

OTHER

HOOD

OTHER HOOD

**Essays on being
childless, childfree
and child-adjacent**

**Edited by
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To all the 'others'

There is something threatening about
a woman who is not occupied with children.
There is something at-loose-ends feeling about
such a woman. What is she going to do instead?
What sort of trouble will she make?

— Sheila Heti, *Motherhood*

Whenever boring old men went,
'What? No children? Well, you'd better get
on with it, old girl,' I'd say 'No! Fuck off!'

— Helen Mirren

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Famous last words

On 3 July 2022, a link to Kate Camp's essay 'No Miracle Baby To See Here' was shared on Twitter, where the following conversation soon appeared:

@LilOBrienWrites: I'm also a failed IVFer and this essay's captured so many feelings. Brilliant. Petition to add this to @aliebenge3's essay 'Mother Of' about making peace with not wanting children, and creating an anthology (I would SO contribute).

@KathrynvanBeek: I've just written an essay about this too. Glad it's in the zeitgeist!

@LilOBrienWrites: Okay so we have 4 essays. There's something in this!

@aliebenge3: Someone make this happen!

Making it happen

We soon realised that 'we' were that someone. Sure, we'd never met before and we lived in different parts of the world, but we weren't going to let that hold us back. By the end of the day, we'd drafted a pitch letter for publishers.

We thought about what Kate Camp's essay had given us: 10 minutes of feeling her grief and frustration, of giggling at all the things she voiced that

you kinda aren't supposed to say out loud. And most importantly, a feeling of being seen. That's what we wanted to try to create with this book.

It seems that one of the lovely things about motherhood is that when you become a mother, you join a community. You have a shared experience that can be drawn upon in any situation, from playground small talk to deep conversations. But we 'others' don't get that community, unless we seek it out — or, create it ourselves.

If you've ever felt like you're on the outside looking in, have lived an unexpected life, or given the finger to social expectations, we hope that you'll find your people inside the pages of this book.

Why us?

It turns out that each of us has a tendency to throw ourselves into causes or projects we really believe in — such as Alie in her former volunteer role for Child Rescue New Zealand, Lil as an LGBTQ+ advocate, and Kathryn as a champion for miscarriage support; in 2021, Kathryn's work with MPs Ginny Andersen and Clare Curran led to a change in the law to ensure that people who experience pregnancy loss can take bereavement leave.

The three of us were drawn to this project because we knew it would help to reduce the stigma that people who don't become parents still face. We also wanted to provide a counter-argument to some of the bullshit mythologies out there, like that people without children are inherently unfulfilled, that they will always be missing something, are selfish, or can't truly know love in the fullest sense. Why, we asked ourselves, is no relationship — no matter how meaningful and fulfilling — considered anywhere close to the lofty parent-child relationship?

We each have our own 'otherhood' stories, too. While Alie has embraced the DINK (double income, no kids) lifestyle, Kathryn and Lil both went through IVF treatment and pregnancy loss — Lil with the added complexity of navigating the fertility industrial complex as a queer person.

Engaging with reproductive healthcare in our beleaguered health system was a lesson in how the patriarchal roots of Western medicine still tangle the care we receive today. Terms such as 'geriatric pregnancy' (to describe pregnant people aged 35+), and structural issues such as midwives not being financially incentivised to provide first-trimester care meant our fertility journeys were filled with wrong turns, dead ends, traps, delays and sinkholes.

Our kaupapa

Thanks, in part, to the advocacy of early ‘mommy bloggers’ who carved out a space for their communities, there are now so many books, podcasts and online spaces dedicated to parenting and motherhood. Parents can read about each other’s experiences and find comfort and solidarity. But there aren’t many stories for the rest of us.

Our aim is for this collection to contribute to a more inclusive conversation. We want anyone who resonates with the term ‘otherhood’ to be able to pick up this book and relate to the multiplicity of stories within it — stories that intersect with race, disability, sexuality and gender identity, and that cover everything from IVF to foster care.

(M)otherhood

When we began working on *Otherhood*, we hadn’t planned to include any essays by mothers. After all, part of the inspiration behind this collection was the desire to push back against common narratives around infertility, including the stories that end with a ‘miracle baby’ — which, as we know, not everyone gets.

But two women with living children did sneak into these pages — Janie Smith, who writes about being an egg donor in ‘Benevolent deadbeat baby-daddy’, and Nicola Brown, who speaks from her unique perspective of navigating secondary infertility as an infertility counsellor in ‘Synchronicity’. There are other mothers in this collection, too. Iona Winter, in ‘Stranded on a shore I never wanted to visit’, and Linda Collins, in ‘Departure from the motherland’, write about the pain of losing their only children to suicide.

Some of our contributors write about the slipperiness between being an ‘other’ and a mother. Jazial Crossley ponders terminology and responsibility as she gets to know her partner’s daughter, while other contributors — such as foster carer Melanie Newfield and Jackie Clark of *The Aunties* — explore forms of care that aren’t easy to categorise.

It’s clear that ‘motherhood’ and ‘otherhood’ are shifting terms, and there’s not necessarily a clear distinction between the two. As Feby Idrus alludes to in her essay, ‘How to not be a mother’, people who are perceived or socialised as women are always brushing up against motherhood — even if only in societal expectation. We wanted to explore this nuance.

