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Preface

Jo Parnell

[B03.0] This book is the end result of nineteen years of fuzzy determination to write a book on a subject dear to all our hearts—representations of mothers-in-law in popular culture. It has been asked what makes me qualified to write this book, an edited collection of scholarly works that I put together in the hope that the reader might gain as much enjoyment and enlightenment from it as I have. In the course of my studies I have been very privileged to have had fine teachers and exemplary supervisors who willingly passed on their knowledge and modeled excellent research skills. I hold a PhD in English Literature from the University of Newcastle, Australia, where I am fortunate in being a Conjoint Research Fellow to the School of Humanities and Social Science, in the Faculty of Education and Arts. I am a literary critic, reviewer, critical analyst, editor, and a writer. I write scholarly articles and personal and literary essays, creative nonfiction including memoirs and literary docu-memoirs, and creative works such as short stories. In particular, I am a life writer. My special interest is with literary docu-memoir.¹ In my earlier lives, I was variously a general (medical and surgical), psychiatric, and maternity nurse, and was in-hospital trained at university level long before the more modern innovation of compulsory attendance at a university and a completed degree pre-requisite to practise. Then I trained as an artist and gained qualifications in fine and visual arts and keen observation. Later, I gained a B Ed. During the 28 years of my tour of duty in teaching, I gained further qualifications in counseling, behavioural studies, and control theory. I already had qualifications in psychology; it was compulsory to both my nursing practices, especially psychiatric nursing, and my teaching degree. During this time, I also worked in student, family, and couples counseling.

[B03.1] Like any other human being I am an individual, and like any other academic I am a private person first. I could say that life experience and personal

experience in the field, as well as hands-on experience, along with my academic qualifications and my work experiences, are what make me qualified to write this book. In fact, I am an authority over the experience and subject of mother-in-lawness, if there is such a word. I have a personal stake in the mother-in-law experience; I own it; I am it. I am mother to four grown children, and mother-in-law to each of their chosen partners. As well, I watch films and television sitcoms and read books and attend plays on that subject as well as other subjects. I absolutely love to watch Marie Barone, the Italian American mother-in-law (who is based on her creator Phil Rosenthal's own Jewish American mother) in the American television sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*, even though my husband absolutely hates the show and has declared it banned at our house. In one way or another, through phone calls and visits and emails from and to family and friends and colleagues, and in working on this book, *Representations of the Mother-in-Law in Literature, Film, Drama, and Television*, I live the mother-in-law experience on a frequent basis as a part of my ordinary life.

Moreover, I have been married twice. That adds up to two mothers-in-law, though I have not had the experience of them both being on my plate together in one sitting. In my first marriage, I had a wonderful mother-in-law. She was an angel on earth. I truly loved her, and she loved me. Sadly, she passed away, and I regretted not having spent far more time with her and getting to know her much better than I already did. So later on in life, when I got married the second time, in all innocence I truly expected that I would have a similar relationship with my new mother-in-law. I looked forward in eager anticipation. It is a sad fact of life that one's expectations rarely come up to expectation. I got landed with the mother-in-law from hell. The half-promise that I would one day write something about it got mixed up and lost in the midst of my confusion about mothers-in-law. Eventually though, that mother-in-law too passed away; and I am still happily married to her son. After the funeral, I searched for literature that would give me insights, and read hundreds of novels and watched television sitcoms to see what other mothers-in-law were like, how they were represented, if they lined up in any way with women out there in the real world, and I talked to my friends. I am very grateful to my husband's late mother because without her this book would probably never have been written. Quite apart from my thanks to my late mother-in-law for giving me inspiration, I truly thank my husband, Bob, for saying to me, "You need to stop talking about it and poking your nose into other people's business and write that book." It was then that an idea rose up from my struggles to understand and began to evolve, but I couldn't write that book. I still needed to find some understanding. Wherever I went in the world, and in Australia, no matter whether I was socialising or conferencing or networking or working or on a trip, I spoke with many different people from Thailand, Vietnam, Iran, China, Canada, Hawaii, Pakistan, Eng-

[B03.2]

land, Australia, America, Germany, Holland, Malaysia, the UK, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Myanmar, France, Israel, New Zealand, the Philippines, and the USA, to name just a few. Among other things, I wanted to get a feel for how the various cultures and societies view and treat mothers-in-law, and I wanted to find out, if possible, how these figures are represented in the pop culture entertainment-arts categories in their countries, and if that factor influenced people's way of thinking.

[B03.3]

One academic from Iran explained that she and her husband, also an academic, were at a university in Australia to gain further experience in their chosen fields of work. They intended to return to their home country permanently at the end of their studies. I asked her where they lived in Iran, if she and her husband lived with her husband's mother. I was surprised to hear that she and her husband lived in their own flat some distance from her mother-in-law. "Do you not get on with her?" I asked. "Oh no, not that, she is absolutely lovely to me," came the answer. Then what? I had understood that it was the custom for young couples to live with their mothers-in-law. "No, not these days," she said. "Most young people are like us. It is more usual to live in your own place now. The old customs are out, and the new customs are coming in." I wondered if this was a direct effect of popular culture and its ability to instigate change. She said she supposed that it might be partly that, but the views and the thinking of many people were definitely changing, and other changes in the society were certainly underway. From talking to people from cultures all over the world, Iran is certainly not alone in this. Change is in the wind. It's like that popular song in Australia—"From little things, big things grow." Hence, this book, *Representations of the Mother-in-Law in Literature, Film, Drama, and Television*.

[B03.4]

Mothers-in-law have long been familiar figures in the jokes, witticisms, and stories that exist in all cultures. They are everywhere. Probably, this could have always been the case since human nature is what it is; from time immemorial, people have sought life partners and those partners have brought progenitors with them. Of course, in other cultures, and in ancient times, the term *mother-in-law* may not have existed: mothers of couples may have been known by another term altogether. Nevertheless, research and archaeological discoveries of ancient hieroglyphics and writings from ancient societies and cultures (for example, the Ancient Egyptians and the Ancient Hebrews), and a few extant works from other slightly less but still ancient times, reveal that the mother-in-law figure was always in evidence. Certainly mothers-in-law were well-known figures in Ancient Rome. The comic play titled *Hecyra* (translates as *The Mother-in-Law*) was written by Terence ca. 165 BC. Hundreds of years later, the Roman poet Juvenal (Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, born in Italy 60 AD; died approximately 130 AD) wrote his collection of satirical poems, the *Satires*. These were written sometime between the late part of the

first century AD and the early part of the second century AD. Translated, Juvenal's famous Satire VI, "The Ways of Women," begins with the line "Give up all hope of peace so long as your mother-in-law is alive."

The Old Testament, begun ca. ?-1445 BC and completed approximately 400 BC, predates Terence's *Hecyra*; and the New Testament, begun sometime in the first century AD, probably in approximately 40–50 AD, and completed approximately 90 AD, post-dates Juvenal's *Satires*. Apart from the first five books of the Old Testament, which were set down by Moses, the Bible is made up of numerous books, each of which is now generally thought to have been penned by a different author and written in a different style and genre. It is now widely acknowledged that portions of the Old Testament were scribed in stone or written on papyrus at least some four or more centuries earlier than previously thought, and that these very early writings had their roots in the oral traditions of the Ancient Hebrews' still more ancient forebears. The important point here is that the mother-in-law is very much a recognised figure throughout both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, reference to the mother-in-law figure is, in the main, implicit, as in Genesis in the story of Sarah and Abraham, for example; yet there are also some explicit references to the mother-in-law—as for instance in the Book of Ruth 25: 1: 6 and 1: 8. In the New Testament, references to the mother-in-law figure are more explicit than implicit, with some very direct explicit references in Matthew 8: 14; Mark 1: 30; and Luke 4: 38–39 and 12: 53.

In any given peoples, popular cultural activities (entertainment-arts, fashion trends, preferred sports, food specialities, and so on) have a way of influencing individuals' attitudes toward certain topics and help to shape the beliefs and popular perceptions within that culture. This collection of ideas permeates the ordinary everyday life of the society and slowly gains widespread acceptance to inform the entirety of the attitudes, images, perspectives, and other phenomena within the mainstream of that society. One of the enduring cultural effects that stems from this phenomenon is the common stereotyping of figures such as the mother-in-law.

