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The art and scope of Eleanor Spence's novels

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THE ART AND SCOPE OF ELEANOR SPENCE’S NOVELS.

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ABSTRACT.

The concern of this thesis is the art of Eleanor Spence and the scope of her children's novels. In general terms, this encompasses the writer's style, the way her work is shaped, and her view of the world. More specifically, the scope of Spence's writing can be described in terms of her preoccupations, namely: the family, personal growth and identity, and Australian social history and values. The author's art, of course, is not to be seen merely in the way she treats these preoccupations but also in the way in which her approach has developed in step with, or ahead of, a changing Australian society.
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In his introduction to *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980*, Richard White discusses the concept of a national identity as an invention. His contention is that when focusing on ideas about national identity, we need to concentrate on their function, who invented them, and whose interests they serve.\(^1\) As he proceeds to single out the important influences that contribute to a national identity, White holds that our intelligentsia is the group most responsible for its definition.\(^2\) The writers, artists, journalists, historians who partly comprise this group are all responsible for producing certain images. By so doing, White argues, they attempt to capture national identity and to give it individuality and personality.\(^3\)

If one accepts this argument, it follows, then, that an author whose writing spans three decades inevitably provides a certain scope, as well as obvious opportunity, to trace the images created and the values explored. This opportunity is enhanced if the writer’s work span coincides with that post-World War II period when Australia is said to have done much of its own growing up, thus leading to the creation of its own way of life. Such a writer of children’s literature has clearly had an opportunity to comment on the social agenda for each period of


writing.

Eleanor Spence commenced writing for children in the late 1950s. By setting her novels in a physical and social environment which is recognisably Australian and faithful to the period of which she writes, she has provided a range of images to scrutinise. For the researcher, this prompts an investigation of the extent to which an author is aware of change and seeks to reinforce or resist it. There is, too, the notion of the values to which this author aligns herself in marking out a sense of identity. The identification of these values is an exercise which not only helps to isolate themes, but also assists in looking beyond the text for a subtext that has something to say about the development of individuality and personality within our social parameters.

As the Australian social context has changed, and, indeed, as it continues to change in its quest for growth and identity, there is much to be gained from the images that writers portray. There is even more to be gained in looking beyond the images to other forces at work. As Richard White has also argued,

\textit{national identities are invented within a framework of modern Western ideas about science, nature, race, society, nationality. Not only is the idea of national identity a product of European history at a particular time, but each addition to the Australian identity has reflected changing intellectual needs and}
fashions in the West.\textsuperscript{4}

Thus, each stage of growth is either accompanied by, or is representative of, an ideology that appears to serve a social need. The significance of this argument is best understood by taking the work of a writer, such as Eleanor Spence, and examining the evidence in retrospect.

Such an understanding can meet the needs of educators, students, and anyone who engages in evaluating literature. Once internalised, this concept can foster teaching attitudes that will promote critical literacy and demonstrate the extent to which a writer can affirm or reject social change. The task is made all the more challenging by examining an author of children’s literature, since that field traditionally has embraced the status quo. Further, the author of children’s literature has a role in raising consciousness. This is singularly significant in creating identity in the broader social sense and also in influencing identity in the individual, personal sense.

Since society is not static, books for children must ideally stimulate discussion of social factors. Literature should present children with a variety of views on such facets as the family, leadership or gender roles, and the national culture or way of life. Retrospectively, Spence’s work may show an attempt to widen the social discussion for each period of her writing so that one may now accept the images invented as descriptive of a

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ibid}, p.ix.
particular era. The challenge for readers, then, is to become aware of the accuracy and relevance of the books of a particular period and to use this awareness to better understand their own personal and social sense of identity.
INTRODUCTION.

Australian children’s literature, no less than any other body of writing, is indebted to the achievements of its authors. Among these authors are individuals whose writing spans a considerable period, thus making their contribution particularly worthy of analysis. This analysis is warranted for several reasons, among which is that one may discern an opportunity for observing the development of the author’s writing, the social changes reflected by that writing, and the themes and values that are sustained, altered, or added over time. Eleanor Spence, whose worth has been acknowledged by publication from 1958 to the present, has been selected as representative of such a contributor.

The concept of the family and the notion of being a member of the family unit have always been pre-eminent in the author’s work. Indeed, it is Spence’s treatment of the familial theme that has evolved most clearly in her writing. Her early families, in Brenda Niall’s terms, depict life without any major conflict or crisis. These families are, in fact, stereotypical both in structure and in the roles of their members. The family in *The Summer in Between* (1959), for example, is happy and stable. The title is a clear indication that the work is an examination of a period of transition for the main character, appropriately named Faith Melville. She is the product of a secure family background and so, despite the pain of some of the experiences she undergoes

that summer in between primary school and high school, Faith is sustained by the relationship she shares with her family and the values imparted by her upbringing. Thus, the author presents a schoolgirl adventure story which, like her first novel, *Patterson's Track* (1958), has something to say about growth in understanding and self identity as a member of an idealised family.

Eleanor Spence’s first award winning novel, *The Green Laurel* (1963), continues with observations about family life and the relationships that exist within the group. Again, Spence capitalises on the development of a female character who is intelligent and single-minded in her sense of purpose. Lesley Somerville typifies those children whom Maurice Saxby describes as being "capable of great seriousness of purpose." In Lesley’s case the purpose is to acquire a real and permanent home.

The Somerville family contrast with other early Spence families because of their itinerant lifestyle. Such a lifestyle fosters Lesley’s interest in houses and her sole wish is to settle somewhere. This wish is granted when her father’s illness forces a change of lifestyle upon the family group. Unfortunately, settling in a housing settlement in Sydney falls far short of a day dream come true. The author’s intention is to tease out the notion of what it means to be settled and to have roots. Lesley’s

illusion is that it means having a special house in Sydney where everything would be wonderful. Her final admission to the question of having roots is that it comes down to a sense of belonging.

Eleanor Spence's first novel, *Patterson's Track*, features a female character who is deliberately introduced as awkward and unsure of herself. Her two brothers, by contrast, exhibit qualities of leadership, confidence, and attractive appearance. While it is true that this novel lacks the artistic merit of Spence's later writing, the writer's treatment of Karen Winter's character is such that it deserves scrutiny in terms of what the writing has to say about the acquisition of personal identity. In this first novel, too, the author's examination of gender specific roles is quite clearly delineated and is, appropriately, an accurate reflection of family relationships during the late 1950s.

Among Spence's first novels are those which make use of Australian nineteenth century history. This has included the themes of discovery and exploration, penal servitude, immigration and settlement, and the growth of a national identity. Thus, in Maurice Saxby's view, *Lillipilly Hill* (1960) stands out because of its concentration on immigrant life. The achievement of this work is its depiction of the plight of the English immigrant family whose social background conflicts with an environment that is totally foreign to their experience.

While the complexities of adaptation within the context of an historical background are made clear, these difficulties by no means override the development of characters and the relationships that govern their lives.

In *Lillipilly Hill*, Spence’s focus of attention on Harriet Wilmot allows the reader to witness this character’s development and to observe the dilemma she faces in convincing her family that their strange surroundings should become their permanent home. The challenge for Harriet is to convince others to see the Australian environment as she sees it. She embraces her bush surroundings with enthusiasm while her parents and siblings are uncomfortable without the traditional values and social opportunities that constituted life in England. Spence deals with Harriet’s dilemma by allowing her to orchestrate the family’s change of heart by concentrating on relationships within and beyond the family group, and by illustrating the landscape with prose that details its beauty and terror.

While the difficulties of immigrant and pioneering life are an important feature of *Lillipilly Hill*, the treatment is much more subtle than that of Spence’s other two historical novels, *The Switherby Pilgrims* (1967) and *Jamberoo Road* (1969). The latter works demonstrate a deliberate attempt to include the results of historical research and to re-create the social atmosphere of the early nineteenth century. To this end, Spence has interwoven some of the themes of Australia’s social history around the fictional life of Miss Arabella Braithwaite and her group of
 orphaned charges. These themes or chapters in history are given precise detail in *The Switherby Pilgrims*. The novel begins by appropriately backgrounding this history with an English setting, the village of Switherby and its accompanying landscape showing the effects of the industrial revolution. Miss Arabella Braithwaite’s role is that of benefactor to a group of orphaned children who otherwise would survive by early entry into the labour market if they survived at all. Her decision to take this group to New South Wales represents the inspiration for new beginnings in a land of opportunity. The author’s narrative skills succeed in telling the tale of this group while keeping before her readers a sense of the history of the period.

The group sails to New South Wales on a transport that contains a cargo hold of convicts, a reminder that the children’s destination is still one of penal servitude despite the reported growth in numbers of free settlers. Colonial life for Miss Braithwaite and her charges is one of hardship, particularly as they undertake the journey to their land grant, then set about clearing land which promises bounty only at the price of very hard work. They are assisted in their task by an assigned convict, a detail which is one of many which the author includes in depicting the period. Other such details include the character of the Aborigines, depicted through the Aboriginal boy who becomes attached to the group, and the impact of European settlement on the Aborigines.

The sequel to this tale, *Jamberoo Road*, continues the story of
the group. It further develops the atmosphere of the period and raises some of the concerns contained in *Lillipilly Hill*. The introduction of the Marlow family into the setting again raises the issue of the immigrant and adaptation. Cassie Brown’s association with the Marlow family as companion and governess forces her to confront the debate, hotly contested in the colony at the time, currency versus sterling. For the Marlows there is no question that England is home and that their sojourn in New South Wales will be temporary. The completion of Gillis’ education and, indeed, the conduct of life itself can only take place where social structures, as they know them, remain intact. Thus, the novel provides an opportunity to focus on social structures and their impact on behaviour as well as concentrating on that point in Australia’s history when individuals, like Wentworth, thought it timely to call for self government while others sought the continuance of British administration.

Eleanor Spence’s ongoing preoccupation with the theme of family has developed over time, with the author examining the impact of social pressures and special circumstances which can overturn family life. This theme, in later novels, is challenged by problems that go beyond coming to terms with individual growth. One such novel, *The October Child* (1976), has attracted both praise and criticism for its approach. This award winner has been adjudged by Maurice Saxby as "...one of Australia’s most significant books in the literature of familial
problems". 8 Walter McVitty, on the other hand, originally viewed the novel as so intent on imparting information about autism that it suffered as creative literature. 9 He later reversed this view to admit that The October Child is "more than mere documentary and can take its place with the finest of children's literature" 10 A final judgement on the novel's structure and its literary merit can only be made by the reader's own analysis. Spence's experience in working with autistic children undoubtedly provides a sound knowledge base for the novel wherein the birth of an autistic child is dealt with in terms of its impact on each member of the Mariner family. Specifically, it is through Douglas Mariner that the burden and pain of assuming responsibility for a brother like Carl is most poignantly revealed.

One's understanding of particular social situations is further broadened by novels such as The Left Overs (1982), which concentrates on the problem faced by four children in foster care. A few years together, under the guardianship of Auntie Bill, has been their only experience of family life. When this arrangement is threatened, the children determine to avoid separation and institutionalisation. The children are like leftovers because they do not belong to an ordinary family. They are,

therefore, left out of that pattern of traditional values which Spence portrays in those novels where family life is held together. The novel explores some important feelings and their effects on young people. The four children, ranging in age from eight to eleven years, have experienced alienation and isolation. Ultimately, their efforts to stay together are unsuccessful. It is to Spence’s credit that the novel thus emphasises the fact that there are no easy or ideal solutions to the problems of an unwanted child trying to satisfy the need to belong.

In addition to social problems and pressures, the novels of Eleanor Spence also reveal something of the composition of Australian society and the attitudes that govern behaviour. *A Candle for Saint Antony* (1977) places an emphasis on the development of feelings and emotions. The language and style of the novel are simple and uncluttered, while the characters are easily identifiable. Justin’s school mates are the predictable mixture one would expect to be attending a North Shore private school. Other characters are also readily recognisable: Rudi, the intelligent, sensitive son of a struggling migrant widow; the hard working Greek cafe proprietor; the middle class, impeccably groomed mother; the loutish youths at the ferry terminal; the kindly, civilised hosts in Austria. The plot, centring as it does, on Justin’s attempts to find order and meaning in his emotional development at this stage of his life, is one with which many sixteen year olds would identify. The contrasting social and cultural backgrounds of Justin and Rudi provide some insight into the make-up of Australian society and the attitudes of the
Australian population towards people who are different. The growing friendship between the two boys offers thought provoking material on the nature of friendship and the way it is expressed.

Another satisfying example of a work that concentrates on social attitudes is *The Seventh Pebble* (1980). Not only does Spence successfully capture the era prior to World War II with references such as Hitler's speeches on the wireless and excited talk of the latest Shirley Temple film, but also delves into deep seated prejudices and hatreds that characterised an Australian country town. Prejudice produces behaviour that children like Rachel Blackwood cannot understand. The child puzzles over adult behaviour that shuns and condemns people like the Connells, whom she finds different but, because of this, fascinating. Rachel Blackwood and Bridget Connell come to share a friendship and a loyalty that are borne of genuine acceptance. Religious intolerance and moral indignation are feelings that are foreign to Rachel. For the community of Hollybush Flat, being different warrants neither acceptance nor any form of forgiveness.

The quality of family life is another facet of the familial theme throughout the novels of Eleanor Spence. This concern receives careful attention in the novels *Deezle Boy* (1988) and *Another Sparrow Singing* (1991). These works highlight some of the factors that can affect the quality of family life and, indeed, place children at risk. Grant, the main character of *Deezle Boy*,


discovers more than his enthusiasm for trains when he is kidnapped by his natural mother, Laurie Lyall and her daughter, Holly, who pursue an alternative lifestyle contrasting sharply with the stable, middle class existence of his adopted family. *Deezle Boy* raises some important issues and one of the most significant has been identified by Maurice Saxby as "the attack on a child's identity which occurs when custody is contended"\(^{11}\).

Contemporary issues are again pursued in the 1991 publication *Another Sparrow Singing*. Two children, Keith and Courtney have to face their parents’ separation and the over-riding question of "Which parent to blame?" The children and their mother also have to cope with living in a caravan park, an address which makes them feel like second class citizens. As the real reason for leaving a comfortable home and a father is revealed, it becomes apparent that Keith’s illness and what is sometimes referred to as "Keith’s secret" constitute the central concern of the novel. The issue of child abuse is brought to the fore as yet another example of an attack on a child’s identity. Removed from his father’s physical and emotional abuse, Keith discovers both acceptance and renewed self-esteem.

The establishment of a new identity in a new environment and, in particular, the establishment of an identity uniquely Australian, are laudably presented in the 1990 publication of *The Family Book of Mary Claire* (1990). Three individuals, Marius,  

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Miriam, and Marion, are singled out for study, thus making this treatment of the themes of personal growth and development in the context of a newly emerging society far more detailed and incisive than in earlier works. Written from the point of view of Mary Claire Hart, the novel is a family saga tracing the history of two families, the Cleveland and the Harts, and widens the definition of family to include the extended family bound by an attachment to a specific cultural and social background. The reader is presented with the background of the three generations covering the period 1819 - 1913. Spence’s narrative skills must be acknowledged in her treatment of such an expanse of time, carefully representing as she does the social changes that make up the different fabric of each generation. The narrative is further enhanced by idyllic descriptions of the bush and coastal landscape of New South Wales.

While this thesis is concerned with the children’s novels of Eleanor Spence, not all novels are examined in detail, nor are those selected discussed in equal measure. In exploring the development of Spence’s dominant themes, the family, self recognition, and social change, greater emphasis has been placed on those novels which provide significant examples of this development. The selection was not random and often difficult. In choosing an example of problem families, for example, the obvious choices were *Time to Go Home* and *The October Child*, each an outstanding example of the genre. McVitty ranks *Time to Go Home* as "a distinct contribution to the development of
Australian children's literature", while the award winning The October Child offers a field rich in interest, relevance and symbolic imagery. When reporting on the award of "Book of the Year" to The October Child, the judges observed that Spence's "meticulous control of her work, her ear for realistic dialogue and her capacity to write with honesty and insight about personal relationships make this a novel of distinction." To discuss both books in the detail they deserve would run the risk of overemphasising Spence's skill in presenting problem families to the possible detriment of other aspects of her art. In an effort to maintain balance, The October Child was selected for exploration while Time to Go Home is mentioned only briefly. The same approach has been taken for other facets of Spence's writings.

Any chronological approach to the writing of Eleanor Spence will conclude that it offers a substantial range. A thematic approach shows that while it has been continually based on ideas about family relationships, these ideas have evolved in step with a changing society. The development of these themes over time is testimony to the author's artistic success in using her craft to illustrate how the same ideas are affected by the mores of a particular time and place.


Chapter 1. Families of the Fifties.

"It's not enough to have the house-with-roots," Lesley said to herself. "Everyone in it has to have roots too."

(The Green Laurel, p.145)

Eleanor Spence began writing in the 1950s and from the beginning revealed her interest in families. Three novels, The Summer in Between\textsuperscript{14}, The Green Laurel\textsuperscript{15}, and Patterson's Track\textsuperscript{16}, are illustrative of the writer's families of this period and of her views about traditional family values.

Spence's second publication, The Summer in Between, establishes this interest and provides a useful study of her early families. Faith Melville, the leading character, experiences growth and development as a result of having her natural leadership challenged by another leader, Pauline Selby. The summer holiday period is a time of transformation for Faith as she leaves her primary education behind and prepares to embark on the secondary stage. The vacation time becomes one of personal growth and its associated pain as Faith comes to accept

\textsuperscript{14} Spence, Eleanor The Summer in Between London: Oxford University Press, 1959.


\textsuperscript{16} Spence, Eleanor Patterson's Track Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958.
the truth about herself and her friends. Spence presents a schoolgirl story wherein life has a happy background without major pressures or complications. In this way, the novel exemplifies the pastoral ideal that characterised the writing of the post-World War II period.17

_The Summer in Between_ features a country setting where the pattern of life is well established and traditional family values remain undisturbed. Faith Melville's family are introduced as relative new comers to Kenilworth Valley, having lived there for only fifteen years. The family is described as lodged in the seclusion of the valley, suggesting that their family life is both secure and protected (p.3). The Melville's house is one of friendly, homely appearance. (p.4) Faith and her brother, Jamey, have a father who is part-time farmer and headmaster of Barndale school, while their mother's full time occupation is the care of home and family. Faith and Jamey have a close relationship based on loyalty to each other; neither would tell on the other to their parents. (p.7) Family loyalty and unity are shown to be important as details of the family unfold. All members enjoy being outdoors both as a family group and individually. Everyone plays the piano with varying degrees of expertise and enjoyment. (p.9)

Some family activities, such as sitting down together in the

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living room to the main meal of the day, and the beach picnics every Sunday from October to April, are ritual. The latter expedition even begins with the ritual remark, "Right - hang on to your hats!" from Mr Melville as he drives his family to their day at the beach. Even the summer holidays have their traditional opening ceremonies, one of which is moving the children's beds out onto the verandah. These rituals may be routine but they count as simple yet satisfying pleasures of family life.

The plot revolves around Faith's development in coming to terms with the sort of person she is and with her relationship with her peers. This development is largely influenced by the adults in her life who not only provide a happy home but also the right measure of nurturance and guidance when difficulties arise in their children's lives. In particular, Faith's mother is characterised as someone who actively supports her children and is ever alert to their feelings. When the holidays dawn, Mrs Melville, knowing how much Faith will miss the company of her friend Margaret, is instrumental in organising a meeting with a neighbour's visiting niece, Pauline Selby. Faith values her mother's wisdom and seeks her advice on more than one occasion. Though confident about her writing, she asks her mother to read the play she has written before showing it to Pauline and the other members of the K.V.L.D.C. Faith also seeks clarification over the correct course of action when one has two best friends but two presents of unequal value to give. On this occasion, what is important is that Faith
knows what her mother’s answer will be before she hears it because such values have long been part of her general upbringing.

Mrs Melville is also depicted as a mother who is able to recognise when something is troubling her children. This is demonstrated following Faith’s grave disappointment and resentment at not having been chosen for the lead part in her own play (p.114). Again, following Faith’s confrontation with Jamey, their mother senses that there is something amiss between brother and sister (p.120). In addition to recognising when something is wrong with her children, Mrs Melville, in her maternal role, bears all with exceptional patience (p.129). In short, the author develops a mother figure who is essential to the home background, one who is always available when needed, and one who responds to the feelings of others while not giving in to her own.