The Barrennesses group chat

With Kathryn and Lil living in Aotearoa and Alie living in London, Alie would wake up to 156 unread messages and find herself volunteered for all sorts of schemes via what we dubbed the Barrennesses group chat.

Kathryn: I am currently of the opinion that Alie should write all the essays.

Lil: I reckon. Maybe then we won't need funding for the contributors. She can just write them for free. As different personas.

Kathryn: Love this idea.

Our professional relationship soon morphed into friendship — and a source of support.

Kathryn: Was just in a work meeting and everyone went around the table and introduced themselves by saying how many kids they have! I was so mad I couldn't even trot out my usual 'I have cats' line.

Alie: Ugghhh that is the worst.

Lil: Missed opportunity to answer 'I'm currently editing a book about the stigma faced by women without children.'

Kathryn: OK got the right response now, just 90 minutes too late: 'I've got three dead babies but I did successfully change the law to have miscarriage recognised as bereavement.'

Alie: That would have been SO GOOD.

Turning an idea into a book

From our first Zoom with the Massey University Press team, we knew we'd found our dream publisher. Based on only a small selection of writing samples, they immediately saw how special this book was going to be.

We put out a call for submissions and wrote the funding application that would enable us to pay our contributors. Too easy! Essays began flooding in.

It quickly became clear how strongly the term 'otherhood' resonated with people. We expected we would hear from people who had unsuccessfully tried fertility treatment, hadn't found the right partner at the right time, had concerns about finances or climate change, or had simply never wanted children. We heard all those stories — and more.

For some people the topic of otherhood was too painful, and they weren't ready to go there, but many writers expressed a sense of relief that someone was giving them an outlet to write about their experiences.

When we didn't get Creative New Zealand funding to pay our contributors, we braced ourselves to run a Boosted crowdfunding campaign. We weren't

sure if we'd get much backing, but by the end of the first day we'd raised half our goal. One of Alie's childfree friends told her how moved she felt watching the incredible support for our project. As our crowdfunding campaign barrelled along, we greedily consumed every essay submission, getting more and more excited as the book began to gain form. Then we got worried again — too many amazing essays! How on earth could we choose just 30?

Submissions were printed out, scribbled on, and hotly debated. We told the writers whose work we weren't able to include that every essay we received had something important to say, that every essay was fought for, and that we were gutted we couldn't share more of them. It was true. The quality of submissions was so high that we've published 36 — instead of the planned 30 — essays (including a comic). And we would have picked even more if we could have squeezed them in.

Looking back, we wouldn't recommend crowdfunding, selecting essays and editing them pretty much simultaneously, but that's what ended up having to happen. At times it was only our group chat — where we dreamed up increasingly ridiculous ideas for the book launch — that kept us going.

Kathryn: New book launch idea . . . driving motorbikes into the venue while a band plays. Also, glitter cannons.

Lil: I love all these ideas. Gender reveal confetti colours for the glitter cannons. Pink and blue cupcakes that say 'It's a book!'

Kathryn: I ride in like Meat Loaf. Behind me I drag a hospital bed and on it Alie dramatically gives birth to a book.

We edited through the Auckland floods, a residency in Budapest, Alie's move to London, and the deaths of pets. As we travelled around different parts of the world we woke up early and stayed up late to Zoom with one another. And we — mostly — did the editing around our other responsibilities.

Lil: I am so supposed to be working on my life insurance client rn.

Alie: I'm supposed to be writing a page on bruises and sprains for St John.

Kathryn: I'm writing about the new Mosgiel pool facility.

We edited on the run, in bars, on trains, and from beneath foils at the hairdresser. We spent so much time at our desks that Lil ended up buying weird-looking products from Instagram to help stretch her cervical spine. And just when our energy was flagging, we were revived by reading Helen Rickerby's essay in which a friend implored her to finish writing her *Otherhood* submission, saying 'Women must know that there is a choice.'

Gonna try to ask this genuinely . . .

At some point a man whom none of us knows took to social media to ask us the following question:

Gonna try to ask this genuinely since I'm also childfree and plan to stay that way for the foreseeable future. What is there to say about living without kids? Isn't that the default? Can't see not having kids having any challenges or similar.

Our hunch was that there's a lot to say about living without kids, because for various reasons, otherhood stories get silenced. Pregnancy loss isn't spoken about because it touches on the twin taboos of sex and death, and because there's implicit pressure for the bereaved not to bum other people out. Infertility isn't spoken about because it can be so painful, because it can elicit such unhelpful reactions, and because other people just don't want to hear about it. And choosing not to have children isn't spoken about openly because it flies in the face of social norms.

But a genuine question deserves a genuine answer, so we spoke with health psychology expert Dr Tracy Morison, who specialises in reproductive decision-making, to see if she thought there was any value in speaking about living without kids.

'Nobody questions why people want to have children — it's just taken for granted,' Dr Morison said. 'But if you don't have children, the three stigma positions are that you're sad, you're mad or you're bad. If you can't have children, that's very sad. If you're deliberately not having children, there's an assumption of deviance — of being mad. Or that you're bad — you're incredibly selfish and materialistic. These stereotypes are worse for women, because women are supposed to have a maternal instinct.'

As Dr Morison spoke, we reflected on the essays in our collection, such as Raina Ng's 'The happy wanderer', that grapple with these stereotypes and assumptions.

'Sexuality and reproduction are very attached to people's different morals and values, so these topics are loaded,' she continued. 'There's a degree of judgement on the part of the people who think that having children is the right and normal way to live based on their religion or politics.'

In their essays 'The feminist shelf' and 'Another good year', Hazel Phillips and Michaela Tempany describe the fundamentalist childhoods they had to

break free from, and the pronatalist expectations they overturned in order to forge the lives they wanted.

‘Pronatalism is the taken-for-granted worldview that having children is something that you should do, and will bring life fulfilment and happiness,’ Dr Morison explained. ‘There’s a strong religious influence, and strong nation-state influence, where people must have — white — babies to bolster the nation. Certain people are encouraged to have children, and people who are seen as “unfit” are discouraged,’ she continued, adding that pronatalism goes hand-in-hand with rigid expectations around gender.

‘Another reason for the push-back some women might experience as “non-mothers” — I hate that term, but there’s no other word for it — is because they’ve stepped out of the traditional gender roles.’

These roles are explored in several essays, particularly those by Golriz Ghahraman and Lucy O’Connor. Lucy’s essay ‘Atmosphere’ points out the irony in our Twitter commenter’s message — ‘I’m also child free and plan to stay that way for the foreseeable future’. Inherent in that statement is the knowledge that he has years in which to weigh his options. As Lucy writes, ‘How differently men and women must perceive time.’

‘Selfish’ by Donelle McKinley speaks eloquently about the decision to prioritise her own life over the life of an imagined future child, and the judgement that comes when you swim against the tide. The use of third person in her essay expresses the self-stigma of choosing to be childfree.

‘Some of the research I’ve done is looking at how people handle stigma,’ Dr Morison said. ‘One of the things we look at in health psychology is called minority stress — the stress that comes from constantly living in a marginalised position and having to cope with the comments that are made. The more socially marginalised categories you occupy, the more it compounds.’

There’s a one-sided glorification of parenthood in which non-parenthood is diminished, as Dr Morison explained. ‘A dynamic is created when people who haven’t had children have to defend their positions. This potentially creates hostility — but you can’t really blame people who are on the back foot and trying to defend their choices in the face of the norm.’

This hostility goes both ways, as Lily Duval explores in her essay ‘The Addington house’, in which she’s accused by a mother of having ‘childfree privilege’. But worse than hostility can be the silence.

‘Society is very set up towards people with children. When you don’t have that commonality, people don’t know what to talk to you about,’ Dr Morison

said. ‘People [without children] who have flocked to online communities and “found their people” there talk about how that’s helped them manage and cope.’

Our contributor Linda Rooney, who set up an early blog about living with infertility, has helped countless others by creating such a supportive space. As Dr Morison pointed out, it’s also important to share otherhood stories more widely.

‘Having people tell their own stories brings different types of being into the cultural imagination,’ she said. ‘It opens up space for what it means to be a woman.’

We told Dr Morison about the Twitter comment. She rolled her eyes.

Here’s to the others

Inside this collection we hope you’ll find stories you may not have even realised were missing, hear people voicing the thoughts you’ve had too, or living lives that more closely represent yours. As romance writer Steff Green comments in her essay, there’s more than one way to have a happy ending.

More schlongs, more cats

STEFF GREEN

I'm Steff, a 30-something cishet woman with a doting husband, too many cats and a penchant for overpriced cocktails. And I'm in love with a fictional man. OK, OK. I should be honest here — he's not a man, but several men, each one taller than the last. Each with a deep, gloomy voice, piercing, fathomless eyes, and a schlong that has to be checked as oversized luggage on aeroplanes. My fictional boyfriends are all brooding and protective, with a relentless appetite for pleasing a woman over and over and over . . .

I am a romance reader. I love nothing more than curling up on the sofa with a block of Whittaker's Dark Salted Caramel and a sexy book boyfriend. I'm particularly drawn to paranormal and fantasy stories where the heroine is hurled into a secret part of the modern world where magic, vampires, werewolves and other supernatural creatures exist. The heroes in these books aren't just handsome and brooding and possessive — they also drink blood, howl at the moon, and possess superhuman strength (perfect for opening relish jars) and 'interesting' appendages.

I'm so in love with these fictional men that I made a career out of writing them — I am also a romance writer. Under my pen name, Steffanie Holmes,

I've independently published over 50 romance novels, sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and have fans all over the world. I've joined an incredible female-led industry, and I'm proud to have penned some of the broodiest, most tattooed, schlongiest men in the business.

The readers, writers and publishers of romance have worked hard to cast aside the 'bodice-ripper' image of the 1960s and '70s. The discourse around romance novels and the people who love them is finally changing. For the longest time, romance was ignored by the publishing elite, despite the fact that the genre is the powerhouse of publishing. A 2018 study showed that 25 per cent of all books and 50 per cent of all mass-market paperbacks sold are romance novels. We romance readers are voracious, devouring books faster than Elon Musk can tank a company, desperate for our fix of falling in love.

And is it any wonder that romance novels are enduringly popular? In the real world, women are still forced to fight for reproductive rights and autonomy over our own bodies. We've got piles of laundry and a work report due and we haven't had an orgasm in six months. We have the wage gap and the thigh gap and the pleasure gap and the gaping chasm of our own existential angst. We all just lived through a global pandemic, and we are tired.

So why not escape for a few hours to a world where a hot prince crashes into our lives like a tousled-haired freight train and solves all our problems? Why not enjoy a happy bubble where our voices shape the narrative and our desires are placed front and centre for once?

Maya Rodale, author of a history of the romance novel industry, writes that they are enduring because they are 'dangerous books for girls that show women again and again that they're worth it', where 'women's voices predominantly shape the narrative about themselves in the world', and where 'real, good love doesn't ask you to lose weight, change your hair, get a different job, silence your feelings or in some way shrink yourself to fit into a box society has labelled "desirable"'.¹

And yet, not even a woman's free time is truly free. If she dares to spend her Sunday afternoon between the pages with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who descend upon earth to give the heroine multiple orgasms (the actual plot of an actual series I read recently, and I highly recommend it),²

1 Maya Rodale, *Dangerous Books for Girls: The bad reputation of romance novels explained* (Maya Rodale, 2015), www.fairobserver.com/culture/romance-novels-womens-rights-donald-trump-misogyny-culture-news-79544

2 Laura Thalassa, *The Four Horsemen* series.

she will be mocked. The terms ‘mommy porn’ and ‘trash books’ are commonly used to describe romance novels. I use the word ‘smut’ lovingly, but some use it derisively. ‘What if these books give women unhealthy expectations about men?’ cries the ubiquitous male commenter on every article about the industry.

What if, indeed.



The romance audience no longer wishes to be silenced about their choice of reading material. Instead, fans proudly take to BookTok and Instagram to show off their ‘smutty bookshelves’ and TBR (to-be-read) piles, and swoon over their favourite fictional boyfriends.

And romance novels are changing with them. The modern romance novel promises not only a swoony romance (and, usually, panty-meltingly good smut), but also a commentary on the changing roles of women, contraception, sexual harassment and rape culture, climate change, women in the workplace, family drama . . . you name it.

But in the centuries since the first love story was penned, one thing about the romance novel hasn’t changed: the happily-ever-after.

In industry shorthand, we call the happily-ever-after the HEA. And the HEA means specific things to romance readers, no matter the gender, race, sexual identity or background of their preferred pairing. A grand gesture to show the characters have grown and changed. A wedding ring. A perfectly planned proposal. A scintillating kiss. And then, one or two or five years later, in the epilogue, the couple get down to making babies.

Readers adore the babies. Some of them skip to the last chapter to read the HEA before they even begin the book, just to make sure the characters get a satisfying ending.

As a childfree woman and an avid reader and author, this both fascinates and infuriates me.

Why is a happily-ever-after not complete without babies?

Why are we not satisfied until the heroine conforms to the traditional gender roles of wife and mother?

What does this say about the way we view romance, love, sex and family?

In books and films and TV, the modern romance heroine is a strong, funny, successful, fierce woman, in charge of and aware of her own sexuality. She does not wait around in a flimsy nightgown for a man to kidnap and ravish

her. She makes her desires clear and she builds a connection with her chosen partner as an equal. She is me. She is my friends. And yet . . .

And yet, for her to have her happily-ever-after, she must have children.

Romance novels, like all media, hold up a twisted mirror to the real world. They say a lot of fascinating, nuanced things about feminine desire and agency, and about the changing attitudes toward contraception and a woman's role in society. Romance novels enable women to have conversations about sex and desire and fantasy they'd normally be too afraid to have . . . even if those conversations are only with themselves.

The genre — which, as all genres do, must continue to reckon with its heteronormative, patriarchal, ableist and white supremacy narratives — is at the forefront of diversity within the publishing industry. Queer romance, polyamorous romance, and romance between characters of colour and characters with disabilities are becoming more common and more celebrated, with networks and industry bodies working hard to lift the voices of marginalised authors and their experiences. As a blind woman who always longed to see myself in my favourite heroines, I'm thrilled by the progress we have made.

Modern romance novels have thrown off so many of their outdated norms. And yet, they still propagate a traditional notion of what it means to live happily ever after as a woman.

This might be why abortion is rarely discussed in romance. It's not a 'sexy' subject, for sure, but where writers are willing to wade in on all kinds of dark and upsetting topics, in some cases making romantic heroes out of serial killers and gang leaders, they shy away from this one. In most stories when a woman encounters an unplanned pregnancy, she decides to keep it.



So what? You might ask. Does it matter? Romance novels deal in fantasy. The heroine's fucking a vampire. Every second guy is a young, hot, kinky heir to a chocolate empire with a heart of gold. No man is that good in bed and *also* a top chef and *also* a secret assassin. Like our concerned male internet commenter above, there's a narrative that runs alongside media made for women by women: that we wouldn't want to give women false expectations of what the real world is like. As if women can't tell the difference between reality and fantasy.

Personally, if asking to be treated like a goddess in and out of bed is

considered an unrealistic fantasy for women, then excuse me while I retreat to my boudoir to be with Geralt of Rivia.

We want our media — the books we read, the movies and TV shows we enjoy, the music and podcasts we listen to — to reflect the beautiful variety of our collective experience as women. We have progressed in so many ways (the fact that I have a bestselling series with a blind heroine, who isn't magically healed at the end, says so much to me about how far we've come) but we are not yet ready to give up on this outdated notion of the happily-ever-after.

Is asking for the happily-ever-after to change unreasonable? Is this the exchange we must make in order to have our smut cake and eat it too?