The works of Terence and Juvenal, and the Bible, were no doubt influenced by the beliefs and thinking of the specific cultures and times in which they were written. This is not to say that these three works can be defined as popular culture. Rather the drama of Terence and the poetry of Juvenal are classified as classics. The Bible is classified as theology. As is the way with the scriptures, the Bible was always, and still is, an extremely powerful influence over writers everywhere, and over the popularly held beliefs and ideologies of many cultures and societies, worldwide, and has demonstrated its power to instigate social and global change, and inspire political ideologies. On a more literary front, Terence and Juvenal both focus on the commonly accepted stereotypical figure of the mother-in-law to advise their audi-

ences: Terence, through employing representation of a mother-in-law figure who fails to fulfil her expected role in society; and Juvenal, through his satirical take on the mother-in-law, to show a man what to expect in marriage. Terence's *Hecyra* failed at its first two stagings and only achieved a successful viewing at its third showing. Juvenal's *Satires* were popular from the time they were first written. In particular, the first line in his "Satire VI" is often quoted in jokes and witticisms. The point that highlights the works of Terence and Juvenal here is that being very early examples of literary creative works that focus on the mother-in-law, they exist on the *outer* parameters of popular culture and also exist within the framework of literary theory. In modern-day higher education studies, all three of these aforementioned works come under the umbrella of the Humanities.

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Hundreds of years after Terence and Juvenal had left their mark, William Shakespeare was born in the April of 1564AD. He died in April of 1616AD. Shakespeare, one of the greatest English writers, if not *the* greatest writer the world has ever known, holds a mirror up to his readers and viewers, and shows his audiences to their selves while making the ordinariness of life and anomalies of human nature and behaviour seem extraordinary—his *Hamlet* (which was written at an uncertain date but probably sometime between 1599 and 1602) is a prime example; *Macbeth* (which was probably written in about 1606, and was first performed in 1611,) is another; and *King Lear* (written sometime between 1603 and December 1606 and first performed on 26 December 1606) is yet another. In his works, Shakespeare openly identifies every single member in a family, or would-be member of a family, other than the mother-in-law. In Shakespeare's plays the mother-in-law is very noticeable by her absence—she screams aloud in her silence as it were. Nevertheless, by implication, Shakespeare allows a tiny, remote hint of the mother-in-law in his *Hamlet* (written probably sometime between 1599 and 1602) in Act 5, Scene 1 (line 206–208), when Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, says she had pictured herself as Ophelia's future mother-in-law, but that never came to pass; instead, she is a mourner at Ophelia's funeral, an unmarried young woman:

[B03.9]

I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.

[B03.10]

I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,

[B03.11]

And not have strewed thy grave. (line 206–208)

[B03.12]

Shakespeare also allows an even tinier hint of the mother-in-law in his *Henry VIII* (which was written in 1612): Lord Abergavenny is named as the Duke of Wellington's son-in-law, and since it is not once mentioned in any way that the Duke is a widower, presumably his wife is still living and therefore is mother-in-law to Abergavenny. In Shakespeare's bawdy, comic play the *Merry Wives of Windsor* (which may have been written sometime between 1597 and 1601, but was first registered for publication in 1602) there is a

more open though still implicit reference to the mother-in-law: Anne Page is in love with Master Fenton but her father is adamant that she marry Master Slender; her mother is equally insistent that Anne marry the French Doctor Caius, and Falstaff, a knight, jealously covets Anne and desperately wants her as his wife. In the end though, through the meddling interference of her mother and her mother's friend Mistress Ford, Anne and her Master Fenton marry in secret. At first, neither Anne's father nor her mother is happy when they discover that their daughter and Fenton are now married, but in the end they come around and give their daughter and her new husband their blessing. The further implication here is that Anne gains the husband she wants, her parents gain a son-in-law, and even though Shakespeare does not make specific mention as such, Anne's new husband, Fenton, gains a mother-in-law. Terence and Juvenal held mirrors up to their audiences, too, though never to the same extent and depth or degree of Shakespeare's genius. But unlike Shakespeare, Terence and Juvenal both openly deal with the mother-in-law in their works. Nevertheless, all three writers mirror the human relationships and behaviours known to their audiences either through self-recognition or firsthand or vicarious experience, whilst at the same time allowing their audiences a safe distance from which to absorb, consider, and enjoy these represented experiences.

In his work on human emotions and feelings, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (2000) explains this phenomenon thus: We are creatures of human emotions, "we don't see things as they are, we see things as we are"—"the comparative aspect of emotions is personal, the comparative nature of emotional meaning implies that emotions go beyond the information given; hence, it involves an imaginary aspect" (4, 19–20). When we view a work of art that interests us, "its higher degree of reality in the sense of its being vivid generates intense emotions," and we indulge a willing suspension of disbelief. By seeing "life through the eyes of those directly involved" in the fictional situation, "we adopt their perspective and feel emotionally close to them"; consequently, intense emotions are further generated," and "we bring our own emotional reality to bear on" the fictional (and therefore safe) situations depicted, allowing us "to empathise with characters in the fiction" (126–30). Simply put, creative texts allow the reader-viewer to look at things from another's point of view, a perspective which enables us as the reader-viewer to follow the event from within, to become part of it. The more we accept an image as real, or believe an event or situation to be real, or understand to be based on true events and people, the more intense emotion we generate in response, and the more detailed knowledge we have about someone's life (even though that person may be a fictionalised character) makes this person even more real, and has greater emotional intensity and significance for us than someone we hardly know about. This perspective enables us as the reader-viewer to address our beliefs in life, solve problems from within a safe environment and

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from a safe distance, and find alternatives and solutions to either our own or our relatives or friends, or some other's possible dilemmas. It also allows us as readers-viewers the opportunity to achieve a measure of understanding of human nature and behaviour, relationships, and events, and hence a deeper understanding of life.

[B03.14]

In real life, the mother-in-law is a central and all-important figure to the internal dynamics and relationships of every family, every culture, and therefore every community, and hence society in the world. It is quite probable that, being a delicate relationship inherently subject to the complexities of intrinsic and extrinsic stresses, strains, expectations, responsibilities, and emotions that naturally occur in life or that go with the territory, in the history of man-woman unions and family-type relationships, some mothers-in-law have seemed to be, or can be or are, a little difficult in some way or another. Still, despite the advice of Juvenal, and human nature being what it is, it can also be safely assumed that an equal number of mothers-in-law have been, or are, wonderfully successful in their role. Even so, it was rather surprising to discover that, going by the chapters in this book, it would seem that more writers, dramatists, filmmakers, television producers, and reader-viewer audiences and cultures the world over are far more interested in the representations of difficult or plain evil mothers-in-law, than with representations of good, or wise, or truly angelic mothers-in-law. Partly this may have something to do with supply and demand, and marketing on the part of producers and publishers. Partly it may also have something to do with representation as an implicit way in which to instruct mothers-in-law on what behaviours are acceptable in their cultural role, about what to do, and what not to do. Partly it could be to make a particular statement or point about gender and generational differences, or about the perceived and actual role, the culture, the society, and familial relationships and human behaviours; and partly it could also have a lot to do with the two-way effect of the entertainment-arts on a given culture. On a more literary theory level though, this seemingly common penchant for representations of abhorrent mother-in-law behaviours could also be explained by the reader-viewer audience phenomena which theorists refer to as the "willing suspension of disbelief," a point which I discussed earlier, or even a measure of secret indulgence in a tad of voyeurism that gives rise to guilty pleasure. Whatever the reasons are or are not though, the various representations of the mother-in-law figure in literature, film, drama, and television are entertaining and interesting and contain deeper levels; they are enlightening, and can assist one toward a level of understanding of mothers-in-law generally and a human relationship that is both personal, central to the home, and at the core of society.



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[B03.17]

NOTE

[B03.18]

1. Literary docu-memoir is a rare form of creative nonfiction as life writing, a mixture of fact, lyricism, and story: this form becomes a flexible tool in the author's hands to empower the subjects, ordinary people who have led unusual lives and who are not normally heard, by giving them a resonant voice in literary works of creative nonfiction.

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