

**chapter 4**

**congratulations - it's a boy!**

Birth is the primary numinous event. It is our major metaphor for life and coming into being. We talk about birth of the universe, the birth of galaxies. It is how the world came into being. It is the first act of magic — and physical testament to the continuity of human and all life.¹

A short film shown at a festival in Sydney in 1995 begins with an image of an imposing Catholic church. The dark chords of heavy organ music overlay the images and serve to intensify the religiosity of the scene. The genre of tragedy is indicated. An Italian woman, dressed in black and wearing a head scarf, enters slowly by the central aisle, lights a candle, crosses herself, and bows her head and solemnly prays. Above and around her are numerous familiar icons and statuary: crucifixes, stained glass, a haloed Jesus and a dolorous Mary. She looks up at the melancholy Madonna and entreats: 'Mother, why are you always so sad?' Tears flow surreally from the moulded eyes, there is a pause and the statue speaks. It declares: 'Because, my child, I wanted a daughter'.²

*Icon*, directed by Di Cousens, although only one minute in length, was both startling and humorous because of the novelty of its concept which subverted the most fundamental level of Christian doctrine. As well, it challenged and therefore undermined the preference for a male child which had been a part of most cultures for centuries.

The birth of a child is a momentous occasion, described by Judith Lumley and Jill Astbury in their Australian study on the subject, as: 'that most creative and joyous of events.'³ Birth marked the crucial moment of woman's transition to becoming a mother according to British sociologist Ann Oakley.⁴ She maintained that 'birth is an event with

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²*Icon* was directed by Di Cousens. It formed part of video collection 'Visions of Women' presented at the Women on Women Film Festival, May 27-28 1995, Valhalla Cinema, Sydney.
great psychological, emotional and social meaning'.\(^5\) Similarly, Arisika Razak considered birth 'an event of incredible human significance' with a 'profound spiritual, psychological, and emotional importance'.\(^6\) These writings indicate that the moment of a child's birth is extraordinarily powerful. From them we can gather that all the connotations surrounding the event are salient in understanding the issues of motherhood.

Because the birth of a child is so important to the family, films frequently used the event for the beginning or the conclusion of a story. In 1992, the cinema review journal, *The Velvet Light Trap*, devoted an entire issue to the phenomenon of birth in films. In it, Lori Shorr discussed the cinematic construction of the maternal body in childbirth. She analysed educational videos of birth and was critical of the paternal presence which appropriated the mother's part in the labour and delivery process.\(^7\) Robin Blaetz, in the same journal, examined films for the sounds of childbirth, and astutely observed that 'birth has traditionally been shown in terms of its effect on a male listener'.\(^8\) Other articles in the journal considered surrogacy, abortion and working mothers in films. While these offered useful insights into research into motherhood in the cinema, they paid curiously little attention to the difference the sex of the child made to the narrative. This aspect was also ignored by Lucy Fischer in her study of birth in Roman Polanski's film, *Rosemary's Baby*. In a long, detailed and exemplary reading of the film, the issue of the child's sex was not considered.\(^9\) The difference the delivery of a female or male baby made for the mother in films has not been fully analysed. This has been a significant omission.

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\(^{6}\) Razak, 'Toward a Womanist Analysis of Birth', p. 168.


This chapter investigates the different meanings attached to birth in films and in particular demonstrates the difference that the child's sex makes in the life of the mother. The aim is to understand whether the context and the reception of the cinematic birth work to reinforce beliefs about the superiority of the male in society. It would be no surprise to find that the exuberance which traditionally greets the arrival of a boy child has been replicated on screen. The acceptance, even expectation, of the preference, raises the question of how the context of the films might have reinforced it. In other words, were narratives organised to support these particular notions? Was the mother of a male child rewarded by appearing to be a more significant figure? What happened to the woman if she delivered a girl baby rather than a boy? These questions can be answered quite simply by an examination of the trajectory of the narrative.

There were thirty-six births in Australian feature films from 1900 to 1988. Of these, twenty-one, or fifty-eight per cent were male. In a patriarchal society, perhaps, it was not surprising that male births predominated in films. It was the context surrounding the birth, however, that was most interesting in understanding how popular images might reflect the preference for a male child which had been a part of most cultures for centuries. This chapter argues that the sex of the child is an important predictor of narrative outcome. Within the films selected, there is a tendency to reward the mother of a son, and to consider the mother of a daughter as less meritorious. That this trend is routine and normalised to a degree that it becomes almost imperceptible, suggests that it reflects a set of beliefs that are both firmly entrenched and unquestioned in the society.

The analysis is arranged in four sections. The first part examines the expectations surrounding the birth. It concentrates on the preferences stated by the parents for a daughter or son, and uses historical, social and psychoanalytical research to understand the position taken in several typical films. The second part considers the events after the birth, particularly in relation to changes the new baby brings to the life of the mother. The punishment and rewards that are attached to female and male births are assessed in
this section of the study. The special circumstances of births to unmarried women are analysed within this context, to identify any differences that female or male births have on the mother's future wellbeing. The third section describes those films in which the birth of a son is used to provide credibility or power in the development of the narrative. These are contrasted with the films in which the birth of a daughter is trivialised by its link to humorous situations.

Expectations: The preference for a son

My readings of the films concentrate on birth and gender, despite this not necessarily being the primary concern of the filmmakers at the time. The incorporation of births into films and the decisions regarding the sex of the infants are, perhaps, part of a normative process, largely unquestioned by the filmmakers and audiences. As historian, Gerda Lerner, observed, 'Patriarchal concepts are…built into all mental constructs of…civilisation in such a way as to remain largely invisible'.

Reflection on the history of childbirth and its relation to modern practice is helpful in gaining some insight into the representation of births in films. Historical writings made it clear that sons have been considered more desirable than daughters for many centuries and across many cultures and countries. Lloyd de Mause, in his European history of childhood, noted that before the fourth century AD, when infanticide was not considered a crime, girl babies were often killed. He concluded that: 'Girls were, of course, valued little'. De Mause cited Hilarion's letter to his pregnant wife Alis in 1 BC, in which he ordered her to expose a daughter and let a son live. Lerner also noted that in 8-5th century BC Athens: 'The main function of wives was to produce male heirs… Many female children were exposed at birth and left to die, with the decision over their fate always made by the father'. Additionally, Adrienne Rich observed that ancient

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Upanishad texts privileged male births by maintaining that the father welcomed the birth of a son, as a representation of his own second birth.\textsuperscript{13} The preference was widespread. George Payne noted the commonplace habit of drowning baby girls in China and the habitual infanticide in India. He claimed that authorities as recently as 1871 attempted to curtail the practice, by issuing an edict which required midwives to report when girls in the child population fell to below twenty-five per cent.\textsuperscript{14}

The situation where boys tended to be more highly valued than girls had its foundation in antiquity, and has continued into modern patriarchal and patrilineal cultures.\textsuperscript{15} Its continuing existence is verified by research into modern society.\textsuperscript{16} American psychologist, Lois Wladis Hoffman, found that men were three to four times more likely to prefer sons to daughters.\textsuperscript{17} Additionally, investigation in the 1970s in the US by Michael Lamb and colleagues, revealed that: 'American men overwhelmingly desire male rather than female offspring, with a degree of preference far exceeding that of their wives'.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly in Australia, Lyn Richards found that the impetus to have a third child often came from a father wanting a son.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15}A fascinating contradiction of this conclusion was reported recently by Tim Radford who wrote about the discovery of a 'mass grave of more than 100 babies—all only one or two days old—in a Roman settlement from 4th-century Israel'. Scientists had examined nineteen of the skeletons, Radford noted, and found that fourteen were boys and five were girls. The surprise that more boys had been murdered can be explained by the position of the grave. It was under a brothel, a place where mature girls would have been more valuable than boys. Tim Radford, 'Roman infanticide: Mystery of the brothel babies', \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 17 January 1997, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{17}Lois Wladis Hoffman, 'Changes in Family Roles, Socialization, and Sex Differences', \textit{American Psychologist}, August 1977, pp. 644-57.
Charles Chauvel's *Sons of Matthew* (1949), one of the most androcentric of the early films, consistently offered examples of the worth of sons over daughters. The film told of Matthew's difficulties in setting up a home for his family in the inhospitable outback of Australia. When his sons grew to manhood, they were expected to search for new land for their own families. They found virgin land and a monumental challenge on the wild Lamington Plateau and eventually, succeeding in overcoming the many hardships, they were able to make a new life for themselves. *Sons of Matthew* emphasised the value of male children, not only in its title, but from its very first frame. In keeping with the genre of the family saga, the characters were introduced as though in a book. The image of each of the four sons appeared on two pages, the first depiction as a child and the second as an adult. The male narrator described their personalities as infants and as they had grown up. Blatantly and laughingly confessing to the idea of the daughters as an afterthought, he added: 'I almost forgot the two girls'. The narrator trivialised the girls' function in the family and they were presented in a much smaller space, on a single shared page.

Indeed, Matthew's daughters remained incidental to the story. The usefulness and value of the boys was a conspicuous theme of the film while the two girls were almost absent in the progression of the narrative. Any discussions about the future of the property took place with the sons. This was a reflection of way the patriarchal Australian land settlers operated, although it served to underline the lack of importance of women for the 'real work' in running a property. The daughters were not consulted and remained confined with their mother in the domestic environment. When hard times hit the family, Matthew lamented, 'There'll be no Christmas for my sons'. It would have been just as easy for him to say 'There'll be no Christmas for my children', and his failure to even mention his daughters in these circumstances made his lack of interest in them quite clear.
Fathers in Australian films expressed a desire for sons, never anticipated the birth of a daughter with pleasure, and when they did appear, frequently treated them poorly. The father's predilection for a son can be clearly observed in Phillip Noyce's *Newsfront* (1978). Fay is about to have her third baby. Len, her husband, tells her that he 'painted the bedroom blue, so God gets the hint'. Fay remonstrates with Len, suggesting that it is his preference, not hers. She is worried that finding a separate room for a son will be a problem, because their house is too small. Len is not concerned with practicalities and clearly blames the devout Fay, (and her God), for the birth of their two existing daughters. Logically, the audience could sympathise with Fay's concerns, however, film reviewer Brian McFarlane summed up the position taken by the filmmakers: 'Len [is] married to a nag for longer than most would bear it, …finally leaving her without losing integrity'.

Paternal preference was also evident in Fred Zinneman's *The Sundowners* (1960). Liz and Bluey are about to have their first baby. Liz is understandably anxious about the birth, although Bluey's main concern is not for his wife, but for the sex of the child. One of his friends teases him while they are drinking beer in the hotel: 'What are you going to call this girl of yours when it's born?'. Bluey drunkenly replies: 'I told you a dozen times, it's going to be a boy'. When he finds out that he has a son, Bluey is delighted. His first words reveal his priority: 'I gotta tell the fellas'. Had the child been a female, his reaction may have been different.

Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* explained the specificities of man's historical preference for sons. Besides needing them to 'enhance his position in the world', she suggested that throughout history, fathers have desired sons, because they provide: 'heirs, field hands, cannon-fodder, feeders of machinery, images and extensions of themselves'. In this way sons were able to guarantee 'immortality' for their fathers.

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insights were pertinent to several scenes in *Sons of Matthew*. As soon as he sees his first-born son, Matthew takes the baby's hand and tells Jane: 'Here's a hand for the plough Jane, strong and confident. It's a straight furrow he'll make'. Baby Shane grows to manhood and echoes Matthew's view of the importance of male descendants. He attempts to persuade the neighbour's daughter, Cathy, to marry him by arguing, 'You are going to be my wife and bear my sons, because that's the way it was meant to be'. His beliefs were echoed in Australian rural films where, commonly, the hero proposed marriage and immediately spoke of an expectation of sons to help him on the farm.22

However lighthearted it might appear to be, the assumption that the husband-to-be could direct his wife about the sex of the unborn children was coterminous with notions of men's jealousy and attempted appropriation of women's ability to give birth. This occurrence has been frequently observed by female scholars. Barbara Creed noted that men appear to exhibit jealousy and awe at the act of birth.23 Fischer has argued persuasively that Freud invented the notion of penis envy to counteract male jealousy of women's undeniable creativity in giving birth.24 Similarly, Susan Dermody interpreted the male involvement with the adolescent's rite of passage as a compensation for his fear that there was no 'equivalent to the precise and weighty flesh and blood matter of giving birth'.25 Evelyn Nakano Glenn has written about the social construction of mothering and argued that male-dominated institutions have in many ways tried to control the birth process. Glenn cited the professionalisation of medicine which has resulted in the suppression of midwifery and the belittling of women's knowledge of childbirth.26

22See for example, *The Squatter's Daughter* (1933) where the hero observed coyly: 'I'll be needing some young chaps to help me' in the same breath as his proposal of marriage.
24Fischer, *Cinematernity*, p. 47.
The issue has been explored within a cinematic context by Virginia Wright Wexman, who described the inclination of men to commandeer women's 'procreative power' in D.W. Griffith's *Way Down East.* An Australian counterpart occurred in *Sons of Matthew,* where respect for the mother's travail in childbirth was undercut by her husband's actions. In the film, wild horses had come to take Matthew's brood mares at the exact moment of the beginning of Jane's first confinement. Scenes of Matthew's fight to save his stock were counterposed with Jane's time in labour and underscored by powerful, dramatic music. The chiaroscuro lighting which Chauvel used could have served to highlight the drama and importance of the birth, instead of emphasising Matthew's struggle with the herd of stallions. While Matthew's strength and courage were accentuated by filmic effects, Jane's efforts were restricted to shots of the midwife boiling water on the fuel stove. When Matthew finally has time to see Jane, he is dishevelled and dirty after his arduous night, while she rests in a clean white-linened bed, with the baby miraculously by her side. As Shorr in her observations of birth in cinema pointed out: 'No long hours of false labor, no vomiting or tearing interrupts the classic narrative.' *Sons of Matthew,* by contrasting Matthew's courage with Jane's apparent comfort, has transfigured the birth as Matthew's accomplishment. The importance of the birth and concomitant merit which more properly should accrue to the mother has been displaced on to the husband.

It is not surprising, given the importance the father placed on a male heir, that the mother was encouraged to share his preference. In Australian feature films, the prospective mother's position was rarely canvassed, although in *A Son is Born* and *Unfinished Business,* the mother professed a desire for a boy, as she clearly expected a son rather than a daughter would please the husband and save her marriage. The position may have a foundation in beliefs that the wife was meant to provide her

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27 Wexman cited Margaret Mead, Karen Horney, Simone de Beauvoir, Lucy Fischer and Nancy Huston among others, who had noted male envy in this regard. V.W. Wexman, 'Suffering and Suffrage: Birth, the female body, and women's choices in D.W. Griffith's *Way Down East*, *The Velvet Light Trap: Review of Cinema,* number 29, Spring 1992, p. 63, n. 9.

husband with a male child. It was almost law, as Lerner in her discussion of the Middle Ages discovered: women without sons were frequently replaced by another woman, and subsequently lost any privileges gained during their marriage.\textsuperscript{29} Lerner also observed that in Hebrew societies based on the writings of the Old Testament, the wife's barrenness or inability to produce sons was cause for divorce.\textsuperscript{30}

The pressure on women to produce sons was still apparent in Hoffman's recent study of American families. She observed that twice as many women favoured sons rather than daughters. The most common reason they gave was that the birth of a son pleased their husbands, as the baby would carry on the family name and be a companion to him.\textsuperscript{31} The husbands' influence on the preference women showed for sons was recognised by psychologist, Dana Breen in her study of the bonding of American mothers to their first-born child.\textsuperscript{32} Breen detected that women with daughters were more likely than those with sons to have post-partum depression. She discovered that women's disappointment resulted from their belief that their husband required a son and their guilt stemmed from their inability to provide one. Oakley ascertained in her research on coping mechanisms of mothers, that 44% of women were disappointed to have daughters, compared to 93% who were pleased to have sons.\textsuperscript{33} Many of these modern studies, appeared to reinforce the idea that women deferred to the wishes of their husbands. Vivien Nice revealed a possible explanation for this in her study of mother/daughter relationships. She found that because the mother's primary concern was for the health of the child rather than its sex, she was content to echo the father's preference for a son.\textsuperscript{34}

In these studies the mother's aspirations about the sex of the baby appeared to be directed by her husband. Recent sociological and psychoanalytical research, however,
has indicated there were more complex explanations. For example, sociologist, Judith Arcana, argued that women wanted female children, or both female and male, and were swayed by the response in society to birth, in which sons attract more praise and status. In Australia, likewise, Babbette Smith commented on the prestige that accrued to mothers of sons, who were envied and praised after World War Two. Psychologist, Phyllis Magrab, concluded that women often preferred sons, to avoid reliving the experience of low status and security they had themselves encountered. Rich's views about the desirability of sons coincided with Magreb's. Her own preference for a son derived from memories of her childhood where she related to more positive masculine roles, the result of which was that she wanted to give birth: 'to my unborn self, the self that our father-centred family had suppressed in me, someone independent, actively willing, original. From another point-of-view, Lerner believed that some mother's desire for a male child could have been instigated by the Catholic religion and doctrinal worship of Mary and her son. As Julia Kristeva observed in her essay, 'Stabat Mater', the maternal element of Catholicism was a powerful part of the religion. In these accounts, a society which gave more status to women with sons, created an environment which had the potential to influence birth preferences.

For many film mothers, the appearance of a son was a cause for celebration. Hoffman's study, however, cited above, revealed that one third of the women she questioned confessed that they were hoping for daughters. These women, albeit in a minority, gave reasons which included wanting a companion; someone who was fun to dress; was more like themselves and was easier to live with and more obedient. Additionally, some expected that daughters could help with the housework and their siblings, and would

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stay closer than would sons. Alexandra Towle in her book, *A Celebration of Mothers*, quoted Gloria Vanderbilt, who, thinking about her own pregnancies, wrote: 'My only regret was that I haven’t had a daughter. That experience must be extraordinary—for a woman to have a daughter and really see another woman, part image of herself'.\(^{42}\) Nice was also interested in the notion of a woman seeing a daughter as a reflection of herself, and she noted the additional advantage of the attachment and bonding between women in the relationship, and of the possibility of getting a second chance in the mother/daughter relationship.\(^{43}\) Women such as these, who indicated a preference for a daughter, were not represented in Australian films. The closest comment came from Fay in *Newsfront*, discussed previously, who had two daughters and when expecting a third child, thought another daughter would be less trouble as she would not have to provide a separate room.

### After the Birth

The second part of this analysis of birth in Australian films considers the changes the new child brings to the life of the mother. Examination of the narrative reveals that the mother's future is based on a system of reward and punishment governed by the sex of the child. For instance, in Jack Lee's *Robbery Under Arms* (1957), the wife, Jean, gives birth to a son soon after the young couple is married. The father, Jim, who is an habitual bushranger, looks at his small son asleep in his cot and immediately decides to give up his life of crime. He surrenders to the police knowing that when he has served his sentence in jail he will be able to return home to be with his son. The birth of a boy marked a pivotal part in the resolution of the story, as the baby provided a credible reason for Jim to give himself up. A catalyst for change, the birth pointed to the beginning of a new life for Jim as well as his son. Additionally, it signalled a reversal of the previous habitual criminality of all the males in the family. The birth of a less-valued daughter would not have provided as suitable a plot device. The reward for the mother

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\(^{43}\)Nice, *Mothers and Daughters*, pp. 21-2.
came with the status which accrued from the birth of her son, and the promise of a better lifestyle with a loving and law-abiding husband.

Interestingly, this film was a remake of a 1920 feature. In the earlier film of the same name, directed by Kenneth Brampton, Jim married, although there was no mention of a child. The emphasis in the narrative was on his punishment rather than his redemption. There was a cultural and historical explanation for the difference between the construction of the plots in both films. In 1920, it was necessary to reinforce the message that crime did not pay, particularly as authorities were sensitive about the proliferation of bushranging films. When the film was remade in 1957, the concern in society had shifted to the encouragement of domesticity, and the son's birth provided a suitable and believable explanation of Jim's desire and ability for respectability in the context of family life.

The representation of a woman's reward for giving birth to a son can also be found in *Unfinished Business* (1986), a film directed and written by Bob Ellis. Maureen and her husband George have everything in their life: wealth, companionship and security, except Maureen has been unable to become pregnant. Because she has had an abortion some years earlier, she realises that it is her husband who is sterile. When Maureen chances to meet her former lover, Geoff, who was the father of the aborted baby, she asks him if he would be willing to make her pregnant without the knowledge of her husband. She tells Geoff that George is desperate to have a child and in particular, a son. Maureen, unsure and nervous throughout the affair, is trying to convince herself when she reasons plaintively: 'It's not just for him, it's for me too'. After all her soul-searching, Maureen is successful. The final scene shows George with a one-year-old son on his knee, unaware of the lover's part in the event. The camera hovers outside the room, constructing a voyeuristic picture postcard of a happy family gathering in an opulent setting where the little son is the crowning glory.

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This film was not judgemental about the actions of the wife. The blissfully happy association of George and his son was instrumental in alleviating whatever guilt may have been attached to the adultery. Despite Maureen's anxiety about the method she used to conceive the baby and the consequent risk to her marriage, the result has been successful and she has been rewarded for her effort.

Many psychoanalytic viewpoints which celebrated the birth of a son could be related to the writing of Sigmund Freud, in particular, his 1935 essay, *Femininity*. Freud argued that woman's most powerful desire was for a penis and when she translated this desire into a desire for a baby, she was able to achieve femininity. He contended: 'Her happiness is great if later on this wish for a baby finds fulfilment in reality, and quite especially so if the baby is a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him'. For Freud, a mother's relationship with her son was 'the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships'. Through the son, the mother could experience those ambitions which had been thwarted in her own life, thus finding satisfaction by the resolution of any remnants of her masculinity complex.\(^{45}\)

An exemplary demonstration of the psychoanalytical viewpoint which noted the mother's attachment to her son could be seen in a film which relied on Freudian concepts for its narrative and sub-text. In Michael Thornbill's *Between Wars* (1974), the effectiveness of psychiatry and psychoanalysis was openly debated and the lives of the main characters were affected by their acceptance or rejection of Freudian arguments. Additionally, and germane to discussions in this chapter, the narrative also included the birth of a son.

*Between Wars* is a political, social and historical portrayal of Australian life from 1918 to 1941. Its protagonist is a male doctor, Edward, who suffers discrimination because of the son's gender.

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his radical views, which include pacifism and an interest in psychoanalysis. During World War One, he befriends a German psychiatrist with Freudian sympathies who has been interned in the hospital where he works. Edward discusses Freud with the German and appears to share his theories. A sub-textual Freudian connection is also signalled with the birth of Edward's son, Rodney, who becomes a close companion to his mother, Deborah, while being largely ignored by his father. In a scene in a dressing room after the grown-up Rodney's appearance in a university revue, he learns from his mother that his father has missed his performance because of an emergency at the hospital. Rodney is clearly delighted to have his mother to himself and he raises his glass of champagne to toast his missing parent: 'Here's to father's little emergency'. The Oedipal parallel is obvious: the father has been vanquished and the son is united with his mother. The Freudian influence is increased by the scene's sexual energy, as a coquettish Deborah allows herself to be persuaded by Rodney to be his companion at the after-show party.

Ultimately, the resolution of Between Wars can be understood with reference to the Freudian theory of the son's acting out the mother's suppressed desires. In the course of the film, Deborah has grown to resent her husband's introspective nature which has limited the family's financial and social success. She has been unable to either influence Edward or communicate her opinions about his behaviour. Rodney is able to achieve Deborah's desire for her, when he manages to take a stand against his father. The antagonism brewing in the family reaches a symbolic climax, when, as an ultimate blow to the staunchly pacifist Edward, Rodney joins the army to fight for Australia in the Second World War. Deborah's triumphant words end the film. Although it is possible that her child may lose his life in the war and it is, perhaps, only a Pyrrhic victory, there is no regret in her voice. She indicates Rodney, standing in uniform in front of the fire, and announces to her husband: 'He sails on Wednesday'. The feminine sounds of Debussy piano music underline her words and contrast with the masculine hardness of the Dixieland jazz used up to now in the film. Deborah looks up to meet Rodney's eyes

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46Freud, 'Femininity', p. 133.
across the room as he stands in the traditional patriarchal place, elbow on the mantelpiece. Edward, defeated, slumps in his armchair.

If mothers who produced sons could look forward to either the father's approval, or at least, a better life, the reverse was usually true for mothers of daughters. A disturbing example of this can be found in *Libido* (1973), a quartet of stories, one episode of which is David Baker's *The Family Man*, written by David Williamson. In this film, a real estate agent, Ken, telephones a male friend with the news that his wife has had another daughter. He is infuriated because he now has 'three girls in a row' and adds that 'girls give me the shits'. His displeasure with the birth and the blatant misogyny of the film is made clear when he jokes in an admiring way about a man who has sex with his wife while she is in labour. Ken compounds his anger with a desire to punish his wife. While she is in hospital with the newborn infant, he gets drunk with his friend and picks up two young women, taking them to his holiday house at the coast with the intention of having sex with them. The evening does not turn out well and arguments and misunderstandings develop among all the characters. Angry because of Ken's chauvinistic treatment of them, the two young women place a large sign on the roof of Ken's house which accuses him of adulterous behaviour. The film could have ended there and made the point of embarrassing Ken in front of his friends and neighbours. The final, otherwise extraneous scene, is used to make the wife's punishment explicit. The offensive sign is plainly evident when the family with a new baby daughter arrives home from hospital. Significantly this is the wife's only scene in the film and her reaction, although she shows some irritation, is oddly resigned. She snaps at Ken: 'Get that off before the girls see it'. It should be remembered that of course the sign would not have been there, had she delivered a boy.

The plot of *The Family Man* was based on the behaviour of a father after the birth of his daughter. By all accounts his treatment of his wife was reprehensible, yet it appeared to be accepted as an understandable reaction. Ken, played by actor Jack Thompson, in
some ways was a stereotypical Australian male: beer-drinking, licentious, shallow and reliant on his mates. He was successful in business, as witnessed by his luxurious house, expensive car and holiday home. Film historians, Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, claimed that the film was a powerful and accurate portrayal of Australian middle-class masculinity. They concluded that the film, 'perfectly captures middle-class speech patterns and ocker male vulnerability'. The film critic, Sandra Hall, writing at the time of the film's release in 1973, described Thompson as ideally cast because of his representation of 'the physicality, the competitiveness, the materialism and the partial familiarity with fashions like pot smoking and Leonard Cohen'. Significantly, Hall indicated that 'the shocks of recognition were felt all over the theatre'.

Hall, like other writers on film, while recognising that Ken's behaviour was typical, failed to acknowledge that the birth of a daughter was a critical factor in his response. The critic, Bob Ellis, also missed that point. He claimed that the film was a 'class struggle between a well heeled sophisticated alf and a couple of rather naive hash headed women's libbers'. A more nuanced reading of the film could place Ken as a most pitiful and unlikeable creature, at odds with those around him, including his wife and male friends. Perhaps, his disappointment with his new daughter reflected a subconscious desire, noted by Rich, in which a son allowed a father a second chance, an opportunity to start life afresh. Nevertheless, whatever the evaluation of Ken's lifestyle, his preference for a son and the punishment of his wife was entirely predictable.

In whatever way it was done, it was more common for mothers of sons to be rewarded, while mothers of daughters were punished. The tendency can be deduced from the synopses of two early films from Australian cinema. Raymond Longford's A Maori

Maid's Love (1916), reveals that a surveyor, who is married to a nagging and shallow wife, has an affair with a Maori woman while he is on a field trip. The woman subsequently has a daughter and dies. She has transgressed and her demise can be seen as retribution. While Nina Auerbach concluded that it was common in Victorian melodrama for an unwed woman to die at the end of the story, in Australian films, the woman usually gives birth to a daughter before doing so. The plot of Kenneth Brampton's The Dingo (1923) is bizarre. A dissolute drunkard, (the 'Dingo' of the title), inveigles a country girl into marriage. She gives birth to a daughter and later dies from shock brought on by distress, on learning that her husband has been arrested for murder. The woman had married a man whom she apparently did not love, and died as a result of being told of his wrongdoing.

Although the birth of a daughter foreshadowed the death of a mother in these films, the mother of a son rarely died. At first view it appeared that Charles Chauvel's Heritage (1935), set in the early days of Australian white settlement, was an exception. In the film, a young woman, Biddy, comes to Australia on a 'bride ship' and marries a settler after having been deserted by the hero, Jim. They have a baby son. In a subsequent fight with Aborigines, Biddy and her husband are killed. Initially, Biddy's death may have appeared to overturn the tradition in films in which a son could mean wealth and happiness for the mother and a daughter, death or illness. Biddy, however, has hidden the baby under the floorboards of their hut and the child is found by Jim. As a poor servant, Biddy had little hope of a decent existence and her son is commandeered by the hero and his lawful wife, to be brought up in their wealthy respectable household. Underlining the contrast with Biddy's privations, Jim assesses his good fortune as: 'What more could a man ask of life than a loving and virtuous wife and a son, and successful achievements?' Had Biddy's child been a girl, his speech would, perhaps, not

51 The film has been lost, but can be examined from the synopsis of Pike & Cooper, Australian Film 1900-1977, pp. 76-7.
53 Pike & Cooper, Australian Film 1900-1977, p. 153.
have had the same resonance. In *Heritage*, Biddy's son was the beginning of a lineage which was important to the finale of the film. It was crucial that in the massacre in which his parents were killed, that he should survive.

The paradigm wherein sons signify plenitude and love within the marriage, and daughters foreshadowed those that are doomed, violent or pilloried, was depicted in three films. These are Ken Hannam's *Dawn!* (1979), Frank Shields' *Hostage: The Christine Maresch Story* (1983) and Fred Schepisi's *Evil Angels* (1988). The female protagonist in all of these films gave birth, and in each case she had a daughter. This followed the expected course of events seen so far in the investigation of Australian cinema, although these films were set apart from the others already examined. Their plots were based on true stories, so in one sense the directors and scriptwriters had no alternative except to represent female children.

Logically, it must be coincidental that the births in these films in which the mother's life ranges from dysfunctional to horrific, were invariably of daughters. These 'real life' female births, however, raised interesting questions of whether they influenced and/or reflected the representation of the births in the fictional films discussed in this chapter. In other words, would Dawn Fraser's husband have walked away and the marriage have broken up in the same manner had the child been a boy? Would the protagonist of *Hostage*, Walter Maresch, have treated his wife so brutally, if she had delivered two sons instead of two daughters? Would the Lindy Chamberlain story, reinacted in *Evil Angels*, have had the same outcome and reaction in society, if her daughter Azaria, and the subsequent baby had been sons? A plausible deduction from the crossing over of films and reality is impossible, although it is noteworthy that each of these mothers was punished by husbands, society or both, in the aftermath of the birth of their daughters.

In films, although the birth of a daughter usually prefigured the breakdown of a marriage, there was one film in which the son's arrival at first appears to have this
effect. This was Eric Porter's *A Son is Born* (1946). The son is not responsible for bringing unhappiness to the marriage, however, as it was doomed from the start. On their wedding day, the husband, Paul, leaves his new wife, Laurette, alone when he goes out to meet another woman. The question of why she married this alcoholic womaniser is never answered and the marriage deteriorates to a point where she is both physically and verbally abused. The birth of a son serves to consolidate the sympathy we have for Laurette. She pleads with Paul for a better life as she tells him she is pregnant: 'Are you pleased? I thought you wanted a son. I know we'll be much happier'. Paul does grow to love his son, David, although he undermines the marriage still further by setting the child against his mother. Eventually Laurette leaves and David, now thirteen years-old, is so embittered that he rejects his mother and decides to stay with his father. Laurette's move, however, foreshadows a better life and the conclusion of *A Son is Born* complies with the usual association of the birth of a son with fulfilment for the mother. Laurette remarries, this time to a loving, wealthy man. She is blissfully happy once she is reunited with her son.

**The Unwed Mother**

The representation of unmarried mothers in films forms a sub-category of the broad trend identified so far, which links the sex of a newborn child with punishment and reward. The birth of a daughter to an unwed woman in Australian feature films tended to signify that the woman was destined to remain with the problems and stigma of single parenthood. The birth of a son on the other hand was an indication of better fortune which usually led to a reconciliation with the father and a name and security for the child. While this was a recurrent formula in cinema for many decades, a single film, *The More Things Change...* made in 1986, perhaps reflecting the beliefs of its female filmmakers reversed the usual narrative outcome.

During the early days of the cinema, unwed motherhood was not condoned. In Raymond Longford's *The Woman Suffers* (1918), the innocent heroine, Marjory, is
seduced by Philip. She suffers great distress because of the disgrace she is inflicting on her family and becomes ill and is near to death. By a great stroke of good fortune, however, she gives birth to a boy, and this is a signal that she is about to be rescued. As a reward for her delivery of a son, Philip agrees to a marriage ceremony in the hospital, with the bride in bed, post-partum. Marjory's recovery is immediate.

A reconciliation of this type also occurs in Lawson Harris's *Circumstance* (1922). A young woman has fostered out her small son, after being abandoned by the father before the birth. By chance, the suitor re-enters her life, although he does not recognise her. He falls in love with her, and before they marry, in another chance meeting, he happens upon his son at the foster home and is beguiled by him. It is only at the altar that all is revealed and he confirms his desire to provide both mother and son with a suitable home. The mother has been rewarded, albeit with a man with a dubious memory, by being united with her son and freed from a life of financial hardship.

This situation was not limited to the melodramatic narratives of early films. The plot of *Circumstance* was echoed sixty-four years later in George Miller's *Cool Change* (1986), where a young woman has given birth after the immature and irresponsible father has left the district. After many years he finds out about his son and the parents renew their love and prepare for a happy married life together. As in *Circumstance*, the reunion was reinforced and enhanced by the presence of a son, the living metaphor for his father's second chance.

The birth of a son is a symbol of salvation for the woman in Tom Jeffrey's *Weekend of Shadows* (1978). This film tells the story of an unmarried woman in a small town who is pregnant and not sure who the father could be. The film suggests that it might be any one of the adult males in the town. The men, in a misogynist parody, draw straws to see

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54 An eleven minute section of this film was discovered recently and has been restored by the National Film and Sound Archive. The synopsis from Pike & Cooper has been used to augment the valuable fragment of film. Pike & Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*, p. 148.
who should marry her. If the winner/loser were to be as appalling as the rest of the men in town, the marriage would have been doomed and one could predict that the baby may have been a girl. The man is, however, the hero of the film and an honourable and sympathetic figure. The woman is reformed, and her new respectability is explicitly shown in an otherwise extraneous scene, when she repels the advances of a former beau. Her marriage, now successful and loving, is complemented by the birth of a son.

In all of these films which dealt with pregnancy and birth outside marriage, the issue of the sex of the child had a symbolic inference. The birth of a son was used to substantiate both the reward and redemption of the mother, and to strengthen the plausibility of the reappearance or presence of the father. On the other hand, the birth of a female child to an unwed woman signalled that there would be no felicitous reunion. In Ken G. Hall's *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1934), because of the scandal caused by her pregnancy outside marriage, Alma is forced to leave her home, her town, and consequently the father, Dean Maitland. She is represented as an immoral woman and is blamed for seducing Maitland. The birth of a daughter rather than a son can be seen as a punishment. She takes little part in the remainder of the story, although we learn from her adult daughter of the hardships her mother has faced in her sequestered existence. Without the rescue that was available to Marjory in *A Woman Suffers* on the birth of her son, Alma becomes gravely ill and is soon to die.\(^55\)

A similar instance of a female birth which heralded punishment and abandonment of the mother, occurred in the Franklyn Barrett feature, *Know Thy Child* (1921).\(^56\) As Shirley and Adams observed: *'Know Thy Child* (1921), recalled the abandoned mother theme of

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\(^55\) The major part of the film concentrated on Maitland. He married a woman deemed more suitable to his religious calling than Alma. This marriage was doomed as Maitland, apart from betraying Alma, had allowed his friend, Everard, to be sentenced to jail for a crime that Maitland committed. The birth of Maitland's son might initially be seen as surprising in the context of this chapter. However the little boy was blind and according to the wronged man, Everard, he was Maitland's punishment for his sins. I see an equivalence between the birth of this blind child, figured especially in the 1934 context as lack, and the birth of a daughter.

\(^56\) For a more detailed analysis of this film, which recognises the daughter's appropriation of the mother's sexuality, see chapter 6.
The Woman Suffers, but here there was no retribution and no convenient escape to the
country'. Although Shirley and Adams did not make the connection, in the former film
a daughter was born, in the latter, a son, and this difference fitted the mother's prognosis
of ill-health and unhappiness. The synopsis of Know Thy Child revealed that a man
deserts a country girl, leaving her pregnant and without resources. A baby daughter,
Eileen, is born and the mother suffers poverty and despair when her child is shunned by
other children simply because she is illegitimate. In an echo of the plot of The Silence of
Dean Maitland, mother and daughter live a life of isolation in the country, until the
mother becomes ill and dies.

Another type of punishment for those unwed mothers who delivered female children can
be found in two later films. In Leslie Norman's The Shiralee (1957), the hero, Macauley,
is told that when he left the area some years previously, his lover, Lily, was pregnant.
Their baby was stillborn. Lily's father recounts this to Macauley and quite deliberately
mentions that it was a daughter. In Bruce Beresford's The Fringe Dwellers (1986),
Trilby insists that she will not marry the father of her baby girl. While still in hospital
after the birth, she carries her daughter into the bathroom and the child dies
mysteriously and, perhaps, accidentally. In both of these films, the death of the child
was not a central or even a particularly noteworthy part of the plot and the sex of the
baby had no other relevance in the narrative other than to downplay the importance of
the birth and retain sympathy for the parents. The lives of the mothers were not
especially affected and the stories concluded, notwithstanding the baby's death, on an
optimistic note. They chillingly recalled the earlier historical instances of infanticide
when it was considered that the family was better off without its newly born female
child.

57Shirley & Adams, Australian Cinema, p. 61.
58The film has not survived but a synopsis can be found in Pike & Cooper, Australian Film 1900-1977,
pp. 144-5.
59Karen Jennings reported that in Nene Gare's novel, The Fringe Dwellers, on which the film was based,
the narrative remained sympathetic to the mother, but it was clear that she killed her baby. K. Jennings,
Sites of Difference: Cinematic Representations of Aboriginality and Gender, AFI, South Melbourne,
1993, p. 51
Australian feature films, in their depictions of the importance of sons, supported the preference for male children that had become firmly entrenched in society. Rich in 1976, however, observing that women's preference for sons was declining, proposed that a social transformation was imminent. She acknowledged that although some women would continue to prefer sons, as women began to take charge of their own lives, they would rethink the position which overvalued male children in society.60 Perhaps, Rich's words were prophetic, as a celebration of the birth of a daughter can be observed in a film of the 1980s. Significantly, it was directed, written and produced by women.61

In *The More Things Change...* (1986), directed by Robyn Nevin, the birth of a girl resulted in acceptance and love from the suitor and augured a better and more fruitful life for the new family. This was a divergence from other Australian films, in which the birth of a son was the essential catalyst for the male's desire to consolidate the family. In this role-reversal film, the wife works in the city, while her husband cares for their child on their hobby farm in the country. A young unmarried, pregnant woman is hired to help him and her relationship with her employers proves satisfactory. It is only ended when her daughter is born and she decides to marry a young man, who despite not being the father of the child, will provide a loving home. If the film followed the typical pattern, the young man's 'altruism' would have been substantiated by the birth of a son. In *The More Things Change...,* however, happiness and the resolution came with the birth of a daughter. The uniqueness of this event served to reinforce conclusions about the way films have historically represented female and male births to communicate ideological positions about the superiority of the male in society.

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60Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 204.
61In a review of the film, *The More Things Change...*, Debi Enker interviewed the producer Jill Robb, who disclosed that 'we set out to make a film about contemporary relationships from a woman's point of view'. Robb described the ending as ambiguous, drawing attention to an ambivalence that perhaps was more suitable to women's senses. At the end of the film it is not clear whether the successful businesswoman/mother will leave her impractical husband. It is clear, however, that she intends to keep her son. Debi Enker, *The More Things Change...*, [rev. art.], *Cinema Papers*, number 56, March 1987, p. 71.
Credibility by Association

Apart from the principle of reward for the 'good' mothers of sons, and punishment for the 'bad' mothers of daughters, the birth of a male child has had a special significance in western culture, which is related to the acceptance of men's superior status. It is this aspect of authority which is associated with male births in films that forms the third part of this analysis.

Social-psychologist, Hilary Lips, noted that men had a higher standing in the community. They were economically better off and their position in the public sphere attracted more prestige. She pointed to the acceptance of men's 'patriarchal power' as a reason for the inequality of males and females in society. Modern legislation has added to male status by reinforcing the laws of male inheritance. In this way, the esteem of the male in most societies has been enhanced by the tradition of the eldest son succeeding the father in authority and possessions. This historical privilege has helped to ensure that there is an almost universal incidence of the predominance of men over women in terms of power and eminence in the world today. The acceptance of this situation has relegated women to the subservient position of sustaining daily life. In western culture, this has meant that the male presence epitomized greater credibility.

In the medium of film, the representations of gender in childbirth reflected this hierarchy of power. The choice of the sex of the child born in the diegesis was significant and many films used the birth of a son to gain credibility in the plot. The narrative of Simon Wincer's The Lighthorsemen (1987), provided an example. The story is set in World War I, where a British intelligence officer is trying to assemble personal documents in order construct a false identity for a soldier. The soldier is to be a decoy, whose belongings must appear authentic to the enemy when he allows himself to be

64 Basow, Gender Stereotypes, pp. 113-4.
65 Lerner, The Creation of the Feminine Consciousness, pp. 3-4.
captured. The officer asks an Australian nurse to write a letter to the soldier as though she were his wife who is longing to see him and show him their newly born baby. She is not directed what to say or given a briefing about the sex of the child, although as the situation concerns plausibility in the role of the soldier, it is, perhaps, predictable that she writes: 'Our little son...'.

The birth of a baby boy was used in other films to confirm the significance of the protagonist. This type of honour by association can be discerned in *The Umbrella Woman*, directed by Ken Cameron in 1987.\textsuperscript{66} The narrative worked to establish a contrast between Marge's early stability and her subsequent transgressions when she became entranced with a dissolute stranger. At the beginning of the film, Marge is diligently scrubbing the floor in her country home. She is interrupted by a call to deliver a neighbour's child. The child she delivers is a boy and this underlines her status and worth in the community. Similarly, in an earlier film, Beaumont Smith's *Splendid Fellows* (1934), the clergyman is an exemplary figure whom the family acknowledges as 'the best in the world'. The narrative works to reinforce his righteousness, in scenes of his travelling through the outback, ministering to the country folk. Four episodes of his worthwhile life are shown. These are: reading the rites at a funeral; conducting a marriage ceremony; visiting a sick woman and baptising a baby. Obtaining maximum value from the situation, the baby is a healthy boy, and he baptises him 'William Ernest'. The birth of a male child in these films was used to reinforce the integrity of the associated character in the narrative. On the other hand, if it were argued that the sex of the child had no real relevance to the plot of these two films, it must be concluded that the male births were set up as 'the norm', the birth of a girl was not even considered.

Another film which used the idea of credibility by association, depended on the worth of a son for its narrative resolution. This situation occurred in a McDonagh sisters' film, *Those Who Love* (1926),\textsuperscript{67} in which a wealthy man marries a dancer. The latter realises

\textsuperscript{66}The correct title is *Peter Kenna's The Umbrella Woman*.
\textsuperscript{67}The print of the film has been lost but for a synopsis, see Pike & Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*,
that her husband may lose his inheritance because of her low social position, and in an act of self-sacrifice, she leaves him. By chance, several years later, the couple is reunited as she nurses him after an industrial accident in which he has been injured. She realises that she still loves him. In order to effect a reconciliation, she takes their son, born after the separation, to the husband's family. The hard-hearted old father is captivated by his grandson and welcomes the reunion. It was possible to conclude that the choice of a male child has been made to give the maximum plausibility for the about-face of the grandfather and the consequent happy ending. Had the child been a daughter, the reconciliation, perhaps, would not have been as believable.

In *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), the birth of a son was used to underscore the tragedy of Jimmie's victimisation both as a half-caste and an Aborigine. He has been cruelly treated, despite his attempts to find favour with a succession of white bosses. Jimmie marries a poor white servant girl, Gilda, because he believes he is the father of her unborn child. The importance and significance of the birth for Jimmie are reinforced by a most moving scene where Jimmie does a joyful tribal dance to welcome his son. It is a cruel blow when he finds out that the baby is white. Although his dreams are shattered as the baby is demonstrably not his, it is a son, and he decides to stay with his new wife. He is however, unable to bear the situation when his arrogant and insensitive employer will not allow him enough money for food to feed his new family. His rejection proves to be a catalyst for tragedy as, now out of control because of his despair and anger, he attacks and murders the farmer's wife and daughters.

Despite the depiction of brutality and violence in Jimmie's actions, the director of the film, Fred Schepisi, was sympathetic to his plight. He wanted to understand his rampage with as much compassion as possible. In an interview, Schepisi commented that: 'it is the story of an underdog, of a person who is trying to make a go of it and isn't allowed to'. Hall also acknowledged Schepisi's purpose in ensuring that the audience 'stays on pp. 176-7.

68David Roe & Scott Murray, 'Fred Schepisi Producer/Director/Scriptwriter', *Cinema Papers*, number 15,
Jimmie's side'. The birth of a son rather than a daughter, gave Jimmie hope and the possibility of a second chance in his poor life. His subsequent frustration, brought to a head by the ridicule and cruelty of the farmers, was closely connected to the birth and was instrumental in offering an explanation of his uncontrollable rage.

It may be beneficial to offer a reading of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* from the mother's point of view, in order to add a further dimension to the significance of the male birth in the narrative. Gilda, an uneducated maid, is treated as poorly as the aboriginal servants by the ignorant white farmers and their wives. They view her marriage to Jimmie with disdain or indifference. From the moment of her white son's birth, however, she is sought out by the farmer's family. It is the desire to reinstate her as family servant that presses the farmer to deny Jimmie food and wages. Without sustenance, Gilda and her son would have to return to the farmhouse, leaving Jimmie alone and once more an outcast of the community. Although his plan does not anticipate Jimmie's rampage, clearly, the realisation that Gilda's son is white is fundamental to the farmer's desire to regain control over her.

The attempt to re-establish the patriarchal power of the middle class farmer was precipitated by the birth of a male child in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. The baby was valorised as the focus of interest and desire of the household, briefly displacing the story of the Aboriginal father and his pathetic wife. Almost sixty years earlier, in Raymond Longford's *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), the birth of a son brought a similar change. Doreen and her 'mar' have a close and loving relationship during the courtship and marriage of Doreen to Bill (the Bloke). When her mother dies, Doreen is inconsolable and unable to care for her new husband. Bill remarks: 'I'm glad I never knewed the mar I must have had'. The concentration on the relationship between mother and daughter is broken with the arrival of Uncle Jim, who offers the couple a house and orchard in the country. Doreen and Bill move from the city to the farm and away from

January 1978, p. 244.

the pervasive female influence of the newly departed mother. According to film scholar, Susan Dermody, when Doreen almost immediately has a son, male-centredness was restored and Bill was ‘firmly reborn’.

The birth of a son was similarly crucial to the narrative of *Break of Day*, set after the First World War and directed in 1976 by Ken Hannam. Here, the pregnant wife, Beth, is neglected while her husband, Tom, has an affair with Alice, a female artist who is visiting the country town where they live. Throughout the film, Beth's domestic environment is juxtaposed with the world outside. Bedrooms, kitchens and verandahs confine her, while Tom roams through great rural paddocks along picturesque rivers. Typically, she plies the silver brush to her long hair as Tom hunts rabbits with his shotgun. Tom finds the outdoors infinitely more appealing and takes up with Alice, who is an exciting part of the landscape. Alice rents a house and sets her easel in the bush, attempting with her artist's brush to capture the environment. At home, Tom is bored with his wife's details about her pregnancy and uncomfortable with the housekeeper, whose conversation is restricted to criticism of his behaviour and concern about their meals. By contrast, he is more at home in public, showing marked animation in the local hotel and at the all-male cricket match. In the end, though, Alice, his paramour, returns to the city, leaving Tom with Beth, who by this time has had the baby.

Beth's excitement and preoccupation with the birth of their first child are figured as dreary and boring. Her attempts to get her husband's attention as she shares her thoughts about the coming child remain fruitless throughout the film and she has to endure both her husband's unfaithfulness and his obvious disinterest. Her life is transformed on the birth of her son. If the child had been a daughter, the feminine presence of the household would have been overwhelming and Tom might have been driven further to escape. The conflict, however, between husband and wife is resolved with the birth of a male child.

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It establishes a male centrality which is redemptive for both Beth and Tom and indicates a more propitious outcome for their marriage.

In *Break of Day* and other Australian films examined, the birth of a male infant sent a signal of regeneration for the protagonists and the opportunity for a new start. While the birth of a daughter, on the other hand, indicated hardship and bad luck, it could also be trivialised by its association with humour. The 1917 film, Beaumont Smith's *Our Friends the Hayseeds*, was a type of backwoods farce recalling the Romeo and Juliet story, where there is an uneasy peace in two bickering neighbouring families when the son of one family married the daughter of the other.\(^{71}\) The feud is rekindled, however, when the newlyweds announce that they are to have a child. Each prospective grandfather insists that the baby be named after him. The birth of twin daughters instead of the expected grandson is designed to teach the old men a lesson. A similar joke is repeated in a later film, Jacki McKimmie's *Australian Dream* (1987).\(^{72}\) Here, a visibly pregnant guest at a chaotic party in suburbia, goes into labour by the swimming pool. After scenes of general mayhem and confusion, there is a cry of 'It's a boy', followed briskly by 'It's a girl'. It is significant that the arrival of the boy was used to establish the birth and that of the girl to provide the humour of the situation.

**Conclusion**

In the Australian feature films examined, it was apparent that female and male births were represented differently with regard to desirability, aftermath and significance. The conventional desire of fathers for sons, shared by men since antiquity, was consistently depicted in the films. Mothers-to-be appeared to reflect the preferences of the father. Those few mothers who were found in recent sociological research to desire daughters, were not represented in the films. It was not surprising that women favoured sons, as those who produced male children were constructed as 'good mothers', their lives were improved, their problems resolved and the benefit of having sons was reinforced. The

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\(^{71}\) The film has been lost but a synopsis can be found in Pike & Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*, p. 88.

\(^{72}\) Later credits of this director use the spelling Jackie McKimmie.
birth of a daughter indicated a predicament of some sort and the penalty for the 'bad mothers' who delivered daughters was so harsh, that in some instances it meant death, either of the baby, or of the mother herself.

This situation was particularly noticeable in pregnancies of unmarried women. Those women who delivered sons were rewarded subsequently with a reunion with the father and more often than not, made a socially acceptable marriage. In such cases almost invariably, the male child was assured of a comfortable and happy future life. Women who produced daughters were punished by having to face the dreary prospect of life alone without wealth or comfort: there was no reunion to alleviate their life of poverty and loneliness. As a consequence, the films gave a clear signal that a woman with a son was a more worthy and more likely marriage prospect. The birth of a son was used to entice the previously absent or reluctant father to exonerate the 'fallen woman'. From another point-of-view, perhaps, it was simply more believable that the father would want to marry her, if he were to gain a son.

Additionally, the films relied on an ideology which attached more status and authority to the masculine identity. An extrapolation of these ideas about the birth of male children was used to re-establish patriarchal order, give credibility to the plot, and reinforce the strength of the character closest to the birth. On the other hand, the births of females were trivialised by treating them as a joke. Consequently, the birth of a son had the connotation of worthiness, while the opposite applied to the birth of a daughter. It can therefore be concluded that in the Australian feature films which have been examined in this chapter, the cry 'Congratulations it's a boy!' stimulated assumptions and expectations which relied on male-centred notions of sexual difference. That the representation previously has been unexamined and accepted as normal is, perhaps, a cause for concern.