Faith’s moodiness is tolerated by her mother who, at the same time, comes up with a palliative in the form of a day trip to Sydney. The excursion introduces another female role model for Faith. Aunt Elizabeth contrasts with Faith’s mother in that she is a woman of independent means and a city person. She is described as distinguished looking, someone who never fusses (p.133 ff). The day in Sydney concludes with Faith’s first experience of live theatre. It is from this shared experience that Faith comes to realise that a good play can become a classic while actors may only be honoured in the short term (p.138).
The significance of this realisation is that it is a great restorative for her own spirit in that her own talent is not to be undervalued. Aunt Elizabeth’s influence is obvious as she concurs it would be better to write rather than to act. Faith extends an invitation to her aunt to attend the garden party and the performance of her play. Aunt Elizabeth’s presence on the occasion helps to emphasise its importance (p.171). When the play turns out to be a great success, Aunt Elizabeth tells Faith how proud she is to think that her niece wrote it (p.177).

Faith Melville always thought she could do everything until Pauline Selby arrived and became part of her life that summer in between (p.111). Academically bright and confident, Faith’s illusions about being chosen to lead are shattered by Pauline, whom Faith’s mother describes as a most extraordinary child (p.55). As with her first novel, Patterson’s Track, Eleanor Spence looks at leadership, but this time the two female characters are already endowed with leadership qualities. Pauline’s ability to command immediately introduces a challenge for Faith who is so used to being a leader that she is naturally reluctant to give in to another’s leadership (p.28). The writer ultimately shows how personal growth and identity are strengthened, but, more importantly, she upholds the family as an essential stabilising force during childhood.

As the summer holidays, with all their experiences, come to an end, Faith bids her friend Pauline farewell for that last time. There are tentative promises of letters and visits between the two
girls but friendship can be a transient affair. As Pauline disappears into the shadows, Faith heads homewards to a "cheerful, brightly-lit house, and the company of her family" (p.179). The reader is meant to appreciate the family unit as solid and the relationships that exist among its members as outlasting all others.

Spence's first award winner, *The Green Laurel*, further establishes her interest in families, the quality of family life, and, in particular, the importance of being settled in a place called home. The Somerville family, unlike the Melville family, are not lodged in the seclusion of a valley community. The vision of a cheerful, brightly lit house is the imaginative ideal of Lesley Somerville. Her father's one-time decision to leave his farm and lead an itinerant lifestyle is one which has involved and affected all family members.

The novel's title is a reference to a Yeats poem, *A Prayer for My Daughter*. The reference appeals to Lesley Somerville because it is her great desire to live perpetually in one place. John Somerville operates a carnival train, which means that he and his wife, Jeanie, and their two daughters, Lesley and Rae, live in many places with tents, trailer, a clumsy slow-paced truck, and an early model car (p.3). While this enforces a way of life which deviates from the norm, the author still keeps the family unit intact. Even though it is not the happy family image of her earlier novels, the relationships that exist within this family group are still based on mutual concern, trust, and
loyalty. For example, when John Somerville announces that his illness will necessitate a long stay in a repatriation hospital in Sydney, Lesley’s thoughts about settling in a place where she had longed to be are overshadowed by a genuine concern for her father, his future, and all that he must give up in the present (p.75).

Jeanie Somerville fulfils her maternal role with strength and dedication to the care of her family. The author deliberately channels her readers’ attention to Jeanie’s role in sustaining the family’s lifestyle and in maintaining an acceptable quality of life for them. One gains the impression that even if Jeanie Somerville had not been totally in agreement with her husband’s wish to travel the country with a carnival train, she would not have made her feelings known. She is introduced as someone who endures life on the road with typical fortitude and determination to make the most of it (p.5). Jeanie’s concern with her family’s welfare is shown by her vigilance in making sure that such an unconventional way of life does not have a bad effect on any one (p.7). Her strength and determination specifically come in to play when, confronted by the worry of her husband’s illness and lack of money, she bears the burden alone. Like Mrs Melville, Jeanie Somerville endeavours to bear her daughter’s uncharacteristic moodiness with patience, despite suffering herself from fatigue and overwork (p.147).

John Somerville fulfils the traditional paternal role of provider, but his tiredness and persistent colds become omens of a specific
and worrying problem for his family. Long-term illness interrupts his role as breadwinner and enforces a change of lifestyle involving relocation and separation from the family group. John Somerville’s daughters believe firmly in their father’s ability to solve problems. For Lesley, the more sensitive of the two girls, he was her protection against the rest of the world (p.13). For her, it is unthinkable that he may not continue being her shield against pain for all time. When her frustration at living in flat number 17 at Blackbutt Hill reaches its peak, Lesley visits her father in hospital to enlist his help in sorting out her feelings. On this occasion, he provides just the right antidote by suggesting that Lesley enter a magazine competition for the design of a house (p.148-149). On the next occasion Lesley makes a special visit to Clarevale Hospital, it is to share her triumph at achieving third place in the competition and wanting her father to be the first to know (p.180).

Lesley’s interest in houses is detailed from the novels’s beginning. It extends to reference books about them and includes collecting all kinds of writing paper so that she can draw them (p.17). Such an interest is no doubt inspired by the desire to settle somewhere (p.18). During the Christmas break, Lesley makes the most of every opportunity to enjoy houses such as *The Dunes* guest house. It is not her dream home but it is a place in which to feel happily settled (p 29). For Lesley, feeling settled is not quite enough. In addition to certain architectural specifications, Lesley wants "a home with roots "(p.80). By the end of the novel, Lesley’s perception of exactly what this means
turns out to be quite different from her earlier ideas.

In common with other characters from the period of Spence’s early writing, Lesley Somerville goes through growth and development brought about by change. Lesley is not an individual who welcomes change. One of the main reasons she does not enjoy her family’s itinerant lifestyle is that it constantly forces change. Changing schools, for example, is accompanied by the pain of feeling different. She worries over the idea of one day commencing high school and being looked upon as "a sort of gipsy admitted to high schools only on sufferance" (p.12). Unlike her sister, Rae, Lesley shrinks from the idea of being different and is highly embarrassed when people make her feel different. The sympathetic glances from other guests at The Dunes following her father’s collapse are a case in point (p.59).

Despite grave concern over the implications of her father’s illness, Lesley is delighted at the prospect of moving to Sydney where the family will be settled in one place like most other families. However, she discovers that she is alienated by the reality of living in a dingy housing commission flat. This feeling of alienation extends to another group of children at the Blackbutt Hill settlement who label themselves The Outcasts and invite Lesley to join them. The group’s feelings also stem from the fact that many of them are migrants and therefore hold another perspective on what it means to be different.

From the novel’s beginning, Spence gives Lesley a sense of
idealistic purpose in wishing for a permanent home. On a more practical level, Spence gives Lesley and the Outcasts some purpose in embarking on a program of weekend outings to places of interest around the city. Their energies are later channelled into the specific task of creating a craft centre and library at the settlement. By setting her characters a purpose, Spence ably demonstrates how such a project can produce a sense of ownership. For Lesley, it helps her personal development as her shy, awkward nature is taken over by a new air of responsibility (p.171).

Lesley Somerville’s responsible outlook helps her to clarify her understanding of what it means to belong. When she visits her friend, Meredith Brent, Lesley is not disappointed to discover that, unlike Blackbutt Hill, Endeavour Park is a quiet, leafy suburb with spectacular views of the harbour (p.140). Nor is she disappointed to find that the Brent’s house is just as she imagined it would be when she first met the family on holiday in Dragon Bay. However, at the end of the visit, she concludes that, while Meredith and her brother Richard, appear to have everything, there is something missing from their lives. Richard is openly disgruntled, Meredith is uncertain about how to spend her time, and her successful, busy father spends most of his weekend playing golf. "‘It’s not enough to have the house-with-roots,’ Lesley said to herself. ‘Everyone in it has to have roots too’ " (p.145).

In this novel, Spence is arguing strongly for family
responsibility in fostering individual growth. Lesley comes to realise that members of a family do not always grow very well. When this happens the family unit is not like the green laurel at all. This can only be true when the family recognises that "home" is being together in any sort of place (p.181). Lesley Somerville realises that this is her fortune, that she really does possess the roots she has always yearned for.

Spence’s interest in the themes of growth and identity, and her singular concentration on just how an individual can grow, are well exemplified by her first publication. In developing the central character of *Patterson’s Track*, Eleanor Spence has introduced the reader to the concept of identity in all its complexity. As Karen’s character and role evolve, it becomes clear that the author has presented a study in character development both in relation to the theme of identity and to the many possibilities for discussion that this theme raises. The choice of a main character who is female in itself raises significant questions about the nature of identity. In general terms, one may focus on the sense of self that emanates from recognition from others, even when that recognition is tantamount to nothing more than criticism or non-acceptance.

The factors which contribute to identity are numerous and varied. Spence’s early novels would seem to concentrate on answering some basic questions about self-discovery, as well as the answers provided by what others have already pinpointed. Of central importance, of course, is the argument that the
individual learns about self by learning about others. Such personal development occurs after that initial growth period when the self is pieced together by family and society. At this stage, identity may depend upon a series of labels or reported information that dwells on sameness, conformity, equality versus inequality.

As Spence makes plain within the first few pages of *Patterson's Track*, her central character has acquired an identity which analysts of this novel would deem as self-effacing and low in self-esteem. The author deliberately details Karen's appearance in order to emphasise how appearance can influence self-perception, acceptance, and approval. As Karen and her two brothers near their holiday destination and their grandparents, Karen grows anxious at the thought of her appearance. Conscious of the fact that her grandmother places great importance on appearance, she frets about the likelihood of not meeting with her grandparent's approval in her present state (p.5). In short, Karen's feelings of inadequacy are dependent on her appearance. The "sad" and "sorry"(p.5) state of her hair is contrasted with that of her two brothers, Barry and Geoffrey. The effect of having their hair colouring described in a positive and attractive way suggests something to the reader about the confidence that derives from being so recognised.

Spence introduces her main character as one whose self-perception falls far short of the positive. Loathe to admit her fears and failures, Karen is made to feel both guilty and puzzled
because she is a dreamer for whom self-confidence is a mystery (p.14). Again, as with appearance, the contrast in character between Karen and her two brothers is made plain. Neither Barry nor Geoffrey is a dreamer. Both are seen to have the advantage of being ever alert, successful, competent (p.14). Karen, on the other hand, carries the burden of a number of shortcomings, including incompetence at all forms of sport (p.18). Despite a brother’s encouragement to stand up for herself (p.19), Karen finds herself at a loss. Unable to resist her grandmother’s decision about her hair, she succumbs readily simply because ".. it was so much easier and more comfortable just to give in"(p.19). Thus the main character’s identity is not merely representative of that awkward, in-between stage of development. Rather it is deliberately presented as one that has yet to attain a true sense of self by overcoming or circumventing those factors which militate against a sense of sameness or equality.

Just as Karen is sympathetic to the Patterson story (p.26), so, too, the reader is sympathetic to this central character who clearly needs the self-motivation that is required to develop strength of character. In determining to solve the mystery of the Patterson story, Karen finds such motivation that Patterson’s track becomes her own pathway towards growth and a different identity. Ironically, it is her brother, Geoffrey, who tells Karen how to do it properly so that her original plan is transformed "into something that could prove to be a great adventure"(p.30).
The confidence and vigour of the male characters, Barry, Geoffrey, and Bluey, are deliberately sustained as natural male characteristics. In addition to transforming her plan into a great adventure, Karen's brothers see the journey as an opportunity to demonstrate their strengths. Geoffrey, for one, is keen to be the organiser, while Barry intends to display his independence and leadership (p.30). It is these very same characteristics that Karen has lived with and which have contributed to her self image. Coming between her brothers in age, Karen appears to be so overshadowed by them that she resembles her hair colouring, which is "simply nondescript"(p.5).

In contrast, the male self-image of superiority which can obscure a female's identity is highlighted in the attitudes of the male characters throughout the novel. Even though the original plan is Karen's inspiration, Geoffrey's response is that she is "queer" to have come up with a brilliant idea and not know "how to do it properly!"(p.30)

As attention is paid to the needs of the trip, it is noted that Barry frowns as if "saying to himself that girls really were a nuisance on a hike"(p.40). Later, when Geoffrey and Barry leave the rest of the group, Bluey is described as being "faintly disgusted at having only girls in his party"(p.126). On this occasion, disgust is overcome by a sense of overall responsibility and leadership. While the author describes Barry's comment to Marcie about being glad that she came on the trip as sincere and unexpected, it is arguably sincere only from a very selfish viewpoint. The
paragraph which precedes his remark is worth noting:

*Older cooks than Marcie would have been driven distracted by having to make do with two saucepans, a billy-can, and one rather sulky fire, but Marcie’s temper was proof against such annoyances. The boys’ comments were thoroughly flattering when they returned to find dinner ready; tinned steak and kidney pudding, well heated, with potatoes and carrots.*

(p.79)

Barry’s approval and acceptance of Marcie may be seen in terms of her competence as a cook, fulfilling a useful female role. Marcie’s reaction is to conceal her pleasure, but the effect of the remark is far-reaching in that it is sufficient to cause her no longer to object *“so strenuously to what she called his ‘bossiness’”* (p.79). The reader’s response is one of disappointment at the impact such flattery has on Marcie, whose identity has already been forged into a manner that is self-assured. Indeed, Spence’s characterisation of Marcie and Marcie’s interaction with Karen contribute significantly to the latter’s growing independence and the dissipation of her fears. A year younger than Karen, Marcie is introduced in positive terms as talkative and cheerful (p.17). From the outset, Marcie is enthusiastic and encouraging at the prospect of the hike. Although the initial plan is not to include her, Marcie is both thoughtful and practical in suggesting that she be included as companion for Karen and cook for the group (p.38). Always looking for adventures, confident, defiant yet basically good natured, Marcie proves to be a far more exciting companion
than Karen’s school friends (p.72). Not only does Karen learn that it is possible to like a friend a great deal, but also that there is a warm, comfortable feeling which derives from sharing a secret with a friend like Marcie (p.72).

At the beginning of her quest to find out the truth about Simon Patterson, Karen’s identity is based on self-assessed shortcomings. Far from possessing any leadership qualities, she pronounces that she would hate to be leader (p.49), that her preference is for quiet places, and that she usually does not think anything very important (p.51). Initially, she plays down the importance of her plan in possibly solving an historical inaccuracy. Ultimately, Karen’s growing self-awareness is placed in perspective. She is able to admit that always she had followed her brothers, who were so much stronger than herself. The habit of years was not readily broken. But somehow, in the last day or two, she had begun to find a new independence. Vaguely and uncertainly she was groping towards the idea that she was a person in her own right, and not just a pale shadow of others (p.87).

Karen’s idea of being a person in her own right is developed by her own vision of Simon Patterson as a hunted man confronted by struggle, disappointment, and a lonely death. This picture clearly in mind, Karen concentrates on her progress, not just in walking the banks of the "treacherous creek" (p.95-96) but in becoming stronger as a person.
As the idea of being a person in her own right takes shape, Karen hesitates over making choices that might irritate her brothers but comes to exhilarate in feeling free and independent. It would seem that there is nothing quite like the sense of self to be gained when there is "no one to give orders to her and no one to criticise" (p.89). Further, one’s own growth in terms of self-worth can be measured against the shortcomings of others. Karen, for example, witnesses how painful it is for Bluey, who has been given the responsibility of leadership, to have to assert that leadership in the face of Barry’s strong disapproval and conditioned bossiness (p.89). She also discovers Barry’s weakness when he failed his responsibility to look after the camp fire properly and tried to shift the blame to his brother, Geoffrey (p.114). Barry is childlike both in betraying his younger brother’s loyalty and in his resentment over Bluey’s leadership. In Karen’s eyes, Geoffrey emerges as the stronger of her two brothers but the true development of character resides with her.

It was strange, she reflected, how many unexpected discoveries she had made on this expedition - about people, including herself, rather than things. Perhaps that was the beginning of growing up (p.110).

The assuming of an identity is certainly part of the process of growing up but identity is not something which remains static unless growth, in all its forms, is stifled.

The Australian families of Spence’s early novels follow the conventional structure of two parents and their children. This
structure is sometimes extended with the introduction of other relatives in a supporting role. These families are shown to be fundamentally happy, with children following behavioural patterns instilled by their parents. The author concentrates on the adventures of her child characters who experience change, growth, and benefit from an accompanying pain. In this period of her writing, Spence further concentrates on developing the leadership qualities of the female characters who feature in her novels. The maternal role is given prominence in its dedication to the quality of family life and in the strength demonstrated during times of trial. Where the family is affected by a setback, such as ill-health, the continued loyalty and support of its members preserves the family unit. Overall, traditional family values are upheld and are unchallenged by the social pressures that afflicted later generations.
Chapter 2. Families of History.

"At home in England, Edward had learnt how to place people in categories according to breeding, appearance, speech and worldly goods... This New South Wales, however, was indeed a topsy-turvy place..."

(Jamberoo Road, p.15)

The story of Australia's early history is embroidered with varying themes which range from exploration and discovery to settlement in a penal environment, the establishment of the states, and, ultimately, federation. Such themes are the markers of our early identity in that they help to focus on events which have been used to characterise a national identity. For example, events such as the discovery of gold brought about an increase in population and a transformation in society which some historians would argue, "sowed the seeds" for a distinct nationalist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century.18 It could be further argued that such developments were used to invent a new reality that was uniquely Australian. To this extent, then, the creation of a national identity has been somewhat fragmentary.

While the strength of such arguments may be disputed, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that this new reality was not

always embraced by those who had come from a background which they labelled as civilisation. Writers, through their literary constructions, have quite readily drawn attention to the attitudes and responses of characters cast against a background of new beginnings, hardship and alienation. If the role of the writer is to give us certain images of ourselves, either directly or indirectly, then the early novels of Eleanor Spence do this by looking to the past and showing how the characters see themselves in the midst of an environment far removed from one they had known earlier. The three novels which are outstanding in providing this background are *Lillipilly Hill* ¹⁹, *The Switherby Pilgrims* ²⁰, and its sequel, *Jamberoo Road* ²¹.

*Lillipilly Hill* is a fitting example of Spence's early work wherein the main characters, with the exception of Harriet Wilmot, see themselves as displaced persons in a foreign country. We are meant to imagine the setting nearing the end of the nineteenth century when cities, like Sydney, were comfortably established and offered many delights. We are also meant to imagine the strangeness of the landscape that lay beyond the cities and which challenged its new inhabitants to decide whether to remain or depart.

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The opening of *Lillipilly Hill* begins with a flourish, due to the departure of the children's governess, Miss Oliver, who, in less than a month, has decided she could not live in such a place. In this way, Eleanor Spence sets up an identity crisis for the Wilmot family who, with the exception of Harriet, discover little pleasure in such unfamiliar surroundings.

The foreign nature of the environment is emphasised via images of the Wilmot household where efforts to retain a familiar way of life stand out as being out of context. The garden of Uncle John's house bears testimony to the efforts of that ancestor and his wife to create a certain beauty and order not readily found amidst the "bright untidiness" (p.6) of the outside world. Such attempts at beauty and order also extend to an interior where the ambience is deliberately dark, cool, neat, and solid. Here, the writer suggests that not only were these people loathe to relinquish their English identity but also were reluctant to accept, even partially, a new identity. The real difficulty becomes one of adaptation and when this proves a problem it is because of the impossibility of living in a civilised fashion, as the characters understand it.

Of course, living in a civilised fashion ultimately depends on means and so, as Harriet's father explains, their property yields little income. Her father's fears are threefold. In the first place, there is the recognised impossibility of giving his children the kind of education they would receive in England. Secondly, their limited income would impact on Harriet's mother who would
have to work harder than she should to run the household. Finally, his judgement is that to sever the entire family from the society they are used to would be a form of undeserved punishment. In Mr Wilmot's eyes the only choice is to sell the property and go "home" (p.7). These parental fears are seemingly well founded as the Wilmot children attend the local bark schoolhouse for the first time. Aidan, in his Eton suit, stands out in scholarly contrast to the rough classroom where most pupils long for the day when they would be free of education (p.43). To Aidan the classroom resembles a prison and the pupils its convicts. Equally objectionable is to be educated with girls (p.52).

