Matron lit heroines are hurt and damaged and many of them respond with anger, initially at their own ageing bodies, then eventually at the social milieu and language which has cost them their self-confidence and persuaded them to disparage themselves. Although matron lit novels frequently report and repeat ageist language and ideas, sometimes seemingly without criticism, there are few heroines in this genre who do not convey their discomfort and distress, in one form or another. The expression of discontent with ageing expressed by the majority of grey chick lit protagonists indicates the negative power of ageism on health and wellbeing.

The genre of matron lit appears to be positioned as part of the 'decline to decline' narrative and is valuable in this respect. However, its preoccupation with personal responsibility for health and wellbeing is problematic because it excludes older people who, for any number of reasons, are not in a position to take on this model. Grey chick lit novels present female protagonists whose approach to health issues is predominantly positive and in keeping with the received wisdom about keeping fit. They display an awareness regarding checkpoints of fitness and health care in broad terms, which generally support a pro-active attitude toward good health. The majority of these heroines could tick most of the right boxes on any government approved leaflet that promotes healthy living.

Yet their occasional over-indulgence in good food and wine mark them out as human and not paragons of fitness virtue unrecognisable to readers. Richard Klein asks 'what do we stand to lose if we lose the enjoyment and pleasure that we derive from good eating and drinking?' (2010: 22). Klein states that his 'concern is with the particular ways in which public health is used for moral edification and as an instrument of social control with political implications for individual freedom' (2010: 17). The majority of female characters in matron lit novels combine an adherence to government guidelines with an instinctive urge to spice their lives with a little pleasure and risk. Klein argues that 'without risk, there is no adult pleasure, and risk is what keeps us alive, not just living on' (2010: 20). Grey chick lit portrays female protagonists as women who want to feel alive and reject the concept of 'just living on'. Klein

invites his readers to ‘imagine another world in which public policy declared that pleasure is the principal means to health’ (2010: 19). While matron lit heroines do not inhabit such a world, they do advocate the pursuit of happiness, purpose and projects that have personal meaning, as routes to wellbeing. It is the opinion of Jesse Dylan that ‘the essence of all health begins with joyful living’ (2009: 10). The heroines of grey chick lit strive for a happy and healthy lifestyle, while documenting the various difficulties which hamper their efforts.

The majority of the main protagonists in matron lit novels choose healthy lifestyles and demonstrate a particular version of successful ageing that promotes personal responsibility. The heroines of matron lit are active participants in promoting their own good health and this reflects the changing attitudes to which Kenneth Brummel-Smith draws attention. He says that ‘the first members of the baby-boom generation (BBG) will begin to turn 65 in 2011 and affect all aspects of medical care’ (Brummel-Smith, 2005: 80). Brummel-Smith explains that:

The type of relationship that baby boomers expect of their physicians will be different than patients of the past. Instead of the paternalistic doctor advising the patient of a certain choice, the BBG will want to participate and be engaged in decision making. (2005: 81)

This particular version of ageing, within the framework of informed awareness about health matters, might in reality be specific to the baby-boom generation but is demonstrated by all the heroines of grey chick lit novels. Butler predicts that the baby boom generation ‘can transform what it means to live a long life’ (2008: xiv). These characters are consistent in their demands to be part of any decision about their health, treatment and care. Brummel-Smith refers to a study by the Institute for the Future, carried out in 2000, which showed that ‘a significant portion of BBG patients want direct advice but still seek out additional health-related information by “researching” it themselves online’ (2005: 81). The main protagonists of matron lit are *au fait* with online research and therefore aware of medical and care provisions, in a way that previous generations of fictional heroines have not been. Even the oldest matron lit heroines are familiar with the internet. Eighty-three-year-old Eleanor, the main female protagonists in *Homecoming*, mentions that her grand-daughter Gillian ‘had taught her how to use a computer several years before’ (p. 117). When Gillian offers to set up some documents for her, Eleanor replies “No my dearest, I’ll type it in myself. You’re never too old, right?” (p. 118). Eleanor’s response to Gillian’s offer of assistance is indicative of the computer awareness and youthful attitude to learning new skills, which is demonstrated by a number of matron lit protagonists. Brummel-Smith’s observation that ‘the BBG will no doubt

use all available resources in the maintenance of health, care of illness, and management of health services' (2005: 81) applies to these pre-BBG fictional characters as well. There are very few heroines in grey chick lit who do not actively participate in their own health care. While this ensures that these characters set a good example, the genre's pre-occupation with self-care excludes older people who do not conform to this positive stereotype.

The mature women of matron lit are well-informed about all aspects of health. Eleanor, the oldest of the female characters in *Homecoming*, has all the information she requires to manage her high blood pressure and has regular checks on her health that include chiroprapist appointments. When she disagrees with her doctor she tells him so and expects full explanations. When Eleanor calmly informs him that the cause of her raised blood pressure cannot be stress, her doctor reassures her "It's familial. Take the drugs, Eleanor. It's not a comment on your mental state" (p. 118). Eleanor demonstrates the involvement grey chick lit protagonists have with regard to medical decisions. She is well-informed and an active participant in the pursuit of her continued independence, mobility and wellbeing. According to Brummel-Smith:

The provision of medical care to older persons will face significant challenges, and experience major changes, in the next half-century. These changes will involve modifications in the doctor-patient relationship, new ways in which medicine is practiced, and an increased need for socio-political decisions regarding the provision and cost of health care. (2005: 80)

The female characters of matron lit novels are aware of health risks they take appropriate preventative measures, seek medical advice and health care treatments whenever necessary and plan ahead for a time when they may need to re-locate to a retirement or nursing home, depending on their level of need for care. The female characters in matron lit novels are not passive about their health. Matron lit heroines demonstrate awareness that keeping fit is worthwhile.

The majority of matron lit characters pursue good health. They do not eat 'convenience food' apart from an occasional take-away. They enjoy shopping for delicious food, they generally eat healthily and a number of them make a point of taking exercise, in the form of walking and cycling, rather than attending a gym or exercise class. While many of the female characters enjoy a glass, or a few glasses, of wine, few consume alcohol with the abandonment of chick lit heroines. Grey chick lit heroines, unlike their younger counterparts in chick lit novels, do not binge drink. The singular instance of a matron lit character getting 'wasted' is Beth in *Hidden Talents*. While intoxicated, Beth writes and sends a saucy e-mail,

and the intense embarrassment that she experiences for a number of weeks, sounds a cautionary note. There are no alcoholic heroines in grey chick lit. The only exceptions to the 'no heavy drinking on a regular basis' rule are the novels *Coming Up Next* and *Toppling Miss April*. In *Coming Up Next* Katie loses her job on breakfast T.V. to a younger woman. She leaves London and goes to stay with her parents. While she is trying to hide from the press Katie turns to drink and is subsequently mocked by the press for her slip. The heroine of *Toppling Miss April* consistently consumes large amounts of alcohol and suffers from gout as a consequence. It is made clear in both instances that such heavy drinking is not consistent with a healthy and respectable life. Julia Edelman's advice to post-menopausal women is that:

Nutrition and activity influence how much independence you will preserve and how much energy you will have to do what you wish to do for the rest of your life. Even if you are well into post menopause, the nutrition and activity door is still open. Women in their eighties and beyond can acquire additional strength and agility. (2009: 262)

This advice is borne out by the lifestyle and good health of even the most elderly of grey chick lit heroines.

None of these characters ever watch television, so they are not 'couch-potatoes'. They walk and cycle. And they are almost all weight-conscious. The heroines of grey chick lit do not smoke cigarettes or take illegal drugs. In fact, none of the characters in matron lit novels even mention cigarettes. No character talks about having struggled to give up smoking and none of them express concern about their children taking up this activity. It is as though cigarettes are not part of this genre's world, which is at odds with the reality of Western society and slightly undermines the realistic credentials of grey chick lit. Hayes and Prior state that 'current predictions suggest that, in the near future, women will experience much higher mortality rates from smoking-related diseases than men' (2002: 162). It does seem curious that so many authors of grey chick lit should choose to ignore such a common activity but this omission ensures that their heroines are good role models for healthy living. Although one or two grey chick lit heroines may have experimented with class B controlled drugs in their youth (this information is never explicit), they are now all invariably 'older and wiser'. In *The Cookie Club* Vera has a dark past that she prefers not to talk about but which is disclosed by the first-person narrator Marnie. Marnie explains that while Vera is now a healthy middle-aged woman she had been subjected to physical abuse both as a child and as a young woman and that Vera took cocaine and sometimes heroin because it 'made the pain go away' (Pearlman, 2009: 215). According to the WHO:

One of the keys to an old age characterized by good health is healthy behaviour, preferably adopted early on in life – including healthy dietary choices and regular physical activity. Healthy behaviour can increase life expectancy and delay the onset of chronic conditions and disability, compressing the time spent in ill-health into a shorter period at the end of life. (2009: 65)

The few matron lit characters who make unwise lifestyle choices suffer the consequences through poor health or they are commended on making healthy changes. The majority of grey chick lit heroines model a healthy lifestyle and their life circumstances are usually supportive of their health promoting choices. Matron lit protagonists experience comfortable lives that are conducive to wellbeing.

For most grey chick lit heroines their environment is largely advantageous. Matron lit tends to promote a vision of ageing that assumes almost everyone has the opportunity to experience ageing in this relatively comfortable and well-managed way. Yet these characters represent only a part of the picture, regarding ageing and wellbeing. The consistent portrayal of matron lit heroines' self-management in health matters, excludes any representation of old age which does not conform to government guidelines that place responsibility for health with the individual. As I have noted elsewhere in this chapter, any lack of self-control in regard to healthy living is flagged up as problematic and the unfortunate consequences for the character are documented. The way that matron lit privileges representations of cause and effect promotes the idea of wellbeing as subject to personal management. The experiences of disabled people and those who are chronically ill do not feature in matron lit, except as a difficulty for the main protagonists to manage. These exclusions in matron lit novels are worth noting as a limitation of this genre.

With only one exception, the heroine of *Star Gazing*, Marianne, who has been blind from birth, none of the grey chick lit protagonists in the novels I have read have a physical or mental disability. The apparent convention of side-lining disabled and chronically ill people is reminiscent of how chick lit relegates older women to the margins of the narrative, very often as a 'problem' discussed by the more prominent characters. Disability and chronic illness are repeatedly relegated to the periphery of the conventional matron lit plot. This is not to say that the subject of disability is not mentioned in grey chick lit novels but that the older characters themselves do not have disabilities. In *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, Eva's window cleaner, new friend and ally Peter, talks to Eva about the problems his family are trying to deal with because of his daughter's disabilities. And though confined to her bed by choice, Eva displays her usefulness as a friend by acting as a sounding board for Peter's

concerns. In *Homecoming*, while Eleanor sits in the waiting room of her doctor's surgery she chats with Pearl Mills: 'A small white-haired lady, Mrs Mills was accompanied by her son, a giant of a man who was clearly mentally disabled' (p. 119). Both Eleanor and Pearl are in their eighties and Pearl confides in Eleanor about her concerns for her son Terence's welfare in the future. Her eyes shining with tears Pearl says "Who will look after him when I'm gone. They have good homes for people like Terence, you know, but I couldn't send him there. He'd be lost without me. I've always taken care of him" (p. 120). It is clear that Pearl Mills is still useful and active in old age, even though her productivity is framed in the normative, gendered matrix of a caring role. The mid-life, old or elderly woman as carer for incapacitated family members is a familiar trope of grey chick lit. This archetype simultaneously disrupts the myth that older women are a burden on society and supports the cultural assumption that women's productivity is defined by their ability to care for others. Some popular fiction draws attention to the fact that such cultural mores may even situate the elderly in the role of sick person, when there may be other explanations.

While some protagonists are concerned about money and may have to down-size or sell their homes to fund their future lifestyle, none of them lives in poverty. The homes of matron lit heroines are not situated on council estates or in high-rises. The female characters do have problems, including financial and health worries, and concerns about their children, but they are not commonly afflicted by such difficulties as criminality or domestic violence. The exceptions here are *The Cookie Club* which touches on domestic abuse and *Elisabeth's Daughter* offers a serious discussion of the subject. Elisabeth's daughter tells her lover that she is pregnant and in a fit of rage he almost beats her to death. As she recovers, her mother tells her the story of her own violent past. Apart from the domestic violence that is discussed in *Elisabeth's Daughter* and *The Cookie Club* the most severe crime mentioned, in the forty-plus matron lit novels that I have read, is financial fraud. The consistent absence of criminal activity and anti-social behaviour in the lives of grey chick lit characters is beneficial to their general health. Jonathan Jackson and Mai Stafford, writing in the *British Journal of Criminology*, assert that there is a 'strong statistical effect of mental health and physical functioning on worry about crime. [...] Worry about crime harms health, [...] there is a core to worry about crime that is implicated in real cycles of decreased health' (2009). Matron lit protagonists are fortunate that they rarely need to worry about crime but yet again this is an omission which writes out the experience of many older people who do live in fear of crime.

The likelihood of stress-induced illness is further diminished because the heroines of this genre are generally only required to engage with ‘domestic’ problems and do not discuss or even make themselves aware of world events. The one instance in which the news is mentioned is in *Separate Beds* when the husband of the heroine loses his job at the BBC News. Steve Chandler advocates ‘news fasts’ in order to increase the motivation to make positive changes because he considers that reportage is biased toward tragic accounts of world events that he believes sap the will to improve life. Chandler says that he:

First heard the term “news fast” from Dr Andrew Weil, who writes about natural medicine and spontaneous healing. Weil recommends going on news fasts because he believes this has a healing effect on the human system. To him, it’s a genuine health issue. (2012: 158)

If ‘news fasts’ are conducive to good health then matron lit characters possess another advantage. It could be said that while the lifestyles of grey chick lit heroines are not entirely without difficulties, they are conducive to good health. Victor states that:

For the UK both life expectancy and ‘healthy’ life expectancy have increased, although the rate of increase has been higher for the former than the latter. Hence there has been a marginal increase in the percentage of life spent in poor health or disability (Kelly *et al*, 2000). It is not clear if all sections of the population have experienced this direction of change. Given the evidence indicating the differential advantage in terms of life expectancy gained by the most privileged groups, it seems unlikely that the above decreases would be equally distributed (Hattersley, 1997). (2006: 144)

The characters in matron lit novels do fit into a category of privileged, if not ‘most privileged’, because in general the relative ease of their lifestyles is conducive to good health. The increase in life spent in poor health or disability that Victor refers to is not reflected in matron lit novels. By excluding any untidy aspects of ageing grey chick lit supports a view of ageing as ‘manageable’. Although anti-decline and empowering, this attitude may encourage a ‘blame’ culture. When the majority of grey chick lit characters are able to make positive choices which promote and maintain wellbeing it seems that anyone who requires assistance from the state may be cast as a ‘failure’.

The only characters in matron lit novels who actively consider permanent residential care are in their eighties and this is not usually forced upon them by health professionals or relatives but is a considered choice which they make for themselves. Writing about *Housing, Health, and Disability* Holmes *et al*, say they ‘are not aware of any research into how housing affects the link between health condition and disability. We speculate that the housing environments with more services and programs may reduce the disability associated with some conditions,

such as diabetes and arthritis' (2003: 121). While there may not be research to substantiate a decision about housing as a move which might alleviate the effects of disability, frailty and mobility, this is nevertheless a concern expressed by elderly fictional characters. Their main reason for considering residential care is an increasing difficulty with mobility and their decisions are presented as rational and pragmatic solutions to a problem. Eighty-four-year-old Adele, in *Hidden Talents*, selects her retirement home, both because she is becoming increasingly frail and less mobile and as an efficient way to dissipate her neglectful nephew's inheritance. These characters are not usually short of money and can finance their care in a pleasant retirement home from the sale of their current property. The relative affluence of matron lit characters seems to curtail discussion about how families provide the necessary care in less fortunate financial circumstances.

The only exception to this is the elderly mother in *Separate Beds* who has to leave the retirement home she had chosen for herself and move in with her son and his family because of bad investments, which have reduced her income and made it impossible to pay the fees. *Separate Beds* is a novel that explores the practical and emotional dilemmas that occur within a large family when one of them requires a measure of care and help in order to live a productive life. This novel also demonstrates how the frailest member of the family is able to nurture and support others in turn. When Annie is told about the new arrangement she is initially horrified. Her husband Tom says "Annie, it looks as though we can't afford to keep her in the home at the moment. I'm going to have to ask you to let her come and live with us." Annie replies "No! Not your mother. That you should even ask. To live with us? For how long?" (Buchan, 2010: 110). Yet in time Annie begins to feel sympathy for her mother-in-law Hermione 'and very sorry for the way in which this move had peeled away her privacy' (p. 196). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter the move is disturbing for Hermione and causes a setback in her health because she is disorientated, which disrupts her sleep. Ultimately all the re-arrangements and adjustments required to facilitate home care are shown to be mutually beneficial. *Separate Beds* is a realistic narrative that does not flinch from describing the difficulties of ageing throughout the lifespan, or the problems caused by poor health. Yet it resists labelling the frail and elderly mother as the exclusive source of the family's problems and promotes understanding of both the negative and positive aspects of ageing. This novel demonstrates that failing health and a requirement of care need not mean the end of a co-operative and meaningful way of living.

However, there is another absence in matron lit fiction that merits discussion. Although we live in a largely secular society Robert Atchley argues that ‘people over 40 are primary consumers of literature, workshops, retreats, and personal growth programs concerning spirituality’ (2009: ix). This is not reflected in the grey chick lit novels that I have read and none of the characters attend a place of worship or mention a belief in a higher power. The ‘exception that proves the rule’ in this case, is *Soft Voices Whispering*, a novel in which the heroine is a nun. In his book on *Spirituality and Aging* Atchley states that:

“Spiritual life” is a major focus and motivator for large numbers of the people gerontologists seek to study, serve, and design programs and policies for. Yet gerontology as a field of knowledge and practice has lagged far behind its target population in understanding the importance of spirituality for aging people and developing complex concepts and language about spirituality. (2009: ix)

This lack of attention is echoed in popular fiction and is an exclusion that may undermine the positive role model of the generally healthy lifestyles of matron lit protagonists. Ellen Idler contends that there is a link between religious observance and health because it encourages adherence to a healthy lifestyle by offering a framework of meaning that provides comfort and understanding for difficult changes common to old age and through ‘social support by and for members of religious groups’ (2004: 24). While Idler argues that there are health benefits associated with religious observance, Harry Moody contends that ‘the absolute power of retrospective meaning— life review— constitutes one answer given by a secular world that cannot completely banish a spiritual hunger for meaning in the last stage of life’ (2001: 50). As grey chick lit heroines are representative of our modern secular society their penchant for reassessment of their lives may be explained by a lack of faith in an afterlife, but the named provocation for a life review is usually some sort of crisis. Dr Robert Butler proposed that a ‘life review’ is fundamental to the possibility of growth in later years.

Michael Carlson observes that Butler attributed his grandmother’s:

Determination and willingness to "start over" with helping him to realise that people benefited from having goals they could strive to achieve. [...] At Mount Sinai medical centre, he pioneered the concept of "life review", where elderly patients reflect on their lives to set new goals. (Carlson, 2010)

In the novel *Turning Point*, the heroine Ruth only decides to start living her life as she pleases, after recovering from a heart attack. For Ruth it is her brush with death which inspires her to heed medical advice about her diet, make a full recovery from her heart attack and actively pursue health and happiness. During a long period of convalescence, Ruth realises that she does not want to die and that at forty-four years old, she has never really

lived. As she recovers she considers her past and starts to make plans to go on a cruise and not worry about the cost. Up to this point she has lived frugally, sharing a house with her widowed mother. It is due to her heart attack that this heroine reflects on how she has conducted her life so far. She is typical of a number of matron lit protagonists who reflect on their pasts and undergo a life review. However, even though these heroines do not articulate any expression of faith, it is possible that their life reviews serve other purposes than that outlined by Moody. In grey chick lit life reviews are often the second step in the process of an attempt to 'undo' damaging ageist structures that are causing the heroine anxiety.

A belief in God does not preclude the need for a life review. In the novel *Soft Voices Whispering* Sister Pius returns to the village she left 50 years earlier, when she was eleven years old. Kildoran holds unhappy memories for her but by facing her past she finds that she can resolve her pain and begin to enjoy her life. I understand the life reviews undertaken by matron lit heroines to be an important part of their process of self-development and essential for personal growth, future contentment and mental health. In *Homecoming*, eighty-three-year-old Eleanor does not travel from America, to her birthplace of Ireland, to reminisce and prepare herself for death. Eleanor is in relatively good physical health and she makes her pilgrimage in order to appreciate and understand her life more fully and to recover from the grief and depression of bereavement. By looking backwards and reassessing her beginnings, Eleanor becomes better equipped to deal with her current problems and prepare for the future. Although Eleanor is one of the oldest grey chick lit heroines that I have encountered, she is by no means ready to give up on life. Eleanor's life review is as much about the present and the future as it is about the past and this is the case for the majority of matron lit protagonists. Eva, the heroine of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, is fifty years old and in good physical health. Eva repeatedly asserts that the main purpose for her taking to her bed is so that she has no distractions while she reflects and thinks. Eva is not at the end of her life but she has called a halt to a particular stage of her life. She intends her sojourn in her bedroom to be transitional and I will discuss this further in chapter 5. Eva's life review is a catalyst which she hopes will make her future possible and liveable. The message that I perceive in many matron lit novels is that the life review is a significant step on the way to deeper understanding, positive change and better emotional, mental and physical health. Many authors of grey chick lit novels imply that it is not possible to go forward successfully without taking a good long look backward, however painful it may be.

Most often the heroines of grey chick lit novels contemplate the past alone or discuss their difficulties with a close friend. In *The Cookie Club*, however, life reviews take place within a group and on a regular timetable, which demands food and drink to fuel the conversation. Nancy Chen suggests that ‘it is important to take into account the intimate connections between healing and culture. Healing foods are deeply embedded in cultural practices, environment, and belief systems. Eating and health care are personal but are also social and political processes’ (2008: xii). *The Cookie Club* is an unusually dark novel, which mixes cookie recipes with stories of romance, happiness, sadness and graphic descriptions of accidents and illness. However, it is a pertinent example of the characters’ awareness about health issues. Taylor, a cookie club member, remarks that “it is so good to be here. This is food for my soul. Healing just being here” (p. 257). Members of the *Cookie Club* freely discuss health issues at their annual meeting. Indeed, Marnie opens up a discussion by asking “how many of us have had cancer?” (p. 221). The way in which Ann Pearlman alternates her female characters’ distressing stories with recipes establishes the connection between talking, eating and healing. Elizabeth Wrenn’s *Last known Address* also provides recipes for the food and drinks, which are presented in the novel as beneficial to wellbeing. Another novel that intersperses the narrative with recipes is *Homecoming*. Despite this similarity with *The Cookie Club* this novel is much lighter and typical of most other matron lit novels. *Homecoming* places great emphasis on the value of good food for a long and healthy life. According to Eleanor no matter what happiness or sadness came and went ‘food made it all better’ (p. 6). Eleanor is the ‘proof of the pudding’ because at the beginning of the story, although she is suffering from re-active depression, she is still physically healthy and independent and readers are informed that she has lived her eighty three years ‘with gusto’ (p. 4). According to Eleanor the consumption of rich food is both a source of pleasure and an enhancement of all life’s experiences. This sentiment is echoed by Dulcie, the pivotal character in the novel *Hidden Talents*, as she passes the time before meeting friends for lunch by strolling around the shops and selecting delicious items of food for her supper. Dulcie contemplates the ‘bottle of excellent red wine she had at home’, and reflects that ‘it was one of the nicest things about living alone: she could eat what she wanted without having to consider anyone else’ (James, 2002: 77). Both Dulcie and Eleanor savour good food and drink; they speak of it as life-enhancing. Although this attitude deviates somewhat from government guidelines toward good health Klein contends that ‘Julia Child was vigorous into her nineties not despite slathering chickens with butter, but because of it’ (2010: 22). Grey

chick lit heroines adhere to the adage that ‘a little of what you fancy does you good’ and for the majority of them this works well.

While matron lit offers overwhelmingly positive narratives regarding health and wellbeing in later life, these novels do reflect the reality described by the World Health Organisation that ‘cardiovascular disease, often thought to be a “male” problem, is the main killer of older people of both sexes almost everywhere in the world’ (2009: 62). Characters in matron lit novels suffer from heart attacks more than any other health problems. In *Hidden Talents* Dulcie’s lover has a heart attack at the start of the novel and dies of a second one by the end of the story. In the novel *Blowing It*, the heroine’s husband, Mac, has a heart attack which means that he and Lottie are unable to actually ‘blow’ their money on an around the world trip after all. Readers learn at the beginning of the novel *Scandals* that Amber had feared the loss of her husband and ‘the blessing she valued most had been Jay’s survival of the heart attack’ (Jordan, 2010: 7). The novel *Turning Point* actually begins with the heroine’s slow and emotionally painful recovery from a heart attack. The regularity with which matron lit characters have to deal with the losses caused through heart problems is an accurate representation of the high incidence of cardiovascular disease worldwide. The varied discussions about cardiovascular disease, to be found in grey chick lit represent this particular health problem realistically. Yet, grey chick lit seems to be selective in its portrayal of realism, when it comes to other matters of health.

In the persistent pursuit of a hopeful ending grey chick lit novels demonstrate that the experience of illness does not have to put an end to personal growth. In Elizabeth Wrenn’s novel *Last Known Address*, (2008) C.C. leaves her home and family to set off on an adventure of a lifetime, with her friends. With their help, C.C. plans to restore an old house which she has inherited but before the three friends can complete the renovation, C.C. becomes gravely ill. As in the novel *Blowing It* illness prevents the possibility of a straightforward happy ending. Matron lit rarely allows its heroines to reach their stated goals with ease. The problems which are put in their path are frequently situations that cannot be easily resolved and require the protagonists to reassess their lives. When she is diagnosed with cancer C.C. reflects that she:

Had hoped to do so much more with the landscaping outside. But wasn’t there always more to do. Wasn’t it always the case that things were left half finished before . . . She forced a deep breath. She had to let go. (p. 408)

C. C.'s realisation that there is always more to do is not solely concerned with the work on the house and garden. She is expressing an awareness that life itself often seems unfinished, even in the face of death. Yet C.C.'s decision to let go gradually changes as she becomes aware that Purdy, the new man in her life, wants to be with her, whatever the prognosis of her illness. Initially C.C. refuses to have faith in the future and clings to her resolve to let go of life. C.C. declines to see Purdy when she has no guarantee of recovery and informs her friend Meg "I'm reluctant to do something so hopeful as falling in love" (p. 413). When Meg passes this information on to Purdy he writes:

C.C. – none of us knows how much time we have here on earth, let alone to spend with someone else. I don't mean to sound too philosophical now, but what is time? Maybe it should be measured by the love we give and receive, not by the clock or calendar. (p. 417)

C.C. sees the wisdom in his words and despite a lack of certainty about her health decides not to let go of Purdy, her friends or her house. Purdy's steadfast affection for C.C. allows her to find hope where there was none and this transforms her outlook. From being resigned to the prospect of losing her life she becomes eager to live with purpose. C. C. decides not to sell the house and tells Meg and Shelly "I'm staying, [...] for a while anyway. Purdy and I are going to take it day by day. [...] He's very eager for a new start" (p. 435). When C. C. informs her friends that she intends to stay on in the house she is demonstrating her will to live. Despite Shelly's "But", C.C. continues "I'd really love it if you would both stay on, keep working on the old gal. She's only half finished." Shelley enquires "just which old gal are you saying is half finished?" C.C. laughs and responds "all of us, girlfriend. All of us!" (p. 435). C.C. chooses to embrace life and love despite her illness. In doing so she demonstrates one of the most significant messages to be found in grey chick lit; that even in ill health it is possible to find joy in living.

