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# From Realism to Romance: The Early Novels

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## From Realism to Romance: The Early Novels

Ika Willis, University of Wollongong

The story of Jacqueline Wilson's career is much-rehearsed. In her own biographical notes and in two book-length biographies for children (Parker 2003, Bankston 2013), we learn that she has been writing professionally since the age of seventeen. She has written magazine fiction, adult crime novels, books for older reluctant readers, and fiction for children of all ages, from beginning readers to young adults, writing solely for children and young adults since 1982. In tension with this story of prolific and varied output is the fact that Wilson's name is now associated with one particular and well-defined set of works, her post-1991 full-length books illustrated by Nick Sharratt (I will refer to these as 'the Sharratt books'). These are clearly marked off from her earlier books, both in branding/ marketing – the Sharratt books have remained consistent in appearance across more than twenty years of changing fashions in book design – and in the narrative of her career, which positions the publication of *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1991, hereafter *Tracy Beaker*) as a turning point (Parker 2003: 22; Bankston 2013, n.p.)

Before *Tracy Beaker*, Wilson wrote nine teenage novels for OUP, from 1982 to 1993, which gradually fell (and remain) out of print in the UK: *Nobody's Perfect* (1982), *Waiting for the Sky to Fall* (1983), *The Other Side* (1984), *Amber* (1986), *The Power of the Shade* (1987), *This Girl* (1988), *Falling Apart* (1989), *The Dream Palace* (1991), and *Deep Blue* (1993).<sup>1</sup> (I will refer to these as 'the OUP novels'.) *The Dream Palace* came out in the same year as *Tracy Beaker*; *Deep Blue* appeared two years later, and was republished by Puffin in 1995, by which time four of the Sharratt books were already in print (*Tracy Beaker*, *The Suitcase Kid* [1992], *The Bed and Breakfast Star* [1994], and *Double Act* [1995]). The two sets of books thus overlap, and I will argue in this chapter that the overlap is more than simply chronological. The OUP novels are classic examples of the realist adolescent problem novel, while the Sharratt books, written for a younger readership,

have a very different focus and tone: nonetheless, the Sharratt books constantly return to and rework characters, themes, and material introduced in the OUP novels.

In this chapter, I will first summarize the OUP novels, on the basis that they will be unfamiliar to most readers, and then compare them to the Sharratt books, arguing that Wilson's hard-to-classify but wildly popular Sharratt books rework themes and motifs from the adolescent problem novel in the mode of romance. The appeal of the Sharratt books, I will conclude, lies not in their realism, but in their creation of a self-contained and satisfying alternative reality.

### **Nobody's Perfect (1982)**

Wilson's first novel for young adults tells the story of fifteen-year-old Sandra, who lives with her respectable mother, her irritable step-father, and her outgoing and cheerful half-sister. In the course of the book, Sandra forms a friendship with a clever but geeky younger boy, Michael, and tracks down her real father, who lives nearby with his new family and is not interested in getting to know her. Sandra's real-life experience is contrasted to a romanticized story she writes for a magazine competition about a girl named Rosamund finding her father. The novel thus reflects metatextually on the competing modes of realism and romance within teenage literature, positioning itself squarely on the side of realism: at the end, Sandra's story is published but, she says, 'they'd left out all my poetic bits... They'd even changed the heroine's name. She wasn't Rosamund any more. They'd called her Sandra!'<sup>2</sup>

*Nobody's Perfect* introduces four characters who were to become recurring types in Wilson's work. Sandra, a shy, creative girl who is not interested in dating and finds it hard to sustain friendships with her peers, is the first in a long line of such protagonists, including Katherine in *Waiting for the Sky To Fall* (1983), Andy in *The Suitcase Kid* (1992), Mandy in *Bad Girls* (1996), Dolphin in *The Illustrated Mum* (1999), Violet in *Midnight* (2004), Floss in *Candyfloss* (2006), Sylvie in *Kiss* (2007), and Beauty in *Cookie* (2008). An absent, uncaring father and/or unsatisfactory stepfather will recur in three OUP