Harriet’s response to her parents’ decision is to imagine, with eyes closed, home as she remembers it, but to confront, with eyes open, home as she sees it. Much depends on Harriet’s response since, through her eyes, the writer presents a view of the Australian landscape as background for a family experiencing a lifestyle which they find neither affordable nor desirable. An important aspect of this landscape is its inhabitants. Even Harriet has to admit that she has never met anyone quite like their servant, Polly, who "lacked respect" (p.11) and remained a tough, independent Colonial despite her years in service (p.12). Nevertheless, Harriet maintains her resolve never again to refer to London as home (p.28) and somehow to be at ease with the differences found in the bush.
Harriet’s determination to help her father transform the property stems from her resolve that this shall be home and that her family will accept it as such. Since Harriet’s enthusiasm is involved with the landscape, Spence provides the reader with Harriet’s view of a natural landscape that can be awe inspiring as well as cruel and forbidding. Harriet’s case is largely argued through these images, rejoicing as she does in the sights that her brother and sister either dislike or do not see. For instance, her explanation of the villagers’ popular name for their home, Lillipilly Hill, prompts Aidan to see trees "big enough to climb, with straight greyish trunks and a tangle of branches clothed in stiff, shiny, green leaves..."(p.3) and to admit that he had never seen the like before. Harriet’s knowledge that the lillipilly trees had been there since their uncle built the house seemingly strengthens her attachment to it as home (p.3). "She loved the guardian lillipillies, and the shaggy garden, and the pungently scented gums, and above all she loved the broad, clear view of blue hills and shadowy gullies"(p.53). Unable to understand the indifference of her brother and sister to their surroundings, Harriet, in her explorations, often draws breath as she notes the brilliance of the bird life and the proliferation of foreign trees (p.17).

Spence details these experiences with images that affirm her own love and knowledge of the environment. Not only does the writing provide images which describe the features and type of beauty not found elsewhere, but also takes care to demonstrate the command of the landscape over its inhabitants. When Mr
Wilmot refers to a wild country with unfamiliar ways (p.148), his response aptly reflects the attitude of a newcomer unwilling to give his trust to all that is in store. Harriet, too, realises this once her brother runs away and she looks beyond the creek, hitherto the limit of her wanderings, and contemplates just how unwelcoming and expansive the hills appear. As the hills stretch out so seemingly endlessly, her genuine fear is that Aidan will soon become lost (p.79).

Harriet also experiences this fact when she and Aidan embark on a redemptive journey that will save Clay, a social outcast, from injustice. On this expedition, Harriet’s motivation and strength of character are challenged by the landscape in a way that the author takes great pains to detail. This time Harriet’s encounter with the swamp is akin to entering a horror scene where mangrove trees become tangled, twisted shapes and close together as if in a combined effort to prevent free passage (p.164). For Harriet, the swamp seems without end, utterly dark and cold. The place becomes one where Harriet can neither rejoice in the sun’s warmth nor in any living creature. Physically uncomfortable and fatigued, she perceives only darkness and silence. It is up to the author to remind her readers that in Harriet’s usual state of mind, and, of course, the writer’s own artistic vision, she could marvel at these strange trees whose "roots formed tunnels and archways and caves above and below the surface of the water" (p.165). The cold, the darkness, the fear that take over Harriet’s being provide a stark contrast to the earlier description of the child who believed in days that were
"clear and fresh and golden, and skies a milky blue" (p.153). These sights made her want to skip and run whereas the frightening sight of the swamp enlivens her imagination to fever pitch and her sense of adventure is transformed into the realisation of being alone (p.165). The chapter concludes with the image of Harriet at the mercy of the mangrove swamp.

Aidan, whose earliest inclination has been one of indifference to the environment, proves resilient in the face of peril and arrives at the understanding that there is pride in owning the property, Lillipilly Hill, and in discovering new successes. In coming to terms with this realisation, there is a significant transformation of Aidan’s attitude and the character, Clay, is instrumental in this. When Aidan rejects Lillipilly Hill and runs away with his cowardice in tow, he comes across the boy who, with his blue cattle dog, lives at one with the bush. For Aidan, Clay’s revelation of self-sufficiency is a humbling experience as is Clay’s astonishment at Aidan’s interest in education. Clay points out just how ill-equipped Aidan is for a journey that really requires "a water-bag and a gun"(p.92). Clay is equally amazed when Aidan marvels at the bird life of the swamp. Clay’s vision is practical as he identifies the cranes, shags, and herons as birds you cannot eat. Aidan’s vision is artistic and combines with excitement as he beholds the sunrise and the changing colour of the swamp. Spence decorates the swamp at dawn with pale pink hues and completes the picture with an example of the bird-life, poised, graceful, and snowy white (p.94). The writer’s choice of language is that of one who has both knowledge and
love of a truly striking landscape. Spence closes this section by bringing Aidan to understand and to share his sister’s love of this new country. Clay also contributes to this growth by making him realise, albeit indirectly, that courage is not found in running away.

While personal growth is a clearly identifiable theme in this novel, as it is in other early novels of Eleanor Spence, on this occasion growth is allied with having an identity, that is, an identity of place, acknowledgment of its uniqueness, and, finally, acceptance. Spence is unrelenting in *Lillipilly Hill* in drawing attention to the vastness and variety of the Australian landscape, portraying the beauties, the dangers, the sense of loneliness, and the sense of uninhibited freedom. The example cited earlier of Harriet’s experience in the swamp is a lonely and hazardous adventure. By contrast, her journey to the sea with Dinny, her rough colonial friend from the bush school, produces a different shock of cold (p.127). On this occasion, there is laughter and freedom produced by the landscape of sky, sea and beach that seems to go on forever (p.127). This love of the landscape is also reflected in the writer’s attention to detail as she describes the intricate beauty of an ocean shelf (p.127).

Two later novels, *The Switherby Pilgrims*, and its sequel, *Jamberoo Road*, are also inspired by the pattern of early Australian history ranging from oppressive English social conditions to the challenges offered by colonial life. Though these novels were published later than *Lillipilly Hill*, Spence uses
the earlier setting of the 1820s to examine a group of people who, though unrelated, form a close-knit family unit. On one level, Eleanor Spence presents one of her favourite and recurring themes, the family, and prompts the reader to consider what constitutes a family. As well, she poses the importance of belonging to a unit, be it called family or some other label, which conveys to its members a sense of worth. On yet another level, the author presents a literary construct of this nation's early European history whereby the reader may contemplate the seeds that were sown in fostering a national identity, and the work of writers in perpetuating these images.

A title such as *The Switherby Pilgrims* draws attention to the term "pilgrim" as describing a traveller who undertakes a long journey to a sacred place. While Miss Arabella Braithwaite's decision to leave the social conditions of early nineteenth century England is well depicted by the writer, Arabella's destination, New South Wales, can scarcely be regarded as a sacred place of early nineteenth century Europeans, even though her journey can certainly be considered an act of devotion. Arabella's brother, Hugh, who considered himself a well-travelled clergyman (p.7), reacts as if his sister planned to travel in total ignorance of her destination. Her response is to describe New South Wales as a place, at that time, that has advanced beyond a penal settlement to being one of opportunity where individuals may make application for land grants and settle among many respectable families (p.23). Moreover, Arabella's determination remains steadfast despite news from a settled and respectable family
describing Sydney as drab, uncivilised, and generally riddled with discomfort (p.23).

Arabella, affectionately titled Missabella by the children she has saved from the streets or the workhouse, plans to take this group of orphans, her family, to the land of opportunity. Her faith in a new start in a new country is taken up by one of her adopted number, Cassie, as they depart the village. Cassie is incredulous at the villagers’ tears as she whispers to Marianne, "We’re much luckier than they are - they have to stay in Switherby for ever and ever." (p.29) To balance this optimism, Spence includes occasional reminders of the truth about their destination. This truth is brought before Cassie and the others as they prepare to embark the Medway Queen, the cargo ship of their pilgrimage. Along with the cargo and other stores are the convicts bound for a term of servitude in New South Wales. Their conditions are so foul that Cassie puts aside her fear and distaste of the convicts to ponder the plight of these prisoners whose very survival will be challenged by the conditions of the voyage. (p.37)

The voyage proves a test of endurance for all aboard the Medway Queen but, at the journey’s end, the pilgrims are sustained by a renewed sense of hope. Spence uses the landscape to inspire this group of travellers to the extent that hope is transformed into a promising vision. The writer describes what they beheld as a sharply lit garden landscape where colours could appear "subdued" but in other places were as bright as any "paint-box" hues (p.45). Such an attractive description is, of
course, meant to contrast with the bleak reality left behind, that is, a society where the children of the poor do not go to school because when eight or nine years old they can earn money in the factories (p.3). In this new land, expectations are raised for orphans like Paul who feels that here anything might be possible, while his older sister, Cassie, is inspired by stories of people said to have made their fortunes in the colony (p.46). This hope and inspiration are translated into reality with the news of a land grant. It is up to Miss Arabella to further translate for her older charges the responsibilities of developing a grant of land. With only one assigned convict labourer, Eben, the hard work involved in such development soon becomes a harsh reality.

In this novel, Spence sustains the difficulties of colonial life but at no stage suggests that Miss Arabella’s transition to life in New South Wales has been an imprudent decision. The positive nature of the move is endorsed by comments such as the sense of fulfilment and confidence the orphans acquire as they begin to establish their new way of life. Within the space of a few weeks, for instance, Paul acquires a new confidence which prompts him to make enquiries that ultimately assist Missabella in acquiring livestock for the farm (p.57). In addition, the orphans’ interest in their new life is heightened by stories about "queer jumping animals" and trees that "look like cabbages on a long, long stalk" (p.66). Though inclined to disbelief at first, the children are keen to find out about these things for themselves.
While the introduction of the aboriginal boy, Cammy, does seem to be a contrived attempt at completing the scene of the orphans’ early Australian experience, Spence’s representation of Cammy is also an exploration of the notion of white superiority. Cammy is estimated to be somewhere between six and twelve years old. However, the confidence with which he carries a spear suggests that he is older, not younger. Spence carefully details his scant clothing as "ragged", "European make" and hanging "halfway down his spindly legs" (p.67). However, it is Spence’s description of his smile which serves as an emphatic reminder of the notion referred to above. "So black was his face that when he finally opened his mouth in a broad grin, the white of his teeth looked positively unnatural" (p.67). Physically, the Aboriginal boy is described as if he were not merely different but, indeed, "unnatural". The ragged trousers that were his only clothing bear testimony not only to their European origin but also to the fact that at some stage in Cammy’s past he has encountered a European concern to cover the body. Cassie’s feeble attempts to communicate with the boy via a "combination of simple English and sign-language" (p.67) initially provide nothing more than a broad, white smile which convinces the orphans of his friendliness. When communication occurs, one assumes that Cammy is meant to experience supreme satisfaction in acquiring understanding and doing what he can to assist these Europeans. However, the author’s deliberate comment about his lack of comprehension could be interpreted as a comment on the Aboriginal boy’s intellectual capacity, sustaining the European view of native inferiority.
As the Switherby pilgrims journey to their land grant, Cammy follows in secret. He makes his presence known, at just the right time, when there is a need of fresh water. Despite proving his worth in this way, Cammy’s arrival causes Phelan to reach for his musket and Missabella to chastise Cassie for being deceitful. Once it becomes apparent that Cammy neither bears hostility towards the travellers nor covets their belongings, both Missabella and Phelan are able to admit to the "practical value of Cammy’s presence" (p.98). Cammy becomes the group’s eleventh orphan and a follower of the Switherby family as they journey towards their place of settlement amidst a landscape that is unfamiliar and forbidding.

In spite of the hardship involved in actually clearing the land, there is the knowledge of good soil and the promise of fresh water nearby to foster Missabella’s acceptance of the nature of her land grant (pp.92-93). Missabella must not only accept what is hers but also the fact that the country itself is difficult. The novel’s concluding chapter dwells upon the nature of a landscape capable of producing both beauty and brutality. The image used to illustrate this is the blowhole at the fictional Kiarmi, which the reader readily identifies as Kiama, with its famed blowhole and that spot’s link with tragedy. Aware of such history, there is little difficulty in identifying with Cassie’s instinctive withdrawal from the place which, even on a clear afternoon, seemed "sinister and threatening" (p.169). At the same time, there is the benevolent contrast, again picked up by Cassie, as she leaves the dark fissure and exults in the urge to run. Eventually, Eben
shares this same urge and begins to run too, "for the first time since his boyhood, and as he went he looked up towards the great open limitless sky and smiled" (p.170). Three of the orphans, Cassie, Luke, and Francis, and the convict labourer, Eben, conclude the tale of the travellers from Switherby with this image which describes their rejoicing in the opportunity of freedom in a new world.

Such open acceptance of the nature of a new environment is both pursued and challenged in the sequel, *Jamberoo Road*. The challenge is posed in a manner that echoes *Lillipilly Hill*. The introduction of the Marlow family, and of Edward Marlow in particular, reintroduces the English family attempting to come to terms with a choice they are not quite sure has been a correct one. Edward Marlow’s visit to Missabella to negotiate the possibility of one of her female charges as governess and companion to his younger sister, Gillis, proves a bewildering experience for him for more reasons than one. Spence presents Edward’s thoughts and feelings as he looks upon Miss Braithwaite and her brood, a sight he has difficulty categorising. He recognises in Miss Braithwaite a person of refinement and breeding, albeit poorly dressed, but the others he sees as a group of peculiar young people, especially the boy who had been bold enough to ride one of his horses without consent. "At home in England, Edward had learnt how to place people in categories according to breeding, appearance, speech and worldly goods,... This New South Wales, however, was indeed a topsy-turvy place" (p.15). The writer details Edward’s thoughts and
feelings so that the reader can appreciate the social challenge for Edward Marlow and others of his ilk. No longer is Edward certain about where he is expected to mix when one’s neighbour might be an emancipist or an individual grown wealthy by illicit trade.

Edward Marlow’s observation is significant in that the author uses it to concentrate on the circumstances that may well have sown the seeds for the idea of a nation based on classless and egalitarian beginnings. The characters that Edward Marlow beholds are, by his standards, an incompatible social group. Edward remembers the English social structure as well defined, and struggles to delineate any clear cut structure in New South Wales. His line of thought also suggests that in no other place would those without background and breeding prosper. Moreover, in his arrogance he is surprised at having to observe certain courtesies before individuals, like Missabella, who have been deprived of such opportunities for some years.

Nevertheless, Spence brings Edward Marlow’s thoughts back into perspective by illustrating the treachery of the local landscape and by pointing out, in no uncertain terms, that for all concerned, the environment demanded understanding and a willingness to learn. More important is the subtlety of the writer’s point that, in surviving such an environment, money and labour count. There is nothing "topsy turvy" in this fact which serves to reset Edward Marlow’s "frame of mind" (p.20). As Missabella’s lack of material resources become apparent,
Edward becomes chastened in his thoughts. However, this does not stop his surprise at sharing the same table with Eben, an ex-convict (p.20).

Spence further draws attention to the rugged environment by stating that the "Jamberoo Road was not a road at all, even by colonial standards" (p.39). No matter what resources people have in their personal possession, the bush can be impenetrable for those who place themselves at its mercy. When someone like Missabella and her orphans settle in such an environment, their daily toil is for the sake of adequate food and shelter. When a family of means, such as the Marlows, settle in this environment, their personal resources and hired labour guarantee a comfortable lifestyle. To this end, the family attempts the recreation of an English lifestyle. The description of their home, Falls Farm, is similar to the household at Lillipilly Hill with its cool, dark English interior. "Inside it was dark and wonderfully cool; cedar floors and panelling and a high raftered ceiling enclosed a wide hall, relying for decoration on several prints of English hunting scenes and a large gilt-framed mirror" (p.44). The scene is completed by the presence of Mrs Kemp, the "excellent housekeeper from the ancestral home in Sussex" (p.45).

Colonial society is layered, albeit differently from English society. The examples given are illustrative of the fact that material resources do make a difference and that despite the opportunities for ex-convicts like Eben to profit from this raw
country (p.71), those with unblemished backgrounds prefer to exert the same social influence they would have enjoyed in the country they know as home. The use of the terms "currency" and "sterling" are also illustrative of the layering of society by separating those who are colonial born from those born in England. The term "sterling" carries overtones of superiority and preference. Even though Cassie claims she would never feel ashamed of being Australian born, she still feels constrained to correct Mr Marlow’s assumption that she is a "currency lass" (p.47). Paralleling this is Marlow’s belief that his residence in NSW and, indeed, that of most others, will be short term. The intention of the Marlow family is to return to England once they have improved the land sufficiently to sell. Mr Marlow is incredulous as he speaks to Cassie: "But surely your brothers and guardian intend to return home one day?" (p.51). But, unlike the Marlows, the Switherby pilgrims have no ancestral home to return to.

Edward Marlow persists in remembering life at home as simple and smooth, with everyone knowing their place. Even Missabella occasionally looks back to the days when "one understood exactly the layers of society and the limits beyond which one could not possibly step" (p.89). Such a longing does not impact on Cassie who, though English born, does not desire smoothness. Nor does she share Missabella’s appreciation of the correctness of Eben’s departure from Mount St Matthew (p.89). Eben’s departure was based on the belief that, despite his feelings for Cassie, he would have nothing to offer her.
Missabella is appreciative of the correctness of his decision to leave without telling Cassie how important their friendship had been. For Arabella Braithwaite it is important to understand, as one did in Switherby, one’s place in society so as not to overstep the limits (p.89). Edward is uncertain about life in a new country even if it is challenging and interesting. At certain moments, Edward can contemplate the view and draw comfort from the fact that it reminds him of Sussex. Such sentimentality is quashed by Cassie who not only has never seen Sussex but also comes from Switherby, where the view was usually obliterated by dense smoke (p.64).

The difficulty that some individuals have in severing ties with Mother England is further explored in the debate for the independence of New South Wales. Spence makes mention of certain non-fictitious characters for this purpose. William Wentworth’s name is raised by Cassie when seeking information from her employer, Mr Marlow. His response is predictable in nominating W. C. Wentworth as a radical and a troublemaker (p.72). Marlow’s opinion of W. C. Wentworth is typical of those loyal subjects of the Crown who view moves towards self-government as an act of treason. He rationalises his argument in terms of a small population composed of free settlers, convicts, and emancipists living in scattered townships and all struggling to make a living. Such a situation, in his view, is better administered by governors responsible to the King. When Cassie challenges that New South Wales might better be administered by individuals who have lived in the colony most of their lives
instead of British administrators who have never seen it, Marlow's rejoinder is that governors such as Macquarie and Darling have served relatively long terms of office. For Mr Marlow it remains an indisputable and unchanging fact of life that everyone is a subject of the King (p.73). Anyone who wishes for an alternative must be regarded as suspect.

*Jamberoo Road* concludes with a summary of the lives and fortunes of the original Switherby pilgrims as they were shaped by the country their guardian had chosen for them. Despite the fact that Miss Arabella Braithwaite could have returned to her home at the Switherby vicarage, she, too, remained. The writer's final suggestion, that perhaps in time Arabella came to call the Illawarra "home" (p.162), serves to remind us that, in her early novels, Spence has focused on the idea of home and what it meant for these characters caught up in the early years of Australia's European settlement. For some of Spence's characters, the fact of the long ocean voyage before their destination was reached, and the unfamiliarity of the land in which they found themselves, are facets of their physical journey. There is also a journey of another kind, involving a personal response to a land that in no way resembled the country they knew as home.

These early novels of Eleanor Spence present a view of Australia that reveals a country without a national identity but with some of the elements that came to be important in fostering our national identity. Edward Marlow, for instance, who was
resolute about returning to Sussex for good, begins to have thoughts of remaining and assuming the role of a colonial squire. Although he ultimately opts to settle permanently in England, Edward Marlow and his family, and the Wilmots of Lillipilly Hill provide an image of English settlement in the Antipodes.

Other features of Spence’s early writing are the development of female main characters and her concern with gender roles. The three historical novels, as part of their scope, give the author opportunity for comment on the roles and expectations of males and females within their nineteenth century context. There is the usual ambition, accepted as natural, for the education of boys, while females with an aptitude for leadership and learning are not encouraged. This is not to the detriment of characters like Harriet Wilmot and Cassie Brown who remain strong and single-minded, despite the social restrictions they have to accept. They challenge the status quo without seeking to overthrow it. This is entirely in keeping with the age of the characters who are powerless to change the rules that govern their daily lives. As Brenda Niall points out in her study, the historical background of these novels prompts valuable discussion about the difficulties associated with new ideas, about ways of living, and also highlights the concept of a new society as a means of discussing class structures and the role of women.22 This discussion is an important facet of Spence’s art and serves to emphasise her

preparedness to comment on gender roles not only in history but in the time in which she writes.
Chapter 3. Problem Families.

"You're not my brother!" Douglas whispered. "You never were my brother!"

(The October Child, p.145)

Throughout each period of her writing Eleanor Spence has maintained an interest in the family theme. In her novels, in keeping with a changing Australian society, families and family life change from the idealised version of earlier works to a representation which reflects the multi-layered nature of the society at the time of her writing. Whereas the early publications attest to the stability of the traditional family structure, the novels of the late sixties and seventies present a structure that is dysfunctional by comparison. The scope of Spence’s writing is broadened by her recognition of the fact that the pressures wrought by social change have to be acknowledged in terms of their impact on the family. In addition, the writer addresses some of the serious issues and problems that sometimes disturb the quality of family life.

As Saxby observes, in changing the character of her families during the seventies, the author also made the transition from female to male main characters. Increasingly, too, the writing is directed at young adults instead of readers nearing adolescence. Individual characters are developed with specific problems other

than those usually associated with personal growth. Moreover, these characters, unlike those from novels such as *The Summer in Between* and *The Green Laurel*, do not always find the support they need within their family. The plight of Glen Calder from *The Nothing Place*\textsuperscript{24} provides an apt example. Glen is physically impaired by his deafness but his mother unwisely decides not to tell the teachers at his new school. Meanwhile, Glen's father makes no obvious effort to meet the needs of anyone except himself. Glen is therefore disadvantaged by his parents' attitudes as well as by his deafness.

Another novel of this period, *Time to Go Home*\textsuperscript{25}, focuses on Rowan Price as the product of a one parent family. Rowan is socially disadvantaged by the family's limited material resources. There is also the limited time a single working parent, in this case Rowan's mother, can give to her adolescent children. Rowan is a resentful individual capable of deceiving his mother and other adults. His greatest disadvantage is his preparedness to neglect his abilities and concentrate on what he believes he can do best, playing football. Through Rowan Price, Spence sets the tone of the era and makes her readers aware of the social pressures on adolescent behaviour. This character's problems are not straightforward, nor is his family's life successfully governed by traditional values.


The treatment of a serious problem and its overriding effects is best dealt with in Spence’s second award winning novel, *The October Child*. This work is based on the author’s personal experience and also continues a process she began with the novel, *The Nothing Place*. The scope of the writing develops the format the writer commenced at the beginning of the seventies in dealing with long-term problems that disadvantage people’s lives. Spence develops the character of an autistic child and looks at the effect of having such a child as part of a family. The art of her writing rests solidly on this treatment of a specific problem, and its impact on the family as a group and as individuals.

At that embryonic stage immediately prior to his birth, the development of Carl’s character is foreshadowed in three ways. Firstly, the author’s introductory chapter, *The Long Week-end*, evokes a protraction of time exacerbated by unseasonably hot weather and bush fires. Secondly, ten year old Douglas Mariner is disturbed by the feeling that something is wrong with the world as he observes his expectant mother lying immobilised, unable to carry out the usual busy cycle of her activities. Thirdly, Douglas becomes temporarily lost near The Devil Hole, a ravine known to him as The Place. This chasm haunts Douglas’ imagination as if it were an enemy lying in wait for him, ready to claim him and smash him to pieces (p.11). These events are, of course, open to other interpretations. Scutter’s

paper at the "Landscape and Identity: perspectives from Australia" conference used them to support her attractive argument that they illustrate the tensions between Puritan and Romantic ideologies present in much Australian children's literature of the period.\(^2^7\) However, regardless of the merits of such an argument, through Douglas Spence clearly seeks to equate The Devil Hole and its dangers to the turbulent disposition of the child born that memorable long week-end.

Even though Douglas is rescued from The Place on the occasion referred to above, the tone at the end of that chapter suggests that his rescue is merely a reprieve since "The Place would not have him after all — at least, not for the time being"(p.12). The foreboding of this first chapter is counterbalanced by the excitement of the second.

When Robert Mariner announces Carl's arrival to his other children, they are silenced by the thought of an addition to the family and then impressed by the fact that naming him seems to transform the creature into a real person (p.17). Throughout the chapter Spence successfully captures the Mariner family's joy and the excitement of preparation to welcome the long awaited baby. Declared physically fit at birth, the Mariner's baby gives no reason for anyone to believe that he would not be the best,

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the prettiest, the cleverest child ever (p.21). The author establishes feelings within the family that are natural, especially as all those concerned believe that the child, Carl, will grow and progress as a member of the family in a perfectly normal fashion. However, by the end of the chapter, when the family gathers about Carl for the first time, Spence again foreshadows that this child is going to be a challenge for the family, particularly Douglas. The child’s face is described as "angry" and "unwelcoming"; his cry is "remarkably piercing" and "remarkably loud". In addition to these details, Spence deliberately draws attention to Carl’s good looks and "extraordinary eyes" (p.24-25).

As the reader follows Carl’s growth, it becomes apparent that the writer focuses, at each stage, on these same details. His increased size and physical strength magnify these characteristics. The language concentrates on emphasising Carl’s handsome appearance and physical good health. It also points to the behavioural patterns he exhibits and repeatedly makes mention of his eyes, either to re-emphasise their vivid, striking appearance or to indicate his lack of recognition of what is happening around him. By the time Carl is two months old he is, in his mother’s view, strikingly handsome and very healthy but not well behaved (p.28).

When Carl vents his displeasure, his cry is angry and protracted; certain hours of the day bring out the worst in him (p.30). His movements, at times frenzied, are accompanied by rhythmic
shakes of his head (p. 37). When Douglas attempts to retrieve a letter Carl has snatched from him, the result is an attack on his finger, followed by furious shrieks which permeate the entire household (p. 38).

By the time Carl is twelve months old, his family is well aware of his atypical behaviour. The opportunity for contrast with what is typical is provided by the Mead family whose baby, Chantal, is the same age as Carl. When the Meads decide not to spend their holiday breaks at Chapel Rocks, Beth Mariner is relieved, because Chantal is "doing all the things Carl should be doing" (p. 38). The reunion of the two families for the joint celebration of a first birthday party serves to highlight the contrast between the two children. Chantal responds appropriately and with a personality all her own to the stimulation of the party, "but Carl — " (p. 40). The poignancy in the tone of just these two words is sufficient to confirm that there is something radically wrong with Carl. What follows is an account of Carl’s panic stricken and violent response to the party. Robert Mariner’s apology for his infant son’s anti-social behaviour, followed by his pitiful reasoning that boys develop more slowly than girls during their first few years, emphasises the existence of a problem that is recognised but not openly acknowledged (p. 40). Later, as Douglas attempts to settle Carl for the evening, he is confronted by the familiar sight of the child rolling his head from side to side. Carl’s blue eyes remain opaque and concentrated on a point some distance away from his brother’s face. As if he were both blind and deaf, Carl makes no response to his brother’s
outstretched arms and offer to pick him up (p.41-42).

Similarly, when Carl, aged fifteen months, is taken to Sydney for medical assessment, his arrival at Central station is punctuated by violent, panic-stricken behaviour. Greeted by his grandmother, Carl opens his eyes but his gaze travels away from her. He totally ignores her and rhythmically moves his head from side to side (p.51). Upon arrival at his grandmother’s home, he ceases rolling his head from side to side only to replace that movement with rocking backwards and forwards. His screams resemble those of a frenzied, trapped animal and, as his rage intensifies, he bangs his head with full vigour against the wooden panel of his cot. Spence’s writing not only details the behaviour but also the physical strength which drives it and the intense resistance shown towards anyone who tries to intervene (p.56).

Carl’s chaotic behaviour resembles more and more the "roaring and smashing of captive water in the Devil Hole" (p.9). In Douglas’ mind, his young brother resembles a yelling, struggling, fifteen month old demon (p.57). Just as the Devil Hole is a potentially hellish place, so, too, the state of Carl’s mind seems to be in torment. At times, Carl seems to belong to the devil’s world. Douglas cannot help the thought that Carl is rather like a changeling, a creature who does not quite fit into the everyday world (p.75).

Carl’s behaviour noticeably becomes more abnormal and is
typified by violent, apparently uncontrollable actions. He rocks violently backwards and forwards, bangs his own head, frowns exaggeratedly and screams piercingly. He flails his arms and legs, shows no awareness of the sound of his own name nor any recognition of the presence of other family members. Increasingly, this behaviour resembles the tremendous force of the sea inside the Devil Hole. One of the most striking examples of this symbolic link occurs the evening Carl destroys the room so carefully prepared for him prior to his birth. At the conclusion of this devastating attack, and despite his violent rage, there are no tears. The blue eyes remain opaque and expressionless (p.66).

The detailing of Carl’s condition should not be viewed as a clinical examination of autism arising from Eleanor Spence’s personal interest in, and work with, autistic children. Indeed, to do so would be a serious misinterpretation on the part of anyone attempting to appreciate this stage in the development of her writing. The fact that Spence does not identify Carl’s condition justifies the argument that the novel is not a case study about an autistic child. By presenting the condition in a literary context, the author is able to concentrate on one of her major interests of the period, namely, the way in which a personal problem can seriously disadvantage other people.

In this novel, the writer relates this interest to her long time preoccupation with the family as she shows how a family copes with a specific problem and how their lives are transformed. The
Mariner family is forced to relocate to the city so that Carl can receive regular medical assessment and attend a special school. The coastal landscape of Chapel Rocks where Robert Mariner has established his post office and general store is replaced by the rather austere cityscape of Quarryfield. There is no welcome to the family when they first settle here, just a series of telephone calls complaining about Carl’s loud screams at night (p.88). As the family makes its transition to a new life, what becomes obvious is their essential aloneness in coping with the problem of Carl. Medical and educational services are available but there is no form of personal support beyond the immediate family. Throughout this period, Douglas maintains his friendship with Daniel and Rachel Mead but does not invite them to his family’s home, Merridale. Thus, it is mainly through the responses of Douglas Mariner, the sensitive child of the family, that Spence brings the reader to some insight into the impact that a child such as Carl can have on family life.

Douglas’ sensitive nature is captured in several ways. He worries about the disturbing events of that long weekend, including his own part in getting lost, and how these may have contributed to Carl’s birth a few weeks ahead of time. Later, he ponders whether the same circumstances may be the cause of his brother’s strange, disruptive behaviour (p.75). Douglas is also gifted musically and readily discovers in Mr Mead someone who shares and encourages his talent as well as someone like himself who is "sort of different" (p.22). Both David and Rachel Mead are different from anyone else Douglas has met in Chapel Rocks
and their friendship becomes very important to him (p.33). In general terms, Douglas is the sort of boy who comes alive during English composition or singing lessons (p.23). This in itself makes him different from his older brother, Kenneth, and from the fishing and surfing interests of the Chapel Rocks community. However, it is his response to Carl which sets Douglas apart, and this is the novel’s true focus.

The first time Douglas holds his infant brother, the baby stops crying and appears to look straight up at him. At the time, Douglas sincerely feels he would not mind helping out with Carl even if it happened to be in the middle of the night (p.25). What eventuates is an increasing dependence on Douglas by his parents, especially when Carl’s resistant moods and physical strength become too much for his mother to handle by herself (p.112). Douglas observes his parents’ exhaustion and despair and so becomes the one "to support his mother and assist his father, and share the heavy burden of Carl as a matter of course" (p.83).

The writer demonstrates that sharing such a burden is, indeed, heavy for a schoolboy. In common with the school age characters of other novels by Eleanor Spence, Douglas desires nothing more than to be ordinary. This wish for ordinariness is not so easily granted when family life is far from ordinary and stable. Thus Douglas accepts punishment for incomplete homework rather than risk further embarrassment by an explanation of a typical evening in the Mariner household.
(p.68). He also gives in to feelings of pride and resentment when his family appear to fail in lending him the support he needs for occasions such as his interview for entry to the Music College (p.97). Even the pleasure of school holidays is quashed by the prospect of spending more time with Carl (p.137). All meal-time conversations come to the same end — "the problem of Carl" (p.106), and the one evening when Douglas invites a friend to dinner ends with the embarrassment of one of Carl's tantrums (p.134).

Despite the burden, Douglas is genuinely shocked by the confrontation with his other brother, Kenneth, over Kenneth's particular view of the family and what he regards as a refusal to accept the truth about Carl (p.109). Kenneth's outburst is particularly disturbing because, despite the erosion of ordinary family life, Douglas has his own vision of the family as both ordinary and stable. He sees his family as one that is held together by a framework built up by common interests and feelings (p.110). Kenneth's outburst and his later decision to leave home and join a group of religious freaks are shocking to Douglas because they represent an attitude that threatens the framework he wishes to preserve. Unlike Kenneth, Douglas cannot disregard Carl as a member of the family, as part of the same framework as himself.

There is a climactic scene towards the end of the novel where Douglas rejects Carl and runs away from him. This time Carl's behaviour is not just a matter of frustration for Douglas but a
public humiliation and an affirmation of the fact that Carl bears him no recognition as a brother. The scene at the playground is charged with tension as Spence give Douglas the task of attempting to control Carl in a context outside the security of home. However, when Carl becomes totally unmanageable, the effect on Douglas is overwhelming. This is powerfully communicated through the language of Spence as she describes Carl’s eyes as never before. The eyes are neither opaque nor expressionless but full of rage and hate (p.145). The combination of no fear, no remorse, no recognition (p.145) provokes a cry of denial from Douglas, "You’re not my brother!" (p.145). Douglas further reacts by fleeing the scene.

Just as the Devil Hole does not claim Douglas, neither does Carl. The reason is not simply that Douglas runs away. His flight is temporary respite only as Spence again ensures that he survives a problem he does not fully understand. And it is the lack of complete understanding that makes Douglas so believable a medium of Spence’s art. The writer concludes on a positive but realistic note by allowing Carl’s teacher to explain to Douglas that if his brother improves at all, it will only be with the help of his family (p.150). In this way, Spence upholds the effort Douglas has been making and suggests that the family will survive as long as they believe Carl will improve.

As with the conclusion to her first award winner, The Green Laurel, Spence deliberately provides the main character with a measure of optimism. Douglas admits that Carl’s existence has
made a positive difference to his life (p.150). The family's relocation from Chapel Rocks to Sydney has given him the opportunity to study at the Music College, a "Promised Land" (p.90), which has guaranteed Carl will not claim him completely.

The survival of individuals with specific personal and social problems must be acknowledged as an important feature of Spence's writing from the nineteen seventies onwards. *The October Child* is a fitting example of this feature as well as of the writer's ability to share a problem with her readers without being didactic for, despite its title, this novel is not about an autistic child. It is about a boy who copes with being a member of a family, one of whom suffers from autism, another of whom suffers from extreme self-centredness, and most of whom fail to recognise or to support his personal needs. In awarding *The October Child* the Children's Book Council "Book of the Year" award in 1977, the judges expressed their appreciation of "the skilled, sensitive and yet restrained treatment which Eleanor Spence gives to a poignant and potentially over-sentimental theme."28 They drew attention to Spence's skill in developing her characters, with special emphasis fittingly focused on Douglas:

*The effect of stress on each of the characters is portrayed calmly, vividly and convincingly. In particular, the growth of Douglas over a number of years and in a variety of circumstances is a fine*

In the novel, *The Left Overs*\textsuperscript{30}, Spence draws attention to a specific social problem by characterising a group of young people who are in foster care. The novel presents some thought-provoking ideas about the way society responds to children who do not belong to the traditional family structure. The background provided on each child is also an indication of the fact that with the progression of time the author remained in step with the transformation of the family unit by an increasingly complex society. The experiences of the four child characters in this novel are those of rejection, alienation, and isolation. Such experiences point to a social background where problems are capable of destroying the family framework altogether. None of the four children has any illusions about the stability of their lives but they all retain the need to belong, to be part of a framework.

Spence's main interest here is the breakdown of family life and what this can mean for young people. In the first instance, there is the likelihood of low self esteem and poor self image when one no longer belongs to one's natural family and then faces the prospect of being continually resettled as a state ward. Drew and Jasmine remark that the closure of Barnfield, their current foster home, will mean yet another school, and both children have

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Spence, Eleanor *The Left Overs* North Ryde: Methuen Australia, 1982.
already had their schooling disrupted several times (p. 13). The writer no longer portrays childhood as secure and stable. In fact, by the 1980s, novels like *The Left Overs* concentrate on the attack on a child's identity that is the natural result of not being permanently part of one family group. Drew's assessment is that he and the others are rather like "left overs" (p.11), that which is left when plans are made and decisions taken without including them.

Notably, the author draws attention to the characters' lack of knowledge about family life and the rituals that families observe. For example, Drew admits that he knows very little about what families do during holidays (p.25). Each child receives very little from their family at Christmas, especially James, whose family spends Christmas at The Shelter (p. 42). Jasmine, meanwhile, has reached a stage where she rejects any family attachment, claiming that she would rather remain in foster care than have either of her parents win custody (p.29). Such experiences create more than just a knowledge gap of family social life. A more serious gap is that of responsibility for care of children and who, in the absence of parents, is their protector. This is where Spence examines society's response.

In this novel, the lives of the four children are shaped by The Department which decides their fate and either approves or disapproves of actions taken by other people on their behalf. For instance, when Mick Mulvaney suggests he might help the children's cause by writing an article about them in the local
paper, he is told in no uncertain terms that "The Department would never allow it" (p.64). The Department is referred to several times through the novel and, during one discussion about The Department's role in their lives, Drew compares it to "dozens of pieces of paper in files" (p.65). Drew, of course, argues from the vantage point of one whose life has been a series of official files (p.59). Such references highlight the fact that officialdom really never deals with individual people, just individual cases.

The greatest dilemma for the four children as they are presented with the inevitability of Barnfield's closure is not merely the loss of the only true home each of them has known but the end of their only experience of family life. For this reason they see it as imperative that they try to remain together.

During their time together, the four children have established themselves as a group and have enjoyed the group dynamics of family living such as organising their lives to suit themselves - "you know, what programmes to watch on T.V., and who's first in the shower..." (p.13). In addition to learning to live together, the children have come to regard each other as special. Even though he cannot explain why, Drew refers to the others as his sisters and brother and feels responsible for them (p.106). Most of the time they all feel like brothers and sisters because they share common feelings and mutual interests.

Through the character Drew, Spence explains the meaning of
family membership and exactly what it provides. This occurs explicitly towards the novel’s conclusion when Drew learns that, once again, he is a left over. That is, he is informed by The Department that he is the only one left after it has been decided that James and Jasmine will return to their parents and that Straw will remain with Auntie Bill (p.105).

In a passage of incisive writing, Spence, through Drew, reflects that it comes down to a definition of what it means to be provided for. Her conclusion is that it is not a matter of having the food, clothing and shelter which anyone can make available, but a matter of having a special person, someone who is yours (p 106).

Throughout the novel, eleven year old Drew is the one who feels he is carrying the weight of the problem of what is to become of the four of them once Barnfield is closed. Through him, Spence keeps the seriousness of the issue before the reader and, at the same time, keeps her treatment of the topic light hearted.

A certain degree of humour is achieved because of Drew’s decision to take matters into his own hands and find someone prepared to foster four children. His naive, childish scheme of a self-improvement plan for each child, followed by a newspaper advertisement offering the four as a "package deal" (p.15) succeeds in eliciting the reader’s sympathy as well as providing some amusing moments as the scheme gets under way.
This light hearted treatment is further well exemplified by Jasmine’s ploy in appearing on stage at the Opera House with a group from the local ballet school. Jasmine’s performance is both funny and embarrassing but, in her judgement, it is better to laugh at someone than to take no notice at all (p.38).

Similarly, Drew’s strategy in getting them all featured in a midday television show is intended as a means of advertising their plight. The image of the four children on camera is a "show-stopper" (p.90). As Auntie Bill later points out to Drew, this is exactly what the T.V. host wanted, an opportunity to capture his audience with the cry of homeless children (p. 92). The incident allows Spence to make the point that society accepts problems and issues that receive media treatment as much for their entertainment value as for the information provided.

Spence consistently presents the concerns of "The Left Overs" in a realistic and controlled manner. When Drew gives Mick Mulvaney the facts about his family background, Mulvaney utters no words or expressions of pity, he simply listens (p. 68). Mick’s character is indicative of Spence’s controlled handling of the issue of children in foster care. Her treatment is neither emotive nor didactic, rather she keeps her characters and her readers in touch through the realities of a serious problem.

As with the conclusion to The October Child, Spence makes no attempt at a fairy tale conclusion. Even though the problem of
where they will end up once Barnfield closes is resolved quite happily for three of the four children, and Drew acquires Mick Mulvaney as his special person for weekends and holidays, the wish that all four remain together is not granted. In a sense, the children are subjected to yet another family breakup in their lives. The conclusion recognises the impossibility of keeping four foster children together as a family, but Drew questions why it should be so difficult. He is willing to concede that at age eleven he is probably too old to attract any interest but finds it hard to believe that part of the difficulty could also be that Jasmine is half Chinese, James is Aboriginal, and Straw’s brain is a bit slow (p. 110).

From the late 1960s onwards, there is a distinct change in Spence’s novels as she concentrates on families and individuals that are disadvantaged in some way. This concentration acknowledges the fact that society is constantly changing and that families have not escaped the effects of change. Spence’s writing further acknowledges that young people are often confronted with serious problems which can threaten their identity and sense of self-worth. In pointing out the disadvantages that young people face, Spence never preaches about the problems that have no easy solutions. Moreover, she always remains positive about the survival of those characters whose vulnerability is clearly exposed.
Chapter 4. On Being Different.

"But there should be another word to describe the feeling you had for a friend whose like you might never encounter again in a lifetime."

*(A Candle for Saint Antony, p.128)*

Feeling different has often been shown to be an uncomfortable, unwelcome feeling for Spence characters. This has occurred particularly where the character has felt the pain of continually facing up to new situations, such as changing schools, or has been confronted by the fact of family life that does not resemble the ordinariness of other families’ lives. The desire to blend in is a natural accompaniment to the need to belong, characterised by characters such as Lesley Somerville in *The Green Laurel*, and Douglas Mariner in *The October Child*. Spence depicts these children as facing challenges which make them feel outside the norm. Her concern for young people who feel different is extended in her later writing by her treatment of the notion of difference. Two novels in particular, *A Candle for Saint Antony*[^31] and *The Seventh Pebble*[^32], help illustrate how differences characterise our cultural context and govern social behaviour. In this way, the writing offers some instruction on the development of Australian society and the differences that make it complex.

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Attitudes towards what is deemed different, and ideas about what will and what will not be tolerated, are also examined.

* A *Candle for Saint Antony* examines difference on various levels, with the two main characters providing an excellent opportunity to explore not only personal differences but also social and cultural differences. The contrast between the two is initially drawn on a socio-economic basis. Justin’s background is a privileged one which he takes for granted. The stamp of privilege is given by a mother who is always well groomed and impeccably dressed (p.34), and by dinner time arguments about not going on holidays because of the need to pay off the swimming pool (p.6-7). The writing is very direct in placing Justin within the framework of a middle-class, traditional family. Family life is fairly routine, with each parent adopting a role most accurately described as stereotypical. Rudi’s background is deliberately contrasted with this life. Born in Vienna, Rudi lives with his widowed mother and his sister in a dingy block of flats (p.14). His migrant background is one of struggle, and Rudi observes that his hard-working mother, though barely forty, sometimes resembles an old woman (p.15). Independent by nature, Rudi has taken responsibility for his education and his ambitions by working part-time (p.17).

Spence emphasises the importance of recognising and judging someone as different when Justin and Rudi first meet. Justin’s first impression of Rudi is that he has a face like a girl’s (p.23). This allusion to a feminine characteristic establishes Rudi’s
sensitive nature, a characteristic that is troublesome to Justin and his friends. Their attitudes are further disturbed as they interrogate Rudi about his background. Their responses are part of the conditioning provided by parents like Bradley's father who would prejudge Rudi for being "totally un-Australian and probably Roman Catholic into the bargain" (p.24). The further revelation that Rudi works to pay his own school fees is almost more than the boys can contemplate. The writer suggests, in the scene that ensues, that the only way these upper middle-class Australians can accommodate difference is through expressions of intolerance, usually in the form of verbal or physical violence (p.25). When his mother asks about new students at his school, Justin, with a surge of anger, describes Rudi as a "bloody little ethnic tyke" (p.28). His irrational outburst is typical of someone who is used only to sameness.

Rudi finds solace in listening to classical music. He plays only one sport and, chilled by the idea of physical and verbal violence (p.25), refuses to enter into argument, a characteristic that Justin finds most infuriating (p.38). Rudi realises that he is neither like the boys at his school nor like his sister and the noisy crowd whose company she enjoys. Though content with this fact, he explains to his mother that it is safer to try to be like everyone else, especially at a school where acceptance is dependent on being the same as the other boys. During the first few days at his new school, Rudi finds only one friend, another outsider who happens to be a Jew. The two boys are "lumped together" because Rudi is a Catholic. The author's comment is
on the nonsensical nature of such attitudes and the depressing thought of a society where individuality is compromised for the sake of conformity (p.35). It might be argued, too, that there is some authorial comment on the conditioned attitudes that perpetuate not only racial and religious intolerance but also gender based stereotyping. Spence’s artistry in this novel rests solidly on the fact that nothing is stated overtly and that there are different levels of meaning.

An encounter with someone who is different inevitably produces a variety of feelings. Such a natural response is identified in the behaviour of the characters during their early encounters. The feelings are not so easily defined as Rudi discovers in contemplating the next meeting with his predator, Justin. Despite the chilling fear of being physically attacked during one confrontation, Rudi does not feel fearful at the prospect of meeting up with Justin again. The emotion he experiences is entirely new to him (p.36). When Justin torments Rudi for the sake of a final showdown, it is Justin who ends up looking ridiculous. He, too, undergoes a new emotional experience, as if, within the space of a few minutes, his identity had changed (p.40). Justin’s confusion at his feelings towards Rudi is understated throughout the novel but is continually present.

There is an emphasis on the development of feelings and the development of a close friendship between two adolescent boys who find they understand each other in spite of their opposing lifestyles. The attempt to find order and meaning in one’s
emotional development at this formative stage is one which many adolescents would identify with. Justin’s confusion as to his own feelings is therefore readily recognisable. The relationship that develops between the two should be seen more as emotional than sexual. The writing sensitively portrays feelings, and the confusion of emotional development is softened by the conclusion that "It seemed that always, somewhere, in another time or another place, there was one who truly understood how you felt" (p.140). The far reaching effects of such understanding are foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Justin’s mother quizzes him as to why Rudi is such a close friend. Justin’s explanation is one that could apply to the success of any friendship where someone can say that they are being helped to find out about themselves (p.63). Rudi fulfils a need hitherto unmet by Justin’s other friends and acquaintances. Later in the novel, one of these friends accuses the two of a homosexual relationship, a charge which not only brings the relationship to an abrupt end but also plunges Justin into confusion again about his own feelings (pp. 124-125).

Although the relationship is not about unrecognised homosexuality, Spence’s writing does carry overtones about this type of relationship well before Greg misconstrues Rudi’s declaration of love for Justin. By this means, Spence shows how a relationship may be subject to various levels of interpretation. An example of this occurs when Justin turns down Rick’s invitation to a night out at the local surf club. Rick demonstrates his resentment over Justin’s friendship with Rudi by suggesting
how the two appear. Justin’s real reason for turning down the invitation is that he realises he is no longer the person he once was, and so is fearful of not recognising himself (pp. 58-59). A few days later, Justin grins at the "unfortunate choice of adjective" as Rudi distinguishes the Austrian temperament as "gay" for the benefit of Justin’s father (p.61). The play on the word gay amuses Justin in the light of Rick’s recent dig, and the writer uses it to convey subtly her ideas about interpretation. Justin’s circle of friends persist in making fun of the friendship as if it were homosexual by referring to the two as "going around" together (p.77).

The innuendos continue during the school excursion to Vienna. When the group is advised that no boy should explore the Vienna Woods on his own, for example, Greg’s innocently asked question, "What about in pairs?", is obviously for Justin’s benefit since he and Rudi have spent much of their time exploring Vienna together. As the boys look on the Vienna Woods and are awe struck, Justin’s romantic reaction to both its size and antiquity is that these are the woods where Hansel and Gretel were lost (p.106). This time Greg retorts with a barbed comment about fairy-tales fitting childish impressions. Here Spence emphasises the static nature of Greg’s narrow outlook, which seemingly resists exposure to another culture. Justin, on the other hand, has developed in his appreciation of difference. Like Greg, Andy, who had found himself lost for words as he looked on the woods, readily finds his words in suggesting that fairy-tale notions may not be for kids but for "fairies" (p.107).
Such comments illustrate how Spence deliberately builds up a case for interpretation of the friendship in terms of what others are willing to make it out to be, rather than what it is. When Greg overhears Rudi’s admission that he loves Justin and invites him to remain in Vienna with him, Greg misses out on the "simple truth" that Rudi attempts to impart (p.119).

The writer’s aim here is to expose people, like Greg, who are incapable of understanding individuals and relationships that are different. Rudi is acutely aware of the various expressions and interpretations of love, and for this reason he is willing to meet Greg’s challenge and repeat his declaration of love for Justin in front of the other boys (p.125). At this point, Justin’s confusion as to his own feelings is understandable. He feels "there should be another word to describe the feeling you had for a friend whose like you might never encounter again in a lifetime" (p. 128). Rudi’s preparedness to speak the truth results in his being "cast out" by the group and the friendship with Justin severed (p.128). Notably, Justin’s long-term regret is the decision to walk away from the friendship.

Despite the element of regret that Spence introduces at the end of the novel, she is by no means suggesting that the friendship has been a regrettable one. The author shows that regardless of the inner turmoil and pain, being different can have its advantages, especially when it involves discovering the opposing lifestyles of another culture. Exposure to Rudi’s lifestyle and cultural background transforms Justin into someone who is
different from the person he was. Not only does he become more tolerant but also more appreciative of differences. The excursion to Vienna is valuable in that it allows Justin to observe an old European culture at first hand. During one of their explorations of the city, Justin observes a gesture of friendship between two Viennese companions that would be frowned upon in Australia. He remarks that at home a "guy would get knocked" for placing an arm around the shoulders of another mate (p.97). He is unable to explain to Rudi why anyone would think twice about it. Earlier in the novel, Justin demonstrated the conditioned response of thinking twice before expressing affection. During a beach walk with Rudi, each boy keeps studiously apart. When they do accidentally collide, Rudi apologises and immediately draws back. Justin simply blames the dog (p.66).

While he may be unable to identify some of the new feelings he experiences, the friendship with Rudi does yield some positive personal results with which Justin is comfortable. For instance, he is motivated to aspire towards academic success for the first time in his life (p.72) and recognises a growth in his social confidence (p.75).

Spence's message on being different is encouraging. Her optimism is substantiated by a few lines from Goethe at the novel's conclusion and depends on a belief in the existence of another person, somewhere, who understands how you feel.

Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
Who never spent the darksome hours,
Weeping and watching for the morrow,
He knows ye not, ye heavenly Powers. (p.139)

This final realisation means that the trip to Vienna has taken on "symbolic significance" (p.55), and, for the reader, emphasises that the structure of this sensitively written novel explores several opposing elements, concluding that while being different may be painful at times, it is not a unique experience.

Another satisfying work with the theme of difference is the novel, The Seventh Pebble. In choosing the period before World War II, Spence successfully transports contemporary readers to a different era. Those readers familiar with the author’s autobiographical work, Another October Child, will recognise some of the experiences and influences from the author’s own childhood woven into the story about characters in a small country town. Rachel Blackwood, like her creator, observes the gravity of the times as her parents cling to radio broadcasts of world events. Both Rachel and Spence are made aware of religious sectarian attitudes. On a less serious level, both attempt to follow the trend established by Shirley Temple but have to come to terms with a lack of dancing talent and so abandon their silver frosted shoes. Something of the author’s personality is also found in Rachel’s habit of avid reading and love of story.

Spence’s adeptness in recreating a bygone era has already been

noted in reference to earlier publications with historical settings. The atmosphere of *The Seventh Pebble* is no less laudable in effectively drawing attention to those details which fashion the era and which made Australian society of the nineteen thirties different from that of today. For example, apart from its function in transmitting news about world events, the "wireless" is described as a substantial piece of furniture occupying a position beneath a portrait of Rachel’s grandmother in the front room of the house (p.8). Spence effectively details the placing of both items by pointing out that the dark veneer of the wireless cabinet matched the colours of grandmother’s dress and fox fur, while "the creamy bakelite of the control panel repeated the pallor of her face and hands" (p.8). Rachel’s eagerness to locate *The Lone Ranger* on the set (p.8) could also promote discussion with readers unfamiliar with that part of Australia’s social history where wireless serials featured significantly in home entertainment. Another important presence in this novel and in Australia’s social history is the British tradition. This influence is woven into the novel via Rachel’s reading matter, with its images of snow, plum pudding, ruined castles, and boarding school high jinks (p.27). Rachel’s mother refers to England as *home*, and nurtures the dream of returning one day to visit her family (p.35). Names that are English in origin, like *Finch* or *Blackwood*, or even Scottish like *Mackay*, sit comfortably with the residents of Hollybush Flat. On the other hand, Irish names like *Connell* are quickly identified as different, somehow set apart from everyone else (p.35). Rachel also discovers in completing a colouring-in exercise in Geography that only a
small section of Northern Ireland belongs to Britain and wonders about its relationship to The Empire (p.68).

In this novel, Eleanor Spence is recreating a time when life was relatively innocent and uncomplicated but, in many respects, very narrow. The author's comments about such narrowness as she describes her own community in *Another October Child*, apply aptly to the fictional community described in *The Seventh Pebble*. The former work states that just over half a century ago, "one needed no particular justification for being rabidly anti-Catholic" (p.28). The latter work places the Irish and the Catholic Connell family in a context where sectarianism is active and where people appear to have no particular justification for their attitudes and behaviour. To identify a name as Irish, and from the South, puzzles Rachel Blackwood, who has no understanding of the bigotry this represents. While her father, Dr Blackwood, can accept the Irish along with the Scots, the Welsh, and the English, her mother is less tolerant. Mrs Blackwood's shocked response as to why the Irish cannot be accepted along with the rest is the issue of their Catholicism (p.12).

As Dr Blackwood dismisses further argument with the question "What does it matter?" (p.12), Spence effectively places this same question before the reader as a central concern of the novel. To people like Rachel Blackwood's mother, with her English background, and to other members of a small, narrow community like Hollybush Flat, it mattered if someone was a
Catholic. Even in stories with more recent settings, such as *A Candle for Saint Antony*, Spence includes this unexplained dislike of Roman Catholics as part of the social makeup of some Australians. It is precisely this lack of justification for being anti-Catholic that the writer explores as Rachel Blackwood puzzles over the question of why the people of Hollybush Flat find it difficult to accept the Connells. Both this novel and *A Candle for Saint Antony* raise the notion of difference, but *The Seventh Pebble* emphasises the point that religious sectarianism, particularly among those Australians of Anglo-Saxon and Irish backgrounds, does constitute an aspect of Australian social history that is well worth considering. By contemplating the reasons for such attitudes, one may also ponder the reasons that religious and cultural differences of any kind may matter to anyone at any time.

Spence structures this story in terms of binary oppositions in order to emphasise the differences about the Connell family that become important to others in the community. The most important of these is the Irish Catholic tradition versus the British Protestant ethic. The structure extends to the portrayal of the Connells’ lives as fiction, disorder, and poverty, which confronts the community’s truth, order, and solvency. Rachel Blackwood, too, observes that the Connell family is different but is one of the few members of the small community whose hostility is not aroused by the fact of difference. Never before has Rachel come across a family quite like the Connells, and this makes them an attraction. It is the "fairy tale imagination"
that seems to surround their true circumstances (p.52) that Rachel finds particularly fascinating. The truth is that Mrs Connell and five of her seven children, with very little money to meet their basic needs, have moved into an abandoned wreck of a house with no electricity. However, from the moment of their first meeting, the ebullient Bridget Connell entertains Rachel with a narrative rich in detail. The absence of Bridget’s father, for example, is explained as a temporary one. He is in Sydney but will arrive soon to build a new mine and make the family rich (p.21). The reality is that the Connell’s father is in prison. Yet, in Bridget’s imagination, he is a romantic hero, the descendant of an Irish king, at one time an officer in the Irish army, and, at another time, an engineer who helped build the Sydney Harbour Bridge (p.52). The writer does not suggest that Bridget’s fictions are intended as either elusive or deceptive. Instead, her imaginative fancy is shown as a natural state of mind. Spence, through this particular character, is contemplating the relationship between fiction and truth which exists in all our lives. For most people the relationship is balanced, whereas Bridget demonstrates how fiction may effectively belie truth.

Eleanor Spence ensures the reality of the Connells’ lives is kept in place through Rachel Blackwood’s observations. Rachel’s first visit to the Connell home again drives the point about difference. She notes that Mrs Connell’s voice is different from the "usual accents of Hollybush Flat" (p.43). Stooped and thin, Mrs Connell is protected from her chores by a sacking apron. The woman and her kitchen contrast quite markedly with the
cleanliness and orderliness Rachel is accustomed to in her own home. The writer details the contents and disorder of the kitchen to illustrate the impoverished circumstances of a family obviously struggling to survive. Amongst the clutter is an object which also sets the house apart from most other homes in this community. Rachel is curious but she is too polite to ask about the statue of a woman clad in white robes and a blue cloak and with a crown of stars on her head (p.44).

One of the most effective scenes in the novel, in terms of emphasising the reality of the Connells’ lives and in depicting what happens when one group fails to blend in with another, is Bridget’s birthday party. From the moment Rachel sees Bridget’s party dress, which is unbecoming in fabric and colour as well as being poorly made, the party is a disaster. Rachel can only think how the more accomplished dressmakers in Hollybush Flat would have shuddered at the sight of it. Rachel, like the other guests, is tempted to laugh from nervousness and embarrassment as Bridget, assisted by her younger brothers, opens presents which seem to stand out as luxuries, that is, "soap and bath salts" for which the "rusted old four-legged bath was not really designed" (p.101). The birthday fare is equally disastrous, especially when placed before the critical offspring of those expert in the art of collecting prizes for cake baking (p.104). The behaviour of the other guests, who constantly giggle and refuse to play outside, is as difficult for Rachel to digest as Mrs Connell’s birthday cake. Her well-intentioned effort to create some entertainment for the occasion with a game
of *I Spy* also ends in disaster. When Rachel fixes on something beginning with "V", Bridget readily identifies the *Virgin*. Her response both shocks and horrifies her guests, especially Joy, who has some idea of the meaning of the word *virgin* (p.102). In the end, Spence uses the word *sorrow* to describe the deep felt sadness Rachel experiences as she looks upon Bridget and the other Connells. It is not merely that the party has gone wrong, but rather that the invited guests came unprepared to share in a celebration (p.104-105).

Bridget is able to share with Rachel her own recognition that other people do not like the family because they are different. The dislike seems to be based on their going to Sunday Mass and having holy pictures and statues. Rachel does not pursue the reasons such minor things should lead to unqualified dislike and distrust. As she correctly guesses, Bridget would not know how to answer (p.105). This inability is proposed by Spence because she wishes to stress how difficult it is to explain that which is without justification.

The religious observance which so disturbs everyone else is a source of intrigue for Rachel Blackwood. For instance, Rachel is perplexed but equally impressed by Bridget’s litany as she identifies each member of her family in turn, and carefully includes the saint’s name of each one. Although she feels "*quite out of her depth*" (p.25) when Bridget freely admits to Mrs Owen that the family attends Mass each Sunday, this is simply because Rachel is unaccustomed to the weekly ritual of church
attendance. While the Connells may be a new experience for Rachel, the attitudes expressed by the community are an even greater source of enlightenment. The writer uses the example of the Connell family to show how bigotry breeds the most bizarre opinions which can, in certain contexts, lead to hysteria.

Dermot, the eldest of the Connell children, is deemed to be mad because he told his teacher, in front of the whole class, that he wants to be a priest (p.68). Rachel finds that her peers regard the Connells with suspicion because their elders have described them as "a shiftless lot", "a mob of dirty Irish", and "Roman Catholics" who, above all, cannot be trusted because they plan "to take over the whole country" (p.69). At a time when the Australian population was again being called upon to demonstrate its loyalty to Great Britain, it is perhaps not surprising that the often disputed loyalty of the Irish was raised in small communities where many feared that the Pope and Hitler were likely allies (p.69). In a sense, Mr Connell has demonstrated his disloyalty by being in the Irish army. Dermot explains to Rachel that this is another factor which makes them different. He was not a member of the same army that everyone else referred to (p.143).