I've wrestled with this question in my own career. What does a happily-ever-after look like if your characters don't want, or can't have, children?

My way through this has been to allow my characters to lead this decision. I don't begin a story with an end goal of babies, or even marriage. I write a lot of polyamorous romance — where marriage in a traditional sense isn't an option for the characters. This is challenging, but it also acts as a permission slip to write a more nuanced depiction of the HEA.

George, the nerdy, true-crime-obsessed heroine of my Dark Academia duet, falls in love with both a Catholic priest and a minor royal, as well as falling afoul of a dangerous secret society. She has her HEA when she accepts a job as a trainee medical examiner while her two men set up a house together and argue over soft furnishings. The final scene is a wedding, but it's not her wedding. I enjoyed playing with this expectation.

The two most badass, blood-soaked women I've ever written in my crime family Stonehurst Prep series — Claudia August and Fergie Munroe — both have children. This felt right for their characters, though the focus in Claudia's HEA isn't about pregnancy, but the animal shelter she set up with her hero. Readers love kittens almost as much as they love babies.

And Mina, the heroine of my popular Nevermore Bookshop Mysteries series, is a blind woman who solves murder mysteries with her three boyfriends, who are all famous villains from classic literature. I am writing the final book in her series right now, in which her wedding day is interrupted when the celebrant is found dead. I have decided that Mina will not be having children. Her reasons are many and nuanced, and they are her own to explore.



Will readers be angry about the lack of babies? Maybe. But so many are grateful, too. I receive fan mail from readers, mostly about the schlongs, but sometimes expressing how grateful they are to read a happily-ever-after that aligns with their own experiences. These readers want to celebrate love and blissful, beautiful lives that don't require the addition of children to be complete.

My friend Devyn Sinclair writes paranormal romance and goes one step further. It is part of her brand that her characters will never have children.

“You'll change your mind one day!” is the most common response to a woman not wanting children,’ Devyn says. ‘No matter if it's family, coworkers or strangers on the internet, few people believe that women can be happy and fulfilled in a childless life. It's coded into the fabric of our society. As a writer in a genre for women, and as a childfree woman myself, I choose to keep my books childfree as well. Romance is a safe space for women to explore, and every type of woman deserves that space.’

I agree with Devyn completely. Childless and childfree women already face incredible pressure from the real world. They don't need that same pressure from their fantasy worlds, too. But I've decided not to take so strong a stance in my books — I may not want kids, but not all my characters share my views. Their relationships with motherhood are as complicated as the writers in this collection. I want to give my heroines the freedom to discover their own HEA, whatever that may look like.

Romance novels may be becoming more inclusive and feminist, but they are also a product of the society that created them. Romance writers have more freedom and agency than ever to react to, reflect and subvert the rhetoric of the world we live in, and it warms my heart to see the happily-ever-after becoming more inclusive and nuanced.

I hope that when next I snuggle up on the couch on a Sunday morning with a block of Whittaker's and my latest read, I'll turn the pages to find more broody, schlongy men, more women who take control of their destinies, a few fewer babies and many more cats.

Mother issues

KERRY SUNDERLAND

While other people his age were experimenting with psychedelic drugs, Dad spent most of the 1970s inhaling glue in his workshop in our backyard — an occupational hazard as he designed and then built a 15-metre wingspan sailplane glider. He called it MOBA, short for ‘my own bloody aeroplane’.

Dad was obsessed with aviation his entire life: he built model aeroplanes as a kid, went solo at 16 and qualified as an aeronautical engineer. After hours, he spent every waking moment either on the airfield, in his workshop or talking about flying.

Mum and Dad first met on the gliding field. He admired her for many reasons, including the fact she’d built her own model aeroplane. They married four months after their first date. Mum was just 23 when she had me; Dad was 34.

Much of my childhood was spent on rural aerodromes. In many ways, the dusty gliding field felt more like home than our little suburban house. Most weekends, my parents made the four-hour-return road trip from our house in Melbourne’s south-eastern suburbs to Bacchus Marsh, about 60 kilometres west of the city, and took to the sky. Left to my own devices on the airfield, I became a gliding ‘orphan’.

I coped with any sense of abandonment by reading, seeking out surrogate families, and creating imaginary worlds wherever I could. A voracious reader, I imagined myself being part of fictitious families — the child in other people's families, never the mother. Being a mother didn't look like very much fun.

And I told tales about my parents. They weren't always true. But the underlying theme of all of them was this: my parents were extraordinary people who had met in very extraordinary circumstances. This was my way of compensating for the fact that my family didn't operate the way other families did. We only socialised with those who flew. We never went on normal holidays.



I am the eldest of two daughters. I was the 'golden child'. My sister, Clare, two years younger than me, was the 'black sheep'. That's what infant colic and post-natal depression will do to the mother-daughter relationship. And Mum never really recovered. She was often indisposed, shut away in my parents' bedroom with the curtains drawn.

Being left to your own devices wasn't uncommon for children growing up in the seventies and eighties. Yet unlike many other Generation X children, I wasn't a latch-key kid. Mum didn't work, so she was always home — but she was often unavailable, physically and emotionally.

When other Gen X kids grew up, realising their needs hadn't been met, they vowed to do parenting differently. Sometimes they succeeded, although occasionally they swung to the polar opposite: becoming helicopter parents who kept their children wrapped in cotton wool.