The majority of grey chick lit novels offer readers hopeful endings that usually avoid graphic accounts of physical pain and trauma. These limited accounts of health and care in later life, predominately support a conventional model of healthy living, and expose the detrimental effect of ageist attitudes on emotional, mental and physical health. According to Mary Kite and Lisa Wagner 'most of us aspire to reach old age; after all, the alternative is to die young' (2004: 129). If it is true that we do all aspire to reach old age then it is counter-productive to accept ageist sentiments and attitudes. It would be beneficial for all 'ageing' people, including the young, to stop associating their own ageing and that of others, with exclusively depressing and debilitating scenarios. The sooner that Western culture can assimilate a

constructive narrative of ageing into our collective consciousness the healthier our environment will be. While matron lit offers only tentative alternate storylines its strength lies in its depictions of the prevailing narratives of ageing and the consequences for wellbeing. These authors are working toward an increasingly sophisticated view of ageing. I agree with Schoenberg and Rowles when they say that 'we must learn to celebrate, rather than rue, the richness and diversity of the aging experience' (2001: 6). According to Worell and Goodheart 'investigators increasingly believe that positive mental states may lead to better states of physical health. Many research findings are congenial with the notion that there is a relationship between mental health and the immune system' (2005: 420). If reading matron lit novels, in any way, however small, assists ageing women to feel better, then this can only be beneficial for their health. The WHO advise that 'major depression is now the leading cause of disability globally' (2001). Matron lit articulates the dilemmas and difficulties which may contribute to depression in later life. Kim Etherington reasons that when we read stories 'we fill in the gaps by making our own interpretations which are informed by our personal knowledge, experiences and questions. In this way we recognize a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity and that there are many possibilities' (2002: 222). Even if older women, who are the target market for grey chick lit, are reading only for distraction, amusement and empathic feeling, then these novels deliver. Yet they do something more and in the guise of entertainment, raise awareness, however subtly, of the culturally constructed character of gendered and ageist attitudes and their negative effects on wellbeing. As life expectancy for women in the United Kingdom increases it may be predicted that the oldest age of a heroine in popular fiction will rise accordingly. If this change occurs matron lit will increase its usefulness, as a popular voice, which is favourably positioned to articulate elderly women's concerns. Gilleard and Higgs contend that 'it is time for ageing studies to consider other ways of thinking about the body that neither ignore, mask or reify the corporeality of later life but seek to adequately embody it within the social' (2013: 1). Grey chick lit would be more valuable still if it were to temper its version of successful ageing as a personal responsibility with a clearer understanding of the very real difficulties many disabled and infirm older people have to cope with.

### **CHAPTER 3: Home**

In this chapter I will explore the significance of home, and the predictable and sometimes unusual ways that ageing affects women's relationship with home, as portrayed in matron lit novels. The characters' emotional association with home is a dominant theme in many matron lit novels and is of particular interest to the debates around ageing because the heroines' relationships with home often change as they age. As Ann Game asserts in her essay on time, space and memory 'shelteredness is the condition for becoming; it makes possible an imagining process' (1995: 202). Grey chick lit fiction demonstrates that the condition of 'shelteredness' is often a state of mind and that as Game also argues 'we cannot consider the house as an object' (1995: 201). In the genre of matron lit the house is not considered as an object but as an extension of the self, especially the woman, and this connection may deepen or be disrupted by the changes brought about through ageing. Description of a character's home may be employed as a useful device, in many genres, to express aspects of identity, connection and/or confusion. Home, or indeed any space which is perceived as homely, has particular relevance in grey chick lit because the heroines' emotional investment and attachment is sometimes conflicted, through ageing, personal growth or decline and fluctuations in financial and family affairs. Emotional loss has the power to re-configure home into an empty space, devoid of care and protection. As readers contemplate the future, fictional representations can offer insight into how it might feel to be an ageing woman in a house that ceases to provide 'shelteredness', or to be wrenched away from a home which is the only remaining comfort, and the impact of deteriorating health, wealth or contentment, on the relationship with home. The authors of matron lit novels often discuss 'home' and 'space' in relation to ageing women and demonstrate how crucial these concepts are to their identity.

Just as language constitutes identity so it constitutes both space and home. In the introduction I have set out how the theories of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler show that identity is produced through discourse and Game plainly articulates that 'space is discursively produced' (1995: 206). It would therefore follow that fictional space is doubly produced by discourse and that this layering of production renders such space worthy of academic analysis. Fictional scenarios play out within space, so it is of interest to the reader to imagine the fictional spaces occupied by characters and consider the significance of these spaces, in particular those spaces experienced as home. Game says it is 'through an imagining, a reading becomes a writing, or a rewriting of spaces' (1995: 205). It is only by

imagining the spaces occupied by the characters that any story becomes credible because it is in imagination that the reader interprets and negotiates both fictional and real space. Grey chick lit offers its readers both conventional and unusual treatments of 'home', sometimes within the same novel. This genre debates, as Game describes it, 'space that has been lived in with all the partiality of the imagination' (1995: 200). These discussions of space and their meaning for the ageing heroines of matron lit, are useful in regard to any imagining of the future. Home, space and a character's emotional association with both, is a theme that is explored in much contemporary popular fiction which features middle-aged and elderly women as the main protagonists. For the middle-aged characters in matron lit novels, the home and its emotional and financial significance is a prominent theme. In the majority of these novels it appears that for middle-aged wives home is a container and reflector of relationships. Game observes that 'space can be abstract, empty, or it can be lived, qualitatively' (1995: 205). The ways in which home is experienced as a safe place may be destroyed in unpredictable ways. Christina Victor and Sacha Scambler argue that 'social relationships can give "meaning" to later life and provide the basis for giving and receiving support, both physical and emotional' (2007: 83). If we accept that social relationships are a significant factor for wellbeing in later years, it may be argued that the lack of such a relationship will influence an individual's perception of space and home. Both *Separate Beds* and *Reading in Bed* explore this theme and the reader is shown how, if a marriage breaks down or ends, it affects the character's relationship with her home. *Separate Beds* tells the story of Annie, who shares a house, but not a bedroom, with her husband Tom. Annie's cleaner comments on how beautiful Annie has made her home. 'Warm, sparkling clean, filled with things that made life easy and convenient. [...] The house that had everything.' 'Not really, thought Annie. This place will never be beautiful while we are as we are' (Buchan, 2010: 2). This exchange makes it clear that the beauty of Annie's home is dependent on family connections. Even though Annie has in happier times enjoyed collecting household luxuries, these markers of affluence and success are undermined by the difficult relationships described in this novel. The mid-life heroines of grey chick lit novels 'live' in their homes and any change in the character's relationship with this space is most often dependent on her relationships with family members and in particular her loss, through alienation, separation, divorce or bereavement, of a spouse. The emotional, spatial and financial adjustments required by these situations are often integral to the plot of matron lit novels. A house may be perceived as a homely place, barren space or prison depending on the heroine's level of wellbeing.

The majority of matron lit novels that feature very elderly women as protagonists focus on the issue of where the character should live, how she can manage the upkeep of the home, both financially and practically, and where she should go if it is no longer possible for her to cope alone. Chivers draws attention to the fact that ‘fiction from the perspective of old age frequently pivots on a decision about where an elderly female character should live’ (2003: xi). In the novel *Reading in Bed*, Maud, who is fiercely independent, lives alone in a remote farmhouse but is becoming increasingly confused and unable to cope. Maud’s closest living relative is Georgia who assumes responsibility to arrange care for Maud. Georgia feels unable to take Maud into her own London home because she knows that Maud would hate living in an urban environment and the situation would therefore become intolerable for both of them. Georgia expresses her distaste at the prospect of taking Maud in when she recoils from the very idea of it and concludes that ‘the thought of Maud in London is simply insupportable’ (Gee, 2007: 195). The only solution to the situation that Georgia can think of is to either put Maud in a nursing home or pay for domestic and personal care in Maud’s own home. Maud loves her isolated house but in Georgia’s opinion she is no longer capable of caring for her home, her dog or herself. This scenario describes the complex emotions and circumstances that may lead relatives to hire domestic help to facilitate the possibility of elderly relatives remaining in their own homes. According to Rosie Cox:

Demand for domestic care services has grown for a number of reasons. First, there are more old people, and more very old people (those over 85, who tend to have greater need of care). Because families are more dispersed, however, they are less able to provide care for members themselves. Women’s roles and aspirations have changed, making them less likely to take on the unpaid care of young and old family members. (2006: 53)

Tragically, as Maud’s condition deteriorates she becomes more confused until she shoots and injures the domestic help. Georgia has to take the decision to remove Maud from the home that she loved and fought to stay in and put her in a nursing home, against her will.

It appears that for the *very* elderly female characters, the home has become a kind of relationship in itself, or even the final relationship. Game remarks that:

The house image has become the topography of our own intimate being. Our memories are housed, our soul is an abode; and by remembering houses, rooms, we abide within ourselves. In short, the house image moves in both directions: they are in us, and we in them. (1995: 200)

This relationship is incredibly difficult to give up because the elderly female protagonists of matron lit fiction believe that it is all that is left of them. Even when elderly characters are

forcibly removed from one space to another, they may try to recreate a sense of home through their furniture and belongings. In the novel *Separate Beds* Hermione refuses to leave her furniture behind when she is required to move into a small room in her son's house. Tom considers the overcrowded room to be a hazard and reflects 'why hadn't he put his foot down and insisted that the worshipped Chippendales went elsewhere?' (Buchan, 2010: 202).

Tom's thoughts demonstrate the dilemma posed by the requirement to balance his mother's need for her cherished furniture with her safety. The last home represents their life, so when they lose the right to choose where they live, it is as though they are losing themselves. It is no wonder that these heroines hold fast and fight for whatever they can. According to Game 'the remembering body is housed, and the body houses' (1995: 202). So it is notable that a common theme in these novels is that when elderly women are told that they have to leave whatever space they call home, they rarely accept the situation meekly. This premise demonstrates a specific way in which 'as women age they may well become more resentful of their position in the world' (Chivers, 2003: 36). If and when an elderly character's literal 'position in the world' is threatened their resentment seems to become too strong to contain. Matron lit fiction investigates and examines the anger and shame felt by women of the fourth age when they are humiliated, often unintentionally, by a younger, and in this situation, more powerful generation. It is often the confrontational stance taken by these older protagonists which offers illuminating insight into the difficult and complex series of transactions which need to be negotiated before any sense of home and connection can be re-established. Like Maud in *Reading in Bed* Hermione's distress is accelerated by being forcibly removed from space that is familiar. Whether home is a farmhouse, isolated by acres of land, or a single room in a care home, it represents an emotional investment that is painful to leave.

Both Maud and Hermione need time to adjust to their new surroundings before they can even begin to feel at home. Hermione finds that, with her grandson's support, she is able to make regular visits to the local library and that this small freedom helps her adjust to her new living conditions. Maud, although feeble and suffering from dementia, finds a creative outlet in the musical therapy provided by the nursing home. *Separate Beds* and *Reading in Bed* both clearly demonstrate that the help available to elderly people must be appropriate to the situation and the individual needs of the person concerned. As Victor and Scambler assert:

Support for the elderly and infirm needs to be of the 'right type at the right time' and there needs to be a goodness of fit – inappropriate or unwanted (or needed) support can be counter-productive and induce dependency instead of promoting independence. We can extend this observation into the realm of social participation

more generally – in order to be effective, older people need to be engaged in social activities and relationships that are appropriate and meaningful for them. (2007: 82)

Both Hermione in *Separate Beds* and Maud in *Reading in Bed* become angry and emotional when the help that is offered to them by a younger generation does not meet their needs. When the help offered is actually perceived as helpful by Hermione and Maud, both of them respond positively. Woodward states that ‘shame is brought to consciousness through the medium of anger; the treatment of women, which results in the feeling of shame, is understood to be unjust’ (2000: 216). It is made clear in matron lit novels that the shame and anger experienced by the elderly female characters, caused by the loss of their home, which is usually a direct result of the loss of health and/or wealth, is legitimate and demands to be acknowledged and addressed.

The treatment of this subject in grey chick lit repeatedly informs the reader that when elderly women become infirm or find themselves in financial difficulties, they become reliant on others to provide them with a home. Middle-aged heroines want ‘home’ to reflect their identity and be a concrete symbol of their personal success both financially and in regard to relationships and family. After all, as Game says, ‘this is what living an image is all about’ (1995: 202). However, the varied ways authors deal with these themes and discuss and dissect the outcomes and consequences of these situations provide readers with multiple scenarios for consideration. The fact that the elderly female characters who are suffering from physical and/or mental health problems frequently have decisions about where they can live made for them by middle-aged relatives does not mean that their stories are homogenous. Grey chick lit novels play out the friction that changing meanings of home have for different generations of women. The emotional gains and reverses that affect the ageing female characters’ perception of home are at the heart of matron lit novels and it is usual to find that the depth of emotion a character feels about other characters is in direct relation to the way she feels about her home. It is rare to find a mid-life heroine of a matron lit novel at ease in her own home if she is in an unsatisfactory relationship. For the characters in these novels home becomes more significant as women age and the longer a character has lived in a particular property the more she becomes intricately entangled with its memories and atmosphere. In chick lit the character’s home is usually just a backdrop to the romantic action and the heroine is more likely to change partners than move house, whereas in so-called ‘mom lit’ the heroines have established a successful partnership and are intent on establishing an ‘ideal home’ for their ‘ideal’ family. Middle-aged grey chick lit heroines usually decide to

leave their homes if their family life is unhappy. Yet the elderly female characters of matron lit are often alone and cling to home as if it were proof that they once had relationships and family.

Novels which explore the lives of middle-aged characters offer readers the opportunity to consider a variety of lifestyles and relationships with 'home' that may be available to home owners when they retire. As Woodward asserts 'people over sixty-five as a group have indeed accumulated considerable purchasing power over the last two decades' (1999: 156). Once the mortgage has been paid off, the sale of a house offers opportunities for older people to realise capital by 'downsizing'. The multiplicity of ways in which characters contemplate the use of such equity illustrates dramatically that 'popular images of retirement have also become much more diverse and fragmented, reflecting the enormous diversity of capacity and experience amongst older people' (Johnson and Thane (Eds.), 1998: 222). Matron lit novels offer imaginary experience of alternative ways to encounter retirement and may inspire readers to reconsider their own relationship to home, finance and ageing. *Blowing It* is representative of novels that place the family home at the centre of the action. These stories explore the meaning of 'home' for their heroines and often use a decision to sell the home as the catalyst for a life audit. Whether the sale of the home is through choice or necessity, characters are required to reflect on where they have come from and where they may go, both physically and emotionally. *Blowing It* is a novel that has, as its premise, the concept that the choice to sell the 'family home' is not the sole preserve of the owners.

The main character is Lottie, a woman who is approaching sixty and is married to Mac. The house and everything it represents to this character is significant. Lottie's nude self-portrait, hanging on prominent display, and not by coincidence hiding a large crack in the plasterwork, makes the unspoken statement that 'I am the home, I hold the house together and keep it beautiful'. Home is used as a symbol of the self. Anastasia Christou argues that 'identity is a product of self-consciousness and self-reflection, of both emotional and rational processes, the articulation and comprehension of a vision of both personal and social history' (2006: 216). In painting herself naked and hanging the portrait where everyone who enters the living room is confronted by her image Lottie is signalling her position at the centre of the family's space and using this as a platform to assert her consciousness of herself as the essential and unadorned 'mistress of the house'. Lottie expresses her considered sense of identity by painting the portrait and marks her territory in her choice of where to hang it. The portrait is a graphic illustration of how Lottie sees herself and her position in the home. The house has

history for all the family because it is the only family home that Lottie and her husband Mac have owned. Writing in *Ideal Homes?* Mike Hepworth argues that:

Mundane everyday life can be seen as a constant struggle to give meaning to life in terms of contemporary cultural ideals. As an image, the 'ideal home' is an expression of value: the kind of private life that individuals hope to achieve. (1999: 17)

Various members of the family use the image of Lottie and Mac's house as a representation of home that they believe they can re-interpret or improve on. The eldest daughter has attempted to create her own 'ideal home', which in contrast to her mother's untidy and run-down house is a model of perfection. Yet it is not possible for home to be the private space which Western culture idealises because at the same time it is subject to the actual or imagined gaze of the 'other' and as Tony Chapman observes 'however much effort we expend in keeping areas of our private space from the public gaze, we cannot easily stop ourselves from imagining how 'outsiders' might perceive us if they gained access to these hidden territories' (1999: 10). It is not only the gaze of 'outsiders' that police the home in this novel but in particular it is the gaze of 'youth' that possesses the power to exert control.

*Blowing It* demonstrates an almost constant awareness of age. Every person and situation is judged through the youthful gaze of the adult children and their peers. Lottie and Mac are relentlessly aware of the viewpoint of young people in general, and of their own children in particular. The opinions of young adults are offered as the reference point from which any deviation must be considered and in doing so calls this Western cultural bias into question. This novel relates discussions about the house from various points of view. The youngest daughter, although on the point of leaving home herself, wants to go away in the knowledge that it will be waiting for her return, whenever it suits her. She tells her friends that her parents are 'mad' to spend the money on travel. In response, one of her friends relates a story about her own parents, describing how they bought a property that would be 'easy to manage' when they were much younger than Lottie and Mac. Even the son's girlfriend has an attachment to the house in her fantasy that, if tidied up and its shabbiness disguised, it would provide the ideal wedding venue. Lottie and Mac are aware that all of their children have strong opinions about what should happen to the house, or the capital that its sale will release. Although Lottie and Mac are fictional characters with a comparatively affluent past, as a retired couple their financial position is typical of many people because 'for most households, housing wealth is the most valuable asset that they possess' (Horsewood, Neuteboom, (Eds.), 2007: 189). Lottie and Mac's son sees the house as his parents' 'pension'. Their house is the

only asset they possess and he considers that the equity in the property is the only thing that can prevent his parents from becoming a financial burden on him.

This novel poses questions about whether the sale of a house may fuel conflicts between generations and who the 'family home' actually belongs to, independent of legal ownership.

Sara Arber and Claudine Attias-Donfut say:

During the past two decades, young adults in 'the establishment phase' (i.e. when they are normally undergoing higher education, acquiring their first home and starting a family) in many countries have experienced both growing unemployment and high 'admission prices' to the housing market, whereas old and middle-aged people at the same time have enjoyed the results of good economic conditions and a favourable economic and housing policy. Based on these disparities between age groups in contemporary society, theories have been put forward which suggest that these inequalities provide fertile ground for conflicts between the generations. (1999: 69)

Although *Blowing It* was published in 2007 the novel illustrates the discontents and divisions between the generations which Arber and Attias-Donfut discussed in 1999. Lottie and Mac's eldest daughter considers that her parents are in a better financial position than herself and her husband, because her parents own a large house outright. She believes that her mother and father should release some of the equity tied up in the house to provide her family with the holiday home in France, which she cannot afford. The youngest daughter, although legally an adult, believes it is her parents' duty to provide her with a home while she is in higher education. She expects them to buy her a flat of her own or keep the family home on, for as long as she needs it.

Lottie and Mac decide to 'blow' the proceeds from the sale of the family home on travel to exotic places. As they consider their future they acknowledge that they have not made any financial provision for their old age in the form of a pension, yet decide to travel the world, first class. The only way they can fund this is to sell the family home. Lottie and Mac do not feel ready to accept old age and in order to defy convention and avoid listening to recriminations they are inclined to indulge in eccentric, irresponsible behaviour by 'blowing' the proceeds from the sale of the house on an adventure. It does not seem possible for them to consider living an alternative old age on familiar ground. To remain in their own culture would require them to behave 'sensibly' and invest the money from the sale of their home to pay for their declining years. Such are cultural expectations that:

Once the mortgage has been paid off, home ownership could provide households with a form of pension. Households could either live rent free in the dwelling or they could

downsize, cashing in a proportion of their housing equity and use it to fund their early retirement. (Horsewood, Neuteboom, (Eds.), 2007: 189)

Lottie and Mac's son is convinced that his parents should take the latter course and in light of their announcement that they intend to spend the proceeds from the sale of the house on first-class travel, he tells his girlfriend that "I despair of them. I mean, what are they going to do for a pension when they've blown it all?" He is fearful that his parents are going to be a financial burden and asks "who's going to fork out for the care home?" (Astley, 2007: 83). It is possible to empathise with both the parents' point of view and that of the son, but the manner in which the son expresses his concerns alienates readers. By brutally stating that they should sacrifice their plans for travel and pleasure to provide for their old age, he appears to be stuffy and materialistic. Astley invites readers to regard the older couple as free-spirited and spontaneous rather than foolish and short-sighted, while at the same time sounding alarm bells about the wisdom of such behaviour. Readers are presented with a conundrum: if the only way to resist old age is to behave irresponsibly, is it inherently irresponsible to resist old age? It would appear that the only possibility available to Lottie and Mac of ageing differently from the way that is culturally expected, is to court ridicule or leave home. The fictional account given to readers of *Blowing It*, focusing on a couple who choose to break the 'rules', offers an insight into how 'old age' may be experienced and how it might feel to be a contrary older person. *Blowing It* also spells out the consequences of elderly rebellion by exploring the adult children's reactions and attempt to influence, if not actually control, their parents. It presents a discussion about how ageing people, especially women, are culturally expected to perceive home ownership.

While the 'householders' in *Blowing It* actually own their property, people living in rented houses do not escape societal sanctions if they choose to 'under-occupy'. This issue has been brought into the spotlight with the controversial U K 'bedroom tax' introduced by the government to sanction people who are in receipt of state benefits and 'under-occupy' social housing. Although a concession has been made for those aged sixty or over, this exception may cause resentment amongst younger tenants. There is a cultural perception, that in a country where there is a housing shortage, that it is unseemly, if not actually wrong, for an older person to hold on to a spacious home, at the expense of young families who are living in cramped conditions. As Jeannette King says 'recently there has been a suggestion that it is regrettable, if not selfish, for old people to occupy houses big enough for families' (2013: xii). It seems that by ageing, people forfeit ownership of their homes even as they pay the

mortgage off. Lottie's attitude to her home and her idea that she has the right to spend the money from the sale of it as she wishes, is repeatedly described in the novel as 'crazy' and 'mad'. After the reader has been invited to applaud Lottie's defiance in the face of the 'crazy old lady' label, and to share in the fantasy of Lottie and Mac's proposed escape from all the cultural expectations and restraints associated with old age, home ownership, inheritance and provision for the future, Mac's sudden illness is introduced to prevent the couple from 'blowing it' and the novel ends with compromise and the promise of a nice holiday. The reader is reminded that in old age the body will break down and that physical capacity will dictate how, and where, a person lives. Astley's novel illustrates the findings presented by Hagen Hennessy and Alan Walker in *Understanding Quality of Life in Old Age: Extending Quality of Life*, that in old age the best quality of life (QoL) is the preserve of those in possession of both good health and good wealth, and that good health is the most important. Hennessy and Walker state that:

The general pattern was that those with good health and good wealth had the best QoL, followed by those with good health and poor wealth while those with poor health and poor wealth suffered the worst QoL. These results indicate that health is more important than wealth for the QoL. (2005: 44)

In addition, *Blowing It* suggests that 'good wealth' and how elderly people see fit to use it, may be open to debate and cause controversy, both within the family and society and that although poor health imposes constrictions on autonomy (as it does at any age) there may be ways to adapt and negotiate within these restrictions. This novel is a rich combination of fantasy and realism and as such invite the 'what if' questions. What if I decided to sell my home and 'blow' the money? What if my adult children reacted like the children in the novel? What if people say that I'm crazy? What if I become ill? What if I choose to live in a big house that my own family and society do not consider I need or deserve? What if I do not conform to cultural expectations of how or where I should live in old age? Older people are constantly made aware that any choices they make regarding where they live, may come under scrutiny.

*Blowing It* is an example of novels that invite women to think about what ageing involves and the impact ageing has on their home and domestic role. There is an expectation that the older woman should downsize in order that the diminished size of her home will then match the diminished size of her power and her diminishing years of life expectancy and grey chick lit explores the ambiguity of the homemaker role in later life. As Christou says 'women's self-agency is contingent upon their individual capacity to produce meanings and to organise their

activities as self-conscious expressions of daily and life practices' (2006: 177). Although Lottie is described as an 'ageing hippie' whose home is badly maintained, cluttered and untidy, all of which indicates that she does not fit the conventional image of a 'housewife', she is clearly a 'homemaker' who relishes her position as matriarch. While she cannot be bothered with mundane chores such as cleaning, tidying or decorating, she grows organic vegetables and caters for large family dinners. Lottie conforms to the 'ageing hippie' stereotype and believes this grants her licence to live and age 'unconventionally'.

Paradoxically, conformity to the expectations of one societal cliché may offer freedom from another.

Lottie is situated in a social sphere to which she brings a lifetime of imposed normative rules, which she perceives as normal and natural in regard to previous generations but at the same time questions whether they should apply to her generation. The normative rules of Western society are based on a 'pervasive binary opposition between burdensome old age and useful youth' (Chivers, 2003: 80). Foucault's work demonstrates the power of cultural discourse to construct identity through enforcement and repetition, which ensures that it appears natural. Therefore the alienating effect of the 'binary opposition' described by Chivers can be understood as harmful to Lottie. Lottie is subject to the 'changing social norms where a broadly ageist, youth orientated society can make older people "seem invisible"' (Victor and Scambler, 2007: 206). Lottie is well aware that at sixty she will be expected to claim a bus pass and that in keeping with her 'invisible' status she should dress in beige and move to a small easily maintained property. Lottie does not want to conform to that particular stereotype of an older woman. She wants to be noticed, to wear brightly coloured clothes and travel first class and as much as she values her home she is prepared to give it up in order to still be able to consider herself of value. *Blowing It* demonstrates one of the crucial differences in the way that third age and fourth age women are portrayed in matron lit. In middle age, home can still be regarded as a symbol and may be used as bargaining tool, an asset or an expression of the self, while in extreme old age it can no longer be considered separate from the self. Game argues that 'memories are localized, materially; the materiality of place lives, is inscribed in our bodies' (1995: 202). In matron lit novels it is made clear that the longer a female character has lived the more profoundly 'place' lives in the body. As the home becomes so much part of the self it is understandable that many elderly women experience their home as representative of themselves.

For Lottie the house has been a symbol of self, which she has celebrated by hanging her nude self-portrait. Yet she is prepared to exchange her home for a sense of autonomy and freedom. It seems that once the house becomes an 'empty nest' it will no longer represent her achievements as a wife and mother. When her youngest child leaves home the house will cease to have any purpose because it will no longer be a 'family home'. Hennessy and Walker argue that an 'unwelcome aspect of retirement or children growing up was the loss of a sense of purpose or role that it sometimes entailed' (2005: 39). Lottie reflects on the number of times she has been told that she and Mac will 'rattle around in it as if they were a couple of loose, forgotten balls on a wonky pinball machine.' (2007: 52) Just as reaching retirement age indicates that people should expect to leave the labour force, the youngest child leaving home indicates a time to give up the family home and 'similar views also emerge in discussion of modern consumer society - that its emphasis on youthful purchasers, products and images serves to denigrate the interests of older people with older bodies' (Johnson and Thane (Eds.), 1998: 6). When Lottie shows a young estate agent around her home he assumes that she will be moving into a smaller place that is easier to maintain and when she is out shopping with her youngest daughter she is aware that the shop assistants will not notice her until it is time to pay. Lottie finds these slights demeaning and undermining, so she fantasises ways to regain status and prestige. As we read at the beginning of *Blowing It* Lottie considers herself to be a 'mid-life soul' but she is increasingly under pressure, particularly when she discusses 'bus passes', 'pensions' and the 'uniforms' of old age with Mac, to acknowledge that in her culture she will soon be considered old. Lottie demonstrates the miss-match 'between the subject's inner sense of selfsameness and the reality of their outer appearance: in its self-divided, ambivalent, attitude to old age' (Davis, 2006: 185). Lottie also experiences a similar discrepancy between outer and inner perceptions of her home, because in her view the house has changed little since she bought it, but to others it looks decrepit and too large for her needs and capabilities. It is only when she is forced to look at it from the estate agent's point of view that she notices how far the property has deteriorated. In regard to this novel, I agree with Chivers' argument that 'different modes of talking about age can shift the meaning of old' (2003: 99). Lottie's preferred image of herself as the vibrant, colourful and strong 'lady of the house' is undermined by the way that people talk to her. Shop assistants, estate agents, her children and friends, all contribute to the unwelcome perception that she is getting old. Lottie comes under so much pressure to accept the opinions of others that the only solution seems to be to leave home.