As the focus of suspicion and fear, the Connells are subjected to name calling and are blamed for past and present problems. During one slanging match with a group of older boys, the abuse extends to the Connell children being called "dirty tykes" who originated in an Irish bog (p.79). Of even greater interest to
Rachel Blackwood is the accusation from one of the boys, Jack, that the "Romans" had been responsible for the closure of the town mine. Jack’s information had come from his father who described the priest of his time as a wicked man who inveigled innocent children into his church where they were made to recite "Hail Marys" and participate in the rites of a "Black Mass and everything" (p.79). And everything sensationalises the events that take place in the imagination. Rachel is interested because this is a rather more emotive version of the story already alluded to by Mr Milton when the Connells first came to the district. Jock Milton spoke of trouble with the Irish occurring long before the mine closed. The Catholic church and a number of other buildings near the mine were burnt (p.36). The causes of this past trouble, the reader can assume, had the same basis as present attitudes, that is, intolerance and bigotry.

There is a prediction of more trouble from Rachel’s mother over the Connells’ unpaid bills and seeming to have more than they can manage (p.111-112). Her prediction comes true but mainly because of Mr Connell’s escape from captivity. The hero of Bridget’s fairytale imagination, instead of making his family rich and happy, brings in his wake the reality of individual suffering. Rachel realises how the tide has turned for the Connells as she observes how the elder girl, Maeve, had changed. It was as if the fairytale had reversed with Maeve, the once beautiful princess, now Cinderella without a godmother (p.156). The fact that Maeve has also become pregnant to one of the local boys further detracts from her fairytale status and, given the context
of the time, her respectability.

The story reaches its climax with the bushfire which Mr Connell is blamed for starting from his hideout near the old mine tunnel. Even though Mr Connell is recaptured, this is not enough for those who want to apportion blame not only for a fire that could have destroyed the whole community, but for satisfaction for current hardships brought about by the drought and the mine closure (p.160). Even though these last two have nothing to do with the Connells, Spence shows how easily individuals will build up a relationship among unrelated factors in order to lay blame. "S.P. betting, someone said. Can’t trust those tykes." "Irish, too. Fought with the Hun in the war." (p.160). These comments are made as Mr Connell is driven away in custody and immediately follow a discussion about local economic hardship. The association of ideas is sufficient for emotions to reach a fever pitch and for a mob of local youths to gather together and stone the Connells’ house (p.161). This is Rachel’s final observation of the ultimate intolerance members of her community are willing to inflict on a group deemed to be different.

The lesson for Rachel Blackwood, as for any observer, is both telling and disturbing. It is personally disturbing for Rachel in view of the novel’s setting to discover that her own father was born in Germany. Even though, as Bridget Connell reminds Rachel, her father’s origins have nothing to do with Hitler and the coming war, there is the fear that the connection with
Germany will be sufficient to make others dislike Dr Blackwood (p.97). Later, the revelation that Rachel’s grandparents were, in fact, German Jews, intensifies her understanding of what it means to be different. Here Spence reinforces the concepts of faith and cultural background as factors that generate religious and social prejudice (p.169).

Although disturbing, this information about her father’s background is just as exciting for Rachel as Bridget Connell’s family histories. It is as if a fiction has surrounded her own reality to discover that her father has been sending money to relatives in Germany in order to aid their escape (p.169). It is the writer’s intention that the reader draws certain parallels between attitudes towards the Jews and attitudes towards Irish Catholics. The link between anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic is the absolute lack of justification for such discriminatory behaviour.

As in *A Candle for Saint Antony*, Spence makes use of a literary reference to sum up the position of Rachel Blackwood at the end of the story. In reciting the Robert Frost poem, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, and accepting a copy of *The Old Testament* at her school prize-giving, Rachel is attributed two forms of symbolic expression. As forecast by Dr Blackwood, the time would arrive when his daughter would realise how the two went together (p.136). The appropriateness of both becomes meaningful when Rachel reflects on the knowledge of her Jewish ancestry and is reminded of the lines she recited:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,*
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.'

How many miles - to where? (p.170)

For the informed reader, the question "to where?" will be answered by linking Rachel’s Jewish ancestry with images of later events in a war ravaged Europe. Spence does not force the connection but weaves the central idea of these lines into the tenth chapter of the novel. The opening description of Rachel’s witnessing of the prison train at the railway station (p.122), presages the ultimate answer. The despairing face of one prisoner in particular has less to do with the fact that this man is Mr Connell than it does with the effect the experience has on Rachel. For now, the pity she feels for the man who seems to stare at her so accusingly is painful, but easily assuaged by her father’s offer of a milkshake treat (p.124). Spence’s aim is to show how easily a sense of pity for others can be numbed momentarily by personal gratification. Later, whenever Rachel finds that her sleep is disturbed by the accusing image of the prisoner, she shuns the blame in her own mind (p.124). At other times, Rachel finds that the only way to curb the haunting image of the prisoner is to concentrate on those events which make a "vision of delight" (p.125) in her own life. She has many pleasures to look forward to in the short term but, as the author suggests in this succinct episode, a long way to go before her life is fulfilled by a sense of responsibility.

In quoting from the poem, Spence highlights this favourite motif
of hers, the journey. Rachel has indeed a long road to travel in discovering and living with the facts of her own heritage. It is something that will make her different, and, being different, as she has already observed recently, can cause great personal suffering. It can also produce the kind of strength which is personal conviction. This is demonstrated by the Connells who walk together quite proudly each Sunday morning. It is also demonstrated by Rachel’s father in deciding to tell Rachel about her Jewish ancestry and that henceforth she will not be attending Church of England scripture at school (p.169).

Both *A Candle for Saint Antony* and *The Seventh Pebble* provide an excellent focus for the individual suffering that ensues on account of being different. The two novels also afford an ideal opportunity to analyse the Australian perspective on difference, including the attitudes and behaviours that have constituted an ethnocentric outlook.
Chapter 5. Families At Risk.

"It was rather like getting out of your depth in the sea, then finding a sandbank to stand on."

(Deezle Boy, p.99)

It is appropriate here to re-emphasise the argument that Eleanor Spence as a writer of and contributor to Australian children’s literature, has provided a valid interpretation of a changing and complex Australian society. Spence’s particular focus on the family has meant also that, over time, the writer has examined some of the issues which have altered traditional family life or even placed it at risk. For the reader, this approach justifies an analysis of the attack on an individual’s identity which sometimes occurs when traditional family values are disturbed. Two later novels, Deezle Boy and Another Sparrow Singing, give fitting examples on which to base this view of Eleanor Spence’s art and work.

In a very significant sense, the novel Deezle Boy is a study of traditional values and how these are affected by changing social values. The book’s title derives from the main character’s passion for trains, which is established as something quite unique to Grant as "the 7.33 . . . grew out of the mists on the

viaduct with a magic that was new every morning" (p.2). The intended audience is the younger reader who may share a similar enthusiasm. At the same time, Spence skilfully demonstrates for all readers just how attuned one can be to what is genuinely interesting. An apt example is the author’s depiction of her character’s sensibilities as he settles into his usual seat and closes his eyes for the purpose of knowing when the train went into the tunnel and sensing the blackness (p.3). The blackness affects conditions such as noise level and Grant has a scientific explanation for the rocking movement of the train once it enters the tunnel. Such a finite knowledge of physics comes from the only book he ever reads, "his train book" (p.4). Spence identifies as her main character a young boy whose enthusiasm for trains compensates for his low self-esteem. Evidence of this low self-esteem is mirrored in Grant’s assumption that the reduced price for the second enrolment at the private school he and his sister attend is akin to being marked down like a supermarket special (p.4). Nor is his self-esteem helped by his tendency to absent-mindedness and slowness to work things out.

Spence further identifies her main character in terms of his family background. The relationship between Grant and his sister, Nicole, is depicted in the usual way with Nicole, a self-absorbed creature, being made responsible for her younger brother. The fact that Grant’s grandparents are part of his family is made known by many references, especially to his grandfather, in the first few pages. It was his grandfather’s decision to spend his lottery win on a private school education
for Grant and Nicole. Spence indicates a family background where middle class values are realised when good fortune allows. Despite the obvious absence of a father, the family structure is completed by a mother whom Grant places in the same category as teachers, that is, someone who gets "carried away about doing things of a useful kind" (p.9). The author gives sufficient information about Grant’s family background to satisfy the reader that he comes from an environment where he is cared for and where the adults quite clearly make the rules.

Spence includes sufficient detail on a stable background and Grant’s own personality to draw the contrast between the life he has been used to and the new life he is introduced to for a short period. Unaware that he is adopted, Grant is kidnapped by his natural mother and her young daughter. Both in structuring the kidnap scene and the course of the story that follows, Spence analyses a number of significant issues. The kidnapping itself raises the issue of a child’s trust in adult behaviour and those who abuse that trust. Since the kidnapper uses another child as an accomplice, the question of adult responsibility is further advanced, but the writer’s skill in raising this concern is instructive without being didactic. Similarly, Spence’s handling of the attack on a child’s identity which occurs when someone assumes unlawful custody is both compassionate and provocative.

Soon after his arrival at the motel where his kidnappers have decided to spend the first night, Grant finds himself looking in
the mirror to check if he is the same boy (p.18). For Grant, this is the beginning of a personal journey where nothing is the same as it has been to date. Initially, one of the perspectives that changes most dramatically for Grant is his view of the adult. An early conversation with his adult kidnapper reveals that she is Laurie Lyall, a cousin of his mother (p.19). In addition to quashing his inclination to phone his mother by telling him that she has already written, Laurie further surprises Grant with all that she knows about him (p.19). His charge that Laurie lied when she said they were going to pick up his sister as well and drive to the station, is met with the blatant admission that Laurie simply wanted him to get into the car (p.20). Grant’s only line of defence is to argue that when other adult relatives wish to see the family, they do so as visitors to his home. Laurie’s counter argument is that she could not do this because they do not like her (p.20). Thus Grant is confronted by an adult and relative who, for reasons he is told he would not understand, is unwelcome at the home where his mother, sister, and grandparents reside and where, presumably, other relatives are welcome guests. With this adult, Laurie Lyall, Spence introduces a character who not only challenges Grant’s identity but exposes his vulnerability.

Grant’s thoughts and fears about the woman who has kidnapped him are understandable in terms of his initial thoughts regarding ransom demands (p.17) and later worries about having to sleep in a strange room, with two strange people, with no pyjamas and no toothbrush (p.21). Spence effectively interweaves Grant’s
past upbringing with present experiences. Further, the writer is inviting the reader to examine this adult and her behaviour in the light of a number of issues. An overriding issue is that of parental responsibility. In a sympathetic, non-didactic way, Spence suggests that Laurie Lyall does not qualify as a responsible parent. Her daughter, Holly, admits to having lived in many places as well as having attended ten schools (p.21). In contrast, Grant, who is accustomed to a life that is ordered and structured, is suddenly thrust into a new life where the adult figure is adept at dodging questions (p.28). She passes on the reading of maps and train timetables to her kidnap victim, Grant, while Holly continues in the role of determining how long unemployment benefits will last (p.31). At times she even speaks to her mother as if she were another child (p.39). While the image is that of a helpless adult, it is not entirely damning because it does at least make Grant think for himself (p.31).

In presenting such an image, Spence remains sympathetic yet balanced in her treatment of the character, Laurie Lyall. Grant admits that she never gets angry but he disapproves of her suggestion that they should hitch-hike since this is a behaviour he is normally not allowed (p.35). The realisation is that all the rules he has lived by are being broken. While Grant continues to worry over regular washing and regular meals, Laurie and Holly remain unconcerned about routines.

The sojourn at Greenleaf serves more than one purpose. It allows the author to give Grant the experience of an alternative
lifestyle where a number of traditional social structures, such as the family, are given a new definition. Although Grant is quite happy at Greenleaf, he feels he does not really belong (p.42). In the same way, as Grant tries to picture Laurie in his own house, she somehow never fits, no matter where he places her (p.85). By contrast, Laurie and Holly instantly feel at home in a place like Greenleaf. Strange food and no electricity are among the least enjoyable aspects of Greenleaf as far as Grant is concerned (p.44). Apart from this, Grant finds that he adapts well to the lack of routine, which even extends to the school where one’s name is not marked off in a register (p.51) and where what to do well made more sense than at his old school (p.55). Here, Spence draws subtle attention to the impact of traditional education on learning and self-esteem, with classes usually too large to meet individual needs and the insistence on lock-step progression (p.55-56).

Another notable part of Grant’s experience is his surprise at being allowed to make choices for himself (p.48). Further, he marvels at Laurie’s efforts to please him, as well as her genuine pride in him (p.52). He may look upon Laurie as a stranger and he may doubt the verity of a number of things she has told him, but Grant grows to like her, particularly as she succeeds in making him feel important (p.48). Spence also enlists the reader’s sympathy for this woman who wants to spend some time with her son. The reader’s sympathy is again called upon when Laurie divulges the circumstances of Grant’s birth and subsequent adoption (p.98). Spence calls upon the reader to
consider how the issues of teenage pregnancy and the birth of a child, presumably out of wedlock, were managed in the past. The author’s prompting is to reflect on social change, especially with regard to the handling of family matters, and to come to some balanced conclusions about following social mores. As Grant’s grandmother says when he inquires why he should have been a secret, there were "some things" not talked about in families when she was young (p.135).

However, in keeping with her own balanced, non-didactic approach, Spence brings the reader’s focus back to Grant. In so doing, she creates the opportunity for further comment about childhood, identity, and family life. In terms of what childhood should or should not be, one may allude to simple choices which delight Grant as opposed to decisions he must make when Laurie fails in her adult role. An outstanding example is their arrival in Hattersby and the discovery that Laurie has again forgotten to collect her Social Security (p.67). The prospect of no money to pay for food and shelter over the weekend forces Grant to do some quick thinking accompanied by swift action. In short, he organises a job for Laurie at the local hotel. At the end of the day, he is not buoyed by his success but worn out. The experience of having to take matters into his own hands is still foreign, as is having to "decide things that ought to be the business of grown-ups" (p.70).

While Laurie does not deliberately subject Grant to neglect, she does challenge the knowledge he has held about himself and his
family up to this point. While he has always had his suspicions and doubts, the full impact of what has occurred only becomes manifest towards the story's end. Spence effectively triggers this dawning realisation with the discovery, amidst the ashes in an old incinerator, of the postcard Grant thought had been sent to his family (p.87). Thereafter, the writer reinforces the nature of this impact through language which captures the thoughts and emotions of her ten year old character. In short, Grant "felt the weight of a mystery that concerned him but was outside his understanding" (p.89). The burden of the mystery increases as he confronts the lies he has been told and questions whether he has something to be afraid of for himself (pp.92-93). These fears concern his background and whether he or his home would be the same when he returned. As Spence points out, the attack on Grant's identity is so revolutionary that he not only feels "pretty old" but also expects "other things and people to be changed, too" (p.96). By this means the writer also focuses on what a unique and lonely experience it is to contemplate that one's identity has changed while the rest of the world remains seemingly unaffected.

When Grant learns of his adoption, the effect is profound and, again, Spence's use of language and imagery both captures the responses of her character and conveys her own thoughts about the issue of adoption and the effect it has on personal identity. Grant's initial response is that his family has suddenly become a "jigsaw puzzle" (p.99). The analogy not only fits Grant's discovery that he has two mothers and a half-sister, but also
suggests to the reader that this is Spence's way of exploring social change within the family. Some contemporary family structures may well be defined as a jigsaw puzzle. As Grant's friend, Ryan, explains, their lives are confused by having one parent too many (p.104). In coming to terms with his own circumstances, Grant is relieved to discover that his grandparents are still his. "It was rather like getting out of your depth in the sea, then finding a sandbank to stand on" (p.99). Spence has ensured that Grant's grandfather, in particular, has remained a constant point of reference from the novel's beginning. At this stage it is the one piece of the puzzle that represents traditional family values. Moreover, it is the first sight of his grandfather when they are reunited that helps Grant decide his future (p.127).

Spence further examines social change within the family when Grant and Ryan act on the latter's suggestion and run away. Their escapade introduces another character, Kyle, a teenage runaway whom Grant cannot resist questioning about her family (p.111). Kyle is representative of another aspect of disintegration within the ranks of the contemporary family when the child decides to leave home even though, as Grant says, that individual may not be old enough to live by themselves (p.111). Kyle reacts to Grant's story as if it were based on a movie and asks about which mother he will choose. Grant seeks her advice but receives in reply only a fanciful story about once imagining she was adopted. Kyle's other fancy, that she would like to have a baby and look after it "on welfare" (p.115), is the writer's way
of providing another glimpse of what some families have become in reality. Kyle's conviction that her child would not be adopted because she would look after it is scarcely a solution for Grant's dilemma. After all, Laurie had once said the same thing.

Spence resolves Grant's dilemma in similar fashion to the plot of the library book he has been carrying around with him. *The Railway Children* has a happy ending with the family coming together again (p.123). The writer removes Grant from the upside down world which he finds attractive but where he does not seem to belong (p.112). Spence returns her main character to an environment which is based on traditional middle class values where adults make all the decisions. Grandma's welcome is formidable and true to character. She demonstrates the adult behaviour Grant is accustomed to when she tells him that he is her grandson, a fact that he should not forget. What has happened has been a "family matter" and so his grandparent salvages his identity (p.134).

In doing this, Spence raises questions about families and their purpose. One answer is voiced by Grandad who recalls that in his youth there were always families who looked after children who were not their own. His other comment, about somehow being related, is a recollection of an extended familial role which even Grant recognises as belonging to the "olden days" (p.126). Spence adds further comment to the passing of the extended family when Grant questions whether his grandfather will continue living with them or follow the trend suggested by
Nicole and go into a retirement village (p.127). Obviously, the author wishes her readers to consider the extent to which social change has allowed the elderly to remain part of the family. It can be cogently argued that Spence sees this trend as yet another development which challenges her concept of the family.

Spence concludes with some interesting yet pertinent observations about young people. One of Grant’s fears, for example, is that others will judge him differently because he is adopted. However, he learns that, when told, Nicole’s friend, Gary, simply replied, "Who cares?", and then went to a movie (p.134). Grant’s return to school produces some brief but curious looks from Nicole’s friends, who then turn in "on themselves the way a shell curves around to protect whatever lives there, and Grant heard Nicole telling the others about what Gary had said after the movies" (p.137). It would seem that the author also believes in the indifference of young people as a kind of shield when resilience is needed. Not only does Grant survive, but he also grows as an individual with recognisable interests (p.140).

The novel, Another Sparrow Singing, further portrays the family at risk. Spence again examines the loss of identity which sometimes accompanies the breakdown of the traditional family unit. In many ways, the book is far more complex in its analysis of social change within the family than works such as Deezle Boy. Its focus is acute in concentrating not only on the erosion of personal identity but also the attempted destruction of the
human spirit.

Spence describes two children and their mother who have come to terms with separation from father and husband as well as the fact of relocation. The move to a caravan park is one which deprives the three of those things which at one time defined the traditional middle class values, that is, a comfortable home with a garden and a dog. The children "went to school like everyone else, and Dad went to work, and Mum stayed home -" (p.23). Courtney, who once assumed that everyone lived this way (p.23), is the character Spence uses to present a view of the family’s changed circumstances.

The comfortable house with doors and windows and a room of one’s own is replaced by a small shabby van next to "a wire fence with a view of other vans and a concrete toilet-block" (p.8). The atmosphere of the caravan park is not improved by the level of noise which seems to prevail. Other people’s radios and television sets and the inevitability of parents shouting at their children are all part of the new and uncomfortable way of life with which Courtney and her brother, Keith, must contend. For Courtney, the feelings of discomfort and confusion stem not just from the cramped conditions and the prospect of having to use a draughty amenities block for the next several months (p.9), but also the recent, unexplained upheaval of leaving home and ending up in a caravan park. Courtney’s feelings of unease and unhappiness are compounded by the realisation that either her mother or her father is to blame (p.10).
The sense of being one of the "odds and ends" (p.10) quickly gathered for the journey is also uncomfortable and foreign. Also foreign to life as it was once lived is the necessity for Courtney’s mother to go out to work. Courtney discovers further discomfort in admitting to her new found acquaintance, Jack, that her mother works in a restaurant and is quick to explain that she will be on the pay desk, not waiting on tables. While embarrassment and irritation over their new life style is one thing, Courtney and Keith discover quite early just how this lifestyle impacts on how others view them. The incident which initially draws attention to the notion of where one lives and how this affects judgements on one’s worth is recalled by a visit to the library (p.17). The author’s focus is on the children’s new identity as not permanent (p.18). Keith and Courtney are denied borrower’s cards because they do not have a permanent address (p.18). This loss of acceptance by another is recognised by Courtney as the local community’s unwillingness to trust kids from the caravan park (p.27). Later in the story, this attitude is transformed into a genuine battle when Keith becomes seriously ill and Courtney attempts, unsuccessfully, to get a doctor. "Courtney felt all was going well until she gave the address" (p.57). Recognising her mother’s helplessness, Courtney is terrified by their aloneness (p.56).

A short time later, Jack tries to console Courtney with the thought that living in a van is not her fault (p.61). She insists that it has to be someone’s fault. The question of apportioning blame has disturbed Courtney from the start. The writer is
suggesting the confusion and difficulty that arise when individuals are seemingly punished by circumstances beyond their control.

In answering the question about which parent, if either, is to blame for the uncomfortable circumstances imposed upon Keith and Courtney, Spence addresses the issue of child abuse. In this work of fiction, Spence raises the reader’s awareness and demonstrates how the victim and other family members are placed at risk when such behaviour occurs. In dealing with this topic, Spence draws on considerable skills to avoid over dramatising or emotionalising the issue.

From the outset, it is made plain that Courtney bears responsibility for her brother’s welfare. Her interpretation of the medical advice previously received was that Keith would get better quickly if no-one talked about home and what had happened (p.14). Courtney is anxious about the noise in the caravan park because Keith is frightened by raised voices (p.4). She laughs obligingly when her brother makes a joke for the first time in weeks (p.17). Equally, Courtney is dismayed by the fact that, despite the distance travelled and the dramatic change in lifestyle, nothing seems to have changed for her brother. Keith still holds the same fears and so it seems that their father’s ghost has joined them in the caravan (p.14). Even Courtney finds it difficult to shed her intense dislike of Sundays. It was always the day when her father was in "a bad mood" (p.38).
What has happened to Keith is treated as his secret. Courtney is so protective of this secret that she does not discuss it even with her mother, and especially not with Keith (p.24). It was one thing to admit that Keith was always getting viruses; after all, "you didn't have to be ashamed of that" (p.24). Understandably, she does feel that one has to be ashamed of a father who has ill-treated his son. When Keith receives a parcel from him (p.42) both he and his sister are angry because it means that their new address is not the secret it was supposed to be. Despite his mother's reassurances (p.44), Keith's feelings of vulnerability are aroused. The author successfully raises the reader's awareness of the powerless victim as Keith reveals his father's attacks have made him feel useless (p.100). Apart from low self-esteem, Keith's physical and emotional health have been jeopardised. Spence describes home as the one place where one should feel safe and secure (p.122). As Courtney's mother explains, when their home ceased to be this way, especially for Keith, they had to leave (p.93).

The final sections of the novel bring together Spence's view of the way family life has changed. Once again the writer gives Courtney the opportunity to express this view. When her father does visit, she recollects the happy times together but concludes that the image of the family, together, happy, united, is a dream rather than a reality (p.116). She further reflects on the image makers who present happy families on television "rejoicing over a new car or a tub of margarine" (p.116). The social reality is quite different when some families, like hers, find peace is
impossible. Such has been the case for Courtney and Keith and their mother. Spence strongly suggests that it is extremely difficult to resolve problems in a non-peaceful environment (p.117).

Despite the factors which place the contemporary family at risk, Eleanor Spence still accentuates the positive and remains optimistic about the resilience of the human spirit. A significant aspect of her gentle treatment of Keith’s secret is the realisation that it is important to be open about such issues. Courtney is instinctively ashamed when Jack guesses Keith was beaten by her father. Jack’s reaction, that "it’s okay - it happens to other kids" (p.88), is not one that condones the issue but one which helps Courtney see that one need not face such problems alone. Courtney’s shame also stems from the admission that, because he treated her well, she does not hate her father (p.88). Jack’s reaction, that families are weird, a mixed-up lot, while intended to reassure Courtney, could also be seen as Spence’s particular indications of the nature of some contemporary families.

Just as sparrows support each other, it is a group of local children whose friendship and acceptance support both Courtney and Keith. The children’s idea for "A Keith Improvement and Progress Association" (p.65) pays rewarding dividends in terms of restoring Keith’s sense of self-worth. The formation of the group, KIPA (p.65), endorses Spence’s own belief in the need to belong and in the value of being involved in constructive activities. On one occasion, Courtney is not altogether convinced
that the day's activity has succeeded in making Keith happy. Nevertheless, Spence is careful to point out the *reassurance* (p.88) Courtney derives from her involvement. In this novel, as in other works, the author's invitation is to value associations which lead to useful, creative activity. The activities of KIPA succeed in making Keith feel *special* (p.148). Unlike the injured sparrow in the prologue, Keith's association with the children of Carmel Bay makes him come alive.

Spence's belief in the value of the human spirit is expressed in two very definite ways by Keith. During the prologue, when recalling the incident over the sparrow, Keith argues that it could have been saved *"if it had heard other sparrows singing"* (p.2). While this become an obvious metaphor for his own happy ending in the novel, it further becomes a measure of Keith's growth in finding the confidence to make choices and to express an opinion. Such is manifest in Keith's letter to his father whereby the child explains to his parent the conditions under which he is willing to spend time with him. Even more important is Keith's statement that he does not wish to live with his father. *"When I was with you I didn't like being myself but now I do"* (p.155).

Keith's letter conveys Spence's optimism about the victim being not quite so powerless. Even though children can easily become victims of abuse because they have no power, the author's conclusion is positive in showing that their point of view can be heard. Courtney is surprised when her mother says she is going
to show a copy of the letter to the judge when the custody case is heard. She is further surprised when her mother tells her that the judge will take notice of it since it could help his decision. Spence’s statement of optimism is that one should not feel "swept along" by circumstances when "the voice of a sparrow could be heard" (p.156).

Throughout the novel, Another Sparrow Singing, Spence has used the word fault significantly several times. Courtney, in defending Keith, assures her father,"It wasn’t his fault" (p.117). Her father’s reply is damningly nonchalant, "These things aren’t anyone’s fault, are they. They just happen" (p.117). Keith defends himself in his letter to his father by asserting "I don’t believe it was all my fault" (p.153). The writer does not set out to find fault with those factors which place traditional family values at risk. However, she does successfully expose a number of issues in a way that shows that she is well attuned to changes within the family and that she is sympathetic to the pressures imposed on young people who are sometimes simply swept along by changing family circumstances. Both the books, Deezle Boy and Another Sparrow Singing, deal with the notion of the family at risk in two very distinctive ways. While both works end with characteristic Spence optimism, it is Another Sparrow Singing which impresses the reader with its faith in the concept of family. Spence’s argument is that, as long as the capacity for nurturing is present among humans, then the risk to the idea of family is significantly reduced, an argument that can be found, in one form or another, in all her family books.
Chapter 6. A Family Saga.

"The name of Cleveland could go on and on - it's like Abraham, in the Bible!"

(The Family Book of Mary-Claire, p.18)

Eleanor Spence returned to her interest in history and in creating families in the past with two novels of the 1980s, *Me and Jeshua* 36 and *Miranda Going Home* 37. These novels represent a departure from the familiar Australian context but offer an interesting extension to the scope of Eleanor Spence's work. Researched in Israel, the two novels are testimony to the author's skill in using historical material to capture the sense of an era. However, the use of an unfamiliar literary setting has not resulted in a departure from familiar themes and preoccupations. In *Miranda Going Home*, Spence develops a leading female character who is strong willed, independent, and intelligent. Family relationships, the need to belong, and being different are again explored as the author combines what one reviewer sums up as an "identity crisis of both country and parentage". 38 The novel has been praised for demonstrating the


beauty of the English language and for its lyrical style.\textsuperscript{39}

Spence’s 1990 opus \textit{The Family Book of Mary-Claire} \textsuperscript{40} must be acknowledged as an outstanding example of the writer’s return to the creation of the family in the past. The first generation featured in this novel is represented by Marius Cleveland. Through Marius, Spence revisits a number of favoured perspectives, including her treatment of the family, the landscape, Australia’s social history, the influences that shape social values and tradition, and the legacy of the written word. In essence, many of the themes the writer has dealt with in earlier novels are brought together in this work at a level of artistic achievement which affirms her contribution to Australia’s literary heritage.

The early nineteenth century setting of Part One imbues Marius’ story with carefully selected features of Australia’s early history. As in Spence’s other historical novels, the reader is left in no doubt as to the history and the fiction. To this extent, the writer adheres to the three rules formulated by Hester Burton for the successful writer of historical fiction.\textsuperscript{41} Firstly, Eleanor Spence conveys her knowledge of the period as naturally as any writer

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid} p.22.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Spence, Eleanor \textit{The Family Book of Mary-Claire}, North Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1990.
\end{itemize}
commenting upon a contemporary period. Secondly, while she does make reference to persons of historical note, these characters are never central to the plot, nor are they given fictional adventures, a manoeuvre Burton advises against. However, Spence does employ this technique quite successfully in another work, *Mary and Frances*, *a story about Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of St Joseph*\(^{42}\), thereby demonstrating both her competence and her willingness to explore a variety of techniques. Finally, the historical background is limited to the vision of either a single character or a small group of characters. According to Burton, not only is it wise for the writer of historical fiction to limit their range of vision but, more importantly, it is much better art,\(^{43}\) an art particularly well exemplified in *The Family Book of Mary-Claire* where Spence’s characters give a totally believable vision of their particular generation.

Given that the participants in any historical period have only their observations to go by, Spence allows Marius’ vision of his family and his environment to depict the beginnings of settlement from the view of direct experience. Through Marius, the importance of one’s origins is stressed. After all, as Marius admits to himself, not to question the origins of everyday things is merely to take these things for granted (p. 7). Titus, Marius’

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father, is insistent that Marius has a right to know the full story. "How else will he ever find out who he is?" he observes (p. 18).

The importance of understanding one’s origins in order to understand oneself is a theme sustained by the symbol of The Book. In a literal sense, The Book accommodates Titus’ need to record the family history before he dies. In a literary sense, The Book, an edition of The Bible, is as much a source of writing material as reading material. Further, The Book becomes a valuable source for recording and understanding family relationships.

The interrelated themes of origins, identity, and belonging are long standing concerns of Spence and have been given attention in works such as Lillipilly Hill. In The Family Book of Mary-Claire these themes are again examined. For Titus, his youngest son’s identity is based on his liberty. Marius questions his father about his freedom as if it were some mercurial condition (p. 4). In the judgement of some, the child of felons might well be considered a felon himself. Paying attention to detail, Spence allows Titus to reassure him in uncompromising terms, pointing to the mitigating circumstances of Marius’ birth. The writing illustrates the child’s innocence in neither having heard of His Majesty King George, who once held his parents at his royal disposal, nor in understanding the meaning of the word felons, which some would use to describe his parents and older brothers (p. 4).

The writer’s intention is by no means merely to concentrate on
identity as determined by one's relationship with the law. However, if the reader observes Marius as a participant in Australia's early history, then the notion of free citizenship is better appreciated as an issue which played a part in shaping our national identity. While this is part of the informed reader's response, the reader's attention is again drawn to the characters as participants in an historical period. Titus' concern over his son's status as a free citizen and his constant reminder to Marius that he is "a well brought up young Englishman" (p. 5), stems from a strong attachment to the same nation which condemned him as a felon. The writer again underlines the attachment to Britain which dominated the thoughts and aspirations of early Australians. Here, too, Hester Burton's thoughts on the plausible character in historical fiction apply. From Titus' point of view, it is a fact that his son's "Papa and Mama were at His Majesty's disposal" (p. 4), and it is also imperative that Marius realise that he is both a free-born citizen and a "well brought-up young Englishman" (p. 5). Obviously, Titus' view of the well reared child extends beyond the immediate family to that wider definition of family which comes from attachment to a particular social and cultural background.

Marius, in effect, represents the gap between generations when it comes to the concepts of home and identity. He regards Cleveland's Arm as home, but for Titus and Sarah, his parents, home is elsewhere (p. 8). Understandably, Marius can only question the whereabouts of the Old Country, and reflect on the fact that it bears little relevance to the only life he has known.
At his death, Titus can remain optimistic about the importance of learning, being born free, and, above all, about having his son's freedom recorded in The Book (p. 53). The writer's comment is about the history recorded and its testimony to personal identity. Writing in The Book also seems to strengthen the family unit by defining the individual. Moreover, the "name of Cleveland could go on and on - it's like Abraham, in the Bible" (p. 18). Marius is both pleased and proud to discover that his name is also in the Governor's book. Marius' brother, Julius, jests that it must be pleasing for Marius to know that he actually exists, even though he may have thought this all along (p. 115).

To keep alive the possibility of his becoming a gentleman, Marius is sent to Barr's Glen following Titus' death. Although a place of imprisonment, there is nowhere else for Marius to learn to be "a proper Englishman" (p. 81). Again, Spence introduces the irony of seeking out an oppressor because they alone can secure a link with a familiar cultural tradition. Major Barr is aptly named as the law enforcer whose responsibility for a group of convicts reminds the reader of the penal nature of Australia's beginnings. When Marius leaves the tiny island of his birth, he moves into this world which is not merely unfamiliar to him but bigger than the world he has known to date. Spence illustrates his experience by detailing the extent of the Major's property (pp. 74-77). Not only does Marius behold sights, such as the windmill, which are totally unfamiliar, but also household objects, such as mantel shelves and doors, which
are truly sources of wonder (p. 77). At the same time, by transferring Marius to this wider world, the writer is able to extend the definition of the family. After his living at Barr’s Glen for only a short time, Marius’ natural family members become distant and formless to him. Secret meetings with his older brother, Julius, are always accompanied by the possibility that they will be the last (p.121). When Marius decides to leave Barr’s Glen, he tells Kilmeny, Major Barr’s daughter, that if she ever sees his outlaw brother, Julius, to say that he has gone home. Significantly, Marius seeks out and is welcomed by Rowdy and the rest of his Aboriginal tribe. Time spent with the tribe is peaceful, just as it was in the days before Marius’ father died and his mother grew old, and "Julius had split the family apart through his union with Taree" (p. 127).

Spence’s treatment of her Aboriginal characters is balanced in that she acknowledges their role in helping the Clevelands survive such a challenging country (p. 22). Nevertheless, the writer maintains the credibility of her other characters, specifically Sarah, by ensuring an unrelenting attitude towards the illicit union between Julius and Taree. Even Julius’ daughter, Juliana, laughs as if it were some kind of joke when Marius reminds her that he is her uncle (p. 124). The suggestion surely is that such a recognised relationship between black and white in that era would have been treated as a joke. The other intended level of meaning is that Juliana regards Marius as a brother and friend rather than an older authoritative figure. Of greatest significance is the fact that Spence includes these Aboriginal
characters as another extension of Marius’ family, with all that that concept implies.

Essentially, Marius’ story is one of a convict family background, and, therefore, one of hardship and displacement. Marius survives his origins in the knowledge of his own freedom and the fact of his name recorded in Governor Bourke’s book (p. 128). Spence emphasises the vastness of the new country he must survive. Even though his own name, Marius, means "of the sea", the river valley of which he is a free citizen is ten times the size of Dorset, his father’s county (p. 128).

Part Two of the novel is entitled Miriam. Miriam, the daughter of Marius Cleveland and Kilmeny Barr, remembers the colour of her father’s eyes and his analogy about the River being like time in transporting people’s lives (p. 129). She is a decade old, that is, the same age as Marius when his father insisted that he should know the full details of his birth. Miriam mirrors Spence’s own interest in the family through her preoccupation in finding out about the fate of each member of her family. Unlike her father, who had the full story imposed on him by Titus, Miriam has to ask her mother for more details about her father. Instead of acknowledging her right to know, Kilmeny admonishes her daughter for being too inquisitive in wanting to find out about indicators of the past such as the wooden fish and the ship’s bell. Another of Marius’ few possessions, the Bible, remains and has been added to, with the details of his marriage to Kilmeny Barr and the birth of their children being inserted
(pp. 132-133). To Miriam, each of these objects suggests an interesting story.

Kilmeny’s reluctance to fill in the gaps in Miriam’s knowledge about her background stems from her decision to protect her children from the truth about her grandparents and uncles. The writer remains as determined as her character to show what it can mean to be motivated by a sense of family, especially when it makes for an interesting story. To this end, Miriam wonders who Juliana is, and becomes increasingly eager to learn more about her father’s relatives (p. 159). Not only is Miriam’s curiosity satisfied, but Spence also achieves certain successful dramatic irony when a soiree at the Hart’s home, Fernhill, is interrupted by two intruders, Julius and his son, Mark.

There is an element of theatricality as Spence strategically unfolds the episode of Miriam meeting her outlaw uncle and cousin. Breaking into the Hart home in the middle of an evening party, Julius and Mark proceed to rob the party guests of their valuables. When Mark is shot and falls almost at Miriam’s feet, Julius safeguards his own escape by taking Edmund Hart and Miriam with him (p. 172-173). Though still a child, Miriam remains strong and calm in confronting her uncle with the fact that she is his niece and in witnessing his grief over the shooting of Mark. The best comfort she can offer is to remind him about the rest of his family, that is, Juliana and her children (p. 177). The scene between uncle and niece perhaps brings even greater satisfaction to Miriam because Julius imparts all the knowledge
about her forebears that she has long sought (p. 178). Added to this, Julius completes the family details with the information that her deceased cousin, Mark, left a son (p. 178).

Despite the circumstances of their meeting, Julius uses the fact of a family relationship to request a favour from Miriam. She acknowledges the familial link as if there was nothing unusual about having an uncle who was an outlaw and a cousin who had been shot in her presence during a robbery (p. 179). The writer’s intention is to make the sense of family so natural to Miriam that she agrees to fetch Mark’s son, Marcus, from the cedar cutters’ camp and take him to live with Juliana. It is with a sense of her father that she agrees, knowing that he would have wanted her to help (p. 180). As a final touch to the evening’s excitement, Julius calls on the Clevelanders’ long-time Aboriginal friend, Rowdy, to lead the two children safely home. Rowdy’s appearance adds another detail to the story over which Miriam and her uncle share conspiratorial glances (p. 182). Her departure from her uncle is an emotional one for several reasons, the most moving of which is the writer’s reminder of the vastness of the landscape and the likelihood that it will defeat a man alone. Julius consoles Miriam over this thought by reminding her of the importance of freedom, a value endorsed by her grandfather, Titus (p. 181).

In keeping with the strong sense of family tradition with which Spence has imbued this character, Miriam fills in the gaps in the family Bible. The gaps, of course, concern Julius and his
family, as well as the other brother, Marcus, who had been hung in Hobart. One is reminded about attitudes towards respectability and how these change at various periods in history. Attitudes towards respectability also govern human actions and so it was decided at one time not to include Julius and Marcus in the Cleveland ancestral tree. What others have decided to omit, Miriam is keen "to be put right" (p. 185) so that the family tradition may be kept alive. Her determination to continue the entries is just as "stern" as that which had them stopped. One is further reminded of the lack of writing material common in most households of the period as Miriam locates a piece of paper at the back of The Child’s History of England (p. 185). The title of the book is also a careful detail in that it indicates the continued influence of the Old Country.

Spence further ensures that a sense of family tradition is kept alive by having Miriam visit the cedar cutters’ camp for the purpose of honouring the promise to Julius. As Mrs Anderson recalls the time and place of young Marcus’ birth for Miriam’s benefit, the latter cannot help but reflect how the information she is hearing is just like a story. Young Marcus had been born near her grandfather’s property, Barr’s Glen, where her father had worked as a child, and where he had met her mother, and so, for Miriam, it is rather like hearing another part of her family history (p. 193). However, the experience is far from gratifying for Miriam because, as Spence shows, responsibility is a burden. Miriam apparently sheds the "load of responsibility from her shoulders" (p. 199) once she has delivered young
Marcus to the Wheelwright household and made the boy's uncle and aunt aware of his natural mother's wishes that he be brought up a gentleman and a Catholic. However, the writer suggests that once such responsibility is assumed it is not so easily relinquished. Thus, try as she might "to shake off the tendrils of the past" (p. 200) and simply anticipate her own future, Miriam still finds herself recording the details of Marcus and his mother that would go at the back of the family Bible (p. 201). The author further suggests that the record may satisfy future generations, possibly Miriam's own children, as Miriam falls asleep thinking about this (p. 201).

Miriam can never really ignore the past, as she further discovers in longing to see the shore and the island where her father was born. As she reminds her brother, Tobias, this remains a matter of importance to her. She and her brother both contemplate the family past on New Year's Day when, together with the Harts, the Wheelwrights, and the Brands, they set off on a picnic excursion to One Tree Island. Symbolically, the images of the past are conjured up by Miriam as she gazes into the depths of the sea and pictures the wreck of the Frederick Bell. Further, both children confront the fact that, if their grand-parents had gone down with the vessel, then they would not exist. The writer then goes on to present an image of which Miriam and Tobias are unaware, that is, Fenella's mother, Juliana, playing on the same rocks with Marius and Mark (pp. 217-218).