novels (*The Other Side* [1984], *Amber* [1986], *The Dream Palace* [1989]) and eight Sharratt books: *The Bed and Breakfast Star* (1994), *The Lottie Project* (1997), *The Illustrated Mum* (1999), *Secrets* (2002), *Lola Rose* (2003), *The Diamond Girls* (2004), *Little Darlings* (2010), and *Lily Alone* (2011). Julie, Sandra's 'cutie-pie half-sister'<sup>3</sup> in *Nobody's Perfect* – a confident performer, cuter, more outgoing, and (the protagonist fears), more lovable than her big sister – will reappear as Rosa in *The Other Side*, then as Katie (the nastiest version of this type) in *The Suitcase Kid* (1992); as Natasha (Nadine's 'horrible little showy-offy sister'<sup>4</sup>) in the *Girls* series (1997-2002); and as Patsy (the most sympathetic version) in *Secrets* (2002). Finally, Michael, the clever, geeky, highly articulate boy who both charms and irritates Sandra, is the prototype of a character who we will see again as a friend or boyfriend to the protagonist in *The Other Side's* Andrew (1984), *Amber's* Justin (1986), *Falling Apart's* Adam (1989), *Deep Blue's* Luke (1993), *Bad Girls's* Arthur (1996), *The Lottie Project's* Jamie (1997), *Girls In Love's* Dan (1997), and *The Illustrated Mum's* Owly/Oliver (1999).

### ***Waiting for the Sky to Fall* (1983)**

Wilson's second OUP novel tells the story of one summer in the life of fifteen-year-old, lower-middle-class Katherine as she awaits her O-Level results. Her anxiety over her results is the focus for the novel's emotional dynamic, while the narrative follows her secret romance with a working-class boy, Richard; her attempt to pull away from her younger sister, Nicola, and the imaginary games they used to share; and her conflict with her parents. Again, this novel introduces some character types who went on to populate later books: Katherine's domineering shopkeeper father and her fat, downtrodden mother. This couple reappears in a very different narrative context in *Love Lessons* (2005); the bullying father appears with a different wife in *Deep Blue* (1993) and *Cookie* (2008).

### ***The Other Side* (1984)**

*The Other Side's* protagonist, twelve-year-old Ali, comes home from school to find that her mother Maureen is having a breakdown. When Maureen is hospitalized, Ali and her little brother Chrissie (a sensitive little boy with a liking

for dolls and a tendency to regress into baby-talk, like Kenny in *Lola Rose* [2003]) have to move in with their father, his new wife, and their cutie-pie half-sister Rosa. Ali starts at a new school, where she befriends geeky Andrew. Under the pressure of the new family and school environment, as well as her continuing grief over the recent death of her beloved Nan, Ali begins lucid dreaming/ hallucinating that she can fly at night. At the end of the book, she sleepwalks out of her window and has to be rescued by her father; this physical rescue seems to pull her psychologically back into reality, and the novel ends with an ambivalent encounter between Ali and her mother, still hospitalized for an unnamed mental illness.

*The Other Side* is a clear forerunner of *The Illustrated Mum*, as is Wilson's next novel, *Amber*.

### **Amber (1986)**

Amber has been raised on communes by her hippy mother, Jay. Like Star in *The Illustrated Mum*, she resents her mother, blaming her for her lack of education and failure to fit in, and strives to dress and 'act ordinary at school'.<sup>5</sup> *Amber* opens and closes with encounters between Amber and Jay, suggesting that the emotional heart of the narrative is their mother-daughter relationship. However, the story in the foreground of the novel is that Amber has taken to her bed in a state of emotional overwhelm (as Ali tries to do in *The Other Side*). This is the first of Wilson's OUP novels to use non-chronological narrative: through a series of flashbacks we follow the development of Amber's friendship with Justin, an odd, clever, posh boy who talks like Michael in *Nobody's Perfect*, this time through a quasi-puppet, Sleeve, made out of the sleeve of his jumper. Although it looks as though this friendship might turn into a romance, we eventually learn that Amber has, instead, slept with Justin's more conventionally attractive and popular brother, Jonty, and fears she is pregnant by him. In the final section, Davie, an ex-boyfriend of Jay's, returns and offers to live with Amber and 'look after [her] and the baby'.<sup>6</sup> It is unclear whether he envisages a parental or a romantic relationship with Amber; in any case, he moves on again after her period starts, making way for a fragile peace between Amber and Jay.

### **The Power of the Shade (1987)**

*The Power of the Shade* is a multi-stranded book and thus difficult to summarize. Its heroine, May, is being raised by her grandparents and great-aunt; her mother Amy, an artist, died in childbirth, and her father committed suicide soon afterwards. May's grandparents and great-aunt idealize Amy, and expect May to become an artist like her. May has a close but fraught friendship with the beautiful, charming, and malicious Selina, the neglected daughter of two actors and a clear prototype of *Midnight's* Jasmine (2004), who initiates May as a white witch in a highly eroticized ritual.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, May is also developing a close relationship with her new English teacher, Rob, a plotline which returns in *Love Lessons* (2005). May writes a series of fairy-tales for Rob, which are interspersed throughout the novel and relate symbolically to her own life, functioning like the illustrations from the fictional Casper Dream books in *Midnight*. Through her relationship with Rob, and his encouragement of her writing, May begins to detach herself both from her grandparents' expectations of her and from the image of her dead mother. She also learns that the woman she calls her great-aunt is in fact her grandmother (her mother's mother, who had an affair with her sister's husband). Convinced that she has magical powers, she believes (like *Love Lessons's* Prue and *Deep Blue's* Barbara) that she has caused her grandfather's heart attack. In a climactic, hallucinatory scene at the end of the novel she also believes that she has burnt down Rob's flat, but discovers that she has not. This dramatic moment of physical danger brings about her psychological return to reality, as with Ali in *The Other Side*.

### **This Girl (1988)**

*This Girl* tells the story of Coral, a dreamy girl who feels out of place on her council estate and in her working-class family, and escapes into fantasies about the Victorian period. These fantasies are counterposed to her experience in a real Victorian house, working as an au pair to a posh couple, Toby and Isabel. Coral takes the children, Freddy and Ada (names which will be reused for two of the Victorian children in *The Lottie Project* [1997]), to the park, where she meets and befriends Deb, a young single mother. The novel

ends when Coral rejects Isabel's exploitation and moves in to 'cohabit' with Deb in her new council flat.<sup>8</sup> The novel manages to be both unambiguous and oblique about the sexual relationship between Coral and Deb, which perhaps explains the failure of critics and readers to recognize the lesbian content in *This Girl*, sixteen years before Julie Burchill's *Sugar Rush* (2004) was 'flagged as the first lesbian teen novel' (*Guardian*, 2004).<sup>9</sup>

### ***Falling Apart* (1989)**

*Falling Apart* returns to the heterosexual cross-class romance featured in *Waiting for the Sky to Fall* and *Amber*, this time between working-class Tina and posh Simon. Tina is fifteen; her twin brother, Tim, died at the age of seven. The novel makes it clear that Tina's fixation on the doomed romance with Simon is a way of escaping her unresolved grief: 'She can't give up on Simon now. She's felt so sad ever since Tim died but now she's found happiness again, and she's going to hang on to it'.<sup>10</sup> Tina takes an overdose in the first chapter, and the bulk of the novel flashes back to the story of her relationship with Simon. Simon seems also to be in a relationship with his spiteful gay best friend Adam, although Wilson's use of circumlocution, innuendo and implication to convey homosexual content in this book, in contrast to *This Girl*, makes the exact nature of their relationship hard to decipher. In any case, Simon eventually leaves Tina for a girl of his own class ('we've got so much more in common... Caroline and I even went to the same Latin summer school a couple of years ago'<sup>11</sup>), triggering Tina's overdose. In the last chapter, Tina's stomach is pumped and she recovers. She confesses her feelings of guilt over Tim's death to her sisters, watches Simon and Adam walk away through the hospital window, and 'then notices her own reflection in the glass, looking back at her. The other side of herself. So maybe she's been a whole person all along'.<sup>12</sup>

Like *Amber*, this novel tells the story of a cross-class heterosexual romance in flashback, with a frame narrative, but this time the stakes are higher. The protagonist of *Falling Apart* is no longer a girl who has taken to her bed over a mistaken pregnancy scare, but a girl attempting suicide. This raising of the stakes begins in *The Power of the Shade*, and in *Falling Apart*,



Wilson continues to intensify her narrative and emotional lines and to provide more dramatic situations and resolutions.

### **The Dream Palace (1991)**

*The Dream Palace* marks the climax of this intensification, having the most adult (or at least Young Adult) content in Wilson's entire oeuvre: stabbings, heroin deals, hepatitis-related deaths, homelessness, and prostitution, both female and male ('I can go down the amusement arcades and try peddling my arse, but I'm too old and I'm not even pretty. So we'd better get you where the action is, little Lolly. King's Cross?'<sup>13</sup>).

The protagonist of *The Dream Palace* is Lolly (short for Loretta), an imaginative teenager who disconcerts her more conventional, boy-crazy friend Lynn with her darker flights of fancy, like Violet in *Midnight* or Dolphin in *The Illustrated Mum*. Lolly's father died soon after leaving her mother, and she is fixated on a memory of him taking her to afternoon tea at the then-posh Palace Hotel, now abandoned and squatted by a group of hippies.<sup>14</sup> The hippies seem romantic to Lolly, especially one couple, Greg and Rosamond. (Not coincidentally, Rosamund is the name Sandra gives the fictional, romanticized version of herself in *Nobody's Perfect*.) Lolly starts a relationship with Greg, who attempts to rescue her from her unsatisfactory stepfather by stabbing him with bacon scissors. Lolly and Greg go on the run to London on a motorbike borrowed from a friend of Greg's in return for drugs. Lolly eventually realizes she cannot sustain a criminal lifestyle and returns home. She informs on Greg to the police, but remains in love with him. The novel ends with her looking out to sea and fantasizing hopelessly about Greg's return.

### **Deep Blue (1993)**

Wilson's final novel for OUP, *Deep Blue*, retreats from the urban/criminal landscape of *The Dream Palace* to the suburban setting of Kingtown. *Deep Blue* features a familiar cast of characters, including a domineering father and a posh boyfriend. It also has a familiar storyline, in which Barbara (like May in *The Power of the Shade* and Tina in *Falling Apart*) struggles to find her own identity, under pressure both from her ex-diver father's image of her as an

Olympic-standard diver and from her Barbie-collecting mother's image of her as a pretty, feminine girl. Like Ellie in *Girls Under Pressure* (whom she otherwise does not resemble), Barbara becomes briefly anorexic during the course of the novel but recovers without outside intervention.

*Deep Blue* incorporates a cross-class romance with posh Luke, who is a disappointment to his father in the same way, and for the same reasons, as Michael in *Nobody's Perfect* (Michael says 'I can't catch a ball, I can't hit a ball. Consequently my father thinks I haven't got any balls';<sup>15</sup> Luke says 'I was this little weedy kid who didn't want to kick a ball about with Daddy and be one of the lads. My dad's practically given up on me'<sup>16</sup>). Luke's brother Danny is the first of Jacqueline Wilson's characters with Down syndrome, followed by Poppy in *Dustbin Baby* [2001] and Sarah in *Love Lessons*, all of whom befriend protagonists who otherwise have difficulty forming healthy friendships with peers. Barbara's domineering father suffers a sudden life-threatening attack after a row, like Prue's father in *Love Lessons* (Barbara's father has a heart attack, Prue's a stroke). Barbara copes by bargaining, making a promise to do the thing she most fears: 'I'll do anything, but don't let my dad die. I'll dive again. I'll go up on the highboard... just don't let Dad die'.<sup>17</sup> Successful bargaining will recur in *Lola Rose* (2003), when Lola's mum, Victoria, is very ill with an infection following surgery for breast cancer, and Lola, who is terrified of sharks, bargains for her recovery by staying by the shark tank at the aquarium for an hour.<sup>18</sup>

## **Reworkings**

There are, then, significant continuities between the OUP novels and the Sharratt books, as well as important differences. The same character types populate both sets of books, and all the books are recognizably set in the same world: the very first OUP novel, *Nobody's Perfect*, is set in Kingtown (a fictionalized version of Kingston-upon-Thames, where Wilson grew up and lives), as are the majority of both the OUP novels and the Sharratt books. Additionally, a great deal of material from the OUP novels is reworked in the Sharratt books.

This reworking is of a particular kind. None of the Sharratt novels is a

straightforward rewriting of a single OUP book. The closest Wilson comes to this is *Midnight*, which, like *The Power of the Shade*, combines a revelation about a family secret with a fraught relationship between the protagonist and a magical girl. In *The Power of the Shade*, Selina invites May over for a sophisticated supper, including white wine, and initiates her as a white witch; in a closely parallel scene, *Midnight*'s Jasmine invites Violet for supper with wine and claims to be a 'white witch... with amazing occult powers'.<sup>19</sup> As for the family secret, May learns that her grandmother is really her great-aunt and vice versa; Violet learns that her beloved but difficult brother Will was adopted.

However, *The Power of the Shade* also contains several elements which do not appear in *Midnight* but were reworked in other novels. The romance with a teacher recurs in *Love Lessons*, while the doomed romance as a way of acting out and/or working through a bereavement recurs in *Falling Apart*. The idea of Anne Frank as an imaginary friend, mentioned in passing in *The Power of the Shade* ('I've thought about Anne so much I feel I know her. She's far more of a friend to me than Selina'<sup>20</sup>), becomes a structuring element in *Secrets*, where India writes 'I feel Anne and I are soul sisters', and refers to Anne as a 'fictional friend'.<sup>21</sup>

This is typical of the way that Wilson reworks material across several books, returning to and re-examining particular characters, themes, and narratives. Sometimes she will rework a particular narrative strand several times from different perspectives and in different ways. The clearest example of this is the father-romance, which enters the Wilson world as a central narrative concern in the very first OUP novel, *Nobody's Perfect*, and is then reworked and re-examined in *Amber* and *The Dream Palace* before appearing for the last time in *The Illustrated Mum*.

In *Nobody's Perfect*, Sandra's magazine story starts out as a romance: 'My fifteen-year-old heroine... was going to run away from her coarse, cruel stepfather and indifferent mother. She would roam London, living in assorted squalid squats, then fall in love with a drug addict, a lean, dark-eyed, wild-haired poet, and they would have a passionate affair before his tragic death from an overdose'.<sup>22</sup> As she writes and rewrites the story, the plot about the

heroine's search for her father becomes more and more central, and the final version of the story ends with their reunion:

[Rosamund's] father smiled back at her. The sun shone on his thick greying curls, his lean tanned face... 'You don't know just how much I've longed for this moment,' he said in his attractively husky voice.<sup>23</sup>

In *Amber*, Amber has a similarly complicated mixture of daughterly and erotic feelings towards her mother's ex-boyfriend, Davie. At the end of the novel, Amber frames herself as in direct competition with her mother for Davie's affections. Jay asks her 'Do you think [Davie] loves me just a little?', and Amber thinks: 'He comes for *me*... He wants me. How can she be such a fool?'<sup>24</sup>

In *The Dream Palace*, the father-romance is developed and intensified. Greg both idealizes and infantilizes Lolly, calling her 'the most special little girl in all the world',<sup>25</sup> and preferring her to wear girlish clothes or school uniform. He takes on an increasingly paternal role when they run away to London, trying to take Lolly out for tea at a hotel in a failed attempt to replay her favourite memory of her real father,<sup>26</sup> and then going to Hamleys, where 'he leads [her] round shelf after shelf of cuddly toys' and buys her 'the biggest rabbit in the whole of Hamleys', while Lolly 'act[s] up to him, little girl loving Daddy'.<sup>27</sup> Through Greg's 'grisly Daddy parody',<sup>28</sup> Lolly comes to realize that her real father was not as perfect as she remembers.

This narrative strand finds its final and most successful form in *The Illustrated Mum*. The much-tattooed mother of the title, Marigold, has been raising her daughters, Star and Dolphin, alone. She remains hopelessly in love with Star's father, Micky, a mythic figure in the girls' lives. After meeting Micky again at a gig, Marigold believes that she will be romantically reunited with him; he, meanwhile, is not interested in her, but is enchanted to find that he has a daughter. Star and Marigold are thus in direct competition over Micky, and Star's words to Dolphin about Micky closely recall Amber's thoughts about Davie: 'He doesn't want to see her [Marigold]... He only stayed the other night because of me... Micky thinks I'm special... It's just magic between us'.<sup>29</sup> Like Greg, Micky takes Star to Hamleys, but unlike Amber and Lolly, Star has no erotic feelings for her father-figure, and the 'magic' between them is not

sexualized – a change consonant with the fact that the readership of *The Illustrated Mum*, with its ten-year-old protagonist/narrator, is younger than the OUP novels'. Rather than being a constraint on the storyline, though, the change in readership seems to have enabled Wilson to find an effective use for this narrative strand. Instead of being part of Star's own psychosexual development, as in the earlier books, the 'romance' between her and her father is seen from ten-year-old Dolphin's point of view and remains metaphorical. It is used structurally to draw a satisfying contrast between the glamorous, feckless Micky and Dolphin's dull but ultimately reliable father, Michael.

*The Illustrated Mum* also incorporates and reworks material from two more OUP novels, combining the mothers from *Amber* and *The Other Side* into Marigold, who is nonconformist and feckless like Jay (*Amber*), and whose breakdown is very like Maureen's (*The Other Side*). Two key incidents in *The Illustrated Mum* directly rework scenes from earlier novels. The structure and many details of the scenes where Owly helps Dolphin track her father down recall Michael helping Sandra find her father in *Nobody's Perfect*,<sup>30</sup> the scene two-thirds of the way through *The Illustrated Mum* in which Dolphin finally has to admit that she cannot cope with her mother's illness closely recalls the opening scene of *The Other Side*. Comparing the two versions of this scene illuminates some of the differences between the OUP novels and the Sharratt books.

In *The Other Side*, Ali comes home from school to find her mother, Maureen, sitting at the kitchen table and refusing to move or eat. Maureen is low-energy and irritable, interpreting her daughter's words over-literally and punning:

'Mum, have you got the sack?'

'The sack? What do you mean?' Mum did a little pantomime of looking. 'What sack? A rubbish sack? A potato sack? Father Christmas's sack?'<sup>31</sup>

In the equivalent scene in *The Illustrated Mum*, Dolphin wakes up in the night to find Marigold in the bathroom, painted all over with white gloss paint, and exhibiting the pressured, accelerated speech and flight of ideas which characterize manic episodes:

It will dry and so will I. And then I'll be right. I'll be white... no more tattoos, Star hated them, she hated me, but now they're gone, until the laser, could I use a razor? No, too red, I want white, pure light, that's right...<sup>32</sup>

Both Ali and Dolphin are unable to get their mothers to bed; both go to sleep themselves. In the morning, Maureen is still at the kitchen table; Marigold is still standing on the lino in the bathroom. Neither of them are speaking or responding. Ali phones her best friend's mother, who calls a doctor, who has Maureen hospitalized; Dolphin calls an ambulance.

The scenes are closely parallel, but with some important differences. Marigold's attempt to erase her tattoos with white gloss paint is a visual metaphor, underlined by her verbal flight of ideas around purity, light, and rightness, and by Dolphin's competing metaphor of her mother as 'a ghost' or 'ghostly'.<sup>33</sup> There is no equivalent use of visual imagery to unify or intensify the scene in *The Other Side*. *The Illustrated Mum* is also both more extreme and simpler, narratively and emotionally. The scene in *The Other Side* lasts for nearly twenty pages<sup>34</sup> and involves Ali's little brother Chrissie, her best friend's mother, Maureen's ex-boyfriend Michael, and a doctor, as well as a description of the flat and a lengthy digression about the clichéd expectations of school English teachers while Ali does her homework.<sup>35</sup> In *The Illustrated Mum*, the scene lasts for eight pages, including two illustrations, and involves only Dolphin and Marigold.<sup>36</sup> Ali's feelings are unclear, ambivalent, and seldom named, conveyed instead through dialogue or physical sensations. She tells her mother 'I hate you!', and then 'I didn't mean it. I love you, Mum'.<sup>37</sup> When she feels pride, she 'glow[s]'; when she feels fear, she 'suddenly [feels] sick'; when she feels shame, she 'burn[s]'.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the scene in *The Illustrated Mum* is saturated with Dolphin's intense, clearly-named feelings: 'I was shaking... I was so scared... I felt I was betraying Marigold'.<sup>39</sup>

The differences between *The Other Side* and *The Illustrated Mum* are typical of the broad differences between the OUP novels and the Sharratt books. *The Illustrated Mum* is simpler and clearer in its emotional landscape and its narrative lines; it is also much more concrete and visual in its imagery.

Although both the Sharratt books and the OUP books deal with 'difficult' material, like a mother's mental illness, the Sharratt books contain much less of the 'adult' material which would make it difficult to market the OUP books to younger readers – for example, the references to drugs and prostitution in *The Dream Palace*, and the detailed suicide attempt in *Falling Apart*.

The Sharratt books are also, in general, much more optimistic than the OUP novels, as instanced by their respective constructions of fantasy and of girl-girl friendships. In *This Girl*, Coral's imaginary games are seen as a problem: her mother even takes her to the doctor, saying that she hears voices. At the end of the novel, Coral converts her fantasy investment in the Victorian period into a pragmatic use of her knowledge for profit, working on an antiques stall to support Deb and Pete. Fantasy is also construed as a problem, and as something to be left behind, for Katherine in *Waiting for the Sky to Fall*, May in *The Power of the Shade*, and, especially, Ali in *The Other Side*, whose lucid dreaming eventually threatens her physical safety and her life. In the Sharratt books, by contrast, while fantasising does not solve the characters' problems, it does not usually lead them into danger. In general, it is seen as a comforting and benign coping strategy, as in *The Illustrated Mum*, where Dolphin's witchy fantasies and imaginary friends help her cope with bullying and with her own difficult feelings.

Similarly, *This Girl* is the only one of the OUP novels where a relationship between girls is portrayed as positive and sustaining, rather than as something dangerously seductive which must be outgrown. Although a few of the Sharratt books present girl-girl friendships as difficult, fraught, or dangerous – notably *Vicky Angel* (2000) – a much larger number view female friendship as important, positive, and central to the lives of girls: *Bad Girls* (1996), the *Girls* series (1997-2002), *Dustbin Baby* (2001), *Secrets* (2002), *Best Friends* (2004), *The Diamond Girls* (2004), and *Little Darlings* (2010).

An even clearer and more significant example of the OUP novels' pessimism and the Sharratt books' optimism, however, is their treatment of class. The romance between middle-class Katherine and working-class Richard in *Waiting for the Sky to Fall* is portrayed as doomed: in *Falling Apart*

the class difference between Tina and Simon is equally insurmountable and much more tragic in its consequences. The most sustained treatment of class in the OUP novels is in *This Girl*, where Wilson uses comparisons between the Victorian period and the present day to develop an argument about the persistence of class division. Twenty years later, in *The Lottie Project* (1997), she revisits this material to very different effect.

In *This Girl*, Coral takes a live-in job as an au pair in a Victorian house which her employer, Isabel, has kept largely in period. Isabel teaches a 'Herstory' course about the Victorian period, and describes 'intelligent women denied a decent education, imprisoned in their ludicrous corsets, lying on their *chaise longues* and sighing their lives away... while other women *lace* those corsets, dust the *chaises longues* ...'<sup>40</sup> She harangues Coral about the 'servant situation': 'Young girls treated like dirt, forced to bob and curtsy and slave from dawn to dusk for their so-called betters!'<sup>41</sup> As the novel progresses we realize, along with Coral, that although the style of interaction between employers and servants may have changed, the essential inequality has not. Coral's own position is shown to be very similar to that of a Victorian servant, culminating in a confrontation with Isabel: 'I thought we were meant to be equals nowadays? Oh no, you want me to bow and scrape to you just as much as the Victorian ladies'.<sup>42</sup>

*The Lottie Project's* protagonist, Charlie, forms a prickly friendship with a middle-class boy, Jamie, who lives in a Victorian house which, like Isabel's, is kept in period. The physical setting of the house again enables comparisons between contemporary and Victorian life to be made. When Charlie's mum, Jo, loses her job, she takes on a cleaning job in Oxford Terrace, where Jamie lives, prompting a fantasy from Charlie which echoes Isabel's vision of Victorian women on their chaise-longues: 'I could just imagine Jamie lounging on a velvet chaise-longue in his posh William Morris-papered parlour, snapping his fingers imperiously at Jo'.<sup>43</sup>

The narrative of *This Girl* intertwines the story of Coral's personal growth with social commentary, and the turning-point of the novel comes when Coral consciously identifies and names the power dynamics between herself



and her middle-class employers, enabling her to start an independent life as a market trader and the head of a family. She realizes that true friendship between herself and Isabel is impossible, because of the insurmountable barrier of class. In strong contrast, *The Lottie Project* ends with Charlie successfully achieving a friendship with posh Jamie Edwards *despite* the class barrier. In Sharratt books, class difference typically functions as a potential barrier to friendship which can be overcome through mutual tolerance, understanding, courage and negotiation. We see this in *The Lottie Project*, but also in the friendships between Mandy and Tanya in *Bad Girls* and between India and Treasure in *Secrets*.

## Returns

So far I have dealt with instances where Wilson revisits particular ideas or themes from the OUP novels, reworking them in a clearer and more optimistic mode, suitable for the younger audience of the Sharratt books. But there is another way in which the Sharratt books relate to the OUP novels, this time through returns rather than reworking. By 'returns' I refer to the way in which concrete incidents and motifs from the OUP novels reappear in the Sharratt books, unchanged in their details but situated in different contexts, associated with different characters, and serving different narrative functions. The unwanted giant rabbit is a typical example. It first appears in *The Dream Palace*, where 'Greg presses a huge snowy monstrosity into my arms, and insists it has to be this one because it's the biggest rabbit in the whole of Hamleys';<sup>44</sup> it returns in *Cookie* (2008) as a birthday gift to Beauty from her actual father Gerry. Here it is again described as a 'monster' (three times) and Gerry uses Greg's words: 'Biggest in the whole of Hamleys!'<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the act of drinking hot chocolate at a swimming pool café first appears in *Deep Blue* and then returns in *Girls Under Pressure*, in both cases as a symbolic affirmation of the protagonist's recovery from anorexia.<sup>46</sup> The location makes sense for *Deep Blue*'s Barbara, who is a diver, but is notably less appropriate for Ellie. In *The Power of the Shade*, May and Selina attempt to make a voodoo doll by baking a biscuit in the shape of Selina's ex-boyfriend Bruno, but the biscuit bloats and distorts, like the angel biscuits Marigold tries to make in *The Illustrated Mum*, although there are no other similarities between the

characters or the narratives of the two books.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the most striking example of a return is the reappearance of the ending of *The Dream Palace* in *Love Lessons*. *The Dream Palace* establishes a parallel between Lolly's romance with Greg and the long-ago doomed romance between another unsuitable boy (a 'dirty tinker'<sup>48</sup>) and Annie, an old woman with dementia in the care home where Lolly works. After Lolly has turned Greg over to the police, the novel ends with a conversation between Lolly and Annie about looking out to sea and hopelessly awaiting the return of their lovers.<sup>49</sup>

At the end of *Love Lessons*, where Prue has been separated from her equally unsuitable teacher boyfriend, Rax, Wilson not only reworks one of the plotlines of *The Power of the Shade* but, more oddly, returns to the seaside setting of *The Dream Palace*. Prue says: 'I could make for the seaside... I could walk along the sands every day. It would be desperately lonely but I could think about Rax'.<sup>50</sup> The novel ends with Prue walking past Rax's house in the definitively landlocked suburb of Kingtown, and the very last line is: 'I walked and walked and walked, slowly, dreamily, as if I was strolling along the seashore...'<sup>51</sup> As with the swimming pool café at the end of *Girls Under Pressure*, there is no real reason within the world of *Love Lessons* for Prue to associate her hopeless longing with the seashore: these concrete motifs simply return, like the bloated biscuits which appear in both *The Power of the Shade* and *The Illustrated Mum*.

This reuse of material should not, however, be seen as a failure of creativity on Wilson's part. Rather, it is part and parcel of the way in which Wilson has mapped out an astonishingly consistent emotional and material landscape across both the OUP novels and the Sharratt books, which, I argue, is key to her appeal.

### **Wilson's World**

Reworking particular themes and returning to particular motifs, Wilson's books create a coherent and self-consistent world, populated by familiar characters and oriented around familiar concerns. Her novels have a distinctive 'feel',

blending a detailed physical environment into the protagonists' imaginary worlds of artistic creation, fears and fantasies. Small, affectively charged objects – toys, cuddle blankets, gel pens – are intensely present in all the novels: a complete set of Caran D'Ache crayons or felt-tip pens is a persistent object of desire for twenty years, from *The Other Side* ('Perhaps... he'd buy her a huge tin of Caran D'Ache crayons like Claire's') through *The Illustrated Mum* ('Owly Morris... [has] got this giant set of Caran D'Ache') to *Clean Break* ('He helped Maxie unwrap an enormous set of expensive Caran d'Ache colouring pens').<sup>52</sup>

Pleasurable and unpleasurable eating experiences, and food as a marker of class, are part of all the books' sensual universes, from Selina's sophisticated supper of 'sparkling white wine still misty from the fridge' and 'a festive cake on a white fluted plate', so 'wondrously different' from the 'surfeit of stale chocolate log' available at May's house in *The Power of the Shade*, to Dolphin's unpleasant first encounter with mushrooms on pizza in *The Illustrated Mum*, and, in *Lily Alone* (2011), Lily's delicious stolen fruit: 'enormous strawberries... soft downy peaches and smooth purple plums', which 'we ate in awe. We had fruit at home sometimes but it was only ever apples, and perhaps little oranges at Christmas'.<sup>53</sup>

Protagonists fantasize about luxurious, white, private places to live. A throwaway line in *Nobody's Perfect* ('I often design my dream flat and all its furniture and imagine myself living there... I shall live alone') is elaborated into the 'wonderfully white' house Amber imagines; into Tracy Beaker's fantasized mother's dressