

# Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities

Drawing on diverse examples from literature, film, memoirs, and popular culture, *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* analyses cultural representations of male infertility.

Going beyond the biomedical and sociological towards interdisciplinary cultural studies, this book studies depictions of men's infertility. It includes fictional representations alongside memoirs, newspaper articles, ethnographies and autoethnographies, and scientific reporting. Works under discussion range from twentieth-century novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to romantic comedy film *Not Suitable For Children*, and science fiction classic *Mr Adam*, as well as encompassing genres including blockbuster romance and memoir. *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* draws upon both sociological and popular culture research to trace how the discourse of cultural anxiety unfolds across disciplines.

This engaging work will be of key interest to scholars of popular culture studies, gender and women's studies (including queer and sexuality studies), critical studies of men and masculinities, cultural studies, and literary studies.

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### **Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities**

*Jonathan A. Allan*

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# Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities

Jonathan A. Allan

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction: Storytelling and Infertility	1
1 Reading Infertility in <i>Lady Chatterley's Lover</i>	18
2 "This Unspeakable Idea": Infertility in LaVyrle Spencer's Blockbuster Romance <i>The Fulfillment</i>	36
3 Ejaculation and the Heavy Load of Masculinity	51
4 "I have no good sperm": Infertility in <i>The Trouble with Joe</i> by Emilie Richards	66
5 Trying and Failing: Men's Memoirs of Infertility	83
6 The Money Shot Transformed: Masculinity, Ejaculation, and the Clinic	100
7 Infertility and Missing Out in <i>Not Suitable for Children</i>	114
8 No Future and Worlds without Babies	127
<i>References</i>	151
<i>Index</i>	161



# Acknowledgments

*Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* has been an interesting book to write that took many twists and turns. I suppose that this is the case of many books, but this book felt different as I was writing it, not least because when I started writing it, the times seemed fairly normal, but as I wrote it, we lived through, or perhaps better, with COVID-19. During this same time, I watched my son grow, and then a second son joined our family. But infertility was always on my mind—even as I sat in the neo-natal intensive care unit holding our premature son. Thus, fertility and infertility were everywhere as I was writing. I was reminded of our own fertility when I heard the laughter of a son, or the cry of another, and reminded of infertility as a news article announced another decline in men’s reproductive health, or I saw another television program that spoke about a character having “boys” who couldn’t swim. I would imagine that this kind of recognition is true of anybody researching a given topic, that all of a sudden, it is seemingly everywhere. I am thankful to the friends and colleagues who shared news articles with me, or that asked me questions about my research.

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viii *Acknowledgments*

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# Introduction

## Storytelling and Infertility

This book has taken a long time to write, or it seemed to take a long time. There were many false starts along the way, there were moments of great joy when it seemed to come together, and then moments of despair when it fell apart. As I was coming to the end of the book or what I thought was the end, I realized how important stories are to not only our families, for example, the stories we pass from one generation to the next, but also the stories we wish we could tell. Many of us tell the stories of a baby conceived on a wedding night or the surprise baby who came along when we were least expecting it. And we tend to tell these stories to our families at times of celebration, whether we are celebrating a new life or a recently departed one. Sometimes we are told the stories of our own conception or the pregnancy that followed. Movies and memoirs alike tell the stories of being “knocked up” or enduring the challenges of infertility. Reality television tells stories of teenagers being pregnant and hardships they face, or the stories of folks who did not even know they were pregnant. News stories tell us about celebrities who have suffered a miscarriage or worked with doctors and managed to have a child with the help of scientific advances. We all, it seems, have stories about birth, reproduction, and fertility (or its challenges).

In her book, *The Art of Waiting: On Fertility, Medicine, and Motherhood* (2016), Belle Boggs makes use of fictions of infertility, explaining that “literature often asks us to imagine the way childlessness affects its protagonists” (p. 39), and this is, in some ways, what I set out to do here. I want to think about the stories of infertility, of childlessness, and how we might come to make sense of infertility. Stories matter.

Each of the chapters in this book then is about a story, a story of infertility. Some of these stories are works of fiction, while others are cinematic, and some are memoirs, but what unifies all of them is that they are all trying to make sense of infertility. In his preliminary discussion in *Or Words to that Effect: Orality and the Writing of Literary History* (2016), the Canadian literary theorist J. Edward Chamberlin writes:

By the meaningless sign linked to the meaningless sound we have built the shape and the meaning of the world, said Marshall McLuhan.

## 2 Introduction

He was speaking, we might say – though actually he was writing – about how we represent ideas and things in words made up of both visual signs and verbal sounds. Writing and speaking provide the most familiar forms of these signs and sounds, though writing without words has a long history in many cultures, and speaking in gestures and other embodied communication may be where language itself began.

(p. 3)

While Chamberlin is invested in oral histories—stories told aloud—I think much of what he suggests is relevant to my project: meaningless signs and meaningless sounds together make up the world and the stories that we tell. We should not lose sight of the importance of stories. It might be tempting to write about infertility, for instance, and look at the services available and the gaps in those services as a medical sociologist might do or consider the advances of the biomedical sciences (for which many are deeply thankful) as a medical doctor might do, but there are still, alongside these aspects of infertility, the stories we tell about infertility and the stories we are told. In this way, this book clings to those stories because stories give meaning, afford insight and comfort, disturb and disappoint. As Northrop Frye says in his Massey Lectures, *The Educated Imagination*, “the poet’s job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens: not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place” (21:457). When we enter the world of fiction, we are not recounting a series of events, but rather we are as readers going along with the narrator or the characters through the events as they happen. We are asked to take leaps of faith with the characters, we experience joy or sadness (sometimes both) with the characters. What links all of the chapters in *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* is a belief in the value of stories, and more particularly, stories about infertility, some more explicit than others, but all united in a story of childlessness and the fear of not being able to have children.

The stories that I set out to read here are diverse in their genre and approach, for instance, in this book they lean towards the popular, perhaps even some might argue that I am interested in “junk fiction,” which refers to “things like Harlequin romances; sci-fi, horror, and mystery magazines; comic books; and broadcast narratives on either radio or TV, as well as commercial movies” (Carroll 1994, p. 225). Truthfully, many of the texts in *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* might qualify under this rubric, but there is something broader at stake. The texts become kinds of cultural deposits that clearly demonstrate an ongoing interest in, fear of, fascination with, and knowledge of infertility. What interests me about these stories is that they are not just the purview of literary fiction or high fiction, but are found throughout the literary universe. I open with a chapter on D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and then move to a chapter on LaVyrle Spencer’s historical romance novel, *The Fulfillment*; later on, I will study a Harlequin romance by Emilie Richard and I will also consider apocalyptic

fictions, memoirs, and a rom-com. In many ways, what interests me about the texts that I study is that they all reflect on the anxieties and desires that occupy daily life. I think it is quite possible that infertility is not just the concern of literary fiction, but rather a diversity of modes and genres of storytelling—just as infertility is not experienced uniformly, so too are the stories not told uniformly.

My approach is eclectic, in part because infertility is eclectic, there is no *one* way to tell the story of infertility, sometimes the stories are comedic, other times tragic, sometimes the stories are filled with hope and optimism (admitted, sometimes that optimism is rather cruel as Lauren Berlant [2011] might suggest), other times deep senses of loss and frustration. Infertility is as much a biological problem as it is an affective, emotional rollercoaster that has the potential to dislodge or even shatter our sense of self. Indeed, as Chamberlin argues in *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* (2003):

Every story brings the imagination and reality together in moments of what we might as well call faith. Stories give us a way to wonder how totalitarian states arise, or why cancer cells behave the way they do, or what causes people to live in the streets...and then come back again in a circle to the wonder of a song...or a supernova...or DNA. Wonder and wondering are closely related, and stories teach us that we cannot choose between them. [...] Stories make the world more real, more rational, by bringing us closer to the irrational mystery at its centre. Why did my friend get sick and die? Why is there so much suffering the world? Whose land is this we live on? How much is enough?

(p. 3)

I cannot help but appreciate the stories that Chamberlin imagines being told; these are not just folklore, fairy tales, and the bedtime stories we tell our children, but the stories that populate the everyday. Stories are all around us. Stephen Greenblatt in *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve: The Story that Created Us* (2017) writes:

Humans cannot live without stories. We surround ourselves with them; we make them up in our sleep; we tell them to our children; we pay to have them told to us. Some of us create them professionally. And a few of us—myself included—spend our entire adult lives trying to understand their beauty, power, and influence.

(p. 2)

Stories are essential to us—they are part of the human spirit and experience. And so, it seems to me that one way to make sense of infertility, even if we ourselves have never been confronted with infertility, is to listen to these stories, to listen to a variety of them. Perhaps this is a result of my

#### 4 Introduction

having been trained in literature, wherein one is taught to study a variety of forms and genres, reading poetry in one class, the novel in the next, and going to the theatre to watch a dramatic performance in the evening, all the while recognizing that they all form a part of the literary universe.

When I began this project, it was intended to be an exploration of men's experiences of the procreative realm, but as I researched and read and listened, I realized how important the stories are that are told about infertility, especially men's stories of infertility or stories about men and infertility. Carefully, there is a difference between the two; in the case of the former, these are the stories that men themselves tell about infertility, while in the latter they are stories told by anyone about men and infertility. Truthfully, whether the former or the latter, these are not the voices we most often think of when we think of infertility. What interests me most particularly is men as infertile, regardless of who is telling the story.

Of course, to tell the story of men's infertility is to write in the shadow of women's infertility, for it is their story that we most often hear. Consider an example taken from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a doctor says to Offred, "most of those old guys can't make it anymore, [...] Or they're sterile" (p. 68). Offred then explains, "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially" (p. 69). This scene from the novel appears verbatim in the hit television adaptation of Atwood's novel. In the novel—as in the television series—it cannot be admitted that men can be and may very well be sterile; instead "there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (p. 69). In Gilead, then, women's bodies are highly regulated, controlled, and men's bodies are imagined as always productive, so much so that the word sterile is a "forbidden word" (p. 69).

While Atwood's novel is dystopian in nature, which is to say fictional (though many now see similarities between Atwood's world and the world in which they are currently living), there are, as is always the case in the fictional world, grains of truth. Not only are women's bodies controlled and regulated, but so too, as this book will argue, is the idea of sterility nearly a "forbidden word." After all, how often when we think about infertility do we think about women and women's bodies? How often is infertility imagined as a "woman's issue?" If we think of religious texts, when Abraham and Sarah are unable to conceive, who, we might ask, is blamed? In Genesis, we read, "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child" (11:30) and further, "Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah" (18:11). Later in Genesis, we read, "Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren" (Genesis 25:21). The Psalmist will tell us that "He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord" (113:9). In Luke, we are told, "But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years" (1:7). In the book of Hebrews, we read, "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since

she considered him faithful who had promised” (11:11). Time and again, women’s bodies are imagined as barren, and like Sarah, through faith their bodies overcome their infertile state. When we speak of barrenness, it is important to frame that as a body waiting to be filled, that is, there is an agentive thing or quality that must fill it: a penis, semen, or a child. Woman is not whole until she is filled. Indeed, this is why we do not speak of men as being “barren,” but as “sterile” or as “infertile.” Infertility, thus, is a story that we tell time and time again, which is why these stories so often feel so familiar to us, as though no explanation is needed.

Infertility is, as we have seen, so often imagined as a “woman’s issue,” or, at least, that is how it is figured in so much of the language and discourse. One of the challenges of this book is to disrupt, but certainly not displace, that narrative. In this book, I set out to move in a different direction, to listen to a different story, and to study representations of infertility and men, and most especially men’s infertility. While men’s infertility is not unheard of, it certainly does remain something of a taboo, a perhaps not yet spoken about topic. However, this is changing. On January 3, 2019, for instance, *Time Magazine* published an article, titled “The Silent Shame of Male Infertility,” written by Mandy Oaklander. The title of this article almost explicitly calls upon the Psalmist who speaks of the man with children “who fills his quiver with them” and this man “shall not be put to shame” (127:3–5).<sup>1</sup> An inverted reading of this Psalm then might be that the man “who does not fill his quiver with them” will be “put to shame.” Oaklander writes:

Infertility is almost always thought of as a woman’s issue, and it’s true that women bear the greater burden of it. They are the ones who ultimately either get pregnant or don’t, and regardless of which partner has the fertility problem, the woman’s body is usually the site of treatment. [...] And yet up to 50% of cases in which couples can’t have babies are due in some way to men. More men are talking about it now, but it remains stigmatized, especially in the U.S. men are largely absent from public conversation around infertility, and even those who have looked for support hesitate to identify as someone struggling with male infertility.

(2019)

Even though, and there is no denying this, it is “the woman’s body [that] is usually the site of treatment,” men’s experiences of the procreative realm, and especially infertility, are taboo. These are the stories that this book considers and explores.

The goal of *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* is not to centre men’s experiences at the cost of women’s experiences, but rather to hold them both as worthy sites of analysis and understanding. I want to read these stories in and of themselves and try to make sense of how they understand gender,

## 6 Introduction

particularly masculinity, which is not to negate women's experiences or matters of femininity, but to imagine that there are both similarities and differences. Consider an example from Oaklander's article:

I feel like I'm your stereotypical masculine-looking man, [...] I'm tattooed. I have muscles. I work out. And I'm infertile. How many other guys out there that have this machismo, this mind-set about them, are in my shoes as well?

(2019)

For this man, then infertility runs counter to being "your stereotypical masculine-looking man." He is telling his experience of how he *feels* like he is not living up to expectations that have been imposed upon him. Hegemonic masculinity, for instance, is not just something to which men strive, but it is something that is imposed upon them. The way he describes his body, for instance, "stereotypical masculine-looking man," and that his body is "tattooed" and that he "works out," is about conforming to societal expectations, expectations that are confounded by his infertility. In some ways, then it might be argued that male infertility is tantamount to male failure, a failure at being "your stereotypical masculine-looking man." Another point that is highlighted in this quotation is the question that closes it: "how many other guys [...] are in my shoes as well?" There is a sense here of loneliness, even though he may well know that "up to 50% of cases in which couples can't have babies are due in some way to men" (Oaklander 2019). The answer to his question is quite a few, but the experience of infertility is one of isolation and solitude, a sense of aloneness. Men's sterility is, as it was in Gilead, something of a forbidden word—even when we know it is relatively common.

My understanding of storytelling is interdisciplinary, perhaps a bit flirtatious in its approach, because while I am deeply invested here in literary analysis, I am also interested in those voices that engage with psychoanalysis, queer theory, affect theory, and feminist theory, to name but a few of the most obvious relations that unfold in this book and perhaps even in my thinking more broadly. I want to be careful because I do not mean to suggest flippantly that my approach is flirtatious as if I have no focus, because as Adam Phillips (a rather flirtatious theorist himself) reminds us, "people tend to flirt only with serious things—madness, disaster, other people—and the fact that flirting is a pleasure, makes it a relationship, a way of doing things, worth considering" (1994, p. xvii). In this book, then, I am flirting with a variety of theorists and theoretical positions in hopes of understanding men, masculinities, and infertilities, and the stories that they tell and that are told about them. For Phillips, "flirting creates the uncertainty it is also trying to control; and so [it] can make us wonder which ways of knowing, or being known, sustain our interest, our excitement, in other people" (p. xviii). In a way, then flirting might be an

entirely interdisciplinary approach because it rebels against the monogamy so often required of disciplinarity where we adopt one method, one theory, and one set of texts. My approach is one that admits from the outset that the texts I study are complex and complicated, and as much as I might like to “try to control” them, I know that knowing them requires a variety of approaches, tactics, and methods. Infertility is a story that is difficult to tell because it does not affect all of us and those it affects it does not affect in the same way, which is why infertility is not treated uniformly. The stories we will read are diverse and so my method is one that braids together theorists and text that seem, at times, quite different from one another in hopes of seeing what happens when they do come together despite their differences.

Another way to think about this approach might be by way of play and playfulness, which D. W. Winnicott would remind us is “immensely exciting” (2005, p. 64). Indeed, I find a great sense of excitement here in thinking about stories and storytelling—I think here of the pleasures of listening to a captivating storyteller who takes us on a journey. But we might be tempted, once more, to dismiss this notion; after all, it is just “child’s play.” But as Michael Moon has written, “play isn’t simply fun, and neither are the intenser reaches of pleasure” (2012, p. 4). That is, play is not just about fun, not just about pleasure, but it certainly can be. Instead, Moon explains:

the seriousness (as well as the great energy and joy) that children sometimes bring to their play can be, to anyone who is mindful of it, all the reminder one needs that play and pleasure [...] can demand engagement with some of our own and other people’s most disturbing feelings, memories, and desires, and can invite and withstand rigorous analysis.

(p. 4)

I admit that play and pleasure are serious concepts and that they are notions that can and perhaps should lend themselves to academic inquiry even when engaging with difficult topics. What I mean here by flirtation and play is that my approach is one that draws on a wide range of voices in hopes of understanding the stories that are being told in the texts that I am studying here.

Storytelling has been of interest to a range of scholars and certainly well beyond the confines of literary study. Indeed, in thinking about stories, I am reminded of Dina Georgis’s article “Hearing the Better Story: Learning and the Aesthetics of Loss and Expulsion,” in which we are reminded that “the stories we construct to survive are the provisions we need to go on living. And if we listen to those stories, we may stand to learn something” (2006, p. 166). Georgis’s approach is one that brings together feminist and queer theory alongside affect theory to read colonial and postcolonial texts. For Georgis, stories “can provide the conditions to listen to expelled voices,”

## 8 Introduction

recognizing and holding that “art and narrative are resources for political imagination and for political recovery: they link us to unthought spaces, to spaces that thought refuses” (p. 166). Georgis’s concerns are different from mine, but the approach to stories is important because there is no surrendering of stories to mere play and pleasure. Stories are tools that teach us something. Georgis argues that,

Narrative and art are significant resources for those interested in learning how to hear the expelled voices of women, queers, transsexuals, raced subjects, and the subaltern because, unlike dominant histories, which pursue impartiality, narrated stories of struggle, and loss privilege perception.

(p. 170)

I do wish to pause here, however briefly, because I do not wish to appropriate this approach as if the infertile men found in the stories I read share a common experience with “the expelled voices of women, queers, transsexuals, raced subjects, and the subaltern.” That is not my intention at all; however, what makes this complicated is that the infertile man is rendered on roughly equal or at least similar grounds to some of these individuals. Their experiences would not be the *same*, but there is a degree of emasculation that isolates them in ways that may be understandable and perhaps even recognizable to those expelled voices. What is clear to me is that “narrative and art are significant resources for those interested in learning” (Georgis 2006, p. 170), and one of those spaces of learning is that of men’s infertility, a story to which we have not, it seems, paid significant attention. I agree once more with Georgis that “in narrative, we enter the space of woundedness, and thus it provides the conditions for working through, or a mourning of loss and trauma, as incomprehensible as that may be” (p. 170). Of course, narrative is not *just* a space for loss and trauma or woundedness and working through. Narrative is a space in which we enter the world of the real and the literary, the imagined and the fantastic, a world in which we can imagine our world anew, through a different perspective, and a world in which we can learn about the world that exists around us and contains us.

Stories surround us because they are important to us, but also because they help us to explain our circumstances. In his *Narrative Psychiatry: How Stories Can Shape Clinical Practice* (2011), Bradley Lewis reminds us that “psychiatrists listen to stories more than anything else they do. Their very first questions—‘What brings you here?’ and ‘What seems to be the problem?’—are open-ended invitations to a story” (p. vii). For Lewis, then stories are at the heart of psychiatry, and surely this should come as no surprise to us. While psychoanalysis, with which I find more affinities, is not psychiatry, the two share a commonality in the presence of stories. As Lewis notes, “the first clinical evaluation is only the beginning of the



story-centric encounter between psychiatrist and patient” (p. vii). In the context of his specific project, narrative psychiatry, Lewis explains that,

the goal of narrative psychiatry is not to denigrate single interpretive solutions for their simplicity, nor is it to take single solutions and make them complex. The goal is to increase our appreciation of alternative solutions, be they simple or complex. The goal is openness to a range of options and to the richness and variety of psychiatric experience.

(p. 16)

Such an approach is certainly appealing to me as this is what is at the heart of the stories that I set out to read. There is a range of options that are rich and various in how people speak about infertility, how the story of infertility is represented. Literary scholars and psychiatrists alike agree on the importance of stories. Indeed, the stories that I set out to consider here are “literary case histories” in the language of the psychiatrist William Tucker. In his work, Tucker uses fiction,

to help the reader imagine doing clinical work with one of the characters in the story. He does not approach a story as a literary theorist but much as a clinician, and he asks the people he works with to begin their reflection on a story by selecting a central character on which to focus.

(Lewis 2011, p. 79)

I suppose that many a literary scholar might be shocked by an approach to a literary story that does not account for its literariness; but the point I take as essential is the importance of the story as a unified subject through which a reader can learn something. While the literary scholar may focus on the narratological elements of the story, Tucker asks his students to imagine how they would treat and engage a character. Narrative psychiatry thus makes use of stories to help doctors understand their practice and how to assist their patients. Indeed, Northrop Frye reminds us that:

One essential aspect of literary training, and one that is possible to acquire, or begin acquiring, in childhood, is the art of listening to stories. This sounds like a passive ability, but it is not passive at all: it is what the army would call basic training for the imagination.

(7:150)

For Frye, storytelling also requires story-listening: we have to listen to the stories we are told, to concentrate on the story and what it is telling us. This might well be an argument for the art of close reading, but it is also a matter of reading while listening.

But one question that may arise is to what shall I listen? To which stories shall I pay attention? Indeed, this is a question of method that arises often

in the study of literature. Why choose a given text? One answer may well be to study only those texts deemed worthy of study, those that have been canonized by some “ultra-critical joker” (22:24) as Frye writes in *Anatomy of Criticism*, “which makes the reputations of poets boom and crash in an imaginary literary stock exchange” (22:19). Another approach, however, may be to admit that “it is of course true that a great deal of trash which passes as literature, or at least as entertaining reading, also articulates social myths with great clarity” (7:154). I would suggest that this is the approach that I am taking here, for I will attend to what many might call “trash,” for instance, romance novels, but there is contained within those stories “social myths” that may be explored with “great clarity.” My point would be that there is value in trash, and one person’s trash may well be another’s treasure. I want to be careful not to quickly dismiss texts because they do not reach the evaluations of that “ultra-critical joker” (Frye, 22:24). Moreover, it is hard not to see how often these evaluations are deeply gendered, for instance, the romance novel is largely read by women and written by women (though this is changing) and yet it is dismissed, while other genre fictions, for instance, science fiction and mystery fiction, have worked their way into respectability.

I remain wholly convinced that stories are beneficial and that they may well do a great deal in helping us to understand experiences and find community. In his essay “Literature as Therapy,” Northrop Frye provides a telling discussion of Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, writing,

Burton does not say that literature is a therapy for melancholy, except in a wider context of recreation generally. On the other hand, he begins his book by saying that he wrote the book because he was melancholy himself. In other words, it was a form of autotherapy that inspired him to write it. The other reason for writing it is that *we* are: everybody suffers from melancholy. Consequently, the book itself may have a therapeutic value.

(18:467)

This anecdote is a story about why Burton wrote about melancholy as a kind of therapy for himself, but it is also deeply about his readers, all of whom, Frye contends, also will suffer at some point from a bout of melancholy. In so doing, then as readers, we find community in the stories we listen to and consume. “It’s perhaps worth noting that the longest and most popular section of [*Anatomy of Melancholy*] by far,” Frye writes, “is the section on love melancholy” (18:467–468). On the one hand, as Frye notes, this coincides with the literary conventions at the time, but on the other, it is also a seemingly universal experience. Once more, readers find themselves in the stories they read. I find myself agreeing here with Frye when he writes that “what I am suggesting is that we should not overlook the immense recuperative power that literature, along with the other arts,

could provide in a world as crazy as ours” (18:476). Likewise, Richard Van Camp in his book, *Gather: On the Joys of Storytelling* (2021), speaks of storytelling as a kind of medicine. While his storytelling is specifically Indigenous, I cannot help but see the values of his lessons more universally: “we have been telling stories since we began: it’s what makes us human and allows us to know one another” (p. 1). Such an understanding of storytelling reminds us that stories connect us to one another as well as those before us and we tell stories so as to “know one another.” Stories provide us with “some medicine for renewal and inspiration and for peace” writes Van Camp (p. 10), but Van Camp reminds us time and again that just as we may tell stories, we need to listen to stories and respect and honour those who tell us these stories: “please remember, you have to know *how* to listen. And that it is *active* not passive listening” (p. 34). There is a restorative potential in the sharing of stories, not just for authors and readers, but for the community of citizens in the literary universe.

*Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* thus is interested in understanding these stories and the discursive moments wherein infertility is put into words. I want to pay attention to the words that are used to try and make sense of diagnosis, for instance, and to the ways in which film, television, literature, and memoirs represent infertility. One of the challenges that each of these stories confront is that we tend not to imagine men’s bodies as infertile bodies. Men’s bodies are framed as not only being productive, but that they likely will reproduce when the time and desire arises (and even when there is no desire). In *Exposing Men: The Science and Politics of Men’s Reproduction* (2006), Cynthia R. Daniels introduces the notion of “reproductive masculinity” as a “set of beliefs and assumptions about men’s relationships to human reproduction” (p. 6). These beliefs are very much part of the problem that this book is working through. These beliefs seem unquestioned. For Daniels, there are four particular beliefs:

- 1 Men are assumed to be secondary in biological reproduction.
- 2 Men are assumed to be less vulnerable to reproductive harm than women.
- 3 Men are assumed to be virile, ideally capable of fathering their own biological children.
- 4 Men are assumed to be relatively distant from the health problems of the children they father (pp. 6–7).

These four beliefs are central not only to how Daniels theorizes “reproductive masculinity,” but also how masculinity has been conceptualized as reproductive, and of course, each element has its own “social history” (p. 7). And my work here, while deeply invested in the third assumption, will work to unsettle and challenge some of these “beliefs and assumptions.”

Even if we know that these beliefs are misguided or wrong, we also know that what remains true is that infertility and reproduction are so often

imagined as “women’s issues.” That is, they are of concern to women. In her book, *Infertility: Tracing the History of a Transformative Term* (2016), Robin E. Jensen explains her method as follows: “because infertility has—with very few exceptions—been constructed as a female condition, this analysis is closely tied to the study of gender, reproductive biology, and the social construction of womanhood” (p. 8). In many ways, I agree, and I would suggest that my approach aligns itself with Jensen’s, but where we depart ways is that my analysis is about the social construction of men and masculinities. I am interested in those “very few exceptions.” Jensen, to be sure, rightly notes that “men and male bodies play a central role in the process of conception,” and then adds, “the female body and its ability to conceive and carry a child to term have remained the primary focus of medical and societal discussions about barrenness, sterility, and infertility” (p. 8). What is so striking about Jensen’s prose is how many terms are deployed in the service of the object of analysis: barrenness, sterility, infertility. While these terms are certainly specific, they are also particular; a “barren man,” for instance, sounds strange, it doesn’t quite make sense, and is certainly not as common as all those “barren women” that we meet in literature. Infertility, likewise, is often modified when attached to male bodies as “male infertility,” while sterility has been used with reference to both sexes but has lost appreciation. Sterility seems antiquated. One historical shift that will surely be noted here is the ways in which, at one time, impotence meant infertility, whereas today, in the age of Viagra and Cialis, the fears of impotence have been allayed if not cured.

I have already hinted at this concern, but I do wish to dwell on it a bit; there is a tension that undoubtedly runs throughout this project, namely how to address men’s infertility. I do not wish to recentre men in the discussion of infertility, as I have said, but I do want to address their experiences of infertility, the stories that are told about men’s infertility. But there is a binary that is almost essential to the study of infertility. Of course, one of the challenges here is that not only is a binary quickly established, it is also one that is deeply biological and medical, which undoubtedly causes many to pause, especially in an increasingly post-structural study of gender, one that recognizes not the binary but the plurality and diversity of gender. But it seems to me that we can agree that “even seemingly objective medical studies of male impotence or premature ejaculation are necessarily already bound up in a whole set of cultural and linguistic assumptions about the penis” (Reeser 2010, p. 13), that is, we cannot unsettle the body to be purely cultural, nor can it be purely medical or biological. The body may well be an ideal metaphor for interdisciplinarity, considering the ways in which the body is not unique to a given discipline. As such, throughout this study, we will see the ways in which male infertility is imagined and represented as both a social concern and a health concern.

Indeed, this leads to a final discussion worth noting here, which is to articulate how I understand masculinity. My approach to masculinity is one

that recognizes that it may seem, but need not be, essential or natural, that is, as Todd W. Reeser suggests,

When we think about the supposed natural aspects of masculinity, we usually employ language, but because language already contains so much cultural baggage, it is impossible to think about masculinity without wondering what kind of cultural assumptions are already at play just by talking about the seemingly natural.

(p. 12)

Reeser and I agree here on the ways in which language itself already contains cultural baggage, a point I think has been made clear above. When we speak about infertility, the cultural idea is that this is a “women’s issue” or a “woman’s disease,” so to turn our attention to “men’s infertility” then is to confront that cultural baggage. Reeser provides a telling example,

Someone might say that having a penis is a natural element of masculinity, but definitions of what the penis is – including the ways in which it is described and the importance attributed to it – are so bound up with cultural assumptions about masculinity that any purely natural approach to the penis as outside culture is impossible.

(pp. 12–13)

Indeed, a study about infertility will certainly bring this into focus, for one may well have a penis and it may even conform to a cultural ideal about what a penis ought to look like; indeed, it may even appear to be perfect, but it does not quite work the way it is supposed to. But more so, it is difficult, if not impossible, to remove these concepts—masculinity, penis, patriarchy, infertility, emotion, and so on—from their cultural setting. These all contain and are endowed with cultural assumptions. For example, “if we have already decided that part of masculinity is a keen interest in sexuality and the ability to perform, then we cannot help but have certain ideas about the penis and its role in masculinity” (Reeser, p. 74). These are not natural ideas, but rather are cultural assumptions that can and often are confounded by lived experiences. Male infertility thus, as we shall see, calls into question the stability of masculinity, indeed, as Reeser suggests, “to think about masculinity as in movement, as fluid, and as unstable, then, necessarily keeps us from thinking in these culturally sanctioned molds that do not correspond to the complexity of masculinity” (p. 15). It is this “complexity of masculinity” that I take as *a priori*, thereby meaning that I do not assume that all experiences of male infertility will be experienced the same; rather, I think there is something interesting happening with masculinity that destabilizes how masculinity is imagined, which is why stories of infertility are so central. When stories are told, meaning is given—meanings that help organize and make sense of the experience. Male infertility, at

least in the representations under consideration here, shows the movement, fluidity, and instability of masculinity.

In what follows, I provide a series of case studies, each of which speaks to representations of infertility. These cases are not meant nor should they be read as universal truths or similar, but rather they are themselves interesting and may influence other cases. I agree here with Lauren Berlant that “the case hovers about the singular, the general, and the normative” (2007, p. 664). Further, the case provides an advantageous model because it “holds, confines, protects and travels; it also categorizes and exemplifies. Cases can be used to teach and to train, for discussion and for proof” (Phillips 2017, p. xv). As such, my examples are cases in the study of men’s infertility, they are examples that can be used rather than must be used. Such an approach aligns with Magdalene Redekop’s *Making Believe: Questions About Mennonites and Art* (2020), wherein she admits to a kind of embarrassment of riches in terms of potential texts to be studied, and explains that she will:

make [her] argument by means of close engagements with individual works of art because doing so makes possible a dialogue deeper and more productive than what is now evident in public discourse. Since my case studies are few and highly selective, readers will wonder why I have chosen these particular works of art for close attention. To some extent, I have chosen works that make my points for me [...] There are not always such clear reasons, however, for my choices in this book. In some ways, it feels as if particular works of art have chosen me, but to say that sounds like an evasion.

(p. 45)

While our subjects are quite different from one another, I appreciate her use of case studies as a model through which to think about her subject. And as with many literary scholars, I think the sense that works choose us, rather than us choosing the works, is not entirely unheard of. It may not be a well-reasoned argument that may satisfy a critic because they can see the inclusion and exclusion criteria, for instance, but it feels true. But the larger point for me is the value of the case study, which allows for ways of thinking with and through the textual matter.<sup>2</sup>

I open *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* with a chapter on *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by D. H. Lawrence, a book that is most often known for its sexuality, even its taboo sexuality: adultery. But in my reading, I wish to think about the importance and the role of infertility in the novel. It should not be lost on us that Clifford Chatterley is impotent and therefore infertile. His infertility is a tragedy that puts the novel into motion. By focusing on the infertility, we see how infertility can affect and influence a series of relations. Lawrence, I argue, carefully constructs a series of juxtapositions

between the fertile world of Mellors, Lady Chatterley's lover, and the infertile and sterile world of Clifford Chatterley.

I then move to a chapter on LaVyrle Spencer's *The Fulfillment*, which is a blockbuster romance novel that appeared in 1979. In this novel, we are introduced to two brothers, both of whom suffered with the mumps in their youth, and only one of whom is rendered infertile. The infertile brother wants a child and seeks a seemingly unorthodox way of having one by way of his brother. This novel is set in a time before the rise of medically assisted fertility treatments, and thus, it returns to a kind of "unspeakable idea," that is, that the fertile brother will provide the infertile brother with a child. I use this chapter as a starting point to open the conversation about infertility and masculinity.

The third chapter turns attention to the materiality of infertility, namely semen. The goal of this chapter is to outline the importance of semen and ejaculation to ideas of masculinity, especially in the contemporary moment, which will largely be the focus of the remaining chapters. This chapter is theoretical in nature and yet also seeks to trouble how we think about seminal fluid. I seek to show that while semen becomes more visible and more known, it also becomes more and more medicalized and very quickly becomes a part of narratives about infertility. Infertility is experienced because of the inability of the boys to swim, for instance, or having too few boys to swim at all. So many of the remaining narratives considered spend great amounts of time thinking about the relationship infertile men have to their semen. What this chapter also sets out to do is show the complexity of masculinity as well as the "ambivalence" (Reeser 2010, p. 109) of semen, which might "embody masculinity or maleness" (Reeser, p. 109) and becomes all the more complicated when it cannot perform.

The following chapter returns to a romance novel, this time a Harlequin romance called *The Trouble with Joe*, which accounts for an infertile hero. In this chapter, I show the ways in which the romance novel industry may be able to challenge ideas of traditional, ideal, or hegemonic masculinity. While it is true that romance novels luxuriate in the "purity of his maleness" (Radway, p. 128; see, Allan 2020b) when imagining the hero, they are also attuned to potential challenges to masculinity, such as infertility. In this chapter, then, I show how the hero of this novel comes to understand his infertility, but also how this affects his ideas about fatherhood and masculinity.

I then move from the romance novel to a series of memoirs written by men about their infertility. In this chapter, I highlight how these memoirs have similar features, what might be called generic commonalities. For instance, they all mention how they discovered their infertility, they will all speak about the clinical spaces, and so on. These memoirs highlight the experience of infertility from the perspective of men who have lived with infertility and who have opted to tell their stories. Oftentimes, we find

humour mixed in with the melancholy. These texts become a part of the archive of men's infertility and become important examples for thinking about infertility.

The following chapter builds on the memoirs specifically by attending to "the room," as it is often called, which is to say, the room in which a sperm sample is produced. In this chapter, I turn to the Spanish film *Embarazados* (*We are Pregnant*), which thinks about infertility. In particular, I focus on the ways in which ejaculation or more specifically the idea of the money shot takes on a new meaning. In pornography, the money shot has a very specific meaning attached to male pleasure and climax, but in these infertility stories, the money shot becomes a test about one's virility. This chapter thus braids together various discourses around sexuality, pleasure, the body, and labour, notably drawing upon Paul Preciado's notion of the pharmacopornographic.

The next chapter continues its analysis of men's infertility and film by attending to the Australian film *Not Suitable for Children*, in which the hero learns he has testicular cancer that will require treatment that will render him infertile. With only a matter of a month, he sets out to produce a child. In this chapter, I think about the idea of "missing out," for instance, what does it mean to the infertile man to realize he may well "miss out" on a part of life that he had anticipated? This chapter draws on the writings of the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, in hopes of making sense of how one might mourn what they will now miss out on.

Finally, I turn to the idea of "no future," less Lee Edelman's notion of no future and more a very literal lack of future. What does it mean to be the last fertile man? Is this a fantasy, a comedy, a nightmare, a tragedy? This chapter draws on *Flesh Gordon Meets the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, a sex comedy, and *Mr. Adam*, a novel, to consider how the story of the last man might be told and what that means in generic terms. It is easy to imagine that being the last fertile man may well be a sexual and erotic fantasy for many, but what of the responsibility that such a narrative entails? These two texts are radically different from one another, but they show the ways in which infertility may be thought of in terms of futurity and temporality, as well as responsibility.

## Notes

- 1 When I speak here and throughout *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* about the "quiver," I do not mean it in the same ways as it is used in the Quiverfull movement, which began in the 1980s. In their work, Laura Harrison and Sarah B. Rowley explain:

the movement takes as its foundation Psalm 127, which treats children as a 'heritage from the Lord' and encourages its members to reproduce prolifically. Situating themselves to the political right of [Roman] Catholics, who eschew birth control through 'natural' family planning, Quiverfull adherents view children as a blessing bestowed by God, and multiple childbirths



as opportunities to express a politico-religious opposition to modern social movements such as feminism. They believe that any attempt to control family size interferes with God's plan, and encourage a gender ideology based on female submission to male authority. Because Quiverfull is an ideological movement, not a religious sect, it is impossible to pin down the exact number of its constituency. That said, since its advent, the movement has grown significantly in membership, involving numbers in the thousands to low tens of thousands.

(p. 48)

The movement has gained mainstream attention thanks to television programs like *19 Kids and Counting* featuring Michelle and Jim Bob Duggar.

- 2 I have used this case model study in my book, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* (2020b, see pp. 25–26). In that book, the matter was how to choose texts from a seemingly endless archive. Instead of speaking about “the romance novel,” my goal was to speak about particular romance novels that may well be interesting to the broader study of popular romance. Again, the goal was not to create or uphold universal truth nor was the goal to canonize particular texts.

# 1 Reading Infertility in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) is a novel that is perhaps best known for being salacious, sexy, and perhaps even a little dirty. Indeed, there are few novels that are as well known as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a novel that was censored for decades, was at the heart of a court case about censorship, has been adapted to film and television numerous times, and ultimately is one of literature's best-known examples about sex—comfortably sitting alongside Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, *The Story of O* by Pauline Réage, *The Graduate* by Charles Webb, the short stories of Anaïs Nin, or the poetry of e. e. cummings (“but it's life said he / but your wife said she”), to name but a few. Even if the novel has not been read, it is a novel that seemingly most know something about. In his poem, “Annus Mirabilis,” Philip Larkin writes,

Sexual intercourse began  
in nineteen sixty-three  
(which was rather late for me)-  
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban  
and The Beatles' first LP.

In the film *The Reader*, Michael reads aloud to Hanna, and one of the books he reads is, of course, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It is a novel that regularly appears in lists of “the best sex scenes,” as was the case in *The Telegraph* (2017),

Then as he began to move, in the sudden helpless orgasm, there awoke in her new strange thrills rippling inside her. Rippling, rippling, rippling, like a flapping overlapping of soft flames, soft as feathers, running to points of brilliance, exquisite, exquisite and melting her all molten inside. It was like bells rippling up and up to a culmination. She lay unconscious of the wild little cries she uttered at the last.

Of course, *The Telegraph* is not alone, as other venues have done similar excises but have opted for different passages. Each February, as we approach

Valentine's Day, newspapers and magazines run stories about the best literary sex—and so often, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is included. What is clear from these brief examples is that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a book about sex, and not only is it about sex, it is also about sex worthy of being canonized among the best sex scenes in literature. These are the sex scenes one should be reading.

*Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a novel about sex, and as Lawrence writes in the opening pages, “however one might sentimentalise it, this sex business was one of the most ancient sordid connexions and subsections” (p. 7). And even though the “poets who glorified it were mostly men” (p. 7), Lawrence will undertake the task of imagining sex once more and will work to make it less sentimental and return it to its raw and wild state. He laments that men “insisted on the sex thing like dogs,” while he also acknowledges that the “beautiful pure freedom of a woman was infinitely more wonderful than any sexual love” (p. 7). While some may lament this focus on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a sexual book, it must be admitted that Lawrence himself knew it was a sexual and even erotic book. Halfway through writing it, he described the book to S. S. Kotliansky, “so improper, you wouldn't dare to touch it. It's the most improper novel ever written: and as Jehovah you would probably find it sheer pornography. But it isn't. It's a declaration of the phallic reality” (*Collected Letters*, p. 1028). Though this book is undoubtedly sexual, perhaps even pornographic in the eyes of some, Lawrence insists that there is more to it. His declaration is that it is about “phallic reality,” and this is the point on which I shall focus.

The novel opens, “ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically” (p. 1).<sup>1</sup> While the age is undoubtedly tragic, what is it that we “refuse to take tragically?” For Candis Bond, “the first lines of the novel set up Connie's ‘position’ on modernity, framing her eventual pregnancy as an embodiment of cultural hope and recovery” (2016, p. 38), and such a reading makes good sense when read through the eyes of Lady Chatterley, but what of Clifford Chatterley? I am inclined to agree with Julian Moynahan, who observes that “in the context of the whole novel tragedy refers to a great deal more than a world war” (1959, p. 70) and it is in this spirit that I asked: what happens if we focus on other tragedies contained within the novel? It is not that I wish to enumerate a list of tragedies, but rather to read from a different angle, perhaps focus on a different narrative perspective. It had not occurred to me previously, but perhaps, as I shall argue, the tragedy—or at least another tragedy—is to be found in Sir Clifford, who has been read many times in terms of his disability, but in this chapter, I wish to speak of his impotence and infertility. Indeed, in this way I agree with Bond that Connie's position is one of modernity, a pregnancy being necessary for “cultural hope and recovery,” but this pregnancy is juxtaposed by Clifford's impotence and infertility. This novel, then, has two central figures who are inversions of one another: if Connie is the “embodiment of cultural hope and recovery,” then Clifford is despair and ruin.

Formally, then, we might pay attention to these juxtapositions throughout the novel, or as Dennis Jackson calls it, Lawrence's "highly effective contrapuntal technique" wherein "Lawrence often plays one chapter off against another for thematic and symbolic effect" (1993, p. 364).

In the opening chapter of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, we are witness to how important fertility becomes, not just for Connie but also for Clifford:

Clifford had a sister, but she had departed. Otherwise there were no near relatives. The eldest brother was dead in the war. Crippled forever, knowing he could never have any children, Clifford came home to the smoky Midlands to keep the Chatterley name alive while he could.

(p. 1)

Almost immediately, readers see the importance of genealogy and the patrilineal. While we know well the patrilineal histories of the Bible, "to Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech" (Genesis 4:18), such a history is not possible for the Chatterleys; their history has been written, a future impossible. The tragedy, then, I wish to suggest is Clifford's impotence, which has rendered him infertile, and that the tragedy then is the end of the patrilineal line of the Chatterleys.

More particularly, what makes the novel "improper" for Lawrence was not that it was sexual, but that it was about "phallic reality" (*Collected Letters*, p. 1028), a reality that he himself knew all too well. While not wanting to advance a biographical critique of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, for I tend to follow Barthes's provocative "death of the author" (1977), I think it is worth recalling here that according to Jeffrey Meyer's biography of Lawrence, Lawrence was sterile, but he "had always enjoyed healthy physical relations with Frieda" (1990, p. 331). However, by 1926, all of this changed when his "sexual capacity suffered as a result of tuberculosis" (Meyer, p. 331). Furthermore, as noted in Worthen's biography, "Richard Aldington would inform the biographer Harry T. Moore [...] that Frieda [Lawrence] had told 'her intimates...Lawrence has been impotent since 1926'" (Worthen 2005, p. 338), a point which has been used by other critics in their readings of Lawrence's work (Worthen, p. 428). In 1926, Lawrence would have been about 40 years of age, and it was in October of 1926 that Lawrence began writing *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, as Roland Gant suggests in his Publisher's Note to *The First Lady Chatterley's Lover* and as Dieter Mehl and Christa Jansohn note in their introduction to *The First and Second Lady Chatterley Novels* (1999, p. xxiii), though Frieda Lawrence suggests, "if I am not mistaken, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the three versions, were written in about three years from 1925 to 1928 on and off" (1999, p. 10). This biographical detail makes it possible then to read Chatterley as a kind of stand-in for Lawrence himself, for not only is Lawrence

sterile, he is also impotent, seeming doubly wounded, like Clifford. This is a point noted by Meyers,

The leading male characters in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* reveal two aspects of Lawrence's illness: Clifford Chatterley is sexually incapacitated (a war injury has paralyzed him from the waist down) and his gamekeeper, Oliver Mellors, has had tuberculosis.

(1990, p. 332)

What I am suggesting, however, is that Clifford becomes a stand-in for Lawrence, and though Mellors had tuberculosis like Lawrence, Mellors was not sexually affected the way Lawrence was. Mellors is the man that Lawrence could never be.

In her work, Bonnie Kime Scott suggests that “the phallus may be Lawrence's ultimate character” (1990, p. 221), and perhaps this is not just in his fictions and poetry. While I agree with Scott, I want to extend this reading further; I want to suggest that the phallus is not only “Lawrence's ultimate character,” but that it is also a great source of anxiety, in part, because of his own experiences of impotence. While I am admitting this biographical detail into evidence, I want to be clear that it is not the *reason* for my reading—indeed, as evidence it is circumstantial rather than direct evidence. If Lawrence's “ultimate character” is the phallus, it is because in some ways he makes its symbolic nature real and its real symbolic. He crafts a phallus that is complex and complicated while not delinking it from its corporeal referent.

In *Infertilities: Exploring Fictions of Barren Bodies* (2001), Robin Truth Goodman argues, “as reproduction and female fertility is, ultimately, the unquestioned basis for considering sexual difference and defining genders, infertility can upset the stability of categories based on the phallus, the name and its heredity” (p. xiv). Certainly, this sense of infertility is at play in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, recalling that “Clifford came home to the smoky Midlands to *keep the name alive* while he could” (p. 5, emphasis added). His infertility thus, as Goodman would have it, “upset[s] the stability of categories based on the phallus, the name and its heredity” (p. xiv), and this is the tragedy that motivates *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and indeed, once more biographically, it is worth noting that Lawrence himself produced no heirs.

In her book *Sex, Disability, and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus* (2019), Jane Gallop speaks about *Lady Chatterley's Lover* negotiating the phallus and desirability. She contends that Lawrence's novel is the “locus classicus,” wherein “Lord Chatterley in his wheelchair is the castrated foil to the phallic hero, Mellors” (pp. 37–38). Gallop further argues that the novel is a “celebration of the most normative version of phallic sexuality” (p. 59), which is tied deeply to hegemonic masculinity and its dependence upon patriarchal power not just symbolically, but also reproductively. Gallop rightly observes,

when the female protagonist gives herself to the phallic man, she of course becomes pregnant. When she rejects her husband because of his war injury, it is widely and repeatedly said that it is because he cannot give her a child.

(p. 59)

It is hard to disagree with Gallop that the novel was “scandalous in 1928 for its explicit sex scenes, [and that] this novel is a paean to the superiority of reproductive sexuality” (p. 59). Even though I could hardly agree more with Gallop—though I do wonder what she does with the suggested anal sex in the novel, which would not testify to the “superiority of reproductive sexuality” but certainly would be a rather explicit sex scene<sup>2</sup>—I am taken aback at how little has seemingly been written about the reproductive sex that underpins the novel. It is as if since we know it is there, we need not concern ourselves with it. But if it were not for the reproductive sex, this novel would be without motive. *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, then, is a novel not only about sex, but more particularly and perhaps especially about reproductive sex and above all its natural superiority. But all of this highlights the importance of the dichotomies that are at play: while Connie is fertile (so too is Mellors), Clifford is not. His infertility, his impotence, his inability to partake in and enjoy “the superiority of reproductive sexuality” (Gallop, p. 59) is central to the novel. Thus, while Clifford and Connie are juxtaposed with one another as infertile/fertile, so too are Clifford and Mellors, which all the more dramatizes “phallic reality” (Lawrence, *Collected Letters*, p. 1028). These two men are essentially pitted against one another in terms of virility. Mellors, unlike Clifford, can rise to the occasion and produce an heir.

When the novel is read anew with a particular focus on the “superiority of reproductive sexuality,” we may note similar but different things, for instance:

And however one might sentimentalise it, this sex business was one of the most ancient sordid connections and subjections. Poets who glorified it were mostly men. Women had always known there was something better, something higher. And now they knew it more definitely than ever. The beautiful pure freedom of a woman was infinitely more wonderful than any sexual love. The only unfortunate thing was that men lagged so far behind women in the matter. They insisted on the sex thing like dogs.  
(p. 7)

This paragraph sets up a binary, one that eroticizes and idealizes how women think about sex, whereas for men, sex becomes a kind of bestial thing. Women understand it is about more, “something better, something higher.” I cannot help but wonder if, for Lawrence, what women know as “something better, something higher” is the productive and reproductive potential of sex in a way that men cannot and do not understand. He relies, of course, on an essentialized vision of the sexes.

Sir Clifford often seems at great pains to philosophize his ideas about sexuality; in a way he is stuck in the realm of “sex-in-the-head.” In *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1964), Lawrence presents the story of Adam and Eve. He writes:

When Adam went and took Eve, *after* the apple, he didn't do any more than he had done many a time before, in act. But in consciousness he did something very different. So did Eve. Each of them kept an eye on what they were doing, they watched what was happening to them. They wanted to KNOW. And that was the birth of sin. Not *doing* it, but KNOWING about it. Before the apple, they had shut their eyes and their minds had gone dark. Now, they peeped and pried and imagined. They watched themselves. And they felt uncomfortable after. They felt self-conscious. So they said, “The *act* is sin. Let's hide. We've sinned.”

(p. 95)

For Lawrence, sex becomes problematic when it is in the head, which is to say, when we think about the sex we are having (or not), when the sex resides in the head rather than being an embodied and lived experience. This brief discussion of Adam and Eve then shows how quickly sex becomes about the head rather than the body. The language is about consciousness. Throughout *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, there is an ongoing tension—another juxtaposition—between the head and the body, or what might be the “mental” and the “real.” This tension may be best seen in how language works in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; the word “mental,” which appears some 26 times, is most often attached to Clifford, while a word like “cunt,” which is used seven times, appears exclusively between Mellors and Connie. In a way, diagnosing sex in the head is easy—either you've got it or you don't. Clifford's got it, so too do most of his friends, and Connie escapes it (or is cured of it) with Mellors.

These juxtapositions become all the more apparent and visible when one considers the geographic differences at play, namely Wragby, the world of Chatterley, and the “green world” in the novel, which is to say, the world of Mellors. I wish to show here how these two worlds come to symbolize the infertile and sterile world of Wragby and the lush and fertile world of Mellors. Northrop Frye observes,

For [Lawrence] the sexual relation is natural in the sense that it has its closest and most immediate affinities with the physical environment, the world of animals and plants and walks in the country and sunshine and rain. The idyllic sense of the world as helping to protect and insulate true love from the noisy city-world of disembodied consciousness runs through all of Lawrence's work from the early *White Peacock* to the late *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

(27:213)

## 24 *Reading Infertility*

What Frye misses, which is what I think many have missed, is the importance of fertility to the sexual relation, and this is what I think Lawrence is dramatizing. The juxtaposition between Wragby and the green world or the wood is ultimately about fertility, recalling here, that Frye argued,

the forest or green world, then, is a symbol of natural society, the word 'natural' here referring to the original human society which is the proper home of man. [...] This natural society is associated with things which in the context of the ordinary world seem unnatural, but which are in fact attributes of nature as a miraculous and irresistible reviving power. These associations include dream, magic, and chastity or spiritual energy as well as fertility and renewed natural energies.

(Frye, 28:215)

It is worth noting here that Frye speaks of "spiritual energy" as well as the "reviving power" of the green world, because it is quite true and many have noted that Lady Chatterley seems to be "revived" by the green world. In a well-known part of the novel, for instance, Connie tentatively walks into the woods, where she stumbles upon Mellor's cottage, and so begins the erotic journey through the green world:

So she went round the side of the house. At the back of the cottage, the land rose rather steeply, so the back yard was sunken and enclosed in a low stone wall. She turned the corner of the house, and stopped. In the little yard two paces beyond her, the man was washing himself, utterly unaware. He was naked to the hips, his velveteen breeches slipping down over his slender loins. And his white, slender back was curved over a big bowl of soapy water, in which he ducked his head, shaking his head with a queer, quick little motion, lifting his slender white arms and pressing the soapy water from his ears: quick, subtle as a weasel playing with water, and utterly alone.

(p. 66)

Connie gazes upon his nearly naked body that seemingly leaves little to the imagination. The denuded forest world is now marked by the naked Mellors. Mellors is certainly naked in the most utilitarian way, as he is merely bathing and cleaning himself. Mellors is not nude, but naked, recalling that "nudity happens in art, nakedness happens in your bathroom" (Carr-Gomm, p. 7). This scene, however, becomes epiphanic for Connie:

Yet, in some curious way, it was a visionary experience: it had hit her in the middle of her body. She saw the clumsy breeches slipping away over the pure, delicate white loins, the bones showing a little, and the sense of aloneness, of a creature purely alone, overwhelmed her. Perfect, white solitary nudity of a creature that lives alone, and inwardly alone. And beyond that, a certain beauty of a pure creature. Not the



stuff of beauty, not even the body of beauty, but a certain lambency, the warm white flame of a single life revealing itself in contours that one might touch: a body!

Connie had received the shock of vision in her womb, and she knew it.

(p. 66)

In this green world, then, Connie experiences a “visionary experience” that will “hit her in the middle of her body”; which is to say, she receives “the shock of vision in her womb, and she knew it” (p. 66). This shock to her womb—a preferred Lawrentian term—is, I contend, about fertility. It is Mellors who is able to awaken Lady Chatterley.

Following this “visionary experience” which affords a “shock of vision in her womb,” Connie returns to Wragby. In one of the novel’s many iconic scenes, readers witness Connie coming to terms with her awakening:

When Connie went up to her bedroom she did what she had not done for a long time: took off all her clothes and looked at herself naked in the huge mirror. She did not know what she was looking for, or at, very definitely. Yet she moved the lamp till it shone full on her.

And she thought as she had thought so often: what a frail, easily-hurt, rather pathetic thing a naked human body is: somehow a little unfinished, incomplete!

(p. 70)

I suggest that this scene is iconic because it—or a variation on it—appears in many of the adaptations of the novel. Although it may very well be tempting to suggest it appears in the adaptations, particularly the filmic adaptations, because of the visual appeal, I would suggest that much more is happening here. Her body has been described throughout the novel:

Being a soft, ruddy, country-looking girl inclined to freckle, with big blue eyes and curling brown hair and a soft voice, and rather strong, female loins she was considered a little old-fashioned and “wom-anly.” She was not a little pilchard sort of fish, like a boy, with a boy’s flat breast and little buttocks. She was too feminine to be quite smart.

(p. 19)

In this scene, she looks at her naked body “in the huge mirror” and readers learn that she does not quite “know what she was looking for, or at” (p. 70). She has become alienated from her body, almost recalling Frye’s observation that “we are fearfully and wonderfully made, but in terms of what our imaginations suggest we could be, we are a hideous botch” (14:47). Her body is described as “pathetic,” “a little unfinished, incomplete”; we might ask, then, what about *her* body is incomplete? Certainly, one answer is that “Connie *did* want children” (p. 12). Indeed, I think this answer

makes good sense when we read that “her body was going meaningless, going dull and opaque, so much insignificant substance. It made her feel immensely depressed, and hopeless” (p. 70). As she continues to look at her alien body, she becomes more and more disenchanted with her body: “the front of her body made her miserable. It was already beginning to slacken with a slack sort of thinness, almost withered, going old before it had ever really lived. She thought of the child she might somehow bear,” all of which leaves her to ponder, “was she fit, anyhow?” (p. 71). She is frustrated, depressed, and miserable because her body has yet to take on a role that she desires—motherhood:

She slipped into her nightdress and went to bed, where she sobbed bitterly. And in her bitterness burned a cold indignation against Clifford and his writings and his talk: against all the men of his sort, who defrauded a woman even out of her own body. Unjust! Unjust! The sense of deep physical injustice burned through her very soul.

(p. 71)

From Connie’s vantage, this “deep physical injustice” is because of Clifford, who had “defrauded a woman out of her own body” (p. 71). But his fraud will be resolved in the green world, at Mellors’s cottage. At the close of the chapter, Connie resolves for a different future, another possible world:

And Connie felt herself released, in another world. She felt she breathed differently. But still she was afraid, how many of her roots, perhaps mortal ones, were tangled with Clifford’s. Yet still, she breathed freer. A new phase was going to begin, in her life.

(p. 84)

Frye speaks of this desire in *Fearful Symmetry*, writing that “once we begin to think in terms of wish and desire, we find ourselves beating prison bars” (14:47). This is precisely what Lady Chatterley is doing. She has been to the green world in which she can imagine another possibility, and now she desires it. The green world here thus becomes more than just a place; it is, as suggested above, a powerful energy that gives life, quite literally, to both Connie and the child-to-be.

The discussion of a “new phase” is, of course, indicative of what is expected in the green world, which, we will recall, “has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desires” (22:171). Her fertile body becomes alive as Mellors explores her body:

“You lie there!” he said softly: and he shut the door, so that it was dark, quite dark.

With a queer obedience, she lay down on the blanket. Then she felt the soft, groping, helplessly desirous hand touching her body, feeling for

her face. The hand stroked her face softly, softly, with infinite soothing and assurance, and at last there was the soft touch of a kiss on her cheek.  
(p. 116)

What Mellors provides is what Clifford cannot or refuses to provide, an intimacy that is physical rather than mental. This has been the case since the Chatterleys were married: "He had been virgin when he married: and the sex part did not mean much to him. They were so close, he and she, apart from that" (p. 12). But this is what Connie craves and desires:

For passion alone is awake to it. And when passion is dead, or absent, then the magnificent throb of beauty is incomprehensible and even a little despicable: live, warm beauty of contact, so much deeper than the beauty of vision. She felt the glide of his cheek on her thighs and belly and buttocks, and the close brushing of his moustache and his soft thick hair, and her knees began to quiver. Far down in her she felt a new stirring, a new nakedness emerging. And she was half afraid. Half she wished he would not caress her so. He was encompassing her somehow. Yet she was waiting, waiting.

(p. 125)

This scene is the first of many sexual scenes between Mellors and Connie, which is in part why this novel was so controversial. These scenes were not only about sex, but about adultery. However, these judgements are judgements that live beyond the text; as Frye would write: "what the critic tries to do is lead us from what the poets and prophets meant, or thought they meant, to the inner structure of what they said" (18:168). Even if these judgements are all true in the ordinary world, that of the text or that of the reader, what remains important is that the "forest society is more flexible and tolerant than its counterpart" (Frye, 28:214). These actions are happening within the green world, which is a world apart from Wragby.

In this scene, we also find Connie discovering a "new stirring, a new nakedness emerging" (p. 125), which is part of the epiphanic reality of the green world, recalling that the green world is a visionary space which provides energy. Compared to the earlier scene of her looking at the alien body in the mirror, Connie is realizing her own body once more, and she is still, of course, trepid: "And she was half afraid" (p. 125). This nakedness will continue to be important to the novel, particularly as Connie comes to terms with her "new nakedness." Connie is in a sense, to borrow from Frye, finding "new directions from old" (21:307); it is not that nakedness itself is new, but that now it is taking on new meanings. Incidentally, the idea of nakedness is important to the novel itself, with the word "naked" appearing 30 times and "nakedness" appearing ten times, while "nude" and "nudity" appear only once. This is important, because "nakedness represents

the raw, nudity the ideal” (Carr-Gomm, p. 7). All of this is possible only because of the green world in which it all unfolds and happens.

Upon another return to the wood, readers are presented with yet another exploration of the greenness of the green world:

Connie went to the wood directly after lunch. It was really a lovely day, the first dandelions making suns, the first daisies so white. The hazel-thicket was a lace-work of half-open leaves, and the last dusty perpendicular of the catkins. Yellow celandines now were in crowds, flat open, pressed back in urgency and the yellow glitter of themselves. It was the yellow, the triumphant powerful yellow of early summer. And primroses were broad and full of pale abandon, thick-clustered primroses no longer shy. The lush dark green of hyacinths was a sea, with buds rising like pale corn, while in the riding the forget-me-nots were fluffing up, and columbines were unfolding their ink-purple ruches, and there were bits of blue bird’s-egg shell under a bush. Everywhere the bud-knots and the leap of life!

The keeper was not at the hut. Everything was serene, brown chickens running lustily. Connie walked on towards the cottage, because she wanted to find him.

(p. 165)

In Lawrence’s work, then, the green world, while very much a powerful energy, is also very much a place—nature is resplendent. These flowers are part of a “childlike delight in a paradisaal world” (Frye, 14:55), almost as if one is seeing in technicolour for the first time, as is the case when Dorothy finds herself in Oz. Connie is no longer fearful or timid about the green world or about Mellors; she is now actively seeking him out in a world that is vibrant and verdant, a world that is marked by the fertility of spring and summer. We are in the world of love and wonder, which Frye sees as “an imaginative expansion: [love and wonder] establish a permanent unity of subject and object, and they lift us from a world of subject and object to a world of lover and beloved” (14:55). It should not surprise us that this vibrancy is found after a scene in which:

Connie went slowly home, realising the depth of the other thing in her. Another self was alive in her, burning molten and soft and sensitive in her womb and bowels. And with this self, she adored him, she adored him till her knees were weak as she walked. In her womb and bowels she was flowing and alive now, and vulnerable, and helpless in adoration of him as the most naïve woman.

(p. 135)

Connie’s body has become, like the green world, fertile. The green world has thus provided “fertility and renewed natural energies” (28:215). As

much as she is pregnant, she has also come to appreciate this “new nakedness” (p. 125), which will be central to yet another iconic scene in the novel which is included in most adaptations. As in the previous mention of adaptations, on the one hand, we could dismiss this scene as included because it involves nakedness, but on the other hand it serves a narrative purpose:

He laughed wryly, and threw off his clothes. It was too much. He jumped out, naked and white, with a little shiver, into the hard, slanting rain. Flossie sprang before him with a frantic little bark. Connie, her hair all wet and sticking to her head, turned her hot face and saw him. Her blue eyes blazed with excitement, [...] out of the clearing and down the path, the wet boughs whipping her. She ran, and he saw nothing but the round wet head, the wet back leaning forward in flight, the rounded buttocks twinkling: a wonderful cowering female nakedness in flight.  
(p. 221)

This scene is important to my reading of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* because it is at this point that we see a full sense of the transformation of Connie, from a woman timidly looking at her alien body in a mirror in the privacy of her own bedroom to running freely, naked in the green world. In this scene then, we may find a kind of long-desired ascent:

Ascent may be to the new: when it is, descents is the recovery of the old that was excluded by repression, forgetting, or lack of awareness. It's a harrowing of hell or rather limbo: a redemption of the dead, a recalling of past to present. Similarly new formulations of myth recapture lost and neglected implications.

(Frye, 5:12)

Connie has rediscovered something that had been lost; her sense of joyfulness, freedom, and the “new nakedness” (p. 125) has taken hold. This scene, moreover, of course, returns readers to another garden: the Garden of Eden. Connie and Mellors, like Adam and Eve, “were both naked and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25), but this is not the Adam and Eve of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, but the Edenic Adam and Eve, an Adam and Eve freed from “sex in the head.”

Clearly, Lawrence has carefully constructed a green world that is lush, verdant, and fertile, a world that stands in opposition to the infertile and sterile world of Wragby, where Sir Clifford spends much of his time. Wragby functions almost metonymically insofar as Clifford and Wragby are two of the same. Clifford takes his “seat” (p. 5) at Wragby and Wragby becomes a stand-in for Clifford. Wragby stands in contrast to the green world in which Connie finds herself. Returning to Wragby, we already see hints of the infertile, “Connie and Clifford came home to Wragby in the autumn of 1920” (p. 13). While not wanting to embrace a pathetic fallacy, it is

30 *Reading Infertility*

hard not to see that they are returning in the autumn and not the spring when everything returns to life. This becomes all the more telling once one has seen the film adaptation for television by Ken Russell (1993), wherein the scene of return is marked by dreariness and an overwhelming sense of brown taking up the bulk of the image, with autumnal leaves, orange and red, overhead.



Still, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1992)

Minutes later, following a discussion amongst townsfolk about how Sir Clifford's father had died when Clifford returned home paralyzed and how it will be so tragic for the parish to no longer have Chatterleys, once more Wragby is shown as being brown, the branches climbing the pillars dead, the ground covered in refuse.



Still, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1992)

A similar image is found in Pascale Ferran's adaptation, *Lady Chatterley* (2006), wherein Lady Chatterley is found standing in front of Wragby. She is dressed in warm clothing and the camera has panned over the autumnal colours that stand in front of her. The branches that crawl up the walls of the home are without colour.



Still, *Lady Chatterley* (2006)

Clifford and Connie are not coming home in the springtime when everything is in bloom, but rather they come home in the autumn when the world around them is dying. They come home not to the green world—lush and vibrant—but to a “low old house in brown stone” (p. 13). Against this backdrop, it is hard not to see Chatterley as “the castrated foil to the phallic hero, Mellors,” as Jane Gallop has argued (2019, pp. 37–38).

Throughout the novel, and especially while at Wragby, it is made clear time and again that Chatterley is never the man that Mellors is. Chatterley's understandings of sexuality seem to be so theoretical. In one moment, Clifford explains, “I do think sufficient civilisation ought to eliminate a lot of the physical disabilities [...] All the love business, for example, it might just as well go. I suppose it would, if we could breed babies in bottles” (p. 74). Clifford, importantly, is speaking here before “test-tube babies,” a possibility that for Chatterley was purely theoretical—once more testifying to the sex in the head. But what is so striking is the ease with which he dismisses sex and romance and love, a fact noted by Olive, who explains “that might leave all the more room for fun” (p. 74). Olive recognizes that sex can be fun, pleasurable, joyful, and this is certainly also a commentary on women's sexuality and its liberation by way of birth control. Once women are able to control the means of reproduction and fertility, the meanings of sex can and do change. And in some ways, the inverse is happening with Clifford: he has lost his ability, as it were, to have sex, and so too have his ideas about sex. He seems to be making several arguments *against* sex, imagining that he has somehow elevated himself to another plane of existence, one that is post-sexual, one that does not *need* sex, but knows about it.

During an earlier discussion with friends about sex, Clifford, we read, “rarely talked much at these times. He never held forth: his ideas were not vital enough to him, he was really too confused and emotional. Now he blushed and looked uncomfortable,” and Clifford explains, “Well! [...] Being myself *hors de combat*, I don’t see I’ve anything to say on the matter” (p. 34). Clifford is so aware of his body and his inability that his ideas are deemed to be “not vital enough,” they have no life to them, much like Wragby itself is lacking in the vitality of the green world. Tommy Dukes retorts, “The top of you’s by no means *hors de combat*. You’ve got the life of the mind, sound and intact. So let us hear your idea” (pp. 34–35). Clifford just as quickly dismisses it, “Even then, I don’t suppose I have much idea.—I suppose marry-and-have-done-with-it would pretty well stand for what I think. Though of course, between a man and a woman who care for one another, it is a great thing” (p. 35). Strikingly, “Connie sat there and put another stitch in her sewing” (p. 35) and sat there sitting mum. As interesting as it may be to hear these ideas, there is a dissatisfaction for Connie: “Connie was surprised at her own feeling of aversion from Clifford. [...] Now the mental excitement had worn itself out and collapsed, and she was aware only of the physical aversion” (p. 97). What is striking here is that his body becomes a site of disgust, alongside his personality. We read, “She felt weak and utterly forlorn. She wished some help would come from outside. But in the whole world there was no help. Society was terrible because it was insane” (p. 97). While all of this is happening:

Clifford was shifting his grip from her on to Mrs Bolton. He did not know it. Like many insane people, his insanity might be measured by the thing he was *not* aware of: the great desert tracts in his consciousness.

(p. 97)

One of the things that may be motivating so much of his philosophizing is the thing about which he is seemingly unaware. It is not just that he is impotent and unable to have sex, but he is impotent and unable to reproduce, and that is what is motivating his insanity.

These movements towards his faults, which Lady Chatterley finds, are all part of an ongoing narrative strategy to undercut Chatterley’s claims to masculinity, which is why *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is so much about, as Lawrence suggested, “phallic reality.” The “reality” of the “phallus,” as it were, is that the phallus can always be cut down. Tommy Dukes explains that “real knowledge comes out of the whole corpus of the consciousness; out of your belly and your penis as much as out of your brain or mind” (p. 37). This moment reminds readers that Chatterley is foreclosed from this “real knowledge” because Chatterley is, as he himself says, “*hors de*



*combat*” (p. 34). It is important here to recall that all of this is happening at the opening of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*; it is after these scenes that Lady Chatterley will begin her fertile journey, while Sir Clifford will remain infertile, without “real knowledge” and stuck in the realm of “sex in the head.”

It is only after reading and perhaps re-reading that one begins to see the tragedy of Clifford’s life. It is not just that he is an “*hors de combat*” (p. 34), but that his injury has seemingly affected his entire life. He will never, as it were, acquire “real knowledge.” He proposes that Lady Chatterley find another man to father a child that can be his:

It would almost be a good thing if you had a child by another man [...] If we brought it up at Wragby, it would belong to us and to the place. I don’t believe very intensely in fatherhood. If we had the child to rear, it would be our own. And it would carry on. Don’t you think it’s worth considering?

(pp. 43–44)

A strange idea to be sure (and one to which we shall return in the next chapter), but this is what sets into motion so much of the book. While Chatterley may have been speaking philosophically, the narrative will embrace that philosophy. She asks if it would matter to him if she had an affair, but for Clifford, the child matters more, so that “it would belong to us and to the place” (pp. 43–44). This idea sets into motion so much of the novel, wherein his marriage will fall apart whilst Lady Chatterley embodies the fullness of life in the green world. As much as this novel may be one that is about adultery and as much as the relationship between Connie and Clifford will change, it seems to me that there is much to be said for infertility.

In his book, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*, Tony Tanner only briefly addresses *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, noting that:

it almost doesn’t matter that it is in fact technically adulterous love, and the idea that the novel acts as a critique of contemporary England (impotent mineowners, virile working-class people, etc.) seems to me to put the emphasis in the wrong place.

(1979, p. 13)

Certainly, I am inclined to agree; the adultery almost seems to disappear because it seemingly makes so much sense, even Sir Clifford has imagined the possibility. For Tanner, “Lawrence is attempting to redefine the very terminologies of contracts and relationships” (p. 13), and this is very true indeed. Lawrence is imagining and calling into question the very nature of the contracts and relationships to which we are bound. What happens

in a marriage where one is unable to provide a child and yet the partner desires a child? How might that contract be reimagined? Of course, Lawrence's exploration is detrimental, and in many ways it becomes a tragedy, recalling that "ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically" (p. 5). Instead of accepting the outcome, Chatterley seeks a solution. Adultery, thus, becomes yet another juxtaposition within the novel, one that highlights the transgression of the contracts and the role of infertility.

While Clifford resides in the "great desert tracts," Connie lives life fully in the green world with Mellors. Clifford remains in an infertile and sterile world, while Connie lives in a vibrant world full of life, love, and sex. These two worlds are juxtapositions of one another. It is hard not to read the novel, then, as a novel not only about sex and not only about phallic reality, but also, and importantly, as a novel about infertility—though this theme may not be explicit. Clifford's impotence renders him infertile, and that impotence seems to have an impact on his entire being and his entire life.

The goal of this chapter has been to show that infertility may not be explicitly named on the page, but the echoes and shadows are undoubtedly there. The stories we tell about infertility are perhaps coded (we might speak in nebulous prose), they are perhaps about gender, they are perhaps about sex, but they are the stories that we tell time and time again. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* reminds us of the complexity of infertility stories, stories to which we shall devote our attention in the chapters to come, precisely because it shows us just how influential infertility can be.

## Notes

- 1 This sentence is similar across the various drafts of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In the published *The First Lady Chatterley*, "ours is essentially a tragic age, but we refuse emphatically to be tragic about it" (p. 17), readers find a kind of clunky version of the final sentence that appears in the 1929 edition. In the second version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, published as *John Thomas and Lady Jane*, "our is essential a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically" (p. 1). In his preface to *The First Lady Chatterley*, Ronald Gant writes, "In an article devoted to *The First Lady Chatterley* in *Encounter*, January 1971, Geoffrey Strickland concluded his percipient analysis of the novel with the words 'Why Lawrence altered the novel three times is a matter mainly for speculation. But that he altered it disastrously is, in my view, beyond question.' Perhaps Lawrence's *The First Lady Chatterley* is the best of the three version. All are now available for every reader to compare them and decide" (pp. 6–7). In his editorial introduction to *John Thomas and Lady Jane*, Gant admits that "some readers may prefer *John Thomas and Lady Jane* to the established *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Others may continue to prefer what has become the 'authorised version.' But it is quite clear that the difference between the two versions reflects both Lawrence's restless inventiveness and his constant artistic self-renewal" (p. ix). In this chapter, I use the 1929 version, which is the most widely read and most widely available.

- 2 I put forward here that the anal sex is suggested, that is, the text implies this as a possible reading. We read that Mellors approaches Connie from behind “and short and sharp, he took her, short and sharp and finished, like an animal” (p. 222). Anal sex would seem to confound, at the very least, Gallop’s reading that the novel is a “paean to the superiority of reproductive sexuality,” since anal sex serves little “reproductive” purpose—anal sex is entirely unproductive and non-procreative. In another instance, the narrator, speaking on behalf of Connie, explains, “...and how, in fear, she had hated it! But how she had really wanted it!” which leads Germaine Greer to comment “here is the common rapist’s delusion embedded in literature, as it were a truth” (2010). But what might be hated (and yet desired) may well be a taboo sexual act, namely anal sex. In *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, we read, “Burning out the shames, the deepest, oldest shames, in the most secret places. It cost her an effort to let him have his way and his will of her. She had to be a passive, consenting thing, like a slave, a physical slave. ... She would have thought a woman would have died of shame. Instead of which, the shame died” (p. 247). This shame, of course, is, or at least could be, anal sex, recognizing the language of being “passive” and “like a slave,” which may well be a misreading of Greek sexuality between the *eromenos* and *erastes*, as well, of course, as “the most secret places,” which surely can signify the anus. For Marina Ludwigs, “Here it is also appropriate to recall that another connotation of *tender* is ‘sore’ or ‘painful,’ which correlates with the strong probability that the act of anal intercourse was probably quite painful for Connie” (2011). There is likely much to be said here about the anality in the text (though that is the work of another paper). Nonetheless, and briefly, the anus is where sperm go to die, there is no procreative potential. The sex between Connie and Mellors may be acceptable to Clifford if it results in an heir, a possibility he suggests, but when it is anal sex, with no productive potential, then it becomes about the sexual relationship between Connie and Mellors. It perhaps becomes about pleasure, a pleasure which Clifford cannot participate in since he is impotent.

## 2 “This Unspeakable Idea”

### Infertility in LaVyrle Spencer’s Blockbuster Romance *The Fulfillment*

Popular romance novels might be a surprising place to find discussions of infertility, particularly male infertility, given the genre’s reputation for alpha male heroes, men who are virile, who are studs (literally and figuratively). LaVyrle Spencer’s 1979 novel, *The Fulfillment*, begins as follows:

The truth had long been settling on Jonathan Gray, sneaking into his resisting corners, but it had finally resounded in the deepest part of him. He’d prayed it wasn’t so, hoped that if he willed it untrue it would be. But it was true. He knew it. At last it had to be faced...and dealt with. After denying it all these years, it had come to Jonathan Gray that he was infertile.

(p. 1)

From the outset, the novel speaks to infertility, and Jonathan Gray, our presumed hero, is infertile. Spencer’s novel, which was part of the Blockbuster Boom of the popular romance novel that saw the publication of *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) by Kathleen Woodiwiss and Rosemary Rogers’s *Sweet Savage Love* (1974),<sup>1</sup> is an early, if not the earliest, example in the American popular tradition to attend to male infertility. Spencer’s novel was so successful that it was adapted for television as *The Fulfillment of Mary Gray* (1989), a title which shifts the attention to Mary Gray as the centre of the story. Cheryl Ladd, best known for her role as Kris Munroe in *Charlie’s Angels* (1977–1981), starred as Mary, Ted Levine as Jonathan, and Lewis Smith as Aaron. In this chapter, then, I set out to explore how the novel considers, represents, and thinks through the hero’s experience of infertility and how this affects his relationships.

In the previous chapter, I explored *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, a novel that celebrates and luxuriates in what Jane Gallop called a “celebration of the most normative version of phallic sexuality” (2019, p. 59). While *The Fulfillment* does not tangle with questions of disability (at least not in the same ways), it does get at the “most normative version of phallic sexuality,” that is, sexuality becomes meaningful when it becomes *productive*. For Jonathan Gray, his infertility becomes a stumbling point; he cannot reconcile

his masculinity with this infertility. If Chatterley proposed that another man might father a child and he would adopt him as his own, *The Fulfillment* takes it a step further: “suppose Aaron sired a son for Jonathan!” (p. 4). What provokes this thought is a creative reading of Exodus 28:

He'd been reading his Bible, easing his eyes over some words there, when he came to a verse that held his mind from wandering on: “Take unto thee Aaron thy brother and his sons with him.” At first it was Aaron's name that held him, made him go over it one more time. It was hard to say who had taken whom unto whom, for Aaron and Jonathan still shared their childhood home, and had since their parents had died. But as for who was doing the “taking unto”—now that was hard to say. For they shared the home place equally, although, strange as it was, the land had been left to Jonathan while the house and the outbuildings had been willed to Aaron.

(p. 3)

I suggested above that this is a “creative” reading, and this should hardly surprise us; many have misread or misquoted the Bible and used the Bible to serve one's own ends often when we proof-text one another or a passage is read out of its context or how a text might become a reason for a movement, such as the way Psalm 127:3–5 has been read as a natalist manifesto. Admittedly, this is also the pleasure of hermeneutics, that is, reading and meaning-making or perhaps as Susan Sontag quips, interpretation “is the revenge of the intellect upon art” (1966, p. 7). In this case, Jonathan misreads the passage from Exodus to fulfil his own needs for a child—a passage which is about “the ordination of the Aaronide priesthood” (Dozeman 2009, p. 641) and a chapter that is about “making priestly garments,” as Martin Noth writes in his commentary (1959, p. 217). He starts to reason all the ways in which Jonathan and Aaron have shared everything in their lives. This sense of community and sharing echoes the earlier description that:

As only brothers they'd shared everything from the tin cup on the top of the water pump to the bed they'd slept in all their growing years, so it was only natural that what one got, the other one got, from the croup of babyhood to the head colds of childhood and, finally, the mumps of adolescence. It was the mumps that had done it.

(p. 1)

First, we note here that infertility has a cause, there is something upon which the diagnosis can be blamed: the mumps. Moreover, these brothers share everything. This sharing nature is important because it highlights all the things they have already shared, as though there is nothing between the two that separates them from one another. Even Jonathan's wife, Mary,

“was taken into the lives of both brothers, as wife to the one, as a true friend to the other” (p. 4). This will lead to an idea for Jonathan that Aaron might “[sire] a son for Jonathan” before Aaron “was married” (p. 4). Jonathan cannot let go of the “sinfulness” of it; we are told that the idea “filled [him] with shame. But that didn’t make the idea disappear. Instead, it made him conjure up reasons why it might be less than sinful after all” (pp. 4–5). I wish to suggest there that while Spencer has already alluded to Exodus 28, another biblical intertext might be worth considering, namely the biblical story of Onan found in Genesis 38.

“Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Go in to your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother’” (Genesis 38:8), so begins the relatively brief story of Onan, and the story continues, “but Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to this brother’s wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother” (Genesis 38:9). This story, brief as it is, is most generally used in terms of the sin of onanism, named after Onan, which refers to the masturbatory sin, even though, as Thomas W. Laqueur notes, Onan was “probably not a masturbator at all” (p. 20). The sin seems to be less about the action per se and more about the result, namely the spilling of one’s seed.

Despite being a relatively minor character in the Bible, the influence of Onan on Western culture cannot be denied; after all, it is from Onan that the term onanism arises. In the early eighteenth century, “sometime between 1708 and 1716 – ‘in or around 1712’” (Laqueur 2004, p. 13), a pamphlet about masturbation appeared in London, its title was *Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution*. This pamphlet was followed by Samuel-Auguste Tissot’s *L’Onanisme*, which appeared in 1760. Across the eighteenth century, then, the fear of “self-pollution” becomes named and is directly tied to Onan’s sin, namely “semen on the ground.” The author of the pamphlet explains:

THE Sin of ONAN, and GOD’s sudden Vengeance upon it, are so remarkable, that every Body will easily perceive, that from his Name I have driv’d the running Title of this little Book; and tho’ I treat of this Crime in Relation to *Women*, as well as *Men*, whilst the Offence, is *SELF-POLLUTION* in both, I could not think of any other Word which would so well put the Reader in Mind both of the *Sin* and its *Punishment* at once, as this.

(Anon)

Onanism, thus, directly refers back to Onan, who is both known for the spilling of seed and what followed, namely his death: “And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also” (Genesis 38:10). Onan’s death leads Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck to

ask: “What had Onan done that merited death?” and they observe, “the theologians formed two schools of opinion, it must be noted, on this point. For some [...] Onan had masturbated, thus avoiding his conjugal duties; for others, he had practiced something that was also a crime: *coitus interruptus*” (p. 21). In both renderings, however, what is common is the spilling of the seed, which denies the possibility of a future.

Read today, one might be bothered by the nature of Onan’s story; there is an inherent incestuous taboo at play—even if not *technically* incest. But embedded within this story is also a lesson about Levirate law, namely that “the law was to preserve the dead brother’s name and family line and preserve the inheritance so that the property of the deceased would remain in the family. It also protected the widow so that she would not have to sell herself for debt or marry outside the family” (*Archaeology Study Bible*, 2017: p. 66, n. 38:8). This will be further explained in the book of Deuteronomy:

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother’s wife, then his brother’s wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, ‘My husband’s brother refuses to perpetuate his brother’s name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.’ Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, ‘I do not wish to take her,’ then his brother’s wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, ‘So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.’ And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, ‘The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.’

(Deuteronomy 25:5–10)

I wish to suggest, then, that while we may not be able to reconcile ourselves with this Levirate law, which has a significant biblical history, the story of Onan becomes a kind of archetype in the study of infertility and more particularly its representations. This story affords a fairly straightforward solution that maintains patrilineal authority. If a man cannot produce an heir, then allow his brother or perhaps even another man (as was the case proposed in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*) to do it, while claiming the child as his own—this becomes an archetypal story. Of course, in the case of Onan, he is to provide his brother’s widow with a child, whereas in *The Fulfillment*, the man is not dead, but infertile. I suggest here if he is not dead in

a literal sense, though, of course, there is a kind of symbolic death at play in *The Fulfillment*, namely the symbolic death of the masculine and virile identity of Jonathan.

Before moving further, I do want to note here that *The Fulfillment* is not a part of the subgenre of romance novels known as inspirational or religious romance, which are typically novels written from a Christian perspective. These novels tend to come out of an evangelical tradition, often Baptist.<sup>2</sup> The evangelical romance novel uses the structures of the popular romance novel but “overlay[s] this basic plot structure with the fundamentals of conservative Christian faith. In these fictional worlds, the obstacles that keep hero and heroine apart emerge from their religious beliefs (or lack thereof)” (Neal 2006, p. 4). In these novels, God becomes an important character in the romance, wherein “the sense of divine immanence and intimacy, the experience of a romancing God, gives rise to a larger evangelical narrative that transcends the pages of a novel” (Neal, pp. 13–14). In their work, Rebecca Barrett-Fox and Kristen Donnelly provide a description of the generic elements of the inspirational romance novel:

Today’s Christian publishers, writers, and readers stress the distinguishing marks of their faith on these books: 1) romance through each partner’s relationship with God, so that God is at the center of their relationship, 2) a lack of detail about theology or religious ritual, 3) no sexual contact or, if the couple is married, only monogamous sex that is not described, 4) a focus on faith to restore brokenness of some kind, 5) a happily-ever-after ending that includes marriage or the promise of marriage between heterosexual partners who have not been divorced from other partners, and 6) traditional gender roles but heroes who may be less traditionally masculine than men in secular romances. These conventions remain true across subgenres of Christian romances published by evangelical publishing houses, though non-evangelical presses and self-published authors may not hold to them as tightly.  
(2021, p. 192)

These novels, thus, like all romance novels, conform to a formula or pattern that might be understood as “the law of genre” to borrow Jacques Derrida’s (1980, p. 55) phrase, or as a kind of “social contract” between an author and a reader (Jameson 1981, p. 92). Additionally, these novels may often re-tell a biblical story; for instance, Francine Rivers takes up the story of Tamar in *Unveiled* (2000), which is a part of *A Lineage of Grace* (2002)—it would seem a few novelists, popular or otherwise, are interested in Onan’s story. It is interesting that these novels play with Onan or the stories around Onan, and in so doing, perhaps speak to the heteronormative contract of procreation—as with *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, what happens when the contract cannot be fulfilled? These retellings can be within the Biblical context or can be an adaptation to modern times. Inspirational



romance novels are, as Lynn S. Neal contends, “instruments of faith” (p. 108). Thus, while *The Fulfillment* explicitly engages with Biblical traditions and characters go to church picnics, it is not a religious romance novel insofar as its structure is not one that commits to a conservative Christian theology or faith practice.

As noted above, *The Fulfillment* begins with an admission that Jonathan Gray is infertile. Typically, though not always, a romance novel introduces the hero and heroine quite quickly and a reader may anticipate that Jonathan will be the hero of the novel; after all, this is how the story begins. But just as importantly, Aaron, Jonathan’s brother, is mentioned in the second paragraph, and we read “as only brothers they’d shared everything” (p. 1), and in this novel, they will share once more, notably, sharing Jonathan’s wife Mary—another all too Biblical name. At the opening of the novel, Jonathan and Mary have “been married seven years and there were no babies yet. He and Mary had been trying all that time, and now it seemed almost certain there wouldn’t ever be any babies” (p. 2). Spencer carefully establishes the traumatic backdrop,

But the pretending got harder and harder and the bed seemed smaller and smaller as their lovemaking brought no babies. The strain was rife between Jonathan and Mary, and nothing would ease it except the baby they both wanted and couldn’t have.

(pp. 2–3)

This is important not only for the genre, which will require an explanation for the forthcoming events that will lead Mary and Aaron’s romance, but also because it recognizes the difficulties inherent to infertility. Infertility is not just a matter of not being able to reproduce, but rather it has huge implications on the relationship. Each month the couple is reminded of their infertility. The joy of sex may be lost to the failures of sex, a failure that becomes all the more apparent when “everybody is having babies but us,” as Jonathan exclaims (p. 30).

Mary and Aaron’s romance is *the* romance of the novel, but it is haunted by two earlier romances, as it were, insofar as Mary and Jonathan are an established couple, but Aaron has also been courting Priscilla (another Biblical name). She grows tired of him and they part ways. Priscilla is thus a rather small character when it comes down to the narrative structure. In narrative terms, *The Fulfillment* shares much in common with the homosocial desire model, wherein two men compete over one woman described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Indeed, this erotic triangle is how the book is marketed; the back cover reads:

Two brothers work a rich and bountiful land—and one extraordinary woman shares their lives. To Jonathan Gray, Mary is a devoted and

giving wife. To Aaron, she is a beloved friend. But seven childless years of marriage have forced Jonathan to ask the unthinkable of his brother and his wife—binding the two people he cares for most with an act of desire born of compassion...awakening Mary to the pain of infidelity, and to all the bittersweet joy and heartache that passionate love can bring.

Immediately, a reader sees that there is this “erotic triangle” amongst the characters, recalling that this happens when “the bond that links two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (Sedgwick 1985, p. 21). Sedgwick will argue that “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power” (1985, p. 25). In many ways, this is the governing structure of *The Fulfillment* because it is a story about brothers who had “shared everything” (p. 1).

Still relatively early in the novel, the second chapter, Jonathan laments the lack of children, explaining that “this place needs children, and they won’t spring from me,” despite Mary’s contention that “I haven’t given up hope” (p. 31). In this scene, Aaron, Jonathan, and Mary are speaking together. Aaron grows increasingly uncomfortable, “I think this is between you two, and I’ve got no place in it” (p. 31), but Jonathan insists that Aaron stay: “though Aaron stayed, he did so reluctantly while Jonathan went on” (p. 31). Finally, Jonathan breaks the ice:

Jonathan’s palms were cold and damp on his thighs. His tongue, like a thick, swollen cork, threatened to stop up his mouth.

“But you, Aaron, they [children] could spring from you.” It came out half question, half something else. But it was out. Before he dissolved in his own sweat, Jonathan hurried on. “You’re the natural one, Aaron. You’re my brother. You see how there ought to be a child, don’t you? It’s not a thing I ask lightly.” He looked at Mary, and her hands were still, her face expressionless.

(p. 31)

Aaron, however, seems to misunderstand the scenario that Jonathan is providing and laments that “I’m getting pretty damn sick of everyone in five counties pushing to me get married [...] I’m not even ready to marry Pris yet, let alone have babies!” (p. 32). Jonathan explains, “I’m not talkin’ about you and Pris,” to which Aaron exclaims, “well, what the hell are you talkin’ about?” (p. 32). If readers do not yet already have an inclination of what Jonathan is talking about, they are about to find out: “I’m talkin’ about you and Mary” (p. 32). Aaron is aghast at the idea, “yes, we suffered side by side and you came out of it worse off than me, but that doesn’t mean I owe you this that you’re asking” (p. 33). Though they both suffered from

the mumps, it did not affect them equally. Jonathan was the only one rendered infertile. Finally, Mary speaks:

“Oh, Jonathan, you thought of it all winter? You planned on asking us all that time.” There was such hurt and bewilderment in her eyes that both men looked away rather than see it.

“Aaron’s your brother. I’m your wife. The asking aside, did you think of the sinfulness of it? Did you think of that?”

(p. 34)

Jonathan has been thinking through the polemics of sin; for instance, he seems to be confused by what is more “damning” as it were: his inability to reproduce or his duty to provide an heir. Where, we might ask, is the sin to be found? What is more sinful? Of course, these questions are deeply human rather than theological or God-ordained. But even if this is sinful behaviour, there is a justification. Jonathan says that he will take on the sin himself, almost as Christ took on the sin for the world, but he is quickly reminded that “you can’t just bend and twist the words to suit your needs” (p. 34). Finally, Mary explains:

Jonathan [...] I never complained about there being no babies, and if I acted like I held you responsible, I’m sorry. But what you’re asking is wrong. It’s wrong for Aaron and me, and it’s wrong for you. How could you ask such a thing?

(p. 35)

Jonathan outlines all of his points and Mary provides counterpoints, “there’s got to be love before...” to which Jonathan responds, “It’s not as if there’s no love at all. [...] And I can see the need in you, Mary, I can see you need what nature intended. Would it be unkind if Aaron could give you that?” (p. 35). Even though he knows that he is losing the argument, Jonathan asks, “I’d just ask that you both think about it, and consider if...” (p. 36). This discussion does not end well, and Aaron says, “you realize that you’re sitting in my house and what I’m considering right now is asking you to get out of it?” (pp. 35–36). And Mary cries, “Don’t say any more. We are not *things*, not animals you can pen up together at mating time!” (p. 38). Jonathan has, in Mary’s eyes, dehumanized Mary and Aaron, turning them into animals rather than the humans they are. Everyone leaves and Jonathan is alone in the house. When Mary returns, she has not changed her mind, and explains, “it doesn’t matter how you said it, it only matters you did. There’s no good way to ask a thing like that” (p. 41), later further explaining that “you and I have to work things out and leave Aaron out of it” (p. 45). That evening, she said, “I’ve never turned you away before, Jonathan, and I know it’s not right, either, but I got to have some time to mend my mind a bit. Let’s just both drop off and work on

that mending for now” (p. 45). This scene becomes or could become a “conflict” or even “point of ritual death” in the language of romance, that is, it is the thing that must be overcome so the two can once and for all achieve their romance, and in this case, it might be that they would become pregnant and have a son, as Jonathan so desires for himself and Mary.

Of course, the answer to the question of how Jonathan could even think such a thing is fairly obvious. This scenario is similar to that of Onan, who was tasked with providing a son to Tamar on behalf of his brother, Er, who was “wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death” (Genesis 38:7). The difference, and this is key, is that Onan’s brother was dead and put to death by the Lord for his wickedness and evilness (1 Chronicles 2:3). That is, Onan never had sex with Tamar before his brother died, which is what Aaron is being asked to do. Aaron, like Onan, is uncomfortable with the situation, but the difference is what is so central. The only way for Mary to take on the role of Tamar is for Jonathan to be like Er and to die, so that Aaron may become a willing Onan who does not spill his seed on the ground. Spencer is, I think, making use of a Biblical story and showing the complexities therein. Even though Onan and Tamar’s story is relatively short, amassing a handful of verses (Genesis 38:1–10, but really Onan’s story is found in verse 4, which outlines his birth, and verses 8–10, which outlines his story), it is a story that is rich for consideration, and it is one upon which Spencer capitalizes—even if she never explicitly speaks of Onan nor of Tamar in the novel. Even though this story is not explicitly mentioned, it is important to recall that Spencer does begin with a Biblical story, thereby affording the critic and reader with some permission to explore these Biblical intertexts.

Shortly after the dispute between the three, Jonathan decides he will be going to the Cattle Exposition “the last week in May,” because he explains, “I’d want to go then to get my pick of the bulls. And so I can talk to the sellers and learn a little more about the breed” (p. 53). This had been an ongoing discussion, as the narrator notes, “they’d talked this over during the winter, and Jonathan, as usual, made good sense” (p. 53); this admission is a bit confounding, given the narrative has mostly focused on the less than “good sense” of Jonathan. Aaron tells Jonathan, “So go ahead if you’ve decided. Maybe we’ll have all the crops in by then. It’s hard to tell” (p. 54). Shortly thereafter, the narrator explains:

[Aaron] felt drained. Only one day since Jonathan had brought this unspeakable idea up among them, and his nerves were already strung out like fence wire. Now his brother had taken it one step further, providing a time when he and Mary would be left alone. Hah! If it weren’t so absurd, it would almost be laughable. But there was nothing funny about the situation at all. Today he’d acted like a schoolboy, flinching every time Mary came within touching distance, but he saw that this must end and knew he’d best treat her like he always had before.

(p. 54)

Unlike the “good sense” that has been described, readers are provided a reminder of the rather “poor” or even “bad” sense that Jonathan had and the impact it has had on Aaron. He is now ill at ease, he is nervous around Mary, and worst of all Jonathan has given them space to fulfil the mission, as it were, that Jonathan has outlined for them. Jonathan leaves and “the two on the platform saw him through the windows as he walked toward the rear of the car. [...] They raised waves in return as the train took Jonathan away, out of their sight” (p. 108). At this point in the novel, readers are more than a quarter of the way through the novel, and while Jonathan is away securing his bull, the narrative romance shifts to that of Aaron and Mary. Spencer has carefully been building the tension amongst the characters, while also, and importantly, showing the differences between the two brothers.

Almost as quickly as Jonathan “walked toward the rear of the car” (p. 108), the romance between Aaron and Mary begins: “It’s past noon and I’m hungry. [...] What do you say to a Sunday dinner cooked by someone else for a change?” Aaron asks Mary (p. 109). Aaron will admit to Mary, “You know that I wanted you then, and we both know it was wrong. I was about as chivalrous as a fox paying a call on the hen house” (p. 117), alluding to a previous amorousness between the two. And Mary calms his fears, “No, Aaron. It wasn’t wrong. We didn’t do anything. If you think you were to blame for something, then maybe so was I. I shouldn’t have stayed with you through that second dance” (pp. 117–118), and the narrator explains, “It seemed an admission of her wanting him. [...] She knew she must not think about his nearness. Oh, God, why had she let Jonathan go on the train?” (p. 118). Spencer is less subtly than before exploring the erotic tension, what the narrator calls “nearness,” between the two. Only pages later, and relatively shortly after Jonathan has left, we read, “I find it harder and harder to be only your friend” (p. 127) and the narrator tells us that “she got up and gathered dishes in front of her. He did the same, and they went to the stove together to wash them” (p. 128). The two are struggling with the “nearness” (p. 118) and yet embracing a kind of marital existence, washing dishes together. That night passion overwhelms them and Mary declares, “I want to know all of you” (p. 134), and readers learn that,

Never in her life had Jonathan stirred her like this. What Mary was feeling now made the past longings of her life vague promises that had never been fulfilled. The heat in her body was a thing so unreconcilable that it scared her. She’d never felt it before, not with an intensity like this, and she didn’t know what to do with it.

(p. 134)

Mary is like Lady Chatterley. Both women are awakened by a lover who isn’t their husband and both seemingly with permission to find that lover for the sake of a child. Everything about this scene will be about delineating

differences between Aaron and Jonathan, with Jonathan, “I never have, not in the light” (p. 135) Mary explains and,

never had she imagined a man taking as much time as [Aaron] was now. He touched every inch of her back and stomach, running his hands up her sides and forcing her arms up to his own shoulders so he could run his hands under her arms and over her breasts. At some time while his vagabond hands roamed over her, her neck grew limp, her head lolled backward, and she groaned, ‘Aaron, what are you doing to me?’  
(p. 135)

Mary is like a virgin insofar as she is experiencing a sexual and erotic awakening. The sex with Jonathan is clinical and sterile, so much so that Mary tells Aaron that “Jonathan never took all my clothes off...” (p. 136). With Aaron, sex is passionate, just as it was for Lady Chatterley with Mellors. Time and again, we read that “Jonathan never” (p. 136), to which Aaron responds, “then Jonathan is a fool” (p. 136). Finally, he asks if she is “sure” and she responds, echoing his earlier claim, “I want to know all of you. [...] It’s what I was made for” (p. 138). This scene works to show how Aaron is different from Jonathan. Aaron is the “phallic hero” of this novel and Jonathan the “castrated foil” (Gallop, pp. 37–38). Aaron is virile and potent. While much of this may appear to be about being a different kind of lover, as Mellors was for Connie, the reader is also reminded that Aaron (like Mellors) is fertile: “it’s what I was made for” (p. 138). Mary is destined to be a mother, and Aaron will provide.

Later, she will explain,

Last night you taught me that it isn’t indecent, even between us to whom it’s forbidden. When you made love to me, it made the act between Jonathan and me seem the indecent one. How can that be Aaron, when Jonathan’s my husband?  
(p. 159)

This recognition of what is and is not indecent recalls Jonathan’s discussion of sin and the kind of mental arithmetic that was necessary to figure out where the sin was to be found, which actions were or were not sinful, and what was the most sinful. For Mary, then, the indecency is that she had been deprived of the goodness and joyfulness of sex. Such a perspective might well make good sense, given it is with Aaron that she experiences the joys of sex, the pleasures of orgasm (seemingly her first). But in so doing, she is also working to destabilize the morality and ethics of this situation. How can this situation become *right*? Throughout there are echoes of Lady Chatterley, insofar as it is through Aaron that Mary is able to feel whole, to feel like a woman, and oddly through the indecency, as it were, to feel decent. She explains, “I’m married to one man and bedded with another,

and I find I can't even be sorry. I've wronged them both, and I can't find guilt for it" (p. 161), to which Aaron assures her that she hasn't wronged him, and as for Jonathan, "what about my brother who threw you at my feet, traded you off so he could gain a sire?" (p. 161). Here then, once more, the legacy of Onan and Tamar seems to be at play: how could that story be romantic? How could Onan reconcile his situation with Tamar and Tamar with Onan? While Levirate law may justify it, that doesn't necessarily make it "decent," to borrow Mary's words. It is hard to fathom how this situation is justifiable and yet Mary cannot "find guilt for it" (p. 161), and it is a situation which was made possible because Jonathan "threw [Mary] at [Aaron's] feet" (p. 161).

As an author, Spencer is carefully crafting a narrative that forces readers to imagine seemingly "unspeakable idea" (p. 54), and do it in such a way that allows for the romance of Aaron and Mary. This is a romance that reminds readers of the complexity of our situations, that is, there is no one right way to find love or to have sex. For instance, at Goodreads (a site where readers can rate and review books), readers have commented that Mary and Aaron go to bed quickly after Jonathan leaves, but by the same token, as the narrator and Mary and Aaron themselves remind the reader, they have known each other a long time. Readers are asked to empathize with the situation, to try and make sense of the "unspeakable." And Spencer leads her reader through the development of this narrative and shows the blossoming of the relationship between Aaron and Mary, while Jonathan is away purchasing his bull, who, unlike Jonathan, will be the stud the farm needs. Upon his return, Jonathan explains, "I bought us that Black Angus. [...] He's a real beauty, too. Promises to be a fine, healthy stud" (p. 177). And Mary responds, "It's what you went for. I'm happy you got what you wanted, Jonathan" (p. 178). Of course, the question remains, for the reader and Jonathan alike, if he got what he *really* wanted while he was away.

The bull becomes a kind of new partner in the romance: "he called the calf Vinnie already, nicknaming it as he would a child," and readers learn that "Mary had heard Jonathan bestow more gentle words on it than he ever had on her. The animal inspired a depth of feeling in Jonathan that she'd never been able to" (p. 185). Jonathan's relationship with the bull develops, while his relationship with Mary flounders: "Jonathan's life remained full because of Vinnie and his field and the ripening grain. The absence of sexual fulfillment caused him no discomfort, physically or otherwise" (p. 207). In other words, he seems to be putting to a test what has happened between Mary and Aaron by not having sex. This is a point reiterated by Mary, "Jonathan hasn't touched me since he came back" (p. 219). To the bull, Jonathan explains, "I brought it about between them, so I got no cause to complain, do I, boy?" and further, "if it turns out there's a babe and it's not mine, we still got you and your strong seed" (p. 206). The bull has the seed that Jonathan does not; the bull is personified so as to give Jonathan an outlet. He can live vicariously through the bull; the bull can

accomplish the task that Jonathan cannot: “any breedin’ to be done around here’s gotta be done by you, you know. There won’t be any done by me. But it don’t matter, Vinnie...” (p. 214). That is, Vinnie will live up to his name “Vindicator” (p. 179). Jonathan will be vindicated by the bull, both in terms of his agricultural success and knowing what really happened (or did not) between Mary and Aaron.

“By late August, Mary’s usual trim, flat belly had begun thickening perceptibly” (p. 225), and both brothers realize the situation. The tensions grow between all of them, and Aaron cannot reconcile the idea of not being the father of the baby: “‘So you’re gonna be an uncle, Aaron! What d’you know about that!’ He kept his smile broad and thought, I know a damn sight more about it than you’ll ever guess” (p. 235). The tensions grow over the novel, with Mary writing a letter to Jonathan,

I’ve told Aaron that I’ll stay true to you from now on. He knows, too, that the baby will be yours—that there is no other way. We all have to find peace for the unborn one. For you and Aaron that can’t happen till you two talk. Then he can start in building his own life and so can we.  
(p. 250)

Jonathan is a bit like Clifford Chatterley; he had what seemed like a good idea (at least to him), but he failed to imagine how the others would be affected. Indeed, this is a point Mary makes, when she explains to Jonathan, “I am upset. I’m upset because my husband doesn’t care enough about me to be jealous” (p. 237). When Jonathan and Aaron do finally talk, Jonathan explains that “at the time it seemed the clear way. I guess I talked myself into it being the clear way” (p. 253). As the time comes closer, Mary’s confusion grows: “She talked to the baby, referring to herself often now as ‘Mama,’ but never calling anybody ‘Daddy,’ feeling that she couldn’t yet give that name to either Jonathan or Aaron” (p. 257). This inability to speak of either man as the “daddy” is a kind of infertility all over again: both men are divested of paternity through Mary’s confusion. How will she tell the story of this baby’s origins to the baby? These kinds of moments in the text do important work because a reader has to, like Mary, reconcile what is happening in the narrative. The reader, like Mary, knows that Aaron is the father, but for appearance’s sake, Jonathan must be the father. A reader, particularly a romance reader, has the benefit of “advance retrospection.” In his work, Wolfgang Iser explains that “during the process of reading, there is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection, which on a second reading may turn into a kind of advance retrospection” (1974, p. 282). While Iser is speaking here about a second or a rereading, I would suggest that advance retrospection is also valuable to the study of genre (Allan 2016, p. 103), especially as a reader can and likely does know the outcome, for instance, a happy ending, without even having to read the book. Thus, the reader of *The Fulfillment* will know that this story will end happily, but how will the characters achieve this happiness? Someone will



have to leave the relationship for Mary to figure out who the baby's daddy is or who deserves the title "daddy."

The baby arrives with much fanfare and the narrative has not yet managed to resolve the outcome; indeed, readers may well be suspecting that an ending will be far off before happiness is achieved. Somewhat quickly, readers learn of a "storm making [the cattle] shift and low noisily" (p. 310). Jonathan's worry is, of course, the bull and "Aaron thought, I wouldn't be surprised to see him ride Vinnie in bareback. The idea made him smile as he tried to shake off the worry that was nagging him, worsening the longer Jonathan was gone" (p. 310). In literary language, readers are quickly sensing a pathetic fallacy coming to fruition. While Aaron returns to Mary, Jonathan does not, leaving Mary to ask: "Where did he go?" (p. 311). Aaron goes to look for Jonathan,

Aaron dropped to his knees beside the inert figure that lay crumpled facedown in the mud. He knew before he turned the lifeless body into his arms that Jonathan was dead.

(p. 312)

The cause of death is Vinnie, "the bull took a step nearer, and Aaron pulled the still form closer in his protective embrace while he railed again, 'Keep away from him, you bastard!'" (p. 312), and later, "He's been gored by the bull" (p. 314). Vinnie has now, as it were, vindicated the romance not for Jonathan but for Aaron, securing a possible happily ever after for Mary and Aaron. Jonathan would never lose the role of father, though he is now a mourned father, and Aaron seemingly can slip into the role of father if he can resolve the romance with Mary. In the language of romance, this scene is not a "point of ritual death," as it is an actual death, but it is also the moment where a resolution between Mary and Aaron seems possible—even though challenges undoubtedly remain.

After Jonathan's death, Mary is able to say to the baby, "Shh, Princess. [...] Did your daddy scare you?" (p. 339), thereby solving an earlier problem and also hinting at the happy ending that is to come. Aaron tells Mary, "Jonathan is dead, and we can't keep him between us forever. We're alive, Mary. You and I are alive, and it's wrong to deny it any longer" (p. 365), and they each declare their love for each other, a requisite of the genre: "They were married in November" (p. 373).

I opened this chapter suggesting that Onan's story in the Bible has much to offer to the study of *The Fulfillment*, and it is as much Onan's story as the Levirate law to which it conforms. As already noted, in Deuteronomy,

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.

(25:5)

This is what seems to happen in *The Fulfillment*—it is, of course, a misreading of the Levirate law, but it asks important questions about men and claims to fecundity and virility, which are tied to vitality. What can a man leave as legacy if he is infertile? His legacy is obsolete, impossible. Jonathan’s solution is one that is perverse to the modern eye and ear, but it is one that perhaps has some semblance in earlier narratives. *The Fulfillment* allows us to think through the despair of infertility; it is one that has antecedents in Biblical texts, but also more modern literature, such as *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which was discussed in the previous chapter. The story of Onan is not one that I imagined being terribly useful or interesting in the study of infertility and representations of male infertility, but *The Fulfillment* works with that story and shows its complexities. The situation of Tamar is not one to envy nor is Onan’s situation, but in *The Fulfillment*, Spencer reimagines the story and provides a different ending, perhaps a more felicitous one. Infertility may well cause someone to make illogical leaps, but what is striking to me is the consistency of the story being told. Children may well be an inheritance given by the Lord as the Psalmist writes, but it is an inheritance that is desired and wanted, and it seems, often enough, characters in literature are willing to do just about anything to be blessed, to be fulfilled.

## Notes

- 1 The early period, of course, included other authors, notably Laurie McBain, Joyce Verrette, Johanna Lindsay, Shirlee Busbee, and Bertrice Small, collectively referred to as the Avon Ladies. For a useful study of these Blockbuster novels and their place in the history of popular romance studies, see Lyons, S. F., and Selinger, E. M., 2016. *Strange Stirrings, Strange Yearnings: The Flame and the Flower, Sweet Savage Love, and the Lost Diversities of Blockbuster Historical Romance*. In: W. A. Gleason and E. M. Selinger, eds. *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom*. Farnham: Ashgate, 89–110.
- 2 In her study, Lynn Neal’s participants are mostly “affiliated with Baptist churches—Southern, Free Will, and Independent. My consultants included five United Methodists and five Presbyterians. There were four Pentecostals, three Roman Catholics, and a few from nondenominational churches, as well as one Moravian and one Evangelical Covenant reader. Although United Methodists, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics might not immediately be identified with evangelicalism, these women often saw themselves (and their churches) as advocates of evangelicalism amidst nonevangelical denominations” (2006, p. 8). While not desiring to get into the theological weeds, the novels tend towards an Arminian theology rather than say a Calvinist theology.

### 3 Ejaculation and the Heavy Load of Masculinity

Throughout *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities*, I am interested in representations of infertility, and most especially the stories we tell about infertility. Infertility takes on meaning when it is given narrative, which does not mean that it does not exist without narrative, but that narrative is important to our understanding. We try to make sense of things through the stories we tell. And one of the ways that this story of infertility is told, especially in texts from the mid-to-late twentieth century through to the present, is by way of science and more particularly by the sperm cell. Very quickly, infertility is less a mystery of circumstance, less a curse, and more a scientific story. While children may well remain a blessing, it is science that explains infertility. Men can defer to scientific explanations, beyond themselves, as it were, for their infertility. Infertility is not *his* fault, but a failing of *his* biology, for instance. Of course, separating these two is never that easy.

In her book, *GUYnecology: The Missing Science of Men's Reproductive Health*, Rene Almeling writes that “biological stories are powerful” (2020, p. 138) and she continues: “they both reflect and produce our collective understandings of our bodies and ourselves” (p. 138). Almeling is interested specifically in the stories told to her by the men she interviewed. If there is a difference between Almeling and myself, it is that for me the stories are real even when in fictional worlds. This is not to suggest that Almeling would discount fictional worlds, but that her method is one that relies on informants who tell her their story directly. My point is that these stories are not just told between and amongst men, for instance, but rather are a part of the cultural and collective nature of the stories we tell. Stories of infertility are not just a sociological phenomenon recounted by one's informants, but rather they are a cultural phenomenon, which, of course, includes the sociological. In this chapter, while continuing with stories, I wish to show how the scientific becomes part of the stories we tell. My reasoning here is that the sperm cell becomes so essential to the stories told in the forthcoming chapters. When we tell the stories of infertility, we have explanations for the infertility that draw upon scientific explanations: he has a low sperm count which is why we are infertile, for instance. This is also true, in some

ways, in stories that do not address the sperm cell, for instance, in *The Fulfillment*, the mumps are the cause of infertility. But something happens when the sperm cell becomes key to the narrative. Simply, stories of infertility braid together the scientific, the social, and the cultural.

Almeling (2020) explains that “biology is the study of the living world, a science that seeks to understand the plants and animals that populate the planet,” and she continues:

At the same time, it provides a rich trove of metaphors that one of those species—humans—mobilizes to make sense of themselves and one another. Blood ties. Maternal instincts. Monkey business. Men are dogs. Biological stories are powerful because they root human experience in something seemingly primal and asocial. They can be used to render a condition more or less ‘natural,’ one’s behavior more or less volitional. (p. 139)

All of this is true, to be sure, but these stories, as I keep insisting, are not just the work of the social but also of the cultural, the literary, the poetic, the dramatic, the filmic, and so on. When Almeling speaks of metaphor, I am understanding this as a fairly broad poetic term that would include things like metonymy, such as when the blood line, as a kind of blood tie, represents the family, or as a synecdoche, such as being part of a blood line.<sup>1</sup> That is, metaphors become ways through which we rationalize our stories, or perhaps even what Paul Ricoeur so eloquently called “the rule of metaphor” (1977). It is not just the infertile who tell these stories; rather, stories are told about them by those who may or may not be infertile. And one of the ways, perhaps one of the most predominant ways in the contemporary moment, we tell this story is by way of biology and science, and I would agree that it is because it renders the “condition more or less ‘natural’” (Almeling 2020, p. 139). There is a certain comfort in having a natural explanation for a given condition—as if nature is beyond one’s control. Admittedly, my understanding of Almeling’s “more or less” is not quantitative, but more ambivalent, a kind of approximation. What is striking to me is that science becomes so important to how we conceptualize infertility, rather than say more spiritual ideas like not being blessed, or perhaps being punished for past or present sins. It is no longer just a mystery as to why a child has not been had, but rather it is diagnosed in clinical settings.

The texts already considered—*Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *The Fulfillment*—represented infertility before the rise of in vitro fertilization, assisted reproduction, test-tube babies, and so on (even though the idea is suggested in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*). The rise of in vitro fertilization and assisted fertility methods present a shift in how we can and do think about infertility. In vitro fertilization “serves as an excellent marker for the new phase of human reproduction in which we now live” (Condit cited in Jensen 2016, p. 1). In thinking about this “new phase of human reproduction,”

I am interested in Dr. Sophia Kleegman's focus on the "microscopic analysis of the sperm" (Jensen 2016, p. 88). In particular, I argue throughout the remainder of this book that sperm becomes essential to how infertility is understood not just in terms of scientific or biomedical discourse, but also in the more colloquial and popular settings in which infertility is discussed such as the novel, film, television, and the memoir. Infertility is not just a scientific or medical problem, and so it has become mainstream. The medical becomes popular and no longer linked solely to the biomedical and the reproductive sciences.

Over the course of the twentieth century and into the present moment, we witness an ongoing and rapidly advancing discussion about semen, sperm, infertility, and men's health. What was once taboo perhaps now became fodder for the newspaper, the news magazine, and the evening news on television, and now increasingly the clickbait of the internet. Simply, men's reproductive bodies and health have become medicalized in increasingly important and visible ways and this becomes reflected in how men's infertility is represented. Infertility, while still largely conceived of as a "women's issue," now includes and considers the role of men. William Marsiglio and Sally Hutchinson (2002) note that "men's ability to become biological fathers ultimately rests on their ability to produce viable sperm, and, in most cases, to have sexual intercourse" and they continue, "when viewed through the lens of social science, perceptions of fecundity, not the viability of men's sperm, is the defining criterion for theorizing men as procreative beings" (p. 8). While Marsiglio and Hutchinson see this as the perception of fecundity (i.e., does one appear to be able to have children?), I am struck by how these ideas intermingle. Indeed, even though few of us will ever know how "fecund" we really are—we just assume we are since a baby has been had (or not)—it does seem that the sperm cell has become more and more interesting to us, especially with its increased visibility from the book about where babies come from for children to the cartoon sperm cells that populate humour magazines. Very quickly the sperm cell is blamed for its failures, which become failures of a man's fecundity. Science thus takes a leading role in our discussions. During this scientific explanation (however popular that science may be), we are also witness to how the sperm cell and semen affect and inform our ideas about masculinity. As the sperm cell becomes scientifically more interesting, as it were, so too does it become more visible in the mainstream. As semen becomes a known concern, it becomes visible, and its meaning is endowed with further significance. More explicitly, sperm becomes a part of how we tell our stories of infertility. The medicalization of sperm and infertility has created an entire lexicon and shared way through which to frame infertility linguistically, once more recalling Ricoeur's "rule of metaphor" (1977), wherein there is a focus on the creation of meaning in language.

While I am framing this in terms of the mid-to-late twentieth century through to the present moment, sperm have a longer historical interest.

Semen and sperm, of course, have their own history and it is not as if they were somehow invented in the twentieth century, but rather they have become represented in ways that render them quite visible. In her work, Lisa Jean Moore (2007) historicizes semen in a way that is worth recalling:

From their humble beginnings in the 1700s to today, scientific representations of sperm have come a long way. What was once a science based on subjective narratives, sketches, and visual observation only is now a probabilistic system that understands men's fertility based on a wide variety of quantifiable parameters. Now, the parameters of semen analysis have expanded to include volume, pH, viscosity, sperm density, sperm motility, viability, and sperm morphology.

(p. 26)

Today, we seemingly know more and more about sperm, we are able to observe, represent, measure, quantify, and analyse these microscopic cells. Importantly, "each technological conception of semen enables new strategies to further measure, define, control, and use sperm" (Moore 2007, p. 29). I contend that each technological conception and innovation affects how we think about men and masculinity and their fertilities and infertilities. Just as sperm is qualified and semen is quantified, so too is masculinity measured in terms of its efficiency and sufficiency, its viability, and its adequacy and capability.

Nowhere does this measuring come more into effect and nowhere is it made more obvious than in the space of the sperm bank, another "technological conception" of the twentieth century. Ayo Wahlberg (2018) notes this in *Good Quality: The Routinization of Sperm Banking in China*, explaining:

Sperm banking is saturated with vital assessment, a task that would not be possible without the concept of quality. In China, sperm banks must promote population quality (*renkou suzhi*); they recruit high-quality (*suzhi gao*) donors from university campuses; assess the sperm quality (*jingzi zhiliang*) of up to four thousand individuals per year; adhere to good laboratory practices (GLPs) and standard operating procedures (SOPs) in order to assure a good quality (*zhiliang hao*) supply of sperm; and provide donor sperm to infertile couples with the aim of improving their quality of life (*shenghuo zhiliang*) and happiness.

(p. 24)

In this example, the quality of sperm is measured by the quality of the donor "from university campuses" (p. 24). These donors become responsible for improving the "quality of life and happiness" of infertile couples (p. 24). This is a significant responsibility. Wahlberg notes that "it also became clear that it was not only the vitality of men and their sperm cells that were

on trial, so too was the vitality of the nation” (pp. 24–25). In this particular case, “vital quality is that which makes good life possible in China today, yet it is this same vital quality that is considered to be under constant threat in a time of compressed modernization and ‘sperm crisis’” (p. 25). Very quickly, one can see how sperm cells become inherent to the “goodness” of a range of people and structures. This example is just one, but it highlights the ways in which men and masculinities are constantly measured, not just in the performative realms of hegemonic masculinity but also at a molecular level, at a microscopic level, at the level of the sperm cell.

Michael Johnson Jr. (2010) has argued for the “inseparability of ejaculation and hegemonic masculinity” (p. 238), noting that “ejaculation is the sine qua non of ‘successful’ sexual acts for males” (p. 244). It is so substantial and so meaningful that Johnson develops the idea of the “ejaculation imperative,” which:

works to support idealized hegemonic masculinity by confirming the legitimacy of sexual adequacy identified through male genitalia. Performing the ‘mission’ of sexual virility and adequacy is furthered by the ‘ejaculation imperative’ by perpetuating male dominance operating within the sexual realm, in which men have a hierarchical position of supremacy.

(2010, p. 245)

Johnson’s theory draws on Connell’s hegemonic masculinity and it is important to remind ourselves that hegemonic masculinity is never permanent; instead, hegemonic masculinity by definition speaks to its fragility and perhaps even its failure: “when conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony” (Connell 2005, p. 77). The connection here is the role that the body plays in hegemonic masculinity. If hegemonic masculinity, for instance, is performative, that is, it is enacted by the ejaculation imperative, what then is the role of the body that performs hegemonic masculinity? In other words, can hegemonic masculinity exist outside of the body? A close reading of Connell’s work shows a keen and ongoing interest in the body. The body is featured prominently in both *Masculinities* (1995) and *The Men and the Boys* (2000), and this should not be lost on us. Connell rightly notes that “the first task of a social analysis is to arrive at an understanding of men’s bodies and their relations to masculinity” (2005, p. 45). In another space, Connell asks, “are men’s bodies, then, *irrelevant* to masculinity?” and responds, “the answer is ‘no.’ But to understand how men’s bodies are actually involved in masculinities we must abandon the conventional dichotomy between changing culture and unchanging bodies” (2001, p. 57, emphasis in original).

This rendering of ejaculation as hegemonic and as a demand of masculinity makes sense, especially when one surveys, however superficially, the

content of mainstream culture. This overwhelming supply of images, rhetoric, and news stories is hardly matched by the language we have to describe and speak about semen, as Moore (2007) writes:

It has been called sperm, semen, ejaculate, seed, man fluid, baby gravy, jizz, cum, pearl necklace, gentlemen's relish, wad, pimp juice, number 3, load, spew, donut glaze, spunk, gizzum, cream, hot man mustard, squirt, goo, spunk, splooge, love juice, man cream, and la leche.

(p. 7)

Writing only seven years later, Moore's list will include new words like "breed juice, explosion, facial, ropes, streams, thick hot cum juice, cum shot, creamy cum, medicine, load, cumload, creampie, high-pressure squirter, protein lunch, wad of juice, feeding, and cummy," all of which, Moore notes, "speaks to the vast cultural imaginary surrounding ejaculation" (2014b, p. 55). The language surrounding ejaculation is surprisingly vast, diverse, and rich. As with so many bodily metaphors, metaphorical language is seemingly preferred to the more technical terms like sperm, semen, and ejaculate. In the lists provided by Moore, many of the terms speak to the actions involved. Nonetheless, these terms speak to very particular performances of masculinity that are attached to men's sexuality. Implicit in these words is often the idea of procreation; after all, consider the phrases "baby gravy" and "breed juice." Moreover, it would be hard not to see the hierarchical and agentive nature of these terms; bound within so many of the words is a suggestion of dominance—explodes, high-pressure squirter, feeding—over a seemingly submissive subject. In so many of the words, ejaculation is something that is done to someone, a lover is given a pearl necklace or they are fed with "baby gravy."

Critics are divided on this hierarchical question, as James K. Beggan notes when he compares Gail Dines's opinion that external ejaculation is "one of the most degrading acts in porn" and Susanna Paasonen and colleagues' insight that "cum shots have become part of private fantasies and desires—and hence part of everyday sexual practices" (Dines 2010 and Paasonen *et al.* 2007 cited in Beggan 2020, p. 13). Ejaculation, for Beggan, requires a "polysemic interpretation" (p. 13), which recognizes complexity and nuance in thinking about the meanings of ejaculation in straight pornography.

Not only has the lexicon grown and expanded as Moore has noted, but so too has the visual representation of semen. The cum shot is no longer exclusively found in pornographic films, but rather has entered popular discourse and imagery. *Vulture* magazine, for instance, notes that 2017 was "the Year Movies and TV Came On Your Screen," and the author E. Alex Jung writes:

our screens have runneth over with the fountain of youth: cum, the sticky coital leftover conveniently and historically ignored in sex scenes, is making a splashy debut. This year, the baby-making fluid came at us



fast and loose, onto screens big and small, into romances both gay and straight, stories both dramatic and comedic. What's particularly salient about this year, though, is placement: Cum appeared in respectable, prestige film and TV projects like *Insecure* and *Call Me by Your Name*. Cum is hitting the mainstream, baby!

(2017)

During the twentieth century through to the contemporary moment, ejaculation becomes more and more visible whether it be the pornographic “money shot” or a silly scene in a mumblecore film that plays on the “gross” nature of semen, for instance, in *Ted 2* when Mark Wahlberg's character is covered in semen during a mishap at a sperm bank. Just as there is a discursive and linguistic diversity in the wide range of terms we use to name it, so too is there a diversity to be found on screen:

In sum, 2017's cum shots weren't needlessly provocative (although that would be fine, too), but instead added texture, flavor, humor, and intimacy to the narratives they appeared in. This cum had the range. It wasn't shy or shrinking, but alternately prosaic and messy. It's possible that cum's foray onto our screens indicates that, as a culture, we're at last becoming a little more adult about all of this stuff (or, at least, the Europeans are). Perhaps we're finally ready to acknowledge a truth we've known since time immemorial: There will be cum.

(Jung 2017)

Whether this is about maturity, I am not certain—and I doubt it, to be honest; it may just as well be a result of the biomedicalization of the body or the increasing pornification of our societies. Even if “we have known since time immemorial” that “there will be cum,” the difference here is the meaning and the intention, recalling Beggan's call for a “polysemic interpretation” (2020, p. 13). No longer an unknown substance, it is a substance that is medicalized, scrutinized, tested, evaluated, and diagnosed. Not all cum shots, as it were, are created equally. Nonetheless, what is striking, then, is the shift in the discourse around ejaculation and semen. It is not a matter of being a simple symbol, for instance, being merely provocative, but rather it has become polysemous. In her book, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self*, Lauren Rosewarne (2014) observes that:

Whereas female masturbation tends to be sensuous and included to arouse the audience, the self-stimulation of men is generally treated vastly differently. It is commonly situated in sophomoric comedies for example, where the act is hurried and inevitably gets sprung leading to embarrassment, if not also grotesque displays of semen splatter.

(pp. 2–3)

58 *Ejaculation and the Heavy Load of Masculinity*

This is precisely the case in *There's Something About Mary*, in which Stiller's character masturbates before a first date and the ejaculate seemingly gets lost—not realizing that it is dangling from his ear. This semen is then mistaken for hair gel and is quickly applied to Cameron Diaz's character's hair.



Still, *There's Something About Mary*

This scene is grotesque, it plays with the abject nature of semen, and it thrives on an audience knowing what a character does not. But it represents semen, that is, semen is made visible. The viewer of the film sees the semen dangling from Ben Stiller's earlobe like a long earring. In the Mexican film and box office success, *Y tu mamá también*, a scene includes two boys, each on his own diving board at a private club, masturbating and ejaculating into a swimming pool.



Still, *Y tu mamá también*

Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz describes the scene as “a high angle, long shot show[ing] the boys side by side lying on adjoining springboards masturbating, and finally an underwater shot shows a squirt of semen in water” (p. 42). While it may seem superfluous to focus on this scene, this scene is important because it is from the vantage of a long shot that we can see how quickly we have, quite literally, “zoomed” in on the semen.



Still, *Y tu mamá también*

The semen in the pool is tightly shot, filling the entire screen. In both *Y tu mamá también* and *There's Something About Mary*, the visual representation of semen is important enough to be included. Neither film shies away from it, but rather represents it quite distinctly, so that it becomes visually known. In the case of *Y tu mamá también*, I argue that it is the visual tightening that is so important because it symbolically represents how the focus has narrowed in on what semen is. Over the course of semen's history, as it were, we continue to get more and more focused on its parts. And consequently, as we shall see, ejaculation has become a social practice that defines masculinity (Connell 2001, p. 59).

Culturally, then we are focusing in on semen in much greater detail, but we are also seeing it as something that is now removed from the man. Semen has taken on a life of its own. In the examples from the films, for instance, the semen becomes a figure outside of the man, separate from his identity. The semen becomes a kind of character and a scene in its own right. In a similar fashion, it is as if we too are looking at a sample of the seminal fluid. We are, in our intense looking and focusing, consuming the specimen that is now visually represented across genres and media. Semen is visible, no longer just a private matter, no longer just a specimen for scientific analysis, but rather part of how men and masculinity are conceptualized and represented.

As the distance between the biomedical sciences and the lived realities of patients (and potential patients) narrows, patients become more and more aware of the particulars; this interest in semen and sperm production floods the popular imaginary. Semen is a known commodity because it is, as it were, everywhere. This a point well made by Shanna H. Swan and Stacey Colino (2021) in *Count Down: How Our Modern World is Threatening Sperm Counts, Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race*. They write:

In late July 2017, it seemed as if every media outlet around the globe had become obsessed with the state of human sperm counts.

*Psychology Today* cried, “Going, Going, Gone? Human Sperm Counts Are Plunging,” while the BBC declared, “Sperm Count Drop Could Make Humans Extinct,” and the *Financial Times* announced, “‘Urgent Wake-Up Call’ for Male Health as Sperm Counts Plummet.” A month later, *Newsweek* published a major cover story on the same subject: “Who’s Killing America’s Sperm?”

(p. 7)

Simply, from my perspective, sperm is everywhere. It has become a ubiquitous symbol not only of fecundity and fertility, but increasingly men’s claims to virility, masculinity, and indeed the very idea of being male. The irony, perhaps, of all of this is as men’s sperm counts are declining, the visibility of semen is increasing. Another rendering may well be that this increasing visibility helps to further capture seminal anxieties. It is a way to respond to what we do when we are fearful that we are losing something. We obsess, we grasp a hold of every vital piece. In a way, we might suggest that the overabundance is almost as if we are collecting these last remaining remnants of it. It needs to be made visible to remember it, as it were. Representation of semen can be found in medical textbooks, the friendly sperm cell found in a child’s book answering the question “where do babies come from?” through to abject humour in mumblecore films, and the pornographic money shot. Semen has become *so* visible. It is found throughout popular culture. It is not a necessarily taboo topic, but has become the source of disgust, humour, and forensic evidence. As Moore writes, “the bombardment of images, news stories, and scientific rhetoric about semen can sometimes seem overwhelming” (2007, p. 8), which highlights once more cultural anxieties about sperm (and its demise).

While we can undoubtedly agree that there is an ejaculation imperative that is part and parcel of hegemonic masculinity, it does seem to me that the argument can be discussed further, teased out, and perhaps even challenged, not so much to refute it, but to recognize its own tensions. Johnson’s ejaculation imperative, in some ways, is a deeply visual theory, that is, it is about the spectacle of ejaculation more than anything else. Drawing on Johnson’s theory, Angela Jones, in *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry* (2020), explains:

Discourses of masculinity shape sexual scripts, and while women usually perform emotional labor for and talk with clients along with performing sexual acts, men are often expected by customers to meet what Michael Johnson has called the “ejaculation imperative,” and drop, pop, and roll (drop their pants, get erect, and masturbate).

(p. 153)

Jones’s context is different from mine, but the ejaculation imperative seems to be about a visual display of masculinity by way of ejaculation.

It is ejaculation that seemingly proves or affirms hegemonic masculinity. Admittedly, one question that remains unresolved is about the dangerous affiliation between a biological function and hegemonic masculinity: does Johnson's argument run the risk of becoming an essentialist paradigm? Bracketing this question, Johnson's argument foregrounds the fragility and precarity of masculinity, especially when defined in terms of ejaculation. Ejaculation, like the penis, reveals the slipperiness of masculinity—ejaculation can, of course, speak to success, as in the case of the ejaculation imperative, which imagines an ideal ejaculation, but it can also speak to the failures, for instance, temporal failures, such as premature ejaculation.<sup>2</sup> If ejaculation is about a "successful" sexual act, is the sexual act deemed "successful" just because of ejaculation? And "successful" for whom? The answer to these questions is complex and complicated, in particular, while it might be easy to think about the premature ejaculation as a failure, how might we think about "shooting blanks?" Does the ejaculator who fails to ejaculate a viable specimen still maintain his claims to the so-called ejaculation imperative? I argue that ejaculation in and of itself is not enough to be indicative of hegemonic masculinity, but rather ejaculation has become increasingly subject to scrutiny and analysis, which can and does call into question claims of hegemonic masculinity. To further the questioning: does the ejaculation imperative require or necessitate a (re)productive imperative?

For Vinodh Venkatesh (2015), the answer to this question would likely be affirmative. Drawing on the figure of the eunuch, he writes that it "lacks testicles but not necessarily a penis, thereby emphasizing the importance of these productive sexual organs in the construct of the masculine subject" (2015, pp. 19–20). Venkatesh is mounting an important critique of the primacy of the phallus, a critique that I find compelling. The penis, in and of itself, is not enough to prove or disprove masculinity, but rather that there must be a (re)productive imperative. Similarly, perhaps before Viagra, a comparable idea was found in the impotent penis. Indeed, in both scenarios, as in the ejaculation imperative, it is the question of the ability for the penis to become erect, to become akin to the symbolic phallus, and it is that erect penis that seemingly guarantees masculinity. Thus ejaculation, made possible by erection, serves not just the purpose of proving masculinity, but also a further purpose, namely the genealogical and the (re)productive.

Drawing on Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, John Munder Ross (1979) has noted, "for the grown man [...] parenthood is both the outcome of his sexual history and a testimony to his masculinity" (p. 73). Such an understanding, once more, affirms the idea that ejaculation is only real when it is productive, or if not a matter of "realness," then it becomes significantly richer when it is productive. Consider the ways that Ross imagines the prepubescent male, "fecundity still eludes him, proud as he is of his burgeoning virility" (1979, p. 79). Ross imagines that adolescence "constitutes a 'mortarium' when paternity, unwanted and irresponsible is to be avoided" (1979, p. 81), an idea that will be taken up by

Michael Kimmel in his exploration of extended adolescence (2008), which helps explain the later ages at which men become parents. Ejaculation is tied to paternity. In the case of the young male, paternity is something to be avoided, but there will come a time when the male should seek the fulfillment to his sexual history and embrace parenthood as a “testimony to his masculinity” (1979, p. 73).

Pensively, while postulating upon the future of sperm, Moore takes up this challenge and further problematizes it by imagining a future in which there are “real dads” who become “elite men. Some men might even fake being ‘real’ dads, perhaps creating even more secrets about how reproduction occurs” (Moore 2007, p. 153). This imagined future includes a scenario where “new grades of fatherhood might emerge where it could be considered low-tech or backward to have conceived a child with fresh embodied sperm” (Moore 2007, p. 153). Of course, there might also be an idealization of this “low-tech” reproduction, since the man is virile enough to not need the assistance of the biomedical community. Either way, masculinity becomes essential to how fatherhood might be conceptualized.

Such a perspective is not unique to Ross’s work nor Moore’s future postulations; consider for instance the recent work by Ryan T. Cragun, who studies his own experiences of vasectomy by way of a collaborative autoethnography with J. E. Sumerau. Cragun explains, “as a result of my vasectomy, I have thus come to the conclusion that the ability to produce children (an ability I have lost) somehow became an important element of my conceptualization of the identity man” (2017, p. 100). To be certain, there is a difference between an elective vasectomy and infertility or what some might call “involuntary infertile” (Spark 2000, p. 347). Nonetheless, Cragun finds himself asking, “am I less of a ‘man’ now that I’m sterile?” (2017, p. 99). As such, Cragun would seem to suggest, then, that ejaculation is no longer enough; instead, the male must be able to fertilize his partner, that is, his masculinity is tied to his fecundity. While Cragun’s language is tentative and uncertain (and he will work through these issues alongside Sumerau over the course of the article), I take his point seriously. That is, somehow and perhaps now more than ever in an age that Paul Preciado (2008, 2013) has described as the pharmacopornographic era, which is to say an age in which medicine, pharmacology and sexuality are interwoven, and in an age of decreasing sperm quality and quantity, the ability to produce a child has become a central definition of being a man. As such, the inability to produce—whether by choice or not—may well call into question the viability of the ejaculation imperative and its connections to hegemonic masculinity.

As I hope is becoming clear, I am separating the seemingly “inseparability of ejaculation and hegemonic masculinity” (2010, p. 238), that is, as much as I agree with Johnson, I see challenges, particularly when we arrive at the question of paternity and reproduction. How “good” is ejaculation if one is, as it were, shooting blanks? Even a phrase like “shooting blanks” speaks to a neutered or castrated power; indeed, “shooting blanks”

is a common refrain in the discourse surrounding vasectomies, wherein the discourse is about having already been successful one now opts to “shoot blanks,” one is “snipped, but still equipped.” Of course, and importantly, “shooting blanks” is a colloquial phrase, part of the ejaculatory lexicon, that is made possible by scientific confirmation. One only knows for certain that one is “shooting blanks” if one has had his semen analysed, measured, and quantified. Ejaculation is a useful site through which to think about the limitations of hegemonic masculinity, that is, on a *prima facie* level, certainly ejaculation may appear an ideal example of hegemonic masculinity, but upon closer inspection (as is so central to how we think about semen), these claims start to erode.

One of the fascinating elements of this is that as semen has become more and more visible, not only in pornography, but also popular culture, it has become more and more scrutinized. That is, semen is not a mystery, it is not merely the province of private spaces and medical laboratories. We know what it looks like, but we do not know how its contents work or function upon a surface-level reading. Semen is forensic evidence, but is it fertile? That question is at the heart of this work. Men may well know that they can ejaculate, but they likely do not know if they can reproduce. One assumes one is fertile, only to have the assumption dispelled. While all the signs may well be there, they may well be able to achieve an erection, have sex, ejaculate, but they do not know if that ejaculate can fertilize an egg. I am struck by how this increased visibility continues to obscure. More and more it is necessary to know the microscopic level of the substance to know its virility and vitality.

It is against this backdrop, then, that this study is written. Though ejaculation has become more and more present, so much so that it is “overwhelming” (Moore 2007, p. 8), a question arises: how can semen be so visible and yet so invisible? That is, we know the thing itself, but what of its contents? Does the ejaculator, for instance, know the quality of his semen? Can one tell, just from looking, if it is of “good quality” or not? Perhaps these queries lead me to being guilty of Elizabeth Grosz’s charge that:

seminal fluid is understood primarily as what it makes, what it achieves, a causal agent and thus a thing, a solid: its fluidity, its potential seepage, the element in it that is uncontrollable, its spread, its formlessness, is perpetually displaced is discourse onto its properties, its capacity to fertilize, to father, to produce an object.

(1994, p. 199)

But Grosz is further ahead than I am, for the assumption is one that all seminal fluid is always already capable of fertilizing. I am interested in how seminal fluid fails and how it is that narratives of infertility have shifted their attention towards the seminal explanation, a biomedical reasoning, as it were. What happens to the seminal fluid that does not make, does

not achieve, and is not capable of fertilizing, fathering, and producing an object?

Importantly, what this chapter has sought to do is to show the ways in which semen becomes enmeshed in various discourses—it is no longer just a biomedical concern, but a cultural concern and anxiety. The focus on the biomedical enables the infertile man to eschew his fears away from his own failings towards the failing of his sperm cells: “my boys don’t swim.” Knowing that one’s “boys don’t swim” is made possible because of an increased focus on the biomedical. The biomedical allows for an explanation of one’s infertility; it might become a kind of coping mechanism whereby one has been diagnosed. The problem is clinical, and not just a matter of being a lesser man. Similarly, Moore notes that “men are also seen as proxies for their sperm” (p. 149) and thus “sperm can indicate the health or degree of masculinity of the man, and the man can indicate the health or degree of masculinity of the sperm” (p. 149). In a way, one might be able to move the masculinity crisis, as it were, to the sperm cell. The sperm cell is the problem. Moore explains, “sperm cells, similar to the oft-cited sway of testosterone and penises, are portrayed as powerful forces, and men cannot be wholly responsible for the actions of their sperm or of how their sperm might make them act” (p. 152). Moore’s sperm cell is agentic because it is powerful and able to perform its duty, and the sperm cells I am interested in are not; they are flawed. The shift towards a biomedical reason is important and will become part of the ongoing discourse that unfolds in the chapters to follow. My goal is to consider the ways in which seminal fluid is part and parcel of the discussion, that is, semen becomes essential to how the stories of infertility are told. As such, I consider popular romance novels, the memoirs of men which speak to infertility, a romantic comedy in which the hero is diagnosed with testicular cancer, and texts that consider what “no future” might actually look like. In each of these, the problem is seminal, whether it be a disease affecting all men’s ability to have an erection or simply a recognition of semen quality. What is striking is that semen becomes so essential to these narratives. In these stories, infertility has a cause that rests not upon the man himself but on dysfunction within his body. The focus on semen then becomes a kind of coping mechanism, whereby the man can explain his failures by way of a medical reason. In this way, this book hopes to expand upon how ejaculation is conceptualized and realized; it is not merely a performance of so-called hegemonic masculinity, but rather it is about vitality and futurity, fear and trepidation, hope and despair. If hegemonic masculinity requires the ejaculation imperative, I contend that it requires more than the simple performance of ejaculation, but rather requires the fecundity of the load. Ejaculation is more than a performance; it is a proof of masculinity and one’s claims to manhood. Indeed, this is why vasectomy, for instance, is so rich psychoanalytically



and affectively; it calls into question one's claims to masculinity, to being a man, even if, in many cases, he has already "proven" these claims by way of children. Seminal fluid carries a burden for men: a load that is loaded with meaning and significance.

## Notes

- 1 For a larger discussion of bloodlines and poetics, see Keyser, P.T., 2018. The lineage of "bloodlines": synecdoche, metonymy, medicine, and more. In J.Z. Wee, ed. *The comparable body: analogy and metaphor in ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman medicine*. Leiden: Brill, 168–203.
- 2 James K. Beggan provides an interesting anecdote about the visibility of ejaculation and the precarity of masculinity and performances of masculinity. Beggan highlights the work produced by Peter North, who "started in pornography in 1984 and drew attention because of his fraternity boy good looks, muscular physique, and, most notably, his ability to ejaculate a copious amount of semen across a long distance" (15). He notes that "these performance elements matter to certain spectators. With regard to Peter North, one person commented, 'distance, volume, density, rate of fire, like WTF? The dude's a walking life support system for a fucking cum cannon. His prostrate should be donated to the medical science community when he passes on'" (16). However, "other comments explicitly rate one porn star against another. In comparing North to another porn legend—Steve Holmes—several people spoke disparagingly about Holmes's performance relative to North's: 'I like Steve Holmes, but I wish his cumshots were better. He almost always shoots weak, watery loads.' Another person stated, 'He needs to get some ejaculation training from Peter North'" (16). The viewer of these cum shots is evaluating the ejaculation imperative and its aesthetics, eschewing the "weak, watery loads" of one star in favour of the "fucking cum cannon" of another.

## 4 “I have no good sperm”

### Infertility in *The Trouble with Joe* by Emilie Richards

In the popular romance novel, it is not uncommon to find a hero, who was once a sperm donor, who meets a heroine, who happens to now be pregnant by way of his sperm. For instance, in *The Italian Doctor's Wife* by Sarah Morgan, the heroine is shocked when she learns that the hero is the father of her daughter by way of donor insemination. In *The Baby Due Date* by Teresa Carpenter, the novel tells the story of a mix-up at the sperm bank. A similar narrative unfolds in *The CEO's Unexpected Child* by Andrea Laurence. Readers can also find a common enough narrative in which a hero, who in his youth deposited sperm, learns that it has been used and he demands to know the child and thus he demands that he can be the father to the child, as is the case in *The Baby Legacy* by Pamela Toth and in *Claiming His Royal Heir* by Jennifer Lewis. In many ways, these novels replicate ideal masculinity that is so central to the popular romance (Allan 2020b). The hero of romance is not just endowed with “spectacular masculinity” that is to be visually pleasing, but he is also endowed with “the purity of his maleness” (Radway 1984, p. 128), and a key part of this purity, I contend, is his reproductive potential. These men are paragons of both sexuality and reproduction, at least within the confines of the heterosexual romance structure. But what has been missing from the critical study of heroic masculinities in the popular romance novel is the reproduction assumption, that is, the hero is assumed to be virile. He is assumed to be endowed with, as it were, “spectacular fecundity,” by which, I mean, the hero of romance is always already (and ready) fertile because it testifies to his masculinity. The hero may not even know how “spectacularly fecund” he is until after the fact when he finds out he has produced an heir.

In Emilie Richards's *The Trouble with Joe*, which will be the subject of this chapter, the novel begins in the happily ever after, that is, the hero and heroine of the novel are already married, their journey through courtship has been completed, as it were. Readers are witness to the couple as they negotiate infertility and strive to find romance once more. This novel is remarkable insofar as it carefully constructs a narrative around the challenges of infertility and how those challenges can and do affect a couple's relationship and romance. There is, in some ways, a startling realism in

this novel. In this chapter, I am most especially interested in troubling the perception that romance novels are chiefly interested in the most hegemonic of masculinities. That is, I begin with the question: does the infertile hero exist in popular romance? The answer, of course, is that he does. In *The Fulfillment*, the narrative considered infertility, and while there may have been a kind of double-heroic structure, the infertile man is not the ultimate hero. The second question becomes: how is the infertile hero represented? This chapter thus sets out to study infertility in the popular romance by closely reading *The Trouble with Joe* by Emilie Richards. To these ends, I will begin by briefly considering the popular romance and reproduction, then move to a reading of *The Trouble with Joe*, focusing on two elements in particular: the representation of Joe's infertility, and the novel's consideration of reproductive futurism (Edelman 2004). These elements interweave one another. Our ideas about fertility are predicated on our expectations that are disrupted, troubled, and challenged. Ultimately, I argue that this novel tries to break the narrative concerning fertility and it does so in a space that is assumed to be hegemonic and normative. The narrative breaks the mould, as it were, and works to show the complexities not only of infertility, but also, and importantly, ideas of masculinity, paternity, and fatherhood and the ways all of these intersect with one another.

While I hope it has already become clear that popular romance novels are themselves interesting and worthy of study, I know that there are critics and scholars who continue to dismiss these novels. I find myself in the category of scholars that finds the genre to be endlessly interesting. I insist, alongside others, that "few genres are more clearly gendered than the romance novel" (Illouz 2014, p. 13) and that "romance novels are ideal for examining gender ideology, since they take masculinity and femininity as a central focus and treat as natural the opposition between the two" (Clawson 2006, p. 463). Reproduction is deeply enmeshed in gender ideology, and when a romance novel, which is a genre that thrives on gender and positions it at its core (along with sexuality and love), tackles an issue like male infertility, it is absolutely commenting on that ideology.

In her study of romance novels and pregnancy, Annika Rosanowski (2019) notes that "pregnancy has become an index for women with which to measure their success, even in genres that are mostly produced by and for women" (p. 2). To be certain, "that is not to say that category romance as a whole portrays pregnancy as woman's destiny, as numerous authors envision a happy end without a baby" (Rosanowski 2019, p. 2). Nonetheless, as Rosanowski notes, even if this is not the case, "there is no shortage of novels that do end with a baby, many of which focus on the actual time or discovery of the pregnancy, rather than those set after the birth" (p. 2). In the novels under consideration by Rosanowski, the focus is on pregnancy and the child-to-come, whereas I am explicitly interested in infertility, which is also part of a gender ideology that unfolds within the popular romance. That is, when Richards writes a novel about an infertile

hero, she is explicitly commenting on male infertility, and intentionally or not, Richards is also rewriting the common narrative that frames women's bodies as infertile. A similar strategy has happened in the genre with regard to virgin heroes—these narratives are often inverting the common narrative of virginity, wherein the heroine is the virgin (Allan 2011, 2020a, 2020b). In these examples, then, the hero's virginity says as much about masculinity and virginity as it does the ideologies of virginity that are part of the history of the genre (and continue to be). Importantly, novels that seek to explore different ways of being a man are undoubtedly commenting on masculinity and ways in which masculinity may be rewritten and reimagined.

As a novel, *The Trouble with Joe* is simple enough, and I do not mean this pejoratively but rather that its complexities rest in its thematic concerns, notably its exploration of fertility and paternity. Samantha Giovanelli is married to Joe. They live in a small town. They were married quickly in spite of their class differences. Samantha comes from a wealthy family, and Joe is working-class. The narrative focuses on the challenges that they have faced, particularly since they do not have children, which is something that they would both like. Indeed, they desired children so much that Joe had already built the tree house for the kids that they would eventually have. Over the course of the novel, readers learn about Joe's infertility. Additionally, readers are introduced to Corey, a student in Sam's class, who is mistreated by her mother. The mother is tragically killed in a car accident, and Corey tells the hospital that Sam is not her teacher, but her aunt. Sam and Joe take care of Corey and slowly they begin to develop a familial relationship, thus troubling the biological definition of family and working towards their own happily ever after.

The novel is formally quite interesting for popular romance because it begins in the realm of the happily ever after, or rather, what comes after the happily ever after. So often the world of romance comes to an end with marriage; indeed, the happily ever after is the hallmark of the genre. If it is not a happily ever after, then it is a happy for now ending, but what is essential is an ending that is emotionally satisfying and optimistic in its outlook. To be sure, *The Trouble with Joe* is not unique, but it is still nonetheless an interesting novel because of the ways in which it reminds readers that there is life after the happily ever after. In the case of *The Trouble with Joe*, readers are living alongside the lovers after they are married—a marriage that has become challenging and seemingly fraught with problems. The story unfolds as the couple comes to terms with Joe's infertility, and through a series of flashbacks, we see how the romance initially developed, and each of these flashbacks flash forward to the present and its challenges. The structure is quite innovative and proves to be quite advantageous because it allows for the novel to show the process towards the first happily ever after, the post-happily ever after life, and the movement towards the second happily ever after when the challenges of the post-happily ever after have been resolved. There is something startlingly realist about this novel, insofar as it

explores the very real challenges that can and do arise for couples, indeed, for many couples: infertility. Richards thus presents a very real challenge to the world of romance. Her approach is one that reminds readers (and scholars!) that romance novels, despite all of their happiness, do still engage with very real challenges that couples and lovers face regularly, and this is why I am so keen to study these novels. These novels do important work and they tell important stories, even if they are couched in “the promise of happiness,” to borrow Sara Ahmed’s evocative title (2010). That being admitted, because these novels are committed to this promise, a contract between an author and reader, readers know that these stories will work out—even as they tangle with difficult issues.

In the first flashback that I wish to consider, we encounter a discussion that is common enough to many couples: the desire for a baby. The baby is the normative expectation of most established relationships. In this flashback, readers learn initially of Joe securing a good paying job, which testifies to his economic upward mobility, and how this affects their lives together, for instance, once a secure job has been achieved, the next milestone on the life course becomes possible. He says to Sam, “it’s too late [for you] to find a teaching job for this fall. Why don’t you have a baby instead?” (Richards 2014, p. 73). This assumption is fairly common. Why not have a baby? There is a tendency to assume that we can all just simply have a baby—these are the narratives that surround us, which is what makes infertility all the more tragic. One becomes an outlier of normativity. Likewise, we tend to assume that women’s bodies are always already ready for reproduction. Consider the way Shelagh Little speaks of motherhood as being “still central to womanhood, the magical thing that women’s bodies do” (cited in Kimball 2019, p. 8). Women’s bodies *just* do it. Even though “our culture is one where essentialist ideas about women are nominally rejected,” Alexandra Kimball writes, these ideas “still infest daily life, from Facebook memes asserting ‘childbirth is women’s power’ [...] to Hilary Clinton’s insistence that the most important job she has is that of mother and grandmother” (2019, p. 30). Women’s bodies are productive and reproductive bodies. We, like Joe, just assume that the bodies are able to reproduce—infertility is a shock. Joe continues:

We’ve been married a year. I’m twenty-six. I can support a family now. We’ll have insurance, and we can find a house cheap in Foxcove. If you get pregnant right away—and why shouldn’t you?—you’ll be due sometime in late winter. The baby would be nearly six months old when you started teaching...if you did.

(Richards 2014, p. 73)

The question – and why shouldn’t you? – functions as a foreshadowing of the events to come, but also speaks to the expectations of reproductive futurism, which I am more and more inclined to see as a deeply normative

expectation. For Edelman (2004), the figure of the child “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (p. 3). Edelman’s argument is about how the child comes to be at the heart of so many political debates; this is the language of “fighting for the children” (p. 3). And it would seem all sides of the political world use the spectre of the child, whether it is about promising a better future for that child or about the harms done to that future child if nothing is done to change the current situation. But not all politics are at this high level; these politics are also at the level of the kitchen table or the bedroom that opens Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. The child becomes the logical next step. Mari Ruti summarizes Edelman’s reproductive futurism as “a social system that not only valorizes reproductive sexuality but also routinely sacrifices the present for the sake of an imagined future (essentially, for the sake of the child)” (2017, p. 28). This imagined future, in some ways, is akin to the happily ever after and is symbolized not only in the child, but also the child’s tree house that Joe has already built. My argument here is that this idea of the right to the child as part of reproductive futurism is at the heart of Joe’s question: “and why shouldn’t you?” (73). Joe’s question is, as Edelman might suggest, “the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity” (2004, p. 21), that is, why don’t you have a baby instead? Admittedly, Edelman’s argument is more fatalistic, more negative than what is unfolding in *The Trouble with Joe*. His is an anti-social argument, whereas the romance novel is fundamentally social. The point in highlighting reproductive futurism here is because it is not only at the heart of the heteronormative structure that underpins the novel, but also because reproductive futurism makes a lot of promises. Reproductive futurism, like Joe, assumes that one will be able to participate in the reproductive impulse and do so successfully without trouble. Edelman’s notions, while psychoanalytic, are also deeply embedded in a certain amount of normative expectations—even in his critique of these norms, he relies upon a series of norms, for instance, that all bodies are fertile bodies that are both wanting and willing to participate in reproductive futurism. What of those bodies that are unable even if they are wanting, willing, and desiring? As Joe learns, reproduction is not always, at least not for everyone, easy, and many are excluded from it for any number of reasons, and yet still likely long for a child.

Joe assumes that both he and Sam will easily be able to have children—“and why shouldn’t you?” (Richards 73). In the introduction to *The Elusive Embryo: How Women and Men Approach New Reproductive Technologies*, Gay Becker recounts a similar narrative:

As Roger and I entered our thirties, friends who were having children began pressuring us to do the same. We were in no hurry, but we began a dialogue about the cultural dimensions of parenthood and how it would fit into our own lives. Most of our friends already had children; increasingly, we felt different from our peers. The peer pressure was

uncomfortable, but we were resistant to having children simply to fit in. A few years later, we saw things differently and decided that children would enrich our lives. Having considered this decision long and carefully, we nevertheless were no better prepared for infertility than anyone ever is.

(2000, pp. 1–2)

Few of us “prepare” for infertility, and this is likely because so few of us imagine infertility as a possibility, especially in a climate that thrives on reproductive futurism. Even if we are not having children, even if we are actively avoiding having children by way of the birth control pill, an intra-uterine device (IUD), or the condom, we still tend to assume that the body is capable of it. Indeed, rarely does a vasectomy procedure require that one is fertile—it is generally assumed because men seek vasectomy after having produced children, but what of those who do not have children and seek a vasectomy? It is nearly normative to imagine that we all inhabit seemingly fertile bodies, even if we will never use these fertile bodies to their full reproductive potential. I recognize wholeheartedly that in acknowledging this “nearly normative,” there is a risk that I am universalizing, but such is not the intention. There are, of course, all kinds of bodies that will not reproduce, will not desire to reproduce, and cannot reproduce. My suggestion here, however, would be that those who learn of their infertility are often in the midst of trying to conceive. This is the narrative that unfolds in *The Trouble with Joe*. This is a story that is not unique, but it is a story that helps us make sense of infertility. The stories of infertilities, I stress, are part of how we experience and represent infertility. It is not merely an individual experience, but it is a story that is reflected back to us in the media, in literature, and in the arts, whether those be high or low, popular or canonical, literary or junk.

Greening notes that “fertility is something that men just assume they have. From the time they develop their first sexual feelings they assume they will be fertile men” (p. vii). And in some ways, one might be tempted to quip, as Joe does, “and why shouldn’t you?” (Richards, p. 73). Rarely are men given the opportunity or the cause to think about their fertility or lack thereof. One sociological study notes that “men were only able to identify 51% of the risk factors and 45% of the health issues associated with male infertility” (Daumler *et al.* 2016, p. 2781). This knowledge of infertility and its risk factors is important because not knowing the factors “could lead some men to engage, unknowingly, in activities that reduce their ability to have biological children” (Daumler *et al.*, p. 2782). But knowing or not knowing the risk factors is, of course, not the same as knowing one’s fertility status. Few men are evaluated until it is “too late,” or rather they have arrived at a point where it is now necessary to ask if something might be wrong. The point, however, remains that fertility is something that men, like Joe, assume they have. Joe is, in some ways, as his name suggests, an

everyday Joe, a regular Joe, a Joe-normal. There is nothing particularly special about him, but he does embody his name, and he becomes a stand-in for many men who experience a similar situation.

It is easy to assume that the future contains the baby that one has seemingly been promised: “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage” as the playground rhyme would suggest. Such a perspective is essential to Edelman’s “reproductive futurity.” Moreover, having a baby is seemingly a part of one’s happily ever after—and many popular romance novels include a postscript or an epilogue that includes this very narrative. In Linda Howard’s *Tears of the Renegade*, for instance:

Cord lay heavily on her, sweetly limp after the whirlwind of their love-making. Susan nibbled on his shoulder, and he put his hand in her hair to pull her head up. He began kissing her again, slow, drugging kisses that lit the fires between them again, fires that burned higher and hotter than ever after a year of marriage. Just as he began moving within her, a faint, fretful cry caught their attention, a cry that quickly escalated into an all-out bellow.

He cursed luridly as he slid off her. ‘She’s got the most incredible timing!’ he grumbled as he stalked naked from the room, outrage evident in every line of his powerful body.

Susan pulled the sheet up over her nude body; she was cool without the heat of him next to her. A slow, gentle smile touched her lips as she envisioned the scene in the next room. Cord might grumble and grouse, but he’d melt as soon as he set eyes on his tiny daughter, who had just learned how to blow bubbles.

(Howard 1985, p. 249)

Likewise, in *Travis Comes Home* by Patricia Thayer, a similar narrative unfolds in the epilogue, “‘She’s beautiful,’ Travis said, as he held his new daughter in his arms. The hour-old baby was a perfect duplicate of Josie with a full head of black hair and big light-colored eyes” (2001, p. 180). The baby is the final proof of the love between the lovers. Not only have they fallen in love and continue to be in love with one another, they have been so successful that they have reproduced—this is the reproductive futurism that is so central to the happily ever after (even if it is not explicit). It also should not be lost that in both scenes, his virility and his masculinity are affirmed by his reproductive potential: sexual prowess and mastery in *Tears of the Renegade* and his new paternal role (always a caring carer). As Joe explains, the baby will be a “symbol of our love” (p. 74). But the inability to acquire and secure this “symbol” will become the narrative tension throughout *The Trouble with Joe*. His trouble is that he is unable to have a baby, which is the *symbol* of their love.

Throughout the novel, readers are witness to a growing tension between Joe and Sam, and in the sixth chapter, the readers learn the reasons for it.



Nearly 100 pages into the novel, they have a heated argument. Joe says, “You can have children. You’re certifiably equipped to conceive and bear them. I’m the one who’s deficient.” Sam quickly corrects Joe, “You’re the one who’s infertile [...] there’s nothing deficient about you, Joe” (Richards, p. 89). She is working to allay his concerns about being deficient, she is doing the emotional labour, while also doing the important work in the romance structure, which is to say, she reaffirms his claims to “spectacular masculinity” (Radway, p. 128). The genre, as noted, depends upon the celebration of idealized masculinity and Sam does this work for Joe, she builds up his masculinity in spite of his feeling “deficient.” She is working to show that “every aspect of his being, whether his body, his face, or his general demeanor, is informed by the purity of his maleness” (Radway, p. 128). Even though “male factor infertility can have significant negative effects on [men’s] sense of masculinity” (Sylvest *et al.* 2018, p. 728), Sam works to alleviate these effects. I cannot imagine that Radway concerned herself with the possibility of an infertile hero when she wrote *Reading the Romance*, but while Joe feels deficient, Sam makes sure to distinguish between Joe, the man, and his sperm. I am fascinated by Joe because he would seem to confound Radway’s expectations. For Joe, however, while Sam makes this distinction, his sperm becomes a synecdoche for his entire being; whereas for Sam, these are two very different things and the one cannot and will not stand in for the other. Thus, while she tries to reduce his worry, he responds, “except that I have no good sperm. A small deficiency” (p. 89). This moment shows that he is starting to distinguish between the two—he has gone from being deficient to having a deficiency. A small transition, perhaps, but an important one because it begins the work of shifting the blame, as it were, to the medicalized body. He is able to make sense of the deficiency not being about his person, but about a facet of his body. He is able to depersonalize infertility. This revelation is shared privately between Sam and Joe and sets into motion a significant consideration of infertility and masculinity that will span the novel. Importantly, the novel recognizes that infertility is deeply tied to Joe’s sense of his own masculinity—even if Sam does not.

Initially, “when Sam hadn’t gotten pregnant during the summer in the mountains, neither Joe nor Sam had been particularly concerned” (p. 95), but “a year after they had begun trying, Sam made her first trip to the office of a fertility specialist in Raleigh” (p. 95). The use of a year as a measure is important because for many definitions—colloquial and medical—one year of consistently trying to become pregnant and not resulting in pregnancy is symptomatic of infertility. Readers learn that the doctor did some tests, but that another “six months stretched to twelve before she made another appointment” (p. 95). This is another fascinating feature of this romance novel; it is temporally quite expansive, which is reflective of the experience of infertility, where time is long and it stretches. Moreover, as is also typical, it is Sam, not Joe, who seeks medical attention. It is the

woman, who more often than not, seeks medical assistance, perhaps because culturally infertility is still framed as a “woman’s issue,” a belief this book hopes to dismantle, even if just briefly. Indeed, readers learn that “Joe was opposed to Sam consulting a specialist at all. He told her stories of other couples who had taken time to conceive. Medical intervention seemed like an invasion of privacy” (p. 95). I want to highlight here that Joe has put into actions the argument of *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities*, that is, infertility is a story we tell. When he objects to medical intervention, he relies on stories that he has heard of other couples, and he tells Sam those stories. Again, and I appreciate this about *The Trouble with Joe*, the narrative is so common—this is an experience that many infertile couples face, the discomfort with seeking assistance, breaking down the boundaries of intimacy. But Joe’s reactions are also very much about masculinity: he is failing a test that he should, as a virile man, be able to pass with flying colours. Finally, readers learn, “when almost every avenue was exhausted and there seemed to be no medical reason that Sam couldn’t conceive, Joe reluctantly returned [to the clinic] with her” (p. 96). His reactions are so normal, nearly archetypal; a reader could predict these reactions. While Sam has already submitted herself to all sorts of tests that are certainly an “invasion of privacy” (p. 95), Joe has been reluctant because “he hated the tests every bit as much as he’d expected. Be he hated the results most of all” (p. 96). While Joe comforts Sam, “if we’ve got a problem, they’ll be able to help us” (p. 96), he explains that he is not expecting that the “we” will suddenly become “he” and “his problem.” When Joe learns that the problem is *his* problem, he struggles to comprehend and understand what is happening, which, of course, again is common enough. This is why we spend so much time telling stories about infertility, because we are trying to make sense of the situation.

Joe will reach out to his brother, Johnny, about his predicament. He explains “It’s me with the problem, not Sam. [...] I’m allergic to my own sperm. How do you like it? Couldn’t have been dogs or dust, it had to be my sperm,” to which his brother responds, “what are you talking about?” and Joe explains:

a doctor in Raleigh did some tests. My sperm count is low to start with. The ones I manage to produce are attacked by antibodies before they can go anywhere. I’ve got as much chance of getting Sam pregnant as flying to Mars.

(96–97)

This scene plays out the challenges to Joe’s masculinity. It is striking that Joe speaks in terms of his body, or more particularly, his sperm, being “attacked by antibodies” as if his body is at war with itself, just as Joe is at war with himself psychologically and emotional about his diagnosis of infertility. For Joe, the problem is *his* problem—“my own sperm”—and not Sam’s problem. The use of “own,” while unnecessary, doubles down on the

problem being solely Joe's problem, which of course harkens back to the title of the novel, *The Trouble with Joe*. For Joe, his sense of self, and the security therein, as well as his relation to his body, becomes the site of trouble. The trouble is squarely about Joe and his infertile body. He could have said "my sperm," but it is "my own." His sperm are the problem. And not only is his sperm count low, but the sperm "are attacked by antibodies before they can go anywhere" (p. 97), and thus, there is no hope of pregnancy for Sam and Joe. Indeed, Joe imagines "flying to Mars" as being more likely than becoming pregnant, which speaks to the distinct lack of hope—if there is hope, it is a distant possibility. Even today, we have yet to fly to Mars, but we continue to strive for that opportunity; perhaps this is nothing more than "cruel optimism," wherein the object we must desire is actually getting in the way of success (Berlant 2011). Moreover, it is telling that Joe defers to science; science and innovation are more likely to get him to Mars than to help him become a father. Once more, sperm become a kind of synecdoche, insofar as they represent not only the man himself, but also his fecundity and future. He cannot do what he is supposed to do. He is deficient. His sperm are under attack before they "can go anywhere" (p. 97).

Johnny is surprised that Joe had not told him earlier and asks, "what kind of brother keeps this to himself?" to which Joe responds, "my kind," leading Johnny to return, "You're ashamed of yourself, are you?" (p. 97). Joe lacks someone with whom he can speak about his diagnosis and Johnny quickly aligns that inability to speak with shame. The shame is about what he cannot do and what he is supposed to be able to do. And shame is, as we likely know, a "radically alienating experience" (Allan 2018, p. 178) and yet one with which we can all empathize. Shame is a kind of universal experience, and it has been central to how masculinity has been theorized, beginning with Michael Kimmel's work in which he suggested that "men prove their manhood in the eyes of other men" and because of this, "we [men] test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood" (1994, p. 129). This scene between Joe and Johnny, then, is powerful because Joe is allowing himself to be ashamed and to feel that shame—he has failed as a man. He assumes that in the eyes of those around him, he has failed the test, he has been unable to perform the heroic feat of fatherhood, and so on. As much as this might be about the homosociality of shame, Johnny rewrites this scene, perhaps even radically, Johnny exclaims, "Like you had something to do with it. That's stupid. You know that, don't you?" (Richards, p. 97). This scene embodies a kind of brotherly love or guy talk and that in itself is somewhat startling because this is not about dominance bonding (Farr 1988) or about one-upmanship, but rather this is about a brother supporting another brother. Johnny is doing the work of relieving Joe's shame, work that has also been done by Sam. Once more this is the emotional labour that is often involved in infertility. For Joe, he is ashamed, he is blaming himself, and Johnny is insisting—rightly—that this is not Joe's fault. I keep suggesting that there is something refreshingly realist about this novel, and the reason I keep doing

this is because it is refreshing, it is real, and it confounds so much of the perception of the genre where everything works out. The more I read this novel, the more impressed I am with how well it crafts its story of infertility.

Joe and Johnny speak to one another about how Joe does not “want Mama to be sitting around waiting for us [Sam and Joe] to reproduce. Because we aren’t going to. Not ever” (pp. 97–98). This scene, which is still working through the shame, amplifies the affective nature of infertility by attending to failure, particularly the failure of the body to perform a normative task. Joe worries about disappointing his family. As the scene closes, Johnny says, “you’re no less of a man, Joey,” and the narrative ends, “Joe didn’t answer. He couldn’t call his brother a liar to his face” (p. 98). Even if Johnny contends that Joe is not less of a man, it is striking that he uses the diminutive, which turns Joe into the puerile Joey. The narrator seemingly corrects Johnny by noting that “Joe didn’t answer.” For Joe, his infertility is very much about being “less of a man,” so being called Joey confirms this. He cannot do what a man, what a husband is supposed to do. And if he is not a man, then, perhaps, he is, at best, a boy. Or, perhaps, even worse, he might be feminine. When a man confronts his infertility, there is undoubtedly a level of shame, as Joe has exhibited, but there is also a shame that comes from recognizing a similarity to the female body, the body that is supposed to be able to bear the burden of pregnancy. When infertility is framed as a “woman’s issue,” then when a man embodies this “woman’s issue,” he may begin to feel emasculated, recalling that Reeser argues that “the emasculated man resembles a woman only if woman and man are considered opposites” (2010, p. 148).

This sense of feeling powerless, or as though one lacks manly power, becomes all the clearer when readers learn that “he felt impotent” (Richards 2014, p. 169), which once more is a seeming failure of his masculinity, but unlike impotence (recalling that the novel appears after the rise of Viagra), infertility has no cure. I recognize by speaking in terms of “cure,” that I am putting a finality on it, as if one is “cured” of impotence rather than treated for impotence. The larger point however is that his masculinity is, in his mind, constantly in question, constantly scrutinized. His masculinity, like his sperm cells, is under attack. One begins to wonder how different men’s lives might be if this competition were not seemingly so essential to masculinity. But, as he will later come to realize, this attack is from within—a point that Kimmel and others miss, often the greatest threat to masculinity is not from outside, but from inside. Just as his sperm are being attacked by his own body and not an external source, so too is his masculinity:

“I was unhappy I’d failed you, but I was more unhappy that somebody up there had failed me. Somebody has snatched my manhood away the day I found out the problem was mine. You know who that somebody was?” He put his fist to his chest. “Me. Only me.”

(Richards 2014, p. 242)

Joe realizes that those around him never doubted his masculinity—and in many ways, how could they. His “failure” or his being “deficient” is at a level that remains invisible and therefore unknown to most. It is not as if one can look at a man and see that he is infertile, which is Greening’s point when he speaks of being “an amazing specimen of manhood” and yet infertile (2018, p. 1). But even more so, even if one has reason to see a man’s semen, one cannot see from the semen alone that he is infertile. Greater analysis, medicalized knowledge, and so on become imperative to that understanding. But Joe had managed to imagine that everyone could see his infertility. Joe continues, “and now I see the difference,” between becoming and being a father, “and where the problem really lies. I’m the problem. Not because of a screwed-up sperm count, but because of a screwed-up attitude” (p. 242). Joe realizes that it is his definition of what it means to be a father, like his definitions of masculinity that are “screwed up.” He can still be a father, even if he and Sam never produce a child. Fatherhood is not about a successful sperm cell fertilizing a healthy egg; fatherhood, like masculinity, is a practice. There is no reason to be trapped within definitions that do not work, which are imposed upon men, for instance, hegemonic masculinity. Instead, he can overcome these definitions and create new approaches to masculinity. This moment in the novel does pedagogical or didactic work. Many readers are quite likely similar to Joe, and they have imagined that infertility is a threat or challenge to the claims to the “purity of his maleness” (Radway, p. 128), but instead, this novel shows that Joe can be masculine, have the hallmarks of the “purity of his maleness,” and still be infertile. I have argued elsewhere, with regard to male virgins, that:

Romance novels have been criticized and even discarded by many in the academy for the ways in which they apparently reinforce patriarchal norms, but when we read these novels with a particular focus on male virginity, we find that romance novelists are quite conscious of these norms, and they sometimes break new ground in both gender and genre. Male virginity may receive its most honest and most complete fictional treatment in the genre pervasively written “by women, for women”: the popular romance novel.

(2011)

I would be inclined to argue similarly here with regard to the infertile hero, however recognizing that I am only addressing *one* novel. Nonetheless, *The Trouble with Joe* treats Joe with respect and dignity, the novel shows the complexity of infertility, and provides a careful representation of that narrative that never threatens or undercuts masculinity (even when Joe does), but rather affirms it. Scholars, of course, could note that this just merely reaffirms a patriarchal dilemma to be found in popular romance novels, that is, even when they try to rewrite and modify masculinity, they merely end up with another masculinity, perhaps softer,

but nonetheless still hegemonic. In the language of critical studies of men and masculinities, these men embody a kind of hybrid masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014, 2018), that is, they are more style than substance.<sup>1</sup> But I would suggest that readers are presented with a model worth considering. Joe questions his masculinity, he learns his ideas and views are the problem, and he reforms those ideas. Thus, the novel imagines and represents other ways of doing masculinity, in spite of the challenges Joe faces. Similarly, this novel will, as I hope to show, rewrite ideas about paternity and fatherhood, once more reflecting upon the diversity of men's experiences while also expanding upon men's infertility.

Unsurprisingly, as Joe comes to realize his masculinity is not up for debate, he begins to think carefully about his ideas about paternity and fatherhood, as does Sam. For Joe, there is an ongoing tension between his infertility and his desire to be a father. Throughout much of the novel, he cannot imagine a future in which he is not a father; after all, he has already built the tree house for his kids. All of this is compounded by his tension with Sam's maternal desires (and perhaps problematically in this novel, womanhood can be tied to motherhood, but even this is unsettled). Throughout the novel, Sam takes care of a student, Corey, whose mother is abusive. Sam becomes the child's refuge, a safe space. This child then becomes a conduit through which Sam is able to ask why she can't have children and why "bad" parents are given children. Certainly, this is a philosophical debate that many have asked themselves, especially those in the throes of infertility. "The world's full of children put here by men who think the only way they have to prove their masculinity is to shoot a few sperm in the right direction," Sam says to Joe (Richards, p. 132). Joe has been struggling with this very notion: his failure at "proving his masculinity" has been his inability to "shoot a few sperm in the right direction." Sam separates the man from his sperm, thereby erasing the synecdochic argument that Joe has had with himself and those around him. For Sam, Joe's infertility was never a threat to his masculinity; instead, it is about "the way he comforts her. The way he makes her feel like a woman. The way he shares his life with her," which leads Sam to "wonder why fathers don't teach that to their sons?" (p. 134). Masculinity is not about sperm for Sam, but about compassion and love. In what will follow, readers find this discussion unfold because not only do men need to learn better masculinities, they also need to learn different ideas about fatherhood.

As the novel reaches its conclusion, the story shifts gears and focuses on Corey. Readers learn that the child protective services have been looking for Corey's father, while Sam and Joe have been fostering Corey (after the death of Corey's mother). In this section of the novel, the discussion of fatherhood continues and moves further and further away from a merely biological inevitability and towards a relational, loving, and compassionate framework. It is not sperm that makes the father. The child protective

services worker, Dinah, explains to Sam that they have found Corey's father and that:

he's completely unsuitable whether he's Corey's father or not. Apparently, he's fathered a string of kids from here to Savannah, and no court's ever been able to get him to be responsible. He has no income. He lives off women, then he moves on when they boot him out. He's been in and out of jail for the past ten years and seems to have no intention of improving his situation.

(Richards 2014, p. 236)

Immediately, the focus here is on Corey's father and his masculinity and his claims to manhood. By some definitions, such as those that Joe himself recently held, Corey's father is the ideal of masculinity because he is so virile that he has managed to "father a string of kids from here to Savannah," but he is a deadbeat father since "no court's ever been able to get him to be responsible" (p. 236). Undoubtedly, this novel creates a stereotype of the father to serve its generic ends, and there is much to be said about fathers such as these, but the point to be taken is that once more the novel challenges notions of masculinity and fatherhood. Dinah explains to Sam that "he says if we don't prosecute him he'll sign a statement admitting he's Corey's father and relinquish all his rights to her," to which Sam retorts, "and he calls himself a man" (p. 236). The idea of manhood has been put on trial here and Sam clearly recognizes how ideas of manhood are not automatic, but rather are earned. The focus shifts to "what makes a man," and Dinah says, "some men measure their manhood in very peculiar ways" (p. 236). Dinah's observation, nearing the close of the novel, is the central argument of *The Problem with Joe*: what is a man and how is manhood measured? This novel has explicitly challenged well-established ideas and shown different ways of measuring, evaluating, and valuing manhood.

Sam explains the situation to Joe, which brings to the forefront, once more, Joe's infertility. Sam angrily tells Joe about Corey's father:

Oh, he's a real man, Joe. A real stud. He's fathered a bunch of kids. He doesn't have any problem getting women pregnant. Of course, he skips out on them and leaves them to raise their babies alone. But he's done his job, right? He's shared his fabulous gene pool. That's enough. He knows he's got what it takes. [...] Apparently Corey's father has prided himself on populating the southeast U.S. He doesn't support the kids he fathers, and when push comes to shove he doesn't even acknowledge them. He's happy just to do his manly thing and send a part of himself into the future.

(p. 239)

Sam is clearly upset, frustrated, and angry about the situation. Corey's father willingly and with a certain amount of ease abandons Corey, a child that Sam has grown to love. Joe begins to recount what a real man *really* is: "my old man was a real man. He would have been a real man even if he'd never been able to make a single baby. He was a real man because he was a good man. It's that simple." This declaration leaves Sam "want[ing] to cheer," and she says to Joe, "You're a real man. You've never been anything else" (p. 240). This moment in the text marks most clearly Joe's epiphany, wherein he realizes that he never lost his claims to manhood, he says to Sam:

And now I see the difference, and where the problem really lies. I'm the problem. Not because of a screwed-up sperm count, but because of a screwed-up attitude. And you know what? Maybe I can't do anything about one thing, but I can damned sure do something about the other.  
(p. 242)

Joe realizes that his infertility does not prevent him from being a father; it may prevent biological fatherhood, but not genuine fatherhood. He realizes, once and for all, that he is still a "real man." What Joe intends to do is adopt Corey and to become a father to her, "I want to be her father. Her real father" (p. 242). Judith Trowell has rightly noted that "when a man becomes a father, it is not only biological issues that are involved. Becoming a father involves psychological and emotional changes; the child's interests have to take precedence over one's own" (2002, p. 4). Joe has relinquished his narrow focus on infertility and become a "real man" because he wants to care for, love, and protect Corey. In this novel, without the biological imperative, then, it is the psychological and the emotional aspects that are on full display. Fatherhood is no longer merely a biological construct and outcome, but rather is social and cultural. Nowhere is this more evident than adoption, wherein there is no doubt that Joe wants to be a father to Corey while Corey's father is seemingly all too eager to relinquish his paternity. Joe chooses to be a father to Corey.

The novel continues, "He was a man restaking a claim, a man who had just discovered that treasure, not the treasure he first sought but one as cherished, as valuable, had always waited just under the surface" (p. 243). The novel brings together all the loose ends; Joe's lost masculinity, as it were, has been found again and reclaimed, and he has realized that it is not his fecundity or his sperm count that makes the man, but that a man is measured by his actions, by his service to others, by his capacity to love and care for someone other than himself. He also learns that one can be a father without having to father in a biological and reproductive sense. He can be the father that Corey wants and needs.

Emilie Richards's *The Trouble with Joe* is an anomaly insofar as it tackles a theme that many romance novelists have not: male infertility. The genre



contains many stories of infertile heroines, who, as noted, become pregnant through the power of love, but in *The Trouble with Joe*, there is no cure, there is no sudden fertility, there is not a moment in which they had sex in the most perfect and orgasmic way possible and they suddenly become pregnant. This novel embraces a realist approach to infertility. Joe's infertility is never cured, nor do we have an understanding of why he is infertile, that is, the novel does not provide us with a reason that helps us understand—as though knowing the cause would solve anything. Indeed, the scenario that Joe finds himself in is the scenario that many men find themselves in, one in which they suddenly realize that they are infertile for no apparent reason. It is not as if he had an illness previously, as was the case with Jonathan in *The Fulfillment*. One can appear entirely healthy, one can be “an amazing specimen of manhood” (Greening 2018, p. 1), and yet be infertile.

In his book, *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup: A Guy's Guide to the World of Infertility*, to which we shall turn to in the next chapter, Greg Wolfe explains that “my sperm was, to put it mildly, poor grade,” and he admits:

Sure, I can joke about it now, but when the doctor handed me the lab report—the numbers of my sperm count reading lower than the ratings on a PBS documentary on wildebeest migrations—yeah, it was kind of a big deal. I tried to keep it together. Being a man, I was supposed to be strong, right? Outward, I was all smiles and sunshine: ‘Okay, well, at least now we know what the problem is, so let's just go ahead and see what we can do about it.’ Ah, but inside...inside, I was crushed. Really, truly devastated. More than that, I was embarrassed. I mean, what kind of man was I if I couldn't even get my wife pregnant?

(2010, p. 126)

Wolfe's explanation, based on his own experience of infertility, is so similar to Joe's experience, in that he struggles internally. Infertility is crushing to a man's sense of self. He is “crushed” by his diagnosis and it becomes a site of failure. Even though we know that Joe is a “manly man,” even though he is described as being an ideal of masculinity, readers are witness to Joe's struggles with infertility as an assault on his masculinity. It is perhaps difficult not to see this as an assault on masculinity, especially since so many men have just assumed that one can and will be a father to a child of his own, as Wolfe explains, “in our minds, we're all virile testosterone-filled baby-making machines. Hell, the only reason we don't already have a trail of babies all over the country is because we were really careful in our twenties” (2010, p. 41). In the minds of many, men are all like Corey's father, entirely able to produce without worry or challenge.

*The Trouble with Joe* pays attention to the construction of masculinity and the impact that infertility can and does have on masculinity. This novel does not pretend as if it is not a challenge or problem, but rather embraces

the complexity of men's experiences of infertility. Accordingly, the novel explores male infertility in important and innovative ways that show just how difficult this situation can be. This novel shows just how honest and complete a representation of male infertility can be in a space like the popular romance novel, which all too often is dismissed as frivolous and trivial. Infertility is a story that we tell and it is not limited to one particular mode or genre. Truth be told, romance novels and their authors are doing important work when they tackle touchy and at times taboo topics, such as infertility.

## Note

- 1 Hybrid masculinity theory does have much to offer to the study of popular romance heroes. I have argued elsewhere that the masculinity in male/male romance novels "is a hybrid masculinity, which is largely performative," and thus, I contend, "the performances may appear 'inclusive' or 'sensitive,' but there is an underlying commitment to and belief in hegemonic masculinity that does not disappear once the clothing is removed." In this regard, I focus on sex scenes in the novels, and suggest that "the sex scenes become sites of hegemonic masculinity. When we look at the bodies in these novels, for instance, the hegemonic reveals itself quite clearly, for in the popular romance novel, readers rarely encounter a small penis" (2020b, p. 93). That is, appearances, as kinds of performance, matter. They show a softening of masculinity, for instance, but these are performative rather than structural. The structures of masculinity remain intact. While this comment is about male/male popular romance novels, I would suspect that hybrid masculinity theory is even more prevalent in heterosexual romance novels. In the conclusion to *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, I suggested tentatively that "my suspicion is that the masculinities in popular romance, as hybrid masculinities, are just different enough to be acceptable to readers. The underlying structure has never changed. Popular romance novels are deeply invested in traditional masculinity" (2020b, p. 111), which may not mean hegemonic, but it does mean a normative, idealized masculinity. At bottom, "these novels challenge traditional masculinity in the same ways that hybrid masculinities challenge hegemonic masculinity. They provide a comfortable way to imagine a new masculinity that ultimately still clings to the structural core of masculinity" (Allan 2020b, p. 113).

## 5 Trying and Failing

### Men's Memoirs of Infertility

This chapter begins with two fairly simple questions: how do men write about their own experiences of infertility? And how might those experiences intersect with their sense of masculinity and manhood? What I mean by this is, how do they come to understand their experiences of infertility, especially as a lived and embodied experience? In previous chapters, much of the work has been at a fictional or theoretical level, but this chapter turns attention to the real lives of real men. To do this, I will read memoirs written by men about infertility while also keeping in mind the work that has already unfolded across *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities*. Memoirs and autobiographies about infertility are not entirely uncommon; many women have written them, but there is a growing, if small, subset of memoirs written by men about their experiences with infertility. To these ends, this chapter considers *Trying: Love, Loose Pants & The Quest for a Baby* (2013) by Mark Cossey, *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup: A Guy's Guide to the World of Infertility* (2010) by Greg Wolfe, and *Maybe Baby: An Infertile Love Story* (2008) by Matthew M. F. Miller. What is clear, even from the titles, is that these men make use of a light and humorous narrative to explore a serious problem. I begin with a brief consideration of the genre of the memoir and then move to a discussion of the particular texts. In discussing the particular texts, I highlight what I consider to be events that happen across the texts, for instance, all will make mention of the discovery of infertility. From this vantage, we can study how these men write of their infertility and how this affects their notions of masculinity and paternity.

As a genre, of course, the memoir has a significant history, beginning, in the West, with *Saint Augustine's Confessions*, which “established a literary tradition of intimate disclosure that addressed a mass but unseen public in intimate terms in which private thoughts were expressed publically” (Neustadter 1999, p. 67), and in some ways this genre would reach a climax, of sorts, with the publication of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. But, as Neustadter notes, writing in 1999, “the literary genre of the memoir has become a particularly robust trend in recent years” (1999, p. 67), and this trend has surely continued to the present moment. Importantly, while

memoirs “were once written by eminences basking in the forgiving twilight of their fame [...] that has now changed. Everywhere today it seems ordinary women and men are rising up to tell their story of how an individual life signifies” (Neustadter 1999, p. 68). And one of these places in which this is happening is the story of men’s experiences of infertility—they are taking ownership of their story and sharing it, often with fellow men. Men are no longer just reading the memoirs of the sports legends they admired as boys or the military generals they wish to know more about, they are now reading the memoirs of men like them facing the same problems they are facing, such as infertility.

Memoirs offer these authors a chance to address infertility and remain in control of their story. These men are not “confessing,” recalling that Björn Krondorfer understood the confession as “an urge to share with us [the audience] their intimate selves, because they have sinned, because they have experienced a transformative moment, because they want to be forgiven, or because they are self-absorbed and self-interested” (2010, p. 2). I highlight this because it might be easy to read these memoirs as a kind of confessional narrative, but there is no sin in a moralistic sense that needs to be overcome; rather, there is a desire to share a common story between an author and a reader. Indeed, in the language of affect theory and genre theory, these memoirs may feel like confessions, but they are not. Barbara Fuchs has noted in the trouble of defining romance that “readers are often able to identify romance almost tacitly: they know it when they see it,” almost echoing Justice Stewart’s definition for another genre (see Williams 1989, pp. 5–6), pornography, and Fuchs continues, “my students call it ‘that fairy-tale feeling’” (2004, pp. 1–2). That is, oftentimes, recognizing a genre is not just about a series of structural elements, but rather it is about a feeling—of course, those feelings can be misguided. These memoirs, though they may feel like a confession, are not, at least not as defined by Krondorfer. These memoirs are so often deeply homosocial and about flattening a hierarchy that would be common to a confession. They are almost about creating a friendship between the author and the reader, as if they can share stories about their struggles with infertility.

In other cases, the book may be written for a non-specific audience, but clearly an audience also enduring the hardship of infertility. In *Maybe Baby: An Infertile Love Story*, Matthew M. F. Miller introduces himself and his wife, Constance, and then explains:

This book is about our struggle with infertility, but more than that, it’s about the love, laughter, and hope that two people in love share when they trust and respect each other enough to replicate. It’s the story of two normal people in love trying to overcome one more challenge in a world chockfull of challenges. And unlike our reproductive efforts, it’s just that simple.

(2008, pp. xiii–xiv)

As a literary scholar, I doubt “it’s just that simple.” That is, this is not just another story like any other story about lovers; this is one about the unique challenges a couple faces when, as is the case in this story, Matthew’s “sperm count fluctuates by tens of millions of swimmers, and for whatever reason, they never seem to be available in bulk when it matters most” (2008, p. xii). But this story, at least as framed in the introduction, is very much about the couple, whereas Wolfe’s, while about the couple, is also very interested in the experience of men.

What is true regardless of the sexes of the audience is that these memoirs are supposed to give hope and courage to the infertile reader and/or readers. The author’s note to *Test Tubes and Testosterone: A Man’s Journey into Infertility and IVF*, which appears before the text has even had a chance to begin, reads:

Allow me to introduce myself. I am a man in his mid-thirties. My wife has no fallopian tubes, my sperm are rubbish and yet our two year old daughter is currently trying to use the computer I am typing on to look at pictures of herself on a bouncy castle.

How did this happen? Well...

(Saunders 2011)

Readers are promised—before the memoir even begins—a satisfying ending, just as the crime story concludes with the crime being solved, in Michael Saunders’s *Test Tubes and Testosterone*, readers are assured of a child being born. A similar strategy is found in *Ripping Up the Script: One Couple’s Journey Through Infertility, a Man’s Perspective* by Charlie Druce:

It’s Saturday morning. When our young son wakes us up, around 7am, he hits the ground running. [...] And for all this bonkers rushing around after our children, all these crazy collisions between work and home, we wouldn’t have it any other way. Why? Because it’s what we wanted. Wanted it for years.

(2018, p. i)

These memoirs relieve the anxiety of reading the memoir from the outset. That is, an infertile reader is not going to spend hours reading the book, only to realize that there is no hope to be found, that they are doomed to a life of childlessness. Indeed, hope is a big theme throughout these memoirs. In *Running on Empty: How My Wife and I Overcame Infertility*, L. Nathaniel provides reasons for why he wrote his memoir:

Perhaps more importantly, I wanted to elicit real hope in your heart of how, along this trip, I learned to transmute the deep challenges along the way into a stronger relationship with my partner<sup>†</sup>, my friends and family, and ultimately myself, without losing my mind.

(2017, p. vi)

While Nathaniel is clear about his intentions and his desire to build hope in his readers, I want to highlight his note, marked by the cross, which perhaps at first glance might read like a note about the death his partner (admittedly, that was my first instinct, thinking I'd found an exception to the rules I am establishing). This is a footnote, which explains:

For the purposes of this memoir, I will refer to my partner as Hope. This isn't her actual name, but it's certainly apt.

Vaclav Havel once said, "Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but that certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

I could not have put it better myself.

(2017, p. vi)

For Nathaniel, then, hope is at the core of his memoir, which accounts for his experience with his partner, Hope. He is so convinced of the power of hope that he endows his partner with this power by renaming her, Hope. The purpose or point of renaming may well have to do with a certain amount of anonymity, but the larger point, or the point that I take as relevant, is the importance of hope within the memoirs dealing with infertility.

While my focus is on infertility and the memoir, it is worth noting here that men are increasingly writing more and more about their experiences in the procreative realm and fatherhood. In his work, Casey Scheibling considers how men write about fatherhood in the world of blogging. Certainly, much has been written about how women write about motherhood, but less interest has been shown to men's blogging about fatherhood. Scheibling explains that "the rise of dad bloggers in North America is still a nascent phenomenon and important questions remain about the ways in which these men write about fatherhood online" (2019, p. 473) and the same holds true of those writing about infertility. Likewise, in his article, "Real Heroes Care: How Dad Bloggers Are Reconstructing Fatherhood and Masculinity," Scheibling "analyze[s] how dad bloggers construct meanings for masculinity" (2020, p. 4), and in a similar respect, I do the same with regard to these memoirs. I am interested not only in masculinity, but also in how these men tell their stories of infertility as well as the ways in which these ideas and experiences intersect with one another. Simply, in this chapter, I argue that men have compelling narratives that reflect on their experiences of reproduction, infertility, fatherhood, and masculinities.

In her article, "Blogging Wounded Manhood: Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity and the Crisis of the Male (In)Fertile Body," Jennifer Marie Rome does similar work to Scheibling by focusing on online communities in which men are able to negotiate their concerns and experiences of infertility. As with Scheibling's work, this article is valuable to this study

because it helps to remind us of the complexity of the experience, especially at an affective level, “instead of opening up about experiences of (in)fertility, the norms surrounding maintaining an ‘ideal’ hegemonic masculinity characterized by able-bodiedness and virility can cause many men to feel isolated, desperate, and depressed” (2020, p. 1) and this is what is at stake in this chapter but with a focus on memoirs.

I wish to treat these books generically, by which I mean that I am interested in the structures that are central to these books. I am therefore suggesting a commonality between the memoirs. My approach to these books is structuralist, while also, of course, being committed to the critical study of men and masculinities. The goal, therefore, is not to absolve the gender problematics because of structuralism, but rather to show how structuralism participates in the construction of gender. To provide a quick example, these books tend to rely on essentialist notions of man and woman. Consider Michael Vermesh’s foreword to Greg Wolfe’s *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup*:

Men deal with problems differently than women, a fact that dates all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. While both Adam and Eve ate the fruit of knowledge, it was Eve who asked the serpent some questions first, whereas Adam simply took it from her on good faith. This is not to say that men are more superficial or ignorant than women. They simply believe that asking questions shows weakness. This is why they don’t like asking for directions, but will gladly use their GPS.

(2010, p. vii)

Obviously, scholars trained in gender studies can and likely will point out a host of problems with this idea that men and women are essentially different. Indeed, we tend to speak of an example such as this as problematic, and then move to highlight the various problematic features. However, as Emily Hind refreshingly noted, “Lest you think my binary approach outdated, I encourage you to contemplate the experience of pregnancy, as I certainly have over the last nine months” (2019, p. 3). I would imagine that not only does pregnancy invoke this binary, but so too does infertility, and these memoirs which are written by men for other men, men like them, certainly show and work with the binary. In the previous chapter, I showed how the novel, *The Trouble with Joe*, managed to reaffirm Joe’s masculinity throughout, and in the same way, these memoirs are similar. They reinforce the idea that even if a man is reading a memoir, let alone a memoir about infertility, he is, like the author, still a man. The binary is important because it erases the possibility for these in-between figures, the not quite man.

Genres have rules. Unlike literary fiction, for instance, there are rules to genre fiction, things that must happen so that a book can qualify and fit

within a genre. The books I am considering are all memoirs and thus fit the broad category of autobiography and memoirs, books which are ostensibly about the author writing them. My focus is on a narrow subset, namely memoirs that focus on and speak to men's experience of infertility, and so, I am interested in what these books all do in the service of speaking to and about infertility. While my corpus is relatively small—so too are the numbers of memoirs on male infertility—my readings of them are in hopes of outlining “essential elements” that seem to appear in the genre, for instance, the above example of a binary, but also other elements. My language of “essential elements” is taken from Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Popular Romance Novel*, in which she outlined “eight narrative events that take a heroine in a romance novel from encumbered to free” (2003, p. 30).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in the memoirs under consideration, readers find a series of events that attest to a man's experience of infertility, for instance:

- 1 He will speak about how he came to learn of his infertility;
- 2 There will be a discussion of the medicalization of infertility, for example, discussing bodily functions and dysfunctions;
- 3 He will address “the room” in which he produces his specimen;
- 4 He will speak about the tolls on the relationship;
- 5 There will be some discussion of manhood and masculinity, which inevitably will also be a discussion of fatherhood; and
- 6 He will eventually speak to a conclusion, in which a child has been born or the couple has resigned itself to childlessness.

These elements do not need to appear “in order,” that is, one can begin with the sixth element, successfully having a child, then move back to the beginning, and then over to the third element. That is, the author can “hopscotch” through these.

Unlike Regis, I am reluctant to speak in terms of the essential, because, as in pregnancy, accidents happen. That is, it is possible for a genre to defy the imposed limits while still maintaining a relationship to the genre. I am not trying here to be a purist and suggest that if a memoir fails to mention “the room,” for instance, that it fails as a memoir about men's infertility. To provide an example, in some memoirs, we find militaristic metaphors in which men wage a battle against infertility. I do not think this essential, but it certainly is common. The same also holds true for the role of humour in these memoirs; in some cases, the books are intended to be humorous, in others, there is a more serious tone. Humour becomes a space for grappling with things that are extraordinarily complex, such as infertility, and betray a sense of vulnerability, and is often found in men's discussions of health and health crises.<sup>2</sup>

One of the first features of the genre is a discussion of how one comes to learn about infertility. This discussion usually commences with an even



earlier discussion, wherein the husband and wife (or partners) decide they want to have children:

When my wife, Julie, and I got married in 2002, we were a couple of young crazy kids (well, thirty—but still crazy) and felt that even though a family was definitely in our future, it might be fun just to be a couple for a while

(Wolfe 2010, p. xii).

In this moment, Wolfe imagines that the future will be oriented towards the family, that is, fertility is something that can be put off, at least for a bit. He then explains:

Thus we came to the momentous decision that it was time to have children. Of course we made a big deal about it to our family and friends. 'So, you're ready to be grandparents?' 'Hey can we count on your to babysit' 'Hope your sofa is vomit-proof!' And then we tried. And tried. And tried. For a year. Then two.

(2010, pp. xii–xiii)

Similarly, in Miller's *Maybe Baby*, the discussion focuses on the failure of trying to have a baby. Miller explains, "we were finally, after years of safety and prevention, having sex for the sake of sex's ultimate utility. Little had changed, however, except for the sixteen days over the course of sixteen months that began with bleeding and ended with disappointment" (2008, p. 9). In both of these instances, the recognition is fairly quick, that is, the couple has tried and failed to conceive, and thus is infertile.

Infertility is, in many ways, an affective space rich with complexity and nuance, feelings are not singular, but are often mixed. To be infertile is to confront dashed hopes, to be threatened by impossible futures, and to feel the shame of being infertile. As such, and unsurprisingly, embedded within these narratives, readers often find quite a bit of affective language (Miller, for instance, speaks of disappointment). Likewise, there is often a shock attached to this aspect of the narrative; Mark Cossey writes:

We never imagined it would require anything else to make those two things happen except us. We just assumed we would get pregnant normally. I didn't actually know what that meant, but that was all right because I was the man, and to kick off a 'normal' pregnancy I only had to get one thing right. My role could be summed up with two simple words: deliver sperm.

(2013, pp. 24–25)

In this example, then, Mark is shocked or at least surprised when he and his partner are unable to conceive—after all, it is so normal, all he has to do is

“deliver sperm.” In this brief passage, the word “normal” is repeated. There is an inherent sense of abnormality in being unable to “deliver sperm.” Of course, even one with low sperm quality is still “delivering sperm.”

This leads to the second generic features, the medicalization of infertility. This section of the memoir may have an accidental feature as well, namely the fear of the seeking out medical attention, which is the case in Cossey's memoir. There are challenges seeking out this medical care in Cossey's memoir because it is dependent upon a public health system, and they have to prove themselves ready and capable for a child while also having filled the necessary demands of being infertile long enough to warrant assistance:

‘We're lying,’ I nodded, lowering my face. The relief of a condemned man flowed through me. ‘We haven't been trying for two years, we've only been at it for twenty months!’

‘Nineteen and a half,’ Martha sniffed.

‘Nineteen and a half,’ I agreed.

The doctor stared at us. It hadn't turned out well, our plan. The truth was we were never up to the job. We were the worst liars in the world. We would often confess before anyone even suggested we'd done something wrong. We would admit to things that we hadn't done, such as the fear that we might inadvertently be lying.

(p. 96)

This moment is telling because it speaks to the urgency a couple feels to become pregnant, especially as the spectre of the 40s is on the rise. The medical world speaks of—or at least it did—pregnancy after the age of 35 as “geriatric,” a fact that amused, if not distressed, my wife. There are risks that are attached to these “geriatric” pregnancies, and worst of all, they point quite loudly towards the finality of the reproductive years. Months seem like years. Enmeshed within this temporal dimension, of course, is the anxiety, the hope, the disappointment of the experience of infertility—it is as if the time compounds the affective experience.

In another example, the onset of medicalization is nearly immediate, in *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup*, Wolfe writes:

Well, if you're trying to have a child, especially through infertility treatments, you'd better remember, and fast. Over the coming days, weeks, and months you'll be hearing so much about zygotes, blastocysts, ova, spermatozoa, etc., that you'll want to pull off your own ear and give'em to the dogs as chew toys. Face it. You need a refresher course.

(2010, p. 8)

In what do you need a refresher course? Basic biology. None of this feels all that basic but in *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup*, Wolfe introduces his reader in the second chapter to the language that he will hear, over and over again, as he attends to infertility. Most men recognize that sperm and

semen are similar, but the sperm refers to the cell, the semen to the collection of sperm cells, ejaculate what it expelled from the penis through ejaculation, and so on. But what of words not used in common discourse, such as these narrower terms like zygotes and blastocysts? The point for Wolfe is to give readers the tools to understand how infertility and reproduction are more than just a matter of “an easy enough recipe: take one man, add one woman, shake vigorously, let sit for nine months, and voila” (p. 2).

One thing that I would almost suggest is universal, but cautiously I will hasten to do so, is that these memoirs speak about “the room,” which will also be the subject of the following chapter. Cossey’s *Trying* opens in the room, or rather, on the way to the room:

‘Here again, Mr. Cossey?’ asked the young Spanish embryologist, shooting me a welcoming smile as I followed him down the corridor. He had recognised me by sight and that wasn’t good. I was now the one thing you don’t want to be in a fertility clinic.

A regular.

(2013, p. 7)

Cossey’s memoir, as is also the case with Wolfe’s memoir, is humorous, trying to find the fun in a seemingly depressing situation. He jokes about the challenges, and this is a way to invite the reader into the journey. It is about humanizing the process that seemingly feels so dehumanizing. He continues:

We stopped outside a door. There was no sign, but I knew what lay behind that beech veneer. Every man who has ever gone down the road of a medically assisted pregnancy knows. It didn’t need a name and anyway what would you call it? A masturbatory? The ejaculatum? [...] The spartan table and chair assumed that any man can and will achieve orgasm under any conditions short of a sustained artillery assault.

(Cossey 2013, pp. 9–10)

The room is where he proves his manhood, as Johnson (2010) might have suggested. Ejaculation is an imperative that proves hegemonic masculinity, but of course already being in the room speaks to a problem, a failure of sorts, and now the room will challenge one even further for he must “conjure up an erection” (Cossey 2013, p. 10) and produce a viable specimen. Wolfe similarly describes this scene:

It may vary from place to place, but at my clinic, I found myself standing outside of a small 6 x 7 foot exam room, which was lit by bright medical fluorescent bulbs and furnished with a paper sheet-covered chair in the middle of the floor and a 12” TV/DVD combo on the sink. Wow. Talk about a letdown.

(2010, p. 119)

The question of pornography or erotic material is almost always central to the descriptions of the room: “finally he pointed to a black folder resting on the side table. ‘The magazines,’ he announced” (Cossey, p. 12). This point is particularly interesting because it opens a host of ethical questions for these clinics, for instance, Timothy F. Murphy asks: “should fertility clinics divest themselves of pornography?” (2016). Murphy, however, is not alone. An editorial in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* considered the use of “erotica in government-funded health service clinics” (2011). These articles are engaging with questions about the apparent harms of pornography and if, by providing patrons with pornography, these agencies are complicit in the harms. In Pete Roscoe’s *Man Up to Infertility*, the room makes its appearance and becomes a stumbling block for the Christian man:

I’ll be blunt, producing a ‘sample’ on demand into a plastic pot in a dingy hospital room whilst avoiding looking at the ‘adult’ magazines ‘helpfully’ provided by the hospital and then handing it to a lab technician wasn’t the greatest moment of my life.

(2020, p. 18)

For Roscoe, then, the pornography is not welcome nor is it helpful; instead, it is something to be avoided. When the room is represented in film, the subject of the next chapter, the images of pornography are often quite mainstream, that is, they are magazines like *Playboy* or *Penthouse*. This is an interesting challenge in some ways because the purpose here is to secure a viable sample, and in the case of Cossey and Wolfe, even with the erotic material there seems to be little pleasure in the scene. This pornography is more of a technology than anything else; it hardly seems to be there for the purposes of entertainment, but rather serves the purpose of securing a sample.

Also common across these memoirs is an exploration of the tolls on the relationship, the feelings involved in being infertile, the real sense of frustrations and despair, and this is also often tied closely with the following feature, which braids together the question of manhood and masculinity. These men embark on a journey that highlights a series of failures all of which seemingly call into question their masculinity, they are poor partners because they cannot sire children, they have failed as men, and so on. In many ways, this is where these memoirs become most compelling because they reflect on the ways in which so many variables intersect with one another; the relationship is affected because the husband or partner is conflicted about his sense of gender, which, of course, is always already relational. It is almost as if the exam room, the cup, and the pornography distills down to this feeling of failure in the masculine expectation of procreation. We are in the room because we cannot conceive (the doctor symbolizes a problem), we need the cup because we need to find out if there is something

wrong with the semen, the porn is needed to achieve the erection, and so on. Everything is facilitated and predicated on this seeming lack.

One of the striking features of many of these memoirs in thinking about the relationship is the ways in which sex becomes a kind of labour. Cossey explains, “for the first time ever we were planning our sex life to coincide with her ovulation” (p. 39), and he further laments, “suddenly sex had become a responsibility. Hopping into bed for a quickie had become like applying for a job, getting a mortgage, or sitting your A-levels. Except you had to do it naked. With an erection” (p. 46). The nature of the relationship changes because no longer is sex merely about intimacy and fun, but now it is about production and labour, and it is scheduled. In the world of fertility, sex becomes yet another kind of “domestic gulag,” to borrow Laura Kipnis’s evocative phrase from her book *Against Love*. Once more, lives are regulated and serve the greater economy, everything becomes measured by productivity. And this becomes a site of frustration and shame because time and again it seems to fail, and every 28 days, one is reminded of infertility. And this stress leads to the feature in which emotions, masculinity, manhood, and fatherhood come to the fore.

Wolfe devotes a full chapter to the myth that “real men don’t cry,” and notes that “we’re not supposed to show emotions like sadness or depression or guilt” (2010, p. 124), only to then explain:

Unfortunately for so many of us in the world of fertility treatments, we know that not only are those feelings real, but they tend to hang out and rattle around our heads 24/7 like those crappy beaded curtains in the back of a customized 1970s van. What you have to do is learn how to deal with what you’re feeling, and how not to let it ruin what should be the most important time in your and your wife’s lives.

(p. 125)

Unsurprisingly, this is no easy task; the failures of infertility are overwhelming and what is so striking about this is how masculinity comes into play. Wolfe explains, “at the risk of sounding crude, let me start out this section saying that throughout my premarried dating life, I was always proud that I never once accidentally got a girl pregnant” (p. 126). Indeed, while it is true that this may be crude, there is an important underlying truth here: Wolfe assumes, as most do, that they are potent, which is to say fertile. All of this leads him to reflect:

What made me feel worse was the fact that this was the one thing I figured I didn’t need to worry about. It seems simple enough: I’m a man; men get their wives pregnant and have babies. But then it turned out I couldn’t get my wife pregnant, at least not naturally, so what did that say about my manhood?

(p. 127)

This moment shows how these fourth and fifth features of the memoir quickly slip into one another. The depressing nature of infertility is compounded by the debates and questions about what this might mean about manhood. As much as theorists and scholars of gender have troubled gender, have argued it is not as significant as we hold it to be, it does seem that once we get to the reproductive questions, gender becomes, well, quite essential. It is no longer just a social construct; there is something that feels essential to it. Admittedly, of course, from the position of an outsider reading this, all of it is socially constructed, he feels less of a man because his idea of man is problematic, and it has been constructed for him. But even if that were logically true or even if one believes that to be true, how does one make sense of the feelings in that moment?

I do not think we should quickly dismiss this question as indicative of the greater problems of gender, but rather, we should think about these moments as real in the lives of the men experiencing these challenges. For Wolfe, as for many men, infertility does have something to say about their sense of manhood and masculinity. Hanna and Gough have noted that men describe their experiences of infertility as “the emotional rollercoaster” (2016, p. 368), which they understand as “useful means of conveying a person’s ‘emotional journey’ when they are sharing online and appears to hold social weight in communicating the ‘highs and lows’ of emotional experiences” (2016, p. 369). Indeed, in his memoir, Nathaniel uses the very phrase “emotional rollercoaster” to describe his experiences of fertility treatment (2016, p. 47). In their analysis of online forums, Hanna and Gough see men describing the diversity of emotions they feel over the course of their infertility journey, recognizing thus that “men are emotionally affected by infertility” (2016, p. 370). Again, this may seem obvious to most, but oftentimes, the obvious needs to be repeated and so often the memoirs speak to the emotions of infertility.

While Hanna and Gough and also the work of Scheibling and Rome focus on online communities, where perhaps there is a greater degree of anonymity, these memoirs speak from the position of authority and an author’s name boldly emblazoned on the cover of the book. In the case of *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup* and *Maybe Baby: An Infertile Love Story*, this anonymity is further removed by the author photographs that appear on the book. There might thus be a certain bravery in telling these stories because these men “continually challenge and re-create what masculinity means, as they navigate a subjugated position that makes their wounds visible” (Rome 2020, p. 3). The wounds here are not even necessarily visible wounds, but the invisible wounds, psychic wounds, of infertility.

In *Running on Empty*, L. Nathaniel has known that he was infertile for years, admitting that he has “faulty plumbing that meant that I cannot produce sperm. And this is something I’ve known since I was a young lad and my mother broached the subject as part of ‘the talk’” (2017, p. 1). Unlike

the other memoirs, his infertility did not seem to be a surprise, but rather was something he had known for a while. Even so, he admits:

I got really lost and confused at that point and had to accept that I would never understand why I was born this way or find a cure and that, fuck it, life was just too short to be missing out on all sorts of other things in the meantime. I decided I needed to start exploring the world and, through doing so, explore myself.

I was never very good with those messy things called feelings, though, particularly the difficult ones.

(p. 3)

While his memoir is quite distinct, the point here is that feelings play a role, even though he had known he was infertile. He goes and has a carefree life, free of the worries of children, and then gets married, “so there we were, homeowners married for about six months. That’s when we decided to try to have a child” (p. 27). He quickly moves through the medicalization of the event and the choosing of a sperm donor. This too, of course, brings up a host of emotions for men and has been documented in the sociological literature. But what is striking is that this narrative is not quick, as if a donor is found and problems are solved. The emotional turmoil continues and is compounded by, for instance, “how free some people feel to investigate the sex lives of others once they know that baby-making is on the agenda,” and everyone seems to offer “unsolicited comments” which causes Nathaniel to admit:

I had many hazy daydreamy moments of how I might best articulate a response to well-meaning but intrusive comments of friends and co-workers. Most of them included the phrase why don’t you fuck off or some slight linguistic variation thereof.

(p. 41)

Frustration and anger is expressed by Nathaniel and many of the men in the memoirs. The multitude of emotions that appears across these pages is rich and confounds many long-held ideas that men do not have emotions or do not want to talk. These men are both full of emotions and feelings—admitting how difficult they may be—and they are telling their stories of infertility. Time and again, we find examples like Nathaniel’s in which he admits, “there is so much that is out of your control. It can drive you crazy if you let it” (p. 81). Indeed, Cossey just exclaims: “how in the hell did anyone ever get pregnant?” (p. 35). These books show the emotional complexity compounded by the shifting nature of the desire for a baby in compelling ways. But each book also speaks to the goal: the baby.

The final feature, then, that I seek to highlight in this chapter is conclusion. Does each memoir end “happily” with a baby in hand? Have we, for

instance, moved from “the room” to “the delivery room?” In Wolfe’s case, we read, in the Afterword:

On March 21, 2009 at 4:21 PM, Connor Joseph Wolfe came into the world, and more importantly, into Julie’s and my life. As I watched the nurse put him down on the sterile table in the delivery room to clean him off, I saw him for the first time: He was small, wrinkled, semibald, and dripping with blood and mucus. In other words, he was gorgeous.

As I held him, it was hard to believe that the long, painful road that Julie and I had to travel in order to get to this point was over. All of the frustration, the anger, the doctors, the shots, the disappointments—they all seemed to disappear from our memories, only to be replaced with ... this baby. Our son.

(p. 211)

For Wolfe and his wife, the story ends happily, and like many parents, they seem to forget the struggles, a kind of post-partum amnesia, because all the struggles now seem to have been worth it and he can begin “the long, painful road of parenthood” (p. 211). Wolfe’s story, thus, ends happily. As readers, we have struggled along with him as he worked his way through infertility and all the struggles, all the pain, all the frustration was worth it and all seemed to disappear once his baby arrived.

Likewise, in the Epilogue to *Trying*, Cossey tells us about the birth of his son Jimmy and all the hilarious missteps that happened as they worked their way to the hospital: “thirty-six weeks later, on Jimmy’s due date, Martha and I were in an ambulance getting lost” (p. 279). Following the birth of their son, who was born in the caul, Cossey explains, “I looked down at my boy, his eyes shut, his lips puckering, his whole body unsure of itself” (p. 287) and Martha shortly after says, “You know what? [...] We need another baby” (p. 287). And Cossey concludes the memoir:

I looked down at Jimmy. I realised, in the cool hospital air, with my wife and son asleep, that things weren’t over at all. That what we’d been through was nothing compared to what was to come. Martha was right; the little baby I was holding would need a partner in crime, a companion on life’s journey, and his parents would do anything to make that happen. Soon, we were going to have to go through it all again.

And so we did.

(p. 287)

As with Wolfe’s memoir, readers are provided a “happily ever after” ending, and in the case of Cossey’s memoir, the future points towards a second child, “and so we did.”



In *Maybe Baby*, the conclusion is less happy; there are resolutions, but not the resolutions we might expect:

For those craving a happy-ending fix, I'm proud to offer you three: Constance and I are still madly in love, Susan was pronounced cancer-free, and Krista and her family are holding each other closer than ever. Baby remains elusive, but we continue down the line.

(p. 289)

While other narrative events have been resolved, indeed happily, the overarching purpose for the memoir, the baby, remains "elusive." And the memoir closes with a shift in the life to a new doctor, and Miller explains:

It remains a comfort to know the chances are higher and that now we are in an environment noted for getting the job done. What I didn't expect, however, was to be comforted by a more passive decision-making role for the time being. IVF is on its way, and maybe baby, but the journey is no longer totally in our hands. We are 'Barren Miss Daisy,' and I'm enjoying the view from the backseat, even if we're still driving in that same straight line.

(p. 293)

In *Maybe Baby*, then, we do not get the happily ever after ending that we found in *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup* and *Trying*, but there is still a satisfying and optimistic ending. They continue to try to have a baby, but recognize that they are not in control, and new processes are begun.

When thinking about the contours of the genre, I spoke about accidents or what some might call deviations from the genre; one of these may well be about audience, that is, for whom the memoir is intended. In some cases, the book seems to be written for fellow men:

For some of us, it's all about continuing the family name. For others, it's about leaving a legacy in this world that will endure long after we're gone. Or hey, maybe you just want someone to help with the yard work. Regardless of the reason, once we get the idea in our heads to be a daddy, there's nothing we won't endure in order to reproduce.

(Wolfe 2010, p. xi)

In Wolfe's *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup*, the intended audience is clearly men. Indeed, "we" are interpolated into the narrative, "for some of us," "once we get the idea," and so on. Rhetorically, this may well be a smart strategy because the reader quickly forms a bond with the author/narrator. The reader may think: he, the author, is like me, we share a common experience. There is a kind of homosocial reading practice, recalling

that “homosociality refers to social bonds between persons of the same sex” (Flood 2008, p. 341). Masculinity scholars have long been interested in homosociality because, according to some, there are “powerful links between homosociality and masculinity: men’s lives are said to be highly organized by relations *between men*” (Flood 2008, p. 341, emphasis in original). In some instances, this has been read as being about “dominance bonding” (Farr 1988), men centralizing power around men, or about a rivalry between men, as is the case in Sedgwick’s theorization (1985), which is also about power, but I would suspect that homosociality is a great deal more complicated and nuanced. That is, there are times when homosociality is not about dominance, or at least not just about dominance, and more about forming a relationship over a shared experience, such as infertility. In these books, then, though these men may never meet in real life, they meet over the words on the page. They speak to one another with winks and nods, “maybe you just want someone to help with the yard work” (Wolfe 2010, p. xi).

These memoirs are fascinating documents about how these men come to terms with their infertility and how infertility affects their sense of self. As laudatory as these books are, indeed, as groundbreaking as they may be, I know that we can find problems with them. Truthfully, what scholar could not find a problem? This is the point of peer review, it seems, to find problems. This is the bread and butter of critical scholarship, finding a problem and exposing new ways of thinking about the problem, perhaps even offering a corrective. But as much as I recognize these problems, for instance, the gender essentialism that runs throughout these books, I want to be careful not to dismiss them out of hand because of these problems. To focus solely on the problem would be to miss the complexity of the narratives being told. My point would be that, of course, there are problems, but what else is there in the memoir? This position may be akin to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading, which requires that the reader:

...surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever take the reader by surprise: to a reparative reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones.

(1996, p. 279)

There is a lot to be said for a reparative approach not only to these memoirs, but also to masculinities. At times, it seems that so much of the work in critical studies of men and masculinities begins with the a priori assumptions, for instance, hegemonic masculinity, and then all masculinity is read through that lens. But what about those moments that just don’t fit? I would suggest that while there are undoubtedly problems, there is also something beneficial to these books. They refocus the attention on infertility, they

admit that men too can and do live with infertility, and they may perhaps also enable us to understand men's experiences of infertility. This need not mean, though it does run the risk of, recentring men, but, perhaps, if more men spoke about infertility as freely and courageously as these men do, just maybe, there would be greater involvement of men in the procreative realm, particularly regarding infertility treatment.

## Notes

- 1 Catherine Roach likewise makes use of the phrase "essential elements" in her book *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. In her work, Roach introduces *nine* elements that are common to the popular romance novel; her work, while structurally informed, is also deeply invested in a sex-positive reading of the popular romance novel. *One* of her "essential elements" becomes "great sex" (p. 21, p. 25).
- 2 For a larger discussion of men's health and humour, see Branney *et al.* (2014); Chapple and Ziebland (2004); Erentzen *et al.* (2018); Mocarski and Butler (2016); Oliffe *et al.* (2009); Williams (2009).

## 6 The Money Shot Transformed Masculinity, Ejaculation, and the Clinic

On March 11, 2017, *The New York Times* called attention to the declining quality and quantity of sperm in the average human ejaculate. The headline ominously reads “Are your sperm in trouble?” and the writer, Nicholas Kristof, concludes—almost fatalistically—that “our human future will only be as healthy as our human sperm.” Truth be told, anxieties surrounding sperm quality are not new, and we have witnessed ongoing discussions about the declining quality of sperm. Indeed, as I am writing this article, *CNN* has reported on the “alarming drop in sperm count,” and noted that more studies are needed (Alukal, 2017). Likewise, *Newsweek* asked, “Does a Declining Sperm Count Spell the End of Humanity?” (Bailey, 2017). As a scholar of men and masculinities, I am interested in these narratives precisely because of what they are saying about men and sexuality, particularly in the quantifiable space of the clinic, which is able to measure sperm quality. These narratives, moreover, highlight cultural anxieties not only about men, but also, and importantly, sperm, and by extension, the future. While much has been written on the “crisis of masculinity,” in these instances the crisis moves to the microscope, the seminal. In particular, this chapter is interested in asking: how does a seminal crisis or anxiety tie to infertility and masculinity more generally? While seemingly obvious, this chapter sets out to consider the anxiety around the power and ability of the sperm cell, something that was addressed as well in the study of memoirs in the previous chapter. Semen is an extension of the man, emotions are the extension tied to semen and masculinity, and all of this is tied to the idea of a masculinity made unstable by the framework of procreative duties.

Semen has long been and is once more becoming an interesting and important barometer of men and masculinity, especially in relation to men’s reproductive and sexual health. Consider the following example: Dr. Alex Shand analysed a “UK-based consumer health website,” paying particular attention to the kinds of questions asked by consumers. Shand found over the three-month sample that “approximately 10 per cent of questions submitted in the sample related to concerns regarding semen.” This sample consisted of 1,231 questions about semen, and “no specific topic came

anywhere near this figure”; for example, menstruation “was the subject of only 430 questions during that period” (2007, p. 242). Shand, thus, contends that “the preponderance of questions relating to semen can be regarded as an indication that semen anxiety is a surprisingly prevalent phenomenon” (2007, p. 247). Shand further argues:

While traditional understandings of masculinity are no longer dominant discourses within society, what constitutes “maleness” must be determined by individuals, and semen is seen as a potent symbol and so the male’s attention focuses on this fluid to provide a symbol of masculinity.

(2007, p. 248)

Semen anxiety and masculinity seemingly go hand-in-hand—after all, the sample consisted of over 1,000 questions about semen. There is much to discuss and think about with regard to semen, which is about much more than just mere ejaculation as a physiological reaction. In the analysis of these questions, Shand finds “three broad categories,” which include “the materiality of semen—its quality, colour or consistency; specific concerns relating to semen and masturbation; and questions relating to potency” (2007, p. 242). That is, semen takes on social, cultural, and psychological significance that scholars of men and masculinities will need to consider, especially now, given the growing anxieties about sperm quality. What might it mean for men and masculinity now that sperm are threatened, quickly becoming endangered? How does the decline of sperm quality affect men and conceptions of masculinity? Does the measurement of sperm become a new measurement of claims to virility and masculinity?

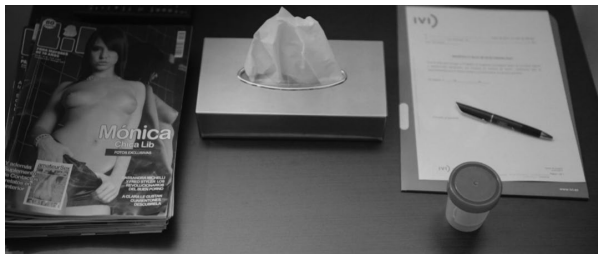
### Setting the Stage

I wish to begin this article with a brief analysis of a scene from the Spanish film *Embarazados* (2016). In this film, viewers are introduced to a couple having difficulty conceiving. This scenario, of course, is common enough; after all, there are many moments in popular culture that represent the difficulty of conceiving. Given their predicament—his sperm quality is described as “pocos, vagos, y anormales” (“few, vague, and abnormal”) as well as her being 37 and premenopausal—and after their consultation with a gynaecologist, Fran and Alina decide to take advantage of medical advances related to having a child, namely in vitro fertilization.

Before moving to the analysis of the film, I want to briefly highlight the research on Spain, reproductive sciences, and fertility and infertility. To date, the body of scholarship is relatively small. For instance, in terms of sperm banking, so far as I can tell, the research is incredibly limited. One study from 1980 notes that sperm banking began in Spain in 1977 (Marina 1980), in the post-Francoist era. By 2005, it became possible

for “women in a lesbian couple to participate in the pregnancy” due to the “rights of homosexual couples [being] equalized with those of heterosexual couples” (Marina *et al.* 2010, p. 938). Additionally, Spain, like many countries in the Global North, particularly the Nordic countries, which have been the sites of significant research, would seem to be anxious about declining sperm counts. In 2013, for instance, an article in *Andrology* noted that “total sperm count and sperm concentrations may have declined in young Spanish men over the last decade,” further noting that while “several studies have investigated temporal trends in semen quality in Northern Europe, [...] the current study is the first to examine this question in Southern Europe” (Mendiola *et al.* 2013, p. 411). Meanwhile, a study published in 2011 in *International Journal of Andrology*, of the same region, found that “young men from the Southern Spain have normal semen quality and reproductive hormone levels as expected in a population with low testicular cancer risk” (Fernandez *et al.* 2011, p. 8). Sperm counts, thus, are being studied in Spain, as in other nations and regions, and are testing a fairly common hypothesis that sperm counts in men are declining.

In one telling scene, the one to which I wish to devote attention, the protagonist, Fran, goes to the clinic to “deliver” his sperm. Throughout this scene, viewers are afforded much comic relief. If one thing is clear about the clinical space, premature ejaculation is never the problem, as viewers shall see; and indeed, one study notes the median time to ejaculation in the clinical setting is ten minutes, with a range of 2–35 minutes (Elzanaty 2008, p. 884). Perhaps it is too clinical, too sterile, but for all the anxiety about premature ejaculation in the erotic space of the bedroom or hotel, this anxiety never seems to be manifested in the clinical setting. The setting includes the requisite materials; viewers see pornographic materials, the Spanish magazine *Lib* (seemingly akin to *Playboy* or similar), tissues, a specimen bottle, and the contract between the client and the clinic. Everything in this scene is very precise, ordered, and organized, almost as if antithetically positioned in relation to the hectic nature of the orgasm.



Still, *Embarazados* (2016)

Fran struggles to achieve climax despite the availability of pornographic texts, which are seemingly so central to this clinical setting (Crawshaw *et al.* 2007; Handelsman *et al.* 2013; Murphy 2016; Wylie and Pacey 2011). The pornographic texts are there to assist in the procurement of semen, which, in the sperm bank setting, is most often collected by way of masturbation. Pornographic texts, then, are provided as an incentive for Fran, a way to arouse him. When these do not work, he frantically searches his phone for a sexual image Alina had sent him after he sent her a photograph of the clinical space and its pornography. He masturbates furiously. The lights go out. He has trouble opening the bottle as he races towards climax. Finally, after all of this, he deposits his sample into the specimen bottle, which he then takes to the nurse. On the table is a pen and a consent form, and an open pornographic magazine.



Still, *Embarazados* (2016)

The nurse admits that it might be difficult to get a viable sample from such a small deposit and he laments the difficulty of the situation. The cup isn't big enough. Aiming is difficult. While we certainly can laugh at this scene, we can, as this chapter will argue, also see this as a kind of rewriting of the pornographic money shot. We see his ejaculate in the cup. This scene is striking because there is an assumption, in a sense, that ejaculation should be easy—how hard can masturbation be? What this scene demonstrates, however, is how heavily regulated ejaculation has become in our age.

I am drawing on this scene in a fashion similar to how Henry Bond speaks of crime scenes in his book *Lacan at the Scene*. Crime scenes “are frequently depicted across the formats of the mass media, but rarely—for the majority—is such a place ever actually experienced” (2009, p. 11). Most viewers may never experience this particular clinical space—the sperm bank or fertility clinic—in which ejaculation is required, but the scenes are readily available across a variety of media, for instance, *Will & Grace* (2002), *The Golden Girls* (1989), *Road Trip* (2000), *Ted 2* (2015), *Family Guy* (2017), and *Queer as Folk* (2003) all included scenes involving sperm banks, which is to say nothing of the various jokes and cartoons that appear across print media or the scenes of sperm banks that appear in books

and memoirs written for a popular audience about infertility. The media has enabled us to have a sense of what happens in these spaces—and this was captured in the discussion of memoirs, for instance, wherein each and every memoir mentioned “the room.” These scenes, I would contend, speak to sociocultural anxieties surrounding this particular clinical space and ejaculation—even if the scene from *Embarazados* is imagined as a kind of joke—that is, we are encouraged to laugh at all the mishaps throughout the scene—we will recall that Freud thought of the obscene joke as having “the purpose of exposure” (8:97). The exposure here is not just Fran’s exposure, but the potential exposure of any and every man who enters this space, especially given the prolific number of jokes and stories told about these spaces.

I begin with this scene from *Embarazados* because it highlights so much in such a short space. This scene, the one in which he produces the sample, lasts about 40 seconds; the trip to the fertility clinic (including the sample) is about two and half minutes. The scene brings about, quite clearly, the intersections of pornography and the clinic—it is all there on the table: pornography and a specimen bottle. In the remainder of the chapter, then, I will argue that thinking about ejaculation and masculinity needs to be conceptualized in relation to the “pharmacopornographic” era, which refers to “the processes of a bio-molecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) government of sexual subjectivity—of which ‘the pill’ and *Playboy* are two paradigmatic offspring” (Preciado 2008, pp. 107–108). For Preciado, one central example of the pharmacopornographic is how “a heterosexual couple will turn to in vitro insemination after discovering the male of the couple cannot produce sufficient mobile spermatozooids to fertilize the ovule of his partner” (2008, p. 114). The clinic then, I would argue, brings together the “bio-molecular” by way of the sperm, which is achieved through the semiotic-technical realm of pornography. Accordingly, this scene allows for a reconsideration of the importance of ejaculation as both related to the pharmaco and to the pornographic. More particularly, I argue that this scene enables a rereading of the “money shot” and its new meanings. The “money shot” becomes less a pornographic spectacle and more a clinical spectacle, a test of masculinity and virility that will be quantified and analysed by scientists afterwards. While the money shot has typically been “proof positive of the viability of the working penis” (Karioris and Allan 2017, p. 254) in the pornographic imaginary, this chapter challenges that idea and suggests that the “money shot” becomes new when it is moved to the space of the clinic, where its “working” is measured and its performance and outcomes scrutinized.

### The Money Shot

The money shot has a long and significant history in pornography, and consequently it has become one of the most hotly debated aspects of critical



responses to pornography. In her agenda-setting, *Hard-Core: Power, Pleasures, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* film theorist Linda Williams notes that by 1977, "the necessity of showing external ejaculation of the penis as the ultimate climax" had become the "sine qua non of the hard-core feature-length narrative" (1989, p. 93). For 40 years, then, the money shot has been essential to the structure and the content of pornography, at least of the heterosexual varieties, and even today, in a digital age where pornography is most readily available online, and even at shorter lengths, the money shot remains ubiquitous.<sup>1</sup> Ejaculation functions as the dénouement of the pornographic scene, perhaps serving a structural purpose, but also, and beyond this, is proof of the actor's orgasm. The money shot is "the visible 'truth' of sexual pleasure" (Williams 1989, p. 50). Likewise, for sociologist Lisa Jean Moore, the money shot is about the "material reality that confirms men's pleasure" (2007, pp. 72–73).

Pornography fetishizes semen, and perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the money shot. Nearly every form of heterosexual and male pornography represents semen and ejaculation. In contemporary pornographies, then, the money shot need not be on the face or abdomen, but also via the "cream pie" or even in the more extreme (not in a morally loaded sense, but in an excessive sense) varieties, the *bukkake*, which is a "predominantly heterosexual act where one or more men excessively ejaculate onto a woman's (or, in a minority of instances, a man's) face or body" (Moore 2014a, p. 29). Semen, in pornography, then, is central to men's identities and to viewer's conceptions of men and masculinity. At bottom, ejaculation is the "irresistible juncture where significance, pleasure, and masculinity are united" (Aydemir, p. 93).

The money shot, of course, is not without critique. Some scholars have argued that the money shot is inherently violent and is "about male dominance and female degradation" (Sun *et al.* 2016, p. 16). Such a perspective, however, fails to account for the shifting nature of the pornographic money shot in queer and trans\* pornographies, wherein a money shot may be found, but its meaning and its form have shifted radically. Linda Williams, for instance, while reflecting on Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009) admits that:

one of the most striking findings of this book is that the most long-standing trope of visible male pleasure—the ubiquitous convention of the money shot—is no longer necessary in a subgenre whose fantasy is the invisible 'breeding' of a virus<sup>2</sup>.

(2014, p. 31)

But if the visible sign of the money shot is no longer central, semen and ejaculate still remain essential, and this is made all the more recognizable in the language of "breeding," which refers to the transmission of HIV. The invisible money shot is about breeding, mimicking the language of

reproduction. The invisible money shot still matters, and knowing and imagining all of these possibilities are important. Thus, Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy* allows for yet another example in which the money shot is being rewritten and used in different ways, and moreover is attached to both the biomolecular realm of the pharmaco and the pornographic. In this chapter, this notion of "breeding" will become less metaphorical, as it is in Dean's work, and much more "real," insofar as "breeding" is the goal of the money shot. What is common across all of these is the idea that there is "significant value to be found in the money shot" (Karioris and Allan 2017, p. 254).

In the money shot, then, we see the ways in which ejaculation is central to men's pleasure and sexuality. What remains inconsistent throughout, however, is the role of ejaculate as progenitor, whether it be the absence of that possibility (e.g., the money shot on the sexual partner's body) or the visual absence of the sign, for instance, the breeding potential and fantasy in gay male pornographies. And moreover, there is likely a third space in which we move from the absent to the present, for instance, in the "cream pie" pornographies, which "focuses on heterosexual intercourse in a way that it usually happens in everyday life, eschewing hard core's convention of the money shot in favor of other forms of verisimilitude" (Dean 2009, p. 170), which in many ways recalls Linda Williams question in *Screening Sex*, "how natural, after all, is the money shot?" (2008, p. 143).

## The Money Shot Transformed

The money shot takes on new meanings in the space of the clinic and the "reproduction industry" (Preciado 2013, p. 51). The money shot remains essential to the scene, wherein the man, in the case of *Embarazados*, Fran, has to produce ejaculate. He struggles over the course of the scene. The pleasure of masturbation is seemingly gone in pursuit of producing a viable sample. The money shot, then, while present, has shifted in its meanings. This money shot is no longer *just* about sexual pleasure, but, instead, about reproductive potential. I am suggesting here that pleasure may be involved, and in a way, the pornography works to do that. The pornography reminds the user of the pleasure involved. Despite being an act towards reproduction, and thereby more utilitarian than pleasurable, there is still a degree of being pregnant with pleasure. The collection room becomes the nexus of work and pleasure.

I am not the first to draw on the idea of the money shot in relation to the "reproduction industry" (Preciado 2013, p. 51). Stine Willum Adrian, for instance, in a study of sperm banks draws on Williams's work. Adrian discusses a moment in ethnographic work:

A secretary followed me to the meeting room where I could hang my jacket. In the room was a white board with a rather large drawing of an erect penis ejaculating into a test tube. The employee showing me

around seemed both embarrassed and amused by the drawing. Since I had not expected to see any sexualized pictures of the donors, I was very surprised to the penis, and started to giggle with her.

(2010, p. 397)

This drawing, we are told:

was a sketch for a big marketing display that they were considering making. The penis would be made out of neon lights, and go from non-erect to erect form, with flickering lights representing the ejaculated semen flowing into the test tube.

(p. 397)

For Adrian, then, one can read “the picture as a continuous ‘money shot,’ a hardcore pornographic story indulging in the visualization of the erect penis and the sperm” (p. 397). And in reading the lamp this way, “the sperm may not only be seen as money, or a commodity, but also as a sign of masculinity, virility or as a valuable surplus sexual byproduct” (p. 398). For Adrian, then, the lamp is pornographic, a representation of the money shot. What I would suggest is that if this is a money shot, it is a money shot transformed. It is serving a very distinct purpose removed from the normal pornographic money shot.

In his book *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup: A Guy's Guide to the World of Infertility*, Greg Wolfe speaks about a similar scene to the one found in *Embarazados*:

So it all comes down to this. You're in “The Room,” a plastic cup in one hand, an erotic (yet tasteful) men's magazine in the other. On the other side of the door, a whole room full of highly trained medical professionals (oh, and your wife too), all of them just...*waiting*.

(2010, p. 110)

The clinical space, which speaks to the medicalization of our bodies, also includes, as an incentive, pornography or erotic materials to assist in the man's ability to “make love to a plastic cup.” The pornography is seemingly essential to the scene as if it is the pornography that reminds the man of the pleasures involved in ejaculation, even though, of course, as Wolfe notes, there is “a whole room of highly trained medical professionals [...] waiting” (p. 110). There is an anxiety at play here and it is predicated on expectation. The man is expected to be virile, to be aroused (to be able to become aroused indeed), to complete the act in an appropriate measure of time (how much time is given to produce a specimen?) with a money shot placed directly and entirely into the plastic cup (the same kind of cup used for a urine sample). All of this converges around the penis, which is a kind of ultimate signifier of virility and masculinity.

Of course, pornography does not exist merely for pleasure in this instance; instead, it serves a biomedical function, that is, assistance in ejaculation. Preciado has noted that:

There is no pornography without a parallel surveillance and control of the body's affects and fluids. Acting on this pharmacoporno body are the forces of the reproduction industry, entailing control of the production of eggs, techniques of programming relationships, straw collections of sperm, in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, the monitoring of pregnancy, the technical planning of childbirth, and so on.

(2013, p. 51)

The rise of IVF and other biopolitical technologies thus participate in the transformation of the money shot, wherein the money is taking on new meanings because the ejaculate is used for new purposes. The pornographic, which flirts with the procreative, denies it. In the clinical space, this money shot, a hallmark of pornography, becomes entirely embedded in discourses of pregnancy, reproductivity, and futurity. The money shot is no longer merely about pleasure, but instead is central to the pharmacoporno body, which is to say, it can be measured, treated, and pathologized.

In arguing that the money shot has been transformed, I am also arguing that we need to think about the "wider socio-historical context of the 'meaning' of male bodies in the history of reproduction" (Kampf 2012, p. 21). Accordingly, we should think not just about male bodies, but also about what the body can and cannot do. As Raewyn Connell reminds us, "bodies, in their own right as bodies, do matter. They age, they get sick, enjoy, engender, give birth. There is an irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice; the sweat cannot be excluded" (2005, p. 51). Indeed, I agree with Connell that we need to recognize "the materiality of the body matters, not just as a template for social masculinity, but as a referent for the configuration of social practices defined to masculinity" (2001, p. 59). In the case of the money shot, this is precisely what is being called into question, not just the ejaculate itself, but the ways in which it functions as a "referent for the configuration of social practices defined to masculinity" (2001, p. 59). The pornographic money shot undoubtedly speaks to masculinity, but so too does this money shot that happens in the clinical setting, a setting which openly admits that the body, and perhaps by extension, masculinity, has failed in one sense or another. Put another way, what does it mean to be able to fulfil what Michael Johnson has called the "ejaculation imperative" (2010, p. 245), but unable to reproduce? Johnson argues:

The "ejaculation imperative" works to support idealized hegemonic masculinity by confirming the legitimacy of sexual adequacy identified

through male genitalia. Performing the “mission” of sexual virility and adequacy is furthered by the “ejaculation imperative” by perpetuating male dominance operating within the sexual realm, in which men have a hierarchical position of supremacy.

(2010, p. 245)

This perspective may work well within the framework of sexuality, but what of the procreative realm? Johnson’s model is one that imagines that ejaculation is enough. Ejaculation, in the case of infertility, may not be the problem, but rather the problem may be found in the ejaculate. It is for this reason that I am arguing that we need to think about the transformation of the money shot, which takes on a very different set of meanings based on the intention behind them and the location in which the money shot unfolds.

This clinical setting is not the first time we see the transformation of the money shot. Historically, for instance, we see transformations if we consider how sperm was collected for the purposes of analysis. Antje Kampf notes in a study on Germany:

In the 19th century, the major method of acquiring sample sperm was through *coitus interruptus*; masturbation was considered both morally improper and medically dangerous, as it was thought to lead to a loss in the “spermatic economy.” In some cases, sperm was retrieved after sex by a doctor who cleared the female uterine cervix.

(2012, p. 28)

Such an approach today may well seem entirely strange and unnecessary; after all, masturbation has largely been normalized, and it has been removed from the *Diagnostic Statistics Manual*. However, as Marcia C. Inhorn (2007) noted in her study of IVF in the Muslim world, anxieties remain about masturbation.

The challenge is the expectation that anyone can masturbate at will, become sufficiently aroused, and achieve ejaculation. Such an imagining assumes that all men masturbate and are comfortable with masturbation regardless of setting. The universality of masturbation is a challenge precisely because it fails to imagine, for instance, the role of culture and religion as well and, perhaps more pressingly, questions of privacy and masculinity. Inhorn, for instance, has spoken about “performance anxieties in the IVF clinic” (2007, p. 44). While it might be tempting to dismiss these anxieties, I would argue that this would fail to account for and understand the psychological complexity of this setting, which, in the case of Inhorn’s study, is also deeply attached to religion; as one doctor noted, “masturbation is not seen as a good thing in the Muslim world” (2007, p. 44). Moreover, there is an assumption that masturbation is not marked by shame and guilt,

for instance. We know that even testicular exams, which barely mimic the masturbatory but rely on “self-touching” (Inhorn 2007, p. 38), are sites of shame for some men (Ugurlu *et al.* 2011).

### The Clinic

In what remains, I wish to dwell on the clinical space and masturbation. I am arguing, as I have throughout, that the metaphor of the money shot is important because it recognizes the complexity with which men are confronted by the conflation of fertility and sexuality, which “involv[es] self-touching through time-sensitive, masturbatory ejaculation of semen into a plastic cup” (Inhorn 2007, p. 38). This scene is a site of conflicted identities and is riddled with anxiety.

The clinic, thus, brings together the pornography and the reproductive by way of the money shot and, perhaps more importantly, because we can begin to recognize the ways in which masturbation is mediated by and through the “technology of sex” (Garlick 2016, p. 132). In this clinical setting, we are able to think about the connections between the auto-erotic body and the pornographic body alongside the reproductive and medicalized body. Steve Garlick writes that “within the pornographic scene itself, men tend to operate as though they were machines, displaying chemically enhanced bodies and superhuman feats of stamina” (2016, p. 132). I am fascinated here by the way in which Garlick frames the male body as a machine, in a fashion similar to Rosi Braidotti, who has theorized the mother’s body as a machine (1994). In other words, the scene is, like the scene of reproduction, a series of repetitions. At the end of the pornographic scene, as in the clinical scene, we are confronted by the money shot, the demand for ejaculation, and that ejaculation is made visible. Garlick writes:

The imperative of visibility dictates the need for a manually assisted ejaculation, and the mirroring of masturbation between performer and viewer marks the climax of the action in a way that draws together the production and consumption of porn. It is unquestionably a moment when masculinity is at stake, not least insofar as semen has long been considered the essence of manhood.

(2016, p. 133)

However, unlike the pornographic scene, following the money shot, the semen will be analysed, it will be evaluated, and it will be adjudicated and regulated. Indeed, if we recall the scene that opened this chapter, the first thing that Fran does is deliver his specimen to a nurse, who notes that it will be difficult to get a sample from such a small amount.

In the clinical setting, then, unlike pornography, the money shot is not the end of the scene, but rather the scene continues and the semen

is analysed further and further, upon which a man will learn the quality assessment of his sample. Many men will never know this information; after all, what would the use of knowing this be outside of the procreative realm? Mohr and Hoeyer explain that while “semen analysis has become a science” (2018, p. 10), it must also be admitted that:

this scientific expertise is plagued by uncertainties: how many sperm cells need to be positively evaluated in order for a man to be classified as fertile? How much semen fluid needs to be tested in order to give a valid answer? How motile is motile enough for ‘normal’ reproduction? Does a crooked tail or a ‘pretty’ head say anything about a sperm cell’s ability to merge with an egg cell?

(2018, p. 10)

Men who undergo semen analysis will learn the answers to these questions. The semen analysis will become a measure of one’s virility by way of reproductive capacity and potential. Simply, as Moore notes:

sperm counts as never before. Our culture is fascinated by sperm. The substance is more visible, more discussed, more researched than in previous centuries. But while knowledge about and access to sperm have grown, the substance itself has become more complicated.

(2007, p. 147)

Sperm counts in new ways that undoubtedly affects how one thinks about masculinity and virility, especially since “based on how their sperm is counted, some men are seen as more powerful, desirable, and masculine, and others are seen as disempowered, undesirable, and emasculated” (Moore 2007, p. 149). Such is the case for Fran, who has learned that his sperm are “pocos, vagos, y anormales” (“few, vague, and abnormal”).

The clinical space, in which ejaculation is essential, has rewritten ejaculation and its inseparability from masculinity, as Michael Johnson has contended (2010), and in so doing, masculinity is measured once more and now at a molecular level. In her work, Moore has argued:

Because semen comes exclusively from male bodies and because men have been so central in the scientific discovery of semen and the subsequent proliferation of seminal enterprises (such as pornography, forensics, and fatherhood rights), it seems to me that men are clearly invested in the representations of semen as inherently linked to their sense of selfhood. In other words, men (as well as women) have represented semen through ideas about masculinity as a way of mirroring back some measure of the man.

(2007, p. 148)

This “measure of the man” is found in the scientific, technological study of semen unfolding in the pharmacopornographic era (Preciado 2008, 2013). Perhaps nowhere is this pharmacopornographic era clearer than in the space of the clinic, wherein reproduction, pornography, fertility, and masculinity exist alongside one another.

## Conclusion

In his anti-porn polemic *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, Robert Jensen asks: “What does the cum shot mean?” (2007, p. 69). While I am uninterested in his anti-porn polemics, I am interested in the question he asks. What does ejaculation mean? Perhaps nothing at all. But critical scholarship has endowed the “money shot” with significant meaning, especially in places that produce pleasure. In this chapter, however, I have sought to rewrite and think anew about the money shot, especially within the space of the clinic. I argued that the money shot is transformed in the clinic. The pleasure of masturbation has been replaced by the labour of procreation—which is not to suggest that there is a hard and fast binary, but rather that in the scene being analysed from *Embarazados*, masturbation is no longer pleasurable.

I wish to pause briefly here to meditate on this question of labour. Testicles are sites of production: “testicles are solely responsible for creating, storing, and disseminating the subject either through the prosthesis of the offspring or through the aesthetics of a copious ejaculation that, in turn, defines virility” (Venkatesh 2015, p. 20). Indeed, in *Dick: A User’s Guide*, Moore and de Costa explain that “the testes are veritable powerhouses of sperm manufacture. If only General Motors were so productive” (2003, p. 12). Masculinity is, as Frank G. Karioris and I have argued, “called into question because of underperforming testicles” (2017, p. 255). This underperformance is very much a question of labour, and labour does seem to be bound up in a lot of this. Procreation is work and hegemonic masculinity and claims to it are often tied to notions of labour, hard labour, and performing well as a labourer. Here the body becomes an unsatisfactory worker, whereby the testicles are not producing as they need to be; the man needs to work his body into an erotic frenzy to produce a specimen that will be analysed by another worker, who will confirm the seminal workers are failing their task. Importantly, this once more ties together the pharmacopornographic, but now alongside the demands of capitalism and neoliberalism where performance outcomes are measured and found to be wanting. This labour needs to be incentivized, and pornography is introduced, sexting is introduced, but these are treating the symptoms rather than the condition. Even with the incentives of pornography and sexting, Fran struggles to produce a specimen. In the pharmacopornographic era, wherein the clinic has taken on greater significance in the pursuit of reproductivity, we are witnessing the rewriting of sexuality and pleasure. Indeed,



to answer Jensen's question would require that we abandon the simple view of men's sexualities and bodies, and instead consider a more nuanced view that allows for incapacity and failure, recalling that, as Raewyn Connell has noted: "the first task of a social analysis is to arrive at an understanding of men's bodies and their relation to masculinity" (2005, p. 45).

## Notes

- 1 Recent research has begun to consider queer and trans\* pornographies. Elijah Adiv Edelman has written a fascinating article on ejaculation, money shots, and trans men, and the shifting meanings therein (2015).
- 2 For larger discussions of breeding and barebacking, see, for example, Dean (2008), Dean (2009), González (2021), González (2010), García-Iglesias (2020), Reynolds (2007). The topic itself is quite big and this list is not meant to be exhaustive nor canonical, but rather a sampling of possible avenues of research.

## 7 Infertility and Missing Out in *Not Suitable for Children*

In the Australian film *Not Suitable for Children*, the main character, Jonah, played by Ryan Kwanten (perhaps most famous for his role as Jason Stackhouse in *True Blood*), learns that he has a month before he will become infertile. Jonah, when introduced to viewers, is the kind of guy who lives in the moment, as the trailer tells us. He parties, he is a kind of playboy. While receiving oral sex, his partner tells him, “you’ve got a lump sort of thing”; admittedly, it is often a partner who notices a lump on the testicle. The scene jumps to another location, a medical theatre, and very quickly Jonah’s testicles are medicalized. Jonah learns that he has testicular cancer in the left testicle and it will need to be removed to prevent further spread of the cancer. While he will remain able to have sex, the doctor informs that he will be rendered infertile permanently. This procedure, resulting in his infertility, will also foreclose the possibility of being a father as he currently has no children and his diagnosis denies biological fatherhood. Over the course of the film, we watch as Jonah tries to find a woman—mostly from his past—with whom he can have a child. This film, thus, highlights the fear of infertility and the mourning of what could have been had one been able to procreate. In this chapter, I set out to think about how infertility can be thought of in terms of what the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has called “missing out.” For Phillips, “missing out” involves the things in life we had hoped would come true but do not; they represent a part of our un-lived lives.

When viewers first meet Jonah, they are introduced to a party boy living a seemingly carefree life. In many ways, he seems to be living in what Michael Kimmel described as “Guyland,” which is “the world in which young men live,” but more explicitly:

It is both a stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood that can often stretch for a decade or more, and a place, or, rather, a bunch of places where guys gather to be guys with each other, unhassled by the demands of parents, girlfriends, jobs, kids, and the other nuisances of adult life. In this topsy-turvy,

Peter-Pan mindset, young men shirk the responsibilities of adulthood and remain fixated on the trappings of boyhood, while the boys they still are struggle heroically to prove that they are real men despite all evidence to the contrary.

(2008, p. 4)

This is the world in which the film initially takes place, a world in which Jonah has not had to grow up, but rather has been able to enjoy the trappings and luxuries of Guyland. Guyland becomes a kind of heterotopia, which Michel Foucault understood as “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1986, p. 24). Foucault’s chief example of the heterotopia is the ship, which is “a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself” (1986, p. 27). In this fashion, then we might also suggest that the dormitory, fraternity house, and so on also functions in this fashion. In the case of Jonah, the party house in which he lives becomes a heterotopic space which allows him to not grow up, as it were.

For Kimmel, this place is imagined as liminal, an in-betweenness. He speaks of “Guyland” as a liminal period in the life course of the male, “between the dependency of and lack of autonomy of boyhood and the sacrifice and responsibility of manhood” (Kimmel 2008, p. 6). I suggest that this liminal space and its limits will become the motive for *Not Suitable for Children*. Jonah, like many guys, assumes he will grow up, but he has put that growing up on pause to extend the joys and pleasures of boyhood—joys and pleasures we seem at once too desperate to grow out of and then desperately trying to reclaim. Guyland becomes a kind of hedonistic paradise for these boys who refuse to grow up and unsurprisingly sex is very present. Guyland is a culture of “hooking up,” which refers to “a sexual encounter which may or may not include sexual intercourse, usually occurring on only one occasion between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances” (Paul *et al.* 2000, p. 76). This culture is exemplified in *Not Suitable for Children*, when viewers see Jonah receiving oral sex from Becky, who he has seemingly just met (and will later be described as “a party thing”). It is Becky who tells him that there is something wrong with his penis: “You’ve got something here. It’s kinda hard. Like a-like a lump sort of thing. Feels a bit like a frozen pea, but not as cold.” This description is similar to how Piet Hoebeke, a urologist at Ghent University, describes testicular cancer in his book *Members Club: A User’s Guide to the Penis: “testicular cancer feels like a lump or hardening in the soft structure of the testicle”* (2020, p. 152). In the film, Jonah slowly clues in, as if waking from the near orgasmic pleasures, and responds, “Lump?” and the scene cuts away to an image of Jonah in a hospital gown with his head on a pillow protected by a sheet of paper, clearly involved in some sort of medical test.<sup>1</sup>



Still, *Not Suitable for Children* (2012)

When viewers see Jonah, now only six minutes into the film, they are not seeing the playboy, fun-loving guy to whom they were introduced in the previous scene. Instead, the scene has shifted away from the party house and Jonah is now in what seems to be a medical theatre—we see his head resting on a pillow as he faces directly towards the camera. Jonah looks sickly, he is made pale by the bright shining medical lights overhead; he is flush, his body is sweating, he hasn't shaved his face and has a rough beard. Jonah even looks older suddenly. In this scene, Jonah is undergoing an ultrasound, and the radiologist narrates what he is doing. The jump cut between the two scenes—from the party house to the medical theatre—does the work of highlighting the transition—a very sudden transition—from Guyland to the real world.

From the radiology suite, we jump once more to the doctor's office, who delivers “a bit of bad news today, Jonah. You have testicular cancer.” The camera returns to Jonah, who looks shocked and confused, and the doctor continues to explain: “I know it sounds a bit nasty, but testicular cancer is in a manner of thinking, the best cancer to get. The treatment is incredibly effective. I'd have every expectation that you would make a complete recovery.” And he asks Jonah: “Do you understand?” Jonah nods his head as if he is agreeing that he understands—the way many of us might nod our head when overwhelmed by the facts, the information seemingly coming fast and quick and we are still trying to process what we have just been told while other facts whiz by. The doctor explains, “It's a relatively simple procedure to remove the testicle,” and Jonah speaks, “remove the testicle? ... Permanently?” The doctor explains, “Aye. We have to permanently remove the left testicle. I was hoping to book the theatre for Wednesday week. Then you'll undergo further treatment to ensure there's absolutely no spread—” Jonah interrupts, “Um...will it...will I lose my hair? [...] Will I still be able to have sex?” The doctor assures him he will not lose his hair and that he will still be able to have sex (after recovery), and then explains that while Jonah will have full sexual function, there will be “one exception. The treatment will unfortunately render you infertile” to which Jonah responds, “as in...” and the doctor continues “as in unable to father

children in the natural way. Thankfully modern science offers us a fantastic alternative.”

Once more we jump to another medical suite; this time, Jonah is being asked to deposit his sperm for preservation (a scene just considered in the previous chapter). In the room alone now, Jonah seems disoriented, with the camera framed above him. As discussed previously, the “room” is a key part of men’s narratives about infertility. Time and again stories tell us about the “room,” in which the sperm sample must be produced. Indeed, while the sample size of men’s narratives and memoirs considered in *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* is small, the room has always appeared. We find similar staging, for instance, a bed upon which Jonah can lie or a chair in which he can sit, a sink to clean up, and the requisite pornographic magazines, which are almost always mentioned when describing the room. Viewers witness Jonah as he carefully and tentatively holds the plastic cup.



Still, *Not Suitable for Children* (2012)

In these scenes, then, we are reminded that Jonah is no longer able to enjoy the fun, the silliness, the ribaldry, the puerility of *Guyland*, but he has joined the real world—and very quickly. He is forced to grow up because death is no longer a far-off concern, but seemingly becomes quite close as he has been diagnosed with cancer. His cancer diagnosis becomes an ominous rite of passage that moves him squarely into adulthood and a maturity that is far removed from adolescent antics. This is why the jump cuts are so important; they do the work of maturing Jonah—there is no need for long drawn-out stories, we know what is happening. Within nine quick minutes, the film has forced Jonah to do some serious growing up.

Before moving further, I do wish to pause momentarily here to recognize something that is also happening in these scenes. Jonah has seemingly never paid much attention to his own testicles, despite testicular cancer being “the most common malignancy among American white males between the ages of 20 to 34 and the second most common cancer among American white males aged 15 to 19 and 35 to 39” (Morman 2000, p. 91). Even though this is a well-known statistic, it is equally well known that “most men remain uninformed about this disease and fail to engage in

regular testicular self-examination practices” (Morman 2000, p. 92). This is, perhaps, because it “involves a male organ that is highly associated with perceptions of masculinity, attractiveness, sexual function, fertility, and romantic relationships” (Carpentier and Fortenberry 2010, p. 115). If a man encounters a problem with his penis, or more particularly his testicles, he may be unlikely to seek help because of the intimate and wholly private nature of the male organ. Moreover, “testicular cancers occur at a point in a man’s life when the impact on sexuality, identity and fertility may be significant” (Gurevich *et al.* 2004, p. 1597). This scene, then, in the film certainly conforms to what we know of men’s knowledge of testicular cancer, that is, they tend to be uninformed, or they are reluctant to participate in self-examinations, which, of course, are not invasive and are relatively simple. There is, thus, a “teaching opportunity” as it were in this film—and this makes sense given the intended audience of the film, being a young audience, an audience most likely to be affected by testicular cancer. Jonah learns of the possibility of testicular cancer from a “hook-up” rather than from his own proactive self-examinations. What is all the more distressing about this lack of information and lack of understanding is that when testicular cancer is caught early enough “cure rates for low-stage disease (99%) are almost a certainty” (Brown 2004, p. 84), which is likely why Jonah’s doctor says it is “the best cancer to get.” I recognize that this book is not about testicular cancer, but it feels imperative that a book that argues for greater consideration of men’s reproductive health also, at the very least, acknowledge what is happening in this scene from *Not Suitable for Children* and why it matters. Men need to perform testicular self-examinations not only because of the risk of cancer, but also because that risk could lead to infertility, as is the case for Jonah.

In some ways, *Not Suitable for Children* is *as much* about testicular cancer as it is about infertility because these two topics overlap—testicular cancer need not lead to infertility, but it can. While Kimmel’s notion of “Guyland” is framed as a problem to be solved, there are also opportunities to be found in “Guyland,” for instance, might not awareness campaigns for testicular cancer, which disproportionately affects members of “Guyland,” target “Guyland,” its members, and its culture? That is, we have to reach men where they are when discussing their physical, sexual, and reproductive health, especially since so many have noted men are reluctant to seek care unless absolutely necessary. Again, I recognize that some may suggest that this is beyond the scope of this book, but I cannot help but think about how this scene is so important to men’s health, especially given the highly successful “cure rates” (Brown 2004, p. 84). Indeed, I would argue that we need an approach to men’s health that is more global, that is, in this chapter cancer becomes a harbinger for change, but also a reflection on infertility. One health concern often affects another health concern. Not only that, but I believe that stories can be effective in helping people to understand; for instance, someone may never search for information on testicular cancer,

but a viewer may see that the character has similar symptoms to himself and then seek out additional information, by way of a Google search or by seeing a doctor. Andrew Singleton, in his study “‘It’s Because of the Invincibility Thing’: Young Men, Masculinity, and Testicular Cancer,” notes that “participants had obtained some limited information through popular cultural references (cyclist Lance Armstrong’s autobiography, a character in the film *Fight Club*, and a Robin Williams film)” (2008, p. 47). To return to the film, in this scene Jonah captures a wider reality: what happens when things one has never considered, death and reproduction, are mingled together?

Most young men *assume* that they are reproductive and will be reproductive in the future. This is part of the reason why *Guyland* works—it is about deferring future, not about rejecting future. To be certain, I am extending Kimmel’s ideas as he does not consider infertility; his guys are more concerned with preventing an unwanted pregnancy. Nonetheless, most assume that they will be fertile. One study observes that “undergraduate university students in this study highly valued parenthood and nearly 90% planned to become parents,” but the study continues, “they demonstrated a significant lack of awareness regarding fertility issues” (Peterson *et al.* 2012, p. 138). In another study on infertility, Whitten and colleagues note that “for most Ottawa young adults, personal infertility was not a significant concern. Participation in this study represented most young adults’ first contemplation of infertility” (Whitten *et al.* 2013, p. 564). Indeed, I suspect this is not just true of young adults in Ottawa, the site of the study, but true of young adults more generally. I would surmise that most people assume that they are fertile and will be fertile when the time comes—and why wouldn’t they? They live in a world that is replete with stories of getting “knocked up,” of being pregnant and not knowing, or of shotgun marriages—in a fertile world, everyone is doing it whether they want to or not. Delaying adulthood may well be possible because most young people assume that they are fertile and moreover because they seemingly lack an understanding of fertility. Sociologically, then this may be a perfect storm waiting to happen. Nonetheless, the challenge of this idea is represented when Jonah realizes that he not only has testicular cancer, but also that he will become infertile once he undergoes surgery. How does one prepare for infertility? In what remains, I will focus on Jonah’s infertility battles and diagnosis, but this infertility is *because* of his testicular cancer. In this film, there is a tension between death and reproduction, which are braided together throughout the film. There is a fear of death, to be sure, but what is it to live without being able to reproduce? That is a question that haunts Jonah. His ideas of the future have been radically altered on account of the diagnosis.

For Jonah, the solution is fairly straightforward: find a past partner as quickly as possible and become pregnant, thereby ensuring a paternal legacy. Jonah’s infertility is thus the vehicle for the romantic comedy, but I am

more interested in how infertility becomes a site of “missing out.” Though he may not have thought about children previously, as is the case for many young men, suddenly the realization he cannot have children becomes a time to think about what is being missed and what will be missed, what opportunities and experiences are being lost. In thinking about this idea of “missing out,” I draw here on the work of the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, and most particularly his book *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*. Phillips begins, in his typically polemical and provocative fashion, with a question: “The unexamined life is surely worth living, but is the unlived life worth examining?” and he continues:

It seems a strange question until one realizes how much of our so-called mental life is about the lives we are not living, the lives we are missing out on, the lives we could be leading but for some reason are not. What we fantasize about, what we long for, are the experiences, the things and the people that are absent. It is the absence of what we need that makes us think, that makes us cross and sad.

(2012, p. xi)

Phillips’s question is important because, as he notes, we spend a great deal of time thinking about our unlived lives, the way things could be if things were just slightly different, or if a missing object or desire were fulfilled. We might think about this in terms of *if only* thinking, a kind of subjunctive thinking, as in, “if only I had a...” wherein the desired object becomes fulfilling. This kind of thinking is all around us—it is part of our unlived lives, lives that we may very well invest a lot of time in. These are the stories we tell ourselves that might justify our discontent, as in the reason I am upset by something is because I lack something else. Or we might explain how we are a poor father because we ourselves had a poor father, which is to say, we lacked a good example. For Phillips, then,

There is always what will turn out to be the life we led, and the life that accompanied it, the parallel life (or lives) that never actually happened, that we lived in our minds, the wished-for life (or lives): the risks un-taken and the opportunities avoided or unprovided. We refer to them as our unlived lives because somewhere we believe that they were open to us; but for some reason – and we might spend a great deal of our lived lives trying to find and give the reason – they were not possible.

(p. xii)

For Jonah, there is perhaps a third category, the life-to-come: when we defer growing up, it is because we assume that it will become available to us eventually. So in the life-to-come, Jonah assumes he will get married, have children, etc., but in the real world of the “lived life,” the shock of the parallel life takes hold. That life-to-come is now rendered impossible; he will



become infertile within a month. He had banked on the future only to have it denied, reminding the audience that they are not entitled to the future, especially not *the* future that they had imagined as theirs.

This shock is made all the more real when Jonah receives information that his sperm sample is problematic, even though it is optimal and the velocity is strong. Jonah has, as many men do, sought cryopreservation for his sperm, which is “a useful and often necessary process for semen storage. During cryopreservation, sperm are kept in a state of suspended animation within a deep-frozen media (typically, liquid nitrogen)” (Jeyendran *et al.* 2003, p. 119). Ideally, once the time has come, the “cryopreserved sample can then be thawed and processed for use” (Jeyendran *et al.*, p. 119). Unfortunately, Jonah learns that his semen responds poorly to the cryopreservatives, and his sample dies. He is told, “sperm cryopreservation will not be an effective option for you,” which means that he has no further options available to him. While his doctor noted that “modern science offers us a fantastic alternative,” Jonah is not a beneficiary of these advances.

It is almost as if the entire universe is against him procreating *unless* he can do it within this month-long period. The universe is willing him back together with past flings. We might even expect that we are now entering the realm of a romantic comedy, that all things will work out, and that he will, thanks to an old friend, get pregnant and rekindle an old love. Even the idea that “modern science offers us a fantastic alternative” speaks to this romantic ideal of all things working out happily, so much so that science itself becomes a romance.

This scene adds insult to injury, for not only is he going to be infertile, but his sperm sample, which is actually optimal, reacts poorly to cryopreservation and all of the sperm die. It was not as if his sample was substandard, but rather it was nearly ideal. So not only is Jonah trying to answer the question about how to prepare for an infertile future, the question has now become more complicated and more specific: how does one prepare for a future of infertility in which sperm preservation and sperm banking are not possible because the sperm does not react well to the cryopreservation process?

His paternal future has been effectively denied, unless, within that remaining month, he can inseminate and impregnate a willing partner, which becomes the driving narrative of the film. He finds himself with few willing participants. Viewers watch as he awkwardly asks old partners, hook-ups, and flings, he even meets with a lesbian couple, which proves to be entirely uncomfortable for he does not seem to understand how any of it will work. Afterwards he suggests that the one lesbian might be “bi,” as if his masculinity is strong enough to “flip” her, while also being a commentary on her being too normatively beautiful to be just a lesbian. There is, to be sure, a homophobic reading here that is compounded by his masculine failings. In essence, Jonah denies the possibility that the woman might actually be a

lesbian, as if he knows better than she does. He desperately tries to find a way to become a father and comes up with all sorts of possibilities—most of which are awkward, none of which work.

Eventually, Jonah and his roommate Stevie agree to try; she drafts a lengthy contract with a series of conditions and rules, spanning pages, which Jonah reads the way most people read a service agreement. This part of the narrative does the work of the romantic comedy. They agree to the terms and conditions and begin to have sex. The first sex scene is awkward; they seem like virgins trying to figure out how to have sex. Awkwardness becomes essential to the film, time and again, we find these awkward moments, which recalls that “awkwardness dominates entertainment to such an extent that it’s becoming increasingly difficult to remember laughing at anything other than cringe-inducing scenes of social discomfort” (Kotsko 2010, p. 1). As awkward as these scenes are, there is also something deeply normative and human about these scenes—as if we can relate to them.



Still, *Not Suitable for Children* (2012)

They are in a motel room, one that is cheap, viewers are told. They cannot quite figure out how to get undressed. Do they keep the lights on? They turn them off and bump heads, the lamps on the bedside tables are quickly turned on. He offers to give a massage; she does not want one, perhaps becoming too romantic a gesture for their agreement. Everything about this is awkward. They agree to not kiss. But how does one have sex without kissing? These are sexual subjects who have tried to create a series of rules to facilitate reproduction. Not kissing does not work, so they elevate the situation and kiss. This kiss is important because it puts into motion the romance. In his work, Phillips has argued that:

At certain periods of our lives we spend a lot of time plotting for kisses, not only as foreplay but also as ends in themselves. It is of course considered adolescent—and by adolescent boys effeminate—to be a connoisseur of such things, although adolescence too easily involves, as only adults can know, the putting away of the wrong childish things. Ostentatious kisses are usually represented in the most popular and

once intellectually disparaged genres, romantic novels and films. And although there are clearly conventions in literature and life governing the giving and getting of kisses, it is really only from films that we can learn what the contemporary conventions might be for kissing itself. Styles of kissing can be seen but not easily described, as though kissing resists verbal representation.

(1993, p. 95)

In the case of *Not Suitable for Children*, then kissing is marked by a set of contemporary conventions. To kiss would be to break the contract that they share about having a baby, a legally informed document—performative in its own right since it is hardly binding or legal in a juridical sense—that works to avoid creating the intimacy afforded by the kiss. One can have sex without kissing, but kissing changes sex into making love. This is no longer just about reproduction as it were, as if it is just a biological act involving friction and ejaculation; rather, this is an amorous, loving, and perhaps even lovely, act. Indeed, Phillips suggests that “kissing on the mouth can have a mutuality that blurs the distinction between giving and taking” (1993, p. 97). Kissing is now about intimacy. What I wish to highlight here is the erasure of the distinct parties that are bound together contractually—to quote the Spice Girls, “‘cause tonight is the night / when two become one.” Kissing does important work, it renders the contract weak because no longer do they wish to maintain their agreed upon distance; rather, they begin to fall in love. Kissing symbolizes the mutuality of which Phillips speaks; the distinction between both parties “blurs” (p. 97). In this scene, there is a blurring between the awkward and the comfortable; the scene gestures at normalcy whereas most of the film has been about these life-upending challenges. As much as they try to keep sex as a negotiation, the kissing breaks down that negotiation. Importantly, as Phillips notes, “kisses—of which it can be said, despite our misgiving, that there are many kinds and that they have always punctuated our lives—are a threat and a promise, the signature as cliché of the erotic” (p. 100). This scene leaves the viewer realizing just how quickly a contract can fracture, dissolve, and even disintegrate, and to use the language of so much queer theory, shatter, when the matter involves intimacy.



Still, *Not Suitable for Children* (2012)

Viewers are witness to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might call “the freshness of slow learners” (1999, p. 22). Once they begin to have sex, the sex is missionary. Stevie remains partially clothed—her polka-dot brassiere remains on. While the brassiere is undoubtedly sexy, as might be expected of the romantic comedy, it is still functional rather than merely aesthetic or erotic. The sex is quick; the scene itself lasts about 30 seconds. Afterwards they both appear sweaty, but it is clear to viewers that they are beginning to fall in love. This falling in love will be exemplified best by the remaining sex scenes, all of which happen during her period of ovulation—a relatively short window to be certain—and the sex becomes more playful and more pleasurable. They change positions, the sex is no longer, at least not only, the utilitarian reason of sex: procreation. Orgasms are achieved. Pleasure is had, an important reminder to the viewer that sex can be, and often is, pleasurable—even when procreative.



Still, *Not Suitable for Sex* (2012)

Indeed, as the relationship develops sexually, they seem to become more and more certain sexually. They seem in tune with one another. At a formal level, the sex scenes last longer, the sexual choreography is better and more developed. There is, to wit, a real joy of sex here. The sexual positions are varied and a given scene will involve more than one position. Unsurprisingly, every sex scene is penis-in-vagina with little foreplay; after all, this is still procreative sex. But what is clear is that Jonah and Stevie have overcome the awkwardness of the first time and seemingly found a comfortable routine, recalling that “to be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins,” as Sara Ahmed writes (2004, p. 148). Jonah and Stevie become so comfortable with one another that the awkwardness evaporates; they seem to be falling in love with one another.

In order to avoid “missing out” on the potentialities of fatherhood, Jonah and Stevie have seemingly found the solution. She will become the mother to his child and as much as they have a contract outlining all the rights and responsibilities, they are also falling in love with one another, almost seemingly heading towards another contract, though this one legally binding: marriage. While marriage will never come up, the point of the romance

is that it will lead towards a sense of happiness and fulfilment, which is often achieved by way of a resolution in which the partners reach a lifelong commitment to one another. In some ways, especially given the world of romance and romantic comedies, one begins to expect that it all will work out. In the language of romance, this is when we, as viewers and consumers, can begin to see the possibilities of living happily ever after: Jonah will become the father he longs to be and he and Stevie will become a couple with child, thereby fulfilling the fantasies of the nuclear family and heterosexuality.

But this is not our standard romantic comedy. Stevie calls Jonah and tells him to meet her at her work. Here she explains to him that her period has arrived and thus she is not pregnant. This moment is fascinating because it destroys the seeming possibility of happiness, but it also, rightly, undercuts the narrative to which we have become so accustomed: that getting pregnant is easy. Too often, especially for those living with infertility, narratives focus on the ease with which one becomes pregnant, a world of surprise babies. Realizing that he only has three more days of fertility, Jonah wishes there were more time. Jonah is residing in the world of “if only” thinking where if he only had a bit more time, he could maybe, just maybe, become a father. He is fearful and realizing just how much he will be missing out on because cancer has robbed him of a future as a father—even as he tries to “seize the day.” One might even be tempted to suggest that the film is telling viewers not to wait on procreating, wherein Jonah becomes a cautionary tale of what happens if you wait.

Jonah and Stevie fight—they both seem unable to see each other’s perspective. With so little time left, Jonah is desperate. They throw one more party and his friend Gus calls Ava, with whom Jonah had already tried to have a child. But this time, Ava knows that Jonah has cancer. They begin to have sex, but Jonah cannot do it. He pulls out and we have a tragicomic moment of the ejaculate landing on her chest, recalling, once more, the finality of Onan’s dilemma wherein he spills his seed rather than allow for creation. Jonah admits he is in love with someone else. As if the tension is not high enough, Jonah and Stevie have one more fight and it appears as if everything is over, everything lost. Viewers next see Jonah at the hospital and, of course, just as he is about to go into surgery, Stevie appears and they admit their love for one another, as is required of the romantic narrative, and she says that they can use a sperm donor in the future and thus have a child together. The romance is thus fully sealed. While they may never have a child together using his sperm, they can still have a child together. In a way, then, the film subverts the normal message wherein two people fall in love and have children; in this film, the message is still one that values love, but one that also suggests that our ideas of family might need to change based upon circumstances. The film lends itself to the imaginative realm of the sequel wherein Stevie and Jonah attend to the difficulties of finding a donor so as to create their family. Importantly, in the romantic comedy as in the romance novel, the happily ever after ending

is not about finality, but what comes next. What does it mean to live in the happily ever after?

*Not Suitable for Children* is, in some ways, a refreshing film because it treats testicular cancer and infertility seriously, and it does not end magically. Jonah's sperm are not suddenly able to be cryopreserved nor does his cancer disappear or turn out to be a false positive. Likewise, even though Jonah and Stevie try to have a baby together, they realize, as so many infertile couples before them, that pregnancy is not easy. The film leans into and embraces impossibility, and throughout *Not Suitable for Children*, the narrative works to understand and make sense of Jonah's reactions to his diagnosis—both his testicular cancer and his pending infertility. As I have suggested above, I think this is psychoanalytically quite rich because the film accounts for what Phillips has called “missing out.” Jonah must work through the process of accepting that he himself will never become a biological father. The treatment for cancer, which enables him to live, will render him infertile. But there are other possibilities. Though the film closes with the option of a sperm donor, this is indeed an option. There are other ways to be a father, and he will find these ways with Stevie by his side. Importantly, I think this film works to show that infertility is about mourning and missing out, at least for some, because so many of our ideas about our futures can be quickly and permanently disrupted, as they were for Jonah. There is so often an assumption that a person is fertile, but to realize that one is infertile or one is about to become infertile is to enter into an affectively murky and complex arena. *Not Suitable for Children* provides a compelling narrative of men's infertility.

## Note

- 1 A similar scene happens in the American television series *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005). Brian Kinney is receiving oral sex in the backroom at a club and his hook-up, who happens to be a doctor, tells him he has a lump on his left testicle and he should have it evaluated, “the sooner, the better” (Season 4, Episode 6 “Death in the Family”). However, unlike Jonah in *Not Suitable for Children*, Brian has already produced a child with a lesbian couple in the television series. Brian's challenges with his cancer diagnosis have a great deal to do with his vanity, which undoubtedly also speaks to his masculinity and sexuality.

## 8 No Future and Worlds without Babies

What would it mean to face a world that is infertile? Such a question is at the heart of this chapter, but is also at the heart of discussions about infertility and declining sperm counts. Lurking within most popular media coverage of declining sperm counts and declining sperm quality is a fear, and perhaps a fantasy (for fears and fantasies are often not that far apart), of what it would mean if the declining counts ever hit zero. This chapter, thus, turns its attention to these infertile worlds. I am interested specifically in worlds in which infertility is no longer about individuals, but about a societal reality. What happens when the fear about infertility is no longer that of the singular man, but rather of all men? In this chapter, I set out to consider two very different texts that attend to this fear. While there are various canonical examples to which I could refer, for instance, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or P.D. James's *Children of Men* or Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, I wish instead to turn to texts about which little has been written, but that nonetheless speak to and think through these problems. These texts are fertile texts that have yet to germinate the way canonical texts have. To be clear, however, I am not making arguments for their canonicity. In the first example, I consider a campy, perhaps even trashy and wholly problematic film *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, which was released in 1990, and acts as a sequel to *Flesh Gordon*, which was itself a parody of *Flash Gordon*, a superhero of the 1930s, while in the latter example, I turn to the 1946 novel *Mr. Adam* by Pat Frank, which is regarded by some (as the cover of my copy boasts) as a "lost classic from the dawn of the atomic age." Both texts think through what it might mean to be the last fertile man in an infertile world.

These two texts—*Mr. Adam* and *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*—may be understood as kinds of junk fiction, which Noël Carroll understands as nearly anything that fits under the "rubric [...] of things like Harlequin romances; sci-fi, horror, and mystery magazines; comic books; and broadcast narrative on either the radio or TV, as well as commercial movies" (1994, p. 225). Truthfully, many of the texts in *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* might qualify under this rubric. But I do want to be clear that not all junk texts are created equally; some are

better than others, some have higher aims than others. For Carroll, who draws on Thomas Roberts's work, "junk fictions aspire to be page-turners" (1994, p. 225), and she notes that "we," referring to readers and consumers of junk fiction, "do not dawdle over Clark's diction as we might over Updike's nor do we savor the complexity of her sentence structure, as we do with Virginia Woolf's" (1994, pp. 225–226). Instead of accepting this claim, I am inclined to dawdle over these texts because they are, or at least they were, interesting for some readers and viewers. Even if it is true that "junk fictions are the sort of narratives that commentators are wont to call formulaic. That is, junk fictions generally belong to well-entrenched genres, which themselves are typified by their possession of an extremely limited repertoire of story-types" (Carroll 1994, p. 226), I cannot help but note that readers continue to read these junk fictions, just as viewers continue to watch them. Not all of us want to spend time "dawdling" over an author's mastery of sentence structure, but would, instead, prefer to read the story without all the pomp and circumstance, as it were. Some readers want the nuts and bolts, they want to be entertained, and junk fictions do this work. These fictions are part of a community of narrative and storytelling, our understanding of these narratives may well help us understand other narratives and how they work (or do not work). Junk fictions are valuable to these readers and viewers, and they are certainly valuable to those who produce them.

But I also think, as I hope has become clear throughout *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities*, that junk fiction fills a need for readers and viewers and that even formulaic and repetitive fictions can help us make sense of things. This is why we tell stories over and over again. When Carroll writes that "junk fiction is analogous to the daydream insofar as it is an avenue for wish-fulfillment" (1994, p. 228), I take this to mean that these fictions reflect on the anxieties and wishes that occupy daily life. I think it is quite possible that infertility is not just the concern of literary fiction, but also can be the concern of junk fiction—just as infertility does not affect one type of person, but affects all types of people. It would thus stand to reason that the stories about infertility cut across a range of forms and genres, and so I turn here to junk fiction, recognizing that some may see the chapter on *The Trouble with Joe* as yet another junk fiction. It is worth noting here the fact that infertility making it into "junk fiction" demonstrates just how wide and deep these narratives run. It shows up in places like popular films, romance novels, television shows, and so on, and thus we must see infertility as an integral part of our shared experience. It is an open secret.

One of these common narratives to be found in junk fiction, and one that aligns well with this project, is the idea of being the *last* fertile man. In these narratives, the fears of infertility have been extended from the individual to an entire community and oftentimes the world itself. What might it mean to be the "last fertile man?" Does the world become a bacchanalia of sexual pleasures for that "last fertile man?" Does that "last fertile man" lose his



rights in service of repopulating the planet? Such are the kinds of questions these texts propose. The idea of the “last man” is, of course, a common enough archetype, recalling here that an archetype is “a typical or recurring image” (Frye 22:91), and in these narratives, readers find a hero who is confronted with the task and responsibility of being the last fertile man. In their article “The Last (Fertile) Man on Earth: Comedy or Fantasy?” Victor Grech, Clare Vassallo, and Ivan Callus immediately announce that they are uncertain about the goals of these kinds of narratives: are we dealing with comedy or fantasy? To what kinds of genre or genres do these narratives belong? In the article, they note that,

Infertility in science fiction is not an uncommon theme. [...] One specific way that has been used to explore a variety of possibilities has been to posit a scenario wherein only a single fertile man is left, a last hope and potential savior for the entire species.

(p. 24)

Like many scholars before me, I do not believe that science fiction is just about fiction that involves science; instead, I would think that science fiction, like all popular or junk fiction, is speaking about and thinking through ongoing social dilemmas and concerns. There is often a speculative quality to these kinds of narratives. As Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon argue:

Science fiction notoriously reflects contemporary realities back to us through the lens of a particular type of imagination, one associated with the future, with the potentials of technology, and with the important idea that life does not remain static; what we know today may be entirely different tomorrow.

(2008, p. 3)

Science fiction thus might be understood as braiding together today’s anxieties and concerns with the hopes of the future and its technologies. Thus, when we think about infertility, we might suggest that authors are responding to growing anxieties about sperm quality, for instance, or they are responding to technological innovations like Artificial Insemination (an AI before Artificial Intelligence) and In Vitro Fertilization. These kinds of concerns lend themselves to the theoretical and philosophical explorations we find in these texts, for instance, what would happen if there were only one fertile man left? How would he re-populate the earth? Who would protect him and his interests? Would he have any interests at all or would he become a prisoner who will pay his debts by repopulating the planet? To imagine these questions is to confront our expectations. So often the infertility crisis in science fiction and in a wide variety of other spaces as *Men*, *Masculinities*, and *Infertilities* has argued infertility is displaced onto the

female body. In some ways, then, these questions would rewrite the narratives we might expect, wherein men orchestrate an intervention and benefit from those interventions sexually.

The narratives ask important questions which have been asked by numerous authors and these questions thus represent a kind of collective anxiety about infertility. In their article, Grech and colleagues provide an overview of these narratives, noting that there are, of course, historical precursors to be considered. Indeed, the so-called “last man” narrative can be found in the nineteenth century, such as:

Shelley’s (1826) *The Last Man*, wherein a plague decimates humanity. Shelley was herself inspired by Cousin de Grainville’s (1805) *Le Dernier Homme*, in which the entire future earth becomes sterile and the last man resists manipulation to father a new breed of monstrous cannibals by choosing death instead.

(2013, p. 24)

I note this because the archetype is not merely a twentieth-century concern, but rather is part of an ongoing literary history. It might be tempting to imagine a narrative as wholly new and that our times, the times to which a novel responds, are wholly new. But the texts that I study here are part of that history, in which infertility has been imagined, represented, feared, and reimagined. Grech and colleagues contend that the trope of the last man has been “recycled repeatedly in the past two centuries” (p. 24), and this makes sense given that “these stories also extrapolate current trends in declining fertility into the future” (p. 27). One thing, however, that is striking about these texts is that they are rarely, it would seem, set in a very distant future. P.D. James’s *Children of Men*, for instance, was published in 1992 and imagined an infertile world in 2021. A similar temporality exists in *Mr. Adam*. A less certain temporality is found in *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, where it feels wholly a product of its time reflecting on its time (for instance, the cars are of the 1980s and 1990s), and at other moments, one that seems to be caught up in a kind of *Star Trek* futurity whereby one can fly to distant planets. In the comic book series *Y: The Last Man*, the narrative is set in the present when all living mammals with a Y chromosome die on July 17, 2002 (the series itself ran from 2002 to 2008). These texts of the last man do not need to be set in a distant and remote future because time and time again we read the headlines warning us about our declining sperm quality, for example, or the rise of a new technology that will render intimacy and sex unnecessary. What is unanswered, however, in the article by Grech and colleagues, is whether or not the idea of the last man is a comedy, or a fantasy, or some other generic category such as tragedy. Likewise, this generic question is important because for whom would this last man trope be a fantasy and for whom would it be a comedy?

In what follows, I think through some of these questions by providing two potential readings of last fertile man narratives. In the first, which will consider *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, the answer is that indeed it is a kind of fantasy or comedy; in the second case, that of *Mr. Adam*, the answer is that it is tragic. Both of these texts are, as Freud might have it, about wish fulfilment, but they are rooted deeply in a fantasy, which may well be a fear (the two are never all that far apart), about infertility. These texts respond to the stories that we tell about infertility. They respond to the “what if” questions that many might ask, for instance, what if there really were only one fertile man left? Or, perhaps even what if I were the last fertile man?

*Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, which was released in 1990, is a sequel to the 1974 film *Flesh Gordon*, in which the hero is involved in a series of adventures that surround or are concerned with sexuality. The plot of the original film *Flesh Gordon* is simple enough. Citizens of planet Earth are overcome by sex madness because of Emperor Wang (played by William Dennis Hunt), the villain, who lives on the planet Porno. Emperor Wang has used his weapon, the Sex Ray, and turns all the inhabitants of Earth into sex-crazed nymphomaniacs. In some ways, it is easy to read the film as responding to and playing with the sexual freedoms of the late 1960s and through to the 1970s. It is a product of a time before HIV/AIDS. As the film opens, viewers witness a group of scientists debating the causes of sex madness and then explain their fears for the planet and its future. They agree to await the return of *Flesh Gordon* (played by Jason Williams). As he returns by plane, the crew and passengers are affected by the sex madness. They then meet Dr. Flexi Jerkoff (played by Joseph Hudgins), who has constructed a phallically shaped rocket, and they travel to the planet Porno in hopes of defeating Emperor Wang and his sex ray. As is the case in most superhero movies and comics, only the hero, *Flesh Gordon*, can save the planet, but will he be able to do it?

In the sequel, *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, the narrative is essentially inverted and all the men are not sex-crazed, but instead are all rendered impotent and the women are desperate for sex. Importantly, the film appears *before* *Viagra*. The cause of the impotence is a being known as Evil Presence, who, as the film goes on, viewers will recognize as Emperor Wang. In this film, *Flesh Gordon* (played by Vince Murdocco) must be rescued as he has been taken hostage by the Cosmic Cheerleaders, who live on a planet where all the men have become impotent. The sexual malady is found elsewhere, not on the planet Earth. Initially, a scientist explains that the problem is that all women have become “hornier than hell,” but the greater problem is that there are no children. It is this latter film then that interests me because inherently, even though this film is about sex and is a sex comedy, it is also a film about futurity and its impossibilities. What would it mean to live in a world with no future?

The two films might be understood as soft-core pornographic films, perhaps following Linda Ruth Williams, who understands soft-core as being

analogous to *coitus interruptus*: “if hardcore really does it, softcore merely fakes it. If hardcore hangs on the authenticity of the real view (that adolescent shock of seeing people actually getting off) softcore holds back, cannot show, kisses but finally does not tell” (2005, p. 270). Indeed, Howard Ziehm, who directed both films, said that “the sequel is more ‘slap and tickle’ soft porn, with a focus on the effects to give it a science fiction connection” (Uram 1990, p. 49). This soft-core quality to the film was matched by the producer’s desire for an R rating for the film, “since the film is a comic parody, [Maurice] Smith said he hoped to sneak the film’s porn aspects past the censors” (Uram 1990, p. 49). The film is a kind of blue balls: the suggestion is there, but the orgasmic finality is never achieved. This film is puerile in its sexuality; in a sense, it is a kind of erotic fantasy of Guyland and the fraternity. It is juvenile and even stupid, a kind of sex comedy.

For some, a more particular generic distinction may be valuable to consider. These films could also be classified as “sexploitation films,” which Elena Gorfinkel describes as “foreground[ing] the conditions of looking at erotic spectacle, making the subject and object of sexual looking at the crux of their drives” (2017, p. 11). The term, sexploitation film, is not itself a new term, but rather “was in use in the American trade press as early as 1958” (Schaefer 2012, p. 149). For Eric Schaefer, the term refers to films that,

were independent productions made on low budgets (relative to the cost of major mainstream releases). The films were advertised for “adults only” and, when the rating system became operational in late 1968, were either rated R or X, or continued to be shown to adult only audiences.

(2012, p. 149)

For Schaefer, then “sexploitation films focused on nudity and sexual situations, including seduction, adultery, voyeurism, and various fetishes; but they rarely asserted higher aims” (2012, p. 149). In some ways, the sequel, as has been noted by others, is more scatological in its humour than the original, which perhaps lends itself to the fetish, but also to the comedy. Perhaps my uneasiness with its genre is reflected by those who reviewed the film, for instance, Alan Jones writing for *Radio Times* explains: “complete with singing turd people, a farting asteroid, a gay penis monster and little nudity, it’s hard to fathom exactly who this dreadfully unfunny fiasco was aimed at because it’s a miserable failure on every genre count.” What is nonetheless true, I think, is that this film surely meets the threshold as junk fiction, and as with junk fiction, I am not certain how much one can genuinely “dawdle” (Carroll 1994, p. 225). To be clear, my intention here is not to elevate a text like *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders* to canonical status, but rather to treat it as textually interesting; after all, there was an audience—however small—and there was enough commercial value in the original to support a sequel.

In his essay “Sextrapolation in New Wave Science Fiction,” Rob Latham opens by turning to Vivian Sobchack’s 1985 essay “The Virginity of Astronauts” and summarizes that “science fiction film has persistently refused to deal with human eroticism, exiling sexuality to the extent that it manifests only as unconscious pathology” (2008, p. 52). However, even if science fiction does not deal specifically with eroticism, it is still pregnant with it; one can think here of the subcultures that grow out of science fiction or the fan fiction that rewrites the stories we consume. This leads Latham to ponder “how [Sobchack] might apply her psychoanalytic methods to the more risqué movies of the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Barbarella* (1968) and *Flesh Gordon* (1974)” (2008, p. 52). This is certainly a good question to ask as these films are implicitly and explicitly about sex, and more particularly, about sex in space. This essay also happens to be one of the very few that I can find that even begins to consider *Flesh Gordon*, but the totality of its consideration is that one sentence. In some ways, one of the challenges of “junk fiction” is that it is rarely studied and one lacks a corpus to which one can refer, but these texts, for whatever reason, were valuable enough to be produced.

I turn now to the film *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*. Shortly after *Flesh Gordon* is kidnapped by the Cosmic Cheerleaders, the head of the security for the group says, “My name is Robunda Hooters, Head of Screw.” After *Flesh* asks if he is being held for ransom, she explains, “We don’t want your money, just your virility. For some reason impotence radiation doesn’t weaken you.” If we think back to the “money shot,” what they are interested in is purely the “shot” itself—it isn’t a financial equation, it is a matter of survival. At this point, Robunda Hooters explains how all the men have become impotent, which is important, because, as Gorm Wagner and Richard Green explain, “Impotence. The word strikes at the bedrock of a man’s worth. The man is without power—ineffectual” (1981, p. vii). This sentiment would be echoed by Angus McLaren, who notes that “to write a history of impotence entails a survey of changing models of masculinity” (2007, p. xiii). Simply, masculinity and impotence are measures of one another. The erection or lack thereof becomes a testament to masculinity (or its lack). McLaren ponders: “why such a concern for the erection?” and responds:

It was obviously essential when the purpose of sex was propagation, but modern sex surveys revealed that much if not most of the male’s sexual pleasure came from means other than penetration. Nevertheless it was taken as a given in Western culture that sex was synonymous with intercourse, a man penetrating his partner. The implication of such a belief is that a man feared impotence, not so much because it might deprive him of pleasure, but because it would prevent him from providing proof that he could perform as a male should.

(2007, p. xiii)

As much as the phallus and the erect penis is a symbolic reference, it is also phenomenological and real, it is how sex and pleasure are imagined, and in so doing, the impotent penis becomes an impossibility of that sex and pleasure. Again, as much as the phallus is a symbol, it is very much a real concern and thing for men, which perhaps is why it is so difficult for so many to distinguish between the psychoanalytic phallus and the real penis—the two are never that far apart, as much as theorists might try.<sup>1</sup> It is, perhaps, also worth reminding ourselves that only recently “the dreaded word ‘impotence’ was sanitized, removing much of the personal failure and demasculating connotation,” thanks in part to the now treatability of impotence (Thompson 2019, p. 115). That is, today, there is something almost quaint about impotency; it is a condition that we have seemingly outgrown thanks to its eminently treatable nature.

In *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, the explanation of the fallibility of the phallus continues. Viewers are witness to a sporting event, a cross between soccer and basketball, wherein the players use their penises to hit the ball. Their teams are replete with heroic penises that “stood high and proud.”



Still, *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders* (1990)

Their “cods” attest to their virility, while the other team’s cods “drooped like three-day old bananas.” During the game, however, Robunda Hooters tells Flesh:

Suddenly without warning, the black cloaked guy grabbed a gun, he blasted our boys’ cods with some kind of impotence radiation, that made them go limp. It was horrible to see. The other team scored at will, cheating by using their hands to score. We lost the game. But worst of all our atmosphere was now polluted with impotence radiation and our

men could not perform their manly responsibilities. To put it bluntly all strange planet women became hornier than hell.



Still, *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders* (1990)

The other team, we are told, “cheat[ed] by using their hands,” which almost immediately calls to attention onanism, which is made all the more obvious that “our atmosphere was *polluted*,” recalling here that onanism has long been framed as a kind of self-pollution. Taking matters into one’s own hands is a kind of cheating, a kind of fake orgasm not genuinely earned by way of sex.

As problematic as this impotence is, as horny as the women are now that the men are seemingly unable to satisfy them without their “high and proud” phalluses, it was not until a scientist explained the real severity of the problem, the cheerleader explains: “But it was from Mr. Jones, the school science teacher, that we learned just how serious the problem was,” and the scene jump cuts to Mr. Jones, who says “children.” This becomes as much a film about sexual dissatisfaction as it is a film about fertility, fecundity, and futurity.

Robunda Hooters thus tells Flesh that he is said to be the “possessor of virile force,” which is to say, as one of the other cheerleaders says, “a big stiff hairy cock with veins all over it.” Read today, such a declaration lacks the pornographic aesthetic that has become normative, that is, today Flesh would not be celebrated for a “hairy cock.” Indeed, not only is this true of pornography, but as Matthew Hall observes, “gone are the days [...] when the hairy bodies of Tom Selleck and Sean Connery were seen as normal for men” (2015, p. 95). While there are still hairy men, they have become a subculture, for instance, bears in the gay community. Aesthetically, today there is a celebration of the hypermasculine body that does not hide behind hair, its phallus is to be seen.



Still, *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders* (1990)

Nonetheless, even though there is a celebration of the phallus as both a symbolic referent and as a very real object, it remains hidden behind a veil, in this case, a towel. The rest of his body is, of course, ready to be consumed, but the “big stiff hairy cock with veins all over it” cannot be seen. The towel presents the “bigness” and the “stiffness” of the cock, but little else. His phallus testifies to his masculinity given its “bigness,” a “bigness” that is likely not achieved by any viewer of the film. This film thus plays with so many of the conventions ascribed to masculinity that the phallus becomes not only a signifier of strength *but also* fecundity and virility.

Very quickly this scene turns to sex, song, and a dance number, which answers the question posed by Grech and colleagues. This is a fantasy, for both the viewer and seemingly for *Flesh Gordon*. The last fertile man, the last man with the “big stiff hairy cock with veins all over it,” is celebrated with song and dance and rewarded with an orgiastic experience. The remainder of the film will be about reclaiming fertility by way of becoming potent once more and will follow the standard narrative of an adventure romance: a few battles, a point of ritual death, and ultimately a conclusion that ends happily.

The goal, then, of the film is the return of erections to the now impotent men, and while the film is undoubtedly a sexploitation film or a sex comedy that thrives on sexual imagery, female nudity, bawdy and scatological humour, there is also, rightly, the recognition that this world has become an infertile world. This is important because infertility was not just a reproductive problem, but also a sexual problem. Impotence, which has seemingly been solved in our times thanks to the pharmaceutical industry, was a fear because of the ways it foreclosed both sexuality *and* reproduction. The women on the planet were “hornier than hell,” and the teacher explains to them that the problem is greater than not having sex (which speaks, of



course, the phallogentricity of sex), but it is also and perhaps more pressingly about the end of time. There will be no future without babies. Undoubtedly, this is the idea that haunts Lee Edelman's *No Future*, but his no future is about opting out, it is the anti-social thesis, rather than a finality imposed upon a population. Here then no future becomes a social problem.

While I have argued in the above that this film is about infertility and the future, there is also, of course, another timely reading of the film and one which I feel ought to be recognized even as I have foreclosed its possibility. It would be hard not to recognize that *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders* appears at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, when HIV/AIDS was found not just in gay men, as was once thought, but in a range of sexual subjects with a variety of sexual practices. This crisis also speaks to the seemingly apocalyptic fear—a fear that has not gone away in our age of pandemic (recalling that HIV/AIDS was, is, and remains a global pandemic). We fear diseases and illnesses, especially perhaps those acquired through penetration. Again, it would be easy to dismiss this film as junk, but it was a film that was a product of its time, it responded to a cultural moment, even if it is an outlier. As a sexploitation film, it arrives late, after the heyday of those films in the 1960s and 1970s. That said, I do think there is something interesting in this film and worthy of consideration, especially as there are additional readings that one could undertake of this film. One could, for instance, argue that this film tries to reclaim sexuality in an era of sex negativity and fear. Nowhere does this become more obvious than seeking the cure for impotence. The sex ray must be deflected, defeated, and diminished, and the solution becomes a supersized condom that goes over the ray and limits its menacing and threatening power, and this, of course, speaks readily to the HIV/AIDS crisis. In essence, we might read this in terms of the joy of safe sex, that safe sex is not about limiting pleasure but about ensuring pleasure in safer ways. This condom nonetheless may seem to foreclose my above reading about infertility, but I do not think that is the case. It is important to remember that when *Flesh* learns of the infertility pandemic, as it were, there are two outcomes: women being “hornier than hell” and the end of “children.” What remains true is that sex and reproduction are never that far apart.

While my focus has been on the infertile reading, the safe sex reading is also, I would suggest, a possible reading; indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that both readings can exist alongside one another and often do in the life of the couple. There are times when one is careful and times when one is carefully trying to conceive. These two readings then speak to the vitality of reading these texts, even if they are junk texts. Devoting time to these texts runs against John Champagne's argument, which can be summarized as “Stop reading films!” (1997, p. 76), though his concern is gay pornography. Champagne “want[s] to suggest polemically the absurdity and perhaps even perniciousness of submitting gay porno films in particular to close textual analysis” (1997, p. 76). While his concern is gay pornographies,

I would suspect that his argument is broader and more sweeping because he encourages his readers to think about “the tactical responses of (homo) sexual subjects to the historical situation of the exhibition of gay pornography [which] is of far more immediate pertinence than anything that can be said about any individual porno text” (1997, p. 77). I am, I must admit, not convinced that this must be an either/or scenario, for I think it could indeed be quite beneficial to study both the “tactical responses” and the “individual texts.” Certainly, in this chapter, as throughout *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities*, my interest is in the text itself as an object of interpretation. Each text tells a story of infertility. I think, perhaps, we are too quick to dismiss junk texts as texts, and we thus become sociologists of these texts, focusing instead on the culture and society around the texts. For instance, the readers of romance novels are often the subject of study and the novels that they read disappear from analysis; the same is often true in porn studies; oftentimes, the focus is on the viewers of pornography (even their pathologies) rather than on what they are viewing. As bad as *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders* may be—and I am not, to repeat, canonizing it—it does tell a story about the anxieties of impotence, the impossibility of the future, and the fantasy of being the last fertile man.

In the second case, then, I wish to turn to *Mr. Adam* by Pat Frank, which is as much a novel about infertility as it is a novel about the atomic or nuclear age. In “From Omega to *Mr. Adam*: the importance of literature for feminist science studies,” Susan Squier explains: “the jacket blurb explains that *Mr. Adam* ‘had been growing in [Frank’s] mind since the atomic bomb fell on Japan.’ Not surprisingly, the novel attributes the fertility crash to a nuclear accident” (1999, p. 150). *Mr. Adam* is responding to a culture in which “the bomb” has become a persistent fear and fascination, a novel that “concerns a global end to male fertility caused by a nuclear accident in Mississippi” (Squier 1999, p. 150). In *Mr. Adam*, then, two anxieties are cast alongside one another: the nuclear threat and the threat of infertility. These anxieties braid together, become intertwined with one another. Unsurprisingly, the infertility trope, which has been “recycled repeatedly” (Grech *et al.* 2013, p. 24), is also tied to the anxieties of the moment, whether it be a fear of a pandemic or the rise of a new technology. Sydna Stern Weiss notes that “authors treat nuclear issues by describing the world after a disaster, thus warning through nightmarish example” (1990, p. 94) and this is what happens in *Mr. Adam*. What does the world look like after a nuclear accident and moreover a world in which fertility has been lost because of the accident? It is as if the accident is not big enough; the outcomes need to be compounded to assure the point is sufficient enough to affect the reader.

Once more, when I consider *Mr. Adam*, I return to Grech and colleagues’ question about whether or not these narratives of the last fertile man are a kind of comedy or fantasy. *Mr. Adam*, unlike *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, does not embrace the fantasy narrative wherein one man becomes the sexual and reproductive saviour. Instead, *Mr. Adam* abandons

Grech and colleagues' questions altogether; at one point, the narrator explains:

The full implication of what he was saying began to sink in. Nature, in a final touch of irony, had picked an inhibited and sex-shy man to become the new father of his country. To some men the thought of possessing the entire female population as a private harem—even if most of the conception would be of necessity by remote control—would have been enormously satisfying to their ego. But to Homer it must have been sheer horror.

(1946, p. 62)

In *Mr. Adam*, we do not find the pleasure of Flesh Gordon's harem, as it were, but rather we find Homer Adam facing down the daunting and overwhelming task of responsibility. Homer stands alone and by himself is tasked with repopulating the planet. When he is discovered to be the last fertile man, he is taken into custody and provided protection. He becomes a kind of state secret: for now, the United States has the last fertile man living on an entirely infertile planet.

As part of this novel, as much as it is about the nuclear age and infertility, there is also a timely commentary about another societal concern, namely artificial insemination. The sexual fantasy of the last fertile man is muted, at the very least, because of the rise of artificial insemination, which brought about a host of ethical questions, questions that unfold in *Mr. Adam* (1946). To provide examples of this, in the March 1952 issue of *Sexology: Sex Science Magazine*, a kind of *Readers Digest* type of magazine, readers found an editorial that asked: "Is Artificial Insemination Legal?" and the same question would be asked again in an editorial in the June 1954 issue. In the 1952 editorial, Hugo Gernsback, perhaps best known for his contributions to science fiction, writes: "differences of opinion exist as to the legality of artificial insemination, especially when the donor is other than the husband" (1952, p. 479), and this is the very question at the heart of *Mr. Adam*. Homer Adam would be responsible for the continuation of the human race, but he would not be the husband to all the women who are inseminated. By 1954, not ten years since the publication of *Mr. Adam*, the editorial of *Sexology* notes that "Artificial Insemination (A.I.), the technique by which a woman is fertilized mechanically with semen from her husband or an unknown donor, has grown to such proportion that its legal aspects have become of increasing public importance" (Gernsback 1954, p. 683). Indeed, the legal aspects are all the more complicated when the donor is neither the husband nor unknown. Everyone knows that Homer Adam will be the donor. This magazine, *Sexology*, about which startling little has been written, is an important archive in the history of human sexuality, particularly in the United States, most especially because it so often reflects on the immediate concerns of society. For instance, as noted

above, in the relatively short period of two years, there were two articles about the legality of artificial insemination. In *Mr. Adam* these questions are taken to a kind of extreme endpoint. What would happen if there were one last fertile man following a nuclear accident? How would he go about inseminating fertile women? Artificial insemination offers a viable solution for the mass reproduction of the species, while also responding to ongoing anxieties about the decline of men (and their importance).

*Mr. Adam* is told from the perspective of Stephen Decatur Smith, who, readers will learn, “got involved in the most important story in the world” (p. 1) and the story is quite simply “no reservations in the maternity ward” (p. 2) and more particularly “people have quit making reservations to have their babies in Polyclinic Hospital, as of June 22” (p. 3). The reader, like Stephen, asks: why are there no more reservations? What would have caused this sudden cessation of reservations? At first, the answer seems to be that the hospitals are overanalysing the situation. Stephen explains to Thompson, who has provided him with this information:

Imagine an institution like Polyclinic spinning in a tizzy because people have decided not to make reservations five months ahead! Hospitals are just money-grubbing, capitalistic corporations, as I’ve always suspected. The truth is that people have just got damned sick and tired of kowtowing to those sacred, omnipotent institutions, the hospitals, and have decided to have their babies at home. And I might remind you that up until about a century ago all babies were born at home.

(p. 3)

Slowly, but surely, Stephen Decatur Smith begins to realize that this is indeed the “most important story in the world” and begins crafting an article for AP, taking this story to J. C. Pogey, who declares:

It may be, of course, the most terrible and certainly the most important story since the Creation. We must make the most thorough check, and yet we must not reveal what we’re after, or do anything that will bring premature publication. It may be simply an extraordinary coincidence—but I’m afraid not.

(p. 6)

The narrative here begins to outline its contours. Steve has stumbled upon a birthing problem, namely, there are no births scheduled:

I called Rochester, Philadelphia, Miami, and New Orleans, and then desperately swung west to San Francisco. The situation was identical. I called Chicago, St. Louis, and Omaha, and then tried some small towns in the South. So far as I could discover, our July birth rate was going to be zero.

(p. 7)

Recognizing that this may be a uniquely American problem, J. C. Pogey orders him to “try Montreal and Mexico City and B.A. and Rio” (p. 7). Very quickly in the narrative, readers get a sense of the urgency and severity of the problem. The story is, as Pogey suggests, the biggest story since “Creation,” which nicely bookends the creation narrative with its ultimate destruction. The world created must therefore come to an end, its future foreclosed. The birth rate of “zero” certainly means a global pandemic, but also speaks to finality. Without birth, there will be no future. Convinced that they must be mistaken, J. C. Pogey reaches out to journalists worldwide, only to learn that “the answers were all the same. So far as anyone could determine, no more children would be born after the last week in June. In Paris and London, very secret official investigations had already been started” (p. 11). Unsurprisingly, J. C. Pogey explains:

the whole world is like a man who knows he has cancer, but won't admit it, even to himself. However, it has to break some time, and as long as it has to break, the AP might as well break it

(p. 11)

recalling the old adage that “if it bleeds, it leads.” This is a story that the media needs to break and the AP might as well be the first news organization to do it. J. C. Pogey explains that:

I kept thinking of something General Farrell said after he witnessed the first atomic bomb explosion in New Mexico. He said, if I remember the words correctly, that the explosion ‘warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to the Almighty.

(p. 12)

Echoing Pogey, Steve speaks of “civilization now having the power to commit suicide at will. I thought about it, and I thought of the Mississippi disaster, and the thing began to come clear to me,” and then he asks, “When was it that Mississippi blew up? Wasn't it in September?” to which Pogey says, “That's it, of course! [...] The Mississippi explosion was September the twenty-first. Nine months to the day! Nine months the very day!” (p. 12). Pregnancy is a nine-month situation, the bomb becomes akin to an orgasm that sets into motion the birth of a new world—without any birth! And so closes the first chapter of the book. The disaster at Mississippi occurred when “the great new nuclear fission plants at Bohrville, Mississippi [...] disintegrated in an explosion that made Nagasaki and Hiroshima mere cap pistols by comparison” (p. 13). There is recognition here of the various reactions to that event in Mississippi and the effect it had on the world, for instance, “the United Nations had no trouble pledging its members to outlaw the atom as a weapon of war” (p. 14), but only now are the effects considered in terms of fertility: “since Mississippi blew up, no babies have

been conceived anywhere on earth, so far as we can find out” (p. 15). While explaining this story to a scientist, Pell, who rightly asks if women have been affected as well, Steve explains:

Of course the investigations aren’t complete. [...] A group of doctors has been making as many examinations as possible. But thus far they’ve found that all men are sterilized without exception, while few if any women were affected. The doctors say almost all women still ovulate, and the Fallopian tubes have not been damaged.

(p. 17)

Thus, to be sure, this is a story about men’s infertility. As with earlier narratives, such as *The Trouble with Joe*, there is a sense of emasculation here because men have seemingly taken on women’s roles (Reeser 2010, p. 148), especially as infertility is so often imagined as a women’s issue. The women, unlike the men, are ready and able to have babies, their bodies are still functioning as they should (Pell classifies this as “theoretical” [p. 17] at this stage). Slowly the stories begin to move “across the wires” (p. 17) and very quickly, of course, the government becomes involved: “Surgeon General George Gail announced that he has called a congress of the nation’s leading physicians and scientists early next week. They will meet in the capital to plan national re-fertilization” (pp. 18–19). Stephen will receive a phone call from Maria Ostenheimer, who is, as the book describes her, a “lady obstetrician” (p. 22), who tells Stephen that “listen carefully. A baby is going to be born—may have been born already—in Tarrytown” (p. 22). Stephen is somewhat doubtful explaining that,

just last week I flew down to a place called Big Stone Gap, Virginia, on one of those tips, and we landed in a cornfield and ground-looped, and it turned out to be a baby, all right, but a baby born to a circus elephant named Priscilla.

(p. 22)

These kinds of stories, one supposes, would likely be the kinds of urban legends that might offer a bit of hope during infertile times. But Maria convinces him that “this is the real thing” (p. 22). Stephen organizes himself and heads to Tarrytown, where he will meet the eponymous Mr. Adam. As Stephen arrives, a baby is indeed born and “she’s average and normal” (p. 26). Stephen quickly calls Poge and tells him a baby has been born, and Stephen begins to converse with Adam, who cannot quite fathom why this is news, “you’d think there’d never been a baby born before” (p. 26).

This becomes the backdrop for *Mr. Adam* and now the story will move squarely to focus on his character, with Steven continuing as our narrator-correspondent. Readers learn that “as a boy he was rather shy” and despite

being “much too tall for [his] age. The older, but smaller boys used to beat [him] up” and he explains: “I think it gave me an inferiority complex” (p. 28). As such, readers are being introduced to a bit of a pathetic character who will be charged with a less than pathetic task. Homer Adam laments, “why did this have to happen to me?” to which Steve responds, “Don’t be a damn fool. [...] You’re a very lucky and remarkable man. Why, you’re the luckiest guy on earth” (p. 30). Such a difference of perspective gets at the heart of the question about how we are to understand these last fertile man narratives. Steve might see the utopian and even fantasy potential therein, but for Homer Adam this is a tragedy. For a shy man, Homer Adam is about to be the focus of the entire world. The baby is compared to the spectacle of the Dionne Quintuplets. The tragedy becomes compounded more and more, for instance, “with the arrival of Colonel Merle Phelps-Smythe at Rosemere, Homer began to understand fully his future role in the national, and possibly the world scene” (p. 33). This book does not allow for the fantasy that was witnessed in *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders*, but instead wallows in those tragic elements—there is a world of responsibility placed on Homer Adam’s shoulders that cannot be denied.

The challenge here becomes that Adam is unprepared and unwilling to do the reproductive task. This book in its tragedy works through the polemics, ethical and moral, in particular. For instance,

Suppose something happened to Homer Adam before we began? Anyway, we can not make maximum—perhaps not even normal—use of Homer Adam until he again becomes a tranquil, normal man. Even if we were able to use him in his present state—which is doubtful—we might create a race of physical and nervous wrecks.

(p. 45)

It is likely obvious to most readers, and it is hard not to notice that the author makes use of two names thought to be generators of all of mankind: Homer as a kind of father of literature, and Adam as the father of man. Here then, the challenges that arise are very much about futurity and the health of the species, all the while accounting for Adam’s well-being. He is a security risk and a threat.

In “Mothers, Monsters, and Machines,” Rosi Braidotti has braided together maternity, monstrosity, and machines in fruitful ways to think through maternal bodies, both as monstrous and as machines. Her context is, of course, different from mine, but I find the ideas that underpin her work helpful in reading *Mr. Adam*. Homer Adam is both a machine and monstrous. His body becomes a machine, by which I mean, following Braidotti, a “scientific, political, and discursive field of technology in the broadest sense of the term” (1997, p. 61), and his body is also monstrous, insofar as it is “deviant, an a-nomaly; it is abnormal” (p. 62), for his is the only productive and reproductive body. For Braidotti,

There is no apparent connection among these three terms and yet the link soon becomes obvious if I add that recent development in the field of biotechnology, particularly artificial procreation, have extended the power of science over the maternal body of women. The possibility of mechanizing the maternal function is by now well within our reach.

(p. 62)

All of this leads Braidotti to declare that “there is therefore a political urgency about the future of women in the new reproductive technology debate, which gives a polemical force to my constellation of ideas—mothers, monsters, and machines” (p. 62). Braidotti’s article is so prescient and timely (and one that I return to often), but I wonder how Braidotti would make sense of declining sperm counts, the fear of male infertility, and what that might mean for “mothers, monsters, and machines.” Braidotti’s argument, of course, is about “the future of women,” but I cannot help see the implications of her argument on Homer Adam. His body is about to become the machine responsible for ensuring the maternal. His body is monstrous, insofar as it is an anomaly. And it is also a machine, insofar as it will be used to “mass-produce.” Moreover, his body will become part of the national structure and will be protected by the military, all the while he will lose very key parts of his own self, including identity and agency. Homer Adam becomes an asset of the government, shared between the National Re-fertilization Project (NRP) and the National Research Council (NRC), and when this is announced, Steve stops being a journalist and becomes “nursemaid to the potential father of his country” (Frank 1946, p. 45). Braidotti is invested in asking important feminist questions about the state of women, and so, against that backdrop, she asks:

How can we *affirm* the positivity of female subjectivity at a time in history when our acquired perceptions of “the subject” are being radically questioned? How can we reconcile the recognition of the problematic nature of the notion and the construction of the subject with the political necessity to posit female subjectivity?

(1997, p. 61)

In this context of her work, these questions are important because they get at the heart of the matter, but her work depends upon a fertile economy, as it were, whereas in *Mr. Adam*, the questions that unfold could very much be about male subjectivity, at least for the last fertile man, who watches as his identity is chipped away over the course of the novel, his rights to agency diminished. The goal here is not to take feminist theory and say, but what about men? But rather to suggest that this book, while playing with the last fertile male trope, is also asking timely and important questions that relate directly to the ongoing anxieties about the technology of sexual



reproduction—technology becomes a threat to a host of ideas and identities, whether they be something like “intimacy” and “love” or identities like “sex.” What is so threatening about infertility, especially on a global scale, is that infertility would threaten not just the species (as if that isn’t bad enough), but the very ideas around which the social is organized. This fear is why Homer Adam becomes so important, so vital to the stability of the nation, to what we now call “homeland security.”

This dissolution of identity happens rapidly after the government acquires Homer Adam. He explains to Steve:

They treated me like a prize puppy dog. They wouldn’t let me off this floor, except when they came to put me on exhibit. Then they’d dress me up, and lead me around to a party where I didn’t know anybody, and show me off like I deserved a blue ribbon. I’m not a freak! I’m a normal human being.

(Frank 1946, p. 61)

In her work, Braidotti has called attention to the freak as a figure, drawing on the work of Leslie Fiedler, wherein he “analyses the exploitation of monsters for the purposes of entertainment. From the county fairs, right across rural Europe to the Coney Island sideshows, freaks have always been entertaining” (Braidotti 1997, p. 74). The challenge here, however, is that Homer Adam is more than the “freak show,” he is the “future show.” What is all the more striking about Homer Adam’s use of “freak” is that it aligns with the ways in which the freak was “presented as belonging to the realm of zoology or anthropology, doctors and physicians examined them regularly and wrote scientific reports about them” (Braidotti 1997, p. 75), which is precisely what is happening to Homer Adam: “they’d discuss me like I was a stud horse—right in front of my face. How long I could be expected to produce, and whether they should inject testosterone, and stuff like that” (Frank 1946, p. 61). He is an asset of the NRP, being studied by the NRC, and he is to be consumed by the masses, for he will be the father of the nation. Indeed, he has been removed from the world he once knew; he tells Steve, “I want Mary Ellen now more than I’ve ever wanted anything in all my life, I need her, Steve. I’ve got to have her” (p. 62), which is to say, they have denied him access to his wife and to the mother of his child. He is wholly without agency.

As the novel continues, taxpayers grow frustrated with the NRP: “Not only has the N.R.P. failed to promote the conception of a single baby—although it has been provided with unlimited funds—but it has as yet announced no definite plans for utilizing Mr. Adam” (Frank 1946, p. 94). All of this unfolds as rumours begin to swirl, and Fay, a Senator, reports that

news has just reached us that in Outer Mongolia there are two men capable of perpetuating the human race. Now I do not begrudge the

Communists the right to continue, but think what it would mean if the world were swarming with Communistic Mongols.

Fay, a Senator (Frank 1946, p. 94)

Once more, readers can see how quickly Mr. Adam is framed as a national asset, especially in the age of the Cold War, where the options are the American way or the Communist way. What is so often missing from all of this is any recognition of the rights, if any, of Homer Adam.

As the novel works to a close, whereby Homer Adam has been denied numerous rights, as it were, because he has failed his responsibility, he leaves a note for Steve, wherein he explains, “please consider this my resignation from N.P.R. Under the Constitution and by other laws I have got as much right to resign as anyone else, and I resign, as of now” (Frank 1946, p. 143). He explains that he is leaving with Kathy, a woman he met while separated from his wife and with whom he wanted to procreate, but was denied. He closes his letter explaining:

I am sorry to leave Mary Ellen and little Eleanor, but there is money enough to care for them. I think Mary Ellen will understand that my only chance for happiness is to resign and go away with Kathy. She is the only one who has the courage to help me. So, goodbye, Steve.

(p. 144)

As much as this is a personal crisis and a marital crisis, the greater crisis is national: “Homer Adam [...] has run away” (p. 145) just as they are about to begin the re-fertilization project. He has abandoned his responsibilities for the human race, as it were, in pursuit of happiness, life, and liberty. Kathy betrays him and he returns to the project.

Once more, Homer Adam becomes nationalized, a property of the nation. A directive is prepared by the War Department and signed by the President, which reads, in part, “Homer Adam, civilian, is hereby declared Class AAA Strategic Material *vital* to the defense to the United States” (Frank 1946, p. 181, emphasis mine). It should not be lost on us that Homer Adam becomes a “strategic material” that is *vital* to the defence of the United States; he is quite literally the life source for the nation. Or, more particularly, within him is found the “strategic material” that is “vital” to the nation. The directive continues and notes that “the Department of War will be responsible for the maintenance and security of this property,” and further that “Homer Adam, civilian, will at all times be subservient to, and conduct himself according to whatever rules and regulations shall be promulgated by the Chief of Staff, or Adjutant General” (Frank 1946, p. 181). If ever we had reason to doubt that the last fertile man is a tragedy for Homer Adam, those doubts must surely be squashed. He is no longer framed as a person with inalienable rights, but rather is “strategic material” and he has become a “property” necessary for the “vitality” of the nation. It is hard now to see Homer

Adam as anything more than a machine and a technology in the service of the nation. Braidotti speaks of “the manipulation of life through different combinations of genetic engineering [which] has allowed for the creation of new artificial monsters in high-tech labs of our biochemists” (1997, p. 62), and while her concern is very much around “the maternal function” (p. 62), it does seem a similar strategy and politic is unfolding in *Mr. Adam*, he is quickly become a kind of “artificial monsters in high-tech labs,” labs governed by both the nation and “the National Research Council [which] shall have the opportunity to use said Homer Adam for purposes of research upon the approval of the Joint Chiefs of Staff” (Frank 1946, p. 181).

Following this, the novel works to its close, and at a baseball game, Steve learns, alongside all those in attendance:

Well, folks, I'm sorry to have to interrupt this ball game, but we've just received an important news flash. But before I read this flash I want to tell you that for calm nerves—nerves able to withstand the shock of modern living—smoke...[...] And here is that flash, folks. Homer Adam ruined! Yes, sir, a flash from Washington tells us that Homer Adam has been ruined. That is all for now, but as we receive additional details we'll give them to you, so you might as well keep tuned to this exciting ball game.

(p. 186)

What might it mean for Homer Adam to be ruined? Speculation is quick and Steve's wife declares, “I knew that they'd sterilize Homer!” (p. 186), which leads her to acknowledge the end: “There it goes” to which Steve asks, “There goes what?” and she responds, “Everything. Just everything. That pitiful little man!” (p. 187). There is an ironic tone here given Homer Adam is not little at all, recalling he is quite tall. He is made little because of his sterility. He is now little because he is no longer able to fulfil the larger demands and duties expected of him, as the one last remaining fertile man. The entire operation has come to an end, Homer Adam is ruined, the two Mongolians turned out to be a ruse, and the end has arrived. Steve confronts Dr. Pell who has been part of the operation to re-fertilize the nation and accuses him of sterilizing Homer Adam, to which Pell responds angrily: “He certainly was not sterilized by accident, [...] he did it himself! [...] Yes, he committed what amounted to sexual suicide” (p. 190).

Homer Adam, in essence, has denied humanity its future by denying it his “strategic material” (p. 181). One can hear the echoes of Lee Edelman's “anti-social thesis,” wherein Homer Adam has opted to remove himself from the social. In her summation of Edelman's work, Mari Ruti writes,

Edelman utters a resounding *No!* to all fantasies of a better future, to the kinds of fantasies of progress that are upheld by both neoliberal capitalist order and the mainstream lgbtq movement. Edelman

claims that such fantasies—which imply that one day things will be better—merely obscure the fact that the day we are waiting for will never come.

(2017, p. 27)

Indeed, it is as if Homer Adam has embodied the “resounding *No!*” of Edelman and put an end to all hopes that “one day things will be better.” Homer Adam has committed “sexual suicide,” which we can assume is rather significant, given that “by the time we found him he had sterilized himself thoroughly. He’s lucky he’s not dead” (Frank 1946, p. 191). As Steve narrates:

With Adam ruined, the two Mongolians a myth, the N.R.C. baffled and helpless, and the N.R.P. on the verge of liquidation, the situation was black as a British communiqué the day before Dunkirk. Yet the customs and habits of man kept him revolving in his orbit as inexorably as planets are bound to the sun. The world would not die in agony and convulsions. It would simply expire of old age.

(Frank 1946, p. 198)

No future indeed. Of course, the novel cannot end here. Such a conclusion may well elevate this novel to literary fiction, which need not require a positive ending. Shortly, Marge, Steve’s wife, says, “I was just going out and get some lemons. [...] I’ve got a frightful craving for lemons” (p. 204). Cravings, of course, are the symptom about which many a joke has been written with regard to pregnancy. Cravings are a sign of something to come: “Marge is going to have a baby!” (p. 205). During this period of no future, their friend Tommy had put together a tonic and it appears to have worked, and sure enough Steve has regained his fertility. The novel closes with hope in the future.

Homer Adam’s story is undoubtedly a tragic one, one in which he loses more and more power, he becomes less and less of a man and instead becomes a monster to be observed and consumed, a machine for the nation-state that promises a future with his “strategic material” (Frank 1946, p. 181). Indeed, strikingly, all of the hope of his namesake, Adam, luxuriating in the Garden of Eden and becoming the father of the humanity, is lost just as quickly as Adam lost his freedom. Homer Adam’s story is one of tragedy, the fantasy is one of despair.

Positioning *Mr. Adam* alongside *Flesh Gordon and the Cosmic Cheerleaders* may have seemed preposterous, and perhaps it still remains that way for some readers. Indeed, they are very different texts. While generically one is a sex comedy and the other a speculative novel, they trade in different styles, too: one is serious and the other not. Even so, however, it seems to me that both of these texts tangle with a fundamental question about the idea of being the last fertile man: is this a fantasy or not? Is this a tragedy

or not? How are we to make sense of the repeated stories of only one fertile man left? In *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities*, I have been fascinated by the stories we tell about infertility, and this story, the last fertile man, is a part of those stories. They occupy our attention, which is why we tell these stories over and over again, as if, upon a new telling, we will finally reveal the meaning of the story. But instead, new stories appear, each time playing with the archetype or the trope that has become so recognizable to each of us. These stories haunt and illuminate our imaginations because they strike at the core of who we are. If reproduction were to cease, what would we do with our differences which have so often been tied to our sense of self? What would it mean to live in a world with no future? Certainly, this latter question may be all the more pressing in our imaginations as we continue to see news reports of declining sperm quality, stories that have been compounded by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, these stories will continue to capture our attention because they speak to a genuine fear of the end. What unites all of these stories is the idea that the only way we can survive is with sperm. These texts leave us to ask if we could even have an imagined future where men are completely written out of the economy of conception. What alternatives might the future—however distant or not—develop? These texts all speak to cultural anxieties about the sperm cell as the progenitor of the human.

## Note

- 1 Jane Gallop, a professor of literature and literary theory, particularly feminism, queer theory, and psychoanalysis, has spent her career thinking through this polemic and has gone back and forth on the question. It is valuable for a reader to consider the various pieces Gallop has written together and alongside one another because it shows the development of an idea, a question remaining unanswered. See, for instance, Gallop 1982a, 1982b, 1988, 2018, 2019. The idea of the phallus runs throughout Gallop's work.



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# Index

Note: Page numbers followed by “n” denote endnotes.

- Abraham (religious texts) 4  
accidents, nuclear 138, 140  
Acevedo-Muñoz, Ernesto R. 58  
adaptations 25, 29, 40  
Adrian, Stine Willum 106  
adultery 14, 27, 33, 34, 132  
*Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Tanner) 33  
*Against Love* (Kipnis) 93  
Ahmed, S. 69, 124  
Almeling, R. 52; *GUYnecology: The Missing Science of Men's Reproductive Health* 51  
anal sex 22, 35n2  
*Anatomy of Criticism* (Frye) 10  
*Anatomy of Melancholy* (Burton) 9  
andrology 102  
“Annus Mirabilis” (Larkin) 18  
anxieties 85, 90, 100, 102, 107, 109, 110, 128, 129, 138, 140, 144  
Arminian theology 50n2  
artificial insemination 108, 129, 139, 140  
*The Art of Waiting: On Fertility, Medicine, and Motherhood* (Boggs) 1  
Atwood, Margaret 4  
audience 57, 58, 84, 85, 97, 118, 121, 132  
*The Baby Due Date* (Carpenter) 66  
*The Baby Legacy* (Toth) 66  
Barrett-Fox, Rebecca 40  
bedtime stories 3  
Beggan, James K. 56, 57, 65n2  
Berlant, Lauren 14  
*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Sedgwick) 41  
Bible 20, 37, 38, 49  
biblical story 38, 40, 44  
biological function 61  
biomedicalization, body 57  
“Blogging Wounded Manhood: Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity and the Crisis of the Male (In)Fertile Body” (Rome) 86  
Boggs, Belle 1; *The Art of Waiting: On Fertility, Medicine, and Motherhood* 1  
Bond, Candis 19  
Bond, Henry 103; *Lacan at the Scene* 103  
Braidotti, R. 110  
breeding 105, 106  
Burton: *Anatomy of Melancholy* 9  
*Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry* (Jones) 60  
Carpenter, Teresa 66  
Carroll, N. 128  
censorship 18  
*The CEO's Unexpected Child* (Laurence) 66  
Chamberlin, J. Edward 1–3  
Champagne, J. 137  
characters 2, 9, 41, 42, 45, 48, 50, 58, 59, 114, 119  
*Charlie's Angels* (Munroe) 36  
childlessness 1, 2  
children 3, 42, 53, 68, 70, 71, 78, 89, 114, 115, 117, 118, 120, 123, 126  
*Children of Men* (James) 130  
Cialis 12  
*Claiming His Royal Heir* (Lewis) 66  
clinic 110–112  
clinical setting 102, 103, 108–110

- clinical space 15, 102, 103, 107, 108, 110, 111  
 Clinton, Hilary 69  
 Colino, S. 59; *Count Down: How Our Modern World is Threatening Sperm Counts, Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race* 59  
 community 10, 11, 37, 128  
 conception 1, 12, 54, 149  
*Confessions* (Rousseau) 83  
 Connell, R.W. 55, 108  
 Connery, Sean 135  
 consciousness 23, 32  
 contract 33, 34, 40, 69, 102, 122–124  
 contrapuntal technique 20  
 Cossey, Mark 83, 89, 91, 93, 95, 96  
*Count Down: How Our Modern World is Threatening Sperm Counts, Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race* (Swan and Colino) 59  
 couples 5, 6, 40, 41, 66, 68, 69, 74, 85, 88–90, 101, 104  
 Cragun, Ryan T. 62  
 crime scenes 103  
 cryopreservation 121  
 culture 2, 13, 57, 69, 109, 111, 115, 118, 138
- Daniels, Cynthia R. 11; *The Science and Politics of Men's Reproduction* 11  
 Dean, Tim 105, 106; *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* 105, 106  
 declining sperm 102, 127, 144  
 De Costa, C. 112; *Dick: A User's Guide* 112  
 Derrida, Jacques 40  
 Deuteronomy 39, 49  
*Diagnostic Statistics Manual* (Inhorn) 109  
*Dick: A User's Guide* (Moore and De Costa) 112  
 Dines, Gail 56  
 dominance 55, 56, 98  
 Donnelly, Kristen 40  
 Druce, Charlie; *Ripping Up the Script: One Couple's Journey Through Infertility, a Man's Perspective* (Druce) 85  
 Dukes, Tommy 32
- Edelman, Elijah Adiv 113n1  
 Edelman, Lee 16, 70, 137  
*The Educated Imagination* (Frye) 2  
 ejaculation 51–65, 91, 100–113; imperative 55, 60, 108–109; inseparability of 62; premature 12, 61, 102  
*The Elusive Embryo: How Women and Men Approach New Reproductive Technologies* (Becker) 70  
 emasculation 8  
*Embarazados (We are Pregnant)* (Spanish film) 16, 101, 104  
 emotional labor 60  
 emotional rollercoaster 94  
 emotions 13, 93–95, 100  
 erection 61, 63, 64, 93, 133, 136  
 erotic triangle 42  
*especially when the donor is other than the husband* 139  
 essential elements 88  
 Exodus 37, 38  
 explicit sex scenes 22  
*Exposing Men: The Science and Politics of Men's Reproduction* (Daniels) 11
- failures 41, 53, 55, 61, 64, 76–78, 81, 89, 91–93  
 faith 2, 3, 5, 40, 87  
 fatherhood 15, 33, 62, 67, 75, 77–80, 86, 93  
*Fearful Symmetry* (Frye) 26  
 fecundity 53, 61  
 feelings 26, 32, 45, 47, 48, 73, 76, 84, 89, 92–95  
 female degradation 105  
 feminism 17n1, 149n1; *see also* women  
 Ferran, Pascale 31  
 fertility 24, 25, 28, 31, 54, 67, 68, 71, 87, 89, 101, 110, 112, 118, 119, 135; clinic 91, 103, 104; treatments 15  
 fiction 1–3, 9, 10, 21, 127, 128  
 Fiedler, Leslie 145  
*The First and Second Lady Chatterley Novels* (Mehl and Jansohn) 20  
*The Flame and the Flower* (Woodiwiss) 36  
*Flesh Gordon Meets the Cosmic Cheerleaders* (comedy) 16, 127, 131, 134, 143  
 fluid, seminal 15, 59, 63–65  
 Foucault, Michel 115; *History of Sexuality* 70

- Frank, Pat 138; *Mr. Adam* 138–140, 142
- Freud, S. 61; *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 61
- Frye, Northrop 2, 9, 10, 23, 24, 28; *Fearful Symmetry* 26; “Literature as Therapy” 10
- The Fulfillment* (Spencer) 36–50, 52, 67
- Gallop, Jane 21, 31, 149n1; *Sex, Disability, and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus* 21
- Gant, R. 20, 34n1; *The First Lady Chatterley’s Lover* 20
- Gather: On the Joys of Storytelling* (Van Camp) 11
- gay pornography 137, 138
- gender 12, 94; ideology 67; post-structural study of 12
- generic commonalities 15
- Genesis 4, 20, 29, 38, 44
- Georgis, Dina 7, 8
- Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Jensen) 112
- Gilead 4, 6
- Goodman, R.T.: *Infertilities: Exploring Fictions of Barren Bodies* 21
- Good Quality: The Routinization of Sperm Banking in China* (Wahlberg) 54
- Gordon, Joan 129
- Gorfinkel, E. 132
- Gough, B. 94
- The Graduate* (Webb) 18
- Grainville, Cousin de 130; *Le Dernier Homme* 130
- Gray, Jonathan 36; *The Flame and the Flower* 36
- Gray, Mary 36; *The Fulfillment of Mary Gray* 36
- Green, R. 133
- Greenblatt, Stephen 3
- Grosz, Elizabeth 63
- Guyland 114–119, 132
- GUYnecology: The Missing Science of Men’s Reproductive Health* (Almeling) 51
- Hall, Matthew 135
- The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood) 4
- Hanna, E. 94
- happiness 48, 49, 54, 69, 125, 146
- Harlequin romance 15
- Harrison, Laura 16n1
- “Hearing the Better Story: Learning and the Aesthetics of Loss and Expulsion” (Georgis) 7
- hegemonic masculinity 6, 15, 21, 55, 60–64, 82n1, 87, 91, 98
- heterotopia 115
- Hind, Emily 87
- historicizes semen 54
- History of Sexuality* (Foucault) 70
- Hoebeker, Piet 115; *Members Club: A User’s Guide to the Penis*: 115
- Hollinger, Veronica 129
- homosociality 75, 98
- Howard, Linda: *Tears of the Renegade* 72
- How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup: A Guy’s Guide to the World of Infertility* (Wolfe) 81, 87, 90, 107
- human sperm 59, 60, 100
- humour 88
- Hutchinson, S. 52
- hybrid masculinities 78
- hybrid masculinity theory 82n1
- identities 59, 62, 105, 118, 144, 145
- If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* (Chamberlin) 3
- impotent/impotence 12, 14, 19–22, 32, 76, 131, 133–138
- infertile 4, 8, 15, 16, 29, 34, 36, 52, 67, 77, 81, 89, 114, 121, 126
- infertile couples 54, 74, 126
- infertile hero 15, 67, 73, 77
- infertile world 127, 130, 136
- infertilities 1–17, 21, 51, 53, 54, 71, 74, 76, 81, 83, 84, 86, 88, 94, 101, 127–129; biological problem 3; *The Fulfillment* 36–50, 52; knowledge of 71; in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* 14, 18–35; materiality of 15; medicalization of 90; men’s experiences of 84; men’s memoirs of 83–99; in *Not Suitable for Children* 114–126; representations of 14; stories 16, 34; stories of 51; in *The Trouble with Joe* 66–82; women’s issue 5, 13
- Infertilities: Exploring Fictions of Barren Bodies* (Goodman) 21
- Infertility: Tracing the History of a Transformative Term* (Jensen) 12
- Inhorn, M.C. 109; *Diagnostic Statistics Manual* 109
- interdisciplinary approach 7

- intimacy 27, 40, 57, 74, 93, 123, 130  
invisible money shot 105, 106  
in vitro fertilization 52, 129  
Iser, Wolfgang 48  
*The Italian Doctor's Wife* (Morgan) 66
- Jackson, Dennis 20  
James, P.D.: *Children of Men* (James) 130  
Jansohn, Christa 20; *The First and Second Lady Chatterley Novels* 20  
Jensen, R.E.: *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* 112; *Infertility: Tracing the History of a Transformative Term* 12  
Johnson, Michael 55, 60, 91, 108, 111  
Jones, Alan 60, 132; *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry* 60  
*Journal of Sexual Medicine* 92  
Jung, E. Alex 56  
junk fictions 2, 127–129, 132, 133  
juxtapositions 14, 20, 23, 24, 34
- Kampf, Antje 109  
Karioris, F.G. 112  
Kimmel, Michael 62, 75  
Kipnis, Laura: *Against Love* 93  
kissing 72, 122–123  
Kleegman, Sophia 53  
knowledge, real 32, 33  
Koteliansky, S. S. 19
- labour 16, 93, 112  
*Lacan at the Scene* (Bond) 103  
*Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Lawrence) 14, 18–36  
Laqueur, Thomas W. 38  
Larkin, Philip 18; “Annus Mirabilis” 18  
*The Last Man* (Shelley) 130  
Latham, Rob 133; “Sextrapolation in New Wave Science Fiction” 133  
Laurence, Andrea: *The CEO's Unexpected Child* (Laurence) 66  
Lawrence, D.H. 14, 18, 20, 21; *Lady Chatterley's Lover* 18–35; *Studies in Classic American Literature* 23; *White Peacock* 23  
*Le Dernier Homme* (Grainville) 130  
lesbian 121, 122  
Levirate law 39  
Lewis, B. 8, 9  
Lewis, Bradley: *Narrative Psychiatry: How Stories Can Shape Clinical Practice* 8
- Lewis, Jennifer: *Claiming His Royal Heir* 66  
*A Lineage of Grace* (Rivers) 40  
literary case histories 9  
literary training 9  
“Literature as Therapy” (Frye) 10  
*L'Onanisme* (Tissot) 38  
love melancholy 10  
“low-tech” reproduction 62  
Luke 4
- machines 110, 143, 144, 147, 148  
male bodies 12, 108, 110, 111  
male infertility 5, 6, 12, 13, 36, 67, 68, 71, 80, 82, 88; *see also* infertilities  
manhood 75, 76, 79, 80, 83, 88, 91–94, 110, 115; ideas of 79  
*Man Up to Infertility* (Roscoe) 92  
marriage 33, 34, 40, 42, 68, 72, 124  
Marsiglio, W. 52  
*Masculinities* (Connell) 55  
masculinity/masculinities 6, 11–13, 15, 51–65, 73, 76–78, 81, 86, 92, 98, 100–113; hybrid 78; idealized 73; idealized hegemonic 55, 108; natural aspects of 13; negotiating hegemonic 86; penis, role 13; potential challenges to 15; reproductive 11; social construction of 12; spectacular 66, 73  
masturbation 38, 101, 103, 109, 110, 112  
*Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Rosewarne) 57  
maternal bodies 143, 144  
*Maybe Baby: An Infertile Love Story* (Miller) 84, 89  
McLaren, A. 133  
McLuhan, Marshall 1  
medical intervention 74  
Mehl, Dieter 20; *The First and Second Lady Chatterley Novels* 20  
melancholy 10, 16  
*Members Club: A User's Guide to the Penis* (Hoebeke) 115  
memoirs 15, 16, 83–88, 90, 92, 94, 95, 97, 98, 104  
*The Men and the Boys* (Connell) 55  
Meyer, Jeffrey 20  
Miller, Henry: *Tropic of Cancer* 18  
Miller, M.M.F. 83, 97; *Maybe Baby: An Infertile Love Story* 84, 89  
*Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (Phillips) 120

- money shot 16, 57, 104–110, 112, 133;  
transformed 106–110
- Moon, Michael 7
- Moore, Lisa Jean 54, 56, 60, 62, 64,  
105, 111
- Moore, M.C. 112; *Dick: A User's Guide*  
112
- Morgan, Sarah: *The Italian Doctor's  
Wife* (Morgan) 66
- Mr. Adam* (Frank) 16, 138–140, 142,  
144
- Munroe, Kris 36; *Charlie's Angels* 36
- Murphy, T.F. 92
- nakedness 24, 27, 29
- narrative psychiatry 8–9
- Narrative Psychiatry: How Stories Can  
Shape Clinical Practice* (Lewis) 8
- narratives 8, 63, 64, 68, 69, 86, 89, 98,  
100, 117, 128–131, 142, 143
- narratological elements, story 9
- Nathaniel, L. 94, 95; *Running on  
Empty: How My Wife and I  
Overcame Infertility* 85, 94
- Neal, Lynn S. 41, 50n2
- Neustadter, R. 83
- news stories 1
- Nin, Anaïs 18
- North, Peter 65n2
- Noth, Martin 37
- Not Suitable for Children* (Australian  
film) 16, 114–126
- Oaklander, Mandy 5, 6
- Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-  
Pollution* (pamphlet) 38
- oral histories 2
- Or Words to that Effect: Orality and  
the Writing of Literary History*  
(Chamberlin) 1
- paternity 48, 61, 62, 67, 68, 78, 80, 83
- Pearson, Wendy Gay 129
- performance anxieties 109
- phallic reality 19, 20, 22, 32, 34
- phallic sexuality 21, 36
- phallus 21, 32, 61, 134–136
- Phillips, Adam 6, 16, 120, 122, 123
- physical injustice 26
- Pogey, J. C. 140, 141
- polysemic interpretation 57
- pornographic scene 105, 110
- pornography 16, 63, 92, 103–105, 107,  
108, 110–112, 135, 138
- Preciado, P.B. 16, 62, 104, 108
- pregnancy 19, 67, 73, 75, 76, 87, 88,  
90, 91, 102, 108, 119, 126
- premature ejaculation 12, 61, 102
- Psalm 16n1, 37
- psychiatry, narrative 8, 9
- psychoanalysis 8
- public discourse 14
- quality 5, 54, 63, 101
- Queer as Folk* (television series) 103,  
126n1
- quiverfull movement 16n1
- The Reader* (film) 18
- Réage, Pauline: *The Story of O* 18
- “‘Real Heroes Care’: How Dad  
Bloggers Are Reconstructing  
Fatherhood and Masculinity”  
(Scheibling) 86
- reality television 1
- real knowledge 32–33
- Redekop, M. 14; *Making Believe:  
Questions About Mennonites and  
Art* 14
- Reeser, Todd W. 13
- reproduction 11, 52, 136
- reproduction industry 106, 108
- reproductive biology 12
- reproductive futurism 67, 69–72
- reproductive health 51, 118
- reproductive masculinity 11
- reproductive sexuality 22, 70;  
superiority of 22
- responsibility 16, 93, 115, 124, 129,  
139, 143, 146
- Richards, Emilie: *The Trouble with Joe*  
66–82
- Ricoeur, P. 52, 53
- Ripping Up the Script: One Couple's  
Journey Through Infertility, a Man's  
Perspective* (Druce) 85
- The Rise and Fall of Adam and  
Eve: The Story that Created Us*  
(Greenblatt) 3
- ritual death 44
- Rivers, Francine 40; *A Lineage of Grace*  
40
- Roach, Catherine 99n1; *Happily Ever  
After: The Romance Story in Popular  
Culture* 99n1
- Roberts, Thomas 128
- Rogers, Rosemary 36; *Sweet Savage  
Love* 36
- romance novels 10, 40, 41, 67, 69, 77,  
82, 128, 138

- Rome, Jennifer Marie 86  
 Rosanowski, A. 67  
 Roscoe, Pete 92  
 Rosewarne, L. 57; *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* 57  
 Ross, J.M. 61  
 Rousseau, Jean Jacques: *Confessions* 83  
 Rowley, Sarah B. 16n1  
*Running on Empty: How My Wife and I Overcame Infertility* (Nathaniel) 85, 94  
 Russell, K. 30  
 Ruti, Mari 70, 147
- safe sex 137  
 Sarah (religious texts) 4, 5  
 Saunders, Michael: *Test Tubes and Testosterone* 85  
 scene: crime 103; pornographic 105, 110  
 Schaefer, Eric 132  
 Scheibling, Casey 86; “‘Real Heroes Care’: How Dad Bloggers Are Reconstructing Fatherhood and Masculinity” 86  
 science fiction 10, 129, 133, 139  
 Scott, Bonnie Kime 21  
*Screening Sex* (Williams) 106  
 Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky 41, 42, 98, 124  
 self-pollution 38, 135  
 Selleck, Tom 135  
 semen 15, 53, 54, 56–60, 63, 64, 77, 91, 100, 101, 105, 110, 111; analysis 54, 111; scientific discovery of 111  
 semen/seminal anxieties 60, 101  
 seminal fluid 15, 59, 63–65  
 sex 19, 22, 23, 31, 32, 34, 41, 46, 47, 93, 116, 122–124, 131, 133, 134, 136, 137  
*Sex, Disability, and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus* (Gallop) 21  
 sex madness 131  
 sexploitation films 132, 136, 137  
 sex scenes 19, 56, 124  
 “Sextrapolation in New Wave Science Fiction” (Latham) 133  
 sexuality, reproductive 22, 70  
 shame 38, 75, 76, 89, 93, 109, 110  
 Shand, Alex 100, 101  
 Shelley, Mary 130; *The Last Man* 130  
 “The Silent Shame of Male Infertility” (Oaklander) 5  
 Singleton, Andrew 119  
 Sobchack, Vivian: “The Virginity of Astronauts” (Sobchack) 133  
 social contract 40  
 social history 11  
 social masculinity 108  
 social myths 10  
 Sontag, S. 37  
 spectacular masculinity 66, 73  
 Spencer, LaVyrle: *The Fulfillment* 36–50, 52, 67  
 sperm 59, 60, 91, 100; banks/banking 54, 57, 66, 101, 103, 106, 121; cultural anxieties 60  
 sperm cells 51–55, 64, 76, 91, 100, 111, 149  
 sperm counts 60, 74, 75, 80, 81  
 sperm crisis 55  
 sperm quality 54, 101, 129  
 spiritual energy 24  
 stereotypical masculine-looking man 6  
 sterility/sterile 4–6, 12  
 stories: bedtime 3; biblical 38, 40, 44; important 69, 140  
 story-listening 9  
*The Story of O* (Réage) 18  
 storytelling 1–17, 128  
 Strickland, Geoffrey 34n1  
*Studies in Classic American Literature* (Clifford) 23  
 Sumerau, J. E. 62  
 Swan, S.H. 59; *Count Down: How Our Modern World is Threatening Sperm Counts, Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race* 59  
*Sweet Savage Love* (Woodiwiss and Rogers) 36
- Tanner, Tony 33  
*Tears of the Renegade* (Howard) 71  
 technology 92, 129, 143–145, 147  
*The Telegraph* (film) 18  
 testicles 61, 112, 114–118  
 testicular cancer 118  
*Test Tubes and Testosterone* (Saunders) 85  
 texts, pornographic 103  
 Thayer, Patricia: *Travis Comes Home* 72  
*There’s Something About Mary* (film) 59  
*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud) 61

- Tissot, Samuel-Auguste 38  
 Toth, Pamela: *The Baby Legacy* 66  
 traditional masculinity 82n1  
*Travis Comes Home* (Thayer) 72  
*Tropic of Cancer* (Henry Miller) 18  
*The Trouble with Joe* (Richards) 15, 66–82, 128  
 Trowell, Judith 80  
 Tucker, William 9
- ultra-critical joker 10  
*Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Dean) 105, 106
- Van Camp, R. 11; *On the Joys of Storytelling* 11  
 vasectomy 62, 64, 71  
 Venkatesh, V. 61  
 Vermesh, Michael 87  
 Viagra 12  
 viewers 101–103, 114–116, 119, 121–125, 128, 134, 136  
 virginity 68, 77  
 “The Virginity of Astronauts” (Sobchack) 133  
 visionary experience 24, 25  
 vitro fertilization 52, 101, 108, 129
- Wagner, G. 133  
 Wahlberg, A. 54; *Good Quality: The Routinization of Sperm Banking in China* 54  
 Webb, Charles: *The Graduate* (Webb) 18  
*White Peacock* (Lawrence) 23  
 Williams, L. 105; *Screening Sex* 106  
 Williams, Linda Ruth 106, 131  
 Winnicott, D.W. 7  
 Wolfe, Greg 81, 83, 93; *How to Make Love to a Plastic Cup: A Guy’s Guide to the World of Infertility* (Wolfe) 81, 87, 90, 97, 107  
 womanhood: social construction of 12  
 women 4, 5, 8, 10–12, 22, 67, 69, 70, 79, 87, 131, 142, 144; bodies 4, 5, 69; issue 5, 74, 76  
 Woodiwiss, Kathleen 36; *Sweet Savage Love* 36  
 Woolf, Virginia 128  
 world, green 23–29, 31–34  
 world of romance 68, 69, 125  
 Worthen, J. 20
- Y tu mamá también* 59
- Ziehm, Howard 132



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