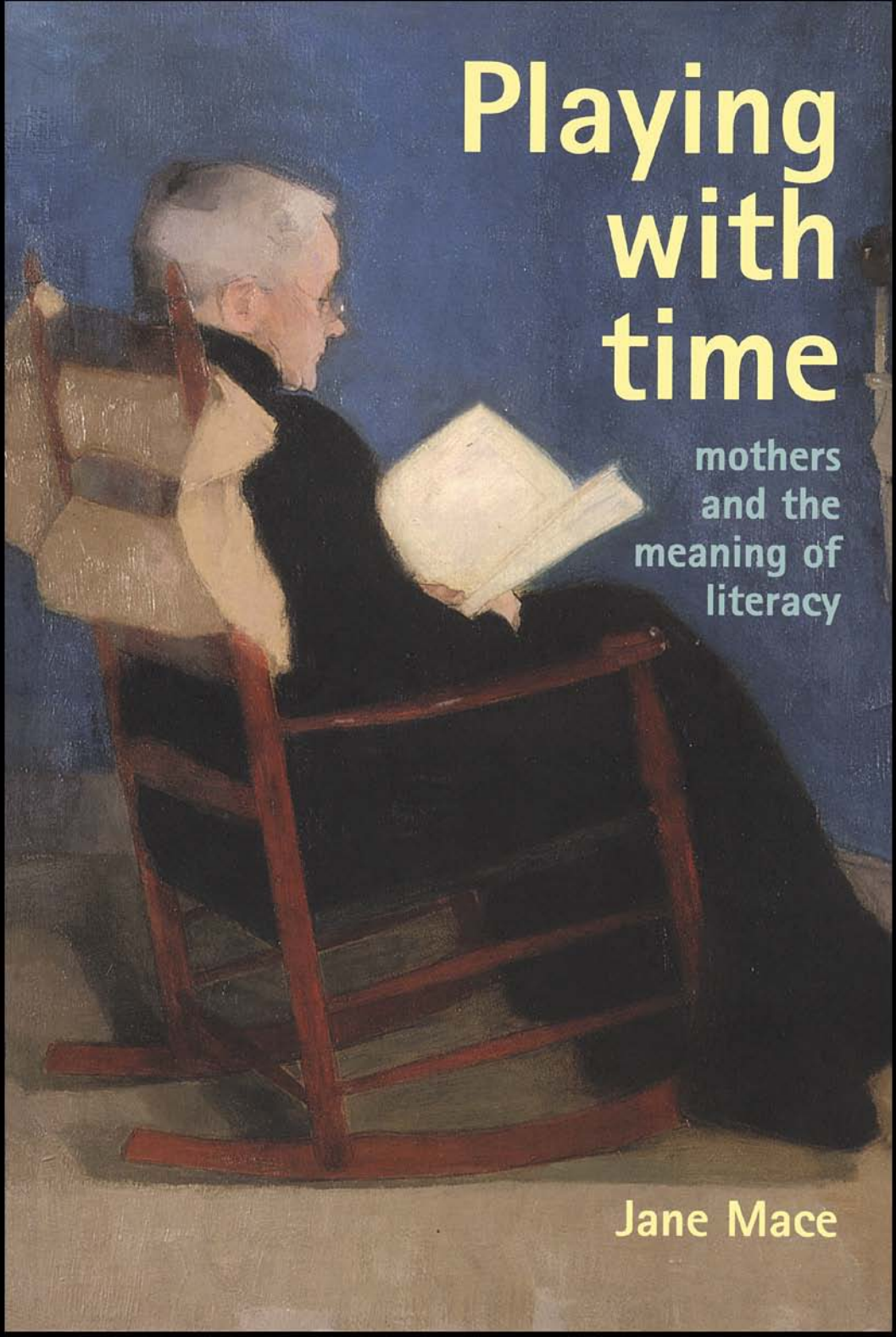

Playing with time

Playing with time: mothers and the meaning of literacy

Jane Mace

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to:

Daisy Pethick, Cynthia Whiskard, Eileen Whiskard, Gladys Mace and Mary Sommerville—my grandmothers and mothers; and to my father, William Sommerville, who reminded me that "of making books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh". (*Ecclesiastes, Chap. 12 verse xii*)

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Ideas arising from the research were shared at papers I gave at the following events and conferences:

> The British Education Research Association, Lancaster (September 1996); Goldsmiths' College Faculty seminar (November 1996); Social History Society Conference on "Time and the construction of the past", Lancaster (January 1997); Open University School of Education seminar, Milton Keynes (May 1997); and the Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) study conference (June 1997).

At each of these, comments and questions gave me stimulation and new perspectives. I am grateful to all those who participated; this, as I see it, is the idea of "academic community" in action.

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Madonna and child, Sandro Botticelli: Museo Poldi Pezzoli.

Chapter 1
Introduction

> But then she was not just a city woman, but a pom, the kind of person who has to put things down on paper before she can see what they mean.[1]

This book is a study of literacy and its meanings in the lives of mothers. Among its origins are two sets of conversations, over 20 years apart.

The first took place in 1973 during two separate initial assessment interviews at the adult literacy scheme where I then worked.[2] The interviews were with women who denned themselves as "no good at" reading and writing and were looking to remedy this. What they said seems to me to encapsulate a kind of self-disqualification by women that bothered me then and has haunted me ever since. The first woman, Milly, in her fifties, worked as a home help. She said: "Reading and writing is something I do when everything else is done". The second woman, Iris, who had been nervous when she arrived, was putting on her coat to leave when she said: "I don't want to be greedy. I just want to read what's on the walls".

Milly had always felt that it was she who had to make sure that "everything else" got done; and, too often, it never did. As Iris saw it, being fully literate would have been more than her fair share: wanting it was excessive greed, not justifiable appetite. Both women had (till then) disqualified themselves, in different ways, from a literate life. Their role was to do "everything else".

On International Women's Day 1995, I had another set of conversations, this time with a group of older women, to whom I had just given a talk on the subject of "women and literacy". In the discussion that followed (a discussion which is elaborated in Chapter 5), two of the women present revealed that their own mothers, growing up to adulthood in this country earlier this same century, had also been illiterate. Both women, now in their seventies, referred to themselves as having led an active literacy life of their own—enjoying a variety of reading and writing over a long period and currently being active participants in adult education opportunities. Later, they wrote me letters with their own accounts of their mothers' lives.

This second set of conversations caught my imagination by making me see something I had not seen so vividly before. A population of adults in the UK (and elsewhere) who are literate today are familiar with illiteracy; they grew up inhouseholds where mother, father, or both could not read and write. Children of illiterate parents, they have grown up to enjoy a full and wide-ranging life of reading and writing. (I am deliberately setting aside the educational "achievements" they may also have enjoyed; this is a book about literacy, not about certificates and degrees.)

My contention in this book is that, more than at any other time, mothers today are assumed to be essential to other people's literacy, yet are the objects of contradictory messages about their own. My purpose in writing it has been to unravel the tangled knots of assumptions from which these messages have come; assumptions that imply an over-simple causal link between the illiteracy of mothers and that of their children. As I see it, the slogans used to promote the "family literacy" programmes of the 1980s and 1990s illustrate the problem this raises.

The slogan "Educate a woman…you educate a nation" originated in campaigns for the equal rights of women to literacy in developing countries where, historically, girls have had dramatically less share of elementary education than boys.[3] The wording of this slogan was chosen to urge long-overdue attention to the needs of women's education. Used before and during International Literacy Year (1990), it grew out of a global concern with the low levels of literacy among women as compared with men. As numerous women's organizations and feminist commentators have observed, however, this apparent encouragement for women conceals a continuing contradiction for mothers across the developing world.[4] Without radical change in traditional forms of production and labour, the time for mothers' education can only be found by subtracting it from the time and energy necessary to sustain basic subsistence for their families. Literacy for mothers (particularly in the rural areas), unless accompanied by other reforms, remains a prize achieved at the cost of economic necessity for the communities in which they live.

During the same period, in North America and then in Britain, a similar slogan became fashionable, with subtly different wording. The exhortation was to "Teach the mother, reach the child": an explicit call, not to improve the opportunities of the mother to gain education for herself, but to lay on her alone (above all other family members) the responsibility for her children's literacy. Behind this call was a perceived crisis in the standards of literacy produced by national systems of schooling. Mothers were to be taught in order to ensure that they in turn taught their children; their own interests in literacy of any kind subordinated to that of equipping their children to succeed in the literacy of the school.

Both these slogans only thinly conceal pragmatic objectives, in which mothers as women and people with their own literacy interests are secondary to mothers as agents for others. Mothers will educate children; children are the future

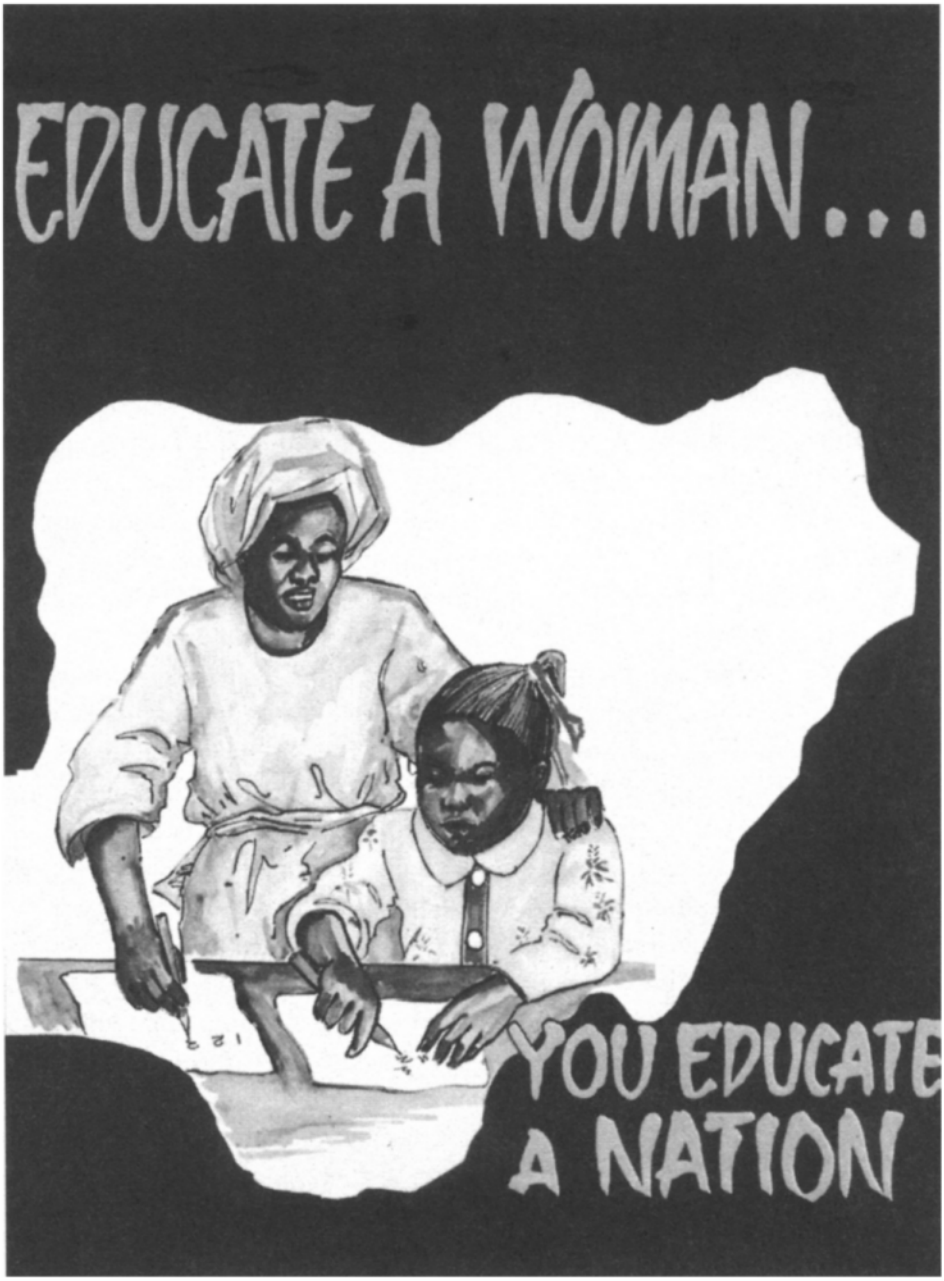
nation. (And, after all, what is wrong with that? Mothers are often the first to agree that their children's needs come first.) So money and slogans are addressed to the education of children's mothers, without altering the economic position of mothers or allowing for the possibility of other members in a family network to support children's literacy development. In North America and in the UK, this policy interest channelled funding during the late 1980s and 1990s into something that became known as "family literacy education".

For those of us who by training and experience are adult educators rather than school teachers, these messages jarred uncomfortably with what we had seen inclassrooms and discussed with colleagues in conferences and professional development courses over some 25 years. Women who have been our students have also been mothers; all too often they have agreed with the idea that their only justification for seeking an education in literacy has been "to help the children". All too often, too, these women have spoken of "not having the time" to read and write for their own pleasure or education. It was precisely because these limited aspirations were not only being echoed but made the subject of public policy in this way that the language of this policy struck a discordant note.

The conditions of adult literacy education are not glamorous. Classrooms are shabby, secondhand; women students such as Milly and Iris come in all weathers, against other pressures. Yet these are the people who, even in these conditions, have found it possible to transcend cautious hopes; whose spirits have quickened as they recognize their own powers as storytellers, and their capacities to be "reading readers" and "writing writers". Such women (who, temporarily, would forget that they were also mothers) were no longer there merely in order to "educate a nation" or to raise the measured literacy standards of their school-children, but to discover new levels of understanding in themselves.

The literacy of children, then, is not the concern of this book; there is a huge literature on that subject, written by others more expert than I. Children feature here, to the extent that children's literacy may sometimes provoke mixed feelings in their mothers; and the childhood of women who grow to be mothers and later grandmothers is part of the story, too. Sometimes you will meet children acting as readers and writers for their mothers; and there are reports of families in which sisters and brothers, fathers and grandparents may influence the way in which young children find interest in writing and reading. But the main focus is on literacy as a lifetime activity, not only something learned in childhood, and as something shared in several directions between generations, nor merely a oneway traffic from adults to children. And the protagonist is mother.

There have been, for several decades now, some engrossing and detailed studies made of the uses and meanings of literacy in everyday life, in a whole range of cultures. In this book I refer to some of these; at the risk of minimizing the depth and scope of this research, I suggest that the key messages it has offered us could be summarized as follows. First, literacy is only one means of education; secondly, literacy is far more than what goes on in school; thirdly,



Educate a women…you educate a nation

Federal Ministry of Education, Lagus, Nigeria 1985

there have always been multiple uses of literacy; and finally, only in a society that assumes itself to be literate is it possible fully to conceive of the illiterate as strange. For those of us who live in one of the industrialized countries, in Northern Europe, in North America, in Australia, in New Zealand, such a society is the one we live in. Those of us who are literate in the dominant language of that society find it disturbing to conceive of anyone who is not. So in Britain (to take but one example) the illiterate—those adults who find reading and writing difficult or impossible, for whatever reason— are seen variously as odd, deviant, worrying: they are *problems*. Their existence poses a threat to the national economy—an economy in competition with others, on the global stage. (The supposed "cost to industry" or the "cost to business" of"poor basic skills" has been one of the less attractive aspects of the British and American campaigns for adult basic education in the 1980s.) The need to ensure that children become fully literate is an international preoccupation. The evidence of a literacy "problem" in industrialized countries with mass schooling systems has revealed that schools cannot alone meet this need. Families must therefore be recruited to do their bit, too. This is where the spotlight falls on the mother. She it is who must ensure that the young child arrives at school ready for school literacy, and preferably already literate.

It is in this setting that the prospect of illiterate mothers looks most alarming; and the myth that illiterate mothers "cause" illiterate children has subtly gained ground. The historical evidence, however, poses a challenge to this "causal fallacy". Mothers alone, whether literate or not, do not cause their children to grow up illiterate; on the contrary, an adult population of fully functioning members of a literate society includes some who are the progeny of illiterate parents. To put it another way: you and I, habitual readers and writers, are very possibly the descendants of illiterate grandmothers. Some of us may even have had illiterate mothers. In short, it is still within the reach of the living memories of literate adults to have had illiterate antecedents in their family histories.

All these observations led me to a decision. I decided I wanted to understand better what literacy means to mothers themselves. But I also decided that I wanted to cherish the possibility that illiterate mothers could be included in this understanding. To do this, I set out to find through living history some accounts of a time when illiteracy and literacy co-existed differently and when to be illiterate might have been ordinary, not strange. My curiosity was to learn more about the meanings that everyday reading and writing activities may have had for another generation of mothers, at a time when there was a different set of political and cultural assumptions about the role that they should play in relation to the literacy of other members of their families. And my purpose, as I have said, was to disentangle present-day knots of assumptions and stereotypes and release some fresh insights into the meanings of literacy today for women negotiating their identities through the excitement and fatigue of motherhood. As someone who gains enormous pleasure from all sorts of writing and reading, I also wanted

to have something more to say about this pleasure to women like Iris and Milly, who continue to hold back from reading and writing.

Using a historical perspective to re-examine these assumptions, my search has been for stories and pictures of the lives of mothers and grandmothers bringing up children in the first decades of this century; mothers like those of the elderly women who had talked to me in March 1995; born in the 1870s or 1880s and bringing up children from the 1890s onwards. The choice of period was determined by the reach of memory rather than a decision made in advance that it was a better one than any other for exploring a research question. It was only when I had done the arithmetic of years that I realized how rich in significance for women's literacy this period might be. Transformations in the worlds of education, politics and popular culture during these years suggested potentiallyradical changes of literacy experience from one generation to the next. This was a time, following Forster's Education Act in 1870, when a universal system of education providing equal opportunities for girls as well as boys was still coming to life. For a woman born in 1880, the franchise was out of the question; universal suffrage would still not become a reality until she was nearly fifty years old. Information essential to mothers, such as contraceptive advice, was only just becoming available in print; by the 1920s this too had changed. Public transport; the penny post; the growth of the newspaper industry; later, the telephone and the radio were already transforming the possibilities of connection and communication between individuals and communities.[5] The immense technological revolutions in domestic management introduced by electricity were yet to come (arguably a revolution of greater importance to women than the more recent changes in new technology). A system of free libraries and an industry of cheap magazine publication were bringing affordable reading material into homes whose book collection, till then, had consisted of a copy of the Bible.

In short, this was a period, like any other, when opportunities co-existed with impossibilities, and when literacy had different social and cultural meanings than it has now. My hope was that by thus turning the lens on the past, there could be new insights to offer to debates in the present; and since at the heart of the argument in this book is the idea that the very uses of literacy may alter and transform our understandings of time, I see this effort to look back as a means to re-conceive how we look forward.

My sources are three. The first has been oral interviews and reminiscence discussions with elderly women. The second has been some 260 texts written by correspondents for the Mass Observation Archive (M/O). These, received in response to a directive I had written, offered a range of accounts about lives, researched from family history, personal recollection, and public records. Thirdly, I turned to literature itself—to fiction, poetry and autobiography; and to research studies in social and cultural history.

The core of the book is the evocations of the mothers and grandmothers themselves offered by interviewees and M/O correspondents. These are indeed imagined lives, refracted through the memories of their children and/or

grandchildren who, in turn, offer reflections on the influence (negative or positive) of these histories on their own. The activity of remembering and imagining has itself entailed a willingness to "play with time"—and there is some discussion at intervals through the book on the issues of memory and loss it entails.

In terms of a commentary on present debates about mothers and literacy, one theme which emerges from these accounts is that of mothers' ambivalence towards their children's reading and writing. By no means all the mothers revealed in the recollections of their children felt pleased at the manifestations of their children's literacy. At times, it seems, there is indifference; at others, an active hostility to reading and writing and the world they represent. There is also a sense of yearning or longing for literacy or the time to enjoy it. Sometimes, but notalways, the indifference and the longing are connected. For some women, literacy never held any promise; for others, it was an indulgence only possible in childhood and old age, but, during the years of childbirth and childcare little more than a snatched pleasure or an essential means of maintaining links with older children or relatives who live far away.

The chapters, in outline, are as follows.

Chapter 2:
Literacy, mothers and time

In this chapter, I set out some ideas about my two central themes of the book—literacy and time; and consider how the experience of mothering interconnects with them. The main body of the chapter then teases out three such connections. These are:

- reading as a means of transcending temporal realities;
- literacy as an activity "snatched" out of other time; and
- the varied meanings and uses of literacy across a lifespan.

The chapter ends with a profile of Eliza, a woman who, illiterate all her life, chose to seek out literacy in her seventies.

Chapter 3:
Observing and remembering

This chapter presents the work of the Mass Observation Archive and the written and oral sources this archive provided for the study of mothers' literacy in the period chosen. Of me 260 texts submitted on this topic, five are examined in some detail, via oral history interviews carried out with their authors. The story of a family literacy "drama" from one (named Gwen) will be returned to in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4:
Domestic reading and writing

This chapter picks out three uses of domestic reading and writing most frequently reported in the M/O data: letters/postcards, library books, and women's magazines. The chapter connects anecdote and story provided by the M/O writers and by other oral history interviews with evidence on the systems of communication to which they relate—postal, public library service and magazine publishing. In the latter half of the chapter we shift the spotlight to the relationship between reading, learning and writing through two present-day accounts of library and postcard use by women literacy learners. Here, too, is presented the concept of writing as a means of imaginative "play" and the obstacles to this playfulness posed by mothering work.

Chapter 5:
Hide and seek

The main source for the chapter is data provided by women interviewed about their mothers; its focus is on the elusive boundaries between literacy and illiteracy. It begins with the idea of oral history as composition, and some reflections on the creative work of talking and listening. The idea of the *literate accomplice* is illustrated by two stories of literate mediators between illiterate and literate lovers; a *spectrum of literacy* is represented by the mothers depicted by elderly members of an adult education group; and a series of *silhouettes* of illiterate mothers are provided by M/O reports. There remains more to be done to reveal powerful images of the illiterate.

Chapter 6:
Family is more than mum

There are two parts to this chapter. In the first part, we look at "the dark side of the rhetoric" around family literacy—including the deficit model of family, in which blame for inadequate literacy falls, by implication, on the female parent. The second part moves into the creative ways forward adopted by family literacy educators, including the continued use of community publishing as a means for mothers to articulate their own experience and histories. The story of the Swansea Mothers' Writing Group and the genesis of the community publication they wrote about their mothers and grandmothers offers an illustration.

Chapter 7:
Images and certificates

Throughout the book are a number of illustrations depicting mothers reading and writing. The visual arts and media provide another source for our understanding of the meanings of literacy for women, and in this chapter, with thanks to the Dutch cultural studies writer Fie van Dijk, I begin with a discussion of two images of "family literacy". To quarry out the shape and meaning of our mothers' lives we may also turn to what historians call "documentary evidence"; and in the second half of the chapter we follow two writers (Eavan Boland and Margaret Forster) in their search for certificates and epitaphs.

These are official documents, with a permanency about them—in contrast with the ephemeral and disposable forms of literacy often associated with women. The book ends with some reflections about these differences as they relate to ideas of time and temporality.

This is a book which has grown more like a honeysuckle than a eucalyptus tree; it twists and turns and sprouts flowers and drops leaves; it does not grow up in a straight line to the light. In writing it I have felt alternately frivolous and solemn; I imagine that in reading it you will alternate moods, too. "Play" is a serious business as well as a delightful one. It calls for concentration and a willingness tobe surprised; there is much here that I had not expected to write. The intention is to present a set of ideas, stories and pictures rather than drive an argument to its conclusion. My hope has been to make something entertaining as well educational; there is much to learn about our grandmothers, about class, about inequality, about injustice and about power. In late-twentieth-century Britain, we are just two or three generations away from a time when to be unlettered, illiterate, or simply without the daily routines of reading and writing would not have been extraordinary: or, to return the negatives into a positive, a time when habitual and pleasurable literacy was just one of what Alice Walker calls "the creative sparks" which mothers could pass on to their children.

Notes

1. This is a line from a novel by the Australian writer, Rodney Hall. The words are the thoughts of Tony, a resident in Whitey's Fall, a remote and disintegrating mining community. Tony has reached desperation point with the Englishwoman Vivien's failure to understand him and his community. He has been trying to explain to her why they want a road. She has not understood, and then he remembers why: she was not just a city woman, but a pom. When I read this book I was living in Australia; this line gave me a sense of ironic acceptance. That's me, I thought: I am a city woman, and a pom — but I'm a little proud of it, too. For me, as for Vivien, writing is about putting things down on paper—a burden to be laid down, but also a treasure to be displayed, a pattern to discover (Hall 1984:344).
2. Cambridge House Literacy Scheme, in South London. At the time, this scheme operated a one-to-one system of teaching; each learner being allocated to a

volunteer tutor. Milly and Iris were among the many hundreds of others which I and other adult literacy organizers undertook that year with men and women arriving for the first time, spurred by publicity in the media to seek a local centre where they could gain some "help" with their reading and writing difficulties.

3. "Educate a woman—you educate a nation" is the slogan used on this poster published by the Federal Ministry of Education, Lagos, Nigeria, 1985; reproduced in the UNESCO catalogue of their 1990 exhibition of literacy campaign posters (Giere 1992:91).
4. At the Fourth World Assembly on Adult Education held in Bangkok, Thailand in January 1990, a group of participants drew up a list of fourteen "major obstacles for women becoming literate", beginning with "the link between illiteracy, poverty and marginalization" and including the "double burden" of childcare and work, the low priority given to the education of girls and women, and the incidence of sexual exploitation and oppression (Yarmol-Franko 1990:80–81). Lalita Ramdas put the problem succinctly:

> Central to any discussion on the reasons which keep 70 per cent of women illiterate the world over, is a thorough examination of those structural arrangements which serve to keep women subjugated—namely patriarch, which alone seems to unite diverse women in their struggle for justice across the barriers of social and economic class, regional and national disparities. (Ramdas 1990:34)

5. Joanna Bourke considers how far these changes also altered people's sense of identity during the period. Historians seem to have agreed that a growth in "national consciousness" accompanied both the growth in communications and in educational opportunities; but they are divided as to how far this increased sense of "being British" crossed class barriers. Some, as she shows, regarded the radio (or wireless, as it was then called) as the single most powerful medium for promoting "the 'we-feeling'" (Bourke 1994:187).

Chapter 2
Literacy, mothers and time

In this chapter are some broad brush strokes across the canvas I have chosen. There are some thoughts, first, about literacy and about time, and how the two seem to be mixed up with each other in contradictory ways. (Since I have chosen to suggest in this book that literacy has something to do with "playing" with time, a few of these contradictions needed to be near its beginning.) From these we move on to look at how these contradictions might be connected with the experience of being a mother at home. For her, the present is dominated by other timetables—those of school (the regulator of literacy), of paid and unpaid work, and of everyday life. We consider how reading provides a means of *transport out of the present time*: excursions not only out of the home, but outside its timetables.

The second connection is between *family time and literacy time*—focusing particularly on working-class mothers in the period 1890s to 1930s, and on the tension between ideas of work and "leisure". When certain kinds of literacy behaviour simply looked like "play" in conflict with the work of mothering, literacy for the mother is characterized by many women as a "luxury" and an "indulgence". Like many other "leisure" activities, literacy for mothers is something saved for the time before or after the years of childbearing and rearing. Thirdly, under the heading *literacy and life time* I consider with you how moments in the life of a girl and an old woman allow for literacy pleasures not available to the same person in the years when motherhood is her dominant preoccupation. In this section, too, there are examples of a daughter turning to literacy to find answers that her mother refuses her; and of how literacy itself has been silent on the experience of women's sexuality.

In the second part of the chapter we glimpse one mother who came to literacy in old age. The story of Eliza is told by her daughter, now herself a mother and grandmother, and her son: the story of a mother who lived through the first six decades of her life without literacy of her own (she was "illiterate"), and who, at the age of 78, for reasons unknown to anyone, chose to learn to read. Since Eliza herself is no longer alive the story depends on the "memories of memories" carried by (now elderly) children. The portrait they have of Eliza the mother is of a woman "always on the go" with no time to spare from the many roles she

fulfils in her home and community. The portrait changes to another picture entirelywhen as an old woman, motherhood and its responsibilities no longer her prime concern, she is found turning the pages of a library book.

Literacy

"The single most compelling fact about literacy", writes Sylvia Scribner, "is that it is a social achievement: individuals in societies without writing systems do not become literate" (Scribner 1984:7). This is an idea which is at the heart of this book.

Literacy is *one way in which people relate to each other* and to the world; to "achieve" literacy means to achieve a place within a literate culture. Just as learning to read and write is not done (either by child or adult) in a vacuum, so the use of reading and writing happens within the many textures and colours of social relationships. Sylvia Scribner, who spent five years studying the social and intellectual meanings of literacy among the Vai people of West Africa (Scribner & Cole 1981), is among a number of scholars who have argued that literacy is not one thing (as it used to be thought), but many—varying with place and time; and that each of us engages in several varieties of literacy throughout our lives, depending on the social and/ or cultural purposes we wish to fulfil. In their research, she and her colleagues found much to surprise them; not least that in the multiliterate Vai society, non-literate co-existed almost casually with literate, and one of the key literacies in use among the Vai people was propagated with no reference at all to a school system.

The question of defining literacy has puzzled people for a long time. At national and international meetings seeking to decide policy and funding for literacy programmes, it has been important for those sitting round a table to arrive at some common agreement about it. They have needed to know what it is that public money can pay for. Is it to fund some people to learn just enough to be able to write "a short simple statement about their everyday lives" (the definition favoured by UNESCO in 1958)? or will it do if they just learn to write their names (the measure used to gauge literacy in England and Wales a hundred years before)? Sylvia Scribner suggests that this worry about *definition*—and the disagreements and controversies that inevitably accompany it—might be a diversion. The useful question to start from, she suggests, is not "What is literacy?" but "What are the social motivations for literacy in a given country at a given time?" In her view, these motivations seem to fall into three groups, each of which carries its own metaphorical meaning. The first she calls the *literacy as adaptation* group, in which literacy is understood as a tool to enable people to respond to given demands or circumstances (so-called "functional literacy"). In the second group she sees an idea of *literacy as power*, in which literacy is associated with efforts at mobilizing poor communities for their own development and growth. Finally, Scribner sees some policies that appear to conceive of *literacy as a state of grace*, by which its "self-enhancing" effects of

personal growth and discovery are emphasized. Each of these metaphors, Scribner suggests, implies a set of sometimes unexamined valuejudgements; for the purposes of educational planning, any one of them may be equally valid.

Literacy understood in this way is literacy which is a *relative* matter: it varies with who people are and where and when they are living. Relative views of the world are always less neat and tidy than absolute ones; the absolute "either-or" view of literacy ("*either* you can read and write *or* you can't")—referred to by the anthropologist Brian Street as "the Great Divide" theory (Street 1995)—sees the literate and illiterate as fundamentally different people. According to this view, the illiterate are ignorant, superstitious and backward, while the literate are rational beings with a logical turn of mind and a greater capacity for conceptual thought. Within the "Great Divide" theory, illiteracy is associated with darkness and ignorance, isolation and stigma: a gloomy place from which literacy provides rescue. Like Scribner, Street rejects ideas about "the Great Divide" and argues for a richer and more complex account of reality: one that recognizes literacy not as a singular but as a plural activity. Of course, this view can be irritating as well as illuminating; for those people sitting in policy-making meetings having to deal with practical decisions about funding, some common definitions are essential. However, the big attraction of relativist understandings of literacy is that, at a stroke, it not only does away with the notion of a single literacy, it also eradicates at a stroke the notion of "illiteracy" as a singular matter, too. Given the wholly negative association of the word, this seems a thoroughly good idea.

If literacy is understood as a way in which people relate to each other in all kinds of settings throughout their lives, another misconception may also be ditched: namely, that literacy is the same thing as schooling. In a lifespan which (with good health and good fortune) may last several decades, the time spent within classroom walls is small. Add the notion of different *domains* in which we live, and school life, as a feature of an individual's whole literacy life, shrinks smaller still. Grouping a life into different kinds of domains—home, community, education, work, and interactions with officialdom—is one way some researchers have found to express the concept of the social contexts for literacy. As a means to put school literacy in its proper proportion, Roz Ivanic and Mary Hamilton set out a memorable diagram in which they listed these "domains" across a horizontal plane and marked five-year periods of an 80-year life up a vertical axis. The resulting image—in which the slice of time occupied in the "education" domain from age five to age sixteen is set beside all the other ages and domains—reveals "how small a place compulsory schooling occupies in a person's whole life" (Ivanic & Hamilton 1990:10).

> We scan, shun, love, copy, list, ponder the written word from the cradle to the grave and in many corners of our lives. School is only one of those corners and occupies only a very short span of time. (Ivanic & Hamilton: 17)

As historical research has shown, the equation *schooling=literacy* is relatively recent. There is a popular misconception (which I once shared myself) that the introduction of mass schooling at the end of the nineteenth century ushered inliteracy and that literacy levels increased with industrialization. Far from this being the case, it seems the nineteenth-century campaigns for a school system available to the mass of the population were not promoted in order to provide literacy, but in order to *control* it (Cook-Gumperz 1986). Scribner & Cole's work was just one of many studies which also showed that, in all societies, for a long time, people have acquired literacy independently of school systems.

Meanwhile, as David Barton has pointed out, whether literate or illiterate, all members of a literate society have literacy thrust upon them: junk mail is no respecter of persons, and packaging is covered in words (Barton 1994b). Everyday tasks entail all kinds of apparently trivial kinds of "literacy events" in which reading and writing form part of other activities. This concept is credited to the influential research carried out by the American literacy scholar Shirley Brice Heath (1983). Her ethnographic study over a period of nine years, in two working-class communities in the Southern United States combined the disciplinary strengths of anthropology and linguistics, and shed light on the rich everyday mix of talk, reading and writing. More recently, members of the Lancaster Literacy Research Group in the UK have published other studies of literacy use in homes and communities (Barton and Ivanic 1991, Hamilton et al. 1993, Barton & Hamilton 1998).

In the late twentieth century the achievement of literacy has become necessary to a sense of wellbeing both of individuals and of nations. Literacy campaigns invoke the language of human rights in publicity (indeed, the very idea of a "campaign" puts literacy into the realm of social justice). As an adult literacy educator for some years, I saw it as my business not only to enable people to have their share of it but also to see reading and writing as both desirable and possible. Yet, of the several hundred women and men I met in interviews and/or classrooms during the 1970s and 1980s, not a single one of them had any sense of reading and writing as something they might *enjoy*. I do not recall one coming with an expectation of pleasure. What they came for was "improvement", with many hesitations as to whether they had the ability to achieve it. (Do you think I am too old? too slow? too late?) Few, if any of these prospective students used the word "literacy" itself; but many referred to themselves as "illiterate". Once in the literacy class, pleasure came as a surprise. Among much that seemed unreadable, something could be read; that which had seemed impossible to put on paper became written; and this experience, repeated little by little over time, revealed literacy to be something that just might become interesting and pleasurable, not merely as a solution to other problems, but in its own right. The stops and starts of the journey included moments of enjoyment, even fun: moments which, for someone to whom any call to read or write had until then spelled certain failure, were an unexpected bonus.

In the years following a public "campaign" designed to "eradicate" illiteracy, the other campaign in which students and educators in classrooms up and down the country were engaged was to transform the dominant view of the "adult illiterate" as a social outcast. Adult literacy educators were out to abolish theconcept of "illiteracy" itself; and the focus of our energy was in persuading our students that a fuller literacy life was within their reach. We were there not only to teach our students how to read and write, but to persuade them of their abilities to do so. As historians of the adult literacy movement in the UK and other countries have suggested, this alternative campaign persisted against a continuing social view of the illiterate as isolated and backward (Mace 1979, 1987, Withnall 1994, Hamilton 1997).

For me, it has only been in more recent years, with the increased detachment that an academic job has given me, that I have been free to exercise a more dispassionate curiosity in literacy itself. From the defensive position of an adult literacy educator challenging dominant ideas about illiteracy, I began to think more about what it means to be literate (Mace 1992). It became important to me to separate the use of literacy from its acquisition; to distinguish between what literate people do with literacy and how people may become literate.

In considering the idea of a "literacy life", which any one of us may have (along with a social life, a spiritual life, a sporting life, and so on), I am happy to see literacy as plural and various, and certainly something far more than skills that may be achieved and assessed within a system of education. I also want to persist with the notion that literacy engages our imaginations, intellects, emotions and memories: and as such, is a matter of enormous mystery, beyond simple measurements. In this book I hope to show that any researcher who accepts this and who seeks to find out what literacy may mean to an individual or a group, has to go beyond mere observation of what could be called "literacy behaviour"; for while such observation can tell us some things, there is much that it cannot. If, for example, I watch someone else reading a newspaper on a train, I can notice which page they turn to, or how long they take to read an article; but I cannot tell what mental images or lines of thought their reading sets up. If I see someone writing a postcard in a cafe, I may notice that they are left-handed, using a felt-tip pen, and pausing over every other word; I may even—when they go up to the counter to buy another cup of tea—catch sight of a word or two of what has been written, and get a sense of what they are writing about. But I have no idea of the unwritten words that they have decided not to write.

This line of thought meant that in order to understand something of the mystery of literacy in the lives of the women I was thinking about, it became important both to learn something of these outward behaviours and contexts (when, how often, what, where and why this person reads or writes, with what skill or ability, and with what materials and apparent purposes); and also to glimpse something beyond—the person's inner life: her "mind's eye" as she read or wrote.

Time

There are two contradictions about time and literacy. The first is that there is an inequality between the *labour time* of the reading and that of the writing. The timethat you take to read this chapter may be an hour or so, at one or two sittings. The time it has taken me to write it has been several days, at several sittings, several weeks apart. The choice of every phrase and connection is one that the writer may have struggled over and re-worked many times; the reader who is familiar with reading will read it in minutes. (Reading and writing, in that sense, are rather like cooking and eating. The writer (the cook) may spend several hours in planning, preparing and seasoning. The reader (the eater) devours it in minutes. This analogy between literacy, appetites and nourishment will recur in later chapters.)

The second contradiction is partly expressed by Raymond Williams's idea of "the paradoxical community…of a shared isolation" between reader and writer (Williams 1984:116–17). Every time we read we read alone; the room may be full of others, but only I am reading the page in front of me (reading aloud by one person to others today being the exception, rather than the rule). The writer, while she may be writing in the middle of a throng of people, writes in similar conditions of solitude—the pen or keyboard only respond to her touch, the choice of word and sentence being hers alone. The meeting of published writer with reader is an invisible encounter, yet depends on both having a sense of a plural readership. While she writes for one reader only, the published author—not to mention her publisher—hopes and believes that there will be many. The isolation that is shared is also one of time; at the very moment of their meeting, writer and reader are living in different epochs, because of *the time that elapses between original composition and its reading*—which may be months, years or centuries. As I write this paragraph late on a Saturday April evening in London, I have no control over when and where it will be read in the future. Yet you and I conspire in an idea which assumes that, during the time you spend reading this, we are together; with common as well as different personal, social and historical circumstances in which each of us is choosing to be in each other's company.

Time is also a commodity, to be calculated, bought, sold, wasted, saved and spent. We speak of it like a possession, so that there is the idea of "having" or "not having" it. During the two years of researching this book, this possessive view of time kept reappearing. Over and over again, in interviews or writing about women bringing up children in the 1910s, 1920s or 1930s, the speaker or writer would say that she did not think she ever "had time" for her own reading or writing. Such a woman is no longer alive to speak for herself; but family history saw her as *having no time* for her own literacy life. This was not said of the woman with servants to do the housework; nor of the mother whose children no longer lived with her. But (according to these accounts) the majority of mothers at home in the early decades of this century, caught up in a multiplicity of

timetables, *had no time* for all sorts of things that they might have wanted—among which, literacy and its pleasures could have been one.

"Time" for reading and writing conjures up time for being still, for pausing and considering: the kind of time which is unimaginable for most women at home, today as well as in the past. (Do women have leisure? asked Rosemary Deem, inher influential study on the subject; replying, in short, that "the experience of 'free time' remains unknown to the granddaughters of the women I have been studying" (Deem 1986:51).) It is true that there are some occasions in a day's housework when this pondering is possible waiting for the water to boil, the iron to heat up, or the baby at the breast, perhaps—and it is also true that women are said to be "good" at doing two things at once, the experience of motherhood having trained us to be constantly interrupted. This being the case, women's lives are less easy to describe in the conventions of time-measurement. They are asked to fit into measurable episodes and timespans, into cause and effect, and they will not. The sociologist Karen Davies described the problem like this:

> If a young infant or senile individual needs to be fed, it is hard to push this activity into a predetermined linear and clock time framework. It is hard to know just how long the activity will take. A senile person's brain and motor skills coordinate badly; it takes time to chew and swallow. Feeding the person may also be carried out parallel to other activities. The mother may help her children do their homework during the time she is feeding the baby and the employee at the old people's home may take the elderly resident with her to her coffee break and continue intermittently to feed her there, as the whole process can take more than an hour. (Davies 1986:583)

In her survey of studies which have looked at "linear time" and women's lives, Davies discussed this problem and offered an interesting alternative. Looking back on her own research into women and unemployment she suggests that, consciously or not, researchers try to push their subjects into a "traditional chronology" that is at variance with the life experience they are describing. She argues that while plenty of people may agree that "time is vitally important for understanding our lives", the problem is caused by the fact that the nature of time itself is generally taken for granted. "Normal" concepts of time, she suggests, derive from Isaac Newton's 1687 definition of it as flowing "without relation to anything external": mathematical, abstract and context-free. If we use, instead, the idea of *temporality* we are better able to recognize that each of us lives in "a present that is made meaningful by past experience and by the person's anticipated future" (Davies 1986:581).

Unconscious allegiance to the Newtonian, linear model of time prevents us from seeing the full complexity of life experience; the concept of temporality allows us to see it more clearly. Women's lives, she suggests, inhabit a different temporal space to men's, being characterized by "a complicated weaving of

different temporal structures, times and timing" for which we need new words or concepts. One such concept, she suggests, could be that of "process time", which allows for a recognition of the mesh between time and social relations and the everyday reality of women often doing two things *at the same time*. "Process time", Davies says, "is characterized by a degree of circularity, simultaneity and waiting" (Davies 1986).

Even if we stick more closely to some idea of time passing in a linear fashion, there are ways in which we can still think more imaginatively about it than in the measurements of hour, day, week, month and year. In a collection of unpublished diaries written by white Australian women, Katie Holmes offers four different conceptions of time to help her distinguish between the way in which women may live the rhythms and interruptions of their days. One of these is close to Davies's idea of "circularity"; she calls it "biological time", by which she means the woman's monthly cycle, her periods of pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, together with menopause, ageing and death. The other three are: industrial time (governed by the clock and calendar); domestic time (closely linked with "family time"); and "individual time"—that is, the events and episodes represented in the diaries. All of these times, she says, intersect and overlap in the diaries she is considering. The idea most directly relevant to connections between literacy and time is that of "diary time" which Holmes attributes to a writer called Judy Nolte Lensink. "Diary time", she says, is the kind of time which alternately may stretch or shrink "real time" by giving "a full page to a lover's single sentence, while describing fourteen hours of the day with the single telling phrase, 'did usual work'" (Holmes 1995:xxi).

The diary writing that Katie Holmes was examining was that which attempts to capture fragments and moments from what she calls the "eddies and whirls" of daily living. A more mundane and common use of diaries in today's society is that which you or I do when we write in for next Tuesday, or for 10 October next year, some meeting or event which we plan to attend: it is the diary as document not of the past, but of the future. Later in this chapter we shall see how a woman logging the dates of her monthly periods is using a diary both to record the past and predict the future.

I want now to see how these ideas about literacy and time can help frame some of the stories about mothers with which this book is concerned.

Literacy's transports

The mother who works at home is the family timekeeper, as well as the keeper of the place, the home. On her depends the timing of arrivals and departures, of food prepared and food eaten, of the time for bed and the time to get up. On her, in today's version of the mother, depends also the time to play with her child, to use every opportunity in the home to develop the child's language, and to enlist the child into the world of literacy. This kind of time, as Valeric Walkerdine and Helen Lucey argue, is felt differently by working-class mothers than for middle-

class mothers. Their case is that the idea of a "natural" mother capable of producing "normal" children is founded on a failure to recognize different material conditions. Mothers in middle-class households appear to have more time to talk to their four-year-old children; but the appearance is an illusion. Working-class mothers, with unskilled and low paid jobs and no-one at home but them todo the housework, are "chained to time"—hence their apparent "lack" of time to do the sensitive mothering which educationalists require of them. What they hold up for us is a picture of the differences between mothers in different circumstances: a picture in which working-class mothers separate work and play, and "insist their daughters play by themselves and who insist also on getting the housework done" (Walkerdine & Lucey 1989:30).

For women living in these conditions, literacy offers an escape: an idea most vividly conveyed by an image offered by the distinguished teacher and critic Margaret Meek. Literacy, says Meek, "is not a school subject; it does not appear on any timetable as a lesson" (Meek 1991:226). It is nowhere and everywhere: spread all over the timetable of the school day like a veil. Her own work in lifting this veil has been an inspiration to generations of teachers and teacher educators (not least because of her engaging capacity to write as if she were having a conversation with her reader). It is her concept of reading's potential for "recreating readers" which I find particularly arresting. The distinction she makes is between *being able to read,* and *being a reader.* To be a reader, Meek argues, is to know that writing is about making worlds, and that "reading itself is part of the text as they read it". The experience of reading in this "re-creational" way is one that is hard to convey to people who are not readers (even though they are able to read); but this passage certainly goes a long way towards conveying it anyway:

> In the process of reading a novel, where am I? at home, sitting in a chair, or in bed. But not really. I feel I am where the action is, where the sufferings are, of the people or events that the writer has made me care about, in nineteenth-century Russia, in a house in Suffolk or on the high seas, or in a quite different other world. *I am on holiday from my self, yet when I finish I know myself better*. (Meek 1991:39) (my emphasis)

According to this idea, the reader is both present in the room and absent: utterly lost to her surroundings; and when she finally looks up from her book, feels as though she has returned from a holiday from the self that she had given to the reading.

An "altered sense of time duration" is the phrase used by two American researchers about "pleasure reading". Presented in the careful form of findings from a research project, the authors lay claim to something akin to Margaret Meek's experience: reading's capacity to lift us out of our present conditions and return us to ourselves with the feeling of a return from holiday. The purpose of their study had been to discover the factors that might decrease loneliness in later

life. They interviewed 195 people between the ages of 56 and 92 living in their own homes or apartments in a Midwest American community. In undertaking the difficult task of measuring "loneliness", they drew on two research instruments: the first, a twenty-item "loneliness scale", and, as a counterpoint, the second, something called the "theory of optimal experience". According to the latter, an enjoyable activity is characterized by a state of "flow"—when we are soabsorbed in an activity that nothing else matters: we have an "altered sense of time duration".

As they suggest, it is often assumed that what prevents any of us feeling lonely is the company of other people. Their sample appears to be of people who could read, even if they were not all "readers" in Margaret Meek's sense. What they found in their study of this group was that it was not a social life, but *reading* which was the most effective enemy of loneliness. Of all the activities that gave pleasure reported by those older people who were not lonely, that of reading was the one most frequently mentioned; and, taking their findings together with earlier studies, the researchers concluded that there is a positive relationship between reading for pleasure and decreased loneliness in later life (Rane-Szostak & Herth 1995).

Pleasure reading, these researchers said, is an "optimal experience"; with an altered sense of the present time, their sample of older people felt no lack of companionship. Like Margaret Meek, once absorbed in reading they are no longer sitting alone in their room, and they are no longer living a mere two hours in a particular afternoon, but two decades or two minutes in another temporality. According to this study, reading provided these older people not only with company in solitude, not only with journeys in immobility, but with a changed sense of the passage of time.

Now "optimal flow" is true for all kinds of things, as the writer Gabriel Josipovic pointed out over 20 years ago:

> I open a book and begin to read. When the book is finished I pick up another, or write a letter, go to the cinema, play tennis, talk to my friends. When the day is done I go to sleep and the next day carry on where I left off: go out to work, read a few more pages of my book, visit an art gallery perhaps, and so on. In other words I fill my days with various kinds of activities, and reading, writing, looking at pictures or listening to music happen to be among them. *These activities follow one another in time, but they also help us to pass the time—help us, that is, to ignore the passing of time*. (Josipovic 1977:124–5) (my emphasis)

These are clearly the words of a man with what many mothers might regard as an enviable freedom to cultivate his mind and his interests. Reading and writing are among many delightful and *leisurely* activities with which he "fills his days". No mention, here, of anyone else's demands causing him to stop, leave the page for an hour or more, to return to it later having quite forgotten his train of thought.

Nevertheless—for different reasons—he too, like Karen Davies, proposes that we reconsider the meaning of time itself. For there are moments, he suggests, "when something in us rebels against this linear yet timeless existence. It is as if there were unexpected knots that formed, unknown to us, in the smooth rope of our existence" (Josipovic 1977:25). How do these connections (and disconnections) between literacy and time help us think about the meanings of literacy in the lives of mothers nearly a century ago?

Family time and literacy time

Feminist historians depicting the lives of working-class mothers in the early 1900s have set out for us a picture of determination and constant labour. Regarded by their "superiors" as the embodiments of the conditions in which they lived, they were also seen as the caretakers of the moral state of their husbands and children (Purvis 1989). The clean front step and the meal on the table were daily victories over ill health, repeated pregnancy, overcrowding and infestations of bugs or rats. As Shani d'Cruze put it: "Despite the odds, very many working-class and lower middle-class women toiled ceaselessly to achieve a clean and comfortable home" (d'Cruze 1995:68).

In the 1900s–1920s, mothers were far more likely to be working full time at home than today. Given the conditions of paid work available at the time, Joanna Bourke regards this as more of a positive choice than their granddaughters might perceive it now; there was skill and science entailed in managing to save and forage. However, the tasks of maintaining husband and children in food and clothes, day in and day out, cost the mother at home a constant and time-consuming labour, from morning to night, seven days a week; so that there was a symmetrical equation between her time and the time of her family: "*her* work facilitated *their* leisure" (Bourke 1994:67).

During those years of child-rearing, of providing food and shelter day after day, week after week, year after year, the woman who is a mother lived in an intricate web of timings and timetables that seems to leave little daily time for her own musings or adventures. The dirty linen must be washed. The vegetables must be bought and peeled. The water fetched and boiled, and the floor cleaned. The shops reached before they closed. The dinner removed from the oven before it burns. The table laid, the table cleared. The beds made and the beds changed.

Washing, "one of the most detested but most implacable of tasks" for women up to the 1930s and beyond, demanded "copious supplies of water and energy": and in many homes, water was by no means easily available. Whether for washing children or washing clothes, for cooking or for cleaning floors, water had to be fetched and carried up and down stairs several times a day. Even by the early 1940s less than a quarter of working-class homes had piped hot water; each batch of washing meant soaking, scrubbing, boiling, rinsing, wringing, mangling and hanging up to dry, often in cramped conditions. (Zmroczek 1994). How

much working-class mothers may have longed for a holiday from all that: let alone from themselves. How some, despite interrupted and limited opportunities for formal learning, still "wrought their education" through reading and writing, must stand as testimony to a fierce determination to nourish an appetite for something else.

For thousands of women working at home in these conditions, there was little or no time for any relief from immediate pressures. It is, however, in the midst of washing that a rare first-hand picture emerges of a mother reading. It is from among the writing sent in to the Women's Co-operative Guild in its campaign for the state benefits for mothers, that one anonymous writer begins: "I was marriedat twenty-eight in utter ignorance of the things that most vitally affect a wife and mother". During the years of "weariness and hopelessness" and an "utter monotony of life" with five childbirths and a constant struggle to make ends meet, this woman says, "I could give no time to mental culture". Yet somehow, as she scrubbed, she snatched a kind of time:

> I bought Stead's penny editions of literary masters, and used to put them on a shelf in front of me washing-day, fastened back their pages with a clothes-peg, and learned pages of Whittier, Lowell and Longfellow as I mechanically rubbed the dirty clothes, and thus wrought my education. This served a useful purpose; my children used to be sent off to sleep by reciting what I had learned during the day. (Anon c.1900, in Horowitz Murray 1984:190–91)

The reading this woman chose to do was the product of an increasingly competitive industry in cheap fiction. In 1896, Newnes' Penny Library of Famous Books had brought out its first unabridged versions of classic works, with Stead and others following soon after. The historian David Vincent suggests that, while this industry opened up new possibilities for reading enjoyment, it also posed new pressures for the reader. Poetry, classics, fantasy, periodicals and newspapers were more affordable to this woman than they would have been to her parents, providing her with brief excursions beyond the endless round of work; they also presented her and her contemporaries with added strain: "The problem was one of finding a consistent focus for their mental perspective, and of readjusting their sights when faced once more with the material realities of their daily lives" (Vincent 1993:211, 277).

It was with an idea about *mothers' reading* that the Women's Co-operative Guild found its origins. In their account of the history of the Guild, Jill Liddington and Jill Morris quote the article in the "Woman's Corner" of the January 1883 issue of the *Co-operative News,* which stimulated the start of the *Women's League for the Spread of Co-operation* (as it was then called). The article was written not by a working-class woman, but by Alice Acland, the wife of an Oxford don: which probably goes some way to explain the suggestion of *reading* as a means for women to become politically involved. Acland urges her

women readers to take a cue from the men ("Are we not as important as the men? are we not more than half the nation?") and calls on them to get together, suggesting the form in which they could do this would be in "co-operative 'mothers' meetings' where we may bring our work and sit together, *one of us reading some co-operative or other book aloud,* which may afterwards be discussed" (in Liddington & Norris 1978:40). (my emphasis)

Alice Acland, in the 1880s, would have had greater access to schooling than the readers she sought to persuade. By the early 1900s, opportunities to gain literacy via a mass education system were still unevenly spread:

> In 1900, the first generation to feel the benefits of Forster's Education Act was just reaching middle age, and those children who had finally been forcedinto school by Mundella's Act of 1880 were only in their twenties. The men and women whose childhood had been passed without the benefits of universality or compulsion still comprised a substantial proportion of the adult population. (Vincent 1993:28)

The school, initiator and regulator of the child's literacy, marked time by lines drawn between lesson time, play time and home time, between term time and holiday time, with little mercy shown to the demands of other children to be washed and dressed, and errands to be run. Outside the kitchen, the clock of the wage-earner's life as well as the clock of the school added other summons. For the mother who worked at home, these indirect controls multiplied the other rhythms of her labour. The cycle of seasons and of menstruation, overlaid with the careful timings of cooking, washing, cleaning and care had to be meshed together with the linear diagrams of the school day and the work shift, to which her children and her husband were called. No wonder, as Anna Davin suggests, that many of those children, particularly girls, did not always meet the school's demands for punctuality, or even attendance. Since "girls' intended future was domestic", it was their schooling, more often than that of their brothers, which was disrupted: "If girls did not attend regularly it meant that family need was being put before education" (Davin 1996:111).

The weariness of years of childbearing left not only little time, but little energy for "mental culture". Later in this book we will think about women reading fiction, in magazines or library books. Women of course also read, and have always read, non-fiction, too (not least in magazines themselves: a source of important reference on health, nutrition and local and national politics, among other matters). One non-fiction best-seller of the period was a book which has been described as "probably the most influential sex manual of the twentieth century", Marie Stopes's *Married Love.* Two weeks after its publication in 1918, over 2000 copies had already been sold, and five years later sales had totalled over 400,000 (Bourke 1994). This was women's (and men's) reading on a large scale: and a text which of itself offered a first opportunity to working-class mothers to conceive of finding time or energy for themselves. The author was a

woman who offered all kinds of other reading material for visitors to her clinic: "On the desk, beside a flowerpot, was a collection of books on mothering and contraception…maintained as a library for patients" (Cohen 1993:98). The first of eight Mothers' Clinics established by Stopes around the country was in Holloway Road, London. The queue of women who waited outside its door on the day it opened had been attracted by a variety of media, not least of which were the posters in Marlborough Road.

A cruel reality for many families of the period was the number of children who died in infancy; to which, for many mothers, had to be added the incidence of miscarriage and stillbirths.[1] So, while a woman's family might have been small, the number of her childbirths might have been many. Birth control campaigners in the 1920s argued that birth control information was just as necessary for thosewho appeared to have no families or very small ones, as for those who had a large number of children (Cohen 1993). Miscarriages, abortions and infant deaths were an invisible factor in the arithmetic of maternity and many women turned to the clinics as a last resort, when they had already had numerous pregnancies (Gittins 1982). Campaigners for women's literacy education today, as in the past, have recognized an important connection between the value of information such as that provided by Marie Slopes and the opportunity for women to control their fertility. Here, I am not wanting to draw any conclusions. I want simply to make the observation that mothers' interests in literacy engage her body as well as her soul and that the imaginative sweep of a non-fiction text could be as great, if not greater, than that of a fictional one.

Between 1918 and 1928, thousands of women wrote letters to Marie Slopes as a result of her books and articles. This extract is from one written in 1921 by a Mrs RGH, in South Wales:

> I hope you will excuse me for taking the liberty of writing to you in this way as I know no other way of doing so I was reading *Lloyds News* on Sunday and I read about what you were going to do and about the Mothers Clinic that you have opened what I would like to know is how I can save having any more children as I think that I have done my duty to my Country having had 13 children 9 boys and 4 girls and I have 6 boys alive now and a little girl who will be 3 year old in may I burried a dear little baby girl 3 weeks old who died from the strain of whooping cough the reason I write this is I cannot look after the little one like I would like to as I am getting very stout and cannot bend to bath them and it do jest kill me to carry them in the shawl… I was 19 when I married so you can see by the family I have had that I have not had much time for pleasure… (Hall 1981: 14)

Literacy and life time

Menstruation, like the seasons, is expressed as a cycle. The bleeding of the womb comes round again and again, month after month, in cyclical regularity. Then comes the interruption. Pregnancy is a growth measured in linear terms: it lasts (usually) nine months, starting with conception and ending with labour. There is a beginning, and then an end (itself a new beginning). Every woman who has experienced this, has experienced the change from something regular and cyclical to the uncertainties of becoming an "expectant mother" guided, now, by the calendar. Just a few, like this one, make use of writing to manage these uncertainties:

> I had my first baby at the age of 16. I remember, when one year passed after my marriage and I didn't get pregnant I started asking my mother, "Why is it that I am not pregnant yet?" Then on December the 17th 1950, I had mylast period; I mentioned the date *because I always kept my monthly dates in writing.* January 1951 came, and went. I knew that I was expecting, (my emphasis)

The months ahead must be measured and calculated; and then the measure changes from weeks or months to hours: "I woke up at 2 o'clock in the morning. I felt some pain in my stomach".

It is no longer a month, but a time in the night which marks a change. The pain is timed by the clock; the contractions of labour reduce the timespan not to the hour, but to passing of minutes within it:

> No, the pain didn't go. It started to get worse. It started to go and come every 20 minutes, so my husband knew it was a delivery pain. (Hackney Reading Centre 1980:37–8)

Three hours later, for this woman, the agony was over: she is delivered of a child.

The contractions of labour refuse a regular measure. Once in the world, the infant embarks on a "life cycle". It is our cultural norms that converts this biological term into a chronology—a "lifetime". Each year, the day (though not the moment itself) of that birth is recalled and celebrated. At intervals over the next few decades, the child is construed as arriving at points on a journey: infant, school child, adolescent, worker, student, partner, parent, pensioner. Autobiographical writing, looking back to our lives, chronicles the events, episodes and experiences of that journey: but only the mother recalls the moment of its inception, as the original interruption to another time in her own life. Few may find (or make) the time to capture in writing the minutes and hours of labour: it took the work of an adult literacy class in East London to offer the published account quoted above.

From the time of her first childbirth, the time for writing or for reading in a woman's life is circumscribed. "Living with contradictions is not easy", writes Maud Sulter in her "Portrait of the Artist as Poor, Black and a Woman". Hers is a "creative challenge" to these contradictions:

> Our priority must be to give ourselves space to create… No one else…can. So if the laundry needs to go to the launderette, or all you and your two kids have to eat for tea is a tin of beans and some stale bread, make a conscious decision. Either you go to the launderette or supermarket or you don't. If so, DO IT NOW: if not, stop dithering and get back to work. (Sulter 1987:149–50)

Since she is both a writer and (in Margaret Meek's sense) a reader, it is not surprising that when Maud Sulter urges other women to "let others help you" she gives as her own inspiration another writer (Audre Lorde). Her message is that literacy, for mothers, offers liberation: but the opportunity is not given—it must be seized. For women with no space to give themselves space, the resolution to their contradictory lives is to be found in insisting on a "space to create" with the encouragement of other, invisible women.

Such encouragement came to me one morning in the post, in the form of a book of poetry sent to me by an old friend in New Zealand. Leafing through it, I was met by these words:

> I want to tell you about time, how strangely
> it behaves when you haven't got much of it left.

The poem is about ageing and time; it speaks of another time in the life of a mother. This is not the 16-year-old mother giving birth; nor the other mother, at home with clothes to wash and children to feed. This is the mother now in her sixties or seventies, telling us of a different sense of time; no longer the urgency of labour to be endured, nor the desperation of meals to be found, but the contemplative possibilities of a later life, where the timings of her children's demands are now a distant memory:

> The rules change, a single hour can grow huge and quiet, full of reflections like an old river, its slow-turning eddies and whirls showing you
>
> every face of your life in a fluid design— your children for instance, how you see them deepened and changed, not merely by age, but by
>
> time itself, its wide and luminous eye; and you realise at last that your every gift to them—love, your very life, should they need it—will not
>
> and cannot come back… (Edmond 1996:11)

Time changes all of us; we grow older. By reading or writing we may reverse the process: ourselves changing time.

The metaphor of time as an "old river" offers an attractive prospect not only of the present, but also of a future: of life and time yet to come, as an old woman. Like the women at Hackney Reading Centre and Maud Sulter, Lauris Edmond uses writing both to reflect on past life experiences and conceive of future ones. As women and as mothers, each had to contend with the temporal pressures of their lives to give meaning to the changes in them, using writing as a means to measure time itself. Maud Sulter urges women to seize the present moment; Lauris Edmond evokes the twist and bend of a river to imagine both future and our past. The woman recalling her labour recalled, too, the use of her diary to record her monthly bleeding.

When you think about it, it is extraordinary how silent literature has been on this most common of human experiences. Period pains, throughout history, have been routine experiences for more than half the population (and more frequent than gunshot wounds); yet until the second half of this century, little or nothing of this experience would be found in fiction, let alone poetry or drama. From herresearch into women's fiction during the period 1914–39, Nicola Beauman reports that the first mention of "the curse" that she found was in a novel called *Four Frightened People* by E.Arnot Robertson. This novel was published in 1931. As to the phenomenon of pregnancy sickness, one with which Mrs RCH in South Wales would have been sadly all too familiar, the first novel found to make any mention of this common malady was Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets,* published five years later, in 1936 (Beauman 1983).[2]

In writing her textbook on women's sexuality, Marie Slopes was part of a campaign for sexual reform (which some say, in her case, had been directly inspired by two years of unconsummated marriage). For this, she drew on her own reading in three languages of every book on sex that she could lay her hands on (Beauman 1983). The publication of *Married Love* opened up the possibility of choice and control for women over their bodies; it appeared at a time when public taboos and silence around menstruation, sexuality and reproduction could make puberty and childbirth a terrifying experience. Some research (and a lot of life history experience, too, probably) suggests that such taboos continued to result in ignorance of female contraception among working-class women as recently as 1945 (Cohen 1993). The imposed silence on these topics made for barriers between mother and daughter in the same period.

It is an autobiographical account of a Glasgow girlhood in the 1940s that suggests how literacy provided the way out, for some. The cosy intimacy of mother and young children sharing reading is in stark contrast with the later hostility, by the same mother, to her adolescent daughter's need for information. The author, Fiona MacFarlane, portrays her mother as a woman who, having had little education herself, was determined that her five children should have "the best of everything", and above all, achieve respectability. Fiona's father, recalled as a heavy drinker, was mainly absent—particularly in scenes of domestic literacy pleasures:

> My mother used to bath us all, we would be in our night clothes, and naturally my father was never ever there, and she would gather us round her at the front of the fire, and as we ate our toasted cheese sandwiches… and hot milk, she would read to us things like most of A.J.Cronin's work, she was very fond of them. She would borrow them from other people or maybe even got them from the library, although she seldom went out except to do shopping; and we got all these tales told to us. They were really tremendous stories, a chapter or so each night.

"I think this is why we all read without apparent effort so young", she goes on; "my mother always was reading and she read these marvellous stories to us at night that we were desperate to get our hands on books and start reading too" (McCrindle & Rowbotham 1983:217, 221–3).

This is a happy picture, showing a mother nourishing her children with both warm food and "tremendous stories". Reading and being read to is set in a sceneof safety and warmth, with the erratic male presence well out of sight and mind. A very different scene between mother and daughter follows later. The girl is now thirteen; she has discovered her first bleeding:

> I woke up one morning and blood was streaming from me—and I was screaming through to my mother in the kitchen. Nothing was sore, I felt nothing, but I thought there must be something wrong with all this blood about. All my mother said was, "Stop that nonsense, that's you coming a woman now", and that was it.

At this very different moment between mother and child, literacy fulfilled another function. The mother's reaction to the child, now "coming a woman" constituted so stern a censorship that the daughter kept hidden from her the subsequent monthly bleeding for a year. During that time, it was from her reading, not from her mother, that she gained some sense of the changes in her own body which had so frightened her:

> Through reading women's magazines—they never did mention it in those days, this would be 1945 to 1946, it just wasn't mentioned—I gradually worked out that these periods must happen regularly, because look at all the advertisements for sanitary towels there were, and if it only happened once in a lifetime you wouldn't need this massive advertising campaign. It was then I realised that this must happen regularly. (McCrindle & Rowbotham, 1983:219)

It was advertiser's copy that provided Fiona Macfarlane with some partial understanding of the education she needed; an education for which she, like others before her, assumed the proper responsibility belonged, not to teachers, but

her mother. (In fact, the day of her first bleeding was the only time this woman recalled she had ever taken a day off school.)

I have said that women, too often, were seen as "having no time" for reading or writing. I have also said that their children can only guess at how they themselves experience this lack: were they indifferent or were they frustrated? The story that follows gives us some clues; the woman at its centre also retains her mystery.

The mother comes to literacy

This is the account of a woman who, illiterate all her life, nevertheless raised two literate children, and two years before she died apparently decided to become literate. It came to me from three sources: from a "fictional biography" of her early life, written by her daughter; from an oral history interview with her daughter and son; and from letters which her daughter wrote to me later. Thestory itself is incomplete and will always remain so, for the question of Eliza's interest in literacy can only ever be answered by Eliza herself.

Eliza Harrison, née Fairfax was born 1892 and died in 1973. She married Harry Harrison in 1913, when she was 21. Their first child, Fred, was born a year later; Joan, his sister, was born twelve years after Fred, in 1925. In April 1996 I talked with Joan and Fred at Joan's house.

Fred, sitting back in his chair, recalled their mother like this:

> She was never still, me mother. Never still: baking, washing, cleaning, going out bringing babies int' world, helping to lay people out that had died. Anyone that were poorly, she'd go and see to. No matter what it were, "Fetch Mrs. Harrison". That's how she was. As recently as last week, I had someone come up to me and say, "By gum! your mother, she were a worker, weren't she!" And she were!

In 1995 the Stocksbridge Writers' Group, of which Joan had been a member for some time, published the book she had written about the first 20 years of Eliza's life, *A Time to Trust* (Firth 1995). Drawn from "tales told and remembered of working class life in Sheffield and Stocksbridge", it is, in the words of the author, a "biographical novel in three parts": dividing Eliza's life into three kinds of time —"Time to be a child", "Time to grow-up" and (referring to her courtship and marriage) "Time to be together".

Joan, like Fred, was struck by the continued reputation of her mother in the community where she herself still lives:

> The most surprising thing that's happened since my book is the number of people who have rung up to say "I wanted to tell you not only have I enjoyed your book, but I remember her so well and your mum nursed my sister or brought me into the world" or you know, things that I knew

> nothing about. I knew she used to disappear in the night and help people have babies and lay them out. A little boy who used to have fits regularly used to always ask for her as she was the only one who he thought that he could trust.

Eliza's mother and father, Phoebe and Jim, had eight children. Eliza never went to school and for most of her 81 years, never learned to read. Her own mother and father had been illiterate. The account of her daughter and son, looking back in their own later years, is that Eliza came to reading when she was 78 years old. The question we discussed in Joan's sitting room that morning, over 20 years after Eliza's death, was this: what was it that had made the idea of reading both possible and attractive to Eliza, after a lifetime of doing without it?

Certainly her childhood had given her little opportunity. She had been kept at home to help her mother in the everyday tasks of errands, washing, fetching and carrying for her younger and older brothers and sisters, and nursing her father after a major accident at work where he had endured burns. She also helped hermother with at least one of her younger siblings' births. Her childhood, then, though not without its pleasures, had not been a carefree one. Joan said: "She once said to me that she never remembered playing without having a child with her; and if she didn't have a child with her, she'd be in trouble."

At the age of 13, Eliza went to work as a "scrub girl" at the local butcher's; and then, to work for an older woman in the village; from there, she went into domestic service. Eventually she met and married Harry who, after a hard time of unemployment, had got a job as a cold steel roller in the firm of Samuel Fox's, in Stocksbridge.

As for Harry, with only three years of schooling himself, he had nevertheless acquired an appetite for reading that lasted all his life. Throughout the next 50 years or so of their marriage, he made efforts to include Eliza in the world of papers and books that he evidently so enjoyed. Joan's portrayal of these efforts in her book about Eliza has Harry, in the early months of their courtship, seeing literacy as the means to "still" his "eternally busy" Eliza:

> She was eternally busy. It irritated him and he found himself begging her to sit with him, especially when he wanted to share something he had found interesting by reading it out to her. When he protested she would just laugh and say, "I can't Harry love. My bottom's too round for sitting, I'd slip off the chair".

Joan has Harry then offering reading as a carrot:

> "Look, Eliza", he said. "You need to have some peace in your life, everyone needs some quiet. What about having a go at trying to read? I'd help you."

She shied away from the painful subject. He went on.

> "I'd find you a book you'd enjoy. I've got one called *Mrs. Haliburton's Troubles.* It's written by woman, a Mrs. Henry Wood. I'm sure you'd like it. I could read it to you and every now and then, when you felt like it, you could try an odd line until you felt able to do a bit more. How about it?" he asked anxiously.
>
> "Well, I'm not sure, but if I ever do learn to read it will be because of you, Harry. I know that and I don't mind trying", she laughed nervously, "and I do like the title, *Mrs. Haliburton's Troubles.* It might end up being Mrs. Harrison's Troubles."
>
> "Come here, love, and make time to give me a kiss." (Firth 1995:150–51)

Harry wrote a good copperplate hand and later won more than one handwriting competition. Before they were married, he taught Eliza to write her own name, with the result that her signature was, according to Joan, "almost identical to my dad's writing".

In summary, then: according to both Joan and Fred, Eliza, as wife and mother, found literacy less attractive than her practical skills as wife and mother (cooking and washing, cleaning and caring) and her identity as the person to whom neighbours turned when there was sickness, childbirth or death in the family. She had taken in lodgers; had had soldiers billeted in the First World War; had earned a few pence doing others' washing, as well as her own; and had been a member of the British Legion for many years, distributing food and help to people who were in difficulties after the war. For most of her life, she was, indeed, "never still".

Phoebe's other children all acquired literacy to a greater or lesser extent; and Eliza's two children, Joan and Fred, both became enthusiastic—and, in Joan's case, avid readers and writers. Both Joan and Fred had known, as children, that their mother could not read, but neither recalled it having bothered them. It was Harry, their father, who was the reader in the family: father dealt with letters, father ordered books by post, father read the daily newspaper, and father ensured that both got on in their education. In 1969, at the age of 87, Harry died. Eliza was 78.

It was at some time in the next two years that Joan came upon her mother reading. Visiting one day, Joan noticed a book on the table. On questioning her, Joan discovered that Eliza was learning to read. This was how Joan recalled the scene in conversation with me. I had been asking her about the portrait she had made of Eliza as a young woman in her "biographical novel":

> *You said that your book is a memory of a memory, so you are remembering what your mother told you about her life. Several times in it, you make the suggestion that Eliza regretted not being able to read. There is a feeling*

you gained from her that she really minded. Now, is that what you got from her? did she mind?

Yes, she did mind. She minded so much that after my father died when she was 78 she actually taught herself to read, which was amazing. I went one day, and there on the sideboard was a book; and I said "What's this then?", she said: "It's mine, I'm still only halfway through it. I've had it three weeks from the library and I'm struggling but I'm going to finish it" and I said "Are you really?" and she said, "Yes". After that for the last three years of her life (she died when she was 81) she actually attended the library and took books out.

It would take a long time to read one book for she was very insecure about reading. For instance, if she received a letter, she would struggle through it but when I called, I mean we used to call three times a week because she had a little flat then, very near the school and so the girls, my girls Helen and Gillian and myself used to go three times to have lunch with her…

With a letter, she would read it but she was very insecure—especially if it was sort of an official letter and she would say as soon as I came in the house: "I've got a letter, will you read it to me?" So she needed that sort of underpinning that my dad had always given her.

These are memories of Eliza "minding" now that she is no longer accompanied by Harry; an Eliza who is now less physically able to fulfil the busy and useful social role she had held all her life; an Eliza who, perforce, was at last *sitting down.*

Fred's memory of their mother "minding" is of a dimly remembered sense of longing he thought that she had felt in relation to his own reading as a schoolboy:

I could feel it, more than anything else. When I used to tell her things about school, she'd be trying hard to understand what I were doing, you see. She'd never done it, so she didn't know it. It were foreign language to her.

When it came to her daughter's reading, as Joan remembered it, Eliza felt not so much wistful as exasperated:

When you read, it used to annoy her. She tried not to get annoyed, but you know how you get lost in a book? and she would take a book off me sometimes and she'd say "I've spoken to you three times" and I'd say, "I'm sorry mother I haven't heard you". She found it very difficult to understand this fascination that my father and I had for books.

We may imagine that the daughter's reading irritated the working mother more than the son; and of the two of them, it is Joan who spoke most passionately of her childhood pleasures in reading:

> One of the jobs in the house that I would always volunteer for was to do the paper and magazine cupboard out. We'd keep some of them in there probably because some of them would be used for the fire (they were all coal fires) and I would sit there all Saturday going through them—and she used to get really annoyed: "You've been at that hours! Whatever are you doing?" Of course, I was reading. My father taught me to read before I went to school I think, I never remember learning. I was only three and a half when I went to school. To me, it's always been an essential; to my mother, she could never quite understand this love of words. I think it was a sort of protection she should have to push it out of her life.

Both recalled their father reading to Eliza from the *News Chronicle* newspaper or the weekly *John Bull* magazine. "He'd say, 'Listen to this, love', or, 'Listen to this, mum'."

Both, too, saw their parents' relationship as a romantic one. As Joan saw it: "They obviously loved each other intensely… They were very much in love all their lives… I think that is very important and helped to boost her confidence".

Harry was remembered as a very shy "sober, god-fearing man" who had "a way of shutting himself off from people"—and of enjoying reading. As Joan put it, he had been "a great sender-off for books": *The Wonders of the World,* Dickens'novels, and "Harman's Dictionary", in parts. Possibly among the second-hand books he often bought from a stall in "the rag and tag market" in Sheffield were the detective stories in which, as Fred recalled, he took particular pleasure: "Me dad got a Sexton Blake and a pipeful of baccy, and he were happy".

The source of Joan's book was Eliza's stories. She was, as Joan recalled her, "a natural story teller" who "would tell me her stories, sort of casually"—and, unlike the mothers of Joan's friends, she also told her daughter about sex. Eliza's own education about her body from Phoebe had been abrupt, cold and uninformative, as Joan had understood it. She wanted her daughter—and her daughter's friends —to have better. This story-telling is remembered with particularly pleasant associations:

> I used to have lots of friends and mother made this lovely treacly fudge. My friends called for me but I didn't realise at the time they were really calling on mum, a) because they knew she'd give them a piece of fudge, and b) because they knew she'd answer any questions that they wanted to ask her. Never any fuss about it, just tell them; never tell them more than they needed to know.

Essentially, Eliza the mother had no need for reading and writing; she had a good memory, and regularly sent her children on errands with lists they simply had to remember themselves, as she had herself no need to write them down.

The answer to the question as to literacy's attractions to Eliza, the old woman, could be several. It has been suggested to me that, unbeknownst to her children, Eliza could read, but simply did not choose to exercise the faculty. For years, she left all that to her husband and children, and got on with more important things. With the unaccustomed leisure offered her by old age, she made the choice to re-attempt an early acquaintance with reading.

An alternative (and more romantic) theory, offered by Joan, is that Eliza sought out reading as a means of bringing her closer to the husband she had loved, no longer with her:

> I think it was partly through loneliness or perhaps it was for him, perhaps it brought her nearer to Harry, it could have been that. Perhaps she wanted to know what Harry found in these books that she'd never been able to find herself.

All those evenings with Harry settled into his detective fiction might finally have come back to her as an attractive option for herself.

A third possibility is that Eliza was not reading at all, but simply enjoying the physical presence of books around her. Neither Joan nor Fred could say how well or with what pleasure she was actually reading; all they could say was that there was a bookmark in the book and that she said to Joan: "I've had it three weeks and I'm nearly half-way through it".

Reflections

In her book on working-class women in Lancashire, Elizabeth Roberts quotes one of her interviewees as saying: "The women, they worked and worked. They had their babies and worked like idiots. They died, they were old at forty" (Roberts 1984:148).

Literacy's meanings, I have said, are deep and varied; mothers, I have argued, have been caught up in a view that sees their educational interests as inseparable from their children's; time, I have proposed, is a concept which, if released from a linear model, enables us to see experience (including literacy experience) in new ways. In beginning a search for the reading and writing lives of women in the past, we are hampered by the lack of firsthand first-person accounts and must guess and glimpse at them. What is clear from social history is that the particular meanings of literacy at the time were different than they are a century later; and that what the historian David Vincent has called "the complex structure of reciprocity" sustained and supported all sorts of literacy events, just as it

supported other situations or problems faced by groups and communities (Vincent 1993).

What reading and writing means and feels like varies, too, with who the reader or writer is. Our ethnic identity, gender and class all colour and flavour the literacy experiences we engage in. While the "either-or" view of literacy and illiteracy may have been abandoned by teachers and academics, much of the world still holds on to the idea that to be illiterate is to be stupid or backward and to be literate is a mark of civilization and superiority. Literacy and class, in our society, are tangled up in each other. Working-class women living at the turn of the century quite simply had less leisure to read or write than their middle-class sisters—even though the evidence suggests that experience of repeated pregnancies and miscarriage crossed the class barrier.

Daily life in late twentieth-century industrialized society is ruled so much by clocks and calendars that it is hard for us to imagine it otherwise. Anyone who has worked in life history or biographical research is continually in the business of checking dates and estimating periods of time. The very effort to relate cause and effect drives us to seek a chronology.

I have suggested three ways in which these themes seem to intersect. The capacity for reading to take us away from here and now is one; the struggle for women to capture the time to do that, in the context of other timetables, is a second; and the way in which life changes in a lifetime may bring us to different uses of literacy is a third.

With Eliza, we are left to muse over the appeal of literacy in a life which, by other accounts, was full enough without it. As an old woman, the "optimal flow" offered by suddenly losing herself in reading might have been an attraction. A fictional account of another woman's arrival at literacy gives a sense of another change. It is another tale of flight from the present, and tells the story of a Yorkshire housewife called Maggie Gregory. A houseproud woman, given to home-baked pies, a full washing line and a scrubbed doorstep, Maggie has neverlearned to read and write and never particularly wanted to. She has too much to do; there is no reason. It is the local priest who persuades her son to teach her to read, which, slowly, Maggie does (at first without much enthusiasm, humouring them). But gradually, things change. She cannot stop reading. Housework is abandoned, cooking and cleaning neglected. Husband, son and priest are shocked —for although she is still at home, she has left: "Once she fell under the spell of the printed page, neither time nor place existed for Maggie Gregory" (Naughton 1961:116). Husband and son come to accept her new identity and the story ends with their agreeing they had better get on with the washing up: a happy ending indeed, compared to that experienced by other women coming to literacy in adult life.

Notes

1. A typical working-class mother in the 1890s (writes Joanna Bourke) experienced ten pregnancies and spent about 15 years of her life pregnant or nursing a child less than one year old. By the 1960s, the average working-class mother spent only four years of her life engaged in these activities (Bourke 1994).
2. Beauman does not record similar figures for literary accounts of miscarriages or stillbirths; but in the language of Welsh, at least, these subjects too have been absent, as Menna Elfyn discovered: "It is difficult now to believe that it was 1977 before the common experience of miscarriage made its first appearance as a subject in Welsh poetry" (Elfyn 1994:282).

Chapter 3
Registers of memory

> Why am I discussing father when it is Eliza we are interested in? Well, it's simply that it is quite impossible to think about them separately, especially for me who met them halfway through their lives. (Joan, letter to me: April 1996)

The work of remembering is always a present activity. Where we have arrived for the moment, emotionally as well as socially or geographically, is the place from which we look around at the landscape of our own life; the story we make of it is created from what Phillida Salmon calls its "current end" (Salmon 1992). In the enterprise of attempting to re-create the life of a person who featured in her own life as mother, Joan mixed biography with autobiography, and told it from the position she was in at the time. In the effort to recall her mother, and imagine beyond what she could recall, Joan found it hard to detach Eliza from Harry—not least because, as a "late child", she had entered her mother's life when it was already halfway lived.

Of all the people I read and spoke to, Joan was unusual in that she had already chosen to write a "biographical novel" of her mother's childhood and youth: a remarkable feat of imaginative writing that ends with Eliza and Harry about to become parents. My interview with Joan and her brother Fred took up the tale from this historical moment. In our conversation, they pieced together for me their memories of the mother and father that Eliza and Harry were to become to the two of them in the years that followed. The dilemma which Joan expressed is central to the whole enterprise: namely, in asking children or grandchildren to assemble a portrait of their own mother or grandmother, and in asking them to imagine this woman's reasons for reading or not reading, writing or not writing, I was asking them to detach this woman from themselves and others. I was asking them to tease out both images and speculation on these images, both the remembered and the guessed-at; and I was asking this from the very people who, of all the people in her life, would have known this woman least well.

I chose to seek out these recollections in two media: written responses to a set of questions, and individual interviews or group discussions recorded on tape. In

the past, I have often undertaken projects which invite talk first, and then writing (Lawrence & Mace 1992; Mace 1995); a practice common in the work of adultliteracy education itself. Now, most of us tell a story one way when we speak and another way when we write. Our listeners may liberate or limit us: some stories we tell are what I think of as "polished pebbles"—tales that we have kept and retold many times, with a slightly different gloss at each telling. Others come out as surprises or afterthoughts in the course of a narrative about something else altogether. In writing, there is the opportunity to curtail, restrain or edit such surprises. Writing allows for revisits and recastings. And in some of the writing I have been reading, the mother is portrayed in a more favourable light than she might have been shown in the flow of speech.

The first time I had the opportunity to notice this difference was some years ago, after I had had an interview with a woman called Nora during a project in "people's history". As part of this project I carried out individual interviews on tape, transcribed the interview and returned a copy of the transcript to the interviewee. She or he could then choose to propose changes and additions with the idea of producing a text for others to read, in the form of a community publication, to add to others which the project was producing. Nora had done this, and in one detail made a significant addition. In her original narrative she had told me of how her mother, suddenly widowed, went on to bring up her five children alone in the 1930s and 1940s. In the interview, Nora had been at pains to say:

> We had quite a happy, oh, I had a happy home. We were never short of anything: I'm not going to say there weren't things we wouldn't have liked, but you couldn't get, you saved up for them—because my mother wouldn't have anything on hire purchase.

In her later editing of the transcript, Nora had made some small changes to the whole, and added an entirely new sentence: "She was a wonderful mother, and she taught us the value of things" (Mace 1995:112). This is a complete statement. It is written with a sense of an audience, a public readership. Without the hesitation of her conversation with me, the mother she wanted to portray was a mother who was "good".