*Blowing It* plays around with how words construct old age and highlights that different ways of talking about age may allow us to structure old age in other, possibly less negative and burdensome ways. Mike Featherstone asserts that ‘today cultures are internally differentiated and complex; externally they are entangled in complex networks with other cultures, and hence it is not easy to ascertain their boundaries’ (1998: 10). According to Foucault, when people have internalised cultural discourse to the extent that they believe the construction of their identity is natural then the cultural law is at its most effective. This is Lottie’s position but she is aware that there are other cultures, which might be, to a certain extent, unknowledgeable about Western cultural laws and where she would not be judged harshly for flouting those rules. Lottie chooses to take advantage of those ‘transcultural networks which have some things in common while differing in others’ (Featherstone, 1998: 10). She imagines that if she can get away from her own culture she can escape the words that make her ‘old’ and gain some distance and freedom from a discourse that demands that she conform to a Western stereotype of an old woman. Lottie would rather leave her home than be exposed to scorn but it is worth noting that it is only the large financial value of the house that allows her to consider this course of action. If she rented her home she would have no capital to realise and the option to leave would not exist. Therefore, this avenue of escape from a depressing and possibly debilitating cultural discourse, is only available to wealthy people.

It appears that Lottie’s image of herself and her home could remain positive if she were not undermined by the views of other people. Lottie is under pressure to leave her home because she has, to a certain extent, internalised the view expressed by others that continuing to live in a ‘family home’ once her family have gone would be ridiculous. She is clear that this is the cultural consensus of opinion yet she is not entirely convinced that she should defer to it. However, she decides to comply with this social sanction in an attempt to escape other, different sanctions. Lottie agrees with Mac’s plan to sell the house so that they can effectively ‘take the money and run’. She has no intention of using the money in any way that would be considered sensible nor does she plan to give the money to her heirs. By leaving the country for at least a year Lottie and Mac hope to escape the disapproval of society and the conflict with their children. Their children may still complain about the waste of money but once Lottie and Mac are out of the country, they will not have to listen. It would seem that this may be a developing trend among older people:

Proponents of the ‘increasing conflict hypothesis’ have questioned the extent to which present and future generations of middle-aged and elderly people are willing to take into account the economic interests of their descendants, and have pointed to the family as an arena for increasing intergenerational conflict. In a situation where elderly people spend all of their accumulated wealth, the stage could be set for conflicts with potential heirs. (Arber, Attias-Donfut, 1999: 71)

Astley imagines the fall-out caused by Lottie and Mac’s refusal to hand over their wealth to their descendants, in her narration of the adult children’s response to their parents’ plans. The son is afraid that he will have to take financial responsibility for his parents, the eldest daughter is concerned that she will not get her inheritance and the youngest daughter simply cannot conceive of the idea that she should house herself. In breathing life into these areas of conflict Astley articulates exactly why it is challenging for younger generations when they think that their parents are being financially irresponsible. According to Arber and Attias-Donfut ‘neither great wealth differences between generations nor the unwillingness of middle-aged and elderly people to take their descendants’ interests into account, will cause intergenerational conflict if these differences are accepted and enjoy legitimacy in all age groups’ (1999: 71). However, writing in 2007, Astley demonstrates that spendthrift behaviour by middle-aged and elderly people may cause problems and debate within families and society, for some time to come. Matron lit novels are well placed to discuss the numerous and often opposed viewpoints about the cultural, legal, moral, and financial responsibilities which are placed on the family and state due to increasing longevity.

As demonstrated in both *Separate Beds* and *Reading in Bed*, the decision about where ‘an elderly female character should live’ is all too often a decision that has to be made by other people, rather than the elderly themselves. Tom loses his job and cannot maintain payments on the care home for his elderly mother, Hermione. He feels responsible for his mother’s homelessness and believes that he and Annie must provide her with accommodation. Annie does not want Hermione to live with them and responds by telling Tom ‘I hate you for even considering it.’ (p. 110) In this novel Annie’s character expresses a variation on a commonly held view that ‘paying for the care of even elderly parents is not generally accepted as being “natural” in the UK’ (Boje, Leira, 2000: 145). In this novel it is not the monetary aspect of ‘paying’ that Annie objects to but the cost in space, privacy, and domestic disruption. Annie relents and Tom moves back into ‘her bedroom’, which consequently alters their relationship, as they have to adapt to one another. Annie’s family has been fractured by Tom’s banishment of their eldest daughter from the family home. When Tom rejects their daughter, Annie perceives this as a rejection of their family, so when Tom retreats from their bedroom she is

relieved to see him go. Featherstone argues that ‘the paradox is that love has at the same time been a weapon of the powerless and a vehicle of oppression’ (1999: 4). Annie and Tom have both used space as a representation of love and as such have also used the boundaries of space as a weapon. Annie observes that, ‘neither she nor Tom had meant to end up in separate beds and in their separate territories. Yet both had retreated into them as a relief’ (p. 34). Although she would like to be reconciled, when circumstances return Tom to ‘her’ bedroom she finds it difficult to adjust. When using ‘her’ en-suite Tom accidentally breaks a soap dish which Annie recalls she had ‘enjoyed’ (p. 177). This incident is the precursor to many small adjustments the couple are obliged to negotiate and demonstrates ‘the symbolization and use of material goods as “communicators” not just utilities’ (Featherstone, 2007: 111). Annie is conflicted because she wants to resume a satisfactory relationship with her husband but she perceives the bedroom as her ‘sanctuary’ (p. 34). Annie has already relinquished some control by agreeing to Hermione moving into the house, so Tom’s return to the bedroom is a further encroachment of her space.

Although it was Hermione’s own choice to move into a care home, she has not been happy there. Even so, she does not take the news of her proposed removal well: ‘Tom responds, “I thought you hated it.” Hermione replies “I know its ways”’ (p. 116). For Hermione it is difficult to leave a place that she is accustomed to, just because her son tells her that she must. She would rather remain in a place that is her own choice, even if she does not like it. In accepting that she must live where she is told, Hermione is disempowered. In this respect the contemporary situation of some old people has not improved over time. As Margaret Ponsonby observes in *Stories from Home, 1750-1850*, ‘homes also changed during a person’s life, with the addition of children, the loss of a spouse, and sometimes the contraction of a household to a few rooms in old age’ (2007: 19). For Hermione, old age combined with financial hardship, has reduced her household space to one room, which is barely large enough to accommodate her few remaining belongings. The distress that Hermione expresses about being confined to such a small space is compounded by the fact that this move is not her own choice. Hermione tells Tom that ‘it’s awful being old’ (p. 117). Variations of this sentiment appear in many matron lit novels and are usually expressed by elderly women who have been forced, for one reason or another, to leave their own homes and move in with their adult children. In *Busy Woman Seeks Wife*, a novel by Annie Saunders, the elderly mother, who moves in with her daughter due to being injured in a fall, confides in the home-help that ‘it’s bloody being old’ (2007: 82). For the female characters in these novels, it is not the

simple fact of being chronologically 'old' that is in itself 'awful' or 'bloody', but the loss of autonomy and respectability, associated with 'homelessness', which makes it so. As

Hepworth states:

While respectability is defined in terms of images of the protective environment of the respectable home, deviance is located in the relatively unregulated world which lies beyond. Individuals in their own home have a respectable place in society: they can be located and identified as anchored in the normal social world. But the unfortunate individual expelled or threatened with expulsion from the family home stands on the line dividing normality from deviance: the transition is from 'being at home' to 'homelessness'. (1999: 21)

It may be that when these elderly female characters complain about the awfulness of old age they are actually complaining about how awful it is to be considered outside the boundaries of respectability.

Different generations of women vary in their perception of the importance of the home and housework and this may be because 'the decline over time in women's domestic work means that, on average, women who are over 65 have invested more time in domestic work than their daughters' (Arber, Attias-Donfut, 1999: 136). Although Arber and Attias-Donfut question the existence of 'generational conflict', it would seem that matron lit fiction indicates that the greater investment of time in domestic work by women over sixty-five may make it more difficult to give up this area of control than younger women are able to understand. The removal of responsibility in the domestic arena may have an adverse effect on elderly women's sense of self. Indeed the violent event which is the consequence of imposing domestic help on the elderly character in *Reading in Bed* makes clear that her sense of autonomy is severely threatened by a situation that a younger woman does not comprehend. In pre-empting any decision by others to put her in a nursing home by choosing it herself, Hermione has retained some measure of power but because of financial circumstances she has to concede even that to the son, and now the daughter-in-law, who pays the bills. In this aspect *Separate Beds* illustrates the culturally held belief that 'the tragedy of the individual self's decline – in both its bodily and mental aspects – and growing dependency are, at the same time, an ethical opportunity for the other' (Davis, 2006: 190). While the situation is a setback for Hermione, her dependence provides Annie and Tom with an opportunity for personal growth, understanding and reconciliation. The decision is made to turn Tom's bedroom, which had previously belonged to the absent daughter, into a bed-sit for Hermione. She argues with Annie about the lack of space and the arrangement of furniture in the room. Hermione's life has been reduced to the bin-bags and suitcases that contain her

worn clothing and belongings. The only way of asserting herself that she still has is to complain.

Hermione becomes confused about her whereabouts, claiming that 'I should be in my room' (p. 203). According to Oliver Davis:

Mid-life crisis is followed, in old age, by a series of other crises which are similar in type in the sense that all involve the subject envisaging his or her own death and all of which occasion loss. The sense of loss which the ageing subject experiences in no longer being able to do, or to remember, things reawakens the fear of something being forcibly taken away. (2006: 137)

Despite Tom and Annie's efforts, the room converted for Hermione's use is not experienced as 'her room' and she is disorientated by her sense of loss. Both Hermione and Annie are fighting to assert some control over their space and their lives and to negotiate a way to relate to each other and to the home. The perception of home and its significance changes with age. For Annie it is still a space where she has some power, some say about how that space functions and about how it looks but in old age Hermione has lost control and power. They argue about whether doors should be left opened or closed, who should sit at the head of the table and where the television should be situated. Hermione does not have a home of her own so she needs to establish some territory within Annie's home. It is not a battle she is likely to win but she still has to fight. Victor and Scambler state that 'our study has demonstrated that the nature and conduct of social relationships in late life is both dynamic and rooted in the life history of individuals' (2007: 226). Although Hermione has to give up her own space, however cramped and unpleasant she perceived it, she is an individual with her own history, separate from the family she is joining, or invading, depending on the other characters' feelings, and she acts in accordance. Hermione's arrival is an invasion of Annie's home and a threat to her power. Annie fights to retain control over her space while Hermione fights simply to establish that some space is under her control and a place where she can express herself. Hermione and Annie negotiate and establish boundaries and connections, which by the end of the novel allow them to co-exist and yet retain elements of individuality and privacy. Their reconciliation demonstrates that 'for all that old age brings alienation, its being a time when the self is essentially in the hands of others can allow for extreme manifestations of solidarity and mutual assistance' (Davis, 2006: 186). When Hermione wakes during the night and calls for help Annie goes to her assistance and in empathising with Hermione's confusion, loneliness and fear, Annie finds herself able to see Hermione as a woman and not

just an inconvenience. *Separate Beds* demonstrates how the connections between women and their homes depend on relationships.

*Reading in Bed* reiterates the influence of these dynamics and offers further insight into how a love of 'home' can disintegrate or grow along with personal relationships. It is a novel about two female friends who go to literary festivals and on holidays together. Georgia and Dido are both aged sixty and recently retired. Their stories show the concept of 'home' to be susceptible to change even when people occupy the same house for decades. These changes in significance and perception of home, as a safe haven or tormented space of loneliness and loss, are the result of the changing relationships, and loss or lack of connection, which are experienced with and within the home. This novel begins with a brief description of the two main characters and their present situation. Gee opens her story by informing the reader 'there they go, two clever women of sixty, making their way towards the car. They've been to a literary festival; now they are going home: Dido to York, and Jeffrey; Georgia to London and an empty house' (Gee, 2007: 3). With this introduction Gee immediately alerts her readers to the contrast in Dido and Georgia's circumstances. Although both are 'clever' and 'sixty' and have shared experience of the literary festival, their home lives are clearly different and Dido appears to be in the most favourable position because 'Jeffrey' sounds more welcoming than 'an empty house'. Storytelling is successfully used in this novel to make distinctions between living alone and loneliness, which research alone is unable to define; this fictional exploration is thus better able to explore its causes and effects. Victor and Scambler state that 'researchers rarely distinguish between those for whom living alone is an established pattern from those for whom living alone is both a recent event and often a traumatic one resultant from bereavement' (2007: 27). Dido and Georgia both eagerly anticipated sharing retirement with their husbands, Jeffrey and Henry. Now that they have retired Georgia's situation is very different from what she was hoping for. She is a widow and instead of enjoying the time she spends in the home she has always loved, it becomes a burden. It seems that retirement from work and a retreat to full-time domesticity is longed for, but only in the company of a loving husband. However, it would seem that both Dido and Georgia's expectations were realistic. According to Victor and Scambler 'because of the well observed reductions in mortality for both men and women, couples who marry or cohabit can expect to "grow old together" and to live together in their own home in old age' (2007: 28). Georgia feels deprived and cheated of her dreams of retirement and the prospect of sharing companionable time at home in the company of her husband. When Georgia returns to her

house she perceives the space as 'dead'. She experiences the loneliness of widowhood, the solitariness of grief and loss. Henry died and left Georgia alone in the house that they had bought together over thirty years before. Georgia spends time in Henry's study 'his spectacles are on her left, his mug to her right [...] nothing matters' (p. 91). Georgia, unlike her friend Dido, is not enjoying retirement. As in real life situations 'whether older workers have been pushed unwillingly into retirement or have deliberately sought to exchange work for leisure is technically very difficult to determine' (Johnson and Thane, (Eds.), 1998: 219). It is unclear whether Georgia's discontent with retirement is exclusively because she has been widowed or whether it is a consequence of having failed to prepare for retirement in the enthusiastic manner of Dido, who plans her days around volunteer work.

Georgia considers getting a lodger, because she thinks that the presence of another person and their possessions would alter the space she lives in 'but she doesn't want to. Perhaps she should do it anyway' (p. 94). This passage in *Reading In Bed* illustrates the poignancy of Elizabeth Jones' claim that 'the experience of any space may be affected not only by the physical characteristics of that space, but also by the cultural and political meanings, the imaginary and personal associations, with which it is infused' (2007: 254). When Georgia and Henry found the house, she felt that she belonged there. She felt safe in their home but with Henry's death she loses that feeling. Georgia's home has been transformed from heaven to hell, sanctuary to prison, with the loss of this relationship. Victor and Scambler assert that their research led them to conclude that 'it is predominantly widowhood that is linked with loneliness and not living alone per se. Hence it is the disruption of an established way of life and social links that is a key factor' (2007: 210). When Georgia loses the love of her life she loses her love for her home. According to Victor and Scambler 'widowhood is associated with isolation, exclusion and loneliness' (2007: 94). They state that it is necessary to consider how loneliness is linked to widowhood in any discussion regarding the complex issue of solitary living in old age. As demonstrated in *Reading in Bed* it is not living alone that is the cause of Georgia's loneliness but the changes wrought in her life by bereavement.

In Dido's case, her emotions transform her home from a safe place to one of disquiet. For over thirty years she has shared the home she loves with her husband Jeffrey. She feels sorry for Georgia, who now lives alone. When Dido is alone she is secure in the belief that when Jeffrey returns from work they will enjoy their home together. Yet Dido's perception of her home as a place of comfort and safety is disrupted by her suspicion that Jeffrey no longer values their relationship as highly as she does. He begins to close the door to his study, which

had always been left open. He becomes edgy, distant and makes furtive phone calls. Jeffrey comes home late and his absence makes Dido uncomfortable in her own home. That single hour is 'as long and difficult as any Dido can remember' (p. 101). Dido eventually discovers that Jeffrey has become infatuated with a young woman who has accused him of stalking her. It is clear from this story's description of Dido's thought process that it is precisely the quality of her relationship with her husband that has a significant influence on whether or not she feels lonely. Victor and Scambler argue that there is an 'association between loneliness and variables that have been used to 'measure' social networks: lack of a confiding relationship and dissatisfaction with relationships' (2007: 220). Dido feels the loss of her supportive relationship with her husband to the extent that she feels unable to confide in him when she becomes unwell. Consequently Dido goes alone to get the results of medical tests and when she sees her doctor she manages to 'keep her home life to herself (and thus some measure of dignity)' (p. 219). Dido equates her former trust in Jeffrey with a home life she can feel proud of and she feels the loss of both. As Dido waits for the bus which will take her home she recalls 'a poster the Samaritans used to use. DO YOU DREAD GOING HOME? How could this ever, ever, have come to be true of her?' (p. 219). *Reading in Bed* illustrates that loneliness and social isolation are not the sole preserve of those who live alone.

According to Victor and Scambler:

It is far too simplistic to see isolation in terms of contact with and availability of social networks. There is clearly an issue of relationship quality that needs to be addressed. Our interviews demonstrated how older people (and indeed the rest of the population) evaluate the importance of differing types of relationships and we need to explore this much further. (2007: 220)

It is important that literature explores the 'importance of differing types of relationships' and grey chick lit ably sets out and evaluates the experiences of older women in this area. Further, matron lit graphically demonstrates the pitfalls of conflating old age with loneliness and offers the alternative view that whether a person feels isolated depends not only on their age or marital status, but on the quality of their relationships. Jeffrey's betrayal has tainted Dido's home life. She is ashamed of it and dreads the experience of being in the house. The loss of a good relationship with her husband equates to the loss of a good relationship with her home. Although Jeffrey still lives in the same house, she feels that she has lost him and consequently her home. It is clear from this novel's treatment of Dido's situation that the loss of trust and relationship can undermine coping mechanisms, at any age.

For the characters that I have discussed in this chapter their houses have not been simply places where they carried out domestic duties. 'Home' for the characters in *Blowing It*, *Separate Beds* and *Reading in Bed* is a space in which they may love and be loved, or cease to be loved, and for Maud a site of independence that she fought to stay in, even to the point of committing violence. Hermione tried to take 'home' with her, no matter what changing space she found herself occupying, by holding on to her beloved furniture. Lottie would have liked to escape to an environment where she did not have to risk censure for remaining visible; she would have preferred that it be easy to retain her own style and spend her own money as she likes. But Lottie is prevented from running away by Mac's sudden illness. So while I would not argue that *Blowing It* offers the older female reader a strong role model in Lottie, her character does inhabit an arena of negotiation. *Blowing It* examines aspects of Lottie's personality with a light touch, which still manages to scratch away and expose the multi-layered construction as a product of cultural law. Further it begins to suggest ways and means of working within those laws to disrupt them. Even though Lottie is forced to stay in Britain the reader is left with the impression that though she will compromise, she will not disappear or stop investigating the possibilities that remain open to an older woman who is prepared to be different or even a little outrageous and bend rules which will not break. Whether matron lit novels adopt a conservative view of family and home or offer something more ambiguous, it is important that the topic is explored. The reader is invited to engage with Lottie and Mac's hopes and dreams before a large dose of 'realism' is introduced. Novels that discuss the very real effects of illness on quality of life (in old age and at all life stages) are as useful as those that presume a rugged healthiness for their protagonists. *Blowing It* does not leave readers with the impression that there is a simple solution to 'societal ageism'. It may be fun to imagine running away from it but there are aspects of ageing which cannot be denied, most importantly that the experience of 'poor health' is likely to increase with age. By insisting that her ageing female protagonist has to accept that she cannot buy her way out of a cultural discourse she does not want to listen to, Astley has created a character who readers can believe may become more creative in her efforts to live as and where she pleases.

The novels *Blowing It*, *Separate Beds* and *Reading in Bed* are representative of how matron lit illustrates the negotiations and adjustments, both spatially and emotionally, that are the consequence of changing family relationships, financial situations and increased longevity. *Separate Beds* and *Reading in Bed* provide examples of how a character's 'home' may be

portrayed as both 'prison' and/or 'sanctuary'. The discontent described by Kipnis (1993), regarding female yearning for the opposite of the domestic situation that they inhabit, seems to be an element in the perception of home for both of the main female characters in *Reading in Bed*, but it is tied to another, more intangible, 'something missing'. In both *Separate Beds* and *Reading in Bed*, the 'something' that is missing for the characters, and which profoundly affects their perception of home, are satisfactory relationships and most specifically, a happy marriage. *Separate Beds* and *Reading in Bed* illustrate that for home to be perceived as a site of empowerment, rather than oppression, a bargaining and balancing act is required. The home is only perceived by the characters as a space of comfort and beauty when relationships are going well. Home is intricately connected to identity, self-expression, self-esteem and relationships. Grey chick lit explores the myriad ways in which 'home' is an expression and extension of the 'self'. As Jones asserts:

At a scholarly level, the perception of space as a neutral, passive arena in which events merely take place is increasingly rejected, and there is growing recognition that space is an active, meaningful force in the formation of culture and society. Spaces are, it is argued, imbued with ideological meanings, and hence are subject to and part of the power relations that structure the world. (2007: 253)

In all three of the novels that I have discussed in this chapter, space and in particular that space which is configured as home, has been debated as a site of power, whether for the individual, family or society. Matron lit shows that a house is not a home unless it provides a feeling of 'shelteredness'. A building is simply a walled and roofed space, until it is imbued with emotion. For all grey chick lit heroines, a sense of homeliness is dependent on their perception of the space they inhabit. Home may be movable; home may become a hostile space or a space that is initially perceived as alien, may eventually become homely. The fictional debates around space, age and gender which readers find in matron lit fiction may contribute to academic analysis and argument.

## Chapter 4: Generational Relationships and Friendships

Matron lit articulates the tensions, strengths and, most importantly, the significance that relationships within and across generations have in the lives of older women. While in chick lit novels, friendships with peers are often foregrounded, relationships across generations are found more often in grey chick lit. Familial relationships are mentioned in chick lit but usually only as background information; indeed family members are often depicted as using the ageing mother of the heroine as a figure of fun or some kind of problem, unless she is wholly preoccupied with the wellbeing of her family. The most prominent example of the ridiculous and unsupportive mother in chick lit is, of course, Bridget Jones's simultaneously interfering and abandoning mum. The genres of romance and chick lit often portray older women as failures as mothers if they do not provide the heroines with adequate support and affection. This familiar trope illustrates the fact that 'women are judged by patriarchal standards that assume unlimited availability [...] too much is expected of mothers— and older women as well, way beyond the age when mothering and nurturing should be finished' (Trotman, Brody, 2001: 4). The main protagonists of grey chick lit are the female characters who society expects to provide unobtrusive support with 'unlimited availability'. As such these characters give voice to the despair and rage of ageing women who have this role imposed on them. However, matron lit positions family relationships, especially those between older mothers and their adult children, as integral to the identity of its female protagonists. In many cases these relationships provide vital support and mutual benefit but the older woman is usually expected to be the one who cares and gives the most. Judith Butler's theory concerning the performativity of gender can be seen to have direct consequences for motherhood. Dr Charney Herst sums up the cause of many older women's distress when she comments that 'in the end, most mothers are still trying to be the faultless, flawless, perfect mom. They are unable to accept themselves as is' (1999: 9). Yet self-help books such as Herst's *For Mothers of Difficult Daughters: How to Enrich and Repair the Relationship in Adulthood* are few and far between. According to Trish Green there is a limited amount of knowledge about how mothers perceive their role once their children have grown and left the family home. Green maintains that:

To date there remains very little acknowledgement of what mothering means to women once their children achieve the sociocultural status of 'adult' and leave home. In consequence, and although there is no shortage of work that considers women's transition to motherhood, and mothering experiences during the early years of children's lives, some of which is woven throughout this volume as well, our

knowledge regarding the later phase of a mother's life course is extremely limited. (2010: 1)

I have found only a limited number of books that examine motherhood in later life, most of which I refer to in this chapter. However, numerous grey chick lit novels investigate this stage of women's lives and offer both provisional explanations for these complicated and sometimes problematic relationships, and ways to improve, tolerate or negotiate the situation. While familial relationships are central to matron lit novels, conventional perceptions about family life are frequently interrogated, sometimes re-negotiated and occasionally overturned. Grey chick lit exposes the intricacies of relationship webs and discusses how all relationships are affected by each other. Matron lit novels demonstrate that no relationship exists in isolation and that problems with one relationship may be ameliorated by the support or pleasure of another. Conversely, this genre makes it clear that contentment within any relationship may be undermined by external problems.

The novels I discuss in this chapter demonstrate situations and dilemmas with which many older women may expect to find themselves dealing, particularly with regard to familial relationships and the importance of friendships. In Western society the female role is primarily to reproduce and to nurture all the family members. The cultural expectation of feminine caring behaviour restricts women's ability for self-expression within gendered boundaries. But adherence to gendered roles ensures that women are rewarded with social acceptance. Matron lit debates the merits and debits accrued through compliance with normative modes of behaviour and questions the benefit of adherence to conventional feminine roles, for women in their post-maternal years. These works of fiction offer readers the opportunity to relate to ageing heroines who display all the confusion and ambivalence which the female role may engender, while entertainingly exploring the consequences of various options for coping, such as leaving home, withdrawal from the duties of caring, abandoning conventional behaviour and traditional responsibilities, or re-negotiating their place in the family and, as a consequence, society. The female protagonists of grey chick lit explore these options and deal with the consequences of their actions in ways that set out the case for both compliance with cultural expectations and resistance. Society requires the normalisation of individuals so that social rules are not disputed and the power structure of society will not be disrupted. Judith Butler contends that 'certain political practices institute identities on a contingent basis in order to accomplish whatever aims are in view' (1999: 22). We are born into pre-existing rules and develop under constant supervision. Foucault's

'docile bodies' are trained to be manipulated for the benefit of society. If the cultural consensus is that females are of use only to reproduce and nurture then each generation of women is programmed to accept the label of useless and regard themselves as useless, as soon as this work is done. Their only option appears to be to continue to care for other members of the family, for example, grandchildren or elderly parents, for as long as they are able. Writing about *Women In The Middle* Elaine Brody argues that:

The unevenness with which the "new" values about women's roles take hold implies that the process of sharing parent care between men and women is also likely to be uneven and very slow in developing. Even though more women are in the work force and have less time at home, they are still the vast majority of primary caregivers. (2006: 82)

Annie, in *Separate Beds*, expresses her concern that in addition to her full-time job she will be the one expected to care for her mother-in-law Hermione, if she moves in with them. Annie asks her unemployed husband Tom, "and would you do your share?" (Buchan, 2010: 110). When he assures her of his support Annie recalls all the times that Tom had broken his 'promise to help' with the care of their three children (p. 110). Sheila Ernst states that 'mothers bear and still primarily care for children, within a framework which, at present, is in a state of major transition' (1997: 91). Social expectations for mature women to repeat the role of caregiver may cause problems for women in later years, as Annie's concerns illustrate. Annie is worried that Tom's level of care for his mother will replicate the situation with their children.

Childbearing and nurturing remains the culturally legitimate role for women, despite its simultaneous disparagement. Ernst argues that 'almost all contemporary cultures conflate femininity and maternity and then idealise and denigrate both' (1997: 91). Retirement from this role is not allowed, unless the women who choose that supposedly 'unfeminine' route are prepared to be vilified. Yet some heroines of grey chick lit novels are willing to endure such judgements, rather than conform to the normative role, which is policed by social values. In the *gap year for grown ups* the heroine's daughter Claire is so annoyed by her mother's defection that she is uncommunicative when Sarah calls from France. Claire's response is either silence or a 'muttered whatever' (p. 113). Lottie, the heroine of *Blowing It*, receives condemnation from all of her children. The youngest daughter Sorrel laughs at Lottie's desire to travel, as she remarks "yeah, but you can't have a gap year, Mum, I mean, not you and Dad" (Astley, 2007: 77). Lottie's longing for freedom from the nurturing role is strong enough to help her endure this ridicule, in the short term. She thinks she will be able to

escape it by leaving home as soon as she can release the positive equity and Sorrel has left for her own gap year. Green evaluates the contributions made to her research by women who had experienced, or were anticipating, an adult child leaving the family home (2010: 26). Green argues for ‘a new model for motherhood that reaches beyond current representations that foreground the presence rather than the absence of children’ (2010: 1). Grey chick lit goes further than this and demonstrates that there is more than one way to experience motherhood, after children have reached adulthood and left home. This genre opens up the concept of motherhood in later life and reveals it to be an individual choice rather than a universal duty.

There are numerous ‘new models for motherhood’ to be found within the pages of matron lit that focus on the circumstances of women whose children are absent from the family home. One novel that represents outright rejection of the traditional nurturing role is Sue Townsend’s, *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*. Eva, a fifty-year-old wife and mother, has simply had enough of caring for her family’s needs. When Eva finds a soup spoon abandoned on the arm of a chair, which she had spent two years re-upholstering, she throws what remains of the soup, left simmering on the stove by one of her children, over the chair and goes to bed. When her husband Brian returns from driving their twins to Leeds University ‘she realised that, although she wanted to go downstairs and let him in, she couldn’t actually leave the bed’ (Townsend, 2012: 3). When Brian finally realises that Eva has no intention of getting out of bed to prepare a meal for him, she sees ‘from the stricken look in his eyes that after twenty-five years of marriage his familiar domestic world had come to an end’ (p. 5). Brian calls Eva’s mother Ruby for help and before hanging up on him, she tells him to “phone your own mam” (p. 6). Brian’s mother Yvonne tells him “She’s probably drunk. Leave her to sleep it off” (p. 8). Brian’s anxious consultation with his mother and mother-in-law establishes Eva’s actions as being completely unexpected. Ruby and Yvonne both perceive Eva’s actions as problematic and unusual because they have not experienced such a blatant rejection of the caring role before. As Marie Maguire states ‘the inequality between the sexes is one of the most intractable features of human culture. Even today, as the relative position of women in western society improves, sex-based patterns of power and submission continue to be reproduced in our most intimate relationships’ (1995: 1). While Eva’s initial response to her children leaving home seems extreme or merely for comic effect, it illustrates a very profound transitional stage in the lives of women who have raised children to adulthood and who have become weary of performing the culturally sanctioned caring role.

The reaction of both Eva's mother and mother-in-law demonstrates that women police the actions of other women, who do not submit to familiar patterns of behaviour. Karen Fingerman contends that 'women's disadvantaged status in society fosters close ties to kin, and particularly close ties between mothers and daughters' (2001: 38). Yet it seems that these ties are not necessarily supportive and may perpetuate cycles of submission. Fingerman accounts for women's adherence to intergenerational bonds in terms of their position in society and argues that this situation provides fertile ground for the development of particularly strong bonds between mothers and daughters. According to Fingerman 'women maintain more intimate intergenerational bonds than do men' (2001: 38). Fingerman has been supported in her research by the National Institutes on Aging and the Department of Family Studies at Purdue University, USA. Fingerman's book, *Aging Mothers and Their Adult Daughters: A Study in Mixed Emotions* is a presentation and analysis of her research into the 'relationships between women aged over seventy and their adult daughters' (2001: 214). Her study 'focuses on the mother/daughter tie during an under-researched period of the life span, when daughters are grown and have entered midlife, but their mothers remain healthy' (2001: xvii). Fingerman argues that:

Women's special position in the family further enhances the bond between mother and daughter at midlife; both women are deeply invested in kinship ties. Finally, a number of psychological factors contribute to this relationship. Women initially define themselves in relationship to their mothers, and later, take on the role of mother themselves. Daughters are socialized from an early age to retain ties to their family of origin, and particularly to their mother. The mother's sense of herself perpetuated in her daughter enhances the special qualities of this relationship in late life. (2001: 38)

Fingerman's observation that the mother perceives something of herself in her daughter goes some way to explaining the distress that many older women feel when their adult children (especially female adult children) are at odds with both the world and themselves and choose to lay the blame for this discontent with the ageing mother. Herst argues that 'we all want to see ourselves reflected (and therefore validated) in other people, especially in our daughters' (1999: 152). This fundamental need can be understood as 'the dialectic that will henceforth link the 'I' to socially elaborated situations' (Lacan, 1977: 5). Lacan's concept of self-identity demonstrates that the 'I' is always in relation to the 'other'. Lacanian theory reveals the construct of self-identity, the 'I', to be grounded in language and lack. The 'I' only ever exists in relationship to the 'other' and cannot be complete without the approval of others. Lacan states that 'the subject is subject only from being subjected to the field of the other' (1979: 188). Human beings continue to look toward family, peer group, and the social world

to reflect wholeness through the language of approval therefore, they 'perform' to gain recognition. The 'I' produces itself relationally. According to Lacan the self is fundamentally an artificial projection of subjective unity modelled on the visual images of objects and others that the individual comes into contact with. Lacanian theory holds that a sense of self is only ever gained from identifying with the images of others, or itself in a mirror as a kind of other. Self-identity is formed with and within the words, norms and directives of a given cultural collective. According to Butler a woman is a woman 'to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender' (Butler, 1999: xi). By extension, it could be claimed that a mother is a mother within the dominant heterosexual frame of the woman as primary caregiver. Butler contends that 'identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them' (1999: 22). So when adult children leave the family home the frame is disrupted and the mother's identity is threatened. Yet when mothers of adult children attempt to establish their identity outside the role of mother or carer they may encounter resistance. In matron lit it is frequently family members who are seen to experience difficulty dealing with any redistribution of power, responsibilities and domestic workloads while friends are more amenable to change.

Grey chick lit novels highlight how women are often negatively judged by family members if and when they act out of character. When a female character behaves unpredictably she rarely receives support from relatives. The heroines of grey chick lit are motivated to move outside the family circle in search of the understanding and help they need to make changes to their lives. Despite her relatives' disapproval Eva decides to stay in her bed for the foreseeable future because she wants freedom from cultural, familial and even personal responsibilities. Eva is insistent that she must have the 'space' to undertake an extensive life review: 'She knew she wouldn't be bored – she had a great deal to think about' (p. 28). Eva banishes Brian from their bedroom and hires 'a white van man' called Alexander to remove all the bedroom furniture and paint her room white. Brian, Ruby and Yvonne all tire of catering for Eva, so Alexander takes over. He is able to respect Eva's decision in a way that her family cannot. Alexander's willingness to offer support demonstrates that the mores of friendship seem to be better able to accommodate behaviour that is perceived as unusual or even unnatural within the family. In particular, the failure to perform the role of perfect mother, daughter or partner permits socially sanctioned condemnation by family, peers and the wider culture. Most significantly, this expectation of perfection is internalised and failure

to reach such high standards undermines women's sense of self-worth. Herst believes that 'it's no surprise they blame themselves: for the past thirty years, most psychologists have held Mom responsible for her child's personality' (1999: xiv). Herst has spoken with over one hundred and fifty mothers and their adult daughters about their relationships and she has used her clinical experience to expose 'the myth of the perfect mom.' Herst elaborates:

Most mothers and daughters unconsciously assume that somewhere, in some far-off, white clapboard house, there lives a perfect family. In that family, Mom behaves the way a good mother should. Her ideal code of behaviour is seldom spelled out, but here are some of her supposed attributes, gathered from the women I've counselled. Mothers are always available. Mothers are forever generous. Mothers are always supportive. Mothers are unconditionally accepting. Mothers do not have problems of their own. Mothers do not get angry. Mothers do not complain. Mothers are an endless source of nurturance. Mothers naturally know how to raise children. Mothers always put their child's needs first, no matter how old the child. Mothers are always strong. It sounds like a tough job description when it's set down in black and white. But not only do daughters believe their mothers should meet these standards; most of the mothers agree! (1999: 8)

Although Herst and her contributors are from the USA, the fable of the perfect family, living in the perfect house, is a concept familiar to those in the West, beyond America. When the standard of mothering is set so high and female worth is so closely tied to reproduction and lifelong nurturing it indicates that the maternal role may become problematic in later life when the perceived goal of mothering to adulthood has been achieved.

However, matron lit novels demonstrate that even an expected outcome may have unexpected consequences. Green says that for the women she interviewed:

Autonomy for the adult child was the perceived and achieved goal of their mothering therefore, a successfully reared adult child leaving home is an ordinary and everyday event that may generally be expected amongst parents and other family members and friends, especially with planned-for and structured leavings such as going to university. (2010: 22)

Eva 'wondered what her children were doing on their first night at university' (p. 10). She imagined them sitting in a room together, 'weeping' but ignores her mobile phone when she sees that her daughter is calling. Brian has flippantly diagnosed Eva with 'empty nest syndrome' and admonishes Eva, asking her to "admit it you're distraught because the twins have left home" (p. 19). Eva tells him the truth he cannot bear to hear and which instantly positions her outside the cultural boundaries of acceptable female behaviour: "no I'm glad to see the back of them." Brian's voice trembles with anger as he passes judgement on her: "That's a very wicked thing to say" (p. 19). Brian's reaction to Eva's 'truth' is representative

of the cultural norms that hold women in thrall to the performance of caring mother. To denounce this role is to invite the displeasure of others and to be regarded as wicked or sick. Eva only leaves her bed to use the en-suite and decides that other people will have to feed her. Although Eva repeatedly assures people, including her doctor and a district nurse, that she is not ill, everyone around her finds this difficult to accept. It is apparent from the above excerpt that any deviation from social expectations, or failure to measure up, is perceived as unnatural or a symptom of psychological illness. While those around her interpret the concept of staying in bed and demanding care as a conventional signifier of illness, Eva redefines her bed as a haven rather than a 'sick-bed'. By taking to her bed and refusing to comply with convention Eva ceases to perform her culturally assigned role. It appears that this could be acceptable, both to her family and the medical profession, only if Eva would admit to being unwell. A woman who is too ill to perform the role of nurturer may be tolerated but a woman who demands care, while maintaining that she is in good health, is no longer recognisable as a real woman.

When a person performs their assigned gender role in accordance with society's expectations, then s/he receives approval from the family, peer group, and culture. When gender is performed 'incorrectly' then the subject is punished through the cultural discourse. When a woman fails to support the normalisation of other family members she is herself considered to be a failure. Butler argues that the process of producing gender is never complete because gender is not what a person is, it is what the individual performs, so that no gender can pre-exist its expression. As Butler explains 'gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time' (1999: 22). The act of performing gender constructs identity through an expression, which is interpreted as the 'natural' result of gender. The body is formed within the cultural discourse and will never entirely be able to step outside of its confines. Gender identity is never complete, never able to reach a conclusion and every moment of the process is subject to cultural law. As cultural discourse constructs its subjects as gendered beings it requires those subjects to age within those same gendered constructs. Matron lit heroines are aware that as soon as their children have left home they are considered to be redundant, unless they can be seen to replay the culturally sanctioned role of carer in some other way or for some other person. Some matron lit characters illustrate the inclination to acquiesce to cultural expectations in this respect. By doing so they are allowed to feel useful within a specific framework that remains so rigid it may seem impossible to resist. In *Reading in Bed*, the character Caro, a colleague of Dido's

at Hand in Need, returns from holiday with her eighty-nine-year-old mother and Dido observes: ‘poor Caro. Such a brick’ (Gee, 2007: 77). As Caro and Dido make their way home from their voluntary work:

Dido watches her go, large and square and lonely. Keeping her end up: the choir, Hand in Need, the garden; taking her mother on holiday, babysitting for her grown-up children, never letting down a soul. But still . . . Deep down, hurt and lonely. (pp.86-87)

Despite willingly involving herself in a double caring situation with her family, helping others voluntarily and being considered a ‘brick’ by her colleague, Caro is still unhappy. This scenario highlights the irony that hard-earned approval of others, is not always sufficient compensation for neglect of the self.

Matron lit also explores the lives and emotions of female characters who find themselves with a craving for self-determination. A number of those characters who do not feel fulfilled by such role repetition choose to step outside the conventional boundaries and deal with the fallout from family and society as best they can. That they sometimes fail to cope with or entirely resist the pressure to conform does not diminish the power of their protest completely. Although the heroine of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* is eventually forced to leave her bed to avoid being sectioned, it is clear that her family life will never be the same again. While Eva’s bid for freedom is brought to an end by the power of society to incarcerate people who persistently flout the rules of normality, it is significant that she leaves with her new friend Alexander, rather than a family member. Eva’s struggle for fulfilment, though curtailed, cannot be reversed. In the gap that is opened up by her children leaving home, Eva makes a bid for freedom and a new identity. As Green states ‘the absence of the child in the mother’s everyday life impacts on her sense of identity as a mother’ (2010: 1). Regardless of the fact that Eva has never enjoyed the role of mother, it is precisely the absence of her children that becomes the catalyst for change. Whatever the context, absence of adult children from the family home is a transitional event which disrupts the boundaries of the maternal role, for better or worse.

Lifetime dedication to the conventional nurturing role gains women little respect, as its fulfilment is labelled, not as an achievement but only ‘natural.’ Maguire says that:

According to prevailing gender stereotypes in the west, women are expected to live vicariously through idealised others, including men and children, to whom they submit, denying the strength of their need and aggression. Men, in contrast, are usually encouraged to assume a stance of pseudo-independence where their own

emotional need is transformed into domination of those on whom they depend. Femininity, in other words, is still associated with passivity, and masculinity with activity. (1995: 2)

As a consequence, even for those who excel in the socially prescribed role of 'woman' there is little status in being feminine because the sensitive, caring, gender is also considered to be the over emotional, vulnerable, needy and weak gender. In *Transforming Psyche* B. Huber argues that 'those values associated with the female and feminine are seen as existing to service the higher values of the male and masculine' (1999: 4). According to Maguire such value judgements arise because the maternal role is predominantly caring and nurturing, while the paternal role provides children with a connection to the outside world. Maguire contends that 'in many societies girls and boys react against the early power of the mother by idealising paternal authority. As a result the work men do and "masculine" qualities tend to be valued more highly than those associated with women' (1995: 2). Women are expected to endlessly perform the passive feminine values of nurturing and caring while being aware that male values are prized more highly because they are equated with activity. And the moment any woman decides to stop, or becomes incapable of, providing care for the younger, older or male population she is likely to be regarded as unnatural and/or a problem.

A number of matron lit heroines suffer from the social shame of having a child who will not, or cannot, conform to cultural expectations and consequently internalise the blame for their perceived failure as a nurturer of the next generation. Yet the number of female protagonists of grey chick lit who have produced wayward adult children and their clearly articulated distress about their situation seems to suggest that maybe the mother is not the sole perpetrator of wrong-doing. In the novel *Separate Beds*, Annie's daughter Mia cuts off all contact with her family, after a heated disagreement with her father Tom about lifestyle choices and political beliefs. When Annie attempts reconciliation, she asks her friend Sadie, to accompany her to Mia's university halls of residence, because 'Tom can't, or won't, go' (p. 38). When Annie and Sadie arrive they are refused admission and informed that Mia has given instructions that no information about her should be divulged. The following extract sums up Annie's distress and Sadie's role as comfort and support:

There was no redress and nothing to be done. Sadie took Annie home, held her while she sobbed helplessly and coaxed her into bed. She knelt down beside it. "You must be strong Annie. You mustn't give in."

How not to give in? In the days that followed Annie roamed the house like a wounded animal. Mia's waterproof hung on the peg. A pair of black jeans was in the laundry pile. Her old school bag lay abandoned in a cupboard. (p. 39)

It is clear that Annie's ability to function is debilitated by Mia's rejection of the family. Mia's argument is with her father but she has chosen to reject her siblings and mother as well. It seems that although it is Tom who told Mia to leave, it is Annie who is in obvious distress. The cultural environment which influences women in their perception that they remain responsible for the welfare of their adult children ensures that Annie feels more responsibility than Tom to try to repair family ties. Herst points out that mothers share the responsibility for raising children with partners, relatives and 'the society and era in which they grow up' (1999: xiv). Matron lit investigates and examines these other explanations for difficulties experienced by and with adult children and searches for the means to understand the wider influence of peer culture, rebellion and the world beyond the family. This fiction adds weight to the concept that women are not necessarily inadequate parents if their grown-up children cut all ties with family, are unhappy and/or unproductive.

Annie encapsulates her distress over her family problems by saying to her friend "if only I had known about having children" (p. 39). When Sadie asks if she is serious, Annie pulls at her hair and replies "No" (p. 39, emphasis in original). Matron lit enables female readers to identify with heroines who, like some of them, may not have wholly satisfying relationships with their adult children but nevertheless still want to maintain those relationships. Green contends that 'in a contemporary UK context, successful mothers are those whose children leave home and "have a nice life". Women's feelings are imagined as mitigated by children's success and happiness away from the home' (2010: 72). A direct consequence of this culturally constructed attitude is that if an adult child does not live a culturally defined 'nice life' the mother is perceived as unsuccessful. Annie has to cope with the fact that her son Jake and granddaughter Maisie are about to become homeless. Her husband, Tom, argues that Jake is 'a grown man and he can't just pitch up on the doorstep and demand to be taken in' (p. 152). Annie's distress, caused by Tom's disapproval of their daughter Mia and the subsequent damage to their family, ensures that she feels compelled to confront Tom about his attitude toward their children:

"We've been here, Tom, and I'm not going to let you do it again. Whatever you may feel about Jake, he's still entitled to your support and it's our absolute duty to give it."  
"I'm not proposing to abandon him."  
"Refuse to step up when he's at a crossroads and he'll believe that's precisely what you've done."  
"Thank you for the lesson."  
She tried again: "Tom, remember if you hadn't-"  
"If I hadn't what?"

“You know very well. Once you’ve told a child to go, they go. They don’t come back.”(p. 153)

This extract reveals the cultural and personal pressure Annie is under to ‘be there’ for her children when life gets difficult, no matter how old they are. Annie clearly feels the burden of responsibility more than Tom does, as she seems obliged to bring up the past in an effort to ensure his co-operation in support of their adult son and his child. Even though Tom is unemployed and Annie is working full-time, she is the parent who expresses most concern about their children’s wellbeing.

Although women are increasingly involved with paid work outside the home, the responsibility for ‘caring’ remains principally the woman’s responsibility. Trotman and Brody argue that ‘with ever-increasing numbers of older women in the upper age brackets, women in their 50’s are often involved in taking care of four generations: daughters, granddaughters, mothers, and grandmothers’ (2001: 12). This list appears to be incomplete as Trotman and Brody fail to mention the male family members who require care. In the novel *Separate Beds* Annie is financially supporting, living with and caring for her mother-in-law Hermione, unemployed husband Tom, daughter Emily (an unemployed and unpublished writer), odd-jobbing son Jake and his small daughter Maisie. In addition to the physical care required for all the above-mentioned generations the role of mother requires that women enable and support the construction of the socially acceptable ‘self’. According to Steph Lawler ‘her task is to produce the good, well-managed self, which will uphold democracy. Yet this is a vision of social harmony which is based on the radical expulsion and othering of groups deemed excessive, repulsive, threatening’ (2000: 2). The unfortunate Annie holds down a responsible job in the NHS, but is not a successful woman according to social norms because two of her adult children do not pay their way, one of them has a broken marriage and cannot house or support himself or his child and the third child wants nothing to do with any of them. When a woman fails to raise children to adulthood who “fit” the social ideal she is ‘seen as doing this through inadequately nurturing the selves of those children’ (Lawler, 2000: 2). Older women with adult children who are not well-balanced, contributing members of society become ‘othered’ in addition to the ‘otherness’ of ageing. They are doubly ‘othered’ because they failed to provide society with the compliant and efficient workforce it needs to function successfully.

Many grey chick lit novels focus on the transition that mothers make when their only, or youngest, child leaves home, usually to attend university. According to Green ‘the majority

of mothers in contemporary UK raise their children to “fit” the accepted role of independent adult in western society’ (2010: 22). This view is reflected in matron lit as the majority of heroines are concerned with the wellbeing and success of their predominately adult children. This preoccupation is not however universal and a number of grey chick lit heroines reject the social norm of never-ending motherhood and nurturing. Green states that ‘the independence deemed so necessary for full adult citizenship was only possible with the child’s move away from the family home and thus the mother’ (2010: 68). Matron lit heroines similarly anticipate the situation and prepare for the change but often find that the actual event triggers unexpected emotions and consequences. As Green remarks, an adult child leaving home is a ‘mundane occurrence’ yet ‘an understanding of motherhood based on notions of childrearing that nurtures the child’s autonomy and independence’ while simultaneously ensuring consistent care constitutes a ‘contradictory matrix’ (2010: 22). Yet the mothers Green interviewed informed her that ‘there are very few if any sites where mothers can talk formally or informally about what happens in their lives when their adult children leave’ (2010: 22). Some of Green’s participants perceived a lack of support because their male partners expressed little emotion about children leaving home ‘whilst others felt unable to talk about their feelings with those who did not share the same life experience’ (2010: 22). It appears that whether or not the event of children leaving the family home is planned for or unexpected and whether or not the mother reaches this milestone in her life with dread or delight, it may be a time of turmoil.

When the youngest child leaves home this event is frequently the catalyst that triggers the need for the female characters to review their lives and take drastic action to make a new start. Green argues that although mothers think they are prepared for their children to leave, the reality of the situation often takes them by surprise:

Although children leaving home was an anticipated and planned for time, many women were not adequately prepared for the reality of separation from their children, for what this would mean in their lives and for them as mothers. Nurturing independence as the goal of childrearing in contemporary western discursive constructions of motherhood has been revealed as underpinning the purpose of my participants’ mothering. Women’s aspirations for their children and children’s own ambitions for the future clearly ran alongside each other, so that mothers seemingly worked towards the time of separation from their children during their childrearing years. (2010: 65)

Even though the culturally acknowledged and widely accepted goal of mothering is to prepare the child for independence, mothers are often at a loss to understand how their own

new-found 'independence' will affect their sense of identity and worth. As Green says 'living with inadequate and incomplete models of motherhood which inform women's mothering experiences and expectations means that a woman's sense of self-as-mother might be disrupted during the child's transition to adulthood' (2010: 74). Matron lit fiction repeatedly unpicks this dilemma and in doing so demonstrates that the feelings engendered by this life stage are unpredictable and unique. While it appears to be possible to plan and prepare for the 'event' in an objective and culturally approved manner, the accompanying emotions are subjective and as individual as the (fictional or real life) character herself.

In the novel *Hidden Talents* Beth, who is a widow, shares an apartment with her only child Nathan. As Nathan prepares to leave home for university Beth realises that although she has not made any attempts to move on with her life in the eleven years since her husband died, the time to do so has arrived. Beth's friend Simone accuses her of using Nathan as an excuse to hide from the world:

Beth knew that Simone was right, she was hiding behind Nathan. Plenty of parents struggle to come to terms with the flying-the-nest syndrome, but she knew that because she and Nathan were so close she would undergo a painful period of adjustment when he left for university next year. She had never suffered from loneliness – mostly because she didn't have time for such an indulgence – but that might alter when Nathan went to college. Common sense told her that she had no choice but to fill the void his absence would create. (p. 14)

On the evening of the first meeting of the writing group which its founder, Dulcie, has named *Hidden Talents*, Nathan advises Beth to "keep it chilled Mum, that's what you've got to tell yourself" (p. 43). Beth smiles and responds "I'm not sure I like all this role reversal" (p. 43). Nathan informs her that he will sort out her computer so that they can keep in touch by e-mail when he moves away from home. Beth walks to the writers group trying to calm her nerves:

It was ridiculous she was so keyed up. She was only going to a writers group. Even if it was a departure from the norm, it was a necessary one, she reminded herself. She was on a mission: to convince all those doubters, herself included, that she would be able to cope when Nathan flew the nest. (p. 44)

These extracts from the novel *Hidden Talents* describe the mixed emotions of the heroine about preparing to live alone. In contrast to Eva, the heroine of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, who has longed for her children's departure, Beth contemplates loneliness. Eva feels that her twins had taken her life over like 'aliens' and sees their departure as a release. Beth anticipates that her life will be empty unless she looks for companionship and purpose beyond mothering. In *the gap year for grown ups* the heroine appears to be comfortable with

her twins' departure for university but their leaving opens her eyes to her mundane life. When Lottie, the heroine of *Blowing It*, goes shopping with her daughter for 'gap year' clothes the trip wakens a desire to travel the world. The dissimilarity between these matron lit protagonists' perception of the same planned for event highlights the possibility of different narratives for readers.

The heroines of grey chick lit occasionally experience a situation where their child makes a sudden and unexpected decision to leave the family home. Such a departure is often perceived as a kind of rejection or abandonment of the entire family and the mother in particular. This action is further interpreted by the mother to signify that she has failed not only the individual child, but every member of her family. According to Green 'when unexpected leaving occurred it was difficult, the pain of abrupt separations provoked feelings of being instantly "redundant"' (2010: 70). Redundancy and regret leave women feeling that the past has been wasted and that there is little left to live for. Grey chick lit articulates the pain caused by feelings of futility and many times offers a guide to overcoming such distress. When responsibility for children is no longer at the core of a woman's role and nurturing ceases to be at the heart of her identity then a sense of redundancy and loss appears to be a predictable outcome. Even though many of the main female protagonists of grey chick lit expect and even plan for the time when their children will leave home, these preparations rarely prevent some level of crisis. According to Trotman and Brody 'many women do approach middle age with optimism and enthusiasm, seeing it as a time of enhanced personal liberation, power, and opportunity' (2001: 12). Matron lit protagonists often long for a measure of freedom at this stage in their lives but even this attitude cannot guarantee a successful transition to post-motherhood.

The removal of the requirement to be responsible for their child's wellbeing is frequently experienced as a sudden and desperate urge to reject normative and socially approved behaviour in favour of self-discovery. David Bainbridge calls middle-age the 'great biological-evolutionary reckoning' and argues that this is 'the time when we humans consciously reassess what our life has been for, while there is yet time to change it' (2012: 7). While this reassessment is possible for either gender it appears that for women the opportunities for change may be more limited. From an evolutionary viewpoint:

It has been suggested that a late non-reproductive period in a woman's life will enable her to look after her youngest offspring. It is clear that, if she were able to reproduce until the end of her life, the development of the latest offspring might be

compromised if not actually jeopardized. A parallel hypothesis postulates that the menopause provides for the existence of grandmothers who can help in the upbringing of younger children. (Weale, 2009: 107)

If either or both of these hypotheses are accurate then the only way for a post-menopausal woman to be considered productive is to repeat the nurturing cycle until death. Any reassessment of her life becomes futile because while she may have literal time to change her life, the biological-evolutionary hypotheses support cultural law and require her to repeat the past. According to Davis, the term 'mid-life crisis' was introduced by Elliott Jaques in a paper entitled 'Death and the mid-life crisis' (2006: 133). Davis argues that:

Jaques's notion of the mid-life crisis can be seen as a developmental opportunity, where the prospect of death offers an occasion for reconciliation, 'reparation', and insight. The expression 'mid-life crisis' has, of course, long since passed into common usage and in so doing seems to have lost this nuance of potential growth, denoting merely a nervous breakdown in middle age. (2006: 135)

It is no wonder that the prospect of having no child to nurture strikes fear into older mothers because according to social norms she has nothing left to live for and any desire for personal growth and positive change is likely to be interpreted as unfeminine or even mental illness.

In the grip of so-called 'empty nest syndrome' matron lit heroines invariably turn to their friends, rather than their spouse, for succour. In many matron lit novels, as in reality, older female characters may be without a partner due to divorce or bereavement. According to Hennessy and Walker:

Widowhood is normative for older women, since half of women over the age of 65 in Britain are widowed. The common experience of widowhood for women contrasts with the norm for men, that they remain married until their death. (2005: 33)

It is an unfortunate fact that 'in general, women live longer than men, a pattern that may be centuries old' (Overall, 2003: 9). Often women's only recourse is to seek companionship beyond the family circle if they wish to engage in, and benefit from, social contact. Worell and Goodheart express the opinion that 'widows who engage in activities with friends following loss are more comforted than if they are involved only with their family members' (2005: 420). It would seem that matron lit heroines are aware of the contribution friends make to wellbeing and cultivate their friendships with other women and men. According to Trotman and Brody 'as older women age, commitment to the role of "friend" is significant for predicting life satisfaction; it is even stronger than income or marital status for doing this. The therapeutic role of friendships for older women is significant' (2001: 7). The 'therapeutic role' that friendship plays in the lives of older women is a significant theme of grey chick lit.

When familial relationships flounder or fail, friendships are supportive and life-enhancing. While relationships with children, parents, partners and siblings are rarely represented as consistently easy or up-lifting, friendships are portrayed as almost always positive. Disagreements or even arguments with friends are depicted as useful opportunities for gaining self-knowledge or as a lesson in tolerance and empathy. Friendships contribute to a successful level of self-esteem in a way that other relationships seem unable to do. As women age these interactions become increasingly important because any level of dependence on family members may reduce a perception of autonomy. Trotman and Brody maintain that:

Role identity comes out of how we see ourselves being and acting at a particular moment in time, and we seek and often find support for the role to which we commit ourselves. Sometimes, increased reliance on family members may threaten an older adult's self-perception as competent; rather, it may reinforce the role identity of needy dependent. In this way, family members may not contribute to an older adult's sense of wellbeing as much as friends do. The friends can offer the positive identity support of peers. They more easily can exchange meaningful feedback and have positive self-perceptions confirmed. Even old friends, who do not stay in touch as often, can continue to contribute to the positive identity. Friends provide a sense of continuity between past and present. (2001: 7)

It is a common trope of grey chick lit that when children leave home and marriages end through divorce or bereavement, friends (both male and female, old and new) become the ties that bind and facilitate healing.

Matron lit concentrates on the value of female friendship in later life and communicates the importance of these relationships to women's sense of who they are and where they are positioned in the social arena. This discussion of friendship as a significant contribution to the wellbeing of mature women is unique to twenty-first century popular fiction. Linda Rosenzweig asserts that in comparison to representations of friendship between men:

Significantly fewer literary illustrations of female friendship appeared until the late twentieth century, and cultural images of relationship have rarely conveyed positive messages. According to the editors of *The Oxford Book of Friendship*, published in 1991, the anthology's chapter on women's friendships is disproportionately short due to the paucity of relevant literary examples. Moreover, portrayals of relationships between women typically present female friendship as shallow, insincere, temporary, and insignificant. (1999: 2)

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, depictions of friendships between women are common in chick lit novels. Though often a significant ingredient of the plot, these relationships are nevertheless secondary to the search for a male partner. This is a continuance of a literary pattern which developed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. According to Rosenzweig ‘although many eighteenth and nineteenth-century works of fiction touch on the topic of friendship between women, it often appears as incidental, peripheral to a central marriage plot’ (1999: 2). The focus on female friendship is much more prominent in chick lit but it is still portrayed as being of less importance than romantic relationships. This is rarely the case in grey chick lit where friendships commonly offer reliable and consistent support in times of both harmony and crisis. According to Peta Bowden, friendship, unlike familial relationships, ‘is characterized by its informality and relative absence of controlling institutions, fixed rituals and conventions’ (1996: 60). It would appear that it is the informal aspect of friendship that allows the relationship to be flexible and important while not being policed by the same intense social rules as other relationships. This lack of cultural regulation permits friendship to be highly valued at particular moments in time and neglected at others, to be picked up and put down time and time again without suffering significant damage. *The Cookie Club* (2009), a first novel, by Ann Pearlman, is described on its slip-cover as ‘a celebration of friendship between women’ and the dedication by its author reads ‘For my girlfriends Thank you.’ Yet in the opening pages of *The Cookie Club* Marnie, the self-proclaimed ‘head cookie bitch’, explains to readers the fluidity with which the friendships change and end. Marnie explains to readers:

Jackie falls in love, marries, and moves east and stops coming. Donna loves the party but hates making cookies. Janine has an affair with a colleague and divorces, and she and her lover move to Benton Harbour. Thus, positions open for cookie virgins. So the membership ebbs with the flow of our lives (Pearlman, 2009: 3).

This extract illustrates the freedom and understanding that is permitted between groups of friends; a flexibility in companionship is allowed which is absent from other types of relationships.

Friendships are central to the lives of matron lit heroines because they are the only relationships that allow for a measure of self-interest. Bowden argues that:

Friendships call up a sphere of social activity that is both exhilaratingly free from regulation and profoundly fragile. The lack of publicly administered roles, activities, responsibilities and boundaries imbues friendships with liberating possibilities for interpersonal caring, unmatched by the more clearly defined structures of other social relations. (1996: 60)

Affection is not expected to be ‘unconditional’ but reciprocal and mutually beneficial. In *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* the main protagonist Eva begins to establish a friendship with her window cleaner, Peter. Peter visits Eva’s room by climbing through the window, and they smoke, drink tea and chat together about Peter’s disabled daughter. Eventually Eva

becomes so disenchanted with the outside world and its occupants that she asks Peter to barricade her window up, from the inside. Peter agrees and they work on Eva's latest project together, as she passes him the nails. They proceed to board the door up leaving only 'an aperture that would enable food and drink to be passed through' (p. 420). Barricading of the room after a year tips the scales for her family who agree with medical advice that Eva will have to be sectioned. Her friend Alexander manages to convince Eva of the desperate situation she is in, breaks down the door and carries her out of her bed. It is clear that the only people Eva is prepared to listen to are the friends who aided and abetted her withdrawal. It seems that for Eva friends, rather than family, proved to be more supportive of her needs. As a result she values their advice and heeds Alexander's warning, just in time to preserve her freedom. Eva finally acknowledges her desperate plight and agrees to leave her bed with Alexander, although she had consistently refused to do so for her husband, mother or children.

Even if a friendship falters or fails then the damage to self-esteem is less than with other relationships. The shame that accompanies the breakdown of a marriage, romantic relationship, or alienation from parents, children or even siblings, is not usually a key ingredient of a failed friendship. Bowden claims:

The friendship that is given in freedom can also be withdrawn with impunity. While it is clear that the absence of formal structures in the constitution of friendships permits endless variety in the range of attachments – endless diversity in the balancing of freedom and vulnerability – it is also apparent that intersections in that range map out distinguishable contours of caring possibilities. (1996: 60)

Grey chick lit explores the flexibility of friendships and the importance that such a relationship can play in the mitigation of loneliness in later life. Victor and Scrambler say that 'for many people loneliness is seen as an integral, inevitable and virtually universal aspect of later life. Indeed this is one of the most enduring and potentially pernicious of all stereotypes of old age and later life' (2007: 128). The stereotype of loneliness, when applied to older people and especially women, is detrimental to their wellbeing because it discourages the formation of new connections. For as long as older women expect to be lonely because it is normative they will be inhibited from seeking companionship. Robert Weale argues that 'a great deal of stereotyping occurs in connection with the elderly' (2009: 3). Stereotyping is insidious in its effect on identity. People become what they are told they are. And according to a spokesperson from Age UK, featured on BBC News at Six, loneliness is as detrimental to the health of old people as is smoking (2013). The emphasis that is placed on the value of

friendship, in the majority of matron lit novels, offers readers an encouraging opportunity to imagine an alternative to the stereotypical image of the lonely old woman. The novel *Hidden Talents* illustrates that living alone does not necessarily mean being lonely:

Dulcie would never have dreamed that she would be so suited to living alone. She had turned into a most self-contained person. Not for her the frantic need to be constantly occupied or entertained: a good book, a glass of wine and she was content. And it was only now, at sixty-three, that she had discovered that if she demanded nothing of another person no demands were made of her. (p. 77)

Despite her contentment Dulcie socialises with old friends and strives to make new ones. The heroines of grey chick lit demonstrate that it is possible to widen one's social circle at any age. In the gaps brought about through changes in family relationships over time, incentives and opportunities arise to establish new friendships. Matron lit illustrates how some older characters deliberately work towards broadening their horizons, in an effort to meet new people.

Dulcie, the founding member of the writers group 'Hidden Talents', is a sixty-three-year-old widow and mother of two adult children. The other members of the group include Beth, who joins the group in an attempt to stave off the loneliness she expects to feel when her only child leaves home. Beth's son is in his final school year and intends to go to university. The other members of the group are two middle-aged men and a teenage girl. These characters establish relationships and help each other face changes in their lives. Dulcie has been a widow for twenty-two years, and despite having been in a relationship with a married man for three years, considers herself to have 'commitment phobia'. Dulcie 'enjoyed living alone too much to want anyone with her on a permanent basis' (p. 2). Nevertheless, Dulcie is devastated when her lover Richard is rushed into hospital suffering from a heart attack and she is unable to find out about his condition because she has no official place in his life: 'She had always thought that his need for her was greater than her need for him. Now, however she wasn't so sure' (p. 3). Dulcie is required to re-assess her feelings in the light of changing circumstances; this plotline demonstrates that a character may be surprised by their own emotional development in later life and that this insight may inspire growth. Dulcie concludes at the first meeting of the newly-founded writers group, that forty-something Beth might be too dependent on her son Nathan because 'his name had already been mentioned several times during the conversation' (p. 45). Fingerman argues:

Most women are widowed in old age, whereas most men are not. Moreover, divorce rates began to climb nearly 50 years ago and remain high. Women are unlikely to

remarry in the second half of life. As a result, women who lack a partner turn to their children, and particularly to their daughters for solace and support. (2001: xvi)

Dulcie reflects that when her husband Phillip had died ‘she had seen how easy it would be to rely on her children, to live her life through them, and she had done everything in her power not to make that mistake’ (p. 45). Dulcie considers that the two men add balance to the small group. Victor, who is approaching sixty, seems pompous and over-bearing, while, the younger and better-looking Jack, ‘has a sag in his shoulders and a tiredness in his eyes’ (p. 45). Dulcie observes that, ‘the most interesting member of the group was Jaz Rafferty. Dulcie was delighted that someone so young wanted to be involved. If she could bear to be with a bunch of old fogies, which was probably how she viewed them all, she would add a fresh and exciting dimension to the group’ (p. 45). *Hidden Talents* is representative of many matron lit novels that explore friendships across generations and disrupt the norm of generational segregation.

Victor is the one character who does not seem at ease within their small circle, yet Dulcie ‘knew that as much as Victor had initially harangued the group, he would continue to grace it with his awkward and at times antagonistic presence’ (p. 51). Victor is among the few characters in grey chick lit that appear to be socially isolated. One of the others is Maud, an elderly relative of Georgia, one of the sixty-year-old heroines in Sue Gee’s *Reading in Bed*. The third is Candace Jack, the elderly heroine of *Fragile Beasts* (2010) who is seventy-seven years old, does not have children, has never married and is self-sufficient. Of these three characters only Victor seeks companionship, albeit in a grudging and condescending manner. However, it becomes apparent that Victor’s unpleasant character is a product of his friendlessness. Hennessy and Walker argue that ‘loneliness may be seen as a “stigmatizing” concept compromising the identity of individuals’ (2005: 113). Victor is stigmatised by his loneliness because it is interpreted by Dulcie and the other members of the writing group as ‘rampant insecurity’ (p. 215). After a second telephone conversation with Victor, Dulcie refers to him as ‘the dreadful man’ (p. 26). Victor’s journey toward friendship with Dulcie and the other group members, especially Jaz, reveals the pitfalls on the road from isolation to social inclusion. This plotline is an interesting exploration of how the effort to step out of loneliness may initially increase the feeling of isolation. It is notable that within the realm of grey chick lit it is a male character who is presented as distressed by his social isolation. The female protagonists, with the exceptions of Candace and Maud, all have some platonic relationships and distress is more commonly associated with the loss of a partner.

As Richard begins to recover and is discharged from hospital Dulcie experiences a feeling of ‘*joie de vivre*.’ She reflects that ‘the older she became, the more she believed that it was the simple things in life that provided the most pleasure: the sun on one’s face and a happy heart. It wasn’t much to ask for was it?’ (p. 75). Dulcie cycles into town to shop and meet her friends Prue and Maureen for lunch:

Every three weeks she and her friends got together for lunch and a gossip. Although they were close and had known each other for many years – they had children of roughly the same age – she was selective in what she shared with them about her personal life. She had never confided with them about Richard, believing that the fewer people knew about her affair, the less chance there was of it becoming known. (p. 76)

The four female characters who feature in Erin Kaye’s novel *the art of friendship* (2010) also keep secrets from each other and this aspect of their friendship allows a measure of privacy which is more difficult to maintain within familial relationships. Members of *The Cookie Club* are not intrusive and do not feel pressured to reveal more about their lives than they are at ease with. These novels vocalise an optimum level of caring and interaction with friends who add joy to life without demanding a degree of attention and disclosure that is uncomfortable. Such depictions of undemanding and flexible relationships are often presented in contrast to the more intimate and sometimes claustrophobic pressure of familial relationships. Grey chick lit repeatedly presents time spent in the company of friends and acquaintances as a necessary respite from demanding and intrusive relatives. Friendship appears here as a safe haven from obligation.

While matron lit protagonists extol the benefits of friendship they also seek solitude when they require time to think about their lives:

Just occasionally she wondered if she wasn’t in danger of becoming self-absorbed, but whenever this thought surfaced she reminded herself that she had devoted most of her life to others – Phillip and the children. Now it was time to pamper herself a little. It was too easy to fall into the habit of justifying one’s happiness. If she allowed that to happen too often, she might forget to relish the joyful simplicity of her life.

She never took her happiness for granted. She knew all too well how fortunate she was, that financially she was better placed than a lot of people she knew. She had used the money paid to her from Phillip’s life-insurance policy to buy the house in Bloom Street and knew it was the best investment she could have made. When the time came for her to sell up, it would provide her with the means to live out her old age in relative comfort. (p. 77)

Dulcie has what Dulcie wants, but she has to remind herself time and time again that she is actually allowed to live this way, if she so chooses. The cultural demand for women to keep

on providing care until ‘the time comes’ is something that Dulcie actively resists. Yet she still feels the need to justify her life to herself, by recalling the years of service she has given to her husband and children in the past.

If prescribed cultural roles demand that improved longevity can only be experienced as a protracted decline then society needs to listen to those who are not content. Phillipson *et al* contend that ‘what makes the twentieth century and after unprecedented is the remarkable increase in longevity’ (2006: 12). I would argue that what will make the twenty-first century remarkable is how people choose and are permitted to make use of their lengthened life-span. For the heroines of grey chick lit social and cultural structures repeatedly fail to meet their desire and need to use increased longevity productively. Overall argues that:

Our moral values and social policies with respect to human longevity and mortality create a context in which the probability of living longer may be increased or decreased. A cultural environment in which postponing mortality and increasing the length of the life span lived in health are valued could have a positive effect on human longevity. (2003: 12)

In a culture that does not value post-menopausal women their increased life expectancy can only be perceived as problematic. In this cultural environment it seems that older women’s will to live must be undermined. Nevertheless, Overall states that ‘in the industrialized nations life expectancy is growing’ (2003: 7). The female protagonists of grey chick lit openly and repeatedly ask the questions, what do we do with this increased longevity, when women are still presumed to be of little use to society after the menopause? Is our only option to be good care providers until our health does begin to fail us? Does this increased longevity just mean more years of drudgery for women? Although the characters’ initial response to these rhetorical questions is despair, this is quickly dispelled by anger, rebellion, escape, setbacks, relationship breakdowns and finally re-negotiation. According to Johnson:

Most women accept their status because it’s all they know or the best they can get. The alternative is to risk challenging a system defended by powerful interests, which makes going along with male privilege women’s path of least resistance. To choose different paths is of course possible, as the frequent heroism of women makes clear, but not without considerable effort and risk. (2005: 165)

In the context of spelling out exactly what such a risk might involve and what the consequences could be, the genre of matron lit does a good job. The heroines who ‘choose different paths’ rarely find their journey goes smoothly. Earlier in this chapter I quoted Trotman and Brody’s observation that women are expected to be constantly available because they are ‘judged by patriarchal standards’ (2001: 4). The female protagonists of grey chick lit

are weary of being available and cry out for the opportunity to live for and (sometimes even by) themselves. The stereotype of prolonged caring for the family, followed by a slow decline into lonely old age is challenged by their imagination, creativity and the support of friends.

According to Phillipson *et al*:

Bridges between self and other have to be based on recognizing the distinctiveness of late-life experience as a valued part of the human condition. Later life should not simply mean 'more of the same' and solidarity should not be based on age similarity alone. If there are distinctive features associated with old age, a genuine and more natural contribution by older adults should be based upon the facilities that are most available at that part of the life course and not by mimicking the characteristics of other life phases. It may then give birth to a deeper understanding of life's priorities. Good teams are not based on everyone being the same, but on a recognition and deployment of complementary qualities. In this respect, life-course solidarity is no different to any other of life's projects. (2006: 116)

Kay Heath singles out Nora Ephron's *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, 'as one example among many I could have chosen to demonstrate the depressing and self-defeating results of allowing internalized ageism to go unexplored and unchallenged' (2009: 202). The authors of matron lit challenge internalised ageism through descriptions of their heroines' ambivalent emotions. The female protagonists' acceptance of cultural perceptions of female ageing is counterbalanced by their instinctive rage against cultural expectations, both internal and external, that they should live out the remainder of their lives as 'has-beens'. Johnson suggests that:

When we evaluate some aspect of social life, such as who does what in families or how men and women communicate, it isn't enough to point out that it appears to be an "efficient" way to organize things because it "fits" with society as it is now. We also have to ask how this way of organizing things is connected to other aspects of social life such as women's subordination. (2005: 135)

The female characters in grey chick lit experience and verbalise a strong awareness that behaviours that support 'society as it is now' may not be in their best interests. According to Scott McCracken 'popular fiction is both created by and a participant in social conflict' (1998: 2). The heroines of grey chick lit engage with social conflict, resist and fight for what they need, often without the support of their families but rarely without the help and encouragement of friends. Matron lit suggests that even if women are disappointed by the reaction of family members, if they choose to move away from the caring role they may find some comfort outside the family. Shelagh Strawbridge, in her prologue to *Constructing Stories, Telling Tales* suggests that storytelling 'can help us to see that, whatever the current plot of our lives, there is always another story' (2010: xxx). Matron lit novels provide 'other'

stories which enable readers to open up their minds and imaginations to new ways of thinking about familiar problems. Even though the female protagonists do not often experience comfortable journeys to a radically different way of life, they do show that the effort is usually worthwhile. These characters are inspiring in their willingness to try.

It seems that families, in common with the wider culture, may have some vested interest in ensuring that older women feel redundant and therefore grateful to play out the 'nurturing role' for as long as physically possible. According to Herst 'mothers and daughters are not usually cut out to be each other's best friend' (1999: 199). Herst further argues that mothers should not expect too much from their adult daughters and advises 'just as you can't protect her from life, neither can she protect you. She wasn't put here to be your permanent companion. She, and you, must make separate lives for yourselves' (1999: 119). This advice could just as well apply to other family members as well and I would agree with Herst's argument that 'isolated in the little universe of the household, a mom can get used to being the scapegoat' (1999: 136). Matron lit demonstrates that this desire to constrain the heroine is not commonly shared by genuine friends of either gender. According to Morgan and Kunkel 'all societies use age in some way to organize social life - to assign people to roles, to regulate interaction, or as a basis for division of labour' (2006: 95). However convenient it may be for families and society to assign roles and labour along gender and age lines it would appear that the main female characters of matron lit are not happy to acquiesce. Richard Leider and David Shapiro advise people moving into the second half of life to ask themselves the questions:

Who am I? Where do I belong? What do I care about? What is my life's purpose?  
They argue that 'only now, in the second half, we have a unique opportunity to be the author of our own story. We have a chance to rewrite it, rather than simply replicate the first half. (2004: 1)

The heroines of grey chick lit ask these questions, or something very similar, and they do not want to replicate the first half of their lives. In *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* Eva's friend Julie visits her and asks why she will not get out of bed. Eva replies "I like it here" (p. 32). By the time Julie leaves she is envious of Eva: 'As she was walking down the stairs, Julie thought, 'wish it was me in that bed' (p. 35). To read about main protagonists in popular fiction declaring their discontent and joining with like-minded friends to disturb the status quo can only support the aspirations of older women who neither wish to continue being a caring supporter of other family members or decline into a helpless dotage but desire to use their years of extended longevity in ways which are personally meaningful and productive.

Extended life expectancy holds out the hope of years that could be spent in the pursuit of personal fulfilment but social expectations limit the opportunities of older women. Johnson argues that ‘societies limit the alternatives that people perceive as available to choose from, which is a direct result of living in a particular kind of society that privileges certain classes, genders, and races over others’ (2005: 164). Grey chick lit heroines resent and rail against the culturally defined roles that they are expected to embrace and repeat until death. Some of these female protagonists reject familial and social expectations outright. Yet few seem to be strong enough to bear the inevitable cultural sanctions that their actions incur, without the support that friendship provides. Heath argues that:

Following the landmark writings of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, whose books call for a radical, activist old age, Kathleen Woodward and Margaret Morganroth Gullette have offered especially cogent analyses of ageism as a burgeoning cultural construction that must be challenged. (2009: 200)

Grey chick lit plays a significant part in the challenge to ageism because its heroines, with their friends’ aid, act. Phillipson *et al* argue that ‘traditional assumptions appear to be fragmenting, opening possibilities for new, more flexible identities to take shape’ (2006: 110). Grey chick lit chronicles older women’s discontent with the limited possibilities for changing their identity while entrenched in traditional female roles. McCracken argues that ‘different types of popular narratives provide the opportunity to project or fantasise different kinds of potential selves’ (1998: 3). Matron lit showcases older female characters who try out new ways of being in the world, in an attempt to experience life differently. These novels give voice to the problems caused to ageing women by social expectations. While it may seem to be a stretch to argue that authors of popular novels are engaged in the same debate as the academic feminist writers cited by Heath, the distinction between political discussion and matron lit are blurred. I am in agreement with Andi Zeisler’s argument that:

Like the disintegrating line between high and low culture, the distinctions between political and pop have also all but disappeared. Pop culture informs our understanding of political issues that on first glance seem to have nothing to do with pop culture; it also makes us see how something meant as pure entertainment can have everything to do with politics. (2008: 7)

The message I discern from reading grey chick lit is that ageism is a cultural construct which deprives people, especially women, of freedom to live as they please, that the female protagonists are furious about it and so they work together with others to contest its power. Holland argues that ‘being “unruly” when you are elderly has the potential to be less difficult, because one is subject to fewer social expectations’ (2004: 119). This may only be true in

particular circumstances and for women who do not mind being labelled eccentric. For the majority of older women it is difficult, though sometimes necessary, to be rebellious and unruly. Older women are constrained in their behaviour by the anticipation and often fear, of a backlash of disapproval from family and society. Matron lit protagonists demonstrate that the most efficient way to lessen the effect of such a backlash is the support of friends. In *Sexual Inequalities and Social Justice* it is asserted that ‘older gays and lesbian rely on their friends for emotional support to a far greater extent than their heterosexual counterparts. For the latter, emotional support is entirely derived from their immediate family’ (Teunis, Herdt, Eds., 2006: 211). Matron lit disrupts the stereotype that older heterosexuals derive all their emotional support from close family. The predominantly heterosexual female characters are frequently failed by family and turn to their friends for emotional support. Even if reliance on family is the norm within a heterosexual matrix grey chick lit clearly demonstrates that it is insufficient to older women’s requirements. Hennessy and Walker argue that participation in social activities improves the quality of life for older people. They further argue that ‘the social forms in which people find themselves do not remain static but constantly change’ (2005: 28). Grey chick lit, while fictional, does not usually take readers to unrecognisable places or require them to suspend disbelief. Yet time after time the heroines turn to friends, instead of immediate family, when they become embroiled in a crisis about their identity and role in society. It is possible that this trope reflects ageing women’s fear that understanding might not be readily available from within the family but that they hope to find encouragement through friendship. Grey chick lit expresses a real need to turn away from family and toward friends, both old and new, to garner support. Once a woman’s appearance puts it beyond question that she is no longer fertile, she becomes an outsider from her own life experience and that of her family. When she is arguably no longer a ‘normal’ woman her relationships within the family are affected and she feels compelled to turn outward for aid and affirmation. Within matron lit friendship is presented as a sanctuary.

Cultural expectations of older women have not caught up with reality. If women work outside the home it still appears to be the general consensus that she will make time to provide domestic care for both younger and older members of the family. Trotman and Brody maintain that:

Because of the changing patterns of family life, there is increased participation in paid employment by women. This fact has highlighted the question of who will care for the elder, incapacitated members of society. The assumption that (older) women will

do the caretaking on an unpaid, and often unrecognized, basis can no longer be taken for granted. (2001: 9)

Yet, that this is still often taken for granted becomes clear from the number of popular novels that voice the weariness and confusion of fictional characters who attempt to cope with both paid work and elder care. While retirement from paid work may be celebrated, retirement as caregiver for parents, adult children or grandchildren, is not socially sanctioned. Hennessy and Walker point out that ‘the present experience of later life is contextualized by retirement at younger ages as well as the expectation of a longer period of (healthy) post-working life more than was the case with previous cohorts’ (2005: 28). But women are not expected to retire from the care-giving role at any age, unless they are too frail to continue. I concur with Hennessy and Walker’s observation that ‘happiness in a role depends in part on one’s wish to be in that role. The importance of personal preference is also shown in respect of a person’s influence over the timing of his or her retirement’ (2005: 74). Any woman who resigns from the job of ‘nurturer’ invites the social sanction of being labelled worthless. Within a discussion about the possibility of retirement from the caring role, grey chick lit novels provide readers with entertaining, yet realistic, information about the importance of grandchildren in women’s lives.

Many older women look after their grandchildren, parent or spouse and enjoy the time they get to spend with them. When women choose this role they are likely to be happy in the role of carer. According to Hennessy and Walker familial relationships are important at every stage of life as they provide both practical and emotional support and point out that ‘while relationships with partner, children and parents may be most important for younger adults, relationships with grandchildren are also relevant for older people’ (2005: 66). Yet Hennessy and Walker contend that ‘there is very little information in Britain about relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren’ (2005: 66). For Annie, the middle-aged mother in the novel *Separate Beds*, her comfortable relationship with granddaughter Maisie provides a sweet respite from all the aggravation she experiences with every other member of her family. But no relationship is perfect in *Separate Beds* and although Annie loves Maisie, she hates ‘the mess in the house (mostly Maisie’s stuff)’ and says ‘I’m training myself not to mind’ (p. 398). *Separate Beds* is an interesting example of how fiction can tease apart and expose the complicated strands of love and annoyance that are part of most relationships. In Kate Long’s novel *Mothers & Daughters*, the heroine Carol’s relationship with her grandson

Matty is easier and more rewarding than the relationship with her own father and indeed acts as a bridge between them. Carol informs readers that:

These days, Sunday mornings are a good time to visit, because I always have Matty with me then; he's stayed over Saturday nights since he was weaned. I have him till tea-time, till Songs of Praise he's all mine. And visiting my dad is now part of the routine. What used to be a potentially upsetting part of the weekend is now transformed, because I tell you, it's a heck of a lot easier to go along with Matty than it is to go on my own. He's a fresh, new thing in the land of the old. (Long, 2010: 25)

Carol's love for Matty and the joy she experiences on his regular visits mitigates the pain she feels when her father fails to respond to her efforts at conversation. Like the relationship between grandmother and grandchild in *Separate Beds* Carol's affection for Matty is not without its caveat, as Carol reveals when she says of Matty 'there's a fine line between being a distraction and a nuisance' (p. 27). Grey chick lit does not present relationships between grandparents and grandchildren as consistently easy and comfortable but reveals their intrinsic complexity. This relationship is rarely experienced in isolation because it is most usually experienced within a continuum of care, which may encompass both the grandchild and the grandmother's own parents.