I didn't trust myself to do parenting better. For the next 20 years, I wore the label 'feminist' like armour, oblivious that it was masking the fear and sadness I was carrying.



During my first year at university, I finally began to develop some womanly curves. I put myself on a strict diet and discovered I was very good at dieting, although starving myself was less about body image and more about wanting to feel like I had some control over my life, when everything else felt so out of control. Within three months, I lost so much weight that I stopped menstruating for almost a year.

Perhaps it was tokophobia, a pathological fear of getting pregnant.

Not long after my eighteenth birthday, someone very close to me had gotten pregnant. A decision was made to adopt out the child. This had horrified me for many reasons, not least because I realised: *This could happen to me*. My fears jumbled together; I was afraid of the pain of giving birth, the shame of an unwanted pregnancy, the fear of losing the child, the fear of the child being taken from me.

Then my anorexia morphed into bulimia and I rounded out, and started bleeding again. I began taking the pill and did so for the next five years, before I realised it was making me crazy, so I stopped.



When I was living in London in my late twenties, I got pregnant, which astonished me; by then I'd convinced myself that I was infertile. After going off the pill, I hadn't been very careful with contraception, but until then it hadn't mattered. When my period was late, my breasts started hurting and I began feeling queasy, I took myself off to the doctor for a pregnancy test. When the test came back positive, I thought it was *very bad news*.

That night, I met my boyfriend for dinner in Covent Garden. When I told him the news, tears welled in his eyes. He jumped off his seat and knelt beside me, with one of his hands on my belly, his words bursting with pride as he said: 'I'm having dinner with the mother of my child.' This wasn't the reaction I expected, and I immediately felt very alone.

Over the next few weeks we discussed every possible scenario, but a big 'yes' eluded me. One night, I stepped outside onto our small patio and stared at the sky, willing the unseeable stars to give me the answer. When I walked back inside, my boyfriend told me how he'd seen me 'talking to our baby'.

Wow, I thought to myself, *I had no idea I was doing that*. But I had stopped smoking cigarettes, just in case I decided to go ahead with the pregnancy.

A few nights later, I arrived home to discover my boyfriend had found a loose page I thought was safely tucked away in my personal belongings. On one side, I'd listed all the reasons he would make a good father, on the other side all the reasons he wouldn't. The negatives far outweighed the positives. He was predictably very hurt. I cried for most of the evening. In the end, he said he would understand if I wanted to terminate the pregnancy.

Turns out I'd prevaricated for too long. I was almost 12 weeks pregnant. Now that I'd decided to have an abortion I felt a sense of urgency that the public health system couldn't accommodate. The following day, I rang a

private hospital on the edge of the metropolitan area. I caught the train to the hospital by myself. My boyfriend had offered to come with me but I thought it was my responsibility alone to bear.

I elected to have a general anaesthetic. For this reason, I was supposed to stay in hospital overnight, but when I woke up I desperately wanted to leave. I called my boyfriend and asked him to come and get me. We caught a taxi all the way back into London, arriving just before midnight, the driver sneering at me whenever I caught his eye in the rear vision mirror.

Our relationship never recovered.



In 2001, I moved to the Byron Shire on the far north coast of New South Wales. That year, Australia had recorded its lowest overall fertility rate in history to date — only 1.779 births per woman. But you wouldn't have known this in Byron, which as well as being Australia's counterculture capital, was also known as the Land of the Goddess. I found myself surrounded by young families. As a childless woman, I felt both contrary and alien. My closest female friends were my mother's age. I tried to socialise with women my age but their conversations, which revolved around their children, bored me. I never dared tell anyone this. Instead, I threw myself into my work and built a thriving custom publishing business. And I fell in love with Steve, my tai chi teacher.

Not long after we bought a house together, Steve and I adopted a puppy, a Lhasa Apso Maltese X we called Lappie. My life soon revolved around this small, white bundle of fur. I poured all my love and attention into him. In contrast, I didn't know quite what to do with Steve's son, who was seven when we met and occasionally stayed the night.

A few years later, Steve, his son (by then 10) and I went camping with two other couples, along with their respective children.

We scored the last remaining camping spots beside the river and pitched our tents, prepared an evening meal and then settled in around a roaring campfire to drink wine, sing songs and share tales. By nightfall, I'd already had too much to drink. All my suppressed sorrow sprang to the surface; for some reason, I only ever contemplated having children when drunk. I remember sobbing in a small huddle with my girlfriends, as the full moon shone above us. At some stage, I became vaguely aware of Steve pulling aside one of them to find out what was distressing me so much.

Back home on the Sunday evening — tired and still a little seedy, with piles of camping gear around us and a cooler bin yet to unpack — Steve sat at the end of the dining table and asked me to join him. I was wary; sitting down for a talk inside was something we hadn't done in years. The busyness of life always got in the way. We usually just made small talk on the deck outside, fighting for attention among the cacophony of magpies during the day, or numbed by our respective self-medicating ways at night. I'd rattle on about my day, but focused on what I was doing or thinking rather than what I was feeling. Steve preferred to smoke a joint in silence.

When I sat, I felt self-conscious, so I stood and rearranged the chair, then tucked one leg under my bum and turned to him. He waited for me to settle and give him my full attention.

'Kerry,' he said, as he put aside the cigarette he'd just rolled, 'I'm wondering why you don't feel like you can talk to me about wanting to have children?'