For the moment, Miriam and Tobias can contemplate their good
fortune because their grand-parents were spared by the sea, but before the day is out, they experience first hand what it is like to be at the mercy of nature. The storm which obliterates One Tree Island and its shores, transforms the sea into a force to be reckoned with and one which mercilessly drags Mrs Hart away from her family (p. 220). Spence stresses the force of the natural elements and the harshness encountered in a country that posed many challenges for its inhabitants. Just before the storm, Mrs Hart contemplated the landscape of eighteen hundred and fifty-nine, and remarked how strange and foreign it had seemed fifteen years earlier (p. 218). It seems as if only the strange and foreign would deal so harshly with those who settled but could not call it home.

Despite the changes and developments that have characterised the district's growth from a wilderness to a thriving town, its principal inhabitants still have strong attachments to England. Just before she drowns, Mrs Hart remarks how she envies her son's return to England for his further education (p. 218). At Mrs Hart's funeral, Miriam draws comfort from the thought that this English woman has at last gone to a country garden "where the songbirds were called larks and robins and nightingales, whose music was so different to the croaking of heron and the wailing of curlew" (p. 222).

On the other hand, Miriam derives little comfort from bidding farewell to her childhood friend, Edmund Hart, as he leaves for England and school. Part Two of the novel concludes as it
began, with Miriam recalling her father’s words comparing the River with time. Here Spence takes the opportunity to emphasise two of her main themes in this novel, family and belonging. Miriam’s remembrances of her family’s history and the uncertainty of her future cause her to weep. "She wept, she thought, for Mrs Hart and Edmund, but perhaps it was for herself, also " (p.223). Spence may also want the reader to consider that Miriam’s tears are an unconscious recollection of the fact that she had outstripped Edmund at schoolwork and yet he was the one to be given the opportunity for further education (p. 207). Marius had also said that the River pushed some people’s lives "into the bank, so they stick there forever" (p. 129).

The third and final part of the novel focuses on the family story of the Harts. Marion, son of Miriam Cleveland and Edmund Hart, is the central figure in Spence’s literary construct. On one level, Spence keeps her readers attuned to the social changes and developments that become part of this third generation. For instance, Government legislation on free education for all children has moved the small school Kilmeny established at Brand’s Wharf into the town of Willowfield (p.243). In addition, Fenton Wheelwright’s sons decide to sell the Wheelwright business, not because the opportunity coincides with their father’s death, but because the coach trade would soon be superseded by a railway through Willowfield (p. 259). On another level, Spence keeps the reader aware of some of the social attitudes that remain important, including attitudes towards
male and female roles. For example, during a childish game of exploration lead by Eloise Wright, George Brand assumes a certain behaviour which suggests that girls were not meant to be "hoydens" (p. 286). Other attitudes which remain unaltered and to which the author makes even stronger references in this third part of the novel are the issues of half-castes, Catholics and others considered "outsiders", being a proper English gentleman, education, social respectability, and personal freedom.

Of particular note is the author's treatment of family relationships in this section of the novel. Given that the novel creates families in the past, it should by no means be assumed that Spence is attempting a return to the values of her early family stories. In keeping with the basic tenet of this thesis, it needs to be emphasised that Eleanor Spence has been continually interested in family relationships but her ideas have always been in tune with a continually changing society. The 1990 publication of The Family Book of Mary-Claire, therefore, creates two families in history, the Cleveland and the Hart, but nowhere does it attempt to evade the problems that impact on family relationships.

Part Three, Marion, is an analysis of how family relationships can alter over a passage of time. At the outset, the writer makes it quite clear that there is a "lack of peace at 'Fernhill'", the gentrified home of the district (p. 226). No longer a show place, Fernhill has fallen into a state of deterioration and disrepair, apparently through Edmund Hart's poor management and his
misuse of money. Financial difficulties always disrupt a household, and so Marion and Cleve are distressed by low-voiced discussions about expenses and are aware that there is not enough money to educate them in England (pp. 224-225). Spence makes it plain that, financial worries aside, the family is disturbed because Edmund Hart is troubled by recollections of the past. Marion recalls family picnics to One Tree Island which his father never attended. He further recalls Edmund’s conduct of an annual pilgrimage on New Year’s Day to his mother’s grave. Such regular mourning caused Marion uneasiness, not merely because he had not known his grandmother, but because it seemed as if Edmund "remembered his mother more in death than in life" (p. 244). Obviously, Edmund Hart was so traumatised by this childhood event that it has affected his adult life, especially his family life.

Marion sums up the nature of this life after the fire at Fernhill. The fire is deliberately lit by Mrs Anderson, a relation of young Marcus, as an act of revenge. However, the conflagration is seen by Marion as another act of violence to add to others he has experienced either directly or indirectly. Spence sums up the impact of repeated violence as wearying and destructive. For Marion, violence has taken the forms of a bad tempered father, the memory of his grandmother’s accidental drowning, and "that old ‘Fernhill’ killing of a young bushranger" (p. 296). Most destructive of all for Marion has been his father’s decision to disallow music at Fernhill. This prohibition encourages Marion in his long held habit of keeping secrets. Marion cultivates his
musical talent by having his mother consent to his having lessons from Sister Archangela, with mother and son both aware that his father would object not only to the pursuit of music, but also to the association with Catholics (p. 258). Another secret that Miriam and her son share is the hidden page in the family Bible. Just as Miriam herself used to hold the book in the evenings to recall the past (p. 204), it is at night that Marion asks his mother to show him the hidden page and then to add the name of Marcus Wright’s daughter, Eloise (p. 258).

The atmosphere and imagery of the night is further used to recall the past and family tradition the night Fernhill "accommodated every member of the Cleveland-Hart-Brand brood except Marcus Wright" (p. 300). Brothers and cousins share a story about the constellation Orion that in future years reminded them of home and family, even when in foreign places. By this means the author affirms her own belief in the family despite pressures which jar its unity at any given time. Spence alludes to this argument often and in different ways. For example, because of the Cleveland’s ancestral links with convicts and Aborigines, some relatives receive little acknowledgment, or perhaps none at all. Marion’s uncle and aunt rarely visit Fernhill because of his father’s attitude towards Fenella being part Aboriginal. Despite the strain and the distance enforced by such attitudes, Marion sees his relationship to them as undisputed. After all, it has been the habit of his mother and grandmother to say that "family mattered" (p. 247).
Family is shown to matter in a different way when Edmund Hart unburdens himself to his son over his denial of family life from the time his mother drowned. In the absence of affection and support, family expectations concerning the English gentry and respectability prevailed (p. 297). Family is shown to matter in a new way when Marcus Wright learns the story of his ancestry and accepts it with "a shrug" (p. 301). Interestingly, Spence describes Marcus as a man who looked to the future, not the past. His origins certainly had not countered his success in business (p. 301). As a sign of changing times, money and respectability no longer depended on family.

Nevertheless, much of The Family Book of Mary-Claire is concerned with those attached to the past. Marion’s conclusions, followed by Mary-Claire’s essay to be entered into the Family Book, upholds Titus Cleveland’s argument that knowing about the past is important to knowing oneself. As Marion learns about his forebears, he wonders to what extent he has inherited their traits and talents (p. 299). As one reads through the epilogue, one is convinced by Mary-Claire’s assertion that an attachment to a family’s past and its record does contribute to personal identity. At the end of her composition, Mary-Claire can make the unequivocal statement, "That’s my family" (p. 306).

The Family Book of Mary-Claire is a notable achievement for Eleanor Spence. Not only does the author succeed in developing a story which revolves around four different characters, each occupying a particular time and space, but also ensures that the
Australian landscape and the Australian story figure prominently. This background gives the writer further opportunity to include in her writing a comment on the individual’s place in nature as well as in history. Spence brings this to the reader’s attention very early in the novel with the symbol of the cedar tree. The cedar tree had been there long before the Clevelands had arrived and would remain long after. Moreover, it had survived the forces of the natural elements and was impervious to man-made implements, such as the axe (p. 2). Such is the writer’s artistry that the novel provokes much thought on where one fits in, and about one’s right to know the full story.
CONCLUSION.

In summing up his evaluation of Eleanor Spence's novels, Walter McVitty asserts that not only does her work deserve close attention, but also that any such examination is a rewarding experience for the reader. This writer has no hesitation in supporting such an assertion but feels that McVitty's comment falls short of giving Spence's writing the praise it deserves. Specifically, if the reader and researcher approaches Spence's fiction with a view to appraising its art and scope, then the experience is not just that of literary analysis but one that recognisably provides educational opportunities and satisfies social needs.

When one recalls Richard White's discussion about national identity and those responsible for its definition, it is manifest that Eleanor Spence belongs to that group of writers who have produced images of Australia that serve as models of the Australian way of life. Indeed, Spence was motivated to write for children because of the scarcity of novels with Australian settings. Her contribution may be seen as twofold, both in assisting Australian children's literature find a voice, and in defining our national identity, giving it individuality and personality at various stages of our social development. As an author who has sustained the family theme over more than three decades of writing, Eleanor Spence has demonstrated that her art resides in the fact that her observations and interpretations of

44. McVitty, Walter *Innocence and Experience*:, p.93.
Australian family life have been in step with contemporary attitudes, and that her craft has fashioned novels with which children and adolescents can readily identify.

Social change within Australian society has fostered Spence’s growth as a writer and interpreter of family life. While her writing is testimony to the fact that the traditional family structure has been affected by social change, Spence’s belief in the family has not wavered. She established her definition of what the family can mean in early works such as *The Switherby Pilgrims* and in later ones such as *Another Sparrow Singing*. In such books the reader can reflect on what replaces the traditional structure of two parents and their children when this structure is no longer viable. Many of Spence’s works constitute a study in group life, with the image of the family varying in keeping with that wider social context which is challenged by issues and developments that necessitate change.

A significant aspect of Spence’s interest in families has been her focus on individuals and their quest for identity. In some of her earlier publications, this pursuit receives the writer’s attention on both a cultural and a personal level. *Lillipilly Hill* and *Jamberoo Road*, for example, with their nineteenth century settings, deal with the idea of the English in the Antipodes and the trauma of being severed from a true sense of cultural identity. By this means, Spence illustrates just how far the definition of home and family can be extended. She also links the motif of the journey to her characters’ experiences. Having made a long journey to a
new destination, they discover their personal journey is incomplete until a sense of belonging is realised. In a much later publication, *The Family Book of Mary-Claire*, Spence raises this quest for identity to a far more philosophical level with that narrative’s overall consideration of the individual’s place in both nature and history.

The quest for personal identity and the need to belong are usually accompanied by a certain amount of personal suffering in Spence’s novels. Nevertheless, as individuals like Faith Melville, from *The Summer in Between*, come to appreciate their limitations as well as their talents, the change is positive because the individual has grown in terms of self recognition. These early novels, too, with their concentration on the development of female main characters also examine the leadership qualities of females and the extent to which these were suppressed by the social expectations of particular eras.

When Spence began writing about families and individuals who were somehow disadvantaged, she did so in a way that highlighted the serious problems they can face. In these novels, Spence keeps her readers in touch with the realities of children in foster care or with a family whose life is suddenly overturned by a seriously disturbed child or a broken marriage. A subtle but significant feature of novels such as *The Left Overs* and *The October Child* is her portrayal of society’s response to the disadvantaged. It is important to emphasise that Spence is optimistic about the survival of such individuals despite the
In keeping with her compassionate treatment of serious social problems, Eleanor Spence has always been in touch with what it means to be different. Being different can have an impact on one’s sense of identity and one’s need to belong. For these reasons much individual suffering derives from being different. *A Candle for Saint Antony* and *The Seventh Pebble* give a sympathetic view of such problems. By drawing the reader’s attentions to Australian attitudes to cultural and religious differences in these novels, Spence has made careful comment on some of our social limitations. The author adds to this comment with the books *Deezle Boy* and *Another Sparrow Singing*, where her aim is to expose those issues which have placed families at risk. The concerns of these later works play a positive role in raising the reader’s awareness of the factors that can directly attack an individual’s identity.

Examined in retrospect, the writing of Eleanor Spence reveals an on-going preoccupation with Australian history, the family, personal growth and identity, and traditional values. Her compassionate, non-didactic style has been supported by the positive view that identity, whether personal or cultural, is not static as long as growth is not stifled.

The literary value of Spence’s work is readily acknowledged, particularly as the precision of her prose has been refined to reflect the social background of each period of writing. While a
literary analysis of this author's work is a rewarding experience, it is the educational value of the exercise that should not be underestimated. Educators and anyone else who would be concerned with introducing literature to young people should come to an understanding of what the work of a writer such as Eleanor Spence truly represents. The argument advanced in this thesis is that it faithfully mirrors a changing Australian society. Spence has opened discussion in each period of her writing and such discussion can lead to debate about the accuracy of the images that she uses to portray a particular era.

To give children the opportunity to internalise such concepts as the family, leadership or gender roles, and their national culture, that is, to be of educational worth, books for children must raise awareness of factors that impinge on human and societal development. Spence's work manifestly does this. The challenge for readers then is to recognise the relevance of such literature and to use this insight to better understand their own personal and social sense of identity.
LITERATURE REVIEW.

To date, the books and articles about Eleanor Spence have provided an overview of her work which gives the impression that the intention is to provide professionals, such as teachers and librarians, with a guide to the novels as appropriate literature for young people. While Walter McVitty comes closest to scrutiny and criticism of Spence’s novels, neither he nor any other reviewer has really considered the writings of Eleanor Spence from the point of view of works of literature.

BOOKS.

General
Arnold, J. and Piccinin, T.

A Practical Guide to Young Australian Fiction
Essentially, this comprises review commentary on twelve of Spence’s novels. The commentary is structured according to theme, plot, characterisation, style, issues raised. A recommended reading level is also offered. As a guide to reading, some of the review comments are misleading since there is sometimes difficulty on the reviewers’ part in distinguishing theme and plot. The validity of some of the issues they raise in the novels also is questionable.

Clark, M.

Sources of Australian History
Academic analysis of those themes which are claimed to have sown the seeds for a nationalist movement at the beginning of the Twentieth Century in Australia. It also examines the search for developments that mark out Australia’s cultural identity.

Parsons, W. and Goodwin, R. (Eds)

*Landscape and Identity: Perspectives from Australia*

*Proceedings of the 1994 Conference*


The proceedings of the 1994 Conference of the Centre for Children’s Literature, University of South Australia, covering a wide range of topics and formats connected by the use of place in Australian children’s literature. Of relevance to this thesis is the paper of Heather Scutter, Monash University, "*Escaping the Landscape* "It’s always ourselves we find in the sea."

Scutter explores the tensions engendered by the use of landscapes and seascapes in Australian literature, linking this to an exploration of the Australia psyche. With an attractive argument she couples Spence’s *The October Child* with Thiele’s *Storm Boy* as examples of the use of coastal settings to depict the hedonistic, hence Romantic, facet of the Australian psyche, with the sea an image of the comforting, caressing mother capable of swiftly turning into "*a voracious and monstrous mother*" (p.39).
White, R.

*Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980*

A scholarly presentation of the important influences on Australia’s national identity. Of particular interest is White’s consideration of the role of a country’s intelligentsia. The overall argument advanced is that each stage of growth in national identity serves a social need.

**Specific**

McVitty, W.

*Innocence and Experience: Essays on Contemporary Australian Children’s Writers*


The chapter on Eleanor Spence is essentially the article by the same author which was published in *Reading Time*, 1977. McVitty’s conclusions about Spence are complimentary in suggesting that close examination of her novels is a rewarding experience which brings high regard for her as an author.

Niall, B.

*Australia Through the Looking-Glass: Children’s Fiction 1830-1980*


Niall views Spence’s first novels as "gentle, decorous, observant" (p.257), and a sign of revival of the indoor family story. The novels of the 1970s are adjudged to follow the
fashion for unhappy families. Niall’s thoughts on Spence’s historical fiction are, perhaps, most encouraging in that she sees them as characterised by ideas about race, class, new ways of living, and opportunities for women.

Saxby, H.M.

*A History of Australian Children’s Literature 1941-1970*


In this volume, Saxby makes a special point of hailing Spence’s craft in recreating history. A feeling for history and a genuine sympathy with people have made for artistic success. In giving Spence a place in Australian Children’s Literature, Saxby suggests that Eleanor Spence is most easily categorised as a writer of the true family story.

Saxby, M.

*The Proof of the Puddin’: Australian Children’s Literature 1970-1990*


Saxby here develops the discussion of his earlier volume with further positive comments on Eleanor Spence as a provider of model literary prose. Commentary on Spence’s later writing focuses on the changing nature of her families and her compassionate, non-didactic handling of personal problems and social issues.
Autobiography
Spence, E.

*Another October Child: Recollections of Eleanor Spence*


This work gives a picture of Australia during the 1930s and 1940s. The picture is one of security, offset by narrowness and limitations. Spence describes the influences that shaped her development, her attitude to life, and her desire to be a writer.

ARTICLES

Blenkiron, H.

"Eleanor Spence - A Woman Ahead of her Time"


Despite the promise of the title, this article does not convince that Eleanor Spence was ahead of her time. Blenkiron’s argument is tenuously based on her prefaced remark that Spence began writing because of a lack of books with Australian settings. She supports this in her conclusion with the observation that Spence is well aware of the ideas children can grasp. Most of the article is taken up with a summary analysis of Spence’s novels.

Bisnette, P.J.

"A Conversation with Eleanor Spence"


This article comprises extracts from an interview conducted in December, 1980. Apart from the predictable probing about background and hobbies, Bisnette takes Spence’s answer about
the development of her interest in writing for children and uses it as a base for a series of questions about the writing process. Other aspects of the interview focus on the writer’s themes and the growth of these themes in response not only to a changing society but also to the changing needs of adolescents. Other questions elicit Spence’s opinions on the qualities that should be present in children’s literature, the role of reviewers and critics, and the skills children’s librarians should possess.

Burton, H.
"The Writing of Historical Novels"

Haviland, V. *Children’s Literature: views and reviews*

Hester Burton sees historical writing as an extension of the author’s human sympathies. Her own guidelines for writing historical fiction, especially for children, proved useful in making a judgement on Eleanor Spence’s craft in this area. Burton’s point about the successful writer neither preaching nor teaching about necessary historical background is an aspect of Spence’s success as a writer and therefore a tribute to her art.

Grgurich, R.
"Eleanor Spence: a critical appreciation"


The writer claims that her main objective in writing a critical appreciation is to discover the themes and patterns in Spence’s overall work. Grgurich’s judgement is that self-discovery and accepted responsibility are common themes throughout Spence’s
novels. She acknowledges the interest in families, and pays tribute to Spence’s handling of sensitive issues in later novels. Discussion of the works tends to concentrate on characterisation and whether main characters succeed in involving the reader.

McVitty, W.

"The Novels of Eleanor Spence"

*Reading Time*, No.64, July 1977.

This article is an intended appraisal of Eleanor Spence’s novels. Having dismissed the subject matter of her early works as unspectacular and insignificant, McVitty is satisfied that this is the reason Spence received little attention during twenty years of writing. He argues that Spence, in making the transition to the more controversial subject matter of *The October Child*, is too intent on imparting information about autism. McVitty argues the case for *Time to Go Home* and *The Year of the Currawong* as the two works he finds most satisfying. Interestingly, he sees Spence’s advocacy of her characters being involved in creative, useful work as didactic.

Spence, E.

"Reminiscences on the writing of *The October Child*


As the title suggests, Spence offers some insights into the writing of this award winner and speaks of the influence of working as a volunteer with autistic children. Of particular use
are her thoughts about whether it is a children’s story, and her
defence of the story as realistic but not sad. Importantly, she
states that it is a work of fiction, not a social document.

(Untitled article)

An untitled article by Spence which is part of a series by
Australian authors on books that influenced them. As a
children’s writer, she concentrates on those books which
influenced her own childhood and admits to her long-standing
preference for the family story.

"Keeping Up With the Junior Jones’"

Spence again covers her development from a writer of simple
family stories to one who pondered social change, particularly in
relation to family life. Interest in this discussion is maintained by
her explanation of the way she gathers her material through
observation and direct experience, and by her rebuttal of the
argument that children’s writers who have reached a certain age
are "out of touch". Her defence is that being a senior citizen
intensifies the writer’s feelings for the other minority group, children.
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