To be an old woman receiving care from family or institution is to be a burden on society. Such cruel labelling cannot possibly do anyone any good and may prevent elderly women from requesting help in a timely fashion. In *Hidden Talents* Beth's neighbour and good friend, eighty-four-year-old Adele, is planning to sell her apartment and move into a retirement home. Adele explains her decision to Beth: "I'm under no illusion that my nephew wants the burden of me. He can never spare any time to visit so I'm spending his inheritance the fastest way I know how" (p. 15). Beth hopes that 'when the time came, Nathan would treat her more kindly than Adele's only relative had treated her' (p. 15). If women were appreciated for attributes beyond the nurturing role then it would allow older women to claim their healthy years for themselves, if they choose. And elderly women could expect to be acknowledged for the contribution they make to family and society through life experience and wisdom, rather than be defined only by the amount of assistance they need. While elderly people may require help on a regular basis this does not mean that they have nothing to offer others. Without the blinkered view of ageism it would be clear to see that all people, including women, can contribute at any age. Matron lit novels show readers what productive ageing looks like.

This genre addresses gendered ageism and shows its characters' development within that paradigm. These novels explain to readers how their characters got to where they are and it is clear that they suffer because of ageist cultural attitudes. The heroines of grey chick lit, whether they are forty years old or eighty-plus, are uncomfortable with being told (repeatedly and in uncountable ways) that they are 'too old'. These characters reach out to each other within and across generations in a bid to be allowed to be considered productive past the time when society valued them because they were reproductive. And they are empowered by doing so, because, as Tannen insists, 'power and solidarity are intertwined: Having a wide network of friends on whom you can call enhances your power to get things done' (1999: 225). Heroines of matron lit do get things done but they have to contend with many of the injustices and difficulties older women are subjected to. Grey chick lit rarely has 'happy endings' but by the end of the narrative the main characters are usually happier or more contented than they were to begin with. Davis is in favour of questioning the 'gerontological assumption that the most effective way to combat societal ageism is to flood the cultural sphere with unreservedly 'positive' images of older people' (2006: 61). The main protagonists of matron lit are rarely 'unreservedly positive' but they are voicing the problems older women experience in an ageist society and mounting challenges to cultural restrictions. That they generally have to make some concessions and compromises is not only a sign of acquiescence to cultural power but an acknowledgement of their own ambivalent emotions and the dynamic situation of a changing era and family life. As Mia the runaway daughter in *Separate Beds* says 'take a look at the world as it really is. [...] It's not an advert for happy families' (p. 159). Davis contends that we need to accept 'a degree of unresolved ambivalence in what we are prepared to hear and write about old age' (2006: 61). Matron lit characters do not have perfect lives but they strive for better lives. Davis argues that it is important to bear in mind that ageing is an ambiguous process and asserts that:

Literary discourse is particularly well suited to engage with the conflict and ambiguity held by Cole and others to be essential features of the human ageing process and to reflect the ambivalence which consequently marks subjective responses to that process. Ageing reflects the ultimately tragic character of even the most privileged forms of life: even if political and material conditions were ideal, human existence would remain essentially ambiguous. (2006: 188)

The female characters of grey chick lit are able to debate the gains and losses of ageing and relationships in and outside the family, in ways that may help readers to imagine and negotiate the later stages of family and social life on new terms.

## Chapter 5: Leaving Home

A number of matron lit heroines choose to move away from their families rather than conform to social expectations. The familial and cultural demand for women to repeat caring roles for the remainder of their lives often engenders such turmoil that they want to abscond, either literally or metaphorically. By abandoning spouses, children and home these characters interrupt the social order and draw attention to themselves. They defy feminine norms when they display self-interest, become absorbed in their own fantasies, cut off contact with relatives, have affairs or when they refuse to take care of other people or even pay attention to their family. These female protagonists defy cultural norms by refusing to continue in the domestic role indefinitely. Lottie, the main female protagonist in *Blowing It*, thinks about her youngest child Sorrel leaving home for her 'gap year' and feels envious. She muses 'Why can't I have one?' (Astley, 2007: 12). Her husband Mac has been thinking the same way and tells Lottie "It's our lot would appreciate it more, surely" (p. 21). That Mac supports Lottie's plainly expressed envy of Sorrel's youthful freedom displays a level of camaraderie between husband and wife which is unusual in grey chick lit. When Mac raises the subject again, Lottie responds by speculating 'could they really just pack and sneak out when no one was looking?' (p. 23). With this thought Lottie reveals her awareness that their children will disapprove if she and Mac take a year out from family life and responsibility. Although Lottie differs from many matron lit heroines in that she does not want to leave her husband, she does want to leave the responsibilities of home, family, domesticity and a culture which makes her feel simultaneously used and useless. I discussed the importance of home to matron lit heroines in chapter 3 and it is clear that Lottie, the heroine of *Blowing It*, placed a high value on her home of thirty years. However, as her circumstances have changed so has her perception of the property and now Lottie considers that her house has become 'a costly dependent' (p. 21). The cost to Lottie is more than financial and homemaking has lost its charm.

More often than not, grey chick lit heroines want to go away by themselves. In Annie Saunders' *the gap year for grown ups*, the heroine Sarah informs her husband that "I want to go away. On my own. I have to [...] I want to get away from here, from us. From everything" (2009: 46). Sarah is even more disenchanted than Lottie and she cannot bear to carry on in the same familiar pattern any longer. She becomes desperate to separate her life as a wife and mother from her life as a post-maternal woman. Leaving home allows the heroine to look at how the life she has lived up to this point has set the scene for her later years and to decide if

the cultural role she is expected to play still feels relevant. For Sarah it has clearly lost all relevance and she utterly rejects the old routine and proceeds to change every aspect of her life. As McIntyre *et al* explain, occupying a different place forces ‘upon each the necessity to negotiate traditional notions of what it means to be “at home” or “in place”’: in short, to ask “who am I?” (2006: 317). Discontented matron lit heroines usually describe home and the domestic realm as a place that has been important to them but now makes demands they are no longer prepared to meet. Sarah looks around the kitchen and muses ‘surely there should be more to life than this?’ (p. 45). Sarah has come to experience her position in the family as drudgery. It is significant that the kitchen often cited in common parlance as the heart of the home, is the space that she denounces as unfulfilling. Sarah begins to perceive her home as ‘the space of duty, of endless and infinitely repeatable chores that have no social value or recognition, the space of the affirmation and replenishment of others at the expense of and erasure of the self’ (Grosz, 1999: 219). Such a revelation is the metaphorical equivalent to becoming aware that she has been buried alive. The longing for more than lifelong domesticity and duty is echoed by Eva Cassady in *The Adultery Diet* and Eva Beaver in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*. Eva Cassady removes her attention from her husband by preoccupying her mind with a fantasy and Eva Beaver gives up on her family by refusing to let her husband into the house or take telephone calls from her children. What all these dissatisfied matron lit heroines crave more than home is a space apart from the life they have lived, up until this point. And like Lottie in *Blowing It* the majority of matron lit heroines become aware of this need when their adult children are about to leave home. The sense of redundancy and prospect of years of living without an obvious purpose engenders a longing for a different way to be. There is a commonality of desire expressed by these protagonists for escape because their feelings of security and purpose within the home have been transformed into a kind of living-death.

When children have grown, mothers are understood to be superfluous, often remaining mothers in name only. Sigmund Freud’s essay ‘The Uncanny’, written in 1919, can assist an understanding of how post-reproductive women in Western society are perceived and treated as uncanny and how they internalise the perception that they are uncanny. Post-menopausal women may fear that the only role they are allowed in society, as living-dead drones, is akin to being buried alive and this may provoke a feeling of the uncanny in themselves, so that they become at once, both disturbed and disturbing. Freud’s assertion that ‘to some people the idea of being buried alive [...] is the most uncanny thing of all’ (1919: 14) sheds light on

the feelings of these malcontent female protagonists. The troubling emotions expressed by many matron lit heroines provoke them into action and that action propels them into a transitional space. When a matron lit heroine considers that she has nothing left to live for she senses that she is disintegrating into nothingness. As a ‘nothing’ she is uncanny among those who are still considered ‘something’ and to herself. Eva in *The Adultery Diet* compares herself to an empty house slowly decaying under layers of dust. In chapter 1 I have discussed Eva’s unhappiness with both her body and her life. When her daughter (whom she refers to as her baby) leaves home, Eva perceives her own post-maternal body as an empty house. Her sex-life has stalled and she equates not being touched with the layering of dust. Eva feels that her husband’s disinterest is causing her to decay, although she is not yet dead. Like the decaying house Eva is neither alive nor dead. Although she does not physically leave home, she withdraws her attention and emotional investment from her husband and places it elsewhere. I interpret these female characters’ actions in the face of such feelings to be understandable and reasonable because, in essence, they are fighting for their lives. These matron lit heroines are driven by the need to be in a different place, either physically or metaphorically. While they do not always move to a different location, they all move into a different mode of behaviour and strive to explore their own minds, needs and emotions. It is useful to understand these grey chick lit protagonists as inhabiting a liminal space which has the potential for personal, as well as social transformation and subversion.

When these female characters step out of line those closest to them begin to perceive them as disruptive and powerful in an inexplicable way. Relatives either turn on these characters or turn away from them, as if their obvious displacement will taint their own lives. As I have remarked in the chapter about generational relationships and friendship, the heroine of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* is told that she is ‘wicked’ because she chooses to retreat. Post-maternal female protagonists who simply withdraw from the caring role are disturbing. Freud refers to Jentsch’s belief that ‘a particularly favourable condition for awakening uncanny feelings is when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not’ (1919: 8). According to Diane Jonte-Pace, although Freud repeatedly recounts and challenges Jentsch’s argument, ‘death, or the theme of the living/dead, animate/inanimate woman, rather than castration, seems to demand centrality’ (2001: 65). She refers to ‘that “uncanny home” that is simultaneously womb and tomb’ (Jonte-Pace, 2001: 146). Read in conjunction with the assertion by Jonte-Pace that Freud denotes maternal bodies as uncanny it is possible to argue that post-maternal bodies (living yet housing dead ovaries) are

symbolically and biologically uncanny. Osamu states that ‘the philosophers and writers who spoke of “existence” believed that it was the relationship to death— considered as one’s own death— that made existence “authentic” or “true”’ (2005: 132). Yet the post-reproductive woman is placed in a no-where space by her biology. It is as if she is somehow supposed to accept and integrate the knowledge that her biological function has ‘died’ within her but that she may have many more years to exist.

If it were possible to point to a definitive evolutionary theory for the long post-reproductive female life-span it would be easier to attribute value to these years but any such explanation is elusive. Lynnette Sievert says that ‘researchers argue passionately in defence of the grandmother hypothesis to explain the evolution of menopause’ (2006: 169). According to the grandmother hypothesis care provided by post-menopausal women for their children’s children is responsible for increased longevity. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, many post-menopausal women relish the grandmother role and derive joy from their relationships with grandchildren. But that is not to say that all post-reproductive women are entirely fulfilled in this role and for many others it is not even an available option. While the grandmother hypothesis may be the most popular, it remains insufficient for the needs of women in the twenty-first century. It may be that one of the reasons that post-menopausal women express feelings of being uncomfortable in their own bodies, in their families, homes and in society itself, is that no-one, not even science, can explain why they are still here.

Matron lit heroines experience themselves to be ‘uncanny’ in their own culture and it is an uncomfortable situation from which they want to escape. The longing for escape is vividly expressed by grey chick lit characters if not in words then through their actions. From Eva in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* to Sarah in *the gap year for grown ups*, to another Eva in *The Adultery Diet*, they all want to escape from restrictive cultural rules. And many of them leave their families without any real explanation, beyond an awkwardly expressed declaration that they must go. In *The Adultery Diet* Eva says nothing at all and leaves her situation without anyone knowing, until after the fact. Eva is provoked into this action when she wonders ‘when did life stop being about hope’ (Cassady, 2007: 8). The grey chick lit protagonists whom I discuss in this chapter have all, in their very personal and different ways, acted to refute the clichéd narrative of post-maternal life. Papadopoulos *et al* explain that ‘social transformation is not about reason and belief, it is about perception and hope’ (2008: xii). The heroines of grey chick lit know what they do not want, which they describe in one way or another as more of the same monotony, yet these characters do not quite name

what they do want. They pursue social transformation in ways that are somewhat clumsy, unfocused yet hopeful, if not always entirely successful.

The matron lit characters who choose to leave home and occupy a liminal space, are searching for meaning, purpose and a renewed sense of belonging. Patricia Hynes defines liminality as ‘a particular state experienced by people as they pass over the threshold of one phase of their life to another’ (2011: 2). When home and family cease to offer a sense of belonging these female characters look for it in other places or with other people, or like Eva Beaver they stay put and look inside. Jeffrey Lesser asks ‘is home a place or a state of mind? Is it both?’ (2003: 1). As matron lit seeks to answer this conundrum it demonstrates just how confusing and difficult the search can be. Claire Drewery proposes that liminality has the potential to liberate, because by transgressing both cultural and physical borders women are enabled to challenge ‘traditional assumptions about political, cultural and personal identity’ (2011: 4). Even as older women seek a new way to understand their identity as post-reproductive females in Western society, they also seek new ways to express their identity. According to Nicolaus the liminal space/place is the catalyst for such growth because ‘the awakening of creative individuality is preceded by an experience of liminality’ (2010: 180). However, it is a testing experience for women to reach for personal growth after their reproductive life has ceased because as Ronald Grimes asserts ‘the belief that human life follows a developmental course or map is a long-standing feature of Western conceptions of self’ (2002: 287). When growth is expressed in Western culture as a movement toward maturity, reproduction and nurturing of offspring, followed by decline and death, it is difficult to imagine any alternative.

The alternative scenarios proposed by matron lit involve acts of subversion and performative surprise that are often unintentional, yet no less powerful because of this. Judith Butler argues that it is possible to be subversive without clear intent and this is the type of action displayed in matron lit. The confusion expressed by grey chick lit heroines about their situation and their lack of rationale for absconding exposes the dilemma of ageing women in Western society. They do not have a space or place that is ‘homely’. They respond by rejecting their husbands and families in various ways and it is this chaotic statement of dissatisfaction, born out of frustration, which has the power to subvert social norms.

It is not always necessary to embark on a journey in order to invoke liminality. Mukherji explains:

The liminal does not have to involve actual travel or even physical movement because in physiology and psychology, limen is a threshold between psychological and physical experience. What is liminal is situated at a sensory threshold, something barely perceptible; poised between the explicit and the implicit, between external and internal, and by extension, between familiar and alien. Indeed, the body itself can act as a threshold between the self and the material world. (2011: xix)

Eva, the main character in *The Adultery Diet*, leaves her marriage mentally by occupying her mind with an affair, which for most of the narrative remains imaginary. This fantasy of a re-kindled romance with an old boyfriend allows Eva to escape into a transitional space. By occupying this liminal space she is empowered to change her appearance through diet and exercise. Eva's changing body becomes the threshold between herself and a new way of being in the world. Eva makes use of her position in liminal space to create her own renewal or rebirth, as a provocative vamp. Eva Beaver, the heroine of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, chooses to inhabit a near motionless liminality. This Eva is so concerned to withdraw from the material world that she cannot bear to let her feet touch the floor as she makes her way back and forth to her en-suite bathroom. She is determined to prevent this physical contact with her old life so she devises an elaborate manoeuvre in which she folds and drapes her bed sheet so that it is 'transformed into a rippling pathway which led from her bed to the adjoining bathroom' (p. 84). As I have noted in the chapter about friendship Eva has requested that her new friend Alexander strip her room of furniture and paint it white. In conjunction with the white pathway this is symbolic of purity and a clean slate. Eva requires this liminality in order to facilitate her thought process as she tries to make sense of her life.

The lack of intent to subvert social norms does not detract from the power of matron lit heroines to effect change in their social roles and familial relationships. According to Butler 'resistance' implies an 'exteriority to power' that 'subversion' does not. Butler says that she prefers to use the word subversion because resistance implies a pure oppositional 'stance' that is often absent. She argues:

Agency is a vexed affair, and resistance does not seem the right word for this kind of struggle. So if I am asked to accept the claim that there is no subverting of a norm without inhabiting that norm, then I fully agree. It is part of what is meant when I say that the norm that forms the subject is also the one that is subject to revision or alteration or critique. (Butler, 2006: 285)

Therefore, it would appear to be almost self-destructive for an older woman to acknowledge a desire to actively resist the social norms that construct her identity, even when those social norms render her 'uncanny'. Lacan says that 'we depend on the field of the Other which was there long before we came into the world, and whose circulating structures determine us as

subjects' (1979: 246). The very same social norms and language that have constructed her identity as a productive female member of society are now those that call her existence into question. The ageing heroines of matron lit have accepted an image of themselves as fertile women which now, in the absence of fertility, places their validity as a human being in question. By accepting as valid the concept that women are only equal to their functioning reproductive organs, women have exposed themselves to a world of woe once they reach the menopause. In matron lit novels there is rarely a moment of clarity when a protagonist knows exactly what is wrong with her situation and what to do in order to improve it. Any action that subverts cultural expectations is the product of distress. Cultural rules are broken by matron lit heroines but not as a result of any clearly defined motive. The upheaval they cause is a reaction to a power that both constructs and de-constructs their identity as women. Lacan states that 'anxiety is a crucial term of reference, because in effect anxiety is that which does not deceive' (1979: 41). Grey chick lit heroines experience high levels of anxiety about their place in the world and this prompts their actions even though they do not fully articulate how or in which ways they want things to change.

The post-menopausal female becomes delegitimised as a woman because she is already dead in terms of her usefulness to men and to society. Butler draws attention to the way in which 'the limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as "bodies"' (1993: xxiii). Grey chick lit explores and exposes the 'constructivism' of such limits through female protagonists such as 'The Bean' in Annie Saunder's *Busy Woman Seeks Wife*, who cries "I'm nothing now am I?" (2007: 216). As an old woman who no longer feels she has any purpose 'The Bean' believes she has to live out the remainder of her life as a 'nothing'. In the chapter about body image I discussed how 'The Bean', like Sarah in *the gap year for grown ups*, attempts to shop her way out of nothingness and that this ploy is ultimately unsuccessful. Nevertheless, while 'The Bean' and Sarah are spending money that they cannot afford, they do experience a short-lived feeling of transition to a liminal space where they can visualise becoming as 'new' as the items they purchase. This excessive consumerism represents a need to buy their way back into social life.

Female matron lit characters live in a culture that repeatedly tells them they no longer have any reason to 'live'. Older women are considered to be 'unreal' women and when they insist on acting as though they are still real women this constitutes a 'performative surprise'. Butler says:

Even as I think that gaining recognition for one's status as a sexual minority is a difficult task within reigning discourses of law, politics, and language, I continue to consider it a necessity for survival. [...] Those who are deemed "unreal" nevertheless lay hold of the real. [...] Vital instability is produced by that performative surprise. [...] Increasing the possibilities for a liveable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins. (1999: xxvi)

I do not propose that Butler includes here post-menopausal women as a sexual minority but I think that it might be fair to say that they are living 'on the sexual margins'. Eva, the heroine of *The Adultery Diet*, feels that she has been relegated to the sexual margins because she is no longer attractive. Eva's objective in losing weight and getting fit is so that she can once again be regarded as a desirable woman. As I have discussed in the chapter on body image and sexuality, Eva has internalised the cultural norm that links desirability with slimness and youth. In order to feel desirable Eva believes she has no option but to parody a youthful appearance in order to be pleasing to men. Eva thinks that unless she can accomplish this transformation she will continue to decay and die so she feels compelled to withdraw into a fantasy world where she can maintain the motivation to fulfil her objective. Eva is simultaneously conforming to social norms and disrupting them. Her eventual appearance as a slender and more youthful-looking woman dressed in a red cheongsam, constitutes a 'performative surprise'. Eva's lack of intention does not undermine her protest through parody. Akiko Shimizu describes how:

We have to stay in the field of vision and remain visible, [...] in order to be, to exist. [...] This is only possible through living with a body that is not our own, a body belonging to the others, for the visible body comes into being only as that which is seen by the gaze. (2008: 33)

She contends that behaviours such as parody and mimicry, 'are not so much based on a deliberate or active choice on the part of the "I", as on the inevitable necessity of the "I" staying in the field of vision: the "I" is drawn towards and becomes the image, rather than moving towards it as a result of its own will' (Shimizu, 2008: 34). Eva longs to be considered sexually attractive and her successful parody of youth results in the male attention she craves. If, as Butler maintains, such performative surprises are able to produce instability at the margins of social control then the actions of matron lit heroines are interesting examples of this positively upsetting behaviour. But as they have already been defeminised by the menopause and the loss of cultural value that is attached to this stage of life, then they really have nothing much left to lose.

Many of the female protagonists in matron lit novels express a desperate desire to escape the domestic sphere, which they had at some time in their past accepted, if not actively embraced. Dorothy Richardson's *Ordeal*, published in 1930, illustrates how difficult it is to actually leave the family home, when the heroine Fan considers hospitalisation to be a holiday and her only recourse to freedom. Drewery draws on the character of Fan to describe the depth of longing with which some women experience the need to leave behind all that has gone before, including their spouse. The difference between the female protagonist Fan in the 1930s publication that Drewery considers and heroines of grey chick lit is that the latter intend to take their holiday before they are dying. Even if this only means commandeering the marital bedroom as her own for the duration of the 'holiday', as Eva does in *The Woman Who Went to Bed For a Year* or leaving for France as Sarah does in *the gap year for grownups* these characters demand the personal space they require to embark on their search for self-knowledge.

When they cease to be legally responsible for their children's care, many grey chick lit protagonists reject domesticity. Sarah, in *the gap year for grown ups*, and Eva, in *The Adultery Diet*, both react to their adult children leaving home with a dawning realisation that at forty and forty-four years old respectively, they may have nothing left to live for. Sarah and Eva are plunged into deep distress by this insight and they are bewildered about how to move forward, so they just follow their instincts. Whether they are unhappy that their children have grown and left home or are elated to see them go, like Eva in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, most of these female characters are desperate to break free from family life. When her twins leave the house to start their courses at the University of Leeds, Eva 'slid the bolt across the door and disconnected the telephone' (Townsend, 2012: 1). Through these actions Eva (unsuccessfully) attempts to lay claim to the family home. In locking her family out and refusing to take their calls she positions herself as an uncaring woman. Yet Eva is not alone in desiring her own space. In a novel which hovers on the chick lit/grey chick lit border Terry McMillan's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* has the forty-two-year-old divorced heroine announce 'Finally some peace and quiet. And three whole weeks of it' (1996: 1). Unlike the over-forties mothers in later and more clearly matron lit novels, Stella's son Quincy has not yet grown and flown the nest. Although Quincy has only gone to stay with his father for a holiday, Stella relishes the time alone and without responsibility 'to do some make-Stella-feel-good-stuff' (p. 13). Stella says that her job in the financial sector is 'dull and boring'; she 'spends a lot of time being a mother' and she is

‘lonely as hell’ (p. 16). While Stella does not in any way neglect Quincy she is completely open about her delight that she now has some time in which to indulge her own wants and needs. Stella’s focus of attention is totally on herself for the three weeks that she is relieved of the responsibilities of motherhood. When these female characters leave the family home, refuse to tend to their families, or express their delight in freedom, they appear to act out of character by defying gender norms and as a consequence they attract censure.

When women leave the domestic sphere, they offend people and they are often mocked by members of their own family. As Chapman points out, ‘those people who escape the trappings of conventional life [...] cause considerable offence (or at the very least amusement) to people in the mainstream’ (1999: 197). This quotation from Chapman reiterates Butler’s theory that subversive behaviour acts on the ‘mainstream’ as a ‘performative surprise’. In leaving, these female characters disrupt the familiar world. By not conforming to expected patterns of behaviour these characters reveal a mysterious power that those around them find disturbing. Refusal of the caring role by a matron lit heroine is frequently labelled madness or ‘empty nest syndrome’ by other characters but it is plain that any such stereotypical diagnosis is a defensive gesture. As Lottie in the novel *Blowing It* anticipates, the revelation of her plan to leave home attracts displeasure and she is so often referred to as mad or crazy that she internalises and regurgitates this language when describing her own need to abandon domesticity. Finally fed-up with catering for her demanding family, as she prepares legs of lamb for dinner, Lottie worries that she might be ‘overcome with an urge to go crazy, savaging them till they were shredded and inedible’ (p. 57). Lottie cannot allow herself to calmly refuse to cater for her family but has to imagine acting out the role of mad-woman in order to be able to throw the food away. According to Freud the appearance of madness can cause uncanny feelings. Conversely, this correlation may explain why people so often label older women as mad. Use of the label crazy is an attempt to rationalise the uncanny sensation that older women arouse, rather than acknowledge that we are disturbed by their closeness with death, in the presence of their dead ovaries, and their distance from death, in their anticipated chronological longevity. When Eva takes to her bed her mother-in-law Yvonne’s explanation for Eva’s unusual action is that Eva is an attention-seeking drunk who should be left to ‘sleep it off’ (p. 8). Yvonne’s reaction is a blatant refusal to acknowledge the fact that Eva may have a legitimate reason for her behaviour. Her dismissive account of Eva absolves Yvonne from any responsibility of care. Although this abdication of responsibility is the very thing that Eva is acting out, Yvonne cannot recognise the connection. Eva is repeatedly

hounded to explain her decision to go to bed for an indefinite period of time. Her husband wants to know why she has decided to retreat from life, her friends want to know, his mother says that Eva is so neurotic some kind of breakdown was practically inevitable and Eva's mother, Ruby, calls in Dr Bridges, who demands an explanation. Eva responds with a straightforward "No, I can't explain" (p. 68). It is not that Eva is refusing to explain her actions but that she does not have access to the language which would provide a coherent explanation that would be acceptable to other people. Ruby, who has been hovering in the background during this doctor-patient consultation, pronounces her own diagnosis: "There's nothing much wrong with her, Doctor. It's that syndrome. Empty nest" (p. 70). This throwaway diagnosis and dismissal of Eva's distress is representative of the clichés used by those people closest to her who despite all their questions, do not want to really know why she is so unhappy. Eva has already heard this theory from her husband Brian and she is angry. Eva throws her pillow and shouts: "I've been counting the days until they left home from the moment they were born! It felt as though I'd been taken over by two aliens. All I wanted to do was to go to bed alone and to stay there for as long as I liked" (p. 70). Eva instinctively craves solitude in which to reflect on the impact that family life has had on her thought processes, decisions and lifestyle. She is convinced that this is the correct course of action for her to take despite being unable to articulate her reasons in a socially acceptable manner.

With the prospect of many more years before them, matron lit characters try to express their need for something more, or at least something different. In the *gap year for grown ups* Sarah's husband David tells her that she is expecting too much from life. She retorts "But that's just it. I don't think it is expecting too much. I'm only forty" (p. 45). And Eva in *The Adultery Diet* is dispirited by the thought that the story of her life could be over by her mid-forties. For both Eva in *The Adultery Diet* and Sarah in *the gap year for grown ups* the need for 'more story' surfaces in the wake of adult children leaving home. McIntyre *et al* propose that 'self-narrative implies the opportunity to create a story that is constructed not from one, but from multiple places' (2006: 317). If this is the case then the female protagonists of grey chick lit novels who express a wish to leave home are seeking a way to make their life-stories multi-faceted, instead of mundane. As Christina Julios contends 'it is through different "narratives" that [...] identities can be said to be constructed and re-constructed in relation to each other' (2008: 9). The female protagonists of popular fiction who are struggling to reconstruct their identities seem to be instinctively aware that staying where they are, either

figuratively or just as often literally, will not enable them to discover exactly who or all that they are, either as an individual or in relation to others. In the foreword to *Boom* Paco Underhill says that women of the 'baby-boom' generation 'have become used to being, and are self-confident in, who they are' (2006: xiv). This sentiment is not reflected in grey chick lit novels and it is only the elderly protagonists, such as Eleanor, the eighty-three-year-old heroine of *Homecoming*, or seventy-nine-year-old Amber in *Scandals* who display a level of confidence about their identity. The baby-boomers of grey chick lit are, for the most part, still struggling to find purpose and mutually supportive companionship.

Leaving the past behind can be accomplished by staying in the same place yet radically changing relationships and surroundings. As I have discussed in the chapter that concerns friendship Eva in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* has her bedroom redecorated, rearranged and boarded up by her new friends Alexander and Peter. Eva locks out everyone who is associated with her past and only communicates with those who have assisted her withdrawal. Building, renovating or reconfiguring living space to accommodate a new purpose constitutes a liminal and transitional space between life as it is and life as the protagonists of grey chick lit hope it might become. On a much grander scale than Eva Beaver, Miranda Meadowe fights to fulfil a dream from university days of communal living with five old friends, in the grounds of her crumbling country house Mead. Miranda is the widowed heroine of Rosie Thomas's *Lovers & Newcomers* and she is grappling with the prospect of ageing with unfulfilled dreams. She wants to re-kindle the youthful feelings of common purpose that she had once shared with her friends from university days. Without her husband, Mead and the surrounding land is a barren and dead space that Miranda seeks to bring back to life by filling it with the lovers and newcomers of the title. When Miranda contemplates her eighty-six-year-old mother Joyce's lonely life she mutters 'old age is horrible' but when she thinks about her fellow 'boomers' she asserts:

They were not old, not yet, and the towering confidence of their generation had been such that they had not expected the indignity to befall them. Gathering at Mead, occupying themselves with their houses, and their changing relationships to one another and the world, was an act of defiance. (Thomas, 2010: 184)

Unlike the 'boomers' that Underhill describes these fictional characters have their self-confidence shaken by the realisation that they too will one day be old. In confronting this fact of life Miranda and her friends are galvanised into the process of preparing for and establishing a way of life that they hope will sustain them in their later years. In her refusal of the prospect of a lonely old age Miranda is prepared to defy convention and risk the label of

eccentric, which she believes has been bestowed on her by the locals for turning her home into a kind of commune. All this rebuilding, refurbishing and reconfiguring of space represents transition from one stage of life to another.

When home has lost its meaning it becomes possible to recreate a sense of ‘shelteredness’ through rebuilding an old house, while simultaneously building a new life. Elizabeth Wrenn’s *Last Known Address* is a matron lit novel in which friends C.C., Meg and Shelly leave home because for each of them it has lost its meaning or has become uncanny because of difficulties and changing relationships. On her last day in the house that she has recently sold the main protagonist C.C. reflects on ‘how odd it had felt, padding about her nearly empty house these last few days, knowing it wasn’t hers anymore’ (Wrenn, 2008: 5). At this moment in time C.C. inhabits a liminal space because she has traded in her home for the money which will fund the long journey to the house she has inherited. Her new house awaits her in a state of disrepair and the three friends travel across the country to renovate it in a mission to find a new sense of homeliness. As C.C. packs her suitcase and looks around her empty bedroom she mourns the loss of her partner Lenny and contemplates her future. C.C. does not know for sure if she is happy or sad, as she experiences pangs of regret for what she has lost and excitement about what lies ahead. Despite her sadness, ‘she laughed a little’ (p. 4). C.C. is eager to move on but still finds it difficult to say goodbye to her daughter Kathryn and grandchild Lucy, even though her relationship with her daughter is fraught with anxiety. C.C. frets ‘she didn’t know how to get off these eggshells with Kathryn’ (p. 9). All this confused emotion is linked in with C.C.’s worries about growing old as she thinks: ‘If fifty was the new forty, it still came with the aches and pains of fifty’ (p. 5). She is between emotions, between homes, between sorrow at leaving her daughter and relief that she can leave. C.C. does not know whether to laugh or cry, mourn or rejoice, she only knows that she has to go. For C.C. the loss of Lenny is entwined with the prospect of ‘C.C. and Shelly and Meg’s big adventure’ (p. 4). It seems that the sense of displacement which is expressed in ordinary and familiar terms by matron lit characters, is in fact describing a condition in which these women perceive both their place in their home, society and themselves to be uncanny.

The reactions of family members to these heroines’ acts of withdrawal are varied but all seem rooted in anger and fear. C.C.’s daughter Kathryn, in *Last Known Address*, angrily shrugs off her embrace and C.C. knows that ‘Kathryn’s anger was really frustration that she too could not leave town, have an adventure’ (p. 6). In *Blowing It* Lottie’s son Ilex seems almost obsessed by his fear that his parents will become his financial responsibility. Lottie’s

daughter Sorrel resorts to accusations of madness because she does not like the idea that the family home is being sold to fund her parents' first-class round-the-world trip. And in *the gap year for grown ups* Sarah's daughter Claire is so annoyed about her mother's sudden departure to France that when Sarah calls to chat about her shopping spree and new haircut, Claire's response is muteness. When told about her sister's plans Rachel berates her 'for ages' and Sarah feels that Rachel seems 'more distressed than she had been when their mother had died' (p. 118). Then Rachel warns Sarah forebodingly "you'll be bored within a week and realise what you're missing. You'll see. Like I told you, it won't be any better anywhere else" (p. 118). In order to 'get her groove back' Stella travels to Jamaica and falls in love with twenty-year-old Winston. In the chapter on ageism and wellbeing it has been demonstrated that Richard Klein (2010) advocates taking risks as a positive move toward constructive change. While he acknowledges that falling in love may incur the risk of an unhappy ending, he proposes that this gamble is conducive to wellbeing (Klein, 2010). If Klein is correct then Stella's pursuit of romance, in the face of cultural disapproval, can be seen as an enlightened decision. However, when her sister Angela, finds out about Stella's relationship with Winston she becomes upset and pronounces "You have gone and just completely lost your mind, haven't you?" (p. 205). The reactions of both Rachel and Angela are typical of the way in which people seek to assuage their fear and/or resentment of unconventional female behaviour with accusations of incompetence or insanity. When women move into a different place in life, others perceive them as betraying rules of gender and react with anger.

In her work about women travellers Sidonie Smith sets out an argument that traditionally, travelling has been seen as a masculine pursuit which enhances male power and she asks 'what does it make of a woman, who is at once a subject at home and a subject at home? What does it mean for a particular woman to gain access to this defining arena of agency in the West?' (2001: x). Some of the ageing heroines of grey chick lit, although having identified, and been identified, with home, become so disenchanted with both home and family and they literally flee. As Smith says 'the "home" that is identified as feminine, feminized, and equated with woman becomes that which must be left behind in the pursuit of agency' (2001: x). Sarah in *the gap year for grown ups* and C.C. in *Last Known Address* both leave home in an attempt to become self-sufficient but with varied results. David Celani argues that 'the whole idea of giving up on one's family is foreign to human nature' (2005: 127). Yet grey chick lit reveals that there may come a time when some women experience

such a profound urge for self-preservation that they need to walk away from family ties. In *the gap year for grown ups* the heroine Sarah gives her children little notice that she is leaving the country for an indefinite period of time. Sarah's behaviour may be interpreted as unfeminine when women's femininity is domesticated through cultural associations with 'home'. Smith asserts that 'whatever particular women may be doing in their everyday lives, the idea of woman as "earth, shelter, enclosure," as "home," persists, anchoring femininity, weighing it down, fixing it as a compass point' (2001: x). By abandoning home and family these older heroines appear to be unnatural women but when they feel that they have no role, or that the socially prescribed role is unfulfilling, then they must leave.

These protagonists express a need to be free from the expectation that they should remain in the domestic sphere for the rest of their lives. No longer content with her life, Sarah, in *the gap year for grown ups*, tells David "I wouldn't have changed a moment, but you have to understand what it's done to me as a person" (p. 55). For as long as her children were at home Sarah was able to smother her dream of playing the violin in an orchestra but she cannot stand the monotony of her life any longer. Sarah has disconnected herself from the responsibility of making sacrifices to hold her family together. As Papadopoulos *et al* explain:

The very first moment of subversion is the detachment from what may seem essential for holding a situation together and for making sense of that situation. Escape is a mode of social change that is simultaneously elusive and forceful enough to challenge the present configuration of control. (2008: xiv)

Even though these matron lit protagonists are not sure about what they wish to replace it with, it becomes essential for their survival that they explore other spaces. Papadopoulos *et al* contend that 'there is nothing heroic about escape. It usually begins with an initial refusal to subscribe to some aspects of the social order that seem to be inescapable' (2008: xiii). This is the situation of the grey chick lit heroines who leave home. While they may have subscribed to the 'social order' for much of their lives it has now become untenable.

It seems that Eva, in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, begins her prolonged act of subversion by detaching herself from any feeling of responsibility for 'caring', whether that applies to her husband, his mother, their children or her mother. When Eva insists that people should care for her, though she claims to be perfectly healthy, she turns the social order of her family upside down. Within an hour of her children leaving home Eva abandons her family to fend for themselves, and her, by taking to her bed. Her husband quickly tires of feeding her

which is ironic after all the years she has prepared meals for him. But as Brian has been awakened to the monotony of domesticity the couple begin to establish a more honest and authentic communication. During a confrontation in which Eva accuses Brian of never answering her questions ‘properly’ he shouts “for God’s sake! Use your own bloody brain!” (p.41). Eva replies, “I haven’t used my brain for so long, the poor thing is huddled in a corner, waiting to be fed” (p. 41). In the wake of her withdrawal Eva and Brian begin to be direct with one another. Eva Beaver claims this liminal configuration of space, place, and time for herself, without apology but she is sanctioned by her family and the authorities for doing so. Kevin Quashie argues that:

Liminal subjectivity is not exactly an achieved state; instead, it is a series of uncoverings — like the ever outward concentric circles made by a pebble’s break of pond surface, circles that also progress ever inward. What is uncovered is not a new identity but, instead, a self that was always there. (2004: 78)

As Eva lies in her bed wondering who will bring her next meal, or if anyone will remember to feed her at all, she struggles to recall the events in her life which have formed and defined who she is. ‘Eva fumbled in the cupboard of her bedside table, where she kept her most precious things, and pulled out her school exercise books’ (p. 41). During her time in bed Eva struggles to filter through her thoughts and understand how she really feels about her life, beginning with her regret that she had been deprived of the experience of university because ‘she had been needed to go to work and bring in a wage’ (p. 41). It is obvious that Eva is still deeply sad about this course of events. Although she does not overtly blame her mother for curtailing her dreams, there is undoubtedly a residue of resentment toward Ruby. As I have noted in the friendship chapter Eva is aware that she has a great deal to think over. This bitterness is just one of the issues which Eva attempts to work through in her struggle to move forward. But Eva’s retreat from the world is brutally curtailed before she has completed her quest to figure out her life. She is forced to comply with social norms under the threat of being committed to a mental health facility. After over a year in her bed Eva is compelled to leave it by the imminent threat of a ‘mental health professional’ with a ‘Section Four’ and ‘the police with a battering ram’ (p. 435). She is thwarted from moving forward from her epiphany that she longs to rewind time to infancy, a revelation which has been discussed in the chapter about friendship. Nevertheless, some of the ageing female characters of matron lit novels manage to escape the confines of cultural rules long enough to explore their identity as an older woman in Western society.

If women desire a rite of passage into a post-maternal stage of personal growth then it seems that they will have to invent it for themselves. Grimes sets out the case that ‘in most societies there is a ritually barren wasteland between marriage and death. Between these two points, roughly from a person’s late twenties to his or her midseventies, there are few if any rites of passage to facilitate transition’ (2002: 288). It appears that many grey chick lit protagonists struggle with a desperate need to change and grow in a culture that expects them to stagnate and decline. The glaring problem facing many matron lit heroines is that they no longer know what their purpose is supposed to be. According to their spouses, families and culture, they have already been the best that they can be, namely fertile and nurturing; they have fulfilled their purpose. Everywhere they see signs that tell them they cannot expect any more than this, but still they crave more. Leider expresses the opinion that purpose ‘is the one thing that cannot be taken from us’ (2010: xii). However, it does seem that purpose can be taken from us when it is not chosen but ascribed and we appear to outlive it. Leider suggests that ‘asking new questions as we age is part of the quest for purpose’ (2010: 26). Grey chick lit heroines do ask a lot of questions and they are on a quest for purpose, if only because their former purpose has been lost to the passage of time and the cultural obsession with female youth and fecundity.

Grey chick lit heroines are emotionally disturbed by the meanings that are attached to the post-reproductive female body and are propelled to seek out a space that is ‘other’ or liminal. As Drewery contends ‘crises of identity are at the heart of the liminal condition’ (2011: 33). Each of the female characters in grey chick lit who leaves home or leaves their family in some less overt guise, does so because of a ‘crisis of identity’. Yet the absconding female characters of matron lit almost all return home eventually, without having resolved all their issues. Still, they are somehow changed usually for the better and as a result do become somewhat more content and self-confident. While Drewery discusses modernist literary fiction of the early twentieth century, the following observation could pertain to popular fiction of the twenty-first century:

Once glimpsed, a shift occurs in the subjectivity of the protagonists in these stories; albeit often a subtle one. Even though they may glimpse a potential which cannot necessarily be realized, characters can still return to their lives where they were. They cannot, however, return as they were. In Mansfield’s and Woolf’s stories a residue of liminality similarly pushes against and subverts ‘meaning’, whilst refusing to resolve the conflicts it reveals. (2011: 49)

The process of leaving home or the familiar state of affairs, the time spent absent from home and/or living in a different way and the eventual return home, is a recurrent trope of matron lit but does not necessarily signify a return to the status quo. By the last chapter of the narrative most grey chick lit heroines have, in one way or another, gained a measure of clarity about who they are and what they want from life. Sarah in *the gap year for grown ups* is an example of this pattern. Although Sarah is desperate to leave her husband, adult children and domesticity, she suffers the unhappy consequences of her actions, which compel her to return home. As a result Sarah and David begin to open up a dialogue, which allows both of them to express their needs honestly. David confides “you’re not the only one with dreams, I just didn’t realise as quickly as you did that I had them” and Sarah responds “let’s do a shopping list of dreams, then. You go first” (p. 338). Like Brian and Eva in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, they begin to communicate by speaking plainly. Although Sarah has been embarrassed by the financial consequences of her escape, when she returns to her family it is not against her will. While some grey chick lit heroines may actually take up where they left off and to all outward appearances have changed nothing, the difference is that they are making a more informed and individuated choice. Although these female protagonists may appear to have given in to the power of cultural norms, if we read between the lines this is not always the case. They carry their ‘glimpse of potential’ inside them and the ‘residue of liminality’ which Drewery cites as central to a change in perception transforms these characters’ understanding of their place in the family and society. The social transgression of abandoning home and family disrupts and disorganises the borders of conventional behaviour.

These heroines have chosen to move out of their given roles, adopted an alternate mode of being and for one reason or another chosen or at least agreed, to return home. Matron lit heroines such as Eva in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* are not always allowed the time and space they need to work through their issues and reach a better place. Even characters like Sarah in *the gap year for grown ups* who think they have found a better life frequently discover that situation to be flawed and difficult. But they have crossed a threshold of acceptable conduct and returned with some insight about their lives even if this falls short of the deeper awareness which they had hoped to discover. Subha Mukherji observes that ‘rites of passage are divided into rites of separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (postliminal)’ (2011: xix). In *the gap year for grown ups* this is precisely the sequence which Sarah moves through. Sarah vehemently states her need for separation and

quickly follows through by leaving for France. She moves in with a friend, gets a 'makeover', takes up a new job and a lover. Although Sarah's new job leads to satisfaction as a musician, her lover betrays her trust by using her bank cards to run up huge bills. This fraud causes a financial crisis, which her husband David helps to solve. Despite this unpleasant outcome, Sarah has fleetingly experienced the fulfilment of her romantic dreams. Sarah has been more successful in her pursuit of rewarding work. She is a violinist and through her employment as Monsieur Flocourt's secretary eventually plays in his orchestra at the Festival du Printemps. On her first meeting with Monsieur Flocourt he asks Sarah "Why are you here?" Sarah replies "Because I need a job." Monsieur Flocourt tries harder to make his meaning clear as he asks "No, I mean why are you here in France. Have you run away?" Sarah replies to his question with an answer, which encapsulates the confusion, hopes and dreams of many matron lit heroines. She says "I was rather hoping I'd come to find something" (p. 116). Even though Sarah is desperately hurt and humiliated by her lover's actions and she returns to England somewhat in disgrace, she is still somehow empowered by her sojourn in France. Sarah did find something that was very important to her in the form of job satisfaction and this positive result fulfils her in a way that domesticity had failed to do. Sarah is able to incorporate her rejection of domesticity, her adventures with their mixture of positive and negative outcomes and her eventual return to family life into a personal life lesson, which cumulatively gives her hope for the future. Sarah's time away from her home and family has been experienced as liminal space which has enabled the transition into a more respectful and honest relationship with her husband.

The main protagonists of grey chick lit do not usually pursue a clearly defined end goal. Rather, they struggle and reach out through their anxiety to gain the experience necessary to re-ignite hope in the possibility of change. Laurie Johnson proposes that the 'experience of free-floating, "liberated" anxiety is uncanny' (2010: 27). In addition, Johnson also reveals the source of discomfort which matron lit heroines experience when home no longer feels like home and they need to search for a new feeling of homeliness in some other space or place. She explains that 'the return "home" implied by uncanny yearning is a dissociated, disoriented shifting of the very meaning of "home"' (Johnson, 2010: 30). Further, she argues that 'the intense anxiety caused by uncanny phenomena drives insight and change.' (Johnson, 2010: 30). As I have discussed throughout this chapter a number of grey chick lit heroines are powered by uncanny anxiety to seek change and hope. In matron lit novels, readers can find multiple descriptions of the process of mounting discontent that culminate in the need to

leave. Papadopoulos *et al* contend that ‘imperceptible moments of social life are the starting point of contemporary forces of change’ (2008: xiii). Grey chick lit heroines’ moments of crisis are fictional representations of the type of ‘imperceptible moments of social life’, which can lead to change. Such change is not huge or universal and is not represented in matron lit as being part of any kind of movement. It is represented as small, personal and driven by the need of the individual for autonomy and meaning. Tony Chapman suggests that ‘it is only exceptional people who fundamentally challenge the social rules of conventionality’ (1999: 197). However, the female characters in matron lit novels who turn away from conventional behaviour are not ‘exceptional people’ but previously predictable, ordinary women who are pushed to break social rules because eventually, they find the rules too restrictive to tolerate.

Grey chick lit heroines do not leave their old life for a new life. They move into a place that needs only to offer the possibility to ‘think’ a new and better life. Drawing on Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, Kevin Hetherington defines heterotopia ‘as spaces of alternate ordering. Heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things’ (1997: viii). The heroines of matron lit who leave home, either physically or metaphorically, are searching for a better way to ‘be’ or for an ‘alternative way of doing things’. Hetherington clarifies:

Heterotopia do exist, but they only exist in this space between, in this relationship between spaces. [...] They are spaces of deferral, spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, from nowhere, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve. (1997: ix)

While none of these characters ever quite name what they are seeking it is clear that they feel compelled to move into a space where it will become possible to imagine a better life. In this genre there is no explicit naming of heterotopias, utopias, liminal spaces or thresholds. Yet in every instance where a female protagonist abandons home and family, she does so in a bid to escape the mundane and to invoke a dreaming space. As Nicolaus phrases it ‘in liminality fixities disappear and everything is in flux’ (2010: 181). When grey chick lit characters express their discontent with their immediate circumstances and set out on a quest to discover something better or at least different, they instigate a chain of events and thought processes that disturb the present social order of their lives.

The ageing heroines of matron lit seek out liminal space, and they cross the thresholds of conventional performances of old age. Their depicted thoughts, speech and action do not

typically fit the social norms and codes of acceptable conduct are not always adhered to. And yet they do not stray so far out of the readers' experience as to be unrecognisable. These characters are both familiar and unfamiliar, as they choose to abandon the familiar and move into the unfamiliar. The actions of these female characters are recognisable and unrecognisable, as they themselves have become, because as post-maternal women they have lost their purpose in the family and society. An escape from the domestic round into liminal space, whether real or imaginary, enhances their prospects of individuation and autonomy.

## **Conclusion**

This discussion and analysis of matron lit has demonstrated the power of popular culture to reflect and instigate changes within Western society. Language constructs identity and the social world so it is not possible to exist as a self-conscious being outside of discourse.

Matron lit reflects the culture that it is composed within and exposes the detrimental effects of societal ageism on the mental and physical wellbeing of ageing women, as demonstrated in the first two chapters. Chapter 1 shows how the constitution of the subject exposes the visible signs of ageing to be detrimental to women's value. Chapter 2 explains how this gendered ageism has an impact upon the wellbeing of older women. As B. S. Nimavat and Dushyant Nimavat explain 'literature can never remain aloof and isolated from the age in which it is born. It is the reflection of age. The impact of the significant economic and social movements is also found in literature' (2009: 4). In the form of a written statement, any unspoken, cultural 'given' becomes an 'intellectual object' that can be analysed, torn apart and put back together in an altered form. In reading a cultural 'truth' objectified as an element of fiction the possibility of authentic agreement or disagreement may take the place of unconsidered acceptance and obedience. Until cultural norms are clearly articulated and questioned they can only be experienced as a natural consequence of gender relations and hierarchies. A close reading of both theoretical and sociological texts provides an understanding of how cultural laws are established, disseminated throughout society and affect individual lives. Therefore reading non-fiction in conjunction with novels offers an opportunity for clarification and comprehension of the systems at work that 'naturalise' society's regulations. Matron lit makes a significant contribution to the debate around ageing and gender, in its portrayal of mature women's lives within the cultural arena. As I have mentioned in the introduction to my thesis, this genre's readers express their delight that its heroines are recognisable within the realm of ordinary experience.

In empathising with the heroine, as a subject constructed within and experiencing the consequences of cultural politics, the reader may engage with the empowering or debilitating effects that cultural rules have on the heroine's sense of self-worth. Chapters 3 and 4 are both concerned with how the subject is 'policed' by social discourse and chapter 5 illustrates elements of subversion and 'undoing' that are employed by protagonists in pursuit of a better life. Popular texts can offer the reader an opportunity to 'try on' different selves in an attempt to discover a more comfortable 'fit'. In chapter 4 I referred to Shelagh Strawbridge's assertion that 'storytelling' is conducive to recognising that whatever situation a person may

find themselves in, the story is not over. Grey chick lit offers its readers a rich source of alternative scenarios, while also ‘flagging up’ the cultural consequences that may befall wayward heroines. The disruptive anguish expressed by matron lit heroines about their place in contemporary society is given serious consideration within a genre, which on face value, seeks only to entertain. The distress voiced by mature female protagonists may be understood as the Lacanian anxiety ‘which does not deceive’ that I discussed in chapter 5. Such anxiety indicates a real problem with which many older women are struggling to deal. They are at a loss to understand their value to Western society if they no longer produce or care for other people. Grey chick lit gives a voice to the over-forties women who are not content to be ‘written off’ once their biological and societal function is complete. Nor are they always amenable to the socially sanctioned idea of re-enacting their nurturing role with other generations, for example grandchildren or elderly parents, in an attempt to remain useful within the family and society. Which is not to say that mature women completely reject caring and nurturing roles when child rearing is complete. But matron lit voices the concerns of older women that this role is not enough. Increased longevity has opened up a debate in matron lit between more of the same versus an opportunity for change. The majority of matron lit heroines encounter the antagonism of family and society if they reject an assumption of continuity. These heroines speak out for transformation and renegotiation. Grey chick lit expresses a search for balance between valuing the child rearing years and a strong desire for something more. While not rejecting family outright matron lit acknowledges that as women age, with the prospect of many more years of healthy life before them, they yearn for a role in life which is in addition to the role of nurturer.

Matron lit heroines often decide that when their youngest child leaves home, this is the time to nurture themselves. These fictional characters frequently have to fight against prejudice for the right to be self-centred. The fundamental premise of matron lit is that the years of a woman’s life following raising a family, offer a window of opportunity for re-assessment or re-invention of the ‘self’. Though the protagonists encounter resistance and sometimes appear to be punished for their selfish behaviour, they work to negotiate a ‘new order’. While adult children may be initially rejected, along with spouse and other relatives, the ties to family eventually adapt or more rarely fall away, in the wake of the heroine’s quest for autonomy. Grey chick lit novels demonstrate that longer life expectancy affords Western women the opportunity for ‘individuation’ in ways that may not have been available to previous generations. Certainly the need to be acknowledged as an individual is expressed repeatedly

and in varied ways by older heroines. Matron lit supports their search in much the same way that literature has validated the young hero's quest for an ethical identity throughout history. Grey chick lit articulates a dilemma that has impeded women's pursuit of an individual identity until now and offers tentative solutions and thought-provoking scenarios. Increased longevity in the Western world provides women with an opportunity which has not existed in the past, except for the few who choose to 'go-it-alone'. While men have traditionally been encouraged through culture and literature to 'find themselves' before 'settling down' women have not had the time to do this or the approval of society. Women have long been advised against waiting 'too long' before selecting a mate and reproducing, by the medical profession and social mores. Both high and low culture have long supported the distinction between the eligible bachelor and the old maid. Now that women can look forward to a long period of post-reproductive life they are still having to fight against the disapproval and censure of a culture which equates women's usefulness to society with nurturing. Matron lit articulates the distress that older women experience as a consequence of this restrictive position. This alone would qualify the genre as useful to the gender and ageing debate. The fact that there is an ever-increasing fictional body of work, allows the fantasy of a way out and creates the myth of the woman who willingly cared for her family, now choosing to live for herself. By repeatedly articulating the myth of the purposeful mature woman, grey chick lit becomes a subversive tool in the 'undoing' of ageism.

It seems that what matron lit has achieved so far, is to push the age-barrier of what can be considered to be an entertaining character within the realm of popular fiction. Further it demonstrates that ageing is not exclusively about deterioration of physical and mental function. As yet the ceiling hovers somewhere in the ninth decade of the life span but I entertain the hope that grey chick lit authors will choose to smash this before too long.

Kausler *et al*, state that:

The life span of a given species is the length of time a member of that species could live if free of disease and accidents that prevent fulfilment of that duration. It may be estimated for a species by the oldest age a member of that species has been known to live. For human beings, that age is at least 122 years (a woman in France died in 1997 at age 122 years). There have been other reports of individuals who have lived longer than 120 years, but these claims have been difficult to verify. (2007: 247)

Unfortunately, it would appear that there is a whole generation missing from grey chick lit and I assume that this omission will only begin to be addressed when ageist attitudes toward the very elderly have been weakened. I have yet to come across a matron lit character who is

much over eighty years old. According to Christina Victor 'expectation of life at birth has increased from around 40 years to 76 years for men, and 80 years for women' (2006: 139). It seems that matron lit reflects the life expectancy at birth rather than the life span.

What began as a sub-genre of chick lit, has been established as matron lit and is now being taken up by television. Until now 'women of a certain age' have only been allowed to show themselves in the guise of audience to and support of younger characters and this role clearly reflects cultural tradition. The one exception to this convention has been soap operas, which have traditionally treated the lives of all age groups as a rich source for storylines. From the early days of *Coronation Street* strong female characters such as Mrs Sharples, have had their say. Alternatively, an older woman was allowed to take centre stage in the guise of a wily old sleuth, such as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. But only now have older women's life stories been seen as sufficient in themselves and allowed to stand alone, with younger characters occupying the peripheral roles. ITV's newest situation comedy is *Pat and Cabbage*, which documents the misadventures of two sixty-something women who refuse to 'grow old gracefully'. The actress who plays Cabbage, Cherie Lunghi, is quoted as saying "the women who grew up in the Sixties and Seventies are starting to hit 60, myself included. [...] It's throwing all the old notions of what it's like to be that age up into the air." Her co-star Pat, played by actress Barbara Flynn, says "here are two ladies who suddenly find themselves free of responsibilities, so they start to behave like their younger selves. [...] It's a truthful take on women's families and friendships, presented in a charming way." The author of the article, Jo Dearden points out that 'this comedy series comes hot on the heels of shows like *Being Eileen*, *Last Tango in Halifax* and *Love and Marriage*' (2013). She goes on to ask 'is this part of a growing trend for TV dramas to focus on the more mature woman?' (Dearden, 2013). This is a question that may offer up some interesting answers and point the way to more pertinent questions, regarding the richness of later life, now that academics are choosing to investigate this genre. The BAFTA award winning *Last Tango in Halifax*, while at times gently amusing, stands apart because it is a serious examination of family life from the point of view of its older protagonists. Alex Fletcher states '*Last Tango in Halifax* cast make ageism swipe at BBC. *Last Tango in Halifax* star Anne Reid made a thinly veiled dig at the BBC at last night's BAFTAs (May 12), applauding the broadcaster for finally realising that they can tell stories about characters over the age of 35' (2013). Further academic research into popular culture, regarding the possibility for women and men to live active, fulfilling lives into old age affords the opportunity to broaden understanding about how we may choose

to use the years beyond retirement from either paid work or housework, in a positive, productive and individually rewarding way. This will in turn provide role models of thriving old people who are in a position to contribute to society even in ill health.

It is important to reiterate that grey chick lit is a product of its time and culture. The narratives reflect the dominant discourse in ways that may be interpreted as *both* perpetuating and subverting ageist, gendered social norms, sometimes within the same text. This conflict powers a dynamic that may generate social change. Matron lit speaks about the reality of post-reproductive women's lives with wit. While it exaggerates some scenarios for comic effect, matron lit rarely fails to speak a kind of truth. On its own matron lit will not set mature women free to live as they please but as a participant in the debate around ageing and gender it contributes an insight that only fiction is equipped to deliver. My thesis is part of this debate and I argue that grey chick lit has the potential to weaken the power of ageist and gendered discourse.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: E-mail interview with Tara Gavin (personal communication) 2012**

What date was the Next series launched?

TG: The Next series was launched in July 2006.

What led Harlequin to consider publishing a series for older women?

TG: Harlequin is always researching and looking for ways to provide the best entertainment for their readers. Research indicated that readers were looking for stories that reflected their lifestyles and the fact that they had reached the 'next' stage in their lives. This search was also reflected in other sectors of the marketplace: More magazine was launched; the Gap created a new store focused on this segment of their customers, etc. Harlequin looked over the changes in women's lifestyles and needs, and created the line Next.

Did Harlequin carry out market research which indicated a readership for novels with mature women as heroines?

TG: yes. We conducted a great deal of research both on the editorial and the cover fronts. All of the research indicated that Next would be enthusiastically received.

Who were the target market for the Next novels and what age group were they?

TG: the target market were the women from the baby boom generation.

How were the Next novels marketed?

TG: There was a great deal of media excitement over the launch of NEXT--with stories ranging from USA Today to Newsweek. More Magazine also did a feature on the Next segment of readers. There were ads placed in magazines catering to the baby boom generation and we also did a great deal of trade and in-book advertising. The novels were marketed with our other series books in book stores, on the Harlequin racks, and when launched and for a year thereafter, we published each title in two formats: one in mass market paperback and the other in a taller, 'C' format. Both versions were at the same cover price.

Were the book covers distinctive?

TG: yes--extremely so. The covers featured a more 'iconic' look, not the more familiar romance couple.

Did Harlequin receive feedback from readers of the Next series?

TG: The readers loved the Next line, and we did receive many wonderful reviews. You might want to look for comments on Amazon.com or at the Romantic Times websites for comments. After all this time, I do not have them on hand.

Could you tell me something about the themes of Next novels?

TG: the themes were as varied as women's lives at this stage. There were books featuring women who had been widowed, divorced, or had stayed single. They dealt with dealing with older parents, finding love the second time around...all the issues that the baby boom women are facing.

Could you tell me something about the authors of Next novels, for example were they already established as authors of novels for younger readers?

TG: the majority of the authors were established writers.

Would it be possible to let me have any information regarding sales figures?

TG: I don't have the information at hand. The line was growing, and the reviews were stellar, but it was not growing as quickly as needed during the time they were produced, so we had to close the line.

When was the Next series closed and what were the reasons for the closure?

TG: as above

Does Harlequin still publish novels with older heroines and are they popular?

TG: yes, but they are seen more in the 'mainstream' part of the business.

## **Appendix 2: Transcription of telephone interview with Nikki Read (personal communication) 2012**

Transita launched in 2004

Nikki Read and her husband have run the successful *How to* books for many years, these books are aspirational and they had both wanted to move into publishing fiction. They were aware that hardly any novels featured heroines/main protagonists over 45 years. There was a lot of chick lit (Read particularly referred to *Bridget Jones's Diary* and all that followed) and they wanted to re-dress the balance because they felt that their generation had 're-invented middle age' and they were aware that many older people were looking for love (Read cited adverts in personal columns and the popularity of dating sites with older people as evidence) and starting again with new careers and that this was not reflected in fiction. They believed that matron lit was an 'untapped market'. Their research led them to believe that if older women wanted to write about older heroines then older women would want to read about them.

They did not do their market research amongst readers but with writers. Female novelists in their fifties and sixties were being rejected by publishers who told them that there was no market for novels with older female characters so these novelists could not get published the authors themselves felt that they could not identify with young heroines in the Twenty-first century and wanted to write about older women. Big publishers are afraid to take chances but Nikki Read was prepared to take the chance and most of Transita's novelists were first time authors apart from Prue Leith, who wanted to make a move from cookery books to fiction (Transita helped to make this a successful move for her) NR consulted The Romantic Novelists Association and found that most older writers wanted to write about women their own age.

NR states that the statistics show that the over 50's are the largest reading group and they believed that as they reached retirement this group would increase and that it would make sense that the female readers would want to identify with the characters they were reading about.

NR Joanna Trollope writes modern fiction about step-families, love second time around etc. but Transita also wanted to do something different. But if Trollope had signed with them they would have had a greater chance of success. There were films out at around that time like *Calendar Girls* and *Ladies in Lavender* and a TV series NR could not recall the name of but

in which an older women had an affair with a younger man but was somehow cast as ‘a bit sad’ and Transita wanted to do something more positive than that, Transita wanted to publish books which were a ‘celebration of women who are in their middle and late lives.’ NR considers that the novels published by Transita were a ‘whole new concept’. NR interviewed by Mariela Frostop for The Book Programme and newspapers.

NR Not a generic cover but individual and suited to each novel individually, for example, Elissa castle has a photo of a castle A Proper Family Christmas has a photograph of the type of house that they felt best represented the story. Most covers were photographic, sometimes art work which was not generic but fitting to each novel. Log and typeface the same for each novel with ‘great books for grown women’ on the spine of each book.

NR Lots of positive feedback from readers but also a lot of readers who argued that there was already ‘literary’ novels available for older women (for example Margaret Drabble) but Nikki Read thinks that these readers were mainly pointing out that there were older female authors but what NR felt was missing was stories about older women and NR did not agree that most mature female readers only wanted to read “literary; she argued that sometimes ‘women of our age want something different’” and that Transita offered that.

NR Transita closed because they ‘lost a lot of money’ and believes that the main problem was that most of their authors were first time novelists and that readers like to read books by people whose names they recognise and that if the likes of Trollope had come on board they would have had a greater chance of success (only known name was Prue Leith) NR says Transita did not do too badly but that money is only made on second printings and that this did not happen. NR thinks that possibly they launched Transita too soon and that if they had started now that e-books have become popular they would have had a better chance of making money.

NR Harlequin came to them at the Book Fair to discuss the idea before they set up their own version Transita was the first of its kind and NR believes Transita made a difference because now novels about older women are being published by the big publishing house but usually they are by well-known authors.

NR Another reason that Transita was started was because she felt that middle and old age are very different for this generation with opportunities that our mothers never had and that without any fiction that discussed these changes history would not have a clear picture of ageing in the late Twentieth and early Twenty-first centuries and she hopes that in a hundred

or two hundred years from now Transita novels will complement factual documentation about the lives of older women.

Nikki Read believes that matron lit has given older women ‘a voice’.

### **Appendix 3: Selected sample of matron lit books covers.**

Fig. 1 Astley, J., (2006) *Blowing It*. London: Transworld Publishers.

Fig. 2 Dillon, L., (2008) *The Ballroom Class*. London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.

Fig. 3 James, E., (2002) *Hidden Talents*. London: Orion Publishing Group Ltd.

Fig. 4 Pearlman, A., (2009) *The Cookie Club*. London: Simon& Schuster UK Ltd.

Fig. 5 Saunders, A., (2009) *the gap year for grown ups*. London: Orion House.

Fig. 6 Townsend, S., (2012) *The Woman Who Went to Bed For a Year*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

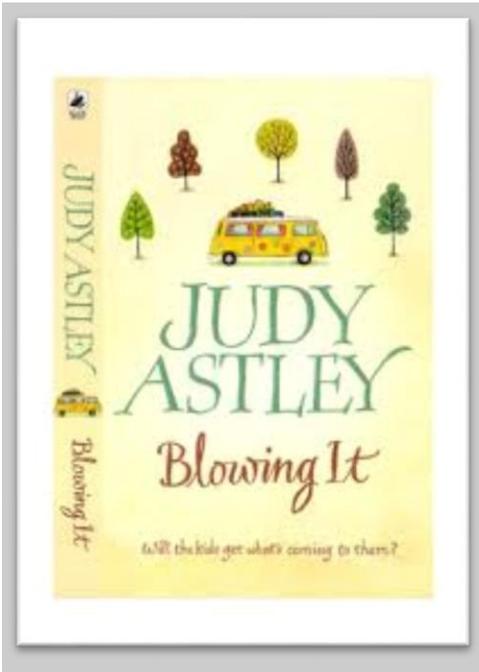


Fig. 1

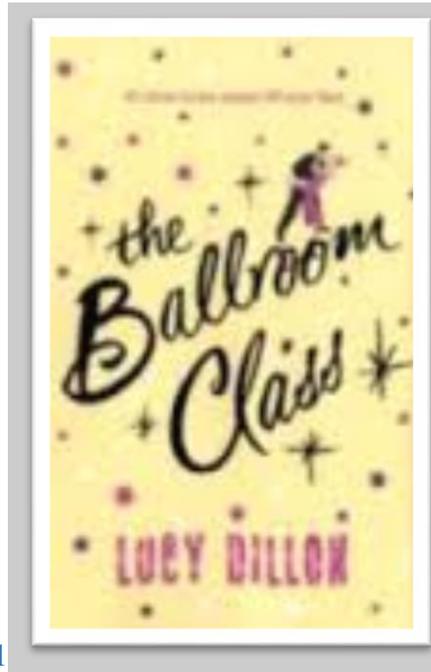


Fig. 2

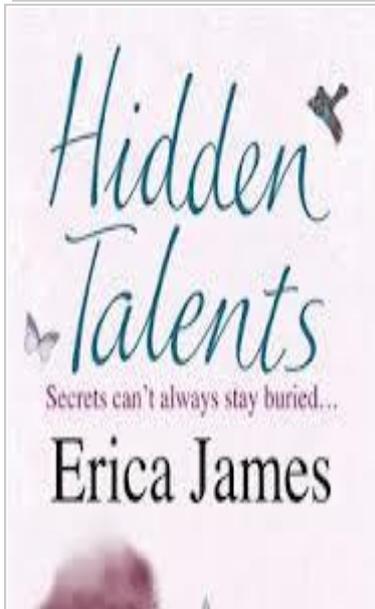


Fig. 3

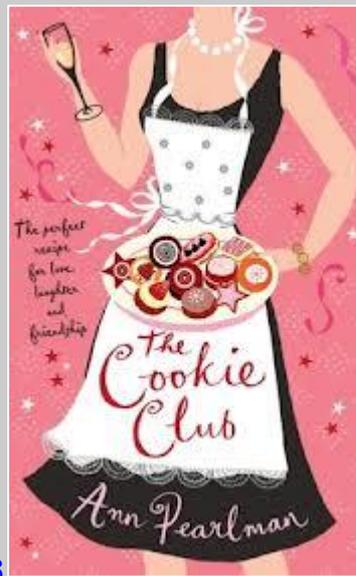


Fig. 4

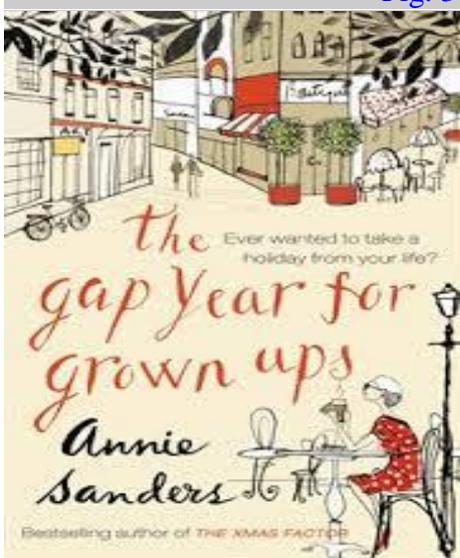


Fig. 5

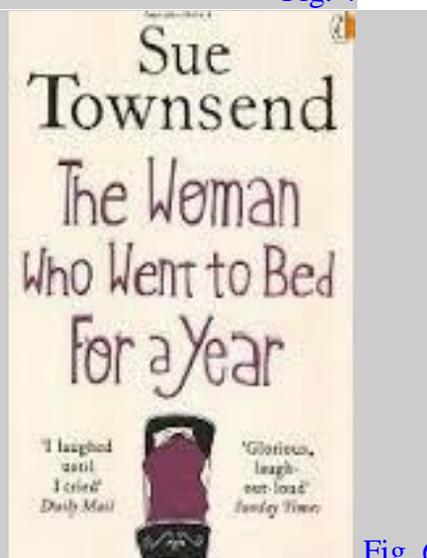


Fig. 6

## **References: Primary Sources**

Astley, J., (1999) *The Right Thing*. London: Transworld Publishers.

After twenty-four years Kitty tries to make contact with the daughter she gave up for adoption when she was eighteen years old. She has since married and has two more children. Her husband Glyn does not support her efforts to find her first child. Kitty gives her details to a contact agency and the daughter, Madeline, turns up at their home, curious and pregnant. The story is told in the third person, and moves between the past and the present.

Astley, J., (2006) *Blowing It*. London: Transworld Publishers.

Lottie and Mac are both approaching sixty. They have no pensions or savings but they own a large house. They decide to sell it and travel the world on the proceeds. Their three children do not approve of their plans. The plan to travel is put on hold when Mac becomes ill. The story has a third person narrator.

Billington, R., (2002) *A Woman's Life*. London: Orion.

This novel begins in the 1960's when three women meet in a hospital in England. They remain friends for over forty years and this story explores their lives as they age.

Brookfield, A., (2008) *Life Begins*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Charlotte contemplates her approaching fortieth birthday. The novel is written in the third person and begins with Charlotte receiving her divorce decree. With her marriage to Martin over, she decides to sell her home and move to somewhere that does not have unpleasant memories.

Buchan, E., (2004) *That Certain Age*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Alternate stories of two women, Barbara, a wife and mother in the 1950's, who is over forty with an adult daughter and is mired in domesticity and Sienna, a twenty-first century woman approaching forty who does not want to become a mother.

Buchan, E., (2010) *Separate Beds*. London: Penguin Group.

Annie and Tom are married, with three grown-up children. When Tom loses his job as a reporter they have to rely on Annie's income and they cannot afford to pay for his mother's retirement home fees. Tom's unhappy mother moves in with them and he has to share a room with Annie for the first time in many years.

Cassady, E., (2007) *The Adultery Diet*. London: Piatkus Books Ltd.

This story is written in the first person and is supposedly autobiographical. Eva is over-

weight but she fails every time she tries to diet. She feels old and has no motivation to exercise or eat healthily, until she contacts an old-flame by e-mail. With the prospect of meeting him again she finds the will-power to finally lose weight.

Dillon, L., (2008) *The Ballroom Class* London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.

Angelica Andrews who is 'nearly sixty' returns to her childhood home of Longhampton from America to sort out her mother's house. While she is in the town she decides to teach ballroom dancing classes. This third person narrative tells the story of Angelica and her pupils as they prepare for a dance contest.

Dines, A., (2005) *Toppling Miss April*. Oxford: Transita.

Eighteen year old Michael lusts after his work colleague, the young, slim and pretty Lucy. He is offered lessons in seduction by Monica, who is overweight, middle-aged and blowsy. He becomes attached to Monica and he moves in with her. So Monica triumphs over both Lucy and 'Miss April', a model in a magazine that Michael treasured for years.

Dines, A., (2006) *Soft Voices Whispering*. Oxford: Transita.

Sister Pius returns to the village she left fifty years earlier, when she was aged eleven. Kildoran holds unhappy memories for her but by facing her past she finds that she can resolve her pain. The story moves back in time between Sister Pius's past life in Kildoran and her present.

Fredriksson, M., (2003) *Elisabeth's Daughter*. London: Orion.

Elisabeth's daughter tells her lover that she is pregnant and in a fit of rage he almost beats her to death. As she recovers her mother tells her the story of her own violent past.

Gee S., (2007) *Reading in Bed*. London: Headline Publishing Group.

This novel is written in the third person and the perspective moves between the characters. The main protagonists are Dido and Georgia, who have been friends since they met at university. They are both sixty years old and recently retired. Dido lives in York and is married to Jeffrey. Georgia is a widow and she lives alone in London.

Gillard, L., (2008) *Star Gazing*. London: Piatkus Books.

Marianne is a widow who has been blind from birth. She lives with her older sister Louisa, who is a successful novelist. Louisa, who is in her fifties, begins an affair with her twenty-five year old male secretary. Marianne is lonely and when she meets Keir, whose voice reminds her of her deceased husband, they begin a relationship. She becomes pregnant at the

age of forty-five and does not want the child. Louisa does not care about other people's opinions but Marianne does.

Graham, L., (1998) *The Dress Circle*. Oxford: ISIS Publishing Ltd.

Told in first person narrative by Ba, the tone is chatty and confiding. Ba is married to Bobs and they have been together since their secondary schooldays. They are well-off, have two grown children and two grandchildren. While preparing for their daughter's wedding Ba discovers that Bobs is a cross-dresser.

Hadley, T., (2008) *The Master Bedroom*. London: Vintage.

Kate returns to her childhood home to care for her mother, who is becoming senile. She meets up with a friend from her youth, who is married with three children. Kate decides that she loves him but initially he does not appear to be interested. In the meantime she begins an affair with his teenage son.

James, E., (1998) *Airs and Graces*. London: Orion House.

Ellen is approaching forty, divorced and has an adult son who is at university. Her ex-husband took all her money and destroyed her confidence. She has to sell her large home and move to a small, run-down cottage. Forced back into work she starts her own business, selling dried flower arrangements. Her friend who is an elderly widow called Hermione advises Ellen to marry again for money. Hermione's god-son and Ellen fall in love but she has already 'nabbed' her wealthy divorce lawyer, Duncan, as a fiancé. By the end of the novel she realises that Duncan is not the right man for her and that she would rather struggle for money but marry the man she really loves. Hermione sells her house which she can no longer maintain and moves into a retirement home.

James, E., (2002) *Hidden Talents*. London: Orion Publishing Group Ltd.

Sixty-three year old Dulcie Ballantyne advertises for people to join her writing group, which she has named Hidden Talents. The people who sign up are Beth, a forty-something widow with a son, who is preparing to leave home for university, two middle-aged men and a teenager called Jazz.

Kaye, E., (2010) *the art of friendship*. London: HarperCollinsPublishers.

Four women meet at an art class in Ballyfergus and fifteen years later they are still firm friends. Forty-something Patsy is the oldest of the group and assumes the role of agony-aunt to the others.

Kaye, E., (2012) *Second Time Around*. London: HarperCollinsPublishers.

Forty-four year old Jennifer Irwin is a divorced mother of two adult children who have left home. Despite running a successful interior design business Jennifer is lonely in her 'empty nest' but that all changes when she meets a man sixteen years younger than herself.

Lewycka, M., (2006) *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*. London: Penguin Group.

Nadezhda's eighty-four year old father announces that he intends to marry a woman of thirty-six. Nadezhda narrates her futile attempts to prevent the marriage and her father's distress and increasingly bizarre behaviour, as his new wife proceeds to squander his money and break his heart.

Long, K., (2010) *Mothers & Daughters*. London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.

Carol has an adult daughter Jazz and a grandson Matty. When Jazz discovers that her husband has been unfaithful and throws him out Carol tries to intervene which causes further problems. Carol's father lives in a nursing home, his health is poor and he does not speak. Carol visits him with Matty every Sunday. First person narrative.

Lurie, A., (1998) *Foreign Affairs*. London: Vintage.

Vinnie is living in England for six months while she does research into children's rhymes. On the flight from America she meets Chuck. On arrival she is unable to get a taxi and Chuck arranges for her to travel on the tour coach with him and his relatives. They meet again and begin to grow close. Vinnie is fifty-four years old and divorced. She believes that she has constructed her life according to the templates provided in English literature and now she has turned fifty she no longer has resource to any guidelines.

Lurie, A., (1998) *The Last Resort*. London: Vintage.

Jenny Walker's much older husband, Wilkie Walker, believes that he is dying and decides to take his own life to spare Jenny distress. They go to stay at the seaside resort of Key West and rent a house where he plans his suicide, by drowning. Because he is cold and unfeeling during this time, Jenny begins an affair with a woman who runs a boarding house. When Wilkie finds out that he is not dying and treats Jenny with renewed affection, it is too late. Though Jenny will not leave him she will not end her new relationship.

McMillan, T., (1996) *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. London: Penguin Books.

Stella is forty-two years old, divorced and the mother of eleven year old Quincy. She is well-educated, wealthy, talented, beautiful and tired of her life. She goes on holiday alone to

Jamaica and meets twenty year old Winston. The first person narrator tells the reader how this meeting changes her life.

Moggach, D., (2005) *These Foolish Things*. London: Vintage.

Norman is repeatedly thrown of the retirement homes which his daughter, Pauline and son-in-law, Ravi, place him in. Norman is loud, obnoxious and still sexually aware. He's been asked to leave his most recent placement because he touched a nurse, inappropriately. Pauline lets Norman come to stay and Ravi is furious because he cannot stand the old man. Ravi meets with a cousin, Sonny and discusses the problem. Together they decide to open a retirement hotel in Bangalore. They send Norman there and recruit other English residents.

Morriarty, S., (2010) *Pieces of My Heart*. London: Penguin Books.

First person narrator Ava is over forty and has two teenage daughters. Ava also has her sixty-eight year old father living with her family. He is recently widowed and waiting to move into a new flat. He falls for a young Polish woman and brings her to live with them. Ava's husband owns a pub and spends little time at home. Ava is constantly at the family's 'beck and call' and she is concerned with ageing and the fact that her dad's girlfriend is younger and has a better body than she does.

Neill, F., (2009) *Friends, Lovers and Other Indiscretions*. London: Random House.

Third person narrative about a group of friends, who are approaching forty. One couple's children are young adults, another couple's children are very young, while the third couple are expecting their first child. They go on holiday together and reflect on their university days with nostalgia and longing for freedom. They all feel old, tired and regretful.

O'Dell, T., (2010) *Fragile Beasts*. London: John Murray Publishers.

The story is told in first person narrative from the viewpoint of a number of characters. After the death of their father, brothers Kyle and Klint go to live with wealthy Candace Jack. She lives in a mansion given to her by her brother, who made a fortune from coal. Candace is seventy-seven years old, does not have children and has never married.

Pearlman, A., (2009) *The Cookie Club*. London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.

First person narrator, plus recipes. Each December, a dozen women bake cookies and meet up to share them with a glass of wine and talk about their lives. Marnie refers to herself as the 'head cookie bitch' and narrates all the women's stories, which are surprisingly dark, for this genre.

Saunders, A., (2008) *Busy Woman Seeks Wife*. London: Orion Books Ltd.

'The Bean' is hurt in a fall and has to move in with her busy daughter Alex while she recovers. Alex hires a 'wife' to be both housekeeper and companion to 'The Bean' for the duration of the stay.

Saunders, A., (2009) *the gap year for grown ups*. London: Orion Books Ltd.

Sarah turns forty, her children leave home for university and she begins to think that there must be more to life than domesticity. Sarah resolves to take a gap year from her home and marriage.

Scanlon, P., (2001) *Francesca's Party*. London: Transworld Publishers.

This novel tells the story of Francesca, aged forty and the mother of two adult sons, who discovers that her husband is having an affair. She throws him out and he moves in with his girlfriend. As a full-time homemaker without qualifications or work experience Francesca has to rely on her husband for financial support. She decides that she wants to sell the family home and earn her own living.

Simonson, H., (2010) *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

This is a late-life romance which is written in the third person. Ernest Pettigrew does not get along with his son Roger. Ernest becomes aware of his loneliness after the death of his brother and confides in the local shopkeeper, Mrs Ali. Their blossoming romance is marred only by the interference of relatives and the gossiping of neighbours.

Sivers, B., (2005) *Turning Point*. Oxford: Transita.

After having a heart attack, Ruth realises that she does not want to die and that at forty-four years old, she has never really lived. As she recovers she starts to make plans to go on a cruise and not worry about the cost. Up to this point she has lived frugally, sharing a house with her widowed mother. The story is narrated by Ruth.

Smith, P., (2010) *Coming Up Next*. London: Fourth Estate.

Katie loses her job on breakfast television, to a younger woman. She leaves London and goes to stay with her parents. While she is trying to hide from the press Katie turns to drink and becomes romantically involved with a friend of her brother.

Thomas, R., (2010) *Lovers & Newcomers* London: HarperCollinsPublishers.

Miranda Meadows and her closest friends from university days are baby-boomers who still

want to live by their own rules. Miranda invites them to come and make their homes in the grounds of the country house that she shared with her husband Jake until his death. Both first and third person narrative.

Townsend, S., (2012) *The Woman Who Went to Bed For a Year*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

On the day that her twins leave home for university Eva goes to bed and refuses to leave it again for over a year. Eva is not physically ill, she has simply had enough of her life and needs time to think and reflect.

Trollope, J., (2010) *The Other Family*. London: Transworld Publishers.

Margaret's husband Richie abandoned her and their son for Chrissie. Twenty-three years later Richie dies, leaving Chrissie with three daughters. Richie has never divorced Margaret, so in an attempt to sort out inheritance the families have to meet.

Wolitzer, M., (2004) *The Wife*. London: Vintage.

Joan decides to end her marriage to Joe. She is sixty-four years old and their three children are grown and gone. Told in first person narrative, Joan reflects on their marriage as they fly to Finland, where Joe is to be presented with the 'Helsinki Prize' for literature. Joan considers that she may choose to remain in Finland and start again. She is tired of Joe's story, being her story too.

Wrenn, E., (2008) *Last Known Address*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.

Three middle-aged friends, C.C., Meg and Shelley, decide to renovate a house that C.C. has inherited. C.C. sells her own home and the three of them set off in Meg's car. The car breaks down and while they are waiting for it to be repaired C.C. meets a man. She continues the relationship by letter while they work on the renovation.

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