I told him I didn't know what I wanted. This was inching close to the truth, as I was struggling with the Kerry who was trying to make herself heard in the haze of drunkenness but who vanished in the longer hours of sobriety.

But I didn't tell Steve why I couldn't talk to him. Although I couldn't express it then, I was unprepared to test his love. Deep down, part of me hoped that, if he truly loved me, he would tell me he wanted to have children with me. But even deeper down, I worried he hadn't been a very good father to the two children he already had, with two different women. For much of the time we were together, he and his daughter were estranged.

So when Steve said, 'If you really want children, I will support you,' it still wasn't enough for me.

The decision whether or not to have children soon became an intellectual exercise. I resolved to think it through thoroughly.

A truth-telling friend told me, 'For fuck's sake, Kerry, most people don't think about it, they just do it and worry about it later.'

But not me. I grappled with the external considerations (an over-populated world, the challenges of being a mum while self-employed) and, in quieter moments, the more distressing internal considerations (my doubts about Steve as a father, my doubts about myself being a good mother).

At that time, my biggest fear was that choosing not to have children made me selfish. Could I admit to myself, let alone others, that my work was more important to me than children? To feel better, I just had to remind myself there were already too many people on the planet.

I decided to redirect my energy into creating a book about women who had chosen not to have children — not the ‘Oops, I forgot to have children’ types, but those who had, like me, deliberated. I called it *Pro-creation*. On an individual level, it would be about choosing creative pursuits instead of procreation. On a global level, it would be about choosing not to procreate for the good of the planet, for the good of all creation. I submitted a proposal with a chapter outline to a publisher and they expressed interest, asking me to send them the first few chapters.

It was a great distraction from the deep need inside me; to feel both worthy of being nurtured myself and capable of nurturing others. In many small ways throughout my life I had learnt to repress my fears and suppress my emotions. But it wasn’t until I reached my late thirties that I discovered this predisposition comes at a great cost. When Steve, by then my partner of seven years, was diagnosed with colorectal cancer, I found myself ill-equipped to initiate the difficult conversations we needed to have.



For a whole bunch of complex reasons, including being raised by a conspiracy theorist, Steve decided against any mainstream medical treatment and instead pursued one alternative therapy after another: fasting, radical dietary changes, vitamin C infusions, juicing, laetrile infusions, enemas, bicarb soda. I deferred to him and set about doing everything I could to keep him alive. I shelved the book project.

More than anything else, Steve believed in the power of belief; we never discussed the possibility he would die. I found myself incapable of speaking honestly, incapable of expressing my fears. Instead, I did everything I could to support his pursuit of a cure.

If my buried desire to have children had been a repressed need to feel nurtured and to nurture another, I had found my place, but caring for Steve was a lonely and unglamorous role. It involved a lot of waiting in my car while he used the toilets at McDonalds or at roadside rest areas. It involved carting 20-kilogram bags of carrots to the fridge. It involved hours and hours at the juicer. There were no mothers’ groups, no chance meetings at the school gate, no playground dates. If Steve had chosen the conventional cancer treatment route, I suspect we both would have found more support.

With no agency in the decisions Steve was making, I redirected my energy into what I believed I *could* control. Although I was in complete denial, right

up to the end — so much so that his death came as a shock to me — for a short time, I got what I subconsciously wanted: the opportunity to care for someone else.

I am grateful I made one good decision. When Steve suggested we get married, I said yes. Our wedding gave everyone there a chance to celebrate Steve's life. He died 73 days later.



Forty-three years old and in the euphoric stages of a new relationship, I flew to Melbourne to catch up with some old friends and to spend a few days at my parents' home, where we would celebrate an early Christmas.

But I was preoccupied; my period was late. On the flight, I agonised about what to do if I was pregnant. And what to say to my (very new) boyfriend, David, if I was.

I didn't feel pregnant. Or did I? I'd felt mild cramps, which I didn't normally get, but there was still no sign of bleeding. Perhaps, I concluded, it was just the anxiety about being pregnant keeping my period at bay.

Then the fearful thoughts arrived: *What if David is upset, or angry, or doesn't want our child? What if there are complications, given my age? What if David's feelings towards me change in some fundamental way? What if he leaves me and I have to struggle as a single mother for the next 20 years? What if he's delighted that we're pregnant but we agree to have all the intrusive tests and find out the baby has Down's syndrome?* I suspected I would choose to continue the pregnancy. *But if we went ahead, would I ever be able to work again?*

And then: *What if I miscarry late or the baby dies?* That was my worst nightmare, having just spent the past two years mourning the death of Steve.

I felt frustrated being 30,000 feet above sea level, contemplating all of this for the first time but unable to discuss it with David. And I didn't want to tell him over the phone that I was pregnant. I needed to see his face, his eyes, his body language. I was so absorbed in my worries that the plane landing took me by surprise.

As I waited for my bag, I remembered how, a few days before, David and I had dropped into end-of-year drinks at my friend's art gallery. I ended up speaking with a woman I had only met a handful of times. During the conversation she told me that she didn't think parents chose to have children. Instead, children chose their parents. David, who I didn't know had been listening, agreed

immediately, telling us both that his daughter Jess had definitely chosen him and her mother. They had broken up but ended up in bed together on New Year's Eve, when Jess was conceived. Their relationship didn't last but David played a key role in her upbringing, solo parenting her on and off over the years. He adored his daughter.

When I got to my accommodation, I unpacked my journal and began to list all the fears I had tallied up on the plane. And I added a new one: ectopic pregnancy.

Writing down my fears helped me let go of them, at least a little bit. Eventually I was able to get to sleep.

The following morning, I tried to let go of the idea that being pregnant meant I would necessarily have a baby. I'd had a termination before and could again. This time I wouldn't be alone. Or should I say I wouldn't be keeping myself alone. I trusted David and knew it would be a decision we'd make together, whichever way. And all of those doubts I'd had last time — that my then boyfriend would be a lousy father — didn't apply. David was a wonderful father.

That night, just before I turned out the lights, I realised I couldn't kid myself anymore that I wasn't pregnant. For the past hour, I'd been experiencing powerful (but mercifully short-lived) waves of nausea.

The following day, I caught the train to Footscray. My friend Kim picked me up at the station, on her way home from work. As we were driving, she glanced sideways at me.

'It's good to see you,' she said. 'You look really well. Almost like you're pregnant?'

I looked at her with amazement, then felt confusion and a hint of fear wash over me. 'What makes you say that?'

'I don't know, you're kind of glowing.'

'Well, actually, it's possible that I am.' I felt my breasts. 'And my boobs are sore. Oh God, Kim, what if I am?'

'Don't you want to be pregnant?'

'I don't know, I don't think so. But maybe I do.'

'If it were me, I'd be really happy,' Kim, who also didn't have children, said. 'I would have the baby. I don't have any doubts about that at all.'

I couldn't say the same.

When we got to her house, we busied ourselves cleaning up in preparation for the dinner party she was hosting the following evening. I was in the

middle of vacuuming the dining room when I realised I had started bleeding, ferociously. This wasn't a typical period; I had miscarried. I felt sad and immensely relieved, all at the same time. But, most of all, I felt drained, weary, like I wanted to sleep for weeks.

When I flew home a few nights later, I was finally able to share everything with David. He responded in a way that made me feel loved and heard. While he told me he didn't want to have any more children, he didn't bombard me with his own relief.



Almost three years after Steve died, I moved to Aotearoa with David. He'd been desperate to move back to his beloved South Island for years and now that Jess had finished high school, he could. I was ready to start a new chapter in my life; I saw it as an opportunity to reinvent myself in a place where people didn't know me as 'Steve's widow'.

Not long after we arrived, David and I went camping for a week at a gathering called Convergence, held annually over the New Year near Rangiora.

Every day, we sat in a circle to 'heart share'; to be vulnerable and speak openly and honestly about our lives. All the big life challenges were aired: abuse, addiction, mental illness. As were all the emotions: jealousy, envy, anger, sadness, grief, joy, relief.

In the beginning, I didn't even know how to identify the sensations I felt in my body when I was activated or triggered, let alone how to express them as feelings. My first Convergence set me off on a journey of discovery, learning how to express my inner life; eventually, it felt like I'd acquired a new language.

I also learnt about the Jungian concept of the 'shadow self'. I had grown up resenting what I perceived to be my mother's neglect, resenting the fact that we never talked about anything important. I learnt to recognise the little girl inside me who'd felt abandoned by my aviation-obsessed father, and my chronically ill mother. I remembered how I'd spent most of my life constructing tales, for the amusement of others, about this little abandoned girl, as if to say, 'This was what made me who I am today.' I realised my abandonment stories were my way of shouting: 'Look at me, how independent I was at only five years of age. Look at me, how I survived parental neglect.'

Until I articulated my frustrations about Mum's physical and emotional absence, I hadn't even realised I had mother issues.

It also dawned on me how little I knew about my matrilineal line. My

mother, Robyn, was an only child. Her mother, Eva, had died when I was three years old. I wondered who my grandmother had been as a person, what sort of mother she'd been to my mum. What had little Robyn learnt from Eva about being a mother? Deep down, part of me didn't feel equipped to be a parent. I had decided to break the cycle. My sister broke the cycle, too, by becoming a wonderful mother to my niece.



The second wave of feminists had paved the way for Gen X women to prioritise their career. My generation was also the first to have the privilege to genuinely choose whether we wanted to have children.

If Mum had been born five years later, would she have taken the pill, chosen not to have children herself? After all, in the beginning, she was a trained teacher and she loved flying just as much as Dad did.

While the contraceptive pill had been introduced in Australia in 1961, it came with a hefty 27.5 per cent luxury tax, which made it financially — if not morally — beyond most women. By the time Gough Whitlam was elected prime minister in 1972 and abolished the luxury tax — thus reducing its cost to \$1 per month — I was four years old. When my parents married in 1967, they did so with the expectation that they would immediately start a family. Perhaps Mum had no choice.

Nowadays, Mum and I have a tender new relationship. She is in Melbourne in dementia care. My sister takes her on a weekly outing, oversees her daily needs. I call her every couple of days, having the same conversation each time, in slightly different ways.

And I've come to realise that for most of my life, I simply hadn't understood Mum's love language: her gift-giving and acts of service.

Now that Mum is completely reliant on others, I notice the absence of her many offerings to me — the elaborate costumes she made me for school dress-up days, the quilts it took her more than a year to hand-stitch, the thoughtful care packages that appeared in the mail at unexpected times, the many phone calls that began with 'It's your mother here.'