Writing allowed an authorized version of the mother to be presented; a version that may have been at odds with Nora's childhood experience of her. David Vincent, writing about nineteenth-century working-class autobiographies, notes a tendency to go further than this. Some writers, looking back on their childhood, felt the need to portray the mother as "absolutely unselfish", "beautiful, exemplary and heroic" and even "saintly". Even fathers came in for this treatment, it seems. "It may be", Vincent suggests,

> that the passage of time increased the tendency of sons and daughters to canonise a mother or father who had struggled against poverty to bring up

> a family. There were instances enough of parents who had failed to meet the challenge. (Vincent 1993:66)

Some of the work for this book was undertaken via oral interviews alone; much of it, by my reading of other sources. But its centrepiece consisted of several hundred pieces of writing by people I had never met, and whose names were unknown to me. Of these, I later arranged to meet just nine people, with whom I had two or more hours of conversation, some of it taped. So the sequence of my earlier work was reversed. We were talking about what they had already written, rather than talking with the possibility of using the talk to inspire the writing.

In this chapter, I set out some of the themes this raised, both in terms of literacy and of mothers. First, I introduce the reader to the Mass Observation Archive, the source of the writing submitted on the topic, and to the ways in which its writers and readers may understand each other. I then illustrate some of the responses by Archive correspondents to my own directive. Of these, we then focus on five women who both wrote for the Archive and later met and talked with me. I pick out some of the pictures they created of their mothers (all born in the 1890s) and show how these provide elaborations of their original writing and conclude with some thoughts about literacy and memory.

Mass observation

Long before the Mass Observation Archive became a physical place I visited, it had been, for me (as for many others, I suspect) an important idea. The idea, as I understood it, had been to give recognition to the experience of "ordinary" people, in the making of histories. "Ordinary" is usually understood in the negative: "not extraordinary" or "not famous"; and in the world of adult literacy education and the community publishing movement in the 1970s and 1980s it had meant "unpublished" (Morley & Worpole 1982). While writings sent in by volunteers for the Archive are not sent in with a view to publication, in an important sense they are writing for public use. Their carefully handwritten or typed pages are, equally carefully, received and catalogued. As I discovered when I began being a regular visitor there, these texts are stored in very solid cardboard boxes, and readers are required to treat them, as original and single manuscripts, with respect. None of them can leave the Archive premises. Photocopies can be made by arrangement. In the interests of protecting original documents, researchers are discouraged from using pens in the Archive room. For this moment when reader meets writer, the researcher's tool is the pencil.

The Archive, originally founded in 1937, has long been an important source of historical documentation on aspects of everyday life in Britain. Established in 1970 at the library of the University of Sussex as the repository of surveys and records from its investigators, it has functioned since the 1980s as a national writing project. Its five hundred-plus volunteers are volunteering their writing: sometimes diaries; more often, detailed replies to questions on specific themes.

These themes are expressed as "directives": directives explain the topic and give some questions to guide the responses.

Over the years, the Archive has consistently attracted more women than men as its "correspondents". Dorothy Sheridan, the archivist and a key figure in interpretative analysis of its resources, explains that this term is preferred to others (such as the earlier one of "observer") for its association with a "sense of mutual relationship" (Sheridan 1996:30). The word also combines the two other associations of letter-writing and of journalistic reports. It is this mix of private and public, she suggests, which might explain its appeal to women (Sheridan 1993: 22). The writing is about experience, personal opinion, subjective observation; at the same time, it is received as valuable material for public use. The identity of the author is kept confidential, until and unless correspondents consent (as some did, in this project) to reveal themselves in face-to-face meetings. This anonymity for many correspondents offers a freedom unusual in any other setting: and in an important sense, represents a particular kind of generosity. These texts are *donations* in a sense which I came to admire. Sheridan (1993) reports that many correspondents do keep copies of what they write; what I found striking, in the nine people I met with, is that not one of these individuals had done so, at least for the directive I had written—so that they could not remember what they had written, and appreciated receiving a copy of it before we met.

Directives are written on a wide range of topics, issues of current interest, or questions from researchers like myself. The Archive negotiates a "house style" with the latter, combining an informal style with a framing of questions that allow for a range of response, such as "How do you feel?" "What do you think?"

> The aim is to ensure a variety of themes, to stimulate, amuse and provoke the correspondents into replying, and to create as far as possible a diverse set of multi-layered, multi-faceted life stories on a whole range of contemporary concerns. (Sheridan 1996:17)

The full text of the directive which I wrote with Dorothy Sheridan's help for this project is found in Appendix 1. It was mailed out in November 1995. By the time of my first visit to the Archive room in the library in the grassy landscape of Sussex University, it was (although only April) harvest time.

The only reading experience that compares with this one is the reading of exam scripts and essays by university students. But this reading was not for assessment or grading. It was a reception. Opening a box, and taking out the first page of writing, not printed like this one, but written as a single manuscript, recently written, warm still, not from the press but from the hand that wrote it, was an extraordinary experience.

The average response by correspondents to a given directive is around fifty per cent: and this one was no exception. As Figure 3.1 indicates, more women than men chose to write about this topic.

	Total Correspondents	Respondents to Directive 46, No. 2	Per cent
Men	178	79	44
Women	393	207	53
Total	571	286	50

Figure 3.1 Mass Observation Directive 46. No. 2–Mothers and Literacy

Source: Mass Observation Archive

Researchers can only speculate as to the reason why correspondents choose not to respond to a particular topic. For some, the question may simply not be interesting. Others may feel unqualified to write about it. For correspondents born *Figure 3.1* Mass Observation Directive 46. No. 2–Mothers and Literacy *Source:* Mass Observation Archive later than the 1940s, the invitation to write about women bringing up children between the 1890s and 1930s meant writing about people they had either only known from childhood as remote and elderly figures, or had never known at all:

> I have found this section rather difficult to answer. My own mother died when I was 12 and I know little about her family. My grandmother died in 1970 when she was 86, but again I am sadly uninformed about her early life. I did ask my father, now aged 83 and although he gave me some information about his own early reading, it is not perhaps relevant to this subject. (D2123)

The lack of personal acquaintance with their subject was not an obstacle to all writers, however. W2338 (a 63-year-old woman) had never known her grandmother; but found a way of creating a sketch of her life, if not a portrait. The only clue she gives as to the sources she used in writing it is a reference to "family tradition". This is a piece without speculation, keeping strictly to the "facts"; she makes no guesses as to what "pleasure" reading gave her, nor what she used her "beautiful" handwriting for. I read it several times, and as I read, I remembered Katie Holmes' idea of "diary time" (discussed in the previous chapter)—when one brief phrase has to suggest weeks, and a sentence is used to encompass whole decades:

> She lived about 10 miles from Oldham, on the moors. As far as I know, she had three brothers and sisters. Her mother was German, and changed her maiden name from Schmidt to Smith. She always wrote in a beautiful hand —learned at school and at home. There were books in the house. She went to a "Dames" School at first. On school leaving age, she stayed on as a

> monitorial assistant, then went to train to be a teacher—so she would be educated up to the age of 21. She had 10 children, the last one at 45. She read for pleasure—books and periodicals. Sons were away in the war and she wrote to them (1914–18). She played the piano and sang and *all* her children went to university. The eldest son was responsible for the education of theyounger children after her husband died. Family tradition has it that she worked extremely long hours—baking, washing, ironing, sewing, cleaning— and had little energy for anything else as the family grew, but education remained a prime concern. I didn't know her. (W2338)

Many other correspondents, like this one, tackled the task of writing about grandmothers by turning to "family tradition", or (often) to memories passed on from a mother or father. Some were able to mix this information with childhood memories, and with census or other data they had looked up in public records. A third approach was to seek out a relative and interview them specifically for this. I will illustrate these three approaches in turn, before going on to look in some detail at the fourth: namely, those who wrote from firsthand memory about their mothers.

Memory "passed on" from a parent

T2003, writing about her maternal grandmother (born 1883 died 1968) simply begins by noting that the piece was based on "information gleaned from my mother (her daughter)".

It is a short piece (two handwritten pages). She writes that the grandmother, born in Bristol of a "stable middle-class family", the third of five children, grew up to have six daughters of her own. It contains an arresting picture of family literacy:

> My grandmother worked extremely hard making ends meet etc—no laboursaving devices and 6 kids to care for. Thus I gather she had little time for reading. *However my grandfather, and the older daughters spent many hours reading to her while she ironed and sewed.* Dickens was a favourite—also travel books and biographies, (my emphasis)

Many correspondents turn to others in the family for information and insights. This correspondent (also aged 44), for example, begins her "portrait" with an immediate attribution:

> Margaret Strong* was born in 1887 and died, at the grand age of 97, in 1995. She was my maternal grandmother, and the information was passed to me by my mother. (HI745) *(pseudonym).

Similarly, S481, a 53-year-old woman begins her piece:

> Eleanor was my grandmother, and she died when I was seven years old. Most of what is recorded here has been told me in the past by my mother, who is now almost 80.

Eleanor had two daughters, the writer's mother, and her aunt. In using the memories which both women gave her of their mother, this writer raises the issue of contradictory memories—one daughter recalling Eleanor as "always busy and impatient"; the other, as "full of fun".

> Eleanor's two girls were kept at home together, away from "ruffians" in the village, and so had to play together despite their differences, except when at school which they both attended to age 14 although my mother missed a great deal through ill-health. She remembers Eleanor as always busy, and impatient, spending little time with her and always finding her jobs to do or errands to run when she was well enough. By contrast, my aunt remembers her as full of fun, singing little songs and telling her stories. Yet the mother they describe is recognizably the same person, for many of the same stories are told but from different points of view (although it must be said that the same applies to their memories of their father, to whom my mother was much closer than my aunt).

A second example of this is provided by a correspondent (W1813) reflecting on the difference between her own recollections of her grandmother, and that of her mother (the woman's daughter). In this, we can see something of the difference between a mother-daughter relationship and that, which may often be freer, between the mother (now a grandmother) and her daughter's child (grandchild):

> I find it strange that different generations often see the same people in different ways. My mother's view of my grandmother is that she saw no real benefit in education and wasn't interested in encouraging her children to read and write.

There's a sense that the writer is wishing to defend her grandmother to her mother, even as she writes for the Archive:

> My mother seems to forget that for most of her childhood my grandmother was blind, so I don't suppose she really knew how to help her children. She did care enough about education to send my mother to school at two, only to be told that she'd have to wait another year! When she did get her sight back, my mother says my granny didn't value anything and used to write shopping lists on the back of family photos and tear out title pages from books to write notes on.

This carelessness and lack of interest in her daughter's education is contrasted with the writer's memory of the same woman's more active interest in her own:

> When I was born in the 1950s she still did that, but she also sang songs with me and played with me and helped me to read… She spent a lot of timelooking after me when I was small because my mother was at work and I do think she was really interested in education, though not much in formal education.

As her granddaughter saw it, the same woman, as grandmother, had greater freedom to support her grandchild's education than she had had to support her daughter's.

> She (grandmother) thought people should know how to read and write, but only for the practical reasons of communication. For her it was most important to know how to survive. My mother wanted to stay on at school in the Sixth Form, but my grandmother considered that getting a job to help out with the family was more important… This upset my mother very much… My mother has never forgiven her. (W1813, 45-year-old woman writing from Staffordshire.)

Just as Eleanor's two daughters had the same but different mothers, so daughter and granddaughter, here, had dramatically different experiences of the same grand/mother.

Correspondent B89, a retired typist (aged 64) wrote about a woman who had died before she had been born—her maternal grandmother—and had no memories of her own to draw on. Her mother had told her a good deal about her, but she too had died (in 1982) and the writer is therefore relying on her memory of what her mother had told her she remembered.

The grandmother had borne ten children and brought up seven. She died at the age of 44 and, having never been much to school had never been able to read or write. This summary, like so many others I read, felt almost breathtaking in its compression of life experience; so that the phrase "very busy" in what follows seems the greatest of understatements:

> She was always very busy with her household chores and looking after her husband and children and even if she had been literate, she would certainly never have had the time to help her children with their reading…
>
> *I remember however that my mother told me* that she and her sisters taught their mother how to write her name, (my emphasis)

Own memory, memory of parent, plus census and other data researched

This combination of sources inspired some of the more lively pieces of writing, locating the recalled woman in the lives of others and in a social context. Younger writers, with little or no firsthand memory of their own, turned to public records and their own mothers or fathers. HI 705, a woman aged 44, for example, mixed direct memory with information she had gathered from others to produce aportrait of her grandmother across a lifespan, setting hearsay fact about her subject as a young girl ("as a child she spoke Jersey French which is a local patois") next to a firsthand recollection of her as an old woman: "When she went senile in her old age she reverted to speaking only in Jersey French".

Some chose to write about more than one woman. M1996, an Australian woman aged 53, offered a lively account of no less than four. Her sense of engagement with both the topic and the reader whom she imagined is conveyed in her choice of the word "talk" rather than "write" in her introduction: "I'd like to talk about several women, although I have only limited knowledge of them as regards the subject heading". Of the four women she wrote about, Miriam, her mother was still alive, and made her own contribution to the portrait of Elise, the writer's grandmother and Miriam's own mother.

The account is based partly on me writing of Miriam, written from England in response to the directive which M1996 had forwarded to her from Australia and partly on the author's commentary on Miriam's reply, drawing on her own childhood memory of Elise, as her granddaughter. The result is a multilayered picture of Elise.

Here, for instance, is Miriam on her mother's childhood, followed by the granddaughter's memory of the same woman, her grandmother:

> Miriam considers the household Elise grew up in as middle class; that is, perhaps until she emigrated and circumstances changed. However, there was always a certain gentility apparent when I used to visit my grandmother…
>
> When I asked her what she knew of Elise's education, if anything, Miriam told me what I've already mentioned plus the fact that Elise could sing (something I didn't know about Nana). Miriam also remembers many letters being written in beautiful handwriting by both Elise and Ollie (her husband, my grandfather).

Miriam's response for her own life is another compression:

> Miriam wrote, "I can't answer question 3 except that I can't remember being read to. I think you know about me. I started public school…at 6 years of age, left 14 years. Only reading done at school".

To which her daughter (writing now, of course, as a woman in her fifties) comments sadly: "My poor, dear mother. I'm pretty sure those years are just too painful to remember." Two paragraphs later, she adds: "I find it very painful to write this, it dredges up memories of the little I know of Miriam's early life."

By way of closure, however, she writes proudly of the mother she knows now:

> For all this, Miriam left school being able to read and write. And I just want to add, even though it's out of the time span you're interested in, that Miriamand I write to each other every week and she sure writes the most wonderful, descriptive letters.

Memory of other relative: interviewed for/spoken to about this

Some correspondents took the opportunity of this directive to do some new "family history research" of their own. T2543, a 62-year-old retired library assistant, with no direct access to her own immediate antecedents, chose to turn to others as a means of researching the portrait requested:

> Having no parents or grandparents to consult on this topic, I have relied on my 71-year-old cousin as my source of information. She has provided details about her mother, my aunt, who I never knew very well, although she and her family lived locally. The woman I am describing was born in 1901 and died in 1983, and I am writing as her niece.

Another correspondent sought a picture of the woman she was writing about from her sister-in-law who, in turn, "groped in her memory". A 70-year-old retired librarian, she was writing about her husband's grandmother, born in "approx. 1874":

> I don't suppose Mary Ann had any *time* to read, let alone an opportunity to learn. I can't answer any of your questions about her. "What was she *like?*" I asked Chris, "you all talk only about your father". Chris groped in her memory. "She was kind", she said, "she never hit us or shouted at us. The only time she got cross was after going to the pub with Dad. If he'd been giving other women the eye, she'd be jealous, and not speak to him". Her grandson has inherited her gentle, silent sulks. (G1041)

She adds her own comment about myth and families:

> A woman like that, hardly remembered, can have more effect on the family myth than their formidably literary and political father. He told the truth, she embroidered it, and it's the embroidery that remains.

W633, a 53-year-old woman living in North East England wrote about her grandma, born in 1889 and brought up in Lincolnshire. She combines her own memories as a small child of this woman with recollections gained from "all her children". First, she mentions a confusion she has between her early memories of these tales with her later reading about other lives of the period:

> Although, when I was small, I often asked her to tell me about "when you were a little girl", her stories centred on the farm rather than on school. Ialways tend to muddle Grandma's stories with Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford,* but this is probably because they have so much in common. (W633)

Later, she says more about those "stories":

> When I was small, I loved Grandma to tell me about when she was a little girl, and these stories carried on even when she visited me after I was married. My husband now bitterly regrets he didn't sneak in a tape recorder.
>
> That is how I know about getting the boots mended and the two Sunday schools. She was an excellent, low key, raconteur and able to build up a wonderful picture.

This was a woman who is portrayed as central to the family "grapevine of letters and phone calls" (fulfilling a role to which we will return in the next chapter):

> All her grandchildren gravitated to her house and those of us within reach went there every Sunday morning with our fathers (the three sons). Although the family is well-scattered now—Bournemouth, Redditch, Kettering, Sheffield, Huntingdon, Cambridge, Peterborough, and Darlington, plus greatgrandchildren away at university in Oxford and Birmingham—the grapevine of letters and phone calls is very efficient and I think this is because Grandma inculcated the habit of keeping in touch.

From her relatives (Grandma's five children), the writer added to this picture of a "raconteur" that of a woman who also took care to listen and to explain:

> All her children remember her talking to them a great deal and explaining things, with a general knowledge that was surprisingly wide. When I said I was going to write this piece, Aunt L told me that grandma had been able to answer their questions and always took time to give information and explain. (W633)

For several correspondents, as for Ml996 above, the experience of writing for this directive provoked a wistfulness or regret. B2258, for instance, a retired

woman teacher aged 58, after writing about her grandmother and mother, registers this in parenthesis: "(How I wish I had asked more questions of her and of my mother— but there we are!)".

Family histories and personal memories are potentially complex and painful. Many correspondents may simply have dealt with this by voting with their pens—i.e. choosing not to write to this directive at all. One or two note the decision they made to write despite the anticipation of the subject being difficult. This correspondent, a man aged 31 living in Coventry, explained why this was true for him:

> You wouldn't believe the trouble this part of the directive has caused me. I hope you realize the agonies you put "mass observers" to sometimes! I asked my Mum about my grandmother (her mother). I knew it might be a touchy subject. She was born in November 1900, the eldest of four children, in Leiston, Suffolk, and died in about 1976. She went to school at about five and left at 14, when she went to work. During this time she learnt arithmetic (tables by rote), basic addition, subtraction and long and short division (I don't know where my Mum's got this information from). She also learnt spelling, composition and comprehension… She apparently had a very loving home, where reading was a "great" pastime. The family were "working class".
>
> I'm afraid that's about all I got out of my Mum. The subject's a bit touchy, as I said earlier, for the following reasons. My Gran had not one but two illegitimate children. The first, my Aunt, was born in 1922, the second, my Mum, was born in 1927. (C2600)

The secret of illegitimacy depends on written records being hidden, lost, or retrieved. As we shall see later in this chapter, the social pressures that weighed heavy on mothers with children born or conceived out of wedlock may seem laughable to their offspring in later life—but were felt so deeply that the evidence (in birth certificates) had to be kept out of sight and memory for years. For those children, like this writer's mother, who had been put out to fostering, her own mother's shame meant a sense of lifetime loss. Now a grown woman in her sixties, the subject of her own mother was still "a bit touchy"—because she had never been able to know her:

> I guess it's very difficult for my Mum, when I ask her to tell me about her Mum during this time, because really, she didn't know her. It must be a terrible conclusion to come to. (C2600)

For other correspondents, this roused other regrets:

> My mother used to write to me regularly and her letters were very good ones; but in general she was very dilatory about letter-writing and put it off

> day after day. She was a very loving mother, but we never got to know one another and I am now consumed with guilt since at last I understand, too late, why the gap was so wide. She died on Christmas Day in 1969. (D996: a woman, aged 68)

Some evidently felt more pleasure from the activity, however. R446, aged 65, living in rural mid-Wales, wrote three typed pages about her two grandmothers (about whom she says she has "very vivid memories") both born in 1872 in the West Riding of Yorkshire and commented:

> Writing this has been one of the most interesting exercises I've undertaken for MO. I've always been aware of my good fortune in having been brought up in a family which valued academic ability and wanted all children, whatever sex, to go as far as they could.

A wry reflection from R1227, a 51-year-old woman might express the sentiments of many others. At the end of a page about her grandmother (1870s–1956), she noted: "This has been quite a weird experience—I seem to have dredged up all kinds of half-remembered things which I haven't thought of for years".

Unwritten tales: five writers talk

Many of the texts had tantalized me, because of a sentence, or maybe two, which suddenly suggested a habit of years, or an attitude that appeared to have dominated the author to this day. It has sometimes seemed that I have been looking for the impossible: the point at which inner feelings, dreams or imaginings just occasionally surfaced or found expression in outer forms of behaviour in reading and writing. Inevitably, the older person's memories called up in answer to my question of a child's observations of these outer behaviours could only be suggestive. But inevitably, too, these observations invited further curiosity.

Originally, I had not foreseen that I would want to meet any of the M/O correspondents who had written so much. But after reading, re-reading, and beginning to detect patterns in these boxes of writing, I knew that I needed to follow up some of these compressed lives with their authors; and in the autumn of 1996, with the help of Archive staff, I picked out nine of these anonymous writers with whom I had been in company during the summer in the silence of the library's archive room, in order to request that I may meet and interview them. They were seven women and two men; chosen, in all cases, because they had written about someone they had known as their own mother, and because what they had written contained suggestive, almost throwaway images of this woman reading or writing. All of them, then, were in their seventies or eighties.

Until they had written to Dorothy Sheridan to give their agreement to meet me, I knew them only as numbers.

With one exception, I met all these writers in their homes, as people with furniture, possessions and gestures: greeting me at their own front door, and offering me hospitality to something of their own present literacy lives. The interviews took place in sitting rooms and kitchens, sometimes with a table between us, always with cups of tea or coffee, plates of biscuits, or (in one case) a cooked lunch.

Each interview was preceded by an exchange of letters, sometimes phone calls, to set up the arrangements; and was followed, usually three weeks later, by a letter from me, thanking the person for the interview and enclosing a copy of an edited version of the interview transcript. Most of the correspondents wrote to me withcomments on these. There were no further interviews, however. I felt I had found all that I could wish for, given the limits of my time and their capacity or willingness to share further thoughts. What follows is some discussion from five of the people with whom I spoke: Anne, Brenda, Noreen, Gwen and Eileen.

Anne

Her house is at the end of a street of houses built (I guessed) in the 1930s, with a front garden and a path to the door in Borehamwood, twenty minutes north of London by train, ten minutes walk from the station. She told me that she and her husband had moved there from South Wales six months before. The choice of home for her, she said (only half-jokingly) was determined by one key criterion: "the library must be within walking distance".

Now aged 70, Anne is a retired social worker, and describes herself as an "avid reader" all her life. (There will be more on the "avid reader" in Chapter 6). Besides her voluntary work for the Family Fund, which disburses grants for children with severe disabilities, she told me she was currently attending (and enjoying) a WEA class on biography, having had a keen debate the previous week on truth and fiction in autobiographical writing.

In her conversation about her mother, Doris, Anne lamented how little her mother had read in the last ten years of her life (Doris died in 1982). "Television took over", she said. "She'd stopped wanting to read. That disheartened me. I'm wondering if I'm going to be like that." Part of the reason for this, she surmised, had been the effect of the sleeping tablets her mother had been prescribed, which had made reading too much effort. This contrasted with her written picture of Doris as a younger woman, whom Anne had recalled like this: "She loved to read and my early memories of her show her with her feet up, lounging in an armchair, reading a novel".

That morning Anne and I talked at some length about this kind of reading; first, however, she welcomed me into her house, made coffee, introduced me to her husband, who was about to go out, and began talking, not about her mother, but about her sister:

> I am interested as to why my sister, who never reads a book, why one daughter picks up reading, and the other one doesn't. What happens? Have you done this? It's weird.
>
> I was thinking this morning about her. You know, I was going to ring her up, actually, and ask her why.

A week after the interview, I received a letter from Anne in which she said (among other things):

> I have just had an interesting phone conversation with my sister… We talked of why she didn't read for pleasure and we have realized that becauseshe was a nail-biter (still is!) and when she reads her fingers always go into her mouth, our mother used to slap her hands away from her mouth. No wonder my sister doesn't read—talk about aversion therapy!

The typed transcript of our taped dialogue, as transcripts always do, failed to convey either the thoughtful pauses or the rush of speech which characterized Anne's conversation with me that morning. Listening back to the tape as I re-read the transcript, I noticed a pause and slowing down, as Anne went on to talk about her mother's early life, before she asked a question which clearly had been on her mind for some time. In this extract, I can only mark this change of tone in her talk with italics:

> She used to say to me, "Oh, I was born in Kensington". I used to think that sounded very posh, but I went and looked at the road a few years ago, after she'd died. I think my Mum had had a very hard life because she was the, you might call the runt of the family. *The way I look at it now, she didn't have the advantages that the others had. I mean, her sister, her older sister, went into an office; why was my Mum put into domestic service?*

By contrast, there was a rush of amusement and laughter as she struggled to find in her mind a picture to offer me of her mother writing. Her answer to my question came out in a tumble of words and occasional surges of laughter. A different typeface is needed to capture this different mood:

> *If you drew some broad brush strokes of your mother's life, and her life as a reader and a writer, what would you say about it?*
>
> I would say it took up a very small portion; although it was an important portion, so it could be quite central, really. But it could only be a small centre. She was just too busy doing other things. Too many demands on her.

Have you a picture of her—at a table like this—ever? writing, maybe?

(laughing) *Well, nothing important or interesting. I suppose I can see her at our kitchen table, licking her pencil, and writing, yes. But I don't think it would be anything terribly interesting. I think she must have been writing shopping lists or something;* because we would all be sent on errands, as they used to say in those days, and she would write it down. "Half a pound of marge; a pound of sugar."

Both the reflective question about her mother's work in domestic service and the sudden image with the pencil bubbled up in the conversation. Neither had featured in Anne's original written piece that she had sent in to Mass Observation.

When I returned, later, to re-read what Anne had written about her mother's girlhood, I read this:

> The family lived in North London, the borough of Kensington, but in the northern part—not the well-to-do end. D's schooling was at the big 3-decker LCC school at the end of her road. She left school at age 14 and went into service. However, her older sister went into office work, her oldest brother was a musician in the Royal Artillery Band, her younger brother apprenticed to a plumber, and her younger sister went on the stage as a "soubrette". My mother, I feel, got the short straw in this family!

Writing anonymously as an informant for the Archive, there is simply an exclamation mark to indicate what kind of emotion "I feel" might have signified. What she said to me, in the very personal and present surroundings of her own home, was in a "thinking aloud": with the phrases "I think", "I used to think", and "the way I look at it now" all punctuating a flow of more feeling than the single line she had offered in writing, summarizing her mother's upbringing, long before she herself had been alive to witness it.

The image of the woman at the table, licking the pencil as she wrote the list at the table, is however one that she had dredged up from direct recall. Both in the interview and her text, she had also sketched in two other images: one, of her mother writing notes to the school, the other of her mother "putting her feet up" in the afternoons, to read novels. For Anne these were clearly strong pictures, seen through the lenses of her own girlhood and adolescence in the 1930s and 1940s.

Brenda

Dear Jane Mace,

Thank you for your letter. It is ideal (if you don't mind the early train) for you

to get to Whitland at 14.12 on the 28th. I will meet you, and it's a country station so you can't miss a little old lady waiting for you! Lunch, talk and the 18.10 to Swansea. Sounds fine to me.

Yours sincerely,
Brenda

Not lunch, in the end: but a gorgeous home-made chocolate cake and tea, the wind outside the window gusting across the fields. Later, before driving me back to the station, Brenda drove me in the opposite direction through a gate and over a hill so that I could see the drop down to the sea just minutes from her bungalow. Two days later, back in London, I received another letter from her:

Dear Jane,

Lovely day. Thanks. I had a restless night (I wonder why??) and overslept, so I've missed the WEA thing today…

At 4am I remembered the only book(s) in the household when I was little. "Golden Treasury" for children—12 volumes in green leather, gold lettered.Again and again I would look at the chapter on slavery and be horrified. It was this classic preoccupation with "noises off" as a child which became a sort of emotional paralysis. The same for *so many* children…

Affectionately,
Brenda

Across the table, by the window, with the neck mike clipped to her jumper, Brenda seemed to be holding her breath and editing her answers carefully when we began. I checked, first, the name of her mother. Annie, she said. Born in about 1886.

Did you ever call her Annie?

(emphatically) Never, *(pause)* And interestingly—I've just remembered—she wanted us all to call her "Mother Dear". The other girls did. "Mother Dear". You see it was a sort of idealized, mother thing. She was a self-deceiver, par excellence. But she had to be, you see, because she married my father, who was better class. (It's the only way to put it, really, because the classes are so complicated.) She was probably lower middle or working class. And she spent all my life trying to pretend she had—voice, you know… Because my father was a terrible snob. She was pregnant when she got married. That was quite something in 1910, so she had to move herself up as best she could. I always knew it was, and that sort of coloured the whole relationship.

This, then, is Brenda, the sixth of Annie and Harold's seven children, brought up in the Wirral and still, in her seventies, grieving with a mix of rage and sorrow at her own unhappy childhood and the mother who, when she first wrote about her in her bold and wonderfully legible handwriting, she portrayed as "an ill-informed and shallow woman". As in the writing, so in the talk: within three sentences, she had captured the woman who had been her mother as a "self-deceiver". There was a mocking intonation in the way she repeated the phrase "Mother Dear"; but there was also (as there had not been in the original writing) a context suggested for her mother's pretensions: the hypocrisies necessary in a deeply-layered class society, in which her mother, as a sales assistant in a drapery store, becomes pregnant by a man with prospects, a "broker" who Brenda sees now as a "complicated man [who] hated being trapped with this silly woman" and who was also a "womanizer" who would chase Brenda's teenage girlfriends and have an affair with the Irish maid. Brenda wrote to me later with other thoughts about Annie, a woman, she said, who had loved very small children and had been kind to her when, as a grown woman herself, she had her own babies; she had simply not enjoyed her own children as they grew older.

What, if anything, did literacy mean in Annie's life? In her text for the Archive, Brenda had said two things: first, that "although she was an ill-informed andshallow woman", she certainly wrote a legible and fairly well-educated letter; and secondly, that "I can't think of one single occasion when she had a book in her hand, but she could certainly read and write".

Annie, according to Brenda, was (unlike other women of her class) not short of time for reading and writing: so it was not lack of time, in the sense we discussed in the last chapter, that prevented her choosing to read or write. Having married "up", she had not one, but two maids; and always hid the fact that when she met her future husband she was serving behind the counter in a store. As Brenda reported it, Annie read little—and showed little interest in her husband reading to her from his newspaper: "He'd say, 'Listen to this, Annie dear'. And she'd go 'Hm'. Never heard a thing".

Despite her evident affection for small children (and for Brenda's, when they later came along) Annie, as far as Brenda was concerned, was no model either of motherhood, nor of literacy. The "emotional noise" of Brenda's childhood she ascribes to a family life in which there was cruelty: a cruelty of which she recalls being an observer more than a victim (watching her sister being caned for a bad school report, for instance)—"not that I didn't feel that I was involved", she wrote to me later.

There had been four children in four years and then a ten year gap before Brenda "came along", followed by another. Brenda knew that she saw her mother differently from her older sister. Like the two daughters of Eleanor, recalled earlier, Brenda and her sister experienced the same mother as two people. Equally, at different times in their lives the mother turned to each of them in different ways:

> When I say this to my sister Ruby (who's 86, you know), she will say, "But she was as soft as a kitten, Brenda". You see?
>
> *That's not your experience of her?*
>
> No. But in much later life I was the one that she clung to, and talked to. "Nobody loves me" you know. Heartbreaking, really. But my heart doesn't break for her, because there wasn't enough there to break your heart about, really.

The portrait Brenda painted of her childhood was of a time when there was too much distress around her to be able to show any interest in sustained reading or writing, even though technically, she could do both:

> It's a killer. You sit at the top of the stairs and listen to that fighting going on down below, at night. That's what thousands and millions of children have to deal with. And they do a damn sight better than me. They're more disciplined; but hard luck. This is the way I've done it. With no help from my mother.

I asked Brenda how it was that she had come to be the habitual and enthusiastic reader and writer that she so evidently was. Her reply was to tell me of the person she remembered as a "mentor", who had been a friend in Nottingham where she and her husband lived when they were first married. This friend had lent her "tilings like *Catcher in the Rye*" and was "the spur" to her lively reading life since. Widowed now, with a full life and shelves full of books and photographs of children and grandchildren on the walls, she spoke enthusiastically of the pleasures of reading books and writing letters, now that there are no longer the "background noises" from her childhood which had haunted her for so long:

> So when people say to me, "How do you like being old?" I say, "I quite enjoy it". Because there's no background noises. If I want to read now, I can sit down there for four, five hours, reading. It's all come round the other way. When people say, "Oh, I read *Mill on the Floss* when I was 14", I think, well, I can read it now. It's lovely! So in a way, no regrets.

This gives another gloss on the American research we looked at in Chapter 2. The "optimal flow" of pleasure reading in her later life is not merely a solution to the possible loneliness of living alone. It is itself a pleasure only possible because, at last, there is a freedom from earlier turmoil.

Noreen

> Woman—born 1880. Died 1942 aged 62. I am her child. *Her childhood.* I don't know a lot about this. She grew up on a farm in Jersey. She was the eldest girl in a family of about six or seven in modest circumstances. She went to the little country school until she was about thirteen or fourteen, then stayed on the farm to help with the youngest children. I don't know if there was much reading or writing in the home—my grandparents died when I was very young so I did not visit the farm.

It's raining, and it's Monday morning. On the settee, in this small sitting room, six piles of newsletters are neatly laid out. The books in the shelves, Noreen tells me, are organized "on the Dewey system". To the left of the television set are autobiographies (H.G. Wells, Lady Sackville), to the right, philosophy, archaeology, history. "There are at least three books I have been told I should write", she tells me, wryly; one on her work with maladjusted children, another on her travels and climbing expeditions. The newsletters are for the local branch of the ramblers association. The next climbing expedition will be in Costa Rica. The room speaks of travel.

Listening back to the tape and re-reading the transcript of our conversation, three months after we met, I was puzzled at how little, in the end, Noreen was able to tell me about her mother as a reader. In the interview, I had tried severalprompts, which, with others, had elicited glimpses and pictures of the mother, as with Brenda, or Anne. With Noreen, our conversation focused on her own life as a reader and writer—and, as a teacher with maladjusted children, her observation of other children's difficulties with literacy. It emerged, too, that she had interpreted the Mass Observation directive to mean a question about how either her mother or she had learned to read, as children. Her main view of her mother's life was that she simply did not have time to read; and she went on to tell me about the boarding house for summer visitors which her mother ran each year where they lived in Jersey to keep the family economy afloat. Her father was an unsuccessful antiques dealer (who was "fonder of keeping his goods than selling them"); it was her mother who had the head for business. So twenty minutes into the interview, I asked her:

How do you know your mother could read?

Noreen simply said:

Because books were coming in; she was getting them from the library.

To the question I then asked her:

> *What picture do you have when you think of your mother reading? in bed, maybe? or in a chair?*

Noreen answered:

> Definitely not in bed. Didn't ever see her in bed. *(After a long pause):* In a rocking chair, in the evening. But even in the winter, she didn't have a lot of time.

Noreen's text for the Archive had simply referred to her mother as "Woman. Born 1880. Died 1942". In correspondence, later, she told me her name was Louisa; but her father and all her relatives called her Lulu. In the text she had written for the Archive, Noreen summarized Louisa's motherhood in a sentence: "Mother had five children, the eldest when she was 22, the youngest, me, when she was 41".

When Louisa died (in 1942, at the age of 62) Noreen herself would have been 21. This was a mother never known to her daughter in adulthood. Noreen had never seen her mother as an older woman, with the increased detachment possible for daughters no longer entangled with the mother of their childhood.

Reading and writing, for Noreen as for her mother, had been a seasonal thing: for winter evenings indoors. For her mother, the summer was non-stop work, catering for the summer visitors; for the child Noreen, it was a time for outdoor life. (For the adult Noreen, a long-standing and active member of a local ramblingassociation, and a regular traveller and mountaineer, this love of outdoors had persisted.) So it felt natural that the one picture which she called up in the interview of herself and her mother engaged in literacy together is a picture of a winter evening.

The picture evokes a child's pleasure in reading with her mother. This is a scene in which they both read together; a scene which was subtly different in the telling (Noreen recalling it for me in her sitting room) than in the writing. In her Mass Observation text, she had written this: "Mother invested in a set of encyclopaedias, *Golden Knowledge,* I think. On winter evenings we would go through them together".

It was in our conversation in her home, in reply to the question "What do you remember of what was going on in the house in winter evenings?" that Noreen said more:

> Ah, well, this was the time when we did—it was things like getting these encyclopaedias, *Golden Knowledge.* It would have been mother, paid out. We didn't have much money, but we got seven volumes of *Golden Knowledge,* I think it was called; and *I would read it with her and she would read it to me. I can remember being devoted to it.* (my emphasis)

The change from: "we would go through them together" to: "I would read it with her and she would read it to me" changes the moment from a formal activity to one of animated intimacy.

For Noreen, however, it was not her mother who was the most significant influence on her own life as a reader and writer. This influence came from her sisters, particularly Doreen, eighteen years older than she. When she was a child, Doreen was training in England to be a teacher, and it was Doreen who inspired her mother's and later Noreen's own ambitions for herself. The sense of pleasure in reading, books, and in writing that stayed with her all her life came, she felt, from other sources than her mother from whom she recalled only "a general sense of encouragement". Nevertheless, it was Louisa, not her husband, who wrote letters to Doreen and the other sisters once they left home.

Gwen

It has been an accident of this research that four of the people I interviewed had worked with children in their professional lives; and Gwen, like Noreen, turned out to have been a headteacher in an infants school, retiring in 1981. Like Noreen, too, she had remained a single woman all her life and had no children of her own. Gwen's mother Lily will feature several times in later chapters. For this reason, an extract from her contribution to the Mass Observation directive (originally submitted in three pages of handwriting) is reprinted at the end of this chapter.

When I went to visit Gwen in her home in a suburb of Manchester, it was a cold Monday morning in February. When I arrived, she made us both coffee; later, she poured us each a glass of ginger wine. Her grandfather clock struck during the interview; the chimes interrupted and punctuated her voice. Gwen laughed often, with what seemed like a detached amusement at the pictures she made for me; of her own childhood as well as that of her mother.

Within minutes of settling down to talk, the tape recorder in place, and my warming up to a question about her reflections on the writing she had done for Mass Observation, she said:

> And, of course, we've got to take account of the lighting. There wasn't much lighting at night, was there? …We got it when I was eleven. That would be 1935… I don't know whether my mother had gas when she was a child, or whether it was oil lamp. I know they had a little shop nearby that sold lamp oil.

What Gwen went on to tell me was this. Her mother's name was Lily. Born in 1890, she had grown up in a small village near Blackburn, the eldest of four children, learned to weave at the age of twelve and continued going half-time to school until two years later, when the family moved to a small town called Rishton. Prospects of work were more hopeful there than in the village, where

the population was growing and employment prospects at the two weaving mills were diminishing. Gwen's father, born in 1889, had grown up in the same village; and his family had already moved to Rishton for the same reason. The two met in a chip shop; courted for three years; and married. Lily had become pregnant before the marriage; and this pre-marital pregnancy remained a family secret—to all but Gwen—until fifty years later. Its discovery by Gwen, as a child, was the subject of a story which she then told me: a drama of literacy at the heart of a family's domestic space.

Couples then and since kept their "marriage lines" in a box or a drawer. (I recall, in a reminiscence group some years ago, one woman showing a box in which she and her husband kept "all their papers"—it had been, she told us, a box her husband had been given when he had left the last Dr Barnardo's home he had lived in as an orphan child.) Gwen's father and mother kept their papers in a "deed box" which her father had made himself in an evening class in carpentry. It had been his "set piece" which he had made and french polished, with dovetailed joints. The story, although told in a matter of minutes, compresses five scenes into one narrative, two in the period when Gwen was a child, and three when she must have been an adult woman in her forties.

In the first scene she depicts her father with the box open on the table and Gwen and her sister Millie watched him going through the papers. Scene two is of Gwen, a year later, getting the box down and looking again at the documents. Years later, three further scenes succeed each other in a few words. In scene three, at the fiftieth anniversary of their parents' marriage, Millie makes the connectionbetween marriage date and the date of her eldest sister's birth and Lily "confesses" the pregnancy. Scene four shows her mother making the same confession to Gwen, and Gwen revealing, in turn, how she already knew about it; and in the final scene, Gwen reports the reaction of the daughter in question, Alice, her eldest sister, conceived all those years before, by parents not yet wed.

The whole, then, is a drama in which the mother is engaged in revealing to three different daughters the "shame" she had kept secret throughout their childhood, which Gwen, the youngest of all, had known, and not known, for over thirty years; a secret which had Gwen, as a child, reading the evidence with curiosity but indifference (at the time), which has her adult sister Millie reacting with mild sympathy, but has Alice, the child originally conceived "out of wedlock" shocked into disbelief. The story, centred on a written document hidden in a box kept on a shelf, begins and ends with Lily's need to keep its contents hidden; a need, according to Gwen, out of all proportion to the likely reaction of anyone else, except Lily's own mother, who had indeed been "scandalized" by the pregnancy.

Here is how she told the whole story to me:

> I think they courted for three years before they married; and then she became pregnant. Oh, dear dear dear. So they had to get married.

Bit of a scandal, was it?

Oh, only my mother. I don't think anybody cared at all about that. Soon after, the First World War started. She probably had Kate, the second one, while the war was on. But before my father was called up. Her younger sister told one of my sisters that my grandma was absolutely scandalized by this pregnancy. She said ever afterwards, grandma always watched the two other girls to see that they menstruated at the right time. Whether she could have done anything, I don't know. It would be a bit too late then! But mother kept this a deadly secret from us. To her dying day she had terrible guilt feelings about it.

But one day *(pause),* I don't know, I might have been eleven, my father was looking through a deed box he had, that he'd made himself. He had been on a carpentry course, night school course or something at one time, and as his set piece he'd made this very nice wooden box with dovetail joints which was french polished. He kept all the family important papers in here—and I think it was an insurance policy he was looking for. My sister next to me, Millie, and I were watching him this evening as he was going through the papers, opening each one, while we were allowed to look over his shoulder and look at them. Then he picked one out; and I just noticed it was the marriage certificate, and he closed it up very quickly. I thought *(pause)* why?

Millie was two years and two months older than I. So I'd have to wait until she left school, till she was 14, and then I got up on the top shelf, when I was alone in the house when she was gone to work, and looked up this marriagecertificate, and found out they were married six months before the birth of Alice. So I'd be twelve at that time, when I knew that. I never thought of breathing a word to *anyone at all.*

It didn't come out, but—what wedding anniversary would it be? Fiftieth wedding anniversary [1960] yes, when my parents would be 70-odd; and the next to top sister, Kate, said to my mother (pause), "It must be somewhere near your fiftieth wedding anniversary?" (you know, thinking when Alice was born). "When were you married?"

And mother just said, "March". And Kate, said, "March? That's a funny month to get married. Was Easter early that year?" So mother had to say, "Well, I was pregnant with Alice". And Kate said, "Well, you'll soon celebrate your 50th, you know".

So Mother thought, well, it was time for us to be told, you see. I was living here in Manchester then. I mean, I was far away from the hubbub. So they told Millie (the one next to me), and Millie said that Mother said, "Well, what do you think about me?" and Millie said, "Well, it makes you a bit more human!"

So then they told me when I went over. I said, "Oh well, I've known for years and years", and I told them about looking in the deed box. They were

surprised that I'd known all this long time. I think Mother was very surprised that I hadn't thrown it back at her, you know, or anything like that.

Alice, the eldest, me cause of all this, she was living the other side of Blackburn, so we didn't see each other very often. I think Kate told her, or wrote to her or something. But Alice couldn't, Alice blanked out. She didn't—

—*couldn't take it.*

She couldn't take it. She didn't believe it.

Reflecting later on how she told this story to me, the scene which holds the most fascination for me is the second one: why had Gwen, at the age of twelve, decided she wanted to look again in the box on the shelf? Something in the way her father must have put the papers away must have fascinated her curiosity; so that, when she did get to re-open the box, in secret, there must have been a disappointment to her. She certainly noticed the dates of the wedding, and equally, from what she recalled, noted the date of her eldest sister's birth; but for the child she was at the time, there seemed to be nothing to excite anyone and she presumably put the whole thing away.

None of this story had been part of Gwen's contribution to the Mass Observation directive. Listening to her that morning, and thinking about it later, it felt another kind of donation that she had made. Lily and Gwen will reappear in later chapters.

Eileen

She had said (on the phone) that she would be wearing a red coat, and she was, there on the platform, turning the other way as I walked towards her. Her house was red, too, as promised by its address ("Red House"). She'd moved three years after her husband's death. Must have been six years ago, she said.

Her little dog has expectant ears and eyes. She worried away at various chewed old slippers in the kitchen, as Eileen turned the heat under the vegetables and I plugged in the mike to the tape recorder. One wall was covered in children's drawings. Her own mother Catherine had been born in 1896 (we calculated), died at age of 86 in 1982 (she trusted my calculations as to the birthdate those two dates implied, and laughed as she put the rock salmon on the plates and the saucepans and vegetables on the table). We talked over the lunch that she cooked.

For the Mass Observation directive, Eileen had written little about her own mother, but a couple of pages about her mother-in-law and about her grandmothers, one, on her mother's side:

> My younger brother and I stayed with Granny "Mul" when mother had an operation, and again when she got TB. I remember lapping up all the books she had, especially fairy tales. I found out years later that she had complained to my mother that I was reading too much fantasy, it wasn't good for me!

I was curious to know more, and during our conversation, elicited some basic data about Eileen's mother, and glimpsed two very striking portrayals of her reading and writing life.

Catherine had been brought up in Northumberland, daughter of a curate father and Irish protestant mother. The family was "bookish", and the children would write a magazine together, encouraged by their parents, a rather "literary" effort. "Her father encouraged the girls", Eileen said, "he really did: which other households wouldn't". Her eldest brother used to bully his brothers and sisters; one sister became a science mistress and went out as a missionary to China. When Catherine and her husband were first married they went out to India, where Eileen said "she wrote a lovely journal". Then she added: "She was always interested in writing. She did the odd poem, you know. But I'm afraid I was so scornful, you see".

The scorn of daughter for mother is not unusual. An exasperation was still in Eileen's voice as she went on:

> *Every* time we'd come in she'd say, "What's blankety blank, something or other?" She was always doing crosswords—and I came to *hate* crosswords, I loathe them! She was so clever, you know, she'd try to race her brother to get The Times one done. You know, that sort of thing. It's beyond me.

Eileen associated her mother reading with her mother being ill or convalescent. Her mother got TB in 1938, and feared she would the, as her sister had done. She went "somewhere in the Cotswolds, high up" for a cure; Eileen's sister returned home to look after the rest of the family; and then the war began.

> So she had a lot of time to read: because they said, "You must have this rest". She really was pretty well cured; it was so irritating, I shouldn't be mad about her, but…

In all that Eileen and I talked about that day, one scene caught my imagination. It seemed like a tableau, a group portrait etched in the memory, the figures in it lit by an oil lamp in the middle. Eileen herself in this picture is a small child. The year, we worked out, must have been 1928. The place is their family home in Devon, where they had moved after her father had returned, wounded, from the First World War. It is evening.

> We were sitting round the table, an oil lamp in the middle, and they'd all be reading—my older sister, my brother was a baby, and me pretending to read with a book upside down. It was so annoying. I thought I was doing so well, you know, copying the parents. But my sister Helen said, "Oh, she doesn't really understand, she's got it upside down!"

The memory was, like many strong memories of childhood experience, one of humiliation. The questions it raised for me were several. What were they all reading? (Eileen was uncertain: but thought, probably her mother was reading biography and her father, a textbook on agriculture or something about birds.) How often did this family reading scene, "sitting round the table", take place? (She wasn't sure: but felt it was something other families of her acquaintance also did.) Despite my returning to it twice in our meeting, Eileen could add no more to this scene. It was a memory that had stayed with her for over seventy years, fixed and flickering in the light of the oil lamp.

Reflections

The topic I was asking Mass Observation writers to consider was inevitably a tricky one. As I suggested in the first chapter, the literacy behaviours we may observe in others can give us only the most superficial idea of what it is that anyone is *making* of what they are reading or writing. (The additional idea I offered —that among mothers whose lives spanned the period 1890s–1930s and beyond may be some who had limited literacy—provoked strong reaction from some writers. A few, as I indicate in Chapter 5, expressed outrage.) The directive I had written invited a combination of autobiography and biography, of memory and research and the results were both rewarding and disappointing. Within the genreof a "report" donated anonymously to a public record, the nearly three hundred writers had written a great deal, while mainly confining themselves to factual data. In this chapter we have seen how many used the opportunity to explore the idea of a "literacy life" by drawing on multiple sources.

The Mass Observers whom I interviewed were among those who had written about a mother, rather than grandmother; they were writing both introspectively and retrospectively.

Our conversations added depth to the autobiographical memory they had offered in writing, and in doing so, reminded me that for any of us, to disentangle a figure we knew as our mother from our own childhood is no simple matter. What mothers choose to tell of their lives children may not always choose to hear; and what it is that children retain of the mother they knew may have little to do with the person she thought she had been. The child's interest in listening may simply not coincide with the mother's interest in telling. The "process time" of the two lives make such a coincidence of timing a rare treat indeed. A witty and poignant account of a mother's selective storytelling is to be found in an essay by the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood under the delicious title

"Significant moments in the life of my mother". Her mother had an enviable capacity to dramatize and make vivid for her stories of her girlhood and youth—such that there was a time in her own life when the version she had of her mother's was one of "sustained hilarity and hair-raising adventure" (Atwood 1992:9). At the same time, some stories were only to be told in particular company: "My mother cannot be duped into telling stories when she doesn't want to. If you prompt her, she becomes self-conscious and clams up" (p. 10).

To tell a story is to draw on our memories for incident: our *autobiographical episode memories.* To then create a person out of these memories is to draw on a more general kind of memory: our *autobiographical knowledge* (Robinson 1992). This distinction between episode and general knowledge I find useful in considering what the M/O writers were being asked to do. In order to make their own story —the story of the mother (or grandmother)—they had to integrate the episodic stories told to them into the knowledge they recalled of the storyteller. Eileen had the general *knowledge* of her mother's convalescent condition to allow her to decide she had "a lot of time to read"; to this she added her own *episodic memory* of the irritating crosswords. Noreen knew her mother had no time to read (at least in the summer season) because of the work of the boarding house; within this overall context she recalled the episode of sitting together and reading pages of the *Golden Knowledge* encyclopaedia.

The other kind of memory, less easy to classify, is that which three of the interviewees revealed: Noreen, Gwen and Anne. It is the *sudden image,* surfacing without warning, and inspired by association. My own feeling is that this kind of memory is special to conversation rather than writing. It is in any case true that all these images came out in interview and had not been offered in the written text. Noreen's was the image of her mother Laura, in a rocking chair on a winter evening. Anne's was of Doreen, sitting at the kitchen table licking the pencil whilethinking what to write for a shopping list. And Gwen's was the image of two daughters leaning over the father at the kitchen table, scanning the marriage certificate.

Much of the information I found in the responses to this M/O directive fell into the category of "autobiographical knowledge", providing detail of home and street, schooling and family. Other directives on other topics are very likely to contain information of relevance to the question I was pursuing—for what seems unimportant and obvious to a writer may be of the utmost significance to the researching reader. As Alistair Thomson has showed, one "dataset" or set of responses to a single directive can be mined for a whole range of different research questions (Thomson 1995). It is in any case the mix of written and oral sources that has always, for me, represented the richest kind of literacy experience; without the texts and letters which followed them, the interviews would have had a different significance; and without the interviews, a special kind of vivacity would have been missing. In the next chapter, we will find other themes that were revealed in the writings from the correspondents before returning, in Chapter 5, to other oral sources.

Extract from E174: "Gwen" about her mother "Lily"

My mother had four daughters and I was the youngest. My father was abroad for three and a half years without leave during the war of 1914–1918 and during that time she would write him letters and I know she sent him parcels of food and photographs of the two eldest girls who had been born before he went abroad.

She also wrote to order dressmaking patterns and had a "set" letter which ended "and obliged" …She would buy a postal order at the post office (usually for nine old pennies) and so would need to know how to make out the postal order or to address the envelope.

If we were absent from school she would need to send a "sick note" with a well child or the note could be taken when the child recovered; and she could never remember how to spell "bilious" and would resort to the Fennings Fever bottle where the word was to be found.

When I was ten an uncle bought me a big thick dictionary which the publisher "John Bull" was selling. My mother was very cross about this purchase as she intended that I should leave school at fourteen, so should not be encouraged to get any "big ideas" so the dictionary was soon banished to the cupboard in my parents' bedroom along with all our story books.

We all went to the local library except mother but she told us to bring her books from there by Ethel N.Dell or Ruby M.Ayres. All other library books she would quickly glance through and then said she'd read them and they were rubbish.

She had a weekly order for *Woman's Weekly* so she must have read some of that. There were complete short stories and serial stories, all of a romantic nature and very middle class, while we were very working class. There was a cookery page and an agony aunt's page and an article by "The Man Who Sees". And Adverts.

The only song I recall her singing was to sing me to sleep "Peggy O'Neill". She did say a few nursery rhymes but as she worked a 48-hour week at the weaving mill from my being 3 years old, she didn't have much time or energy to spare.

Reading and writing for us, her children, was taken for granted. She would carefully take off the plain paper which the butter had been wrapped in over the greaseproof paper and give it to me to cut up to write or draw on. Paper and pencils were always in short supply at home.

Chapter 4
Domestic reading and writing

Reading and writing are temporal activities; they also enable us to shift time about. We read or write at particular moments; but in doing so, we transcend the moment. I have said that one of literacy's attractions is the possibility it offers of "transport" out of the present time. This also implies an imaginative move out of the present place. What reading and writing both offer, as well as a journey out of "now", is a means of migration out of the immediate "here". For many of the mothers in this research *here* meant home: the only place where their excursions into reading and writing could happen. Home, the place from which they had no other escape, was—and still is, for many women—anything but a place of leisure. Home was their place of work. Literacy, as I want to suggest in this chapter, allowed not only the flight from present time, but a means to give distance to the immediate place.

Unlike other cultural pastimes, reading and writing demand little space. Somewhere to sit, the corner of a table, maybe: these are minimal claims compared with dancing, painting, or football. For women in their own homes, though, such space has been hard to find. The kitchen table is already covered in dishes to be washed or clothes to be ironed; the very act of sitting down in a chair with a letter or a magazine requires a chair to be empty—let alone a room free of other people's demands on her. So those mothers in the past who lived in crowded homes, had little space, as well as "no time" for literacy.

For women caring for others at home, moments for their own reading and writing have always had to be "fitted in", squeezed between spaces as well as times demanded by those others. The homes in which they raised their children left little room for what some saw to be "flights of fancy"—let alone the "flight" offered by literacy, caught up in the endless round of domestic tasks. Even so, in the midst of gathering up dirty clothes, or ironing clean ones, tying one child's shoelaces or washing another's hair, mothers have always remained people with their own mental worlds. The brief moments of reading and writing offer us just one manifestation of these; between stirring a pot of soup or peeling vegetables, putting food on the table or clearing it, the list is written, the pages of a magazine turned. Physically caught in one place, these moments help us recognize that women in the home, just sometimes, are imaginatively somewhere else entirely.

There are three kinds of literacy activities frequently engaged in by mothers during the first decades of this century, according to the Mass Observation correspondents: writing letters, reading library books, and browsing through magazines or newspapers. As Gwen reported, Lily was someone who, at some time or another, did all three. In this chapter, I first link examples from these reports with some account of the communication systems of which they were part and then begin to suggest the connections they make with the present-day literacy environment.

We begin, then, with the letter-writing mother; the person who wrote to husband or children, who wrote notes to school or letters to mail order companies, and who also took part in the huge growth of card-writing and reading —cards from holidays, greetings cards sent for Christmas, birthday, Valentine's day— which at the beginning of this century had grown into a huge national pastime.

We move on to the mother's use of library books: often (but not only) romantic fiction; often chosen for her by her children, brought home to the domestic sphere from the public one; books from circulating libraries and public libraries brought, temporarily, into it. During the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first two of the twentieth, the idea of a national public library system had become a reality; library use had multiplied; people with little money had, for the first time, reading "for free"—and women at home could read books without having to pay for them.

We will then look at the use of women's magazines: not only for the fiction of romance and escape that dominated their pages but also for the other features for which Lily and other readers bought them; features in which mothers were not only readers, but writers too. This was the period which saw the birth of the letters or "problem" page: a literate solution to the physical distances opened up by the dispersal of families between mothers (real or ideal) and their adult daughters. The woman's magazine industry, originating with weeklies for the upper-and middleclass woman, did not take long to seize market opportunities among the working-class in the early decades of this century.

In the last section of the chapter we will consider how these three domestic uses of literacy in the past, interconnecting as they always did with many other uses of language, might connect with those of today's mothers. We will see how women's aspirations and longings for greater mental space are finding outlet within the curricula of adult education, and how this literacy activity has given renewed value both to sociable forms of reading and writing and to the oral traditions of storytelling.

Letters and other things

As her daughter remembered it, Lily wrote letters with three purposes: to confide, to order goods, and to explain. First, as a young wife, she wrote regular letters to her husband, posted abroad for over three years in the First World War.

Secondly, she would write a "set letter" to order the dressmaking patterns she needed; and thirdly, when one of her daughters had been ill, she sat down (with some effort) to write a "sick note" for the child to take with them to school when they returned.

The letter-writing mother is evoked by many other correspondents to the Mass Observation Archive. This, written by a correspondent now in his late seventies, is a particularly eloquent example:

> My mother was born on 23 February 1889 and died in 1992… She had two children—me and a brother nine years younger. Miscarriages restricted her family.
>
> She did not apparently read much; she was always too busy, I suspect. Her lifetime love was singing, and she attended a choir until near the end…
>
> She wrote copiously—letters. Her eldest sister married and went to New Zealand early this century, and my mother wrote regularly, long and detailed letters, until her sister's death. She knew everything that went on in our distant relations and she related everything that happened to us here. Her incessant letter-writing was a linking between her immediate family and distant relations and friends. When she died and the letters stopped it was as if a retaining cord had snapped and all the interchange of knowledge and gossip stopped. (R2065)

Another grandmother (born in 1878) is also reported as maintaining contact with far-flung relatives; she "had cousins living in Canada and sent regular correspondence all her life". (P1978) Brought up in Bury, Lancashire, she met her future husband while still at school, where (according to her grandson) "he used to sharpen her pencils for her". After their marriage in 1902, they had four children. Both "were keen on education", keeping a large open shelved bookcase full of books. The writer lived with this grandmother between the ages of six and sixteen (when she would have been in her sixties) and recalls that from this bookcase, she "reluctantly allowed" him to take out "one book at a time…*after* I had washed my hands to her satisfaction". This is a portrait of a stern but affectionate woman, who gave her grandson "a very gloomy picture of Victorian life, long working days, poverty, frequent deaths, illness, whippings, limited food".

Postcards were commonly used, by this woman as by many others, for quite brief messages; her grandson writes:

> I have lots of postcards sent between members of the family, most quite local. Postcards were used by my grandparents almost as the telephone now, and most appear to have been sent *and* received on the same day.

At this stage it seems worth putting a context on this. Writing, at that time, was not only a means to keep contact with those who had moved far away; for

manypeople in the early decades of the century, it was a means to communicate with very near friends and relatives. In the late twentieth century, an affordable postal and telephone system is taken for granted as part of the necessities of everyday life. A century ago, there were no phones; and the invention of the penny post but a few decades earlier had introduced a change which calls on all our powers of imagination to comprehend. Today it is commonplace for daily messages to go through the letter box of rich and poor alike. These may range from bills, sales material, free newspapers, and personal or formal letters through to postcards sent from the other side of the world. While messages via fax machines or electronic mail are the experience of the minority (albeit a growing one), the majority have grown up in an era in which it is taken for granted that the receiving of a letter costs nothing and the sending of it is cheap. It is hard, then, to imagine the period before Rowland Hill's invention of the penny post in 1840, when payment for a letter was made by its receiver, and the cost was judged on the distance which the message had travelled.

The change this reform introduced makes present-day changes in new technology pale into insignificance. Between 1840 and 1915, as David Vincent reports, "the volume of correspondence increased nearly fifty-fold, from an estimated 76 million items in 1839 to 3500 million in 1914" (Vincent 1993:33). The idea of the Penny Post was by no means welcomed by all: for it was an idea which meant for the first time that the mass of the population could engage in the "epistolary intercourse" hitherto enjoyed only by the few who could afford it: and this could, some argued, assist in the promotion of dangerously seditious ideas among the labouring poor. The argument which helped to push through the reform was one that said: making a postal system affordable to the poor would ensure a proper sense of family life, at a time when family members were having to travel away from home for work or military service (Vincent 1993). The "family literacy" argument this represented meant literacy being promoted as a means to maintain dutiful communication between children and their parents, husbands and their wives.

As things developed over the next fifty years, more frivolous uses of literacy emerged—including an industry of greetings cards (Christmas, birthday, and Valentine). The picture postcard, as Vincent shows us, enabled all classes of society to celebrate the growing opportunities to travel away from home allowed by a developing railway system. The postcard from the holiday resort was but one symbol of a change in the way in which place and distance was understood. By 1901 some 350 million of these cards were being written and received in England and Wales: a literacy phenomenon made possible by the combination of postal, transport and photographic changes in the previous half century. The result was that for the first time, for the mass of the population:

> Communication was for pleasure. It was both a consequence and a celebration of a marginal increase in prosperity. Literally and symbolically the railway and the post came together at the seaside. The working-class

> familyleft home on the excursion train, and returned through the picture postcard. (Vincent 1993:49)

How far postcards during this period had become as widespread an activity among the working class as this suggests is hard to know. Many Mass Observation writers certainly reported mothers and grandmothers as writing them. P1009, for instance, recalled a grandmother who wrote postcards "from wherever she was':

> If my grandmother needed to write a letter, I think my mother used to write it for her. But she did write postcards a lot. When she got older, she travelled around the country by bus, visiting relatives. And she always sent postcards from wherever she was.

What does seem clear is that short notes and postcards had become easier to transmit: the medium, if not the message, was for the first time more widely available than it had ever been. Postcards, before the telephone, were an easy way to make arrangements. A number of M/O correspondents recalled receiving a card the same day it was posted. In an autobiography of her life in Luton, Edith Hall recalled:

> Just prior to the Great War of 1914 when I was about six years old, postcards with the then half-penny postage were sent between my relations each day. My grandmother would send us a card *each evening* which we received by first delivery the next morning. She would then receive our reply card *the same evening.* If one lived in the same town as one's correspondent, an early morning posted card would be delivered at twelve midday the same day and a reply card, if sent immediately, would be received the same afternoon. (Hall 1977:5)

The very energetic activity of postcard collection for this period has mostly tended to concentrate on collecting the images on one side, rather than the messages on the other. Collectors collect for the pictures and vie with each other for the best collection of a particular cartoon artist, topic, or period. "Few people today collect cards specifically for the interest of the messages", writes one enthusiast, in a rare publication picking out the more curious and amusing of those on cards in the "boom period" (1890–1914) (Brooks et al. 1982:6). Indeed, the picture postcard was only partly used for conveying messages; at least half its attraction was to satisfy what became a nationwide collecting craze, with the result that "the sole purpose of sending a card through the post was often to provide another card for someone's collection" (Brooks et al. 1982:12).

Nevertheless, they seemed to have provided a useful medium for making arrangements:

Box 4.1 Sample postcard

London, W.C.

8 June 1905

Dear Jessie

Mama would have been up to see you only it has been so wet, but perhaps she will come on Friday if fine. Will you write and let me know if you are going anywhere on Monday because if not I should like to come up, but must leave early in the evening. Your affect, niece Corrie

(author's collection)

Box 4.2 Sample postcard

Stockport

6 April 1909

Dear Ethel,

Will come round to your house, between 10 past and quarter past 8 tonight. Trusting you are in the pink of condition.

From Willie

p.s. Tell Esther I will put on my hat tonight, so I hope she has got the binding etc.

(Brooks, Fletcher & Lund 1982:48)

To conclude this section on the "writing mother", two other points need to be made. First, families and communities shared out writing tasks; and secondly, writing letters and postcards were only one means of maintaining continuity and contact in a family. Mothers (and, less often, fathers) are several times recalled as scribes and readers of letters. W2338, a retired teacher, recalls her maternal grandmother (born in 1860) as a "strong, domineering woman". The mother of nine children, she lived in Manchester after her second marriage and was evidently active in the suffrage movement ("women's suffrage was her main hobby horse and with it rights of women—property, etc."). This was someone who was much in demand as a scribe:

> I think she took her own literacy for granted but did a good deal of letterwriting and reading of documents for friends and neighbours who didn't have her skills. There was a constant stream of people wanting to have letters read, explained or written and they all turned to her.

As Ursula Howard suggests, many of the children who were to become mothers in the early years of this century would have grown up in a period when "bothwriting and receiving letters was a social as much as a solitary activity". Some did not wait till adulthood to be the writers and readers of letters for others: "After the 1890s it was common for a Board School educated child to be the scribe for older family members who did not have literacy skills" (Howard 1991:101).

The mother of Ml571 (whom we shall call Nina) would have been a teenage girl when she took on such a role for others in her community, too. The youngest of nine children living in a small East Sussex village, Nina's father had been a gardener who had "worked up from kitchen garden boy…to head gardener". Nina had attended school until she was fourteen; her first job was in the village store and post office (a place which, in Ursula Howard's words, was often "an informal advice and social center oiling the wheels of working people's lives") (Howard 1991:102). There Nina found herself called upon not only to deliver, but also to read letters to their recipients: and in so doing, being the bearer of often dire news:

> She lived in, to be available for sorting letters early in the morning, and did deliveries up onto Ashdown Forest in all weathers. Her ability to read meant that she would read the "letters to mother" sent back from the sons fighting in France, and it often fell to her lot to deliver the dreaded "official telegrams". This experience, I am sure, helped to make my mother the kind, understanding woman she was.

Letters and postcards to children away at war or relatives who had emigrated were certainly an important way in which women sustained what R2065, quoted earlier, called the "knowledge and gossip" to the family connectedness. Writing these was not the only way this connected feeling could be created. The mother (or grandmother) as the family historian, the one who tells the stories and passes down the history to her children, was a figure who appeared several times in the writing of Mass Observation writers. This grandmother, who plainly took pleasure in both reading and writing, also engaged her granddaughter in storytelling through other media, too:

> She was easy to talk to… I was very shy and could not talk to other adults. My grandmother gave me things to do like playing in her huge button box and telling me the history of different buttons. She was the family archivist; she kept masses of photographs of her relations and wrote on them who they were. I have inherited these, and her notes are invaluable. She used to talk about these people to me. (D826)

Library books

Lily, it will be remembered, started work in 1902 at the age of 12 in a weaving mill in Lancashire. At the age of 23 she married and her first child was born the sameyear. She went on to have three more daughters. It was these daughters who took turns to bring her home books from the library:

> We all went to the local library except mother: but she told us to bring her books from there by Ethel M.Dell or Ruby M.Ayres. All other library books she would quickly glance through and then said she'd read them and they were rubbish. (El74)

For us living in the late 1990s and beyond, reading material may often be "free" in a negative sense: it is unwanted and gratuitous—it is junk. Like it or not, the texts of advertising copywriters confront us on the doormat, in the street, on the bus, in shops, in every public space. Free papers are pushed through the letter box. Free magazines are thrust in our hands outside shops or stations. And libraries themselves are full of leaflet racks, poster displays and tables laid out with college prospectuses, guide books, programmes for upcoming local attractions. Anyone who is a confident reader of English is daily invited to a positive blizzard of free reading; and for those of us born in the 1940s or later the idea of a free public library service is barely commented on. Without any payment, we expect to be able to walk into a building and have at our disposal several hundred books. We can sit down there and then and begin reading; or we can borrow a few of them and take them home.

Thomas Kelly, the historian of libraries, suggests that the word "free" had "unfortunate connotations". There was, as he put it, an "odour of charity" (Kelly 1977:101) about the first municipal libraries, seen as primarily for the working class—and, like the penny post, introduced originally against considerable opposition. The Public Libraries Act of 1850 (for England and Wales: that for Scotland was passed in 1853) provided the funding of books for the labouring classes: but this funding would mean increased taxation. The "liberal minded reformers" saw libraries as the means to ensure a sober and industrious working class; others (such as landlords and shopkeepers) "objected to paying rates for the benefit of a lot of lazy people with nothing to do but lounge about reading" (Kelly 1977:81).

Municipal authorities were slow to institute their own public libraries; one by one, Norwich, Winchester, Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham led the way. But others took longer. Finally, in the last years of the century, other authorities followed suit, encouraged by (among other things) Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887, the demands of newly instituted technical education opportunities legislated for two years later, and substantial funding from private benefactors such as the Scottish-American steel magnate Andrew Carnegie. By 1918 some 60 per cent of the population, theoretically, had access to a public library; but

those living in urban areas were far better provided for than those in villages. (Kelly 1977).

The "local library", where Lily's daughters collected books for her, might have been not the municipal library but one of the circulating or twopenny libraries, stocked by the newsagent or corner shop. These, at this time, stocked between twoand three hundred books, rented by the shopkeeper from a wholesaler. Both of Lily's favourites novelists were among the most popular in the stock; Ethel M. Dell's *The Way of the Eagle,* published in 1912, had been an instant success and reprinted 27 times in the ensuing three years (Beauman 1983). Set in the final days of a siege at a British-held fort in India, its main character is Muriel, the wife of a "masterful" and fearless soldier husband. As Nicola Beauman sees it, this novel was:

> The best kind of read for anyone wishing to curl up in an armchair, flubound and lackadaisical, and wallow unashamedly in a book that is entirely timeless, oblivious of realities and predictions. (Beauman 1983: 179)

To be able to borrow, not buy: to have several books in one week, all for free: the public library must have had a special impact on what life indoors felt like. In the last decades of the nineteenth century it offered, of course, the opportunity for uses of literacy that were more apparently purposeful and serious than the cosy escapism of romantic fiction. As Liz Greenhalgh and Ken Worpole put it, the free public library meant free public access to all, regardless of income; it ensured the opportunity for someone "to try it once and see if they like it". It also opened up possibilities for study and self-education—at least for men (Greenhalgh & Worpole 1995). During the years of the 1914–18 war, surveys of public library use as well as publishers' sales figures reported a reading "boom": more books were being sold and borrowed.[1] This was in part owing to the restrictions imposed by the war (blackouts, the closure of public entertainments, for example), which curtailed leisure activities, so that reading was increasingly seen as a cheap way of passing the time.

It was for fiction that the Mass Observation writers most recalled library use by mothers and grandmothers. Norah, introduced in Chapter 2, was someone whose reading was squeezed in between her daily work of feeding, not only her seven children, but also livestock ("pigs, young calves, hens, turkeys, ducks") on the farm where she lived and worked in rural Ireland. Like Lily, she had her library books chosen for her. Her daughter (W1835) reported how she and a friend of hers from the next farm would collect books for their mothers from a library run in a house some three miles away from their village. Other women had their husbands, rather than their children, make their choices for them. According to B2240: "My parents were *avid readers.* They belonged to Boots Booklovers Library which was their one 'luxury' expenditure. My father chose the books and rarely did my mother not enjoy his choice for her", (my emphasis)

This expression—avid reading—is used by several Mass Observation correspondents. R1025, who describes herself as a 52-year-old housewife, writes about her grandmother, born in 1890 in a village in Essex in a family where "a great deal of reading and writing went on" and in which her grandmother, as a little girl, was "an avid reader, always with a book in her hand, often shutting herself in the toilet to be alone to read".

"We all joined public libraries", writes correspondent F2090; adding "My mother did not have a lot of time for reading at that time but she was an avid reader to the end of her days". A2787, a 32-year-old woman writing about her grandmother, reports: "Nora, as I said, greatly grieved for the fact that she hadn't had an academic education, because she read voraciously—mostly library books—and loved figures".

"Avid" or "voracious" reading—usually of library books—was an activity which children engaged in, often to the torment of their overworked mothers. Thus, a retired librarian recalls her mother's horror at her passion for reading. Her mother, she writes, taught her to read when she was four (in 1929); but:

> I learned so fast, and read so ravenously, being a bored, short-sighted only child [at the time], that she was alarmed, and seemed to spend the rest of our lives discouraging me from reading… Appalled at my turning out a bookworm, she would not let my sister learn to read until she was nine. (G1041)

This woman's mother may have been appalled for several reasons. There were potential dangers to eyesight and health from continuous reading: especially given the danger of "germs" from library books. Books might give children—especially daughters—ideas. And daughters reading were daughters not helping mothers, or learning to be mothers themselves.

Eliza, whom we met in Chapter 2, brought up two children who were enthusiastic readers without being able to read herself. It was especially her daughter's passion for reading that "annoyed" her:

> When you read, it used to annoy her. She tried not to get annoyed, but you know how you get lost in a book? and she would take a book off me sometimes and she'd say "I've spoken to you three times" and I'd say, "I'm sorry mother, I haven't heard you". She found it very difficult to understand this fascination that my father and I had for books. (Interview with Joan: Stocksbridge, April 1996)

Libraries, then, while offering new opportunities for affordable reading to adults and children alike, held fears for mothers, as well. We will return to this ambivalence in Chapter 6.

Fictions and fantasy

To judge from both the Mass Observation writers and the interviews I have had with older people, "unashamed wallowing" in sensational fiction by mothers, at least by working-class mothers with large families, was the exception, rather than the rule. Only one person had an unequivocal view of her mother's capacity to indulge her reading appetites—whether for romantic fiction or any other kind,and that was Iris, in the University of the Third Age (U3A) discussion group we will meet in Chapter 5. "She was an avid reader", said Iris then: "It wasn't a case of, 'Oh, you've got a nose in a book'; it was a case of, 'Mother? oh, she's got her nose in a book again!'"

Avid reading and housework seem at first to be impossibly at odds with each other: to read avidly suggests to read for more than a few minutes at a time. Lily, however, enjoyed reading romantic fiction. Ethel M.Dell and Ruby M.Ayres satisfied this appetite; so did the short stories and serials in *Woman's Weekly*—written, in the words of E174 for middle-class readers:

> She had a weekly order for *Woman's Weekly*… They were complete short stories and serial stories, all of a romantic nature and very middle class, while we were very working class. There was a cookery page and an agony aunt's page and an article by "The Man Who Sees". And adverts.

A magazine which Lily may also have read was called *Peg's Paper* (a publication also referred to by members of the U3A group, discussed in Chapter 5). As her daughter recalled in our later interview, "a little card…little adverts on *Peg's Paper"* used to come through her mother's door.

Peg's Paper (as I learned later, stimulated by these references to seek it out in the shelves of the British Library) was launched in 1919 as a "really cheery paper". In its first issue, the editorial began:

> It's going to be your weekly pal, girls. My name is Peg and my one aim in life is to give you a really cheery paper like nothing you've ever read before. Not so very long ago, I was a mill girl too.

The "snippet" which landed on Lily's doormat in the Lancashire mill town where she still lived as an older woman was, as Gwen recalled it for me, a trailer for the magazine's main sales pitch: that of fantasy and romance. The titles of short and longer stories featured in the early issues give a flavour of their appeal: "Lured to London", "Her ruined beauty", "Her night of terror", "Her secret past". The print, to our modern eyes, is small; the illustrations inside, black and white line drawings. The magazine cover, however, had colour. Not the colourful glamour achieved by *Woman* magazine (launched in 1937, and the first to use photogravure); and certainly not the multi-image photo-collages and mix of graphics we are used to today in that magazine—but at least, red.

Beside my word processor on this table is a colour copy of the cover to issue No. 113. Beneath the magazine title picked out in bold scarlet letters, is a picture of a young woman in bed. Her long wavy hair spreads over the pillow and sheet. Her lacy nightdress is short-sleeved; her bare pink arm lies across the pillow, which she is clutching in evident despair. We can see at once this is a woman sleepless with love; each of her beautiful large eyes, gazing hopelessly into the distance, is filled with a huge tear. Beneath this image of tragedy we read the anguished questionwhich is evidently its source: "Would he never speak to her of his love?" Below these words, framed with a red border, is the caption (lettered in large black capitals): "SCORNED BY SOCIETY". Above, in smaller lettering, appears another (equally irresistible): FROM FACTORY TO FOOTLIGHTS. The red border which surrounds the picture with rosettes and ribbons also embraces the proud words PEG'S PAPER (with the price—twopence—more discreetly printed in grey alongside)

The years of *Peg's Paper* (1919–40) coincided with the growth of the cinema, and a regular feature in the magazine was "photostories" of film stars such as Mary Pickford. Other features were fortune telling ("our woman of mystery") and a letters page ("My private postbag")—usually answering anxious queries on matters of etiquette. (Mabel—Richmond: bread eaten at mealtimes should always be broken with the fingers and never with the knife (No. 88, 11 January 1921, p.3); he drinks—tell him he must give it up, or lose you, dear (No. 111, 21 June 1921).) Advertisements focused on appearance and beauty secrets. (Blushing—how to cure it. Don't be laughed at. Have you a red nose? send a stamp to pay postage and you will learn how to rid yourself of this terrible affliction free of charge.) Corsets are everywhere (the "natural corset style 2" a particular favourite).

Did Lily give in to the "adverts" about *Peg's Paper* and buy one? Was her appetite whetted? According to Cynthia White, the historian of women's magazines, many thousands of women did. *Peg's Paper,* like other later publications *(Red Star,* launched 1929; *Secrets,* 1932; *Oracle,* 1933; *Lucky Star* and *Miracle,* 1935) satisfied

> The need of hardworked poorly paid girls and women to escape from their drab surroundings into a colourful, action-packed dream-world where love and riches were for once within reach. (White 1970:98)

These, White tells us, were the first women's magazines to be published with the working-class woman reader in mind. They were the product of a period between 1875 and 1910 that saw the birth of an entirely new kind of reading material, unavailable to previous generations: the affordable, disposable weekly or monthly magazine written for women. To that extent, women like Lily (born, you will remember, in 1890) had reading material at her disposal which had been quite unknown to her own mother.

In 1921, two years after its parent paper was launched, *Peg's Companion* appeared, a "new story paper" in each issue of which would be two complete novels. In the editorial to its first issue, "Peg" is once again here to explain all:

> Dear girls—I daresay a good many of you who read this little paper will wonder about the title—why it is called PEG'S COMPANION and who Peg is? Some of you will know me, because I already edit another paper bearing my name—Peg's Paper. But to those who don't, I would like to introduce myself.
>
> Really I am a mill girl, or rather I was before I took up journalism. It was always my ambition to succeed in conducting a paper—or papers! that give girls like myself exactly what they want to read—papers which contain stories you'll enjoy reading after your day's work is done, and which on your "grey" days when things go wrong will cheer you up.

The cover picture to this first issue shows a slightly different portrait of a woman's anguish than had appeared two years earlier. This time, there are two people. On the right stands a young woman, holding in her shawl a sleeping baby; her head is tilted back so that we can see the curls peeping beneath the brim of her hat. Her other arm is outstretched to, on the left, a fierce-looking man with a moustache. His eyes glare at her, his moustache is bushy with rage. His right arm thrusts an accusing hand out of the picture. "For my baby's sake forgive me, dad", reads the caption. It is the image of the fallen woman; the banished daughter, guilty of the ultimate sin: a child born out of wedlock.

As I sat beneath the dome of the British Library on a summer's day in 1997, turning the yellowed pages of this magazine, I wondered about the women who, in very different surroundings, would have read its issues hot off the press. If Lily did ever read this magazine, did it "cheer" her? As a young mother, unable to find comfort in her own mother's reaction to the pre-marital conception of her first pregnancy, did she ever think of writing to "My mother's pages" in *Peg's Companion?* The invitation to her and others to do so (had she read it) was cast in hospitable terms:

> Dear All of You,
>
> Although I've never really met any of you, I seem to know many of you through my girl Peg, and when she came to me with the request that I should write a letter to her chums—as she speaks of you to me—I was delighted.

In the centre of two columns of print is a picture of the fictional author: a sweetly smiling woman, knitting in an armchair. Hair parted in the middle, dark dress edged with lace at collar and cuff, she looks straight out of the page at her readers.

> I've got wrinkles on my face, and my hair is white, but I can still laugh and joke, and find this world a good place to be in; I am not so old that I cannot remember when I was a girl.

How comforting she sounds! what a contrast to the agony of doomed love, let alone of an unexpected pregnancy!

> I know how dreadful a heartache can be, dear girls, a far worse thing than a headache, so if ever you have a secret that worries you, come to me.I shall keep your letters for that time. Remember that all your confidences will be sacred. You need not even tell me your name, or where you live… (1 November 1921, p. 39)

Alongside this promise of secrets shared and shame confided, *Peg's Companion* provided stories with titles even more sensational than those in *Peg's Paper*. Turning the pages in the hush of the library in London, I wondered how the same pages might have rustled in the commotion of a crowded kitchen:

> *The fatal kiss*: When Lord Tony kissed her, beautiful Amber West forgot that she was only a working girl and he was rich and titled. What happened afterwards is told below in a long complete novel by MURIEL KING. (Issue No. 2, 1921)
>
> *The finger of scorn*: Gay Nicholson was lonely and longed for adventure, and when Fate beckoned she followed, never realizing that she had taken the first step down the path of sorrow and deceit. Her story is told by HESTER YORKE. (Issue No. 153, 1924)

Had I been Lily or someone like her, and read the first issue, I would have encountered a tragic tale entitled *Her mother's sin*: "the love story of the beautiful Annette Orme", by Cora Linda. The villain of the piece, someone by the name of Gervase Fortescue, was an individual prone to talking "suavely" or "coarsely". The heroine herself (I would have discovered) was virtuous, as well as beautiful. Sometimes she spoke "primly" (as in: "Mr. Fortescue!" she said primly. "Whatever does this mean?"); at other times she was "vehement" or "broken" ("'Have mercy have mercy!' the girl cried vehemently… 'I can't explain!' she whispered brokenly").

Had I been Lily (or someone like her) I might have been in my thirties, the mother of several children; the hands that turned the page would have been dried a moment before from wringing another pile of washing. Among the readers intended by "Peg", the supposed editor of these publications, were factory girls such as Lily had once been. Neither Gwen, nor I, nor anyone else can know if Lily read this magazine, and if she did, what she found in her reading of its pages. Whether the fictional "mother" in the columns of "My mother's page" offered her amusement or comfort, we can only speculate. The ideal mother this

feature represented—always hospitable to the troubles of daughters—was a commercial product. The reality for mothers like Lily, herself still a daughter, was governed by other imperatives.

Mothers, talking and writing

Whether they have time or inclination for reading or writing, mothers have always told stories. It is partly from the recollection of some of these stories that children, now older women or men, were able to create new ones; composingimagined and/or remembered portraits to send in to the Mass Observation Archive. For some, this storytelling life was vivid indeed, and of much greater importance to the vitality of the family than reading or writing:

> On the evidence of what I saw while living in my mother's childhood home, there was little to suggest a family devoted to the printed word; but plenty to confirm that Kerry folk are great talkers, and pursue this pastime late into the night. (P2578)

In the latter part of the twentieth century we inhabit a world in which opportunities to tell and listen to stories in the home compete with other media. Children have television programmes to watch, computer games to play, and telephones on which to talk to their friends. At the same time, opportunities for mothers to explore their own literacy interests, while still far too circumscribed, are certainly greater than they would have been for their grandmothers. It is the contribution of a movement of community publishing that these opportunities have at the same time reasserted the value of oral tradition through the practices of working together at reading and writing in groups, and sharing the writing that emerges in public readings.

The following piece, first published in the 1980s, came out of the experience of the writer meeting with other women in a writers' workshop.

> Shush—mum's writing
> Sit down be quiet read a book
> Don't you dare to speak or look
> Shush Mum's writing
> She's left the dishes in the sink
> All she does is sit and think
> Shush Mum's writing
> Nothing for dinner nowt for tea
> And all she ever says to me is
> Shush Mum's writing
> But what's all this Mum's wrote a book
> Why not buy one have a look
> No need to shush now we can shout
> And tell all our friends about
> MUM'S WRITING
>
> Pat Dallimore (1978) (in Morley & Worpole 1982)

The writers' group of which Pat Dallimore was a member formed part of the activities of a community publishing organization called Bristol Broadsides. This, in turn, was a founding member of the national Federation of Worker Writers andCommunity Publishers, established in 1976 and still thriving today.[2] I was fortunate to hear Pat read this piece at one of the readings organized by the FWWCP in the early 1980s: so in reading it on the page, I can still hear particular voice (and the defiant rise in her intonation on the last three lines).

Women in the 1900s–30s appeared to use libraries a lot—but rarely as places in which to read and write. "Shush—mum's writing" is shushing the family in the home, not other readers in a public space. Libraries—some of them at least—offer the quiet and uninterrupted place in which to compose ideas. Working in the reading rooms of reference or academic libraries has been for me among the great pleasures of writing this book; as an academic attached to an academic institution I expect to be able to browse frequently both along shelves and on screen in search of thinking that continues to enlarge and extend my own. It was on a Saturday afternoon in 1997 that I knew I wanted to find Liz Greenhalgh and Ken Worpole's study of the changing history of the public library from which I quoted earlier. In the local branch of my public library in Lambeth, London, I stared at a computer screen and adjusted the mouse to "author/title". Discovering that the library did indeed have it in stock at the reference library two miles away, I left the branch library, walked to the bus stop, and caught a bus. Twenty minutes later, I was reading the book I had been looking for: all this, "on the rates".

As it happened, that afternoon, the bus on which I travelled was full of mothers. All ages were there; grasping huge carrier bags, clutching one child and keeping an eye on another, turning to their neighbour, finding a seat; some wearing lycra leggings, others, billowing cotton dresses; some, leather trousers; others, pastel jackets. Black velvet with sequins sat next to faded brown tweed. Scarves and hats of all shapes and turbans covered the heads; sandals, trainers, platform boots, court shoes the feet. There was grey hair, wispy brown; black, glossed or stretched; plaited auburn; blonde, caught up with combs. The faces were pink-pale, brown-dark; spectacled, lipsticked, smiling, blank; crows-footed and smooth.

Such variety mocks generalization: but this is what I thought, that afternoon. Motherhood is both gift and theft. Mothers are people who, all things being equal, are given the experience of watching a small infant grow, and, all being well, receive the rewards of a needy child becoming a loving friend. However, things are not equal, and all is not always well, and in a culture which assumes them to be primary carers, mothers are also people too often robbed of their own care. Literacy, a medium with which we may create worlds of our own, is a means to care for our need to recall and to plan, to imagine and to record: to make a mark. So the expressive possibilities of writing enables a mother to give voice to her suffering, as well as such joys as children may give her, and in so doing, claim a hearing which otherwise is denied her. Many of those other mothers on

the bus may themselves have been using libraries for studying, if not that Saturday, some other time in the week. Or they may not. Their reading and writing lives, like mine, are but a fraction of their other lives. But for some who choose to make the fraction a little larger, as Pat Dallimore did, they may themselves become authors of the library books, as well as readers.

Such an experience is reported of a woman adult literacy student called Suzanne in Melbourne, Australia. It was in a library near where she lived that Suzanne first met the person who was to be her literacy tutor. She felt fearful and shy. She found it "nerve-racking" to be there and "spoke very quietly", and was "frightened that someone in the library reading a book" would find out that she was illiterate. Later, much later, Suzanne contributed a piece of her writing to a collection by students in the literacy programme of which she had become a member. Her piece was "a story on my schooling and childhood". The collection was published; the library acquired copies, where they were from then on available for others to read. From being afraid of reading, of not being able to read, and of being found out as an outlaw in a library, Suzanne had moved to being one of the writers on its shelves (Campbell 1991:12–13). Like Pat Dallimore, she had changed the distance between public and private literacies, altering the relationships between herself, her family and her community.

Both women did this through me talkative literacy work of the classes and groups in which they were participants; claiming their own time to "play around" with ideas, to be playful with possibilities. It is in an essay by the teacher, poet and feminist theorist Adrienne Rich that this phrase was used about writing and motherhood. In this essay she poses the idea of writing as a form of *play*; going on to tell how it was this mental playfulness of which she felt robbed during her own years of mothering in the 1950s. The sheer weariness of "work that others constantly undo" had put an end to the writing that she had been doing before having children:

> I was writing very little, partly from fatigue, that female fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being, partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children's constant needs.

In contrast to this weariness and interruptedness, she goes on, what is needed in order "to write poetry or fiction, or even to think well" is

> a certain freedom of mind…freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away. Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. *You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate;*

> *nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name.* For writing is re-naming. Now, to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding-back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of conservatism. (Rich 1980:43) (my emphasis)

The "holding-back" and "putting-aside" seem like an inner brake: once the brake is taken off, the wheels roll, the mind takes off. Day might be night and night might be day, and the mother can, simply, let herself go. It seems to me that it is for that freedom to *play,* with time, as well as with "notions", which mothers, today as in the past, must claim their own time, if literacy in its fullest sense is to be theirs.

Reflections

I write this sentence on a summer's afternoon; *you* may be reading it on a winter's morning. Writer and reader of the same text, we inhabit different times. Once any piece of writing has left its author, this has always been and will always be the case. In the literate relationship, reader and writer meet at different moments in their own lives. The experience of the text in front of them can never be a simultaneous one; the reader, reading, is living through real and imaginative times different from those lived through by the writer, writing.

While literacy had never been the sole means for women to undertake such journeys of the mind, it sets up a relationship beyond the immediacy of the oral expression of song and story. The storyteller or singer and her listeners occupy the same space; each is present to the other. Whereas, just as you and I, reading and writing this paragraph in different times, inhabit different historical moments so we also inhabit different places. I (on this summer's afternoon) sit in a specific upstairs room in a particular house. You (on your winter's morning) are somewhere else: maybe not in a room, but on a bus, or beside a river. For me, you are in the future; for you, I am in the past. What separates us is history; but what also separates us is geography. Writer and reader, while we engage in this relationship of literacy, are both physically and imaginatively located in separate places.

This physical difference is true for the briefest of literate communications as well as for the longer one of a book like this. The holiday postcard is the most extreme example, for it offers a picture as well as the writer's greeting to emphasize the geographical separation between her and her reader. This is very literally a message from one place to another place, sent precisely to enable the reader to locate the writer, at a seaside resort instead of at her usual address. The literal message may often be just a few words: but the message conveyed by the whole text is—look, I'm here! (not where I usually am). The words themselves ("wish you were here", perhaps) are there to underline how far away the reader

seems to the writer; the reader, for her part, is being given a reminder that the writer is somewhere else.

"Avid reading", reading with an urgency of appetite, was certainly something which public libraries were able to offer to households who otherwise could not afford their own books. Mothers, according to several Mass Observation correspondents, found their children's avid reading alternately infuriating and worrying. A fictional account set in the 1920s offers a particularly vivid picture of the scenes referred to in the M/O reports. The mother in the scene is called Ada, aJewish refugee from Poland bringing up her children in the East End of London. Ada's daughter, Miriam, becomes a passionate reader; she "read as if starving, read while dressing, read at the table, read in the lavatory, and to finish a chapter would walk to school holding the book in one hand and leading Philip by the other".

Ada, struggling with the daily toil of managing home, family and shop, is portrayed in this novel as torn between pride at the school achievements of her growing daughter and torment at the effects this passion for literacy will have on her daughter's future as a wife and mother: "The girl was simply not interested in anything, it worried her to death. What would become of her? One couldn't clean a house with a book in her hand, or give it to one's husband instead of dinner" (Adler 1984:79).

The association of reading with nourishment, hunger, and greed brings together both reading for escape and reading for learning. This chapter has focused on "domestic" reading and writing; exploring, through three kinds of domestic literacy activity, how mothers in the early decades of the century might have "played" not only with time, but with the space in which they found themselves. We have also considered how literacy—especially reading—is seen both as stimulating and satisfying an "appetite" to move beyond the present place. This metaphor of appetite and nourishment is taken to its limits in a passage describing a scene from the period in which the mothers about whom we have been reading were living.

It was in Newcastle, on a hot morning in June 1913. A crowd of women were gathered for a meeting. They had travelled from all over the country for a conference of the Women's Co-operative Guild, founded twenty years earlier. One by one, they had come up to the platform to speak, calling for reform of the divorce laws, for a minimum wage, for shorter working hours, for improved maternity welfare, sanitation and education; they demanded the right for women to vote. Many of the speakers were mothers, all were working-class, none had spare energy for their own leisure or education. Yet they conjured up the image, for one witness, of women with the "indiscriminate greed of the hungry appetite" for reading.

That witness was neither a mother nor working-class. The appetite she thought about, however, was one for which she had a particularly keen sympathy. Her name was Virginia Woolf; and as she watched and listened that day, she felt frustration at the continued powerlessness of pre-suffrage women:

> In all that audience, among all those women who worked, who bore children, who scrubbed and cooked and bargained, there was not a single woman with a vote… The thought was irritating and depressing in the extreme. (Woolf 1990:xxi)

Recalling the scene some years later, Woolf wrote of being inspired, as well as frustrated; not only by the "vitality" of the women she listened to that day, but bythe "inborn energy" she found, some months later, reading the memoirs sent in by Guild members to its Secretary, Margaret Llewellyn Davies. What she found in these writers was a determination, against the odds, to reach out for other possibilities via literacy,

> With that inborn energy which no amount of children and washing up can quench [and which] had reached out…and seized upon old copies of magazines; had attached itself to Dickens; had propped the poems of Burns against a dish cover to read while cooking.

"They read at meals; they read before going to the mill", she goes on; these women (as she saw it) read:

> With the indiscriminate greed of the hungry appetite, that crams itself with toffee and beef and tarts and vinegar and champagne all in one gulp. Naturally [Woolf went on], such reading led to argument. The younger generation had the audacity to say that Queen Victoria was no better than an honest charwoman who had brought up her children respectably. They had the temerity to doubt whether to sew straight stitches into men's hat brims should be the sole aim of a woman's life. (Woolf 1990: xxxv–xxxvi)

There is more: but I hope this has given you a flavour. The reading these women had done had fed an appetite and created another; an appetite for "argument", and for speaking up and writing, too.

Literacy is about more than reading, and certainly about more than reading books. In this chapter we have looked only briefly at the informal writing of postcards and letters, and imagined something of the traffic of written messages in the early years of the century. The widespread use of the telephone means that postcards today fulfil different functions; yet I suspect that the writing of cards, for condolence, celebration, encouragement, gratitude or simply keeping in touch, is still more a female than male habit. This is temporary and transitory literacy; brief (especially postcards) and disposable.

It was at a 1993 conference on women's literacy that Anne Nederkoorn offered a story of two postcard-writing episodes, which had taken place among the group of eight women in a literacy class that she taught just outside Amsterdam, in Holland. The group, who were aged between 22 and 50, met

every week with her in a community centre, practising reading and writing and, what is usually known as, "basic literacy skills".

> One time (Anne told us), we had some practice with writing postcards. Most of the women had never written any postcard or letter before, so this was quite a new experience to them. They wrote a little note to each other, and the address. And they themselves received mail! All within the classroom.
>
> One day one of the participants was absent; she was ill. Every woman wrote a little note to her, first without paying too much attention to spelling, then rewritten (as correct as possible) on the postcard. One of the participants wrote the address, another volunteered to post it. From that moment on, we almost always sent something to someone absent. We wrote letters together or put several single letters in an envelope.

Martha was the name of one of the learners in the group. She often talked, Anne told us, about her learning and change through literacy.

> After about six weeks participating in the literacy group, she told me about a letter that had been sent to her and her family. Until then her husband used to read and answer letters. But this time Martha said to him: "I'll answer it". He said, "You're not able to write properly. I'll do it". Martha grasped the letter out of his hands and he had to let her answer it.

Some weeks later, Anne herself was ill. After a few days in bed at home, she received a big postcard from the group, written by Martha. "She wrote the address too" said Anne (Nederkoorn 1993).

Within this story were the elements of a kind of *affection* in teaching and learning which many of us at the conference had been speaking of with wistfulness. The hard edges of market forces, "outcome-related funding" and measurable performance indicators of literacy progress in the funding schemes of the late 1980s had been taxing the spirits of adult literacy teachers. In the words of Rosemary Fraser, then Adult Basic Education co-ordinator in Edinburgh:

> Government agencies, with their emphasis on the acquisition of functional skills (divorced from political realities) are actually entering into literacy as a form of social control. This has led some educators to fear accreditation as an instrument of this control. (Mace 1993:4)

The achievement represented in the writing of the postcard to the woman at home, at first glance, appears fairly trivial. Compared to the writing of reports, letters of complaint, curriculum vitae, application forms for housing benefit, and all the other necessary routines of adult basic education, a postcard seems light-

weight stuff: inessential. But in that context its purpose—to gather and express group support for another woman—was central to those women's interests in literacy: and central, too, to celebrate their sense of pleasure in being able to use writing in more confident ways. So Anne's story restored for people at that conference the sense of *playfulness* on which serious literacy education flourishes: the kind of playfulness that women all over the world have always used to transform the "control" of government agencies.

For women coming to literacy in adult life, there are persistent and daily obstacles. Seeking to claim time or space to write anything—whether it is anessay or a postcard, a list or a poem—is making a claim to "play around": so that the imagination, however briefly, might be free to "transcend and transform" experience.

Notes

1. There is something innocent in the question used to try to discover what people actually *did* with their reading (used in Gallup Polls on the reading public in the 1940s):

   > Do you happen to be reading a novel or other book at the moment? (McAleer 1992:74)

2. The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers was established in 1976 and currently consists of some 30 member groups: community based writers' groups, publishers and adult literacy organizations. The FWWCP has a website: http://www.fwwcp.mcmail.com.

Chapter 5
Hide and seek: the search for illiteracy

This chapter is about two things: talking and illiteracy. Most of it is about conversations and interviews, rather than written sources; and at the heart of it is the "taboo" of illiteracy, on which I hope to shine some calm and gentle light.

In the last two chapters, there have been examples of how one person expresses their recollection of another differently in speech than in writing; how the same person may vary their account of another when they are telling it to different people; and how two people will have different memories of that person. These are familiar experiences to most of us; just as, if we stop and think about it, we can recognize that at different moments in our lives, we retell the same experience in different ways. It is sometimes as if we are trying on different clothes, using language to experiment with different kinds of truth; sometimes the telling is "dressed up", at other times it is allowed out "any old how". But all the time, autobiographical narrative wears the ornaments of imagination.

The interplay between the remembered and the imagined is even more evident when we attempt to create a life of which we can only have ever known a small part. "To me, grandmothers were born grandmothers", one woman said to me. Within the world of the child's reality grandmothers are unimaginable as being any other age than the age they are now (which, to a young child, is simply *very old indeed*). For the child, still young, it is impossible to comprehend them as having a life beyond their own reality; only when the child has become old herself may it begin to become possible to perceive just some of the dimensions of that life beyond her own autobiography.

So when autobiography fuses with biography, when we conjure up a sketch of the person we knew, who is no longer here to give their own account of themselves, our memory has to be extended by imagination: we combine the creative effort of novelist and historian. Thus did Joan piece together an imagined story of her mother's life before she herself entered it, writing what she called a "fictional biography". Her published book about Eliza drew on "a memory of memories": her recollection of the stories that Eliza, her mother, had told her when she herself had been a child. What she wrote was a creative story-telling act, superimposed on that of her story-telling mother.

My research purpose, as I expressed it in the directive to Mass Observation Archive correspondents, was to invite others to help me "create a portrait" of women no longer alive and to discover the place that reading and writing had in their lives. These portraits were elusive; their daughters, sons, grandchildren and other relatives did what they could to imagine, as well as remember them. As correspondents for a public archive, they were both liberated by their anonymity and constrained by an unseen readership. There was restraint in the writing. The development that was possible when some of these writers consented to meet and talk was considerable; in the intimacy of interview, other recollections came to life —not because these were censored from the written account; rather, that with a present listener in the room, the tales could be elaborated with the certainty of their interest.

Oral history is the term usually used for such work: two people with a taperecorder. Reminiscence work (as I understand it) is what goes on when a group of people meet to recollect and exchange memories with each other, usually with someone acting as facilitator. Both approaches entail a creative process—a *searching* and a *making*. Since I am by training an adult educator first, and only secondarily a researcher, my own preference is for a combination of the two: both individual interviews and group meetings, offering the opportunity for the interviewees to meet each other, as well as me—not just once, but several times. Because the single tape-recorded interview has so much at stake, this has always seemed more comfortable to me. With only a single meeting between interviewee and interviewer, there are considerable risks of injury to the former and confusion to the latter. Of course, with sensitivity and care these risks can be avoided. But with only a single meeting, however risk-free, an opportunity is missed. Conversation provokes memories; memories, once spoken aloud take on a life of their own. With time allowed for revisiting and revising things said, the interview becomes more than a useful research event for the interviewer: it is the start of an interesting communicative process for the interviewee. Offered the opportunity of reflecting on the interview—either through receiving and being invited to comment on a copy of its written transcript, or through a second conversation—the interviewee is also given back material for research of their own. If there is also the possibility of the individuals having the choice to meet up with others who have been through the same interview process there is the chance (if they want it) to continue the reflections and to re-situate their own experiences in another context. In this chapter, I quote from interviews with two individuals and use some transcript from a discussion in a group. I continue to feel grateful to these people for the time they gave me. What I hope is that the interviews, discussion and later correspondence and meetings provided a process that was useful to them, too.

I begin with the idea of oral history as a project of joint composition, in which both listeners and tellers compose together, pictures and tales. From two separate interviews then comes two such pictures, both (as I see it) portraying a "literate

accomplice" to their mothers' girlhood romance, both mothers recalled as illiterate. From this, we move to a discussion with a group of older women recallingtheir own mothers, each in turn conjuring up glimpses of their literacy lives. The "Great Divide" theory is indeed of little use in making sense of these lives: instead there are shades and changes, a "spectrum" of literacy use and absence, told by women who themselves are committed readers and letter-writers and actively engaged, in their seventies and eighties, in their own education. The illiterate mother sits next to the "avidly reading" mother.

From this I have returned to those written accounts that reported illiteracy, and present some silhouettes of mothers who could neither read nor write. The chapter ends with some reflections on the debates about measuring illiteracy in the past.

Composing in talk

Interviewing others, as I was interviewing Anne, Brenda, Noreen, Enid, Eileen, Joan and Fred (in Chapters 2 and 3), is a project that is like both reading and writing. The interviewer and interviewee read each other's faces, voices, intentions. In the case of these interviews, I was also privileged to read something of their home surroundings: something interviewees were unable to do of mine. Opening the door, there stood a person. Entering her home, there were her chosen possessions, colours and textures. On the walls were paintings, photographs, calendars. On the shelves were books and ornaments; on the tables, cups, saucers, newspapers; on the floor, rugs, carpet, lino; on the pegs in the hall coats, hats, umbrellas. All these were the person who was now inviting me to take off my coat. Photographs of children and grandchildren stood on the mantlepiece. Calendars hung in the hall or the kitchen. All this was for me to read, too, as well as the welcoming smile of my interviewee.

Interviewing is also like writing. It is a composition between two people; we are partners in a conversation in which we are both composing ideas, questions and images. As co-authors, we create between us a text that pauses and hesitates and then, suddenly, leaps forward. The composition also becomes a text in the literal sense when, later, the tape-recorded interview is transcribed onto paper. The common and separate ground between written and oral sources of history, as the historian Alessandro Portelli suggests, needs to be better understood. Many interviewees, as he points out:

> Read books and newspapers, listen to the radio and TV, hear sermons and political speeches, and keep diaries, letters, clippings and photograph albums. Orality and writing, for many centuries now, have not existed separately: if many written sources are based on orality, modern orality itself is saturated with writing. (Portelli 1998:69)

Communication between interviewee and interviewer is a two-way process. Portelli will brook no excuses: the oral historian is as much a maker of the text ofthe interview as their "informant". Not for him the invisible identity of the interviewer: she or he is part of what is said, too—too easy, the pretence of the detached and impartial narrator quoting their sources. "Alongside the first person narrative of the interviewee stands the first person of the historian, without whom there would be no interview" (Portelli 1998:72).

For this writing project to be fruitful, both participants need also to be actively engaged in imaginative work; as I see it, both life history and autobiography are not only the making of narratives, but also an exercise in speculation—a puzzling around possibilities. An image from my own past illustrates what I mean; not a clear story, with known boundaries, but a blurred image:

> It is an early morning in spring. My sister and I are in my grandfather's garden, taking turns on a hammock, swung between two trees. We are there before breakfast. The perfume of the wallflowers in the garden is only just rising. The grownups are still in bed.

As I recall this scene, I hold both certainty and uncertainty together. For an instant, I am quite certain that scene happened, and happened more than once. But within the instant, there is also what I can only call a shimmer of uncertainty. The scene suddenly appears impossible. As I sit there recalling it, there is only me as the witness. Later, on the phone, I check with my sister; she agrees with me that the scene happened, and happened more than once. But in the hour or day or week after the phone call, when I try to revisit the scene, it retains the shimmer and there are uncertainties. How did it happen, that she and I ran into the garden in those early mornings? there is no name to the day (was it Wednesday or Thursday?) and no length to the hour (was it seven or eight in the morning?) The picture, at first very sharp, seems to tremble. It is a reflection seen on the surface of a pond, not in the sheer surface of the mirror. A breeze ruffles the water's skin and the outlines of the picture become blurred.

Life-history work is the work of turning word pictures into tales. For my hammock picture to become a tale, there would need to be others, so that the one picture follows another in a sequence, and a tale is told. The telling may be a private soliloquy: we reminisce alone. But once it is spoken aloud to a listener, the speaker is no longer the sole creator. When Gwen told me the story of the box and the marriage papers, I was part of the making of the story. She spoke economically, with little in the way of descriptive language, setting the stage with the minimum of scenery; in order for me to create my own picture of the scenes she described, I had to give my full attention and ask her questions that would bring them to life while she composed the drama in which they were played out.

As we sat in her sitting room on a rainy February Monday, both of us were creating our own images of the twelve-year-old girl reaching for a box on a shelf

in the kitchen. For an instant, as I listened and Gwen talked, the girl hovered between us. Once she began telling me the story of her father, her sister, herself, and the family secret hidden on the papers in the box on the shelf in the kitchen,my imagination was working as well as hers. The two of us were engaged in a joint project. In Carolyn Steedman's words, I, as the "story-taker" was the "necessary collaborator" in the project of story-making:

> The one who listens, shapes the narrative by assuming that there is something to be told; who takes the story, not as appropriate, but as part of a deal, so that the outcome—an entity, a story—might be placed there, in the space between listener and teller. (Steedman 1992:171)

The listener, in this view, is partisan and participant. She, with the interviewee, is far more than simply a passive receptacle for any story that happens to come her way. She is co-author; her every signal, verbal or non-verbal, contributes to the story's making.

Carolyn Steedman's earlier book about her own mother, subtitled "a story of two lives", is not about oral history research, but about the telling and interpreting of stories (Steedman 1986). It is a fierce and painful book that has, no doubt, inspired many other people, as well as me; a scholarly work, the author carrying her scholarship through the three parts of the book as though it was a torch. Among the gifts that it offers is the possibility that we too, her readers, might be able to make some use of the disconnected stories of our own lives, if only we are prepared to allow ourselves to dwell on them. Another, is her central theme—the difficulty of *classifying* a life, and the recognition that any story of a life is a partial and ephemeral one:

> Accounts of working-class life are told by tension and ambiguity, out on the borderlands. The story—my mother's story, a hundred thousand others–cannot be absorbed into the central one: it is both its disruption and its essential counterpoint: this is a drama of *class*.
>
> But visions change, once any story is told; ways of seeing are altered. The point of a story is to present itself momentarily as complete, so that it can be said: it does for now, it will do; it is an account that will last a while. Its point is briefly to make an audience connive in the telling, so that they might say: yes, that's how it was; or, that's how it could have been. (Steedman 1986:22)

Gwen's story began as a story about her mother Lily: about her shame at a child conceived out of wedlock. The tale as she told it to me, however, was one in which Gwen herself—or rather herselves—had a principal role. Gwen the storyteller is an old woman—as old as her mother would have been at the climax of the tale. An old woman as she tells it, the two other selves she conjures up of her own life are a young girl and a woman in her forties. Lily, her mother, is at

first off stage: an absence. The people in the scene are a father and two daughters, looking through papers on a table: papers in which the mother is present only symbolically. Later, Gwen is alone with the same papers, again registering the mother's symbolic presence. It is when the mother is by now the same age as Gwen herselfis now—an old woman in her seventies—that she becomes present in the story. To the extent that I "shaped" her narrative at all, my part in the making of this tale was to recognize that here there was something to be told—not so much something about Gwen herself (although, as I have said, her part in the drama still intrigues me) but about her mother. I was there to listen as Gwen made her own commentary on the tale. In the space between us the tale took its place, with the invisible mother at its heart.

This is a story told from inside Gwen's own experience; for her, the protagonist must be herself. For me, the search is for Lily, the elusive other woman; together, we glimpsed something of her, and speculated. The pictures that the story reveals of Lily, like those of the many other women whose lives have been composed for and with me, shimmer in waters of *imagined memory,* a combination of imagining and remembering. As we have seen, many more of these memories have been what Joan (in Chapter 3) called "the memory of a memory", using the recollection of the mother's tales of herself or of her own mother, composed and conditioned, as Gwen's was, by the listener who was present at the telling. The listener makes up her own pictures to fill in gaps left by these tales. Sometimes the gaps were left by the teller; sometimes they are gaps in the listener's capacity to hear the tale. There is something else here, too: for the story Gwen told me had also been told before, to others, by her sister, her mother and herself—each time with an audience "conniving" to its telling and to its production in the form it was given to me. (In Chapter 7 we will return to the literacy event at its heart: to the keeping and finding of certificates.)

Imagining the lives of women just over the horizon of living memory is like trying to reach the plum that is just out of reach. The other fruit is nearer; we have autobiography and living history to give it to us. But just above those that we can pick, within reach, hangs the ripe golden oval of a life whose taste can only be guessed at. Audrey spoke of her mother as having had a "very hard life". To this day Audrey is still asking a question to which she has no way of finding an answer. Why, when her sister went to work in an office, did Doris (her mother) get "put" into domestic service? The question clearly holds a fascination for her. There is a sense of a wrong done, and injustice suffered. There is also the sense of an imagination stopped in its tracks.

For me, there was another fascination, too. There sat Doris, the young mother, at the kitchen table. She is licking a pencil. Her mind is on a list to be written. Suddenly, when Audrey said "I suppose I can see her at our kitchen table, licking her pencil", I saw her too; and weeks later, when I re-read the transcript of our conversation later, I too felt my imagination halted, uncertain. I could taste the metallic stub of the pencil on my tongue, and hold its wood in my fingers: but how long would the pencil be? I felt the surface of the table: but was it oil cloth,

newspaper, fabric or wood that I felt? I wanted to hear the children's voices beside her, feel the ache at the base of her skull, sense the fold of her skirt on my hips and the shape of her shoes on my feet. I wanted to know the angle of light through the window, the colour of the sky outside; the smells in the room of coal, damp, soapor cooking. I wanted to imagine being Doris, to be inside her, as her mind reached out to remember what else must go down on this list, different from the one she had written the day before or the one she would write the day after as she calculated the price and the amount and the time.

On the scrap of paper are the words that she has written: "half a pound of marge". Something must be written next. The pot is boiling; the child is becoming impatient; a decision must be made. She picks up her pencil and writes: "A pound of sugar".

And so Audrey and I both worked to move our imaginations beyond this sudden gift from her memory to create a fragment of Doris's guessed-at life which now shimmered in the space between us. This moving and telling, listening and imagining is what goes on every time a story is told: as when a mother tells her daughter the story of her own mother.

The literate accomplice

Doris's shopping list is an unromantic piece of literacy history. It is a spare piece of literature, deliberately disposable. Yet in the action of writing it, the mother whose mind is disorganized with the work around her claims a moment of order. Literacy at this moment is represented by the scrap of paper on the table and the pencil in the hand. The writing to come is both an instruction to her child and a request to the shopkeeper. Here sits Doris, the same person who, at the age of fourteen, left her own home to work as a servant in another's: the person who, at another time, has her feet up, reading of a fictional world in which poor women marry rich men and there is no more washing to be done.

What year was it that she wrote this list? Might it have been 1926, the year of the General Strike? or 1928, the year that all women over the age of 21 finally got the right to vote for those who would govern them? Doris is not here to answer, and she has left us no written account of her life to help us. We are dependent on our imaginations as she writes: "Half pound of marge; a pound of sugar".

There is more romance in a first message between boy and girl, than in the later writing that girl has to do once she has become his wife. If one of the couple was illiterate, such a message needed a third person, an intermediary. Kathleen and her future husband met at a horse fair in Ireland, in 1925, when she was sixteen. He could read and write; she could not. The meeting had to be secret because of the prohibitions around illicit courtships in the Irish travelling community. This is how her daughter Mary Anne told me the story:

Do you know how they met?

Yes. In a fair, in a cafe. She had to pretend that she didn't notice him. He'd

> got a note to her—she got someone else to read it—to meet him later on… At that time you couldn't approach anybody. It wasn't done. Andeven now, with a lot of us, it isn't done. It's got to be done in a roundabout sort of a way. And if you do talk to someone, there's got to be someone there with you. So she decided to go to meet him and that was it. He was a very handsome looking man. So was she.
>
> *She had the note, that someone else had to read for her.*
>
> But that was another young girl like herself, who wouldn't squeal on her, see what I mean? Some of them could read and write, but a lot of them couldn't… There was very careful chaperones in those days. (Interview, September 1996).

Kathleen married her sweetheart and bore him fifteen children. Five of these children died in infancy. Her husband died in 1949, when Kathleen was forty. All of that was in the future, that day at the horse fair; and who can know how things would have turned out for Kathleen had it not been for the "other young girl like herself to read her the invitation to meet.

Mary Ann, Liz and I are sitting in her home on a travellers' site in Bermondsey, South London. It is September 1996. We are drinking tea in a tiny kitchen/sitting room. There are paperback books on the shelf beside the cooker. Mary Ann recalls her mother Kathleen with affection, as a woman with contradictory feelings about the literacy of her children: "She'd say to me, 'Them books is putting ideas into your head! With the books you'll go blind!' And yet the only thing she ever wanted to do was to write a book about her life".

Living in her small trailer in a crowded inner city site with the voices of neighbours and children just outside the door, Mary Ann, a mother and grandmother herself, withdraws into the paperback fiction she buys from boot sales as a retreat: "When I want to forget about all the noise out here, I'd get straight into a book".

The three of us sit there sipping tea. The years of Kathleen's life, the pregnancies and the bereavements hang heavy in our imagination. But like the flicker of a candle far away in the dark there is that afternoon, before all that, when a "handsome" young man sends a note to the girl of his fancy and she and her friend huddle together to read what it says.

In a second story of literacy and young love, it is again the boy who is literate and the girl who is not. Once again, there is another girl who steps in as the literate accomplice. This time, the scene is not in rural Ireland, but in London's East End.

Kate started life in 1898, the child of a refugee single parent. When her mother made the decision to flee the pogroms in Vilna (then under Russian domination) she left behind a husband who, as a conscript in the Russian army, was unable to leave with her. Unable to speak a word of English, she arrived in London with

two young children, pregnant with Kate, her third, to join the 120,000 other Russian and Polish Jews who, between 1870 and 1914 made the long journey to Britain in order to escape waves of savage anti-Semitic persecution (Frow 1996). The fatherwho was to have followed them never did: and nothing more was ever heard of him. Possibly the young pregnant mother with her small children stayed in the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter set up by the Jewish Board of Guardians which, between 1895 and 1914, provided two weeks' board and lodging to nearly all the newly-arrived refugees. In any case, Kate's mother made a living sewing, along with many of her neighbours, and the girls—particularly Kate, the youngest— were often kept at home from school to help make ends meet.

Abraham, later to become Kate's husband, was born in 1902, also of Jewish refugees. After his father died, he and his three brothers were sent to school in the Jewish orphanage, and unlike Kate, he became literate. The two of them met in one of the many workshops started by Jewish clothing manufacturers in Whitechapel, where he worked as tailor, she as seamstress. During their courtship Abraham wrote not one but several letters to Kate. It was not until after they married that Abraham discovered who had written the replies. It was not Kate, but her sister who wrote Kate's love letters. This is how their daughter Joyce told it to me:

> I'll tell you another story. He didn't know that my mother was illiterate; because her sister used to write her love letters for her!
>
> *So they met, but in such a way that they'd exchange letters? So they weren't seeing each other every day? or he was separated from her?*
>
> I don't really know. He worked in the tailoring, so they worked in the same sweatshop. That's where they met. Now, whether he moved on, or whether there was a forced separation, I don't know. But there was letter writing. My father would have been a very romantic young man. He's a romantic old man! but he would have been a romantic young man—and possibly would have written even if he was working with her. He would have written to her: to my mother. And possibly, my mother would have felt obliged to return in the same way. So whether they were actually separated? It could have been.
>
> *So she got help from her sister?*
>
> Who wrote her letters. Not just help: her sister wrote her letters.
>
> *How do you know?*
>
> My father told me.

And how did he know?

> He found out: when they were married, you see. I suppose she couldn't really hide the fact from him altogether. Also, being sisters, they lived in the samehousehold: both were married with children—and there was great rivalry between those two. I've no doubt in one of the quarrels it came out. So he knew. He got to know, after they were married. He said it was a bit of a shock. (Interview, April 1996)

Kate and Abraham had three children. Joyce, the oldest, was born in 1926. The window of her sitting room where she and I were sitting (70 years later) looked out on a garden. The image of the young woman we both tried to imagine was overtaken by other images, of the same woman as her mother, bringing up her children with a fierce determination that none of them should have to grow up as she had done:

> No child of hers would ever have to scrub a front doorstep, as she had had to do. No child of hers would ever have to go into a sweatshop, as she had had to do. Her children were not going to be subjected to this way of life.

Kate never became literate: and, as far as Joyce could tell, she had never had a longing for literacy. We have no way of knowing how she felt about her sister writing her "love letters" for her, or whether she might have wished for the privacy of writing her own words for herself. One thing Joyce did know: Kate had certainly wanted the first literacy ambition of all: "She learned how to sign her name—very shakily. You know, like, you sometimes see very old people slowly and shakily write their name? That's how she'd write it. I watched her do it". But it was her sister who wrote her love letters.

These two stories were told me by literate daughters of illiterate mothers. Mary Ann is in her fifties; Joyce, in her seventies. Neither, as children, had found their mothers' illiteracy either shocking or strange: it was part of the life they lived. Other people, not the mother herself, could be relied on to deal with reading and writing when it was necessary. Both women, as children, learned to read and write, and grew up to enjoy literacy. For them, the stories of their mothers' courtship were known to include others who could act as the writers and readers of letters between sweethearts—the friend who could be relied on "not to squeal" and the girl who was able and willing to write "love letters" for her sister.

A literacy spectrum

In July 1996, six women sat with me in a room in Goldsmiths' College, London (where I then worked) and talked about their mothers. Rita, first, talked about her mother Hetty, born in 1898. Sylvia told us about her mother Sarah, born in 1885.

Doris, next, spoke about Laura Elizabeth, born in 1896. Jean, then, talked about Peggy, born in 1886. Iris took her turn to tell of Grace, born in 1904. And finally, Dorothy told of her mother Violet, born in 1879. The women talking are activein their own education, for they are all members of a branch of the University of the Third Age, the voluntary organization set up in the 1980s to enable older people to design and run education courses to their own agenda. Our meeting had been arranged as a result of a discussion we had had eighteen months earlier, which I will briefly recap here.

On 8 March 1995, International Women's Day, I had been invited to give a talk to the Goldsmiths' College U3A branch about women and literacy. The talk I gave was about four themes: adult literacy education in the UK in the previous 25 years; the picture of adult literacy and illiteracy internationally, as revealed by statistics; the focus this had given to women, schooling and work; and, lastly, some examples of women learners growing into their possibilities as writers and readers. I spoke of how the campaigns by feminists worldwide had generated attention on the disparity between male and female illiteracy; and how it had only been in very recent years that this specific focus had been given published form (with writings from conferences and research work by Krystynia Chlebowska (1990), Fie van Dijk (1990), Jenny Horsman (1990), Lalita Ramdas (1990), Lalage Bown (1991), and Nelly Stromquist (1992)—all appearing within a couple of years). Unequal opportunities for schooling remained a major barrier to girls and women in countries of the South to achieving literacy. Meanwhile (I had continued) in the UK and other industrialized countries, while education at primary level may be longer established, the experience of adult literacy education suggested that many women remained limited in their confidence as readers and writers. The UK adult literacy campaign launched in the 1970s, I said, had been dominated at first by an idea about male illiteracy; in the 1980s, the push by many women in adult education for better crèche provision had enabled other women to take part in the classes that existed; and while women in the UK were (statistically) said to be no worse off than men in terms of their opportunities to develop and use their literacy, it remained a fact that many women were excluded from educational opportunities by reason of family and social pressures.

That is how I talked. The discussion that followed, that day in March, was one of the inspirations for this book. Some 30 women were there: all aged sixty and over. The questions at first were about the adult literacy work in this country. But right away I noticed they were not the usual questions from a "lay audience". Only one person asked the routine "How do they manage?" question, from an experience in which illiteracy was strange. Everyone else there was clearly familiar with the possibility of illiteracy. And within minutes, first one woman, then another, began to talk about their mothers. Not all recalled mothers who were illiterate. But many recalled mothers who had had little opportunity for education, and little time for reading and writing; and two spoke about their own mothers who had never learned to read or write.

Speaker	Mother	Mother's d.o.b.
Rita	Hetty	1898
Sylvia	Sarah	1885
Doris	Laura Elizabeth	1896
Jean	Peggy	1886
Iris	Grace	1904
Dorothy	Violet	1879

Figure 5.1 Mothers recalled: July 1996

A year later, the Nuffield Foundation approved a grant for me to carry out a study I called: "Literacy histories and futures: the role of mothers". The work of this book formally began in the autumn of 1996. But in truth it began that March day in 1995. For it was the first time in all the years I had worked in adult literacy that I had been in the company of literate people who took the experience of parents' illiteracy as ordinary.

So when a group of the same women agreed to meet me again in July 1996 I knew there would be much for me to learn. During the two hours we spent together, it seemed as though I and the six of them were joined by six other women: born in another time, each different, all related to those speaking for them. Figure 5.1 provides a "map" of the speakers and the names and dates of birth of the mothers about whom they spoke.

Rita was the first to speak:

> My own mother was born in 1898.
>
> *Would you tell us a bit about her? What's her name?*
>
> Hetty. She wasn't born in this country. She was born in Russia. Or Poland: she wasn't really quite sure, because it kept changing. I mean, you know… the borders kept changing. It actually was Russia, part of Russia.
>
> I don't know too much about her, really, apart from the fact that, when I was aware of her, she was literate. She could read, she could write: she read newspapers, she wrote letters. But I don't know actually where she learned to do all that. She probably came over here when she was twelve. But she had enough English to be able to help other people who'd come over here with no English—to help them with their shopping. She taught them the money over here. And she would take them out the East End of London and orientate them.
>
> But when you're, what, five or six, and your mother can read and write, you don't [know] all the questions I would like to ask, it's too late to ask her now, where she learned all those things.

Was she one of many children?

I don't really know. Probably five or six, I think. Some who may have been born in this country. And then, of course, with the interruption of the war, when I was nine years old, I went to Norfolk, and it was expected that I got letters from my parents, and it was my mother who would do all the writing.

What year were you born, Rita?

1930. My brothers and sisters were born in the twenties. All sorts of questions I would like to ask her, but it's like a lot of things: you only think of them afterwards, don't you?

Say that bit again, about the war and her writing?

Well, she would write us letters, when we were away: we would write to her. There was an expectation on our part that she was able to do all these things. But I don't think she read for pleasure, because I think bringing up three children in the thirties, most of her time was spent in domestic chores. She used to go to the theatre; she used to love going to the theatre. There wasn't a great deal of money around. But I don't remember actually seeing her read a book not for pleasure. You read the newspaper for information. You listened to the wireless. She listened to the wireless.

She wrote you letters. When you were evacuated.

Oh yes. She used to say, "My handwriting is bad". But it wasn't bad at all, it was perfectly legible. She said that when she was in her late eighties, "My handwriting's bad", but it hadn't changed from when she was young. "That's my arthritis", she would say; but her handwriting was perfectly all right, and it was very legible.

Sarah, Sylvia's mother, was also an emigrant from eastern Europe. At the age of nine (in 1894), Sarah was sewing clothes for her many stepsisters and brothers; at twelve, her mother died; at fourteen, she travelled with her family to the East End of London and "went straight into the rag trade". The language Sarah grew up with and with which she brought up her own children was Yiddish. All her five children learned to read and write in English; neither Sarah nor her husband were literate in any language.

She was born in 1885. Her father had been married three times; but the first two wives had died. And so her mother had a very large family. Her

own mother died when she was twelve. They were living in Poland, and they were persecuted by the military. So they didn't go to school…

She couldn't read or write. She never learned to read or write. But she spoke quite good English. Although at home, because my father spoke verypoor English, they spoke Yiddish all the time. So we didn't hear English, really, until we went to school.

She was very keen for us to learn. She was very encouraging. She wouldn't allow any of us to go into the sweat shops, which were the usual place for school leavers to go into. She was very adamant that we shouldn't do that.

She was wanting more for you?

Yes. Very much.

Did anybody take a newspaper in your house?

I was the youngest of five. And my two brothers and one sister always brought in newspapers. They started going to the library at a very early age. Course, we didn't have any books at home at all. My mother and father couldn't read or write. And I suppose I followed the tradition of going to the library.

Doris's mother was called Laura Elizabeth. Born in 1896, Doris told us, "she had meticulous handwriting…very clear, and joined up; spelling, perfect". But Laura disliked books, and disliked her children reading them.

She was born in 1896; and she had meticulous handwriting. They certainly taught them how to write. Very clear, and joined up; spelling, perfect. But she never read anything. She despised it; my dad was a bit bookish, and unionist, and socialist; and I got a place at a grammar school. And if we sat down at a crossword, she thought, "Oh you *two*! wearing your heads out, doing crosswords". She could speak well, and grammatically. She could write beautifully; and she could read. But she never read a book… She wasn't interested in books; yet she was highly articulate.

I think you said, she wasn't only not interested, she wasn't very pleased that you—

She was hostile, almost. My father used to go to auction to bring home sets of Shakespeare. He wrote off to the *Daily Herald for* a complete set of Dickens. I said, "Whatever you do, mum, don't throw away Dad's books, they're quite valuable". She had no time for them.

What did she say about it, do you remember? about book reading?

Well, she thought girls reading—she'd say, "Come and dry up!" And I'd say, "Why can't he dry up?" My brother. And she'd say, "Always got your nose stuck in a book".

Interjection by Rita: *Brothers never dried up.*

And she used to think I was awful! I remember when I was seven. I said, "Come along", I said (to my mother), "We're going to the public library to join". Because you couldn't join before you were eight. There was no children's department. And I took her along—she was a bit fed up about it, really. It would be more books, wouldn't it?

Do you think she thought they were messy? *or got in the way of the—*

No, it was—it withdrew you. If you were reading a book, you weren't listening to her claptrap; because, like me, she could go on for ever. Talking. And it was nothing.

"Brothers never dry up": Doris had struck a chord:

Sylvia: My brothers were never asked to do anything in the house. They used to read excessively. But if my sisters were reading, she'd say there was something for them to do. She encouraged all of us; but the daughters would be expected to do the household chores.

Jean: It was a threat, in some way. Reading books. I don't know —

Rita: I don't think that was a literacy thing. I think that was the social climate of the time. Boys didn't help. They just ate the food you prepared. And they walked away from the table.

Iris: Because they were going to mature and have families and go out to look after the families, and be the wage earners. So really your mother asking you to make the beds or wash up, was: "Well, you've got to learn to do it someday, my girls, so you might as well start now". It was almost like domestic science, perpetually every day. In the home.

For Doris, because reading was something she enjoyed doing, the double standard felt a double irritant.

Doris, what made you want to read?

Oh, I *always* wanted to read. I don't know.

Do you think it was something about losing yourself, too? The very thing that your mother didn't want you to do?

> She used to read magazines. *Peg's Paper* and *Home Notes:* all those things.

Rita's mother, Hetty, could both read and write—"she read newspapers" (for information), she wrote letters (with an "expectation" from her children that she would do so). Sylvia's mother, Sarah, who never learned to read or write, was "encouraging" to her children's learning. Doris's mother (with the "meticulous" handwriting and "perfect" spelling) never read anything and was "hostile" to her daughters' reading.

Jean knew that her mother, Peggy, read romantic fiction (Ethel M.Dell and Warwick Deeping, as examples) but never witnessed her doing so: ("I can't recall her actually sitting reading"). Like Sarah and Hetty, Peggy was recalled as someone who had had a hard life, and always wanted her children to have a better one. Dorothy's mother, Violet (born in 1879) had a happy childhood in Kent as the adoptive child of parents who kept a newsagent shop, and later went into service. Dorothy remembered her with affection. Violet had four children (three sons and Dorothy); and in later life wrote regular letters to her daughters-in-law (expecting replies by return of post: "She got ever so wild if she didn't get letters back!" Dorothy recalled).

Iris spoke of her mother Grace, as an "avid reader". The expression was uttered (and repeated) with certainty:

> She was, yes, she was literate. In fact, at home, I wish I'd brought it today — I've got a book, where she won a prize, for English, English essays: from her junior school. She was an avid reader. She loved reading… Novels, magazines, anything. *She was an avid reader*. She used to read a lot. Yes. Irrespective of what the paper or the content… She lost herself. Monday was wash day. She'd do all the washing. We came home from school and had cold beef and mashed potatoes. But in the afternoon, she'd sit down, make herself a cup of tea—it wasn't a case of, like Doris' mother, "Oh, you've got your nose in a book": it was a case of "Mother? oh, she's got her nose in a book again". It was the mother, yes! (my emphasis)

The "Great Divide" view of literacy (touched on in Chapter 2) would place these women, and their mothers, in one of two camps: either they could read and write, or they could not. Instead, as this discussion reminds us, reality is something much more subtle and interesting. The women portrayed represented a spectrum of literacy lives. Between us, we saw not only differences in what women did with their reading and writing, but also in what attitudes they had to that of their sons and daughters (a theme to which we return in the next chapter).

Like Kate (Joyce's mother), Sarah did not speak English as a first language. In order to be literate in English she first needed to be fluent in English. Denied literacy in her first language, literacy in her second could only come hard. Today she would be a candidate for an ESOL class (English for Speakers of Other

Languages). Both women were illiterate mothers of literate daughters. Other mothers, with English as a first language, were also illiterate in English, and also raised literate children. In the end, research is about discovering the questions asmuch as revealing answers. And this conversation with the group of six women in South London helped me realize I needed a new one. Instead of asking: what is the meaning of literacy? Or how do illiterate mothers successfully raise literate children? I now wanted to ask: What is illiteracy, anyway? Does it exist?

Illiteracy: silhouettes and questions

The directive I wrote to correspondents for the Mass Observation Archive (reproduced in full in the Appendix) had begun with a couple of provocative statements. Re-reading it now, I am momentarily alarmed at the exaggerated claim it contained: "A generation of women in the early years of this century had had little if any schooling as children. As adults, many therefore had little or no literacy in English".

This is a sweeping generalization indeed; and on reflection, it is surprising there was not a stronger reaction to it from the correspondents who read it. "A generation" is a lot of people; and me stickler for evidence in me recoils at such an unsubstantiated assertion: a thing which, as Brigid Ballard and John Clanchy observed, is one of the punishable crimes of academic writing (Ballard & Clanchy 1988). However, my purpose in writing it at the time—one which I still stand by—was to set up a framework within which it would be possible to write freely and without inhibition about mothers or grandmothers known to have been illiterate.

I had done this because it seems to me there is a need to see beyond the simplistic stereotypes of illiteracy—not least because, in a literate society, the experience of being illiterate can often indeed be associated with shame and embarrassment. Some years ago, Mary Wolfe and I carried out a search for positive images of illiterates as people who were powerful and wise. We chose to look at fictional representations within our own culture—broadly understood to be British/American—in the media of film and novels. We thought, and still think, that the seemingly separate categories of fictional or documentary representations of illiteracy in fact inform each other and have a mutual influence on the way in which the experience of being illiterate is depicted.

What we found was depressing. There seemed to be three ways in which the illiterate men or women were portrayed, as:

- dumb animal;
- prisoner (usually criminalized); and/or as
- outsider. (Mace & Wolfe 1995)

Put in other terms, illiteracy has become a condition which, in Jennifer Horsman's words, has become couched in the "discourse of 'the other'; it is

considered to create 'foreignness'…[which] helps to create an image of an 'outsider', unable to function in this society" (Horsman 1990:138).

From the experience as an adult literacy worker in the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear how much this discourse was evident in media coverage. To judge from Rosie Wickert's example from an Australian newspaper report, the language of melodrama is still alive and well in the 1990s; the woman described:

> was *crippled* by illiteracy, *reduced to silent isolation* by her sense of shame and humiliation… Yvonne Simmons has escaped the *prison of illiteracy* but there are a staggering 1.1 million adults still tr*apped inside its invisible walls.* (Wickert 1993:31) (my emphasis)

Such images, which have for years reinforced ideas of failure and inadequacy on the part of the "illiterate", also dominated the thinking of those who chose to enrol as adult literacy learners. (More usually, this was known as "coming forward to seek help" with their reading and writing.) In initial interviews, the common phrases would come out: "I'm a bit backward, I know"; "I've always been a bit thick when it came to spelling"; "I'm probably too slow for this class"; "I've always felt bad about it". In writing published by adult literacy programmes, the sense of regret and retreat would recur whenever the writer chose to write about their literacy:

> I am a very ordinary person, and I must dress ordinary. I cannot wear a coat that has fur on it. I would feel like everyone is looking at me. I used to say that it is people who can read and write should wear those things. For if you dress up and go out in the street and someone asks you to read something for them and you can't, then that is where I would feel funny. (Minto 1979)

"I have reading and writing difficulties" is the title of a paper given to an international conference on literacy, in Sweden. Its author, Eva Karlstrom, wrote: "I left school without the ability to read and write properly… For eight long years nobody talked to me about my difficulties. The only thing I understood was that I was unintelligent, nothing but stupid" (Ericsson 1991: 131).

While their teachers avoid the term "illiterate", adult students of literacy all too often claim the word for themselves, marked by a sense of exclusion from a majority population perceived to be not only more literate, but more clever than they are. In an adult literacy programme in Georgia, for example, a woman called Janis is reported as insisting on using the word illiterate for herself, despite the "well-intentioned objections" of her tutor. Her fear as a self-defined "illiterate" was that her daughter would become like her:

> And that hurt me so bad when her teacher talks to me about her. Sometimes I want to cry but I say to myself I can't cry and let the teacher see me act like this… My heart drops in sorrow because I know that I am not smart. (Nurss & Ketchum 1995:38–39)

It was, then, from that context—a *discourse context,* I suppose, rather than a statistically valid context—that I wrote my invitation to Mass Observation writers. For a very few, indeed, this was too much to ask. Three in particular reacted against my generalizations; two, with polite bewilderment at my ignorance; a third, with disgust and outrage:

> The response to this question has been most interesting and it has aroused strong feelings in the people I have spoken to about it. The general feeling is that the setter of this question has her facts wrong and must be thinking of the previous century! …My mother is sure that the parents of all the children she went to school with could read and write. (R1025)

> I have read this over and over. I really don't want to be rude but I question this statement whole-heartedly. (B1120)

> I disagree completely with the preamble, and think that JANE MACE is writing absolute nonsense… I made it my business to consult those of my friends, classmates (WEA) and relations of the appropriate age, and they all agreed…that, as today, there may well have been the odd "thick" child who was illiterate, but not their foremother, certainly not a generation… I am certain that JANE MACE is most comprehensively misguided, and I beg of her to reconsider her current headlong descent into the blindest of alleys. (F2693)

Fortunately, the last writer proved wrong. This was no blind alley. My invitation to imagine and remember the possibility of mothers who either did not or could not read or write released many other kinds of reflection. Some simply did not know, for sure, whether the woman they were considering was or was not literate. A woman born in 1889, for example, the mother of six children whom she brought up in a two-bedroom terraced house in Liverpool ("without electricity, no bathroom, no hot water on tap, no indoor lavatory") is introduced with these words:

> I do not think my mother had time to read or write anything.

The writer went on:

> My lasting impression of my mother who died when I was fifteen years old was of a kindly, meek, quiet lady, who would not say boo to a goose but

Name	d.o.b.	Details	M/O ref
Anne	1870	One of 9 children, brought up in "tiny mid-Wales village"; no schooling; Welsh first language	P2759
"Kathleen"	1864	Family of itinerant charcoal burners; never went to school	R1418
"Margaret"	1870s	Did not go to school but, at age of 12, was taught the 3 Rs by the "lady of the house" where she worked in domestic service	L318
"Rachel"	1868	Refugee from Russia; spoke no English, could sign name	K1380

Figure 5.2 "Silhouettes" from Mass Observation

> lived in fear of offending my father… As she died at an early age… she must have been worn out looking after her family. I think she loved all of us but I am also sure that she was not very bright or clever enough to be more than just a good mother. Being the nice inoffensive person she was, she would even forgive me for daring to suggest that she might have been illiterate. (T2459)

This is gentle writing, with no sense of horror at the possibility of a mother's illiteracy. As for his own literacy education, the writer refers to the encouragement of his older sisters, who introduced him to the public library. There is no sense of the mother being regarded then or later as strange or "foreign" for possibly being illiterate.

Others wrote about women who were known to be illiterate; and while they did not all provide what Mary Wolfe and I had been looking for (namely, portraits of people who were powerful and wise) none resorted to the narrow limits of dumb animal, prisoner or outsider. In the next few pages are portrayed four such women. More silhouettes than full portraits, three describe women without any literacy at all; one is of a woman who gained basic literacy without benefit of schooling. All were born in the 1860s and 1870s. Figure 5.2 provides an introduction to them.

Recent research has shown that people who do not happen to be good at reading and writing may often have well-developed routines for dealing with literacy. This suggests that the shame of illiteracy is even today not necessarily felt by all illiterates in a literate society. Arlene Fingeret's study in America (Fingeret 1983) and David Barton and Sarah Padmore's research in England (Barton & Padmore 1991) both showed that networks of friends, neighbours and relatives exist to provide a give-and-take support when it comes to reading or writing letters or other documents. From a year's research with 43 adults who were unable to read or write at basic levels in a northeastern American urban

setting, Fingeret argued that only a minority of these could be called "dependent". What she found, instead, was a careful choice of people on whom they might call when literacy tasks had to be undertaken, for whom, in return, it was assumed they

Box 5.1 Anne My mother-in-law's mother, Anne, was born in a tiny mid-Wales village in 1870 and lived in good health up to her death 82 years later in 1952 in a south Wales valley town. She was brought up in the small and remote village of Bont, "emigrating" South, as so many of the people of Wales did during the late 19th and early 20th century, when she was in her early twenties. Anne was one of nine children, with her twin brother the second oldest. Extraordinarily there were two other sets of twins among her brothers and sisters. Not untypically the family were almost entirely Welsh speaking and although she was able to speak English it was not her first language and it was clear that she was not comfortable using the language. It is remembered that she had a very heavy accent when she spoke English and could be difficult to understand. The family was poor. By her early teens her father had died and her mother relied on parish relief to survive. Anne did not attend school but did learn to read to some level in Welsh. There is no memory of her being able to read in English or ever writing in either language. It is thought that her brothers did go to school and gained a level of literacy in both languages. In the early years of the century Anne had three boys and two girls, two of whom (one boy and one girl) died in infancy. The remaining children attended school, indeed the oldest child, a boy, completed school and went on to university where he gained a degree. My mother-in-law initially attended school until she was 14 years old in 1920, then she went into service. However, her older brother insisted that she returned to school to complete her education. Anne was quite involved in the local community and was an active member of the early Labour Party in south Wales. The fact that she did not write in English or Welsh or read English at that time appears to have presented no particular social difficulties in pre-war Welsh local communities. Quite clearly, however, Anne recognized the importance of her children being able to use English as Welsh society was increasingly transformed and anglicized. Talking to my mother-in-law it is clear that Anne was a strong, and what we would now call assertive, woman. She exhibited no embarrassment about her own lack of formal education, or indeed considered she had been denied any alternative life because of it. She appeared, rather, to be determined that her children took the advantages of education that became gradually available in the early part of the century.

Box 5.2 "Kathleen" My grandmother, born 1864, never went to school and had no formal education at all. Grandfather, born 1861, was able to read and write. His education, though, was not entirely free. For some years after the implementation of the 1870 Education Act, parents were expected to pay a school fee of up to sixpence per week according to the age of the pupil, proceeds of which went towards paying the Master's salary. These same parents, from a deprived working-class background in an era of universal poverty, were also expected to pay for their children's books. By September 1891 school fees had been reduced to a flat rate of one penny and all books and other materials free of charge. Even so, as the Master's log for 1874 at our elementary school makes clear: "Several pupils are very irregular in the payment of their fees, although it is only a penny. It is as much trouble to get a penny as it was sixpence…" Grandmother must have been very self-conscious about her inability to read. I can remember as a child going to the house and seeing a newspaper there and books on a shelf and sometimes she would put on tiny glasses and pick up the paper or open one of the books. I never knew at the time that she could not make anything of what she held. It was likely that grandfather would read aloud to her when they were alone. I used to love going to grandma's house and seeing all the shining brass on the mantel piece, the copper kettle, the cast-iron ornaments on the hearth with its gleaming black-leaded grate, the polished floor and bright rugs, the beautiful vases and pictures, and I would be in awe of the orderliness so lacking in my own home. It was not until after she died I knew of her disadvantage. All I know of her earlier years is that she had one sister and a brother, and because of their life style I have no doubt that they too grew up without any schooling. And it was later still I learnt she belonged to a family of itinerant charcoal burners and were never settled long in one place. English was her first language, of course, but I think she had at least one more, because of her gipsy roots.

would return other kinds of support or services. Such a woman was Diane, of whom her friend said:

> She listens and helps you figure out your problems. No matter how hard it gets, you know you can come here and have a friend, get some ideas, some help, so you can face it…sometimes I read the mail for her, or her daughter brings the paper and we sit and read it together, talk about what's going on. We don't none of us have much, but we help each other, what we can. (Fingeret 1983:139)

Box 5.3 "Margaret" My mother was born in 1894, had six sisters and one brother, and another brother who died in infancy. Her father was a farm labourer but early in his life served for 12 years in the army; her mother ("Margaret") was in domestic service before her marriage and although she had a large family she continued to work in the domestic field when and as long as she was able. My grandfather could neither read nor write other than sign his name, but I thought always fairly good at arithmetic as he could always keep track and count his money. ["Margaret"] did not go to school and at the age of 12 was put into service in a large farm house. There were several servants and the lady of the house was a believer that they should all be able to read and write and as she was an educated person taught them the three Rs, so my grandmother was able to read to my grandfather. Many years ago there was a daily newspaper named the *Daily Graphic*. It had more photographs of daily events than any other paper by far. They purchased this paper daily price 1 ½d (pre-decimal). Grandfather looked and studied all the pictures then grandmother would read out the captions to him and I thought that a very good arrangement. They never owned a radio although they were readily available, TV was not on the go at the time, they lived in a very old cottage without running water or electricity and the toilet was at the end of a large garden some 200 yards from the house.

Box 5.4 "Rachel" My maternal grandmother was born in Russia in approx. 1868, arriving in England as a pogrom refugee in 1898. She came from a small country village where she received the most basic of education. Her principal ability was to do simple adding and subtraction, and almost daily reading of the Bible. She spoke no English and was almost unable to write, apart from signing her name. She married my maternal grandfather, a skilled cabinet maker, in 1899 and produced five children, three boys and two girls, the first of the two girls (my mother) seeing the light of day in 1900. Until my grandmother's death in 1931 she remained in her original home, her whole life spent in rearing her children, unpicking knotted string for a living, scrimping and saving to clothe her flock by taking in washing and ironing. Until her dying day she was never able to speak English, her tongue was classic Yiddish mixed with Russian. All her children received their education in elementary schools in the East End of London.

Similarly, Barton & Padmore found, from their study in Lancaster, that people took different roles for different literacy activity and illiterate and literate

operated reciprocal networks of support, exchanging assistance in reading and writing with other kinds of help. As they point out:

> Because these networks exist, problems do not arise… Often it was when these networks were disrupted that people were confronted with problems, and this was sometimes given as a reason for basic education classes. (Barton & Padmore 1991:70)

There have been many social science studies of networks of support among poor communities. In the effort by the habitually literate to imagine illiteracy, such a concept is useful: it allows for the possibility that to be illiterate might be ordinary. It helps us imagine its unimportance; for what it also does is alter the idea of literacy as merely an individual and solitary activity. In so doing, we begin to see ideas about the meaning of "family literacy", to which we will move in the next chapter, in a different light.

The following are four examples of what I mean, silhouettes again from Mass Observation writing. Reading them, we may be tantalized with what is left out; these are people for whom illiteracy and literacy were co-habitants, and whose own perceptions of this can only be imagined. Each extract is followed by the questions they raised for me. In the absence of an evidence which gives us the answers, they are here as an invitation to you, too, to *speculate* as to the possibilities.

The first shows a woman who left family correspondence to her husband, having other things she clearly did to support him (such as cook his meals):

> Grandma "Minnie" lived in a Devon village. At about 12 she was put on a tram to go as a servant to a London family… She could not read/write well, but had other skills she could teach… She could not read a recipe, her "head" was her book…and…relied on her husband for any "letters". (B86)

> *How did Minnie keep contact with her family of origin in Devon once she started work in London? What did she feel, later, about her husband reading and writing letters?*

In the second, an "avid reading" mother is partner to a non-reading father. While recalled as "sadly called illiterate", he was also accorded the respect of being a hard worker and clever at mental arithmetic. The correspondent, a woman now in her eighties, recalled:

> My father was a hard worker and did manual work, but I can remember how quickly he could add up figures almost on his head! Yet sadly he was called illiterate! He could not read or write and today they would have said he was dyslexic…

> My mother herself was an avid reader, and I quickly followed in her footsteps. One of the first books I read was Charlotte *Brontë's Jane Eyre,* my favourite book even to this day. I have just bought a copy. (B36)
>
> *Who was it who called this man illiterate? What did he make of his wife's pleasure in reading?*

In a third extract (from a text written by a woman now in her sixties) we are shown children teaching literacy to a mother:

> My maternal grandmother married when she was about 21, gave birth to ten children of whom seven survived infancy, and died at the age of 44, from meningitis I believe.
>
> She herself was one of the elder daughters of 18 children and despite the 1870 Act was not able to attend school much as she was kept at home to help her mother with her large brood…
>
> My mother told me that she and her sisters taught their mother how to write her name. (B89)
>
> *When did they do this? Were the daughters still young girls? Or adult women? Why did they do it? How?*

Finally, we meet, in the same person, a considerable capacity for reading and a near-illiteracy in writing. The extract contains a family tableau: while the woman sits carefully writing her name, her family stand round her, "holding their breaths". R446 portrays her grandmother as someone who "was still reading library books into her eighties"; yet:

> Although she was a great reader, her writing skills were almost non-existent. I always took this for granted but can clearly remember how, whenever she had to sign her name, anyone who was around was called in to assist and the only picture in my mind that I have of her writing is of her surrounded by a small crowd holding their breaths.
>
> *Were they there to give her moral support? or to marvel?*

All of these questions are unanswerable: but each of the extracts invites us to puzzle and imagine. All four come from texts which show households with few material resources. Each one is a working-class experience, written by literate descendants, without astonishment. The U3A group that afternoon in London, similarly, had found no surprise in recalling both the "avidly reading" Grace and the illiterate Sarah as among their mothers. In these extracts from Mass Observation writers, I found a similar spectrum of literacy ability, set within a set of social relationships with others.

Only in one Mass Observation report did I find any suggestion that, at the time, there may have been any shame associated with illiteracy. The story is of a marriage between someone who today would be called a literacy tutor and her student. According to the writer, the romance between them caused such horror in the woman's family that they never spoke to her again. What seems to be implied here is the shame, not so much of the young man being illiterate, as of him being from the "lower classes". The parents regarded him as a social inferior to their daughter:

> My grandmother was born in 1876 and her family were quite prosperous. She was therefore very well educated and able to read and write. At the age of 19 she became interested in teaching "the lower classes" to read and write. This was done through the church at evening classes. Here she met a young man and fell in love. He could neither read or write and he worked on the railways. Her family were distraught and threatened to disinherit her if she insisted on marrying him. In the year 1897 at the age of 21 they were married at church in Plaistow [East London]. Her family never spoke to her again! (H260)

There is one other tale of illiteracy which evidently intrigued the writer. Her grandmother, she recalls, was born in 1874 of "extremely poor" family, first living in Lancashire and later moving to Manchester. When this woman married in 1896, she signed her name on the marriage register. A year later, she registered her mother's death. This time, she gave her name with the X of an illiterate. The granddaughter (now aged 49) writes this:

> Either
>
> 1. She hadn't learned to write her married name
> 2. She was too shocked and upset to write
> 3. She did not want to put her name to what was on the death certificate (it was not all correct information).
>
> When I told my mum (her daughter, b. 1916) that her mum possibly couldn't write, she had no comment, i.e. she did not know that she couldn't write but she could not say that she had ever seen her write (letters, shopping lists, etc.) so there was no proof either way. I think that writing was not very relevant to her life. Her work was always as a cleaner or a servant and after her second marriage her husband could deal with any paperwork. (J931)

Within a spectrum of literacy-illiteracy, ranging from one extreme of complete absence of literacy to the other, of total dependency, even addiction to it, there are many other gradations of experience. Of all the vignettes and glimpses

offered by Mass Observation writers, one in particular is my favourite. It is an image of twopeople who, while literate, did not enjoy literacy: a mother who (according to the writer) read "laboriously—seldom for pleasure" and a father for whom "reading and writing always seemed difficult". This is how the writer recalls them reading the newspaper: "My father frowned at the business pages—my mother 'read the pictures'." (G1374)

What recurred throughout the reports, as I suggested in Chapter 2, was the simple *lack of time* for mothers, literate or not, to find pleasure in literacy. To this, at least one family offered a solution. The story is of the writer's grandmother. Evidently born (in 1883) into a middle-class family, the girl had done well in school. However at the age of 17 she had had to stay at home to "mind" her alcoholic mother. Once married, she had six children, whom she had to bring up in "dire financial straits" after her husband's discharge from the army on medical grounds. Her granddaughter writes:

> My grandmother worked extremely hard making ends meet…Thus I gather she had little time for reading. However, my grandfather and the older daughters spent many hours reading to her while she ironed or sewed. (T2003)

Reflections

What adult literacy learners said or wrote about illiteracy when they joined adult literacy programmes in the 1970s and 1980s revealed insights into the experience of being, or being seen to be, illiterate in a literate culture. They spoke of shame and embarrassment, of humiliation and frustration. And adult literacy educators like me learned to listen with a different ear and to devise ways and means for others to listen, too. For a long time it was assumed that all illiterates—all those who could not read and write in adult life for the purposes and in the ways that they wanted to—must feel like this. It was Mary Hamilton's work in the mid-1980s that suggested another possibility. Studies of adult literacy until then, as she pointed out, had concentrated on those who had come forward for tuition. This included my own book, based on interviews with adult literacy students. Hamilton's point is this:

> Such studies can be very misleading. They have typically reported on small groups of adults who do not represent the full range of adult students. In addition, there is no guarantee that those who come forward for tuition are representative of those who do not. (Hamilton 1987:7)

In this chapter we have been hearing about women for whom such "tuition" did not exist. They were living in a period when a national "campaign" for adult literacy education was several decades in the future. If they felt ashamed, isolatedor frustrated, we do not know. The speculative among their biographers

tried to allow for the possibility, but could not find any evidence either way. The story of the grandmother who gave her name one year on a document as a signature and the following year with a mark is mysterious. But signatures themselves *an* a mystery. To assess adult literacy levels in the last century, they were the single measure used by historians, who based their data on the ability to sign the marriage register. On this basis, the census of 1851 placed the literacy rate for England at 69.3 per cent for males and 54.9 per cent for females; by 1900, on this measure, it was 97.2 per cent and 96.8 per cent, respectively. As the historian of literacy, Richard Altick, put it, these figures are "very unsatisfactory evidence of how many people were able to read", and other evidence (such as school attendance statistics, and house-to-house surveys) suggested that signature literacy (or what David Vincent calls "nominal literacy") was very far indeed from full literacy (Altick 1983:170–72).

Literate observers had their own opinions as to the reasons for which some people might have made a mark when they could have signed. Altick cites one Victorian commentator who was concerned to explain away the high number of marks in marriage registers. In the 1867 *Journal of the Statistical Society* one W.I.Sargant evidently suggested that some brides and grooms, though fully able to sign their names, were so nervous that they preferred to scrawl a cross instead; or that when a literate man took an illiterate bride, "he chivalrously wrote his X instead of his name to save her embarrassment" (Altick 1983:170).

"Embarrassment", like "shame", is a frequently used word in any discussion about illiterate people in English-speaking literate societies. In attributing it to the "illiterate bride" W.I.Sargant had only his own sentimental views of young love, or of young men's vanity, to go on. From the "illiterate bride" as from the illiterate women bringing up children 40 or 50 years later, however, we have only silence. A total of 12 such women have been discussed in this chapter: Joan's mother Eliza, in Sheffield; Mary Anne's mother Kathleen, in Ireland; Joyce's mother Kate and Sylvia's mother Sarah, in East London. We have also met Anne, in Wales, "Kathleen", from an itinerant family; "Margaret" who learned the three Rs in service; and "Rachel", who spoke no English; we have also glimpsed the grandmothers of B86, B36, B89 and R446.

Such writing as we have today about firsthand experiences of illiteracy often bears witness to pain and exclusion. Janis, who, with her tutor, wrote so eloquently in this vein, was a student in an adult literacy programme who went on to gain confidence and fluency in her writing. The understanding we have of present-day experiences of illiteracy depends on sources like her, who are by definition a specific population: people who have chosen to seek out education for themselves. The habitually literate who do not happen to live together with or near to those who cannot read or write with ease must rely on their imaginations to conceive of living with different spectacles on. Meanwhile, in the search for powerful and wiseportraits of illiterate mothers, the writings of Mass Observers and the interviews with daughters offered some additional questions to consider.

In the next chapter, we will see how the fear of illiterate mothers has taken shape in the form of educational policy.

Chapter 6
Family is more than mum and literacy is more than school

> It was very difficult to get accounts of the literacy work that women do in maintaining their home and families. They don't notice it; literacy is another piece of the invisibility of women's work. (Rockhill 1993:167)

"Family" and "literacy" are two words with many meanings. In the language of educational policy, they have been joined together as one phrase, intended to represent a solution to perceived crises in standards of reading and writing. This chapter gathers together four clusters of debate around the two words. From consideration of these, we will move on to see how the experience of mothers in the past may give inspiration to the literacy interests of mothers in the present.

The first cluster circles around a negative association between mothers and the literacy of their children. It seems useful to begin with the dark side of rhetoric, even though the intentions behind the policies that it expresses have included liberatory ideas, too. The association is one of blame and of deficit, internalized sometimes by mothers themselves as well as articulated by implication in public discourse.

From this we will consider the way in which research data purporting to show the effect of mothers' education on their children's success at school has been used to signal the launch of a national initiative in family literacy education in the UK. In this section we will notice how this initiative, apparently intended for "the family" actually focused attention exclusively on the mother and the young child.

The results of the initiative (and the funding it provided) included a wide array of varied activity, developed often with imagination and creativity. Its effect, however, as its commentators have observed, has been to shift the meaning of "family literacy" itself—from the reading and writing life within families, to an educational programme. This shift in meaning is the subject of the third cluster of ideas we will consider.

Time-sharing

Fourthly, we return to mothers: and notice how the language of rhetoric has elided the word "parents" with mothers, rather than fathers. Here, we will also consider how the idea of mothers with time for their children is an idea premised on class assumptions about *time.* The encouragement to both parents to have anything to do with the schooling of their children is a recent one. Two examples from the interviews for this book illustrate how distant (to the mother) a school may have appeared.

Where do these issues take us? In the second half of the chapter, I offer first, a reminder of the extent to which mothers have been excluded from their ownliteracy. History, as Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen, and Virginia Woolf each bear witness, suggests centuries of a kind of silencing of women's creative capacities as writers. In contrast to this, we will then consider how the movement of community publishing, originating in the early 1970s, has opened up for mothers in settings of adult literacy and family literacy education new ways of telling old stories; and in so doing, offered another dimension to the meanings of "family literacy"— illustrated by the story of a "mothers' writing group" who chose to use their own literacy education to research that of their mothers.

Blame and deficit

Mothers are convenient scapegoats for our children's failures, if not the ills of society. We are only too vulnerable to the charge that any difference between our child and an assumed "norm" is our fault. Despite all kinds of evidence to the contrary, if our child learns to crawl, talk, or read later than any other child we are quick to believe that it must be something that *we* are doing wrong. If our child seems less clever, less quick, less successful than other children, it must be *our* failure. If they sniff glue, bunk off school, or steal, the cause of their wickedness lies in *us.*

Part of my research interest has been to explore how adult children perceive this view of their own mothers. Looking back as people now in their seventies and eighties, many writers and interviewees have been at pains to portray "good" mothers—and edit out the imperfect person of whom they may have felt less forgiving as children. However, as we saw in Chapter 3, this happy state of affairs is not true for all: some children, looking back on their mothers, found them to have been difficult or deficient in some crucial respect. For this, the passing of the years does not always make it easier to forgive.

Over 20 years I have read and collected the writing of many adult literacy students, from the UK and many other countries. In all this writing I have found only one example of an adult child who assigns blame to her or his mother for their own literacy difficulties; and even this is blame attached at one remove, as it were. The piece, which is published in Canada, begins like this: "This story is about my mother not having an education and her mother is to blame". As the author (Yvette Gonzales) goes on to relate, her mother's education ended at the age of five when her father died. The person who made this decision—and

(Yvette assumes) thereby caused her mother's consequent illiteracy—was her mother (her own grandmother).

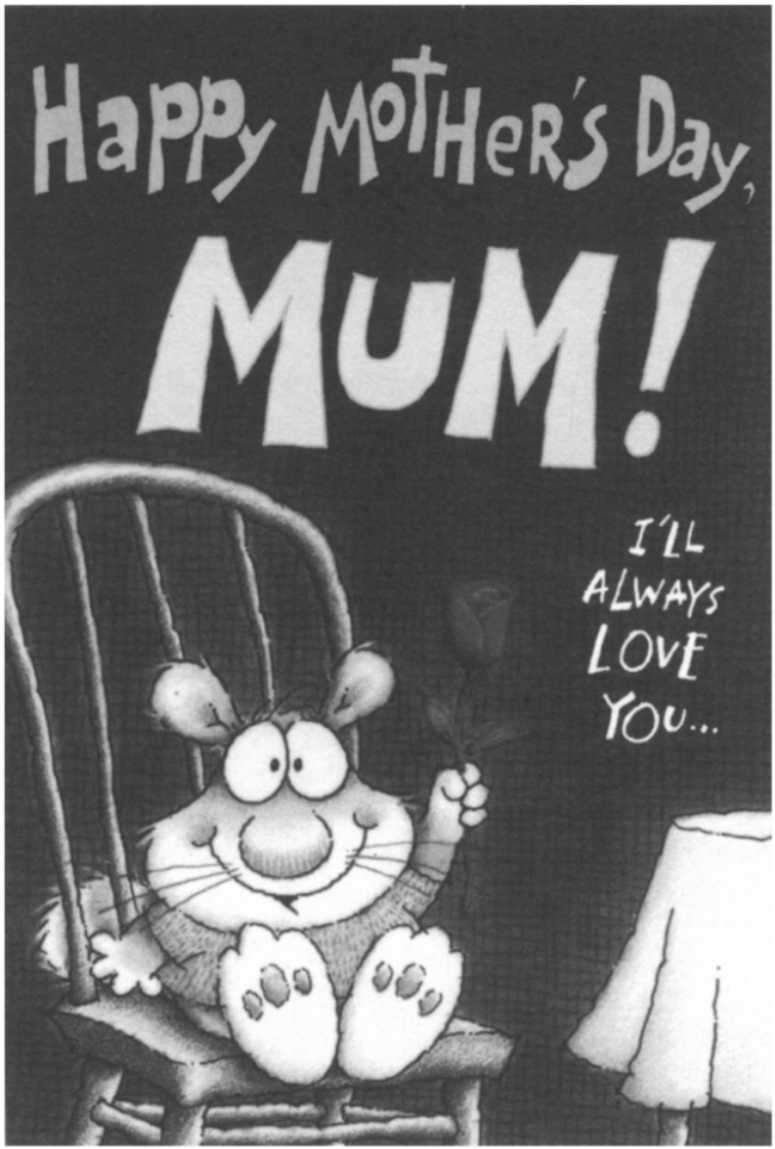
Yvette sent her mother a Mother's Day card and rings her up to tell her she has posted it. In a phone conversation which follows this, her mother says: "Yvette, you know I can't read because of mama Olga, I does feel so ashamed." In reply, her daughter told her: "Mommy, it's not your fault that you can't read. It's your mom's. She took it away from you by not sending you to school while your other brothers and sisters attended and learned to read and write" (Gonzales 1991:96).

I find this piece striking. Yvette Gonzales is an adult student of literacy. Yet in this piece she says nothing about her own quest for learning; and makes no suggestion that her mother's illiteracy may have had any part to play in her own difficulties with reading and writing. The mother who is blamed here (the grandmother) is being charged, not with failing to be able to read and write herself, but with failing to send her daughter to school. Yvette Gonzales' purpose seems to be both to free her mother of the sense of shame she feels about her illiteracy and atthe same time—in making an accusation of neglect to her grandmother—to issue a warning to other mothers: "Don't let what happened to my mom happen to your child by stealing their education" (Gonzales 1991:96).

Although the charge is not a mother's illiteracy, the target of her accusation is still the mother. The blame for the daughter's lack of schooling is laid, not at the economic conditions of society in which her grandmother raised her family, not at the society of the time that assumed the daughter might as well remain outside the school system, not at her mother's father, but at her mother.

As some of the accounts in earlier chapters suggest, illiterate mothers are part and parcel of the social history of families of the literate, as well as the illiterate. Yvette Gonzales was herself the daughter of an illiterate mother; she is also (as an adult education student of literacy) clearly a very active member of a literate culture. Yet this same culture suggests that this is unusual, if not impossible; that mothers with "low literacy skills" do not have children who are literate; and that illiterate mothers are dysfunctional mothers. Voiced publicly, this suggestion is most usually made obliquely, with an air of benevolence. Here, for example, is the *Reader's Digest* (a publication with a considerably larger readership than that in which Yvonne Gonzales' piece appears). The story is of the discovery of the "illiterate mother" who, in the view of the reporter, is an exception; she is a concerned and competent mother—but she cannot read and write:

> It was her son's class teacher who first spotted that Pauline Hammond might need help. Why, she wondered, did Stuart's mother never come to school to talk about the six-year-old's progress, or return forms giving permission for him to go on school trips? Pauline seemed an alert, attractive wife and mother. Could she have a reading problem? (Brown 1993:37)



Mother's Day card, 1990s: "Happy Mother's Day, Mum! I'll always love you…but I'll never forgive you for cleaning my face with spit on a hanky!"

This mother is portrayed as "alert" and "attractive"; she is also a "wife". There is an insinuation here. Alert, attractive, married women are *assumed* to be literate women; it is taken for granted that they will also make sure their children do well. Tired, plain women who are single parents are clearly not. This being the assumption, the blame for Pauline's illiteracy is attributed later in the article, not to any failure on her part, but to inadequate schooling. Even so, the writer nevertheless goes on to attribute guilt to Pauline herself and makes no suggestion that things should be otherwise. "Barely able to write her name" at the age of 36, he tells us, Pauline is "handicapped" in her own right; but "worse still", he writes, "was the guilt she felt about her son" (Brown 1993:38).

The story comes right in the end, for this mother is guided by her son's teacher to an adult literacy scheme down the road. Pauline's son, it seems, will not meet the same fate as Yvonne's mother.

In 1995, BBC Education decided to promote the social issue campaign of adult literacy. Unusually for an education programme, they decided to use an advertising agency to design the promotion. The resulting programme or "spot" wasbroadcast 25 times over a week in February 1995, advertising an 0800 phone number for viewers to ring up and order a free copy of a "Read and Write together" pack (part of the Basic Skills Agency's family literacy initiative). A target of 40,000 response calls was set. The programme far exceeded its target; over 300,000 calls were received. Encouraging news indeed for anyone interested in ensuring good times for children learning to read and write. The advertisers saw themselves as "doing something to stop [illiteracy] going from generation to generation"; their clients distributed a lot of educational packs; and the advertisement won an award (IPA 1997).

Less encouraging, however, were the images used. The two children portrayed were: a little girl with her doll, mimicking her mother finding reasons not to read to her, and a little boy, listening to repeated readings of a story his father has committed to memory. The picture of the girl shows her standing at a toy ironing board in her Wendy house. She has blonde plaits, and is talking to her doll. "Sorry darling", she says, "I can't read to you now. I'm busy." And in silky tones the voiceover tells the guilty viewer at home: "If you can't find time to help them, your children *may* have trouble learning to read". The parent of the girl is a mother who has no time. The parent of the boy is a father who cannot read. The father of the little boy reads to him alright; unlike the mother mimicked by her daughter, *he makes time.* His father (the viewer knows this, but the boy does not) is a good father—but an illiterate one, who has to pretend he can read.

So the bad mother is not necessarily an illiterate mother; she is the mother who is *not finding time* to help her children. Reading and writing is, today, a silent and often solitary business; the mother who does not or cannot read and write with her children casts her shadow across the Wendy house, the spectre which haunts the "deficit model" of family literacy. According to this model, the problems of children's illiteracy are created by the low-literate home and, especially, the non-literate mother; illiteracy is "passed on" from parent to child

like an illness, and poor literacy is mixed up with poor parenting. The model is most starkly represented by one William Raspberry, who in a piece published in the *Washington Post* in 1989 asserted the following:

> The point is that literacy, like illiteracy, is a heritable trait; children catch it from their parents. And it may be that the best way to launch an attack on illiteracy is to treat it as a family disease… [Illiterate parents] also tend to have poor parenting skills… Illiteracy is condemning millions of adult Americans to poverty and destroying the life chances of children (cited in Auerbach 1994:11)

It is certainly shocking to find the *Washington Post* giving houseroom to such blatant nonsense. Elsa Auerbach, who attacked it in an article of her own, is the author of the most robust published critique of the "deficit" version of family literacy education, based on substantial research and practice carried out by a team sheled in Boston, Massachusetts. In their review of work already undertaken, the team found that:

> Study after study…has refuted the notion that poor, minority and immigrant families don't value or support literacy development. In fact, often, quite the opposite seems to be the case for immigrants: those families most marginalised frequently see literacy and schooling as the key to mobility, to changing their status and preventing their children from suffering as they did. (Auerbach 1989:170)

Their own family literacy programme, which worked primarily with immigrant and refugee communities, drew on the research experience of other populations too, with the aim of challenging what they had found to be the single idea which, despite these studies, dominated the *practice* of American family literacy education to date: the "transmission of school practices" idea, by which the programmes trained parents to transmit the literacy culture of the school, in order to prepare their children more adequately to engage in school-type reading and writing. This idea was founded on the idea that the "problem" of poor literacy was caused by families and the homes in which children grew up, not the schools. Auerbach's team also found that the idea of family literacy assumed, not a mix of experience across lifespans and between all age groups and relatives, but a one-way activity, from adults to children—or, more specifically, from parents to young children.

Both from other research studies and from the learners in their adult education programme, however, Elsa Auerbach and her colleagues found no simple link between the limited literacy of parents and the commitment of those parents to supporting their children's literacy. Whatever their literacy abilities, parents were encouraging their children's confidence as learners in other ways apart from actually doing reading and writing with them:

> I help my kids by staying together with them, by talking to them. I help them by confronting them and telling them what's wrong or right just as they do me. I help them when they need a favour or money, just as they do me. It's just like you scratch my back, I scratch your back with my family. (Auerbach 1989:171)

Five years later, Auerbach summarized her argument for a progressive approach to family literacy education as being "against intervention and towards participation":

> Rather than proceeding from the schools to the communities and families, its direction is from the families and communities to the schools. It invites students to become critical readers of their own reality and authors of the changes they hope to make, so that literacy can truly become socially significant in their lives. (Auerbach 1994:16)

The William Raspberry article compared the "intergenerational cycle of illiteracy" to a hereditary illness and had been circulated by the Barbara Bush Foundation. Two years later, I heard the same article quoted with similar concern by Professor Colin Harrison in a lecture given in London. I was only sorry he did not demolish it more thoroughly. In this lecture, Harrison offered an analysis of the efforts of the International Reading Association's Family Literacy Commission (of which he was a member) to review the developments in family literacy education since 1991 and distinguished between an "interventionist" interpretation of family literacy education (designed to improve children's literacy development in a family setting) and two others. The first he called the "intergenerational" interpretation. This aims to boost children's literacy, improve their parents' ability to help them, and increase the parents' own literacy and, as he saw it, had been the predominant version in funding policy in North America and the UK in the 1980s and 1990s. The second he referred to as the ethnographic approach, which understands family literacy to be those uses or practices of literacy that occur "spontaneously" in the home. Within this interpretation, Harrison (like others) saw Denny Taylor's study of families in a small community in New Hampshire, U3A, as being the originator of the term "family literacy" itself.

Harrison reported concern among the members of the Family Literacy Commission at the ideology of what he, like Auerbach, saw to be the "deficit model" of family literacy (of which metaphors of plagues and epidemics would be an extreme symptom). According to this model, he said, three interlocking factors are blamed for national ills:

- the level of literacy skills among the population is inadequate to meet the demands of the economy;
- poor literacy skills (or illiteracy) are the cause of poverty and crime; and

- the reason for schools' apparent failure to deliver is that families fail to deliver children to them who are capable of acquiring literacy.

The solution to these ills (proposed by bodies like the Barbara Bush Foundation) had been to introduce school-like activities into the home, in order to reverse a perceived "cycle" of illiteracy.

In his lecture, Harrison then described the alternative to this: a "wealth" model of family literacy. According to this:

> There is no national literacy crisis and literacy levels are, in fact, rising steadily; poverty, unemployment, homelessness and crime are the result of economic policies; illiteracy is a consequence of poverty, not its cause; [and] programmes which recognize and use practices already in people's homes may be more successful than those based on school-like models. (Harrison 1996:26)

From his study of the family literacy work in North America and the UK, he noted that while flinders had tended to think along the lines of the "deficit" model, those who are employed as educators work with a "wealth" model. The first group tend to attract more media attention than the second: which may be why British, American and Australian teachers and adult educators (who could do more of our own media relations) have evidently been so concerned at the family literacy's association with "deficient" families.

School teachers and adult literacy educators alike would agree that literacy-rich homes offer a more favourable environment to children's interest in literacy. This is not, however, the same thing as seeing poor literacy skills as an inherited illness; an idea which still, unfortunately, seems to find echoes in the language of policy-makers. In a July 1997 radio interview, for example, I heard Helena Kennedy QC, Chair of the Committee reviewing adult and further education saying on an early morning radio interview:

> And then there is the problem of basic skills. One in six people in this country have problems with literacy and numeracy. If we don't address this problem now, *it will get passed on.* (BBC Radio 4, 2 July 1997, 7.15 am) (my emphasis).

Teach the mother to reach the child

With the exception of one day in 1993, the word "mother" was not frequently used in public utterances about family literacy education. On that day, the then Secretary of State for Education for England and Wales launched a Family Literacy initiative in the UK. Many of us present at the conference he addressed, organized by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (soon after to be renamed the Basic Skills Agency), were caught unawares by the slogan he attached to the

announcement. Like the readers of the newspapers the day after the conference, the several hundred delegates who heard him speak represented experiences of all kinds of family structures. We were nevertheless told that the "family" in mind had only one adult in it: "John Patten, the Education Secretary, yesterday announced a £250,000 grant for 'teach the mother, reach the child', pilot projects to be set up by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit" (McLeod 1993:4).

The mystery was this. If the focus was to be limited to what Elsa Auerbach had called the "one-way" traffic of adults to children, where had the fathers gone —or indeed any other adults in the family? The answer, as we were to find out later, lay in the interest raised in the UK by a study carried out in America, which had stressed the importance to children's literacy attainment of their mothers'. The study argued that: "Parents', *especially mothers'* education levels are related to the development of children's learning abilities before school…during school… and into adulthood" (Sticht 1993:12–13). (my emphasis)

The appeal of the family literacy approach in America, as Ruth Nickse had expressed it, was its capacity to "help prevent the debilitating cycle of illiteracy" (Nickse 1990:13). Among the factors seen to be at the root of a perceived "literacy crisis" were: a shortage of daycare provision; the assumed difficulties of minority groups in acquiring appropriate education and job training; the low literacy of the many young families living in poverty; and—note—the large number of mothers now in the workforce. The key to reform which family literacy "programme interventions" would provide was the notion of "literate models" for children. As Nickse saw it: "Low literate parents cannot act as literate models, have trouble helping children with homework and often have low expectations and poor attitudes about schools and schooling" (Nickse 1990:13). Like Sticht, Nickse saw the most significant person in this cycle as the mother: "Family variables, most particularly the mother's level of education, are associated with the child's school achievement and therefore the child's chances for school success" (Nickse 1990:13).

By 1990 there were over three hundred family literacy programmes in the US, and with Even Start legislation between 1989–94, still more "coming on stream". By the time, then, that the UK launched its own initiative, in 1993, there was a groundswell of assumptions and claims from the other side of the Atlantic with which to legitimate the catchphrase favoured by the Secretary of State for Education.

Research findings, promoted with enough energy, have a way of coinciding with and reinforcing dominant views and ideologies. The idea that mothers are to blame for what goes wrong in schools finds support in all kinds of casual and not so casual discussions. The absence of fathers, for instance, appears to dominate the training of primary teachers. Among the texts assigned for undergraduate students of education, the assumption remains unquestioned: "Once a child has begun to learn to read he [sic] can bring his book home from school and *read to his mother* the same words which he read to his teacher earlier in the day" (Donaldson 1987:91). (my emphasis)

Little wonder that some of these students reproduce unquestioningly such assumptions. Among essays I marked from a group of fourth-year students in a BA (Ed) degree programme in 1996, for example, was on the topic of "helping the special needs child with learning to read". The child under observation was described by the student writer as having parents who lived separately.

> She lives with her father who cannot read, and visits her mum once a week who can read and is keen to help in the limited time available.

With a complete lack of concern as to what he was implying, the student went on:

> The initial priority is to communicate with her mother, establish the value of her contribution and to make sure she understands her role and feels both positive and confident about it.

The question I pondered, reading this assertion, was this. Was it because the father was not the mother, that the student assumed this parent had no role in the child's literacy? Or was it because the father was not literate? The child lives with the father; presumably it is with this parent that she has most daily and nightly contact and most opportunity to talk, learn, and gain confidence in learning. But this is a father who "cannot read". At a stroke, the male parent is both absolved and dismissed. The student (who would soon, presumably, be a primary school teacher) took it for granted that a father, especially a non-reading father, had no part to play in the child's learning.

Family literacy: shifts in meaning

What families actually do with reading and writing in everyday ways is actually a rich area for research, as David Barton reports. His work, and that of the Lancaster Literacy Research Group of which he is a member, has done much to open up the possibilities for the ethnographic approach to family literacy identified by Colin Harrison, and to support its "wealth model" espoused by many teachers and adult educators in family literacy education. In a review of research and practice in family literacy, he suggests that the most useful way of understanding the conjunction of the two ideas—"family" and "literacy"—has been to study "people's actual lives". From studies such as these, Barton picks out six observations that can be made about this conjunction. Firstly, literacy is more than book reading. Secondly, these studies take account of the fact that "family is more than mum". Thirdly, they show that home literacy is not always the same as school literacy. Fourthly, family literacy means literacy across all sorts of lifespans; fifthly, all sorts of people, literate and less so, participate in literacy; and finally, literacy itself may be supported in all kinds of ways as well as by a child (or adult) being given direct reading and writing instruction or help (Barton 1994a).

Abbreviated in this way, these insights suddenly look painfully obvious. Yet, as David Barton suggests, they remain ignored or unknown to many. He quotes Denny Taylor, writing ten years after publication of her influential study, which had first coined the term "family literacy" (Taylor 1983). Taylor voices a concern at:

> The way in which the concept of family literacy has been co-opted and used to reify deficit-driven views of families who live in poverty… Above all [she concludes] we need to…turn to the wealth of information that we can gain from educators and researchers who work with families in naturalistic settings, (cited in Barton 1994a:4)

Essentially, what has happened to family literacy over a 15-year period is a shift in meanings. Peter Hannon sees this shift from family literacy as, "*A way of seeing*the interplay of literacy activities of children, parents and others within families", to one applied solely to

> Certain kinds of educational *programs* [which] used broadly…refers to any program which, through its content or practice, recognizes the family dimensions of literacy learning. (Hannon 1997:1)

Hannon, whose own work persuasively argued for primary teachers to attend to "people's actual lives" (Hannon 1995), cites the National Literacy Trust as an important source of information about the wide variety of family literacy work which, funded though it may have been through a "deficit model" of families and literacy, has nevertheless celebrated the alternative (Bird & Pahl 1994).

"Now is the literacy hour": thus the *Guardian* newspaper headlined a report (7 January 1997) on the Conservative Government's announcement of its "National Literacy Project", which, among other things, was to require schools to allocate one hour a day to all-school literacy activities. This was a move (following others) in anticipation of a new general election, to show the government's muscular response to the perceived literacy crisis in schools, following the launch in Summer 1996 of a number of "literacy centres" round the country.

For their part, the Labour Party was not slow in promoting itself as the party to rescue us from the same crisis. Just a month later, its own announcement of a literacy strategy was reported in the familiar triumphalist language of "campaigns" against illiteracy. This, too, was to be a "fight" against a disease—but this time, parents are to be not the campaign's beneficiaries, but its lieutenants: "Labour to enlist parents in fight against illiteracy" (*London Evening Standard,* 24 February 1997). By July 1997, when the Labour Party was now in government, its strategy had taken on an added edge. Time, once again, is the commodity required of parents (and for parents, we must again read "mothers"). The obligation is quite specific. For 20 minutes a day, parents of primary school

children were to be required to "sign an undertaking to read with their children" ("Parents told to sign reading pledge", *Guardian,* 29 July 1997).

This front page article featured Stephen Byers, the Education Minister with responsibility for schools, announcing an allocation of £1.8 million to run three-month literacy courses for thousands of parents whose own standard of reading was not good enough to provide the necessary help. The purpose of the programme was to enable the government to meet its declared targets for literacy at 11. "There is no intention of parents being sued if they do only 19 minutes of reading with their children", the Minister is quoted as saying. (Did he have his tongue in his cheek?) The sense of veiled menace implied here continues: "The government would eventually have to tackle the very small number of parents who did not act responsibly", Mr Byers said (*Guardian,* 29 July 1997:1)

In all this plethora of publicity, from the 1993 announcement to this most recent variation on it, mothers have once again vanished: the word is "parents".The 17 photographs reproduced in the pack produced by the Basic Skills Agency in 1993 to promote and encourage the development of the programmes, which were careful to represent an ethnic mix of children and adults, included seven featuring men, of whom several looked as though they might be fathers (Basic Skillis Agency 1993). Seven out of 17 is not a lot; but it is a lot more (proportionately) than the number of fathers who participated in the programmes that were funded. Three years later, the evaluation of the programme reported that, of the parents who participated, just 4 per cent of the total were male. To put it another way, 96 per cent of "parents" in the biggest family literacy initiative in the UK had been mothers (Brooks et al. 1996:24).

Mothers are the only parents

Please, miss
my mother, miss
forgot to tell you this, miss:
that I, miss,
won't miss,
be in school tomorrow, miss.[1]

It is at this point that I want to reconnect with my theme of mothers and time. Twenty minutes a day may not seem a lot to a male politician. But what of the reality of mothers who, sometimes, may be single parents, who may have more than one child, and who have just got home from the part-time job at the supermarket checkout? There is a game which Valeric Walkerdine and Helen Lucey see as "beloved of psychologists and educators"; it is called "Find the sensitive mother". According to this game, the bad mother fails to prepare her young child for school; the good, sensitive mother, "tirelessly answers [her

child's] unrelenting questions and makes her home, her everyday life, an assault course of developmental tasks" (Walkerdine & Lucey 1989:22).

The game, as they set it out, is one in which researchers search the transcripts of interactions between middle-class and working-class mothers and their young children in order to detect which mother is adequately carrying out her role of developing the child's language. As I suggested in Chapter 2, the analysis that Walkerdine & Lucey offer is a direct challenge to this one, which (as they argue) is steeped in class prejudices about "normal" and "natural" mothering. Their critique has been inspirational to other feminist writers, glad of the blast of air they blow into the airless claustrophobia of the good mother "tirelessly" working at her child's play. The working-class mother has work to get on with; to see this work as compatible with the child's play is a luxury available to mothers who either have other women whom they can afford to pay to do their housework, who have a partner (male or female) sympathetic and willing to share in this work, or whohave the material conditions to provide the toys and books and, simply, time, to give to one or several children at the end of a long day.

Miriam David, one of those who cites their work with gladness, offers what I find to be a really useful insight into the recent discourse to be found on "family literacy". Like Walkerdine & Lucey, she is writing before this term gained the currency it now has. What she does is pick out the move from the *explicit* focus on mothers following Bowlby's (1953) influential concept of "maternal deprivation" to one which *implicitly* refers to mothers, as a result of the 1967 Plowden report on primary education. The language of Plowden, David points out, referred to an ungendered "parental participation"; it is this language, she suggests, which permeated both official policy developments and the subsequent range of social research studies set up to evaluate them (David 1989). She points out that these developments, couched as they were in apparently neutral language, coincided with reductions in nursery and childcare provision, a growth in the voluntary organization of mothers in the form of the Pre-School Playgroups Association and an increase in home—school initiatives: all having a direct bearing on the assumed and actual pressures on mothers to take the primary responsibility for their children's learning. Despite becoming grouped with fathers as "parents" since the 1960s, David argues, "the different parental roles expected of mothers and fathers were in fact clear" (David 1989:44).

In the 1990s, then, "mother" remains a word masked by the word "parent". In this context, John Patten's call to "reach the mother" is striking. Since his conference address in 1993, policy language has once again retreated into ungendered territory. It is as if there is a coyness about using the actual word "mother": even though she was the person precisely identified by the Minister. Once again, the word "parents" is used to mask the woman at home; and "family" too often stands as a euphemism for the maternal parent. In a study of the language used in journalism about family literacy education, Jacqui Armour noted how easy it was to pass by the stereotyping at work. From an analysis of feature articles published in seven national newspapers covering literacy

programmes promoted for "the family", she found that mothers were mentioned over three times more often than fathers, that images of women outnumbered men by 3:1, and that 75 per cent of the "gender-encoded" phrases in the text were female gendered (as in: "welfare mums", "at mother's knee", "listen with mother"). In reflecting on this, Armour comments on how subtle this language bias can be, and how on first reading, she had been unaware of it. She concludes:" 'Teach the mother and reach the child' denies any interest that women may have in literacy learning from their own development and ignores women who are child free" (Armour 1996:36).

With the growing movement of home-school links in primary education stimulated by the 1967 Plowden Report, mothers and fathers have been able to get beyond the primary school gate as a matter of course, and if a teacher needed to know of a child's absence, the child's parent or carer could tell her in person. Parents at the turn of the century, however, were in a different position. AsPeter Hannon put it: "There was no space for parents in schools of the late nineteenth century. Indeed there was little enough space for the children" (Hannon 1995: 18). Equally, many parents then (as now) had little spare time to visit the school, let alone have conversations with the teacher; and the growing movement to professionalize teaching in the early half of this century, if anything, increased the gulf between the school and the home. Telling "miss" had to rely on the child or sibling taking a message: and sometimes a note must be written.

Once again Gwen's mother Lily helps us imagine what this might have felt like. Gwen had four older sisters, so by the time she herself started school in 1930, Lily had had some practice in solving the spelling problem such writing posed for her —and a solution:

> If we were absent from school [mother] would need to send a "sick note" with a well child, or the note would be taken when the child recovered, and as she could never remember how to spell "bilious", she would resort to the Fenning's Fever Cure bottle where the word was to be found (El74).

The writing of the note was a formal business, however, and Lily obviously took it seriously, as Gwen recalled for me when we talked:

> It was a palaver. It was a big event, this writing. It was quite something… "Oh, we'll have to send a note. And get organized, and get the Fenning's Fever Cure bottle out". (Interview, February 1997)

The note to school posed different problems for Audrey's mother, a woman recalled as writing little other than "birthday cards or short notes to relatives". Audrey remembered her own embarrassment when Doris "used to write notes to teachers if I was absent from school and address them 'Dear Madam', which somehow I didn't think was right. Her style of handwriting was round and carefully formed—and I could easily copy it". (B1533)

In interview, later, Audrey said: "It made me feel very ashamed"; and then added this reflection:

> You see, it was due to her life in service, wasn't it? "Dear Madam". All ladies were called Madam, weren't they? They always called teachers governesses, didn't they, too? Did you know about that? Oh yes. Always. They didn't call the teachers the governess; the headmistress was always the governess. My mother would refer to Miss Richards, the headmistress, as the governess.
>
> *You don't think she wrote "Dear madam" because she didn't know the teacher's Name?*
>
> Oh, she knew the teacher's name. I'd do nothing but talk about my teachers. Yes, so it wasn't that. No, it's because she was used to addressing women in a better position as "Madam". She continued in domestic work, charring, all through my childhood—and in fact long after it, during the War, too.

For Doris and for Lily, the children's school was remote and the teachers who worked in them were distant figures to be treated (at least by Doris) with deference. For both women, writing of any sort was an unusual activity; more formal writing was undertaken only under duress.

Exclusions and resistance

Historically, mothers in many cultures have been actively forbidden (sometimes by their own mothers) to read and write. I was reminded of this when, in July 1997 I came across a Website on the Internet published by a network of some one hundred women journalists in America. From a 1994 article reporting on the then imminent Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing, I read this:

> Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian novelist and professor at the University of California at Berkeley, recalls how her mother had to fight against society and her in-laws by learning to read and passing this skill on to her daughters. Mukherjee remembers her mother stashing away part of her monthly allowance to buy books secretly.
>
> "If any of us were caught reading books, my grandmother would confiscate them", she says, explaining that reading and ideas threatened her illiterate grandmother's sense of right or wrong. (Levine 1994)

In the previous chapter we saw how daughters in Britain recalled their mothers discriminating against their own literacy and learning in favour of sons.

Testimony such as this reminds us that mothers themselves have often been effective censors of their daughters' literacy development. It is from another feminist writing from an Indian experience that we are reminded of the political and social context within which this censorship might flourish. The writer's name is Lalita Ramdas; the article she published in 1990 had a profound effect on me when I first read it, and I have used it in my teaching and writing many times since (for instance in Mace & Wolfe 1990). The core of Ramdas' argument is this. Literacy education for women cannot be separated from the lived realities of power relations and poverty. Too much educational planning, she says, has assumed it is possible to separate the two. And she tells the story of a national convention in Bangalore, India, at which over a thousand delegates were divided into subgroups and charged with the task of coming up with "timebound action plans" for their states. One group of women delegates rebelled. They met separately, andtalked at length about the specific barriers to literacy experienced by women and girls.

When this group came to present its recommendations to the conference, they proposed that, for literacy programmes to be effective, certain conditions would need to be met. Instead of a "timebound action plan", they called for childcare facilities, a re-education process towards the traditional roles expected of women, and at least 50 per cent of decision-making bodies to be composed of women. Their proposals were greeted with "condescension bordering on disapproval". Where was their "timebound" plan of action?

In the same article, Ramdas went on to argue that any timetable for literacy can only be conceived within the lived timings of women's lives. She illustrates her argument with a woman, whom she called Chintamma—who, as Ramdas suggests, may have neither the time nor the interest for the literacy being promoted for her, let alone for her daughters. Chintamma is part of the statistic which, globally, shows that 70 per cent of the world's illiterates in 1990 are women. She is also one of many thousands whose conditions of living are such that there is not only little incentive to take up such opportunities for their literacy as may be offered, but little time. Ramdas makes the connection between Asia and Europe where, historically, "male control over female access to literacy continued in one form or other, visible and subtle, into the industrial period" (Ramdas 1990:34).

It is from the black American writer, Alice Walker, that we are reminded of another, more thorough prohibition laid on the literacy of both women and men: four hundred years' of literacy being denied to black people who had been slaves. "What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great-grandmothers' day?" she asks. "It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood" (Walker 1995:233).

The passion of this essay is enormous (enough, indeed, to stop my blood). It is a piece fashioned from a poet's research and a granddaughter's rage. As a white reader, when I first read it, I felt (as I turned the pages) like a witness, allowed in to a huge gathering of black women, the readers addressed by Alice Walker. This

is certainly not only a piece about literacy, and literature; her fury and grief is at the wasted talents in *all* the arts, brought about by centuries of brutality and humiliation wrought by white people on black slaves. While her subject is the whole field of artistic creativity, it is literacy and the full use of reading and writing that is nevertheless at the heart of her piece (unsurprising from someone who is, after all, an artist in this medium herself):

> How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist. Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. (Walker 1995:234)

Alice Walker was the ninth child of a mother who, in the late 1920s, had run away to marry her father. She describes this mother as a woman "rarely impatient in our home" whose "day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night": a woman who was constantly at work, with "never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts, never a time free from interruption—by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children" (Walker 1995:238). The "punishable crime" of reading and writing, although no longer forbidden to her mother in the same way as it had been to her grandmother, was still out of reach; a pleasure in which she had no freedom to indulge, no time to spare.

How would this woman be judged by a "pledge" to read to her children for 20 minutes a day? by what kind of "standard" are we to measure the literacy of her daughter, who has the power to "stop the blood" of those who read her writing? The ticking clock of the Education Minister cannot be answered.

Tillie Olsen, also an American, also writing in the early 1970s, from her catalogue of the number of published women writers in the nineteenth century concluded that "until very recently almost all distinguished writing has come from childless women" (Olsen 1980:31). As Olsen eloquently expressed it, history shows that for white mothers too (although to a very different degree than for their black sisters) literacy and the creative business of writing was forbidden territory. "Almost no mothers—as almost no part-time, part-self persons—have created enduring literature…so far" (Olsen 1980:19).

Tillie Olsen's first book was published when she was fifty; and she gives a poignant account of her own longings, over two decades of combining child-bearing and child-rearing with such paid work as she could get, for the space and time to do the writing she had in her. Situating her own experience in the context of women silenced by men and by the social forces that insist on them caring for the needs of others before their own, she places this autobiographical narrative into a world in which mothers, historically, have been hemmed in and kept away from a literacy they craved.

> More than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now* (and remember, in our society, the family must often try to be the center for love and health the outside world is not). (Olsen 1980:20)

In the hope of writing, during those years, she was living a daily life of "conscious storing, snatched reading". No coincidence, she says, that the first work she considered worthy of publishing was the piece that began: "I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron".

What, then, does this silencing of mothers' literacy suggest about the daughters who grew up to write? If their own mothers had given them little to go on, in terms of being "models" of literate behaviour, or whose own "standard of reading" was "not good enough to give them the necessary help", how have women like these two internationally acclaimed authors been possible?

Among the answers, of course, is the radical change in educational opportunities for working-class and black girls and women over this century. Alice Walker gives another: her inspirations and encouragement to write as she does came, she says, from something else her mother gave her. Not a "model" of a literate life, nor a source of "help" in children's homework, the gift with which her mother supplied Alice Walker was instead something else. This is how she puts it:

> And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.
>
> And so it is, certainly, with my own mother…No song will bear my mother's name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life —must be recorded. (Walker 1995:240)

For Walker, the "creative spark" of the oral rhythms and meanings given to her by her mother had infused those she went on to use in her writing. There was something else, that had nothing directly to do with literacy, which she sees her mother to have given her. Not only was her mother a storyteller; she was also a gardener—and this, according to Alice Walker, inspired her daughter's growth as a writer no less than her use of words. Her mother, she says, was constantly working with flowers, in the house (however "shabby") and in her "ambitious gardens"; and it is from her mother's sense of artistry in planting and pruning, her

"respect for the possibilities", she says, that her own creativity—as a writer, and as a black woman—was given life.

Mother-publishers

I want now to suggest how, in the 20 and more years since adult literacy "campaigns" took off in North America, Britain, Australia and other countries—and especially since specific campaigns for women's literacy in the 1990s—workingclass and black women and mothers have changed the "silencing" referred to by Tillie Olsen and Alice Walker. One way in which this change has been made has been through the work some of them have done together in the setting of adult literacy and women's education groups. In these settings, women have found the means to write and become published and, in so doing, created another set of meanings for family literacy.

Publishing from adult literacy work began in the mid-1970s in the UK, America, Canada and South Africa, not long after the writing we have just beenconsidering by these two women. The work grew out of a dissatisfaction which English-language adult literacy teachers felt in the reading matter available for teaching grown-up students. It had become apparent that the way in which this problem could best be solved would be by asking for the help of the learners themselves. The teaching method that became known (in primary, as well as adult literacy education) as "language experience" was brought in to help. Using this method, the literacy teacher acts as scribe. The learner, freed for the moment from the anxiety about spelling and wording what she wants to say, talks a little; maybe tells a story. The written version of what she has said is then the text between teacher and learner. Later, with others coming to read it, the same text may need to be changed a little, added to and shaped (Moss 1995). The technology of typewriters, duplicating machines and later word processors and photocopiers made the business of then "publishing" this text for a wider group of people relatively simple.

Out of this unpretentious classroom business grew national and then international movements in community publishing, resulting, over 20 years later, in hundreds, probably thousands, of booklets, magazines, news sheets, and even "proper books" (with spines), appearing in centres of community education as far apart as Johannesburg and Cork, Toronto and Edinburgh. They vary in appearance from the home-made and humble to the glossy and glamorous. In content, they have one thing in common. Each author in their pages is moving towards Tillie Olsen's position of being "a writing writer", and in so doing, just slightly altering their own position in the world.

Here, for instance, is a piece by a woman about why she writes poetry. What she says, among other things, is that from a position of being a woman abandoned to bring up children alone, she turned to being a writer, read by the husband who had left her. Her feelings that, in another form, had seemed mere "petty nagging", expressed in another language could no longer be ignored:

> I must have told my husband half a dozen times how I felt about him going to prison and leaving me to cope with the children on my own. He used to read my letters and dismiss them as petty nagging. So I wrote him a poem, "I've heard it all before" explaining my grievances. Suddenly it sunk in. He realized that if I felt strongly enough about it to burst into poetry, then I must be serious! (Fazackerley 1984:51)

(I remember another woman, a few years earlier in South London, also speaking of her husband suddenly seeing her in a new light. She had had something she had written printed in a community publication. There she was, in print. Her regrets for a schooling cut short, the sense of loss after their emigration to Britain from the West Indies, and the determination she now felt—now that their children had grown up—to claim time for her own education: these things he had known about, but only (she said) when he saw them written down had they fully "sunk in": and he wept.)

Among many themes in this literature, that of what once were the taboos of women's reproduction is one. In Chapter 2, I quoted from the best-known example of these: *Every birth it comes different,* published by the Hackney Reading Centre in London in 1980. The process of producing the book had taken two years. Beginning from reading the information, pictures and poems about childbirth collected by the tutors, the work had entailed telling and listening to stories 18 women literacy students took part, all of them with stories of childbirth to recall—and writing. At one stage, two local midwives had joined the group to talk about home deliveries and hospital births. After the book was published, one of the authors, Sue Bissmire, gave a copy to another woman as a source of reference. As one of the literacy tutors recalled it for me, Sue took the book into the nursery where her baby was cared for and gave it to one of the nursery staff who herself was pregnant. She said, "If you're going to have a baby, this is what you should read" (Mace 1983:41).

Community publications from adult literacy work, then, have become a resource beyond the walls of the classroom; and—in this case—women's stories of motherhood and reproduction, written down, took the "creative spark" from a long line of mothers before them to pass on to others. This, then, is one way in which black and working-class mothers have taken hold of literacy to reverse several kinds of silence—including that of reproduction and menstruation. As one woman put it, in a collection of writing and discussion about the experience of "the curse":

> My Mum never talked to me about this stuff. She would the if she heard the word vagina! (East End Literacy Women's Group 1990:16)

The mothers who have taken part in "wealth models" of family literacy education have been enabled to use the opportunity familiar to women's education groups in adult literacy programmes like these to mesh their own

reading and writing interests with those of their children. The publishing of their stories becomes a resource for the children. The example in which I have been able to take part myself took place in Swansea, South Wales, between January and July 1997.

The Swansea Family Learning programme began in May 1994. Set up by the Community Education Service in West Glamorgan, its declared intention was first and foremost to provide an educational opportunity for women who had always been under-represented in their basic skills and Employment Service courses. (Employment opportunities for women in Swansea has been, in the 1980s and 1990s, largely confined to part-time shiftwork as shelf-fillers, cleaners, care assistants or factory operatives.) From a beginning in two schools, the programme grew over two years into a programme working with 23 schools, on a pattern of weekly half-day attendance. Sandra Morton, the co-ordinator, quoted women reporting similar gains in confidence to those reported from literacy programmes such as those in Hackney and Toronto:

> "It has made me realize that I still have a brain…and it works." "
> I don't feel so isolated now." "
> There's more to life than being a housewife and mother; there are opportunities beyond home." "
> I joined a computer course last week and I never would have done it if I hadn't come here." (Morton 1996:41, 42)

When Sandra agreed to work with me to convene a group of women from this programme to explore their own experience of literacy in relation to the historical material I had gathered, I felt excited. Originally, we planned it as a two-day project, with an interval of six weeks in between for the participants to carry out some of their own research, stimulated by what I would share with them of my own. As things turned out, a sequel proved essential; for a small group of the women with their tutor chose the option I proposed to develop their work into a community publication.

Forty-eight women from nine different family learning groups turned up on the first of the two days, in January. The two crèche workers employed for the day were fully occupied with ten children to look after; five tutors, and two librarians took an important role as scribes and discussion leaders. The invitation they had responded to was headed: "Reading, writing and living: a research project with and about mothers". The day began with a presentation I gave on three themes picked out from my reading of the Mass Observation writings about mothers bringing up children in the early decades of the century, summarized in the words: *time, help* and *letters.* The idea was to offer a sense of a recent past, when mothers like those in the room that day had had (or not had) time for their own reading and writing; when there were networks of help among communities which mixed illiterate and literate members; and when mothers were often the key letter-writers in family groups. In giving them examples of

autobiography, poetry and fiction during the presentation, I had wanted to suggest that history has many sources.

The women shifted the chairs into circles and within minutes the room was alive with talk. As I might have (but had not) predicted, the intended focus on literacy in the lives of their grandmothers and mothers was soon lost in the energy of all kinds of recollections. It was as if a tap had been turned on. The talk flowed; the scribes and discussion leaders were awash in words. Giving their own names to each other at the start of the talk was the easy bit. Giving names to the subjects of their discussion, was not. The women spoke of "my gran", "mum", "my mother-in-law", "granny", and that particular Welsh word, "mam": women portrayed as having many children, much washing and scrubbing to do and strong personalities. Their names—Vera, Gladys, Maud, Emily, flitted in and out of the talk like strangers. Scrapbooks, knitting patterns, newspaper crosswords, funeral bills—the reading and writing they did, at least as it was recalled that day by their daughters and granddaughters, had been fiercely practical (one great-grandmother had a straightforward filingsystem: the rent book kept under one cushion and the insurance under another).

Many of the women, as they left at the end of the day to go and pick up children from school, spoke of a new enthusiasm for history, hitherto seen as a dry affair. A month later, 28 of the same women returned, having carried out some of their own research. At Sandra Morton's suggestion, a "talking wall" display was put up (a long sheet of newsprint paper) on which the pictures and writing that women had brought in was tacked up and visible. Much of the morning was spent in groups with women talking of what they had learned from interviews and questions they had asked in their families. There was then a discussion as to who would be willing now to take their writing about mothers or grandmothers further, and take part in a community publishing project.

It was a group of five women and their tutor who, later, chose to develop the work in their weekly meetings during May and June, for which I joined them on two occasions. The family literacy they were engaged in now had a focus, not on their children, but on themselves, their mothers and their grandmothers. Jayne chose to write about her mother-in-law, about whom she had spent many hours in discussion and inquiry with her husband; Nazma decided to write about her mother, who had died a year before in Pakistan, for whom the process of the work provided, she said, a partial healing for her grief. Carol had interviewed her mother on three separate occasions, and learned a whole new dimension to the person she had known all her life. Lynda had written about her grandmother, drawing partly on childhood memories and partly on recollections of her aunt; and Linda had written about the grandmother with whom she had lived as a child.

Of Carol's two children, her 9-year-old attended the same school as Lynda's daughter. She had not been able to take part in the original days in January and February because of hospital appointments; but she had taken inspiration from the notes of those sessions and discussions in the group, and had interviewed her mother, Margaret—known as Peggy, now aged 83. At our meeting in May she told

us this had been "hilarious": and in recounting some of what her mother had told her, she had us all laughing too. Lynda, the mother of one daughter, had come to both the first meetings, and had brought with her to this one two versions of a piece she had written about Maud, her grandmother. Her aunt (her mother's eldest sister, now aged 90) had read the first version and said, "But you haven't said about her temper". So Lynda had inserted an addition to the second version. In her first version, she had begun:

> My Gran was a lovely lady who always had a smile for everyone. She was born on the 11th February 1881, one of four children, to a Devonshire Father and a Welsh Mother.

The comment from her aunt led her to insert (after "everyone"):

> But she didn't suffer fools gladly and had a sharp tongue for everyone.[3]

Jayne, herself the grandmother of a child at the school where the family literacy group had started, had from the start of this project declared an interest in researching the life of Lily May, her mother-in-law, who had died aged 92. She brought to the group an assortment of notes, certificates and photographs about her, together with typed sheets of her own writing.

Nazma's recollections of her mother, in this and later meetings of the group, brought tears. This is how she described the process of writing and remembering:

> I started writing all the things *I* remembered about my mum—my personal relationship with her. At times I felt like crying. Towards the end, our relationship was a bit tense. She's gone now, and what I tried to do was to go on to think about her as a person. I kept thinking, I've got to write this down for my daughter. It took me five or six weeks altogether. Lindsay helped me a lot. She wrote down some of the things I said. And we thought about the words. What about another word for "clean"? We looked it up in the thesaurus and found "immaculate". So I used that, instead; it seemed to say it better.

Carol was the only member of the group writing about a woman still living. Asked if she thought her mother would mind reading about herself in the planned publication, Carol said:

> Oh no. When I said "I've got to interview you" she said, "Am I going to be on the telly?"

The interview, she said, had been hard:

> I sat down and wrote a list of questions, but when she began, she talked about nothing to do with what I'd written. I interviewed her several times. I found it upsetting. My mum has always been there; I hadn't realized what a hard life she'd had.

Linda wrote, first, from her childhood recollections of her grandmother, who, with her grandfather lived with her and her family. It was not till later that Lindsay herself, the group's tutor, decided that she too wanted to write about her grandmother. This was at the stage when we agreed that this could be a community publication, to be launched in the autumn as a fruit of the earlier meetings in January and February, as an encouragement to the women who had participated then and others to develop their recollections in the same way, and as a resource for the authors' children and grandchildren.

It is always hard to convey in writing the vitality of discussions like those we had together, this group of women and I. There was a tremendous outburst ofanecdotes—about funerals, for instance, and the writing work of undertakers' receipts, letters of condolence, obituaries. (Jayne brought in a tin box with a 1928 receipt from the local undertaker in Swansea.) Carol spoke of her mother (now 83) keeping receipts of all kinds of things—including the pram in which she had been pushed as a baby. We discussed the question I had asked Mass Observation correspondents: namely, how do we know our grandmothers could read and write? and Lynda remembered hers reading the newspapers to her grandfather when he was going blind.

The work of the group's meetings during these weeks had sometimes been emotional. ("We've had so many tissues passed round since we started this!" said Lindsay.) There was a discussion about making the move from seeing their mothers as "mum" to seeing them as people with names. As Jayne said (of her mother-in-law) "Lily May was always 'Ma' to me". Each member of the group, in her writing, alternated between using their subject's full name and using her family name. Linda referred to Maud as "my gran", throughout; the habit of a lifetime was impossible to break. Carol alternated between "my mum" and using her name, Peggy. Nazma introduced her mother by her name, Sakina Bibi, and then moved on to writing about "my mother" or "mum".

In November 1997, the group held a publishing party, to which many of the original crowd of over 50 women came, together with families, friends, and children. By this time they had chosen a title both for their publication and for themselves. The first was to be called *Portraits in time*; as for themselves, they chose "The Swansea Mothers' Writing Group". Here are extracts from two of the pieces they wrote.

Peggy (by Carol)

> Peggy had always been conscious of her lack of education, especially in reading and writing. My favourite story is one my sisters have told me

about my mum writing letters to my dad at sea. It was a time they both dreaded. They would both be banished to bed and she would settle herself at the kitchen table ready for this mammoth task.

After a few minutes, Peggy would call out: "Glen, Glen!"

"Yes, Mam?"

"How do you spell *please*?"

Glen would diligently call out the letters one by one.

Next minute you'd get, "Glen, Glen!"

"Yes, Mam?"

"Which way does the P go—up or down?"

This would go on until the letter was finished.

Things haven't changed. We all dread her writing her Christmas cards, because every few minutes we get a phone call asking how to spell somebody's name. (Swansea Mothers' Writing Group 1997:5)

Lily May (by Jayne)

My mother-in-law Lily May was born in 1898 to Sarah and Patrick Morrisey. I feel that her life through childhood, marriage and old age can be reflected by the improvement in her circumstances. I've thought of them as flagstones, lino and fitted carpets.

Flagstones

Lily was the third of five children but survived them all and lived until April 1990. Her birth certificate with a mark of "X" shows her mother Sarah Jane's inability to write her name. Although her birth certificate shows her as Lily May, on her marriage certificate she is called Lilian May. She was an exact sort of person and had wanted her name written in full. (Swansea Mothers' Writing Group 1997:20)

This then was a group of mothers choosing to "play with time": to imagine and research what life might have felt like for their own mothers, mothers-in-law, and grandmothers. The process of making this history had included: interviews of a mother still living (Carol, with her mother); painful recollections of a mother recently dead (Nazma); gathering of childhood memories (Lynda, of her grandmother, who died when she was six years old); "long evenings reminiscing" (Jayne, with her husband about his mother); "lifting the mists" of her mother's memory through her own (Linda, of her grandmother); and sifting through family photographs (Lindsay, of her grandmother). Two women were reporting on women still living; four had searched for the other women through the traces they had left behind in their own memories and in the documents (such as they were) that remained of their lives.

Reflections

The family literacy programmes undertaken in the UK since 1993 have been creative and widespread; and I have no intention, in this chapter, to underplay either the seriousness of intent or the educational effectiveness of the whole range of projects and schemes that this initiative has encouraged into life during that time. Following a series of surveys over three years in England, Scotland and Wales, the National Literacy Trust estimated that some four hundred programmes were currently taking place in the UK "which could be broadly described as family literacy initiatives" (Pahl & Bird 1996, unpubl.). The fact that they found that the projects took place in playgroups, churches, housing schemes, libraries, day nurseries, baby clinics, family centres, travellers' sites, after-school support centres as well as schools seems to be an encouraging indication that the Ivanic & Hamilton (1990) notion of "domains" in which literacy enters our lives is more fully reflected than some have feared. The dominant model remains,however, that of parents working with young children; the Trust does not report how many of the parents were male.

My central question, therefore, remains this: why, in its inception, did the family literacy "idea" have such a central focus on the mother? This focus on the female parent ignores the other literacy networks which research—as well as everyday experience—shows us, surround the child. More important, for me, this focus on the mother, as the person responsible for carrying a message about the literate life to her child, poses a serious risk to that woman of denying her any interest in literacy for herself. Teaching the mother solely in order to reach her child excludes her from reaching herself.

That morning in a room in Swansea, as we ate the sandwiches and cake and coffee that the women had brought, we talked of women with no names but the name of mother, mum, gran, and ma. In the talk, the use of their names began to become a custom; and in that use, other people were revealed: Maud, Lily May, Violet, Sakina, Peggy. People who had been girls, as well as old women: people with voices of their own, and possibly—like the women there that day—with literacy appetites, too.

In the last chapter, I wrote about the networks of support to which those with limited literacy might resort when there is literacy work to be done. Such networks are not always simple, however; and among the pleasures for women in gaining their own self-confidence as readers and writers is the pleasure of no longer having to rely on a literate partner. Many years ago I was reminded of this by a woman called Sarah, talking to me in her flat with her volunteer literacy tutor, Pam. Sarah —the mother of eight children—had had constant paperwork to deal with in the struggle to gain a passage to this country for her son in Jamaica. She spoke that day of the sense of pleasure she had in Pam's meetings with her. She also spoke of the pleasure she had in no longer having to depend on her husband to deal with her letters:

> Before directly I couldn't read. I feel a fool of myself, you know? Like I doesn't have no sense. You know, but since now I picking up, you know, no one can fool me directly so much again. Even my husband, you know. Sometime when I get a letter, sometime when me and him don't agree, you know? I have to still force on him to look at the letter. But now I can directly look at it and see the words, and I don't have to ask him. Sometimes when the kids them take letter, form, from the school, I can sign it and write so-and-so on it. (Mace 1979:103)

For Sarah, at the time, to be literate was to become independent—a position of pride. The women in the group in Swansea were already—in a technical sense — literate, certainly more able to read and write than Sarah was. What they stood to gain from our project together, as I hope Sarah has gained since then, was the sense of being members of a writing community, mother—writers as well as mother-readers. What they revealed, too, was the existence in their own histories of some mothers who chose to conserve and treasure the paperwork of family life. Jayne's mother-in-law Lily was such a woman:

> As I was clearing her home following her death (writes Jayne), I was struck by how much she'd loved writing and had hoarded anything written. She kept many documents such as the rights of burial for her parents, dated 1913. I also found a letter from her son David John dated "Sunday 1944–5. 30" sent from France during the war. All letters from (her sister) Elizabeth and her friend May were neatly stored away in a chest. (Swansea Mothers' Writing Group 1997:24.)

The theme of "mothers and literacy" assumes, as one colleague put it to me, "the idea of mothers helping their kids to read and write". In this chapter we have, instead, considered how it can mean mothers imagining their own mothers' lives through the lens of reading and writing. This suggests one alternative to the oneway, mother-and-young-child version of a "family". Another is offered by the Family and Community Literacy Electronic Network, announced at a 1997 conference on the subject: "A 'family' can be construed as any small constellation of adult(s) and child(ren) committed to living closely together for an extended period, potentially including a very wide range of carers" (Savitsky 1997:50).

Notes

1. The bounce of two balls against a wall created the rhythm for a playground rhyme on the subject, which my daughter Jess, like thousands of other girls in playgrounds all round the country, chanted with her friends in the mid-1970s.

2. Both Alice Walker and Tillie Olsen add their own gloss to Virginia Woolf s earlier diatribe against the silencing of women. Woolf had written: "Genius of a sort must have existed among them, as it existed among the working classes, but certainly it never got onto paper" (Woolf 1981:48). Olsen footnotes this with: "Half of the working classes *are* women" (Olsen 1980:11). Walker's parenthesis, to the same passage is this: "…among the working class [Change this to 'slaves' and 'the wives and daughters of sharecroppers']" (Walker 1995:239).
3. It was a change that for me related to others, described in Chapter 3, in which talk with others may extend the written account of one person's memory.

Chapter 7
Images and certificates: traces of a life

Sources for understanding the past may be written or oral. They can also be visual. This chapter pays a little attention to this, and begins with the possibility that pictures and photographs offer as sources for imagining mothers in the past.

Most of the written traces of mothers' lives consist of what historians call "ephemera": transitory writing, not intended to last or be kept—the kind that, if it is kept at all, clutters up the kitchen drawer, is stuffed behind a clock on the mantlepiece or forgotten in a box: postcards, shopping lists, bills, messages and scrapbooks; written for a time, but not for all time. All these are important evidence of everyday literacy practices, the place where private and public selves meet: intended only for the self or the single other reader, for light entertainment, for arrangements or as a prompt to the memory. Until now, these are the only written "evidence" we have considered.

There are also, however, the official documents of a life, designed to last as a permanent record, and providing a public record of the individual's existence. Certificates of birth, marriage and death and the inscriptions on graves are literacy at its most solemn: the search for family histories depends on their preservation in archive record office or stone. This chapter tells of a poet and a novelist who both seek to become the historians of their grandmothers' lives through sources such as these.

At the beginning of this book, I considered some thinking about two of the book's themes: literacy, and time. Literacy is not an absolute: its uses vary with context. Similarly, in lived experience, time is a conditional matter. I conclude with some reflections on the identity of "mother" herself, and on how this, too, is a relative matter. With this, I recapitulate the main strands of the book as a whole.

Images

Several times in the research for this book I found myself asking people: When you see your mother reading, what do you see? when you picture her writing, what is the picture?

When I interview myself with this question, I see at first nothing. Then, I see two things. First, a sheet of blue notepaper, address in capital letters centred at the top; and my mother's low, round handwriting. Her letters to me always began with the same words: "Darling Jane". (But still I do not see *her,* for by definition the letters are symbols of her absence.) Then, I see her reading aloud to my daughter, years ago, when she was maybe six or seven years old, both of them curled up on the sofa. (But still I do not see her *reading for herself*.) She read, I know, in bed at night; she used to say she could not contemplate going to sleep without first reading for at least half an hour first. She bought and read magazines, I know; she borrowed and read library books; she read and consulted knitting patterns; she wrote shopping lists—and more letters. For the last 17 years of her life she was a volunteer transcriber of braille; she would sit in the afternoon in the spare room upstairs and translate all kinds of texts, from O-level exam questions to cookery books, for a transcription service.

But I cannot *see* her reading or writing. My mother's name was Mary. To the extent that her literacy life was a time of play, Mary, in adult life, played at a time and a place when this child of hers at least was not there.

In the second chapter I said that, to understand anyone's literacy life, the observation of their literacy behaviour is not enough. Looking through other windows and between the curtains of other people's memories, it has been possible to catch glimpses of other mothers, at different ages throughout their lives, snatching moments of reading, pausing over writing a letter, alone and with others. With that information we can piece together a partial idea of their literacy: but we can still only guess at what they made of it. In order to create some kind of portrait of mothers reading or writing, the writers and speakers in this book have searched their imaginations as well as their memories. Some of them also searched through the written documents of a life; and a few of them referred to photographs.

On the pinboard in front of my desk is the photograph of another woman: half-lying on a sofa, her arms flung in the air, her face wonderfully animated: an image of warmth and voice captured by a camera, one Saturday morning in June 1997 in her house in Holland. The woman is Fie Van Dijk. The occasion is a conversation: she and I are talking about women and literacy. Beside me on the table, here on a dark London autumn evening six months later, are some of the postcard reproductions she lent me from her collection.

Fie Van Dijk's work in collecting and analyzing the gendered representation of reading and writing has illuminated the thinking of literacy educators across Europe and beyond. In the UK, her work first became more widely known at a conference convened by the national Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) network in 1990.[1] Papers from that conference were later published (Hamilton et al. 1994) and included six reproductions from Fie's collection alongside the summary of a discussion on women and literacy. Her own account of the origin of the collection later appeared in a number of papers, notably in an article she published in an issue of RaPAL Bulletin (van Dijk 1994):

> The start was quite simple: now and then I got postcards with love from friends. I don't remember when it startled me that a certain pattern showed up in the pictures of reading and writing. And that pattern is that women are reading and writing in quite different ways from men. (van Dijk 1994:1)

Two examples she gives of this difference are: men read newspapers, women read or write letters; and:

> Most postcards depict women in subordinate positions. They look up (often in a very provocative posture) at the man who gives them orders, they type their texts even literally blindfold, and above all they read the letters of their lovers; they never study, (van Dijk 1994:2)

The collection is one of postcard reproductions; from that early start somewhere around 1983, the collection has since grown to over a thousand. Selections from it have been displayed at conferences in England, in Germany, in Holland and in France; and the thinking that they have provoked has inspired and contributed to cultural studies in those countries and beyond. These are pictures of women and men reading and writing, in many different settings: outdoors and indoors, in hot and cold climates, alone and with others. They are reproductions of drawings, etchings and paintings from across the world; as well as photographs and cartoons (usually European or American). As such, they are commercial products, themselves designed for literacy use; and the very fact of Fie sending and receiving them is an illustration of one of the roles in which she found women most often depicted: namely, as readers and writers of letters (of which the postcard, as we discussed in the previous chapter, is the most abbreviated and least "important" form).

In the next two pages are three cartoons lent from Fie's collection that offer an ironic look at the kinds of reading and writing we have seen that mothers engage in. Out of duty or pleasure, with grim determination or delicious luxury, these women write the holiday postcard, make yet another shopping list and soak indulgently in fiction.

Two other images follow: images at the opposite extremes of "family literacy": the first, a sentimental and domestic scene which portrays both parents with a child, the second showing three women (any one of whom might be a mother, we don't know) very clearly reading with nobody's interests in mind but their own.

Bourgeois literacy: France, 1920s

The woman is sitting in the armchair, one bare arm resting on the arm of the chair, the other embracing her child. For her part, the little girl seems to be half sitting, half standing close to the mother's crossed legs. The mother is turning the page of a magazine. The magazine has a picture on the front of what appears tobe a child-fairy, with full-skirt; the figure is clasping a baton and staring

Wish you were here…

laughingly out at the reader. Above the picture is the magazine title; indistinct, the first word, the second (blurred) appears to be the word "Ouvrage". Mother and daughter smile at the magazine. Their hair is carefully waved and brushed; the mother is wearing a short-sleeved silky shirt and a round-necked plain dark dress, and the kind of shoes that were fashionable in the 1920s, with bars across and low heels. We cannot see much of what her daughter is wearing, except her white socks. The two of them smile, eyes lowered, at the magazine. And at the mother's elbow, lying on the arm of the chair and casually touching the skin of her forearm, are four roses.

Who is this, standing behind? dressed in three piece suit, his tie pierced by a neat tie pin, his glossy hair smoothed flat either side of the careful parting, leaning over mother and daughter: who can he be, but father? The three of them, looking down at the magazine held lightly in the mother's fingers, form a triangle: entranced, as it were, by the magazine—which, held at the distance it is from the mother, must be all but illegible (as it is to the viewer). The smiles are unanimous. The message is: we are a unit, united at the lowest point of our triangle by the prospect in front of us. None of the three has their mouth open. No-one is speaking, still less reading aloud from the page in front of them. The rose petals just touch the skin of the woman's arm; the man's finger just brushes the silk of her shirt. How happy they look! how transfixed! what an image of family bliss!

It is a photograph, in sepia; all it says on the reverse, is "fabrication francaise". We do not know the identity of either photographer or subjects. Fie's comment on it as I picked it out of her box of cards was: "It is so *bourgeois*!."

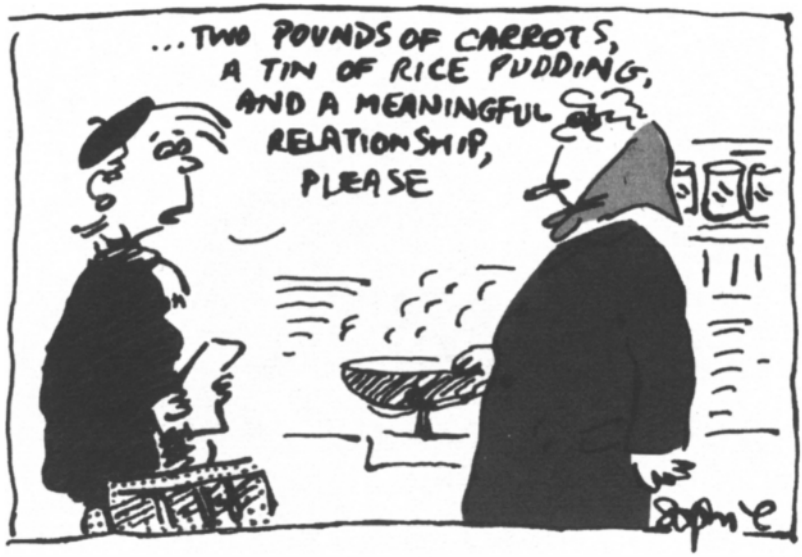
Too much of a good thing can be wonderful…

Knit your own orgasm

Many Mass Observation writers mentioned that the one thing they *did* remember their mothers reading was knitting patterns. Both my mother and my mother-in-law were fine knitters, prolific producers of garments large and small, fine and chunky, from girlhood to old age, over six or seven decades. Knitting is also the single thing it is possible to do—if you are good at it—at the same time as reading or talking. To the outsider, or non-knitter, knitting is homely, knitting is sensible, knitting is the good housewife and mother; it appears to occupy no intellectual oremotional energy; out of the context of home and hearth, it is faintly absurd. What is deliriously funny about this picture, then, is the association of the knitter with sexual delight. The secret is out: women who knit also have bodies. Beneath her motherly apron, the reader on the right is capable of lust.[2]

In the search through Fie van Dijk's collection, I became struck by the representation of family literacy offered by European paintings of the "Madonna and Child". While, at first sight, the pose appears to be that of mother reading to child, it holds other significance. As an interesting aside on my main focus, I have included a note on this in Appendix 2.

Most of this book has focused on memories as a source of information about the lives of mothers. These have been a mix of episodic memories—tales and anecdotes—and something referred to earlier as "autobiographical knowledge".



Meaningful relationship

In addition, we have noticed that some memories have been of pictures or scenes. The following is another such image; its power lies not so much in the visual scene it presents as in an atmosphere which it recalls. It comes from my interview with Gwen:

> I remember, I think it would be just before my 4th birthday, the Christmas before I was 4. And we went to my Grandma's on Christmas Day. My Uncle Joe and Aunty Lena lived there, of course; they'd provide most of it. Father Christmas had come to Grandma's before we arrived—and I remember thatI'd been given this beautiful nursery rhyme book. It were the colourful, stiff back kind, and it was thick. It was big. My mother was sitting on a chair, and I was standing next to her with this book open. And there were pictures—on every page, there was a nursery rhyme and a picture—very, very nicely done. It would have cost a lot of money. It perhaps cost 5 shillings, which was, you know…and I was trying to attract my mother's attention: "What's this about? what's this about?". But she was, of course, in conversation with all the adults.
>
> *I remember feeling great pleasure with the book and with my mother being there, because my mother was working otherwise, you know. The whole, the warmth of the room, and everything was absolutely smashing—even though I didn't get my mother's full attention— it was all absolutely magical, and this book was part of it.*
>
> (Interview, February 1997) (my emphasis)

Bourgeois literacy

Lily had had little schooling herself; an "unbookish" upbringing. All Gwen's childhood she had been a working mother, working at the mill. In this picture of mother, child and book, the book is incidental. Its importance lies not in who was reading and what it was about, but in the intimacy and warmth of atmosphere. It was "magical"; and in that sense, it is a picture which neither painting or photograph could adequately capture. It is the context of the image that keeps its importance for Gwen—a context which is absent from the sentimental cameo of family literacy provided by the "bourgeois" threesome in the postcard.

Knit your own orgasm

Certificates

For Carolyn Steedman, the discovery of a photograph on the mantlepiece was also the discovery of her father's first wife and child. It was after her father's death that she and her sister learned they had been illegitimate; in this learning, a multitude of details and incidents from their lives took on a different significance and meaning than they had ever had before. (The fact that the two girls had had "proper" birth certificates is one which, she says, gave her (as a historian) cause for concern: if her own certificate had been fake, what did it mean for "the verisimilitude" of any others? (Steedman 1992:41).) The certificates lied: or rather, her parents had. She follows this discovery with that of another certificate —one she had always thought would exist, and which turned out to be nonexistent. When she was a child, her mother had told her that she had been baptized, in Hammersmith, and that they had "lost touch" with her godparents. After her mother's death, years later, she found that this story was a fabrication: "It was a genuine shock *not* to find a baptismal certificate with my name on it after her death, among all the papers stuffed into drawers and old handbags" (Steedman 1992:71).

As well as memories, Mass Observation writers and the other sources for this book also turned to documents to make some sense of their mothers' lives. Just as literacy itself represents a hidden life, so the hidden lives of mothers may berevealed through written documents discovered long after the event they record. The Irish poet Eavan Boland and the English novelist Margaret Forster

both sought to find an understanding of their grandmothers via "written evidence". Their published accounts of these searches mix poetic description with autobiographical narrative:

> In a summer dusk, when I was seventeen (writes Eavan Boland), my mother told me a story. I was leaning across a chair, facing a window. Back out towards the river, which ran behind the house, the sky was still bright; everything else was still darkening. The fruit trees were spare and dark—a child's drawing. The apples were black globes.
>
> The story she told was about her mother. She had been born into a family of millers and had been one of thirteen children. She had married very young, a seaman who became a sea captain. She had died after the birth of her last child—my mother—at thirty-one in a Dublin hospital.

"It was a short conversation", Boland goes on:

> Of a woman she could not remember. Who had been deserted by good luck and had left five orphan daughters. There was nothing heroic in her account, and she offered no meanings. Instead she did what innumerable human beings have done with her children. She told me what had happened. (Boland 1996:67–68)

The scene is between mother and daughter—a scene when, briefly, the mother is herself a daughter, passing on the "facts" of her own mother's life. Elsewhere in the same book, Eavan Boland takes the reader on her journey to fill in the gaps in this picture: gaps left both by her own listening, as well as by her mother's choice of telling. Her search takes her to the Dublin hospital where she attempts to discover the woman who, at the age of thirty-one, had gone there to the; and to a graveyard, where this woman, her grandmother, had been laid to rest.

But her grandmother's name was not to be found. In that graveyard outside Dublin, through a long cold afternoon, she peered through unkempt grass at stones, some with inscriptions, most without; reading the few with words and names on them, and searching the others, she finally had to give in and recognize that her grandmother's name was not there, and she grieved—both for the name and for the woman it belonged to: "She had turned her head for it, come running to it as a child, hoped for it on a letter and answered if in moments of love. And now she had no memorial because she had no name" (Boland 1996:23).

With this, Boland resumes the narrative of her own life as a young poet, of how she had felt herself to have no name; a woman reading men and finding no place for her own experience in their writing.

This had been a quest for a grandmother whom the granddaughter had never met but who had always been part of her life. Reading it recalled a similar searchI had made myself, not long before. In 1995, I too sought my grandmother's grave. Like Eavan Boland, I had never met this woman: she had died before I was

born. Unlike her, I found her name, carved in stone, and I read the words that had been composed by her grieving husband, my grandfather. On the wall at home I also have a black and white photograph of her, taken in 1919 or 1920 holding my mother (aged three) on her lap. In a box I have just one letter in her handwriting, written to her son, my uncle, a few months before she died. These three pieces of "evidence" are all I have with which to imagine the life of someone called Cynthia Salome Caroline, "born January 12 1893, married August 28 1915, died July 30 1940". I know she had three children; I do not know how many other pregnancies she had. I know she had a brother and a sister, a father and a mother, and a husband; I do not know who else she loved. I know she suffered from asthma, played the piano, grew up in London, died in Canberra, Australia. What I do not know is how she saw the world or her place in it. What I am told, by the inscription on the gravestone, is that "she was much loved".

When my grandmother wrote to her son, my uncle, she was 47; he, 15. As the mother of a son who is now 26, I feel sympathy for her. Yet, despite the phrase "my grandmother" I can feel little claim on her. Our lives are separated by deaths: her own, that of her husband, my grandfather, and all her three children, including Mary, my mother, the eldest. It takes a conscious effort to name her in her own right—Cynthia—a similar effort to that of the women in Swansea or in the U3A group in London. But at least her name was visible to me, that day in the churchyard in Canberra.

Boland found no stone memorial for her grandmother; but she did find her death certificate, marking "the death of a young woman, far from her home" in the National Maternity Hospital in 1909. Here, Mary Ann's name is written "in a sloping, florid hand…the letters of the name thick and thin by turns, where the calligraphic nib pressed down and eased up" (Boland 1996:29).

In Margaret Forster's case, the search was also for written names. She sought not only her grandmother, but her grandmother's "fourth unacknowledged daughter". She too went looking for the *name written down*—the name of the mother, and also of the daughter who was never allowed to be named. In her search, she checked registers of birth, marriage and death. Knowing her grandmother's birthdate (1869) and her name, she was able to track down the record of the daughter's birth:

> Immediately, it was there: to Margaret Ann Jordan, domestic servant, aged twenty-three, on 12 April 1893 a girl, named Alice, born in Wetheral, the village Tom (Margaret's husband) took his girls to, but where Margaret Ann would never go. (Forster 1995:48)

The book Forster writes is not an autobiography (or not in the sense of the author's own lifetime alone)—although she enters it in the first person two-thirdsof the way through; it is, rather, a combination of fictional and documentary narrative, woven with the skill of the practised novelist. The search

it represents is not for her own life, but for her grandmother's: for Margaret Ann, mother of an illegitimate daughter, had herself been illegitimate.

Its magic, to me, is the way in which Margaret Forster steps from one literacy drama to another. Beginning with the birth of her grandmother, she moves to a day just over 60 years later when a woman (who turns out to be Alice) Stands on the doorstep asking to meet Margaret Ann, the mother who had abandoned her as a child. From there, Forster shifts the scene to another day, after Margaret Ann's death and funeral, when Alice reappears seeking to know what may have been left to her in her mother's will. This document, pulled out of a drawer by shocked middle-aged daughters, makes no mention of Alice. Ten years later (in 1946) we are in a church hall where eager young Brownies (of whom Margaret Forster herself is one) are being encouraged to go home and research their family history, ask questions of relatives, and write down their family trees. The child, "goes straight into her home and begins asking for names and dates, pencil poised, sheet of paper ready" (Forster 1995:11)

Thus began (as a good storyteller might say) a lifetime's search, culminating (but not ending) in the discovery of Alice's birth certificate. So the grandmother *had* given birth to a fourth daughter: a daughter whose name she had caused to be recorded at the time of giving birth, but refused to recognize at the time of her dying.

In 1930 Jean, Margaret Ann's daughter, married and moved. It was as if she had emigrated. The mother grieves; the daughter promises to write. Letters would be small consolation: "Facts had to be faced; this daughter was leaving the family and that was that. The ninety or so miles to Motherwell might as well be nine thousand for all they would now see of her" (Forster 1995:79).

As things turned out, the letters to and from Jean *did* provide consolation—not for Jean's mother, but for her sister, Lily (Margaret Forster's mother). The picture she gives of Lily sitting down to write each week to Jean (so far away) is of a ceremony:

> It was a formal business, this letter-writing and it impressed me. My mother looked so important doing it. She would spread a felt undercloth on the living-room table and put a sheet of blotting paper on top of it and then a bottle of Quink ink and a pad of blue Basildon Bond notepaper, and then she'd pick up her blue and black Conway Stewart fountain-pen and start. (Forster 1995:141–2)

Lily, once a doctor's secretary in an office with letters to type and be signed, brought the formality of the office into her living room. The letters themselves, according to her daughter's recollection, did not satisfy their author; but the replies (each Tuesday) were "a treat, kept for the afternoons, when the washing and cleaning were done" (Forster 1995:142).

The "bare facts" of the life of Eavan Boland's grandmother had been given to her one summer dusk when she herself was 17 years old. Years later (in her early

thirties) she set off to a graveyard in her car to try to find the headstone of this woman, and finds none. At the age of 49, she writes about these two episodes, and about her reaction to the handwriting on the one document where she did find her grandmother's name written: the death certificate. The handwriting is "sloping"; the letters of the name "thick and thin by turns".

Facts and handwriting go hand in hand. Pencil in hand, the eight-year-old Margaret Forster sat poised to elicit "facts" about her family history. Her mother Lily, writing to her sister, set herself the task of telling her some of the "facts" of her life that week. And at the end of the letter, she signed her name, as a sister would: not with the formal signature she might have used for more official purposes (like the marriage register) but in her everyday handwriting. Cynthia, my grandmother, wrote the word "Mummy" at the end of her letter to her son: the sign of a tie of love and affection, but a word which also puts limits around what he could ever have known of her. When, years before, she had signed her name on the marriage register, she would have written, instead, the word "she would have turned her head for".

Mothers are relative

A mother, of course, is only a mother to her children. It is a relative term. The mother of my niece is also the sister of my husband; my own mother was the sister of two brothers; while I am the mother of my two children, I am also aunt to my brother's sons; and so on. My own mother was not only "mine": she was the mother of my two brothers and sisters, too. More important still is the fact dial a mother is also a woman with other identities. In different contexts she will introduce herself as different people: in one, she may say she is the chair of the meeting; in another, she is the receptionist in an office or surgery; in a third, she is the singer of a song. She may be able to fix a broken engine; she may be good at speaking three languages. She may be black, she may be white. Being a mother is a relative condition, not an absolute one. But as soon as we put "mothers" and "literacy" side by side, there seems to be a common assumption that what we are talking about is "mothers helping their children to read and write".

The business of mothering has itself been the subject of a mass of writing, in the last century as well as this. Since the 1950s, for women becoming mothers for the first time, or for mothers of infants and pre-school children, an "explosion of books, pamphlets and magazine articles" had become available, advising on every aspect of child development (Urwin 1982). New mothers have been subjected to advice since time began; advice on the best way of bringing upchildren has never been in short supply. The special feature of advice to mothers in the late twentieth century, however, seems to have been this focus on *literacy.*

There is such pleasure to be had in knowing we can help our children; the confidence that mothers gain from feeling we are competent to enable them to grow and bloom is immeasurable. That children flourish in such a relationship of

support is well known. Meanwhile, every mother has her other identities and lives; each one holds within her adult, maternal self both the girl she once was and the old woman she is yet to be: regrets and relief mix with anticipation and dreams. When one or other of her other selves seeks to find expression, her family may protest:

> I announce to my family that, in future, I am claiming time off from domestic chores to read and write, in preparation for an O-level in English! "Mum's Career" has long been a source of merriment, and notes left on the table or cooker are referred to as "Mum's literary efforts", without any action being taken on their contents.
>
> Now I am in earnest. Other mothers belong to clubs, play bridge, golf, bingo. This Mum wants to read to some purpose. The hour between the children's tea and preparation of Father's dinner shall be devoted to Keats, or Hardy, or Macbeth. I shall go into the lounge, away from the television noise. My books are already in there. "MUM! is something boiling over on the stove?" (Stanton 1986:40–41)

Women who leave home to engage in their own writing and reading via family literacy projects can and do meet in their own right, as well as in their capacities as mothers to children at school. Such a group met for two years in Moss Side, Manchester, telling stories about their own families, childhoods, and the countries they had grown up in—as part of learning to speak English more fluently. The women had grown up in Somalia, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Pakistan; for most of them, learning English had also been their first opportunity to learn to read and write—and the magazine and anthology they produced was published in their first languages as well as in English. Ten of the women contributed to a book of these texts published by Gatehouse, the established publisher of writing by adult learners. Both the process and the publication represent a fine example of a family literacy strategy that gives voice to the women in their own right, not merely in their relative roles as mothers (Fitzpatrick & Mumin, 1996).

"Teaching the mother to reach the child", without attending to the woman in her own right, is to continue to subordinate women to being mere agents of reproduction. It should hardly be a surprise that mothers who have been denied the opportunity to reach their own literacy interests have had mixed feelings about their children's.

Ambivalence

"She wanted us 'educated', so that we could get safe jobs", recalls one Mass Observation correspondent (El510). His mother had been born in 1894, the eighth and last child of a tailor, in Devon, who grew up to have four of her own children and whom he recalls as "literate, intelligent, politically-minded…but

not an avid reader". Also described as a "tough, Amazonian woman", this mother, according to her son:

> Would have snorted at such words as "literacy". To her, education was a means to an occupational end. And who could criticize her, given her years-long struggle keeping us fed, clothed and together during childhood?

Other mothers felt impatient or even hostile to their children's schooling:

> Maud ruled her family with a rod of iron, and I believe, was afraid of her children being "cleverer" than her. She believed that school work should be done at school… Maud would not tolerate their homework and once threw Elsie's homework on the fire. (R1321)

The sight of a child lost in reading or writing is assumed to be a delight to parents: in practice, it could be the last straw. Eleanor (in an account derived from stories told to the writer "by my mother, who is now almost 80"), was a woman who had brought up a large family in a remote Lancashire village. She had, according to the writer, "an antipathy to reading":

> She felt it was "a waste of time when there's work to be done", and my mother remembers her throwing books on the fire, or lighting the fire with their pages, with the remark that "It's all they're good for".

Eleanor's "antipathy" to books co-existed with an equally passionate sympathy towards other kinds of literacy. She enjoyed what she saw to be "real life" reading. She valued receiving letters from her family in the village 12 miles away and regularly read the newspaper, which she said "had some point to it": "It was about real life and not the fanciful stuff of books" (S481). Several people (including Gwen) wrote about mothers who, at one stage, were apparently sympathetic to their daughters' literacy and at another stage opposed to their education.

If at the heart of literacy's pleasure is the pleasure of playing, both with time and with what Adrienne Rich calls "notions", then who should be surprised if a mother "in the old way"—a mother managing home and family with little space or time for herself—should feel contrary emotions at her daughter's withdrawal into this play?

> It is difficult to draw an accurate picture of my mother's childhood. I know what her parental home was like, because it was still where my grandparents lived during my own early childhood, an upstairs two-bedroom flat in a mean, brick terrace where the housewives proudly whitestoned their front steps daily, where there was always a smell of

> damp and decay along the downstairs corridor, where a single room always served as combined kitchen-dining-living room and where you washed yourself in the shallow kitchen sink with water heated in a big kettle on the coal-fired range. The loo (unlit) was in the back yard alongside the scullery. It was in this setting that she shared her formative years with her sister (two years older) and her brother (two years younger). (J2520)

After a day's reading texts such as this in the cool shade of the quiet Archive room in the University of Sussex library, I was struck by the contrast between what I had been reading and the scene that faced me when I walked outside. Students, women and men, were strolling across the grass, leaning against the wall, meeting and talking, resting or hurrying. After the descriptions I had been reading of crowded basements and kitchens steaming with clothes drying and meals cooking, the sunlit scene was a sharp contrast.

The lifespans summarized in some of the texts lingered in my head as I walked down the steps from the library:

> Jinny (born 1874) went to school and I remember her telling me that at the age of 12 she went part time and paid twopence (or a penny) a week. She could definitely read (she died reading a newspaper). All I ever heard about her home life was how poor the family was. There was never any suggestion that anyone (mother or father) read or had any education. From age 12 she worked as a servant. (J931)

The scene before me had the illusion, at least, of freedom. Had I not been aware of the growing fears of debt and poverty facing university students since the 1980s, I would have assumed that the people I saw that afternoon were living a life of luxury of which their grandmothers could only have dreamed. Once mothers had become grandmothers and (with good luck) were enjoying a relative freedom from the round of daily housework endured when they had been raising their own children, many were reported as swelling with pride at their granddaughters' educational achievements. But indoors, in the home, when those daughters were "*in the way, not helping*" or "*doing the dishes*", with their "*nose in a booK*", many of the mothers recalled in the typed and handwritten pages I had been reading, under the constant pressure of "work to be done", had felt maddened.

Teaching the mother

Literacy is a very ordinary, everyday business; it also confers status and power. Ethnographic studies of reading and writing in daily life have offered exciting ways to recognize the interest in this "ordinariness", so that the literacy of the kitchen may be as interesting as the "important" literacy of published history and

literature. (Among many interesting chapters in Denny Taylor's book on family literacy, for example—which I recommend to you—is that in which she gives examples of the notes, left on the kitchen table, written between members of a family (Taylor 1983).) The ordinary and incidental kinds of writing and reading that mothers' undertake in the routines of the lives of their families became suddenly fascinating to the women in the Swansea project (described in Chapter 6). As their own ethnographers, they were undertaking a mini-research project on their own family literacy and in so doing, giving recognition to what they already knew—as well as continuing to think about what they still wished to learn.

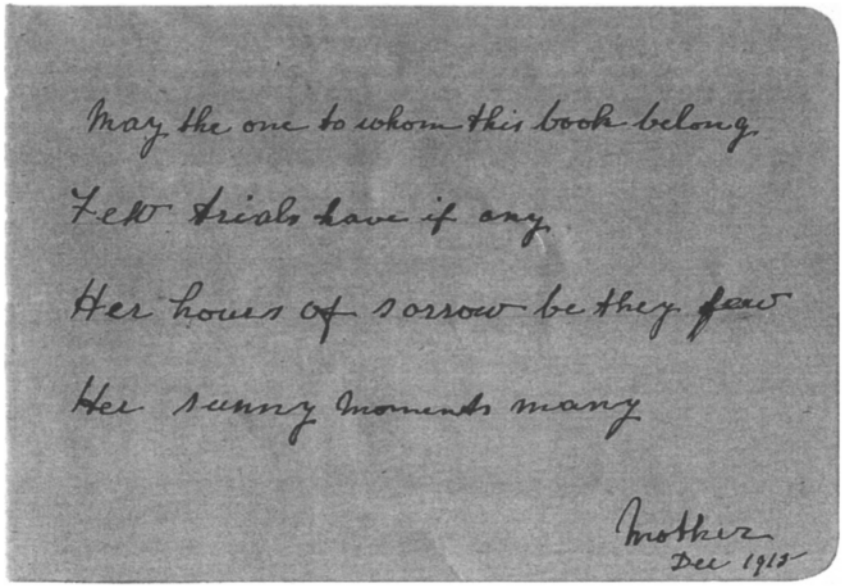
By way of conclusion, I invite you to consider the signature—the conventional end to much paperwork, both mundane and ceremonial. There was a time when it was common to collect autographs in an autograph book. This is a different practice from getting celebrities to give their autograph—on a book they have written, on a cricket bat, on anything that the fan has to hand. The autograph book was something particular to girls at school; we got our friends to sign in it, usually at the end of term or when we all finally left school. (The practice of giving signatures on parting company continues today with the office leaving card or the practice of school-leavers writing messages and signatures on each others' shirts.) Messages and rhymes would go with the signature—"By hook or by crook I"ll be last in this book".

The signature in the autograph book on the next page is that of "mother". She has signed the book of her daughter (then aged 19), with a careful rhyme.

> May the one to whom this book belong
> Few trials have if any
> Her hours of sorrow be they few
> Her sunny moments many.

This, then, was the impersonal/personal signature of the (as usual) nameless "mother" with the personal/impersonal rhyme addressed, not to her daughter's name, but to "the one to whom this book belong".

The double meaning of signatures—personal, impersonal, formal, informal—is played out, too, in the way that they represent formal agreement to legal arrangements. This agreement cannot be accepted as binding until and unless the very personal mark of each party has been given to it. The signature, referred to in Chapter 5 as the single measure of literacy levels in the nineteenth century, is an intensely personal matter, used today for the most official events. David Vincent has pointed out that it is a special feature of a society with advanced writingtechnologies (first typewriting, then electronic) that the artifice of the illegible signature has reached its summit. Until this century, the handwritten name was set down with the express intention that it could be read in full: "Only the gentry and the occasional lawyer drew attention to their learning by the elaboration of their writing; few adopted the twentieth century conceit of cultivated illegibility" (Vincent 1993:21).



Signing off

The signature on the marriage register provides the single trace we have of the literacy of our antecedents in the early nineteenth century. As historians have recognized, the ability to sign said little about anything else in the user's literacy life. To be able to write our own name is one of the oldest and deepest of literacy ambitions. To be able to write it illegibly is a relatively recent symbol of the fully literate citizen.

Most of this book has been about the past, not the future. That is because, as I said at the start, this was the approach I chose with which to look differently at the present. We live in a time when it is assumed that terrible things are happening to national standards of literacy. On a daily basis, complaints are made about the standard of spelling, reading, or writing among today's children, compared with previous generations. Someone must be at fault; progressive methods of teaching are one scapegoat, poor standards of literacy in the home are another. It has not been my intention to arrive at a conclusion either way, for, like Margaret Meek, I am doubtful that the complaint itself has any basis. I have certainly not set outto "prove" that mothers (or any other family members) do or do not cause children to fail in school, because that is not an issue that interests me. Rather, I have been exploring what mothers themselves might want literacy for. I have been seeking to tease out with you how we may put the two words "mothers" and "literacy" next to each other without it being assumed that we are only talking about children. And in doing so, I have been inviting you to play a little.

Notes

1. The Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) network was established in 1985. It is a national network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland who are engaged in adult literacy and basic education. Supported by membership subscription, it publishes a bulletin three times a year and aims to promote democratic practices in adult literacy work.
2. The reading of knitting patterns is not usually seen as a literacy activity in its own right; plenty of knitters read patterns without knitting, of course—if only to decide which pattern they like. Someone might do some research on this, perhaps. Mary Hamilton and David Barton have found people who read cookery books in bed at night for the fun of it—so why not knitting patterns? (Barton & Hamilton 1998). I have knitted too, but less skilfully than my mother or mother-in-law. My tension is tight; and for years I had the disappointment of making up a finished garment only to discover it was one size too small. When my children went to university, I knitted each of them a jumper. Choosing the thickest yarn and the fattest needles, I thought I could not fail. The jumpers were to be warm and large; and I became nervous in another direction: I thought they would end up knee-length. So once made up, it turned out that the sleeves were fine, but the body was three inches too short. The pattern brings it all back to me:

   Using 6½ mm needles cast on 47 (51, 53, 55, 57, 61) sts.
   Rib row 1: P. 1 *k.l, p. 1, rep. from * to end.
   Rib row 2: K.1, *p.1, k.1,
   rep. from * to end.
   Rep. these 2 rows for 3 in., ending rib row 2.
   Change to 8 mm. needles.
   Proceed in fisherman's rib as follows:
   Row 1: (Right side) K.
   Row 2: K.1 *p.1, k.1B., rep. from * to last 2 sts. p.1 k.1
   These 2 rows form the patt. Continue in patt. until back measures 13½ (14, 14, 14, 14, 14) in. from cast-on edge, ending wrong-side row. *(Length can be adjusted here)* (my emphasis)

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Appendix 1
Mass Observation Directive No. 46, November 1995
Part 2: Mothers and literacy in the early 1900s[1]

Jane Mace of Goldsmiths' College, University of London, has asked for this subject to be included in the directive at this time. She will be analyzing your replies as part of her research. This is her summary of the research question she is asking:

> Today's educational policies stress the importance of mothers in young children's literacy development. Illiterate mothers, it is suggested, raise illiterate children.
>
> But is this true? A generation of women in the early years of this century had little if any schooling as children. As adults, many therefore had little or no literacy in English.[2] Yet, as a population of older people today can testify, many of the children of those women grew up not only able to read and write, but also positively to enjoy reading and writing in their adult lives. Maybe then, it didn't matter if a mother could not read and write in English? Or maybe it did, but the child learned from others? Or maybe mothers provided something else even though they had no skills in reading and writing themselves?

Please help us create a portrait of some of these mothers from your own experience. What we are looking for is anything you remember or anything you know about a woman who was a mother raising children between 1890 and 1930. You may need to talk to your own parents or grandparents to get this information. *You should not use real names*.

To begin with, please note down (if you know them) the dates of birth and death of the woman about whom you are writing. You can write about more than one woman if you wish. Then make a note of whether you are writing about her as:

a) her child
b) her grandchild, or
c) in some other relationship—please specify this.

Please try and offer your reflections in two parts. As always, the points below are guidelines, and although it would be useful if you could try to cover them all,you are welcome to add additional points wherever you feel they are important.

(1) ***Her childhood:*** say anything you know about where she grew up, with how many brothers and sisters, and in what circumstances. What reading or writing occurred in the household? Was English the first language of the home? If not, what was? Did she go to school at all? For how long?
(2) ***Her life as a mother:*** how many children did she have? What reasons, if any, might she have had to want to read and write? For example, did any of her children, or her husband, live away for any time? Was she involved in religious, political, or other groups? Write anything you know about her literacy. Did she ever, as far as you know, read anything? If so, what? What about writing? If she couldn't read or write, who did she rely on for different kinds of literacy? Did she sing, tell stories, or talk to her children? What was her health like?
(3) ***If you were her child or grandchild:*** your memories of her attitudes to *your* reading and writing. Did she comment on your early efforts to read and write? What kind of things did she say? What feelings do you think she had about her own literacy?

Notes

1. Part 1 of Directive No. 46 was on: images of where you live: cities, towns and villages.
2. My reasons for expressing the issue in this way, and the reactions to it, are discussed in Chapter 4. Directives, as Dorothy Sheridan puts it, "have a tradition of provocation" (conversation with author February 1998). The pleasure I had in working with her and with the Mass Observation Archive was the hospitality this offered me to invite writers to engage with the topic.

Appendix 2
Holy literacy

Fifteenth century Italian "masters" of painting depicted images of family literacy. The mother is the humble learner from the literate child, a child who is no mere consumer, but the producer of the text between them. Sandro Botticelli's painting of "Madonna and Child" (now in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan) shows a tender scene. The young mother, her eyelids lowered, and one hand resting on the open book, bends her head as if listening to the child who, seated on (or rather half-falling off) her lap, turns his head up towards her while laying his hand on hers. With her other hand she gently holds him.

Bernardo Luini's portrait of the Holy Family includes the father, Joseph. This time, it is he whose eyes are lowered; while Mary, standing in front of him, gazes at their son, standing proudly on a table. Again, one of her hands keeps him safe from falling; and again, the other touches a book: in fact, she is holding the book to her bosom with this hand, one thumb caught inside it as if to hold the page. It is as if she is interrupting her own reading to hold the naked baby from falling. But we know that this is not any book that she is holding: it is a holy scripture, for which her holy son holds the key, just as his eyes hold her gaze.

In Christian morality, literacy is something taught as precious, necessary and important. Like Botticelli, Luini shows the Holy Mother as the parent of a literate child. Paintings of the annunciation from the same period show the Angel Gabriel holding a scroll announcing her sacred destiny to the teenage Mary. The image suggests that the mother was literate, too. The message of paintings that depict her with the infant Jesus, however, show her as a mother not only listening to but also learning a new literacy from her holy son.

The historian Albert Manguel (1996) tells us that, until the fourteenth century, the Virgin Mary was depicted as innocent (or ignorant) of the written word. It was only a hundred years before these two paintings that she had first been allowed the possibility of literacy: "Traditionally, in Christian iconography, the book or scroll belonged to the male deity, to either God the Father or the triumphant Christ, the new Adam, in whom the word was made flesh" (Manguel 1996:217).

The decision by the painter Simone Martini in 1333, in his painting of the Annunciation, to show the Virgin Mary holding a book was, it seems, a bold, andeven risky one. The painting, frequently reproduced (like Botticelli and

Madonna and Child: Sandro Botticelli

Luini's) in postcard form, hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Golden angels cluster at the apex of the central arch; a vase of lilies stands between the kneeling angel and the submissive, almost cowering figure of the Virgin. One hand grips the Virgin's cloak under her chin; her eyes gaze on the words, streaming out in letters of gold from the angel's lips; and in her left hand she holds a book, her thumb keeping the place on the page she has just been reading (like Bernardo

Luini's Madonna, over a century later). What book did Martini intend this to be? Could it be a Book of Hours (likely to be the only book possessed by many wealthy homes of the time, and the one used by mothers and nurses to teach their children to read)? Could it be one of the Old Testament Books, in which Mary might have been reading (ina chapter of Isaiah) the prophecy of her own fate? Or could it (the option Manguel prefers) have been one of the Books of Wisdom? If it was, then this portrayal of Mary might be seen, he argues,

> as an effort to restore the intellectual power denied to the female godhead. The book Mary is holding in Martini's painting, whose text is hidden from us and whose title we can only guess, might suggest itself as the last utterance of the dethroned goddess, a goddess older than history, silenced by a society that has chosen to make its god in the image of a man. Suddenly, in this light, Martini's "Annunciation" becomes subversive. (Manguel 1996:221)

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