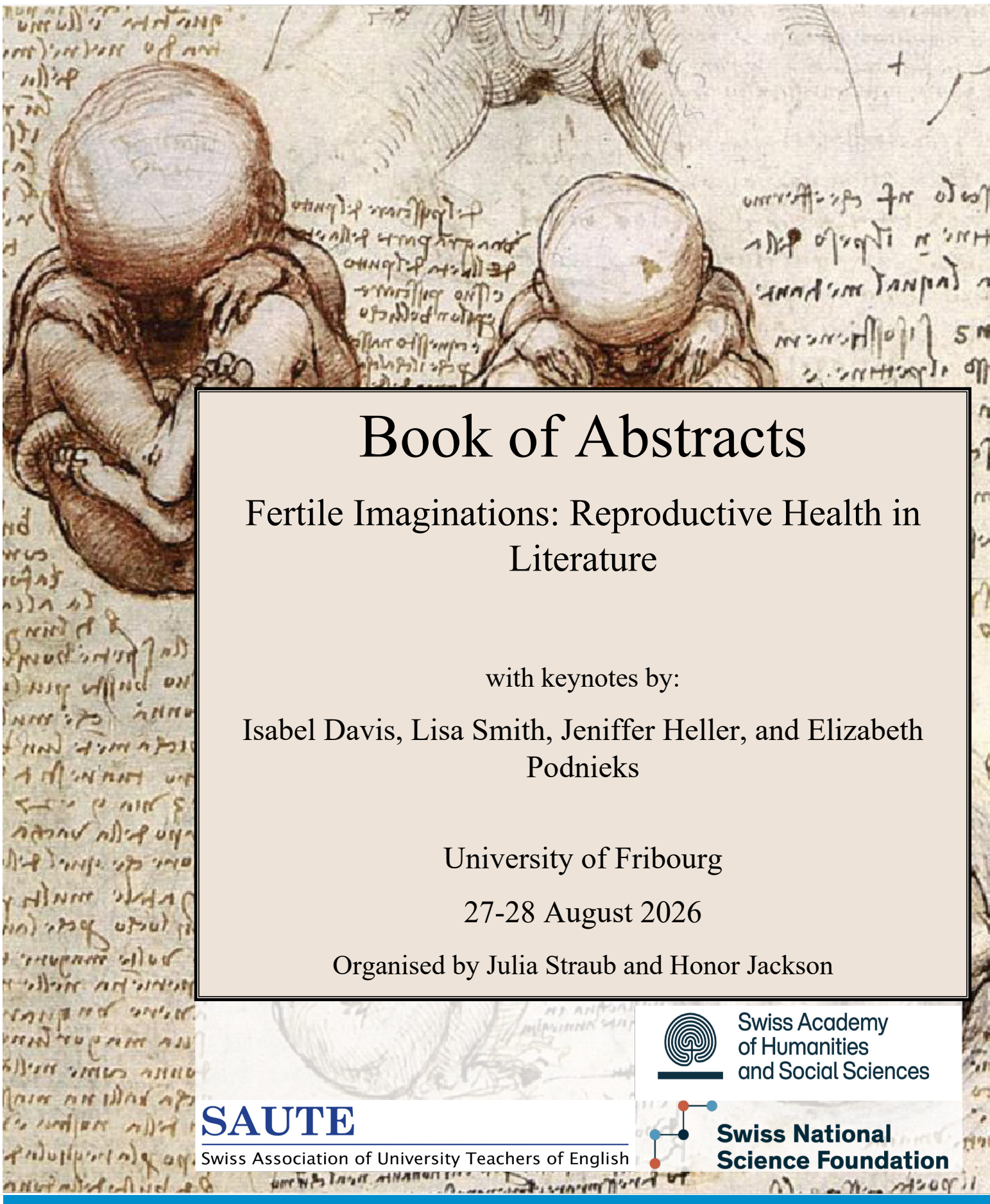




Book of Abstracts

Fertile Imaginations: Reproductive Health in Literature

with keynotes by:

Isabel Davis, Lisa Smith, Jeniffer Heller, and Elizabeth Podnieks

University of Fribourg

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Organised by Julia Straub and Honor Jackson



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KEYNOTE LECTURES

Isabel Davis (National History Museum, London)
**The Cylindrical, Catoptrical, Rotundo-Concavo-Convex Machine:
The Metaphor of Wind in Imagining Conception**

Thursday 27 August, 09:45-11:00

Chair: Kristen Curtis

Room: MIS 03 3115

In *Lucina sine concubitu* (1750), a satirical letter addressed to the Royal Society, John Hill suggests that whenever we encounter tales of virgins impregnated by rivers, dragons, or golden showers, we should understand them as cases of conception by wind: ‘nothing in the World but Wind’. Hill’s joke rests on a long history in which air and breath were associated, symbolically and materially, with fertility. From Classical antiquity to the Middle Ages, wind circulated through medical, literary, theological, and mythic accounts as a force that animated bodies and initiated generation.

This paper uses Hill’s satire as a lens through which to revisit that enduring metaphor. I examine the terms and contexts in which Hill mobilises ‘windy conception’ and trace the intellectual lineages on which he draws. Hill claims, humorously, to have proven the possibility of asexual, wind-borne conception through a ‘wonderful, cylindrical, catoptrical, rotundo-concavo-convex machine’ designed to trap airborne *animalcula* capable of initiating new life when inhaled or imbibed.

Reading Hill’s mechanical fantasy alongside earlier traditions, I explore how metaphors of air once shaped cultural understandings of reproduction, bodily permeability, and environmental influence. I suggest that revisiting the metaphor of wind as a medium of generation, can help us reimagine the porous, relational nature of bodies in a world increasingly attentive to invisible environmental forces.

Isabel Davis is a researcher and Research Theme Leader in Collections and Culture at the Natural History Museum, London. She is a free-time-traveling cultural historian, although she began in the late Middle Ages. Her recent work focuses on the history of human fertility health in environmental perspective. She is the author of *Conceiving Histories: Trying for Pregnancy, Past and Present* (MIT Press, 2025). The book is illustrated by long-term collaborator, artist Anna Burel, and is shortlisted for the V&A Illustration Awards 2026.

Jennifer Heller (Lenoir-Rhyne University)
‘Great with childe to speak’
Maternal Metaphor and Material Culture in Early Modern Literature
Thursday 27 August, 11:30-12:45
Chair: Honor Jackson
Room: MIS 03 3115

Mothers held a position in early modern English culture that was both vital and vexed. The influence they wielded was bolstered by Protestant thinking, even as it was undercut by rigidly patriarchal authority structures. A surprising number of women—and, perhaps more surprisingly, men—operated in this complex space, taking advantage of the contradictions to create a unique and compelling form of maternal influence.

Maternity worked as a metaphor for generative writing as authors claim to have “birthed” texts for private and public consumption alike. Yet maternity was, of course, more than metaphorical; it also had revealing material dimensions. Historical mothers come to life through the production of very real manuscripts and books, which required paraphernalia like paper and ink as well as the embodied practices of reading and writing. Those texts moved through a concrete world of printing presses, booksellers, messengers, and private homes, ultimately inviting textual maternity into the lives of a wide range of readers.

Not only can we trace the outlines of maternal influence through textual circulation, but we can also read these texts to understand how mothers strategically used specific material items. Goods ranging from apples to Venice glass are more than objects: they become tools that mothers use to shape the world around them for the benefit of their children. This talk presents case studies of the early moderns who, through writing and material exchange, created the enduringly influential figure of the early modern mother.

Jennifer Heller researches the intersection between material culture and gender identity in early modern England. She is the author of the article “Mother’s Advice Books” for *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Early Modern Women’s Writing*, forthcoming this October. Her most recent published articles are “Reading Wrecks of History and the Harley Family Narrative,” which appeared in *The Seventeenth Century* and “To Follow Pleasure’s Sway: Atomism in Sarah Ruhl’s *The Clean House*,” which appeared in *Modern Drama*. She is also the author of the monograph *The Mother’s Legacy in Early Modern England*, which is the first full-length analysis of the genre. Heller teaches at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, North Carolina, where she has been honored with the Raymond Bost Distinguished Professor Award, given annually to honor an LR faculty member for outstanding teaching and mentorship, and the Faculty Scholar Award, which is presented to the faculty member who has made the greatest contribution to their discipline during the academic year.

Elizabeth Podnieks (Toronto Metropolitan University)
Postmaternal Memoirs:
Motherhood, Aging, and the Rise of ‘Empty Nest’ Narratives
Thursday 27 August, 16:15-18:00
Chair: Julia Straub
Room: MIS 03 3115

Mothers adjusting to life—and to their older selves—when their adult children leave the domicile has become a topic of preoccupation in the twenty-first century. Witness the headline “I Spent 30 Years Trying to Be a Good Mom. I Never Thought About What Comes Next” (Fern Reiss, August 10, 2022, *Huffpost*). Postmaternity has been particularly manifested in textual narratives, as signaled in “The Empty-Nest Book Hatchery” (Oct 10, 2014, *The New York Times*), wherein Nancy M. Better observes how, “The generation that religiously read ‘What to Expect When You’re Expecting’ to herald the arrival of children is now fueling a flurry of publications and blogs aimed at softening their departure.” Similarly, in “‘A different way of living’: why writers are celebrating middle-age” (Aug 11, 2018, *The Guardian*), Lara Feigel finds that among contemporary female authors, “there is another kind of coming-of-age story, in which the protagonist is not an adolescent but a middle-aged woman who undergoes a transformative process, gaining a new emotional maturity, a clearer intellectual perspective and an evolved sense of identity.”

In my talk, I chart this matrifocal literary turn as manifested specifically in the postmaternal memoir, written by mothers about their so-called ‘empty nesting’ in the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia within the last two decades. Drawing on maternal theory, aging studies, and auto/biography theory, I showcase this developing yet understudied genre of postmaternal life writing. This new genre gives crucial prominence to heretofore typically silent and invisible subjectivities of postmaternal women.

Elizabeth Podnieks is a Professor of English at Toronto Metropolitan University. Her publications include articles and chapters that have appeared in, among others, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *Life Writing*, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, *The Diary: The Epic of Everyday Life*, *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*, the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, the *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, the *Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, and *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*. She is the editor of the critical edition *Rough Draft: The Modernist Diaries of Emily Holmes Coleman, 1929-1937*; *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*; and *Pops in Pop Culture: Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the New Man*. She is the co-editor of *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures*; and *The Palgrave Handbook of Parenthood in Popular Culture*. Her monographs include *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anaïs Nin*; and *Maternal Modernism: Narrating New Mothers*.

Lisa Smith (University of Essex)
Thinking with Herbs:
Fertility in Eighteenth-Century England
Friday 28 August, 09:30-10:45
Chair: Rahel Orgis
Room: MIS 03 3115

This talk responds to the conference title – ‘Fertile Imaginations’ – by thinking about it in relation to my ongoing work on botanical knowledge, medicinal recipes and domestic medical care. My starting point is the question: can herbal knowledge about fertility tell us something about embodied experiences and spaces? I draw on herbals and remedies to consider the ways that herbs (and the landscape) were a type of text that shaped how fertility was imagined and experienced in eighteenth-century England. After all, the early modern language of reproduction was filled with agricultural metaphors: from seeds and flowers to blooms and fruits. Domesticated fertility, like agriculture, was tamed, beautiful and fruitful, unlike barren fields or wilderness. The relationship between fertility and nature was not just metaphorical, either. Women’s experience of fertility was fundamentally shaped by one’s every-day and medicinal interactions with herbs. Indeed, whereas scholarship on reproduction has often focused on individual parts, such as menstruation, or conception or pregnancy (for example), this paper considers how remedies and herbal knowledge reveal that fertility was imagined as a continuum that ranged from establishing good health to expelling a dead foetus. Fertility, moreover, took place within a macrocosm, wherein an individual’s body and experience connected to the natural world.

Lisa Smith is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Essex and the Chair of the Society for the Social History of Medicine. A founding member of the Early Modern Recipes Online Collective, she has published widely on infertility, fertility, embodiment, recipes, remedies, food, gender, and caregiving. Her most recent publications are a book chapter on ‘Beautiful Fertility in Eighteenth Century England and France’ in *A Cultural History of Beauty in the Enlightenment* (2026) and a co-authored book, *The King’s Dinners: Family, nation and identity on the British table 1760-1820* (2026). She is currently revising a co-authored article on the reproductive care provided by two women in eighteenth-century Lyon, as well as developing a project on the sensory experience of herbs in early modern England and France.

PANEL 1: MOTHERHOOD, GENRE AND FORM

THURSDAY 27 AUGUST, 14:15-15:45

CHAIR: JULIA STRAUB

ROOM: MIS 03 3014

Alice Hall (University of York)
Disability, Animality and Transformation:
Collaboration in Claire Oshetsky's *Chouette*

This paper analyses Claire Oshetsky's *Chouette* (2021) and argues that it is part of a wave of recent writing that examines the relationship between motherhood, animality and transformation. Other recent examples include Sarah Hall's short story, 'Mrs Fox' (2014), Rachel Yoder's novel, *Nightbitch* (2021), Lucy Jones's memoir, *Matrescence: On the Metamorphosis of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Motherhood* (2023) and Jennifer Case's memoir, *On the Nature and Politics of Motherhood* (2024). All of these examples share concerns with animality, fertility, caregiving, and the violence of motherhood - topics which, as Oshetsky suggests, have 'not been valued economically or culturally.'¹ These examples, I argue, challenge the 'flight from nature'² in second wave feminism and resist the model of nature writing as an escapist mode in which a male explorer conquers the passive natural world. Instead, they address urgent political questions and depict complex cross-species dynamics and alternative kinship networks.

Oshetsky's *Chouette*, however, is distinctive in the sense that it engages with questions of disability. While Yoder's *Nightbitch* ultimately uses animality to reinforce neoliberal notions of reclaiming individuality, futurity and productivity outside of the home, *Chouette* privileges collaboration, present experience, domestic life and an openness to other forms of knowledge. Tiny, the mother figure, does not want to 'fix' her queer, non-conforming 'owl-baby'; instead, their interdependency is given a name: 'motherdaughtering'.³ This is underscored by Oshetsky's use of collaborative editorial practices with her own daughter in the writing of *Chouette* and her insistence upon the importance of various specific musical pieces as a companion to, and inspiration for, the form of the book itself. As such, *Chouette* has much to tell us about disability, collaboration and the ways in which, as Nancy Fraser argues, 'social reproduction is...intimately entangled with ecological reproduction'.⁴

¹ Claire Oshetsky, 'OurShelves with special guest Claire Oshetsky,' Virago, 29 October 2021.

<https://www.virago.co.uk/virago-news/2021/10/29/ourshelves-with-special-guest-claire-oshetsky/>

¹ Stacy Alaimo, 'Transcorporeal Feminisms and the ethical space of nature,' in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo & Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 237.

¹ Claire Oshetsky, *Chouette* (London: Virago, 2021), 143.

¹ Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do about It* (New York: Verso, 2023), 87.

Dr Alice Hall is a Senior Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literature at the University of York, UK. She holds a BA, MPhil and PhD in English from the University of Cambridge and

has previously taught at the Sorbonne Nouvelle and Université Paris VII. Alice is the author of two monographs on modern literature and disability. She is also the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Disability* (Routledge), *Contemporary Literature and the Body: a Critical Introduction* (Bloomsbury) and the forthcoming collection, *Representing Reproduction in Contemporary Literature and Visual Culture: Time, Crisis and Futurity* (Edinburgh University Press).

Roberta Garrett (University of East London)
Brave ‘Girls’ and Angry Women:
The Affective Economies of Motherhood in Domestic Noir and Literary Fiction

This paper examines the status and affective framing of motherhood in female-oriented texts, contrasting its narrative and thematic significance in domestic noir and literary fiction. Analysing domestic noir novels such as *The Girl Before* (J P Delaney) and *The Girl on the Train* (Paul Hawkins) alongside literary fiction, including *Nightbitch* (Rachel Yoder), *Soldier, Sailor* (Claire Kilroy) and motherhood memoirs, it argues that each form performs distinct socio-cultural and psychological work for readers. Domestic noir often frames motherhood as precious, fragile, and morally central. It also dramatizes female ‘failure’—through infertility, child death, or disability—as a site of moral and political growth. Threats to children or relationships emphasize patriarchal control and the dangers of romantic love, producing suspense while affirming motherhood and female solidarity as stabilizing forces. Literary fiction and memoir, in contrast, explore the shadow side of motherhood under patriarchy: isolation, loss of identity, boredom, and the revelation of entrenched sexism beneath seemingly equitable marriages. Drawing on Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism, Parker’s theorization of maternal ambivalence, Baraitser’s analysis of the temporal and affective dimensions of early motherhood, and Almond’s work on maternal aggression, the paper contends that these narratives reflect alternative visions of female identity in neoliberal culture. Domestic noir externalizes conflict, offering maternal identity as compensation for social and relational cruelty, while literary fiction internalizes affect, foregrounding the constraints and psychic labour of maternal subjectivity. Rather than judging these narratives as more or less ‘authentic’ or ideological, the paper argues that they reflect alternative affective fantasies shaping readers’ emotional investments in motherhood, intimacy, and gendered social hierarchies. By situating these texts in conversation with contemporary sociological, cultural, and literary theory, the paper highlights how different narrative strategies render visible conflicting responses to contemporary patriarchal structures and media representations of motherhood.

Dr Roberta Garrett is a senior lecturer in the department of arts and creative industries at the University of East London. She has written widely on representations of gender, class and race and the domestic and maternal in popular literature and film. She is the author of *Postmodern Chick-Flicks: the Return of the Woman’s Film* (Palgrave, 2008) and *Writing the Modern Family: Contemporary Literature, Motherhood and Neoliberal Culture* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022). She is also the co-editor of *We Need to Talk About Family: Essays on Neoliberalism, the Family and Popular Culture* (Cambridge Scholars, 2016) and has recently co-edited the first scholarly collection on Rachel Cusk in the Bloomsbury *Contemporary*

Critical Perspectives series (published August 2024). Chapters and articles produced in the last few years include publications on *Game of Thrones*, *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously*, maternal memoirs, the figure of the ‘mumpreneur’ in popular culture and popular and literary and screen representations of domestic abuse. In the last year, she has published book chapters and articles on Hulu’s adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, misogyny and ageism in domestic noir and recent contemporary women’s writing and precarious work cultures.

Roberta is also a fiction writer and is leading the funded *Telling the Untold Stories* project. The project explores the use of creative writing as a tool for recovery for survivors of domestic abuse.

Emily Anderson (University of Constance)

Motherhood and Other Magical Transformations in Rachel Yoder’s Magical Feminist Novel *Night Bitch*

Magical transformations of any kind are a frequent occurrence in magical realism but magical transformation in magical feminism especially focuses on criticizing patriarchal expectations of the identities of women connected to the changing nature of their bodies. In Rachel Yoder’s 2019 novel *Night Bitch*, the unnamed protagonist who is simply introduced to the reader as the mother of a baby boy, wife to a busy working husband and a former artist turned housewife in that exact order, undergoes two distinct transformations which each significantly shape her identity. First, her journey through pregnancy and childbirth transforming her into a mother and second, her sudden, inexplicable transformation into a dog she calls Night Bitch when the role of mother became too restrictive. Two transformations, one considered natural and the other supernatural while both are represented as magical transformations innate to the female body, are juxtaposed in the novel, highlighting the physical changes during and after childbirth as well as society’s romanization of motherhood which most often contradicts and hides women’s actual experiences. While her transformation into motherhood robbed the protagonist of her creativity as an artist due to postpartum exhaustion and the restrictions and repetitiveness of her role as a mother and housewife, her later transformation into a dog revives her original creativity by helping her escape from oppressive societal expectations of motherhood which hindered her individuality. This paper will therefore explore how both the natural transformation into motherhood and the resulting supernatural transformation into an animal in order to escape the stereotypical mother role, are represented as magical feminist features which shape the protagonist’s identity as a woman and an artist and criticize society’s romanticization of the significant psychological and physical changes caused by childbirth and motherhood.

Emily Aline Anderson is a second-year PhD candidate at the department of English Literature at the University of Konstanz, Germany. Her PhD project “Old Magic, New Realities: New Perspectives on Contemporary Magical Realism” is being supervised by Prof. Dr. Irtraud Huber and Prof. Dr. Christina Wald of the University of Konstanz. Her research interests include contemporary anglophone and international literatures from the 1990s until today, magical realism and fantastic literature, science-fiction, as well as feminist and queer literature. Since 2024 she has been a member of the British Association of Contemporary Literary Studies.

PANEL 2: MATERNITY AND MORTALITY

THURSDAY 27 AUGUST, 14:15-15:45

CHAIR: MARION BUCHS

ROOM: MIS 03 3016

Rahel Orgis (University of Bern)

Fertile Absences?

Mary Wroth's Representation of Childbed Death and its Consequences in the *Urania*

The death of Snow White's mother in childbed is the pre-condition from which the fairy tale evolves, leading to the king's remarriage, Snow White's hardships and eventual triumph over the evil stepmother. Maternal mortality can thus function as a 'productive' literary trope or point of departure, as in Victorian novels like *Oliver Twist* or *Hide and Seek*. In early modern literary works, one finds references to women dying in childbed in genres ranging from poems to romances. This paper analyses Mary Wroth's two depictions of childbed death in the manuscript continuation of the *Urania*. By contrast to the many absent mothers in Shakespeare's plays, which, as in the case of Snow White, indirectly impact the individual development of (female) protagonists according to critics, in the *Urania* the female characters' death in childbed affects primarily the widowed husbands. Wroth presents maternal mortality as an incapacitating experience that leads to a stasis which defies reason and traditional religious comfort and can only be overcome by otherworldly or magic intervention. Thus, while women's death in childbed remains minimally represented in the *Urania*, as is often the case in narratives or plays, their absence is writ large, taking on an explicitly haunting quality and rendering the normal continuation of life impossible.

Dr Rahel Orgis works as a scientific collaborator at the University Library Bern. She holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Neuchâtel. Rahel is the author of *Narrative Structure and Reader Formation in Lady Mary Wroth's Urania* (Routledge, 2017) and co-editor of *Fashioning England and the English: Literature, Nation, Gender* (Palgrave, 2018). Her articles on early modern prose fiction and drama have appeared in *ELR*, *Sidney Journal*, *SPELL* and *Renaissance Studies*. Rahel's current research project focuses on the development of the narrator in early modern fiction.

Laura Lazzari (Georgetown University and The Sasso Corbaro Foundation for the Medical Humanities, Bellinzona)

Spiraling Narratives:

Stillbirth and Grief in Two Contemporary Memoirs: *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* and *Ghost Belly*

Stillbirth and miscarriage used to be taboo subjects and, as Rosanne Cecil argued, pregnancy loss was "rarely portrayed in any detail in literature" (1996, 3). Since Cecil published her

volume, however, the theme has increasingly gained literary interest and texts across genres, languages, and cultures have progressively focused their attention on this long-silenced topic.

In our society and in the medical domain, narratives addressing fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth usually concentrate on positive outcomes and traditional happy endings, such as successful fertility journeys and the birth of a miracle baby. Likewise, pregnancy manuals circumvent events including miscarriage and stillbirth, while childlessness by circumstance, failure of Assisted Reproductive Technology, and reproductive loss are erased from mainstream narratives. As it has been noticed, a feminist agenda for pregnancy loss is still needed, and both society and medical care should question standard practice to develop effective and empathic rituals and protocols that are truthfully women-centered (Layne 2003, 235-249; Kimball 2015).

In my presentation, I examine how stillbirth is represented in a series of memoirs written by three English-speaking authors: Elizabeth McCracken, *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* (2008); Elizabeth Heineman, *Ghost Belly* (2014); and Kristen Rademacher, *From the Lake House* (2020). My investigation lies at the intersection of literary studies, the Medical Humanities, and Trauma Studies. By embracing a feminist approach, I use textual analysis methodologies and engage with close reading to explore how stillbirth is depicted in a corpus of contemporary texts. I scrutinize how the experience is narrated by analyzing what feminist rituals are put in place to navigate loss, grief, and trauma, and I emphasize how traditional happy endings are revisited to address and encompass marginalized outcomes. Literary techniques and language are also explored to highlight how linear or circular narrative structures and ordinary terminology are challenged to fully embody the protagonists' spiraling process of grief.

Laura Lazzari is a scholar in Literature, Motherhood Studies and the Medical Humanities. She also works as a Fertility Consultant, Doula, and Childbirth Educator. As a Birth Trauma Resolution® therapist, she offers classes and sessions from pre-conception to post-partum, including assistance in the event of pregnancy loss and birth trauma. Dr Lazzari has been on the faculty of the University of Lausanne, Fribourg, and Franklin University in Switzerland, and in the United States at Catholic University of America, George Washington University, and currently at Georgetown University. She is a Scientific Collaborator at the Sasso Corbaro Foundation for the Medical Humanities—an institute associated to the Università della Svizzera Italiana in the Canton of Ticino, Switzerland—and is an Affiliate Scholar and Faculty member in the Department of Italian Studies at Georgetown University, and at the Georgetown Medical Humanities Initiative. She holds a PhD in literature from the University of Lausanne, a Master of Studies in Women's Studies from the University of Oxford (UK), a BA and MA in Italian, French, and history of art from the University of Lausanne, and an MA in Education from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI). Dr Lazzari has published extensively on reproduction in contemporary women's writings from an interdisciplinary and transnational perspective. More information on her research and work is available on her website: <https://sites.google.com/site/lazzarilaura>.

Orlagh Woods (Vilnius University)

‘The one that matters’

Reproductive Loss and Narrative Resistance in Emilie Pine’s *Notes to Self* (2018)

Since Ireland’s founding as an independent state in 1922, the Catholic Church has exercised considerable influence over political and social life, shaping a range of patriarchal politics concerning sexuality, reproduction and bodily autonomy. One of the most significant manifestations of this influence was the passing of the Eighth Amendment in 1983, which equated the life of a foetus with that of a pregnant woman and effectively prohibited access to abortion. Within this cultural and legal framework, silence and shame structured Irish women’s experiences of sexuality, pregnancy and reproductive loss.

Published in July 2018, just two months after Ireland voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment, Emilie Pine’s essay collection *Notes to Self* offers a powerful intervention into these histories of reproductive regulation and silence. This paper focuses on the essay “From the Baby Years”, in which Pine recounts her experiences of infertility and pregnancy loss. Through a deeply personal narrative, Pine demonstrates how experiences often framed as private suffering are inextricably linked to wider social, political and economic forces. Her essay illustrates the extent to which the reproductive body functions as a site of ideological debate, where questions of gender and citizenship intersect.

While Pine’s work interrogates the historical influence of Church and State over reproductive rights in Ireland, it also draws attention to the ways contemporary neoliberal institutions continue to regulate reproductive experiences through bureaucratic and medical forms of control. In doing so, *Notes to Self* highlights the enduring consequences of restrictive reproductive healthcare systems and the unequal burdens they place upon women. I argue that Pine’s work forms part of a broader trend in contemporary Irish literature that I term ‘repro-fiction’, a body of writing that foregrounds reproductive bodies and experiences as central to understanding identity and social change in post-Repeal Ireland.

Orlagh Woods received her PhD from Maynooth University in 2024. Her dissertation explored representations of motherhood in a range of contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare. She is currently undertaking a postdoctoral research fellowship at Vilnius University, focusing on reproductive bodies in contemporary Irish literature.

PANEL 3: NON-NORMATIVE PARENTHOOD

FRIDAY 28 AUGUST, 11:15-12:45

CHAIR: ALICE HALL

ROOM: MIS 03 3014

Jennifer Cooke (University of Loughborough) Surrogacy, Genetics, and White Supremacy in Contemporary Literature

This paper argues that contemporary literary depictions of surrogacy display cultural anxieties about genetic purity and blood lines, ultimately depicting the genetically related family as the desired unit. At the same time but rather differently, these texts, while open to inter-racial assisted reproduction, underscore the primacy of white supremacy. Thus, while these reproductive technologies open the way for forms of utopian thinking that rethinks the family, as projected, for instance, in the work of family abolition theorists such as Sophie Lewis and M.E. O'Brien, the literature which depicts surrogacy expresses concerns about how these technologies might be used. The novelists raise concerns about how ART might shore up conservative and racist ideas about the family. In the process, the surrogate herself is often scapegoated.

My literary case studies for this paper are Filipina-American author Joanne Ramos's debut novel, *The Farm* (2019), which imagines a near-future wherein the kinds of surrogacy clinics seen in India during the 2010s have been upgraded to a luxury version in the USA and Indian writer Kishwar Desai, *Origins of Love* (2012), which features an international surrogacy clinic in India, before they were banned by law in 2014. I will focus on certain key moments in these texts which highlight the way surrogacy might still feed white supremacy and promote genetic relatedness as superior. This, clearly, harms the flourishing of non-genetically related and inter-racial families.

This material is drawn work for the monograph I am currently writing, called *The Help Deficit and the Stories We Tell To Dispel It*, specifically the chapter focusing on surrogates. The book argues that in the West we are suffering from what I call a help deficit: the fact that to lead the lives we want we need help but are not good at accepting this fact.

Jennifer Cooke is Professor of Contemporary Literature and Theory at Loughborough University, UK. She's authored and edited five academic books, including the BACLS Best Monograph prize winner, [*Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity*](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and the double award-winning edited collection, [*The New Feminist Literary Studies*](#) (CUP, 2020). Published open access with Routledge last year, [*Intersectional Feminist Research Methodologies: Applications in the Social Sciences and Humanities*](#) is co-edited with Line Nyhagen. She is co-editor of the CUP series [*Elements in Feminism and Contemporary Critical Theory*](#). Follow her on Bluesky at: [@jenniferacooke.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@jenniferacooke.bsky.social)

Jemma Walton (Birkbeck College, University of London)
‘I was it. Both. All. The lot’
Surrogacy and Solo Fatherhood in Ian Mucklejohn’s Memoirs

Surrogacy remains one of the most contested forms of assisted reproduction, provoking debate around questions of commodification, exploitation, and the changing meanings of parenthood. While sociological and anthropological scholarship has examined the experiences of surrogates and intended parents, comparatively little attention has been paid to the autobiographical narratives produced by those who form families through surrogacy. This paper examines these texts as a form of reproductive life writing in which intended parents seek to make new family formations culturally intelligible.

Focusing on Ian Mucklejohn’s memoirs *And Then There Were Three: Diary of a Truly Single Father* (2005) and *A Dad for All Seasons* (2013), this paper explores how a heterosexual solo father constructs a narrative of legitimate reproductive masculinity. Mucklejohn became the first single man in the UK to have children through US-based egg donation and surrogacy in 2001, at a time when single intended parents lacked access to the legal recognition later provided through parental order reform. His memoirs therefore offer an account of a man seeking cultural legitimacy for a form of fatherhood before legal recognition was available. Drawing on scholarship concerning men’s historically marginalised position within reproductive discourse, I argue that Mucklejohn’s narratives construct legitimacy through three interconnected strategies: the performance of caring masculinity, the negotiation of relationships with the women whose reproductive labour makes his fatherhood possible, including the surrogate and egg donor, and engagement with legal expectations surrounding maternal presence.

Importantly, the memoirs do not simply present an uncomplicated defence of surrogacy. Mucklejohn documents ethically troubling moments, including the transfer of three embryos and the health consequences subsequently experienced by the surrogate. Rather than eliminating ambiguity, however, these moments become part of his broader project of ethical self-presentation. Ultimately, the memoirs are not only narratives of becoming a father, they are attempts to produce a culturally recognisable figure of the reproductive man, whose parental identity is formed through emotional labour and everyday care.

Jemma Walton is a doctoral researcher at Birkbeck College, University of London, researching reproduction, care, and narrative in contemporary anglophone literature. Her PhD project analyses surrogacy memoirs (“surrographies”) through an ethics of care lens, exploring the moral, affective, and gendered tensions of assisted reproduction. She has published in *BMJ Medical Humanities* - “*They Are Not All Wolves: Menstruation, Young Adult Fiction And Nuancing The Teenage Boy*” (2024) - and *The Polyphony*. Jemma is a founder member of the Broadly Conceived interdisciplinary research network for scholars who are interested in reproduction.

Sabine von Rütte (University of Bern)
Trans/Parent Bodies:
Normativity, Visibility and Trans Parental Embodiment in Krys Malcolm Belc's *The Natural Mother of the Child* (2021)

This paper explores how Krys Malcolm Belc's memoir *The Natural Mother of the Child* (2021) reimagines gestational parenthood through a transmasculine, nonbinary lens. Focusing on Belc's account of his embodied experience as a trans gestational parent, this analysis seeks to demonstrate how Belc's memoir brings together embodiment, motherhood/parenthood, and life writing to challenge cis- and heteronormative understandings of gender, kinship, and the parental body, while also interrogating trans-normative narratives about transition. Through close readings and intermedial analysis of textual and visual elements (cf. Rippl 2018, 2020), this article traces how Belc presents the trans gestational body as a site of both alienation and affirmation, of both dysphoria and recognition.

This paper further contends that the memoir's intermedial strategies, such as the inclusion of sonograms, family photographs, birth certificates, and adoption and legal transition documents, prove particularly fruitful to challenge and subvert the medico-legal discourses that define who and what counts as 'normal,' 'natural,' and 'recognizable' mother-/parenthood and kinship. Drawing on queer, trans and maternal theory (Jones 2024, Gibson 2014, Hornuff 2014, O'Reilly 2021, Park 2013, Vipond 2022, Young 2005), this analysis demonstrates how Belc's text both queers motherhood and complicates dominant trans narratives that revolve around 'wrong-body'-discourse and linear transition tropes. His memoir of trans gestational parenthood makes visible this doubly marginalized position largely neglected in both queer theory's suspicion of reproduction and maternal theory's tendency for cis- and heteronormativity. Thus, *The Natural Mother* negotiates how the trans parental body is rendered (in-)trans-parent, (in-)visible and exposed within these various discourses.

Ultimately, this paper argues that *The Natural Mother of the Child* constructs a queer, intermedial counter-narrative in which transmasculine gestational parenthood is not a contradiction, but instead offers an opportunity to negotiate, articulate and affirm trans embodiment. In doing so, the memoir expands contemporary literary representations of pregnancy and reproductive embodiment, reshaping what can be imagined about reproduction, gender, and parenthood in the 21st century.

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Sabine von Rütte is a doctoral researcher in the Department of English at the University of Bern, where she is completing a PhD in American Literature and Culture. She holds an MA in Literatures in English and Film Studies from the University of Zurich, and a BA in English Literatures and Languages and Film Studies from the Universities of Bern and Zurich. Since 2025, she is serving as Study Counsellor and International Coordinator at the University of Bern's Department of English, following several years as a research assistant at the same department. Her research focuses on contemporary North American life writing, with a particular emphasis on maternal narratives through the lens of embodiment, relationality, and temporality. This work contributes to the growing field of motherhood studies and has been shared through invited lectures, workshops, and presentations at national and international venues. In previous research, she worked on Black feminist imaginaries in Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*, which has informed her undergraduate teaching and public lectures. Her publications include contributions to *Anglia* and *Genderstudies*.

PANEL 4: THE BIOLOGICAL CLOCK

FRIDAY 28 AUGUST, 11:15-12:45

CHAIR: HONOR JACKSON

ROOM: MIS 03 3115

Honor Jackson (University of Fribourg)

Securing Generation?

Reproductive Uncertainty in Charles Cotton's *Erōtopolis*

In the later decades of the seventeenth century, anxieties surrounding dynastic succession transformed reproduction into a matter of political concern. Charles Cotton's *Erōtopolis; or, The Present State of Betty-Land* (1684) has generally been read as pornography, libertine satire, or erotic cartography. This paper argues instead that the text is fundamentally concerned with the problem of reproductive uncertainty. Reading *Erōtopolis* against the Restoration succession crisis, I show how Cotton repeatedly explores the impossibility of securing certainty over generation at a moment when political legitimacy depended upon it. Through the intertwined discourses of husbandry, female reproductive knowledge, and fertility medicine, Cotton imagines a series of patriarchal attempts to understand, regulate, and verify generation, each of which ultimately reveals its dependence upon reproductive processes that remain opaque and resistant to masculine control. Rather than offering simply an erotic fantasy, *Erōtopolis* emerges as a sustained meditation on the limits of patriarchal authority and the political consequences of reproductive uncertainty.

Honor Jackson is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Fribourg. She completed her PhD at the University of Neuchâtel in 2023, where her research examined gender, politics, and utopian writing in Restoration England. Her work focuses on early modern literature, with particular interests in seventeenth-century drama and prose, reproduction and the medical humanities, political thought, book history, and women's writing. She is currently completing a monograph, *Utopian Intertextuality in Restoration Drama: Gender, Politics, Adaptation, 1660–1700*, and is developing a new project on reproductive knowledge and literary culture in early modern England.

Jessica Edwards (Goldsmiths University London)

Imagining a Reproductive Lifecycle through Premature Menopause

Davina McCall's 2021 and 2022 menopause documentaries on Channel 4, may be understood as an example of how popular media discourses influence understandings and experiences of menopause (Jermyn, 2024). In McCall's documentary, Hailey Cockman is shown to experience premature menopause at the age of 14, and since the documentary's streaming, gained some media presence through her Instagram profile and online interviews, such as in the Daily Mail. However, contemporary media representations discuss menopause mainly in relation to ageing

(Banet-Weiser 2018), the workforce (Rottenberg, Orgad and Gilchrist 2024) and biomedical understandings of a ‘normal’ reproductive lifecycle (Dillaway 2011). Cockman receives in the documentary only a few minutes of airtime, which mainly show her speaking about fertility and doctors disbelief of her ‘abnormal’ menopause symptoms. This, I argue produces an image of a reproductive lifecycle bound to normative biomedical framings of what counts as a ‘normal’ menopause. As premature menopause falls outside of what dominant discourses have framed as a reproductive lifecycle, where menopause is treated as a separate bodily process from menstruation, and mainly addressed in relation to ageing, I will explore how premature menopause may pose alternative conceptualisations of how we understand a reproductive lifecycle within tensions between the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’.

Using a case study approach, this paper discusses Hailey Cockman’s Instagram profile as a site of contemporary socio-cultural realms (Hall 1978). Hence, Gill and Orgad understand that media discourses shape and form individual bodily agency and experience, Hailey Cockman’s Instagram profile could be understood as a public representation, influencing how individuals may understand premature menopause. I will use Tyler’s (2022) theory of the abject, exploring how premature menopause can be embodied and understood within an ‘(ab)normal’ reproductive lifecycle. Tyler argues that neoliberal social structures form and reproduce abject subjects (2021): in Tyler’s model, social structures shape internal experiences. For example, Tyler’s (2011) work on maternity and media representations discusses how reproductive justice is contested through the reproduction of hegemonic discourses. Thus, Hailey Cockman’s Instagram profile may illustrate how social structures inform and form ‘(ab)normal’ imaginations of reproductive embodiment.

This paper concludes by asking: How can we understand a reproductive lifecycle outside normative perceptions of menopause? And, in what ways might Cockman’s case impact how we imagine embodied agency for premature menopause?

Jessica Elaine Edwards is a doctoral student in Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths University London. Her research interests include feminist media studies, interdisciplinary research methodologies between performative arts and social sciences, and reproductive justice in menstrual and menopause studies.

PANEL 5: FERTILITY AND LITERARY FORM

FRIDAY 28 AUGUST, 11:15-12:45

CHAIR: MICHAEL BOYDEN

ROOM: MIS 03 3116

Leila Michelle Vaziri (University of Constance, *online*) **Pregnancy's Affordances in Early 20th-Century Narrative Literature**

The turn of the 20th century marks a fundamental shift in the perception and representation of pregnancy and pregnant bodies in British literature and culture. During this time, novels began to pay sustained attention to pregnancy and childbirth, fuelled by advances in medical science, debates over eugenics, new laws around motherhood and divorce, as well as the political struggle of the suffragettes. My paper considers this sudden interest in pregnancy narratives and how it formally impacts on representations of pregnancy.

Further, my paper not only considers the literary forms of pregnancy emerging for the first time during modernism but also investigates pregnancy as a form that has aesthetic, material, political, etc. affordances whose investigation, as Caroline Levine argues, “opens up *a generalizable understanding of political power*” (Forms 7). In particular, pregnancy and its literary representations afford the experience of thresholds, like those between pregnant individual and foetus, inside/outside, in-/visibility, un-/knowability, and life and death. It is through the affordance of threshold experience that pregnancy becomes an ‘interspace,’ a form and location where (maternal and foetal) body, (material) text and (political, cultural, etc.) context intersect.

I want to show this in discussing three different examples of modernist novels representing pregnancy: Hall Caine’s *The Woman Thou Gavest Me* (1913) focuses on the economic and social impact of pregnancy and has its protagonist struggle with her social death as a result of her pregnancy. Charlotte Haldane’s *Man’s World* (1926) uses the generic affordances of science fiction to focus on questions of human reproduction and decay. Lastly, the symbolist aesthetics of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936) negotiate the thresholds of life and death as well as (rejected) motherhood. All three novels, due to their depiction of pregnancy, are sustained inquiries into the modernist politics of sexuality and reproduction, into how female bodies were perceived and policed, and into how the social, cultural and political role of pregnant bodies shifts during modernism.

Dr Leila Michelle Vaziri is assistant professor and lecturer in English literary studies at the University of Konstanz (Germany). She received her Ph.D. from the University of Augsburg in 2023 and has published several articles on pregnancy and ecology in contemporary drama. She is author of *The Theatre of Anxiety: Border Crossings in 21st-Century British Theatre* (De Gruyter, 2024), co-editor of a special issue of *JCDE* on *New Stages for Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Theatre* (2026) and she will co-edit a special issue of *Feminist Theory* on *Feminist Theory and the Pregnant Body, 1850–1950*. In general, her research

focusses on the intersection of literature with philosophy and sociology, as well as feminism, ecology, and the medical humanities.

Julia Straub (University of Fribourg)
Contemporary Motherhood Writing as Literary Criticism

Throughout literary history, writers have entwined their representations of mothering identities with reflections on the compatibility of motherhood and female creativity or intellectual work. Consider Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as an early literary perspective on this perceived dilemma central to feminist discourse since its emergence.

This paper explores three selected contemporary works that engage with mothering through such unresolved alignments between motherhood and literary writing. Their perspectives range from (a) the inadequacy of literary models for mothers in academia (Kate Zambreno's *Drifts*, 2020), to (b) a questioning of the uses of traditional genres for maternal self-reflection (Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary*, 2019) and (c) a reconsideration of the novel as an essentially 'motherly' form of writing (Kate Briggs' *The Long Form*, 2023). While broadly self-referential, these works exemplify more specifically how contemporary writers develop writing about motherhood into critical self-commentary on literary form and tradition.

Julia Straub is Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Fribourg, where she is currently also serving as Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Humanities. Motherhood is among her current research interests, with a recent article on influencer mums in fiction, and a research project on motherhood in contemporary literature in preparation. She has also worked extensively on intermediality and has a broader interest in literature and form (e.g., a 2026 article on the novel after the internet novel in *Critique*).

Marion Buchs (University of Fribourg)
Exposing the Script of Motherhood:
Tactical Turn to Drama in Claudia Rankine's *Plot* (2001) and Erica Hesketh's *In the Lily Room* (2025)

In their poetry collections poets Claudia Rankine and Erica Hesketh use a variety of poetic forms, play with layout and ekphrastic passages, showcasing their playful and intentional approach to form. Both poets have a section of their collection in which they turn to a dramatic form, the chapter called "Intermission in IV Acts" for Rankine and a poem titled "Live action role-play" for Hesketh. These two sections function as a way to reframe the experience of living as a woman of childbearing age in the 21st century. The turn to drama shifts the attention from the immersive, intimate narrative inside the poems to the medium, the stage, through which the narrative is to be experienced. This creates an emotional distance, through which the presented play can be critically observed and also seeks to reveal the mechanisms that dictate the depicted experiences. On the one hand these passages shed light on the scripted nature of 21st-century womanhood, or the socially accepted way to be a woman and what roles a woman can play in

her own life. The dramatic form implies the presence of stage directions and the idea that the characters on the stage are following instructions and are performing a scripted routine. On the other hand, these passages also highlight the sense of social monitoring and surveillance mothers experience, whether they step out in public or the internalized self-surveillance inside their own homes. This form also implies the presence of an audience which scrutinizes the actions of the women in these passages in a way that mirrors the way society surveys and passes judgement on women's reproductive and lifestyle choices. This paper draws on the concept of the *panopticon* (Foucault 1975) and how women and more specifically mothers live under their own version of surveillance as theorized by Michelle Hughes Miller, Rebecca Jaremkow Bromwich and Lynn O'Brien Hallstein in various chapters of the *Routledge Companion to Motherhood* (ed. O'Brien Hallstein, et al. 2020). Rankine and Hesketh's texts showcase the versatility of form and how a tactical turn to drama in the midst of a poetry collection can strengthen the overall argument of the collection by adding a formal component to the complexities of the maternal experience.

Marion Buchs is a PhD candidate at the University of Fribourg working on a thesis on contemporary poetry on motherhood (working title: *Form and Expression in Contemporary Anglophone Poetry on Motherhood*). She completed her MA in English Literature at the University of Fribourg in 2025 with a Master's thesis on motherhood memoirs, for which she was awarded the Gender Prize 2026 by the Office for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Fribourg. Her first publication dealing with motherhood in Asian Anglophone literature is coming out in 2027 with Routledge.

PANEL 6: MOTHERHOOD IN PERSPECTIVE

FRIDAY 28 AUGUST, 14:15-15:45

CHAIR: SABINE VON RÜTTE

ROOM: MIS 03 3014

Magdalena Rozenberg (University of Uppsala)

Mother is Ill:

A Daughter's Intersubjective Illness in the Norwegian Novel *Mothers Gifts*

During the last 15 years, the recurring theme of mother-daughter relationships has once again become remarkably topical in Scandinavian literature, where at least 60-70 titles have been published on the subject. More specifically, it is not only the relationship between them but also their adult separation that is at the centre of these contemporary literary depictions. This separation shakes especially the adult daughter's identity as well as naturally shapes her. In this presentation I would like to present an analysis of how the daughter's subjectivity is being shaped by the separation from the mother figure in the Norwegian novel *Mors gaver* (2013) (trans. *Mothers gifts*) written by Cecilie Enger. As a part of the contemporary literary tendency of stories about the separation between mother and daughter, this novel is about a daughter that is facing a separation from her mother that has been diagnosed with dementia.

The mother's diagnosis places the mother and daughter in a kind of waiting room for death, where the separation from the mother has already begun even though she is not yet dead. This ambivalent situation is mentally unsettling for the daughter, and due to her close bond with her mother, the mother's illness affects the daughter intersubjectively.

Stories about mothers suffering from dementia are a subcategory within the contemporary literary trend of mother-daughter relationships. The medical aspect and the daughter as a relative, but also as someone who is intersubjectively ill, become a major part of these stories.

Magdalena Rozenberg is a PhD student in comparative literature at Uppsala University, Sweden. In her thesis, she writes about mother-daughter relationships in contemporary Scandinavian poetry and prose. In her research, she is specifically interested in the daughter's identity development in relation to her mother during the adult separation from her mother.

Valerie Heffernan (Maynooth University)

Literary Representations of Maternal Ambivalence and Regret

The 2015 publication of a pioneering study by sociologist Orna Donath confirmed what we had long suspected, namely that there are mothers who regret the decision to have children. Regret is not a feeling that is often associated with motherhood; indeed, it conflicts with conventional notions of maternal bliss and assumptions that all women will find happiness in mothering. Donath's research and the international debate it triggered provoked important conversations

about the impossible demands placed on mothers in the contemporary era and the impact of their pressure on their health and wellbeing.

The debate about maternal regret also generated a number of literary and artistic engagements with the concept of maternal regret, and these further the debate in interesting ways. This paper looks at recent novels that engage with the experience of maternal ambivalence and regret, as well as the feelings of isolation, loneliness and shame that these can engender. It will consider Irish writer Claire Kilroy's *Solder Sailor* (2024), American author Claire Vaye Watkins' *I Love You But I've Chosen Darkness* (2021) and Austrian writer Mareike Fallwickl's *Die Wut, die bleibt* (The Rage That Remains, 2022) as examples of novels that deal with the challenges of motherhood and the complex and sometimes confronting feelings that it evokes. My paper analyses the particular ways in which literary texts can offer insight into the circumstances that can lead to feelings of ambivalence and regret, as well as the oftentimes intense thoughts and emotions associated with mothering. Finally, my paper will examine how this intensity is reflected in the form of the three novels.

Valerie Heffernan is a Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at the Maynooth University School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures. Her research interests include literary and cultural portrayals of motherhood, with a particular focus on cultural expressions of maternal regret. She has two recent publications on this topic: a co-authored article (with Katherine Stone) entitled [#RegrettingMotherhood in Germany: Feminism, Motherhood, and Culture](#), which appeared in *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 46/2: 337-360; and a book chapter (also with Katherine Stone) entitled [International Responses to Regretting Motherhood](#), in: *Women's Lived Experiences of the Gender Gap*, ed. by A. Fitzgerald, Sustainable Development Goals, Singapore: Springer, 121-133. Heffernan is also co-editor (with Gay Wilgus) of *Imagining Motherhood in the Twenty-first Century* (Routledge, 2021).

PANEL 7: ABORTION STORIES

FRIDAY 28 AUGUST, 14:15-15:45

CHAIR: HONOR JACKSON

ROOM: MIS 03 3016

Ella Berny (Queen Mary, University of London)
Bringing Abortion to Writing:
Can Poetry Help Us Tell New Abortion Stories?

This paper will respond to poet Holly Pester's call/desire to 'bring abortion to writing'* by asking what this means and whether it is possible. Writing *about* abortion, particularly abortion storytelling, has become a popular tactic of pro-abortion activism, where people are encouraged to publicly share their personal abortion stories to resist restrictive legislation or combat abortion stigma. Online storytelling forums have sprung up, and high profile individuals are increasingly sharing their experiences publicly. But is the act of telling a story enough to shift stigmatising abortion narratives alone, or must we find ways of writing and narrating that allow us to engage with abortion and reproduction differently? In Pester's desire to bring abortion *to* writing, I hear a desire for disruption and dislocation; an impulse for abortive writing; a hope for an unravelling of dominant (often 'naturalised') ways of telling and 'knowing' through playful experiments with language.

This paper will explore poetry as a space of possibility for abortive writing by focusing on three British poets that have meditated on abortion in their writing: Holly Pester, Amelia Loulli and Martha Sprackland. Via a close engagement with their texts, it will ask whether poetic modes of writing can confront and distort dominant abortion narratives. I will argue that poetry can be a space where abortion can slip, or be pushed towards, broader, challenging or disruptive language horizons - where abortion can be thought of (positively) alongside death/killing, or as something mundane or comedic, for example - and a space where the boundaries of 'the social domain of speakable discourse' (Butler, 1997: 133) can be teased and played with. I will also think through the limitations of poetry in this task, whilst reflecting on what wider abortion-positive politics might learn from poetry, surrealism and fabulation.

*Pester posed this idea during an event hosted by the Silver Press and the Vagina Museum called 'Writing After Sex', 11 July 2024.

Ella Berny (she/her) is a LAHP-funded PhD candidate at Queen Mary University of London. Her research focuses on abortion discourse through different sites of abortion storytelling in the UK, and interrogates the limits and possibilities of 'speaking out' as a politically transformative act. Her work has been published in *Feminist Legal Studies*, *Feminist Review* and *Medicine Access @ Point of Care*, and she is winner of the 2025 *Feminist Legal Studies* award for best creative reflection. She previously worked in communications for human rights and reproductive justice organisations.

Ina Batzke (University of Augsburg)
Literary Imaginations of Abortion in Early 20th-Century US Literature

This paper explores the contested notion of reproductive freedom in early twentieth-century U.S. literature, focusing on the ways literary texts negotiated abortion as both a social reality and a cultural taboo. While the Declaration of Independence enshrined “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as unalienable rights, women’s autonomy over their own bodies remained profoundly curtailed well into the twentieth century in the United States. Abortion, criminalized in most states by the late nineteenth century, became a site where questions of individual liberty, state authority, class, gender, and morality collided. Literary representations of abortion between 1900 and the interwar years reflect these tensions, revealing how women’s reproductive choices—or their absence—were embedded within broader struggles over the meaning of American freedom.

Drawing on fictional and non-fictional works by Edith Wharton, Nella Larsen and Meridel LeSueur, this paper examines how abortion figured as a narrative problem, a social critique, or a silent absence. While the works expose both the silencing of women’s reproductive experiences and the imaginative strategies writers used to render visible what was legally and morally unspeakable, abortion also appears as a prism through which anxieties about class decline, eugenics, and racialized motherhood were refracted, while at the same time providing female characters a means—however fraught—to assert agency against social and familial constraints.

By situating these literary engagements with abortion within the discourses of freedom and unfreedom, the paper argues that reproductive autonomy represents a crucial but often neglected dimension of American liberty. Early twentieth-century texts not only register the lack of reproductive freedoms but also anticipate later feminist claims that bodily autonomy is foundational to women’s citizenship. In foregrounding this literary archive, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about the limits and contradictions of U.S. freedom, showing how struggles over abortion reveal the gendered exclusions underlying national myths of liberty.

Ina Batzke joined the University of Augsburg, Germany, as a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer in American Studies in 2018, after she received her PhD from the University of Münster. She is author of the monograph “Undocumented Migrants in the United States. Life Narratives and Self-representations” (Routledge 2019), which summarizes her research interests in life writing and critical refugee studies. She is also co-editor of the volumes “Exploring the Fantastic: Genre, Ideology, and Popular Culture” (transcript, 2018), “Storied Citizenship: Imagining the Citizen in American Literature” (Amerikastudien 65.4, 2020), and “Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene” (Palgrave, 2021). In her most recent project titled “Reproductive Citizenship in 20th and 21st Century US-American Fiction,” she explores the “silencing” and representations of the pregnant body in US fiction and life writing.

Ida Aaskov Dolmer (University of Southern Denmark)
Discovering Danish Abortion Literature

The representation of elective abortion in American literature has long been a subject of inquiry in feminist literary studies. Because of the country's turbulent history of reproductive politics, most recently evident in the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, the politics of abortion have long and often been debated in the forum of literature, where different aspects and implications of the experience of making the decision to end a pregnancy have been explored. But what about a nation where reproductive history has seemingly been much less turbulent?

In this presentation, I wish to explore and establish a field of study in Danish abortion literature. In Denmark, abortion was legalised the same year as in the US, 1973, and it has since been broadly accepted among the Danish population – at least, this is the common narrative. Consequently, abortion has not been debated much in Denmark, and it has been viewed as an uncomplicated free choice and an advantage of the social-democratic welfare state. This seemingly calm history was however challenged in 2024, when the government presented an amendment to the law that allows elective abortion up to 18 weeks. Many Danes were surprised at the heated public debate this suggestion caused, and it led to a surge in literature about the experience of abortion. In this presentation, I establish a literary history of Danish abortion literature, both before and after this debate. I argue that Danish abortion literature, rather than being shaped by political turbulence and disagreement, is rather informed by a culture of silence and the difficulty of telling a story without concrete institutional limitations on the central conflict. These narratives explore feelings and experiences of ambivalence and regret as well as the difficulty of speaking out in a nation that is not used to understanding abortion as a problem.

Ida Aaskov Dolmer is a researcher and teacher at the University of Southern Denmark, having recently completed her PhD on representations of motherhood and work in contemporary British literature. She is interested in questions of reproduction, care, gender, and the climate as well as how literature may be used to elucidate social issues. She has published in both Danish and anglophone contexts, and she has presented at conferences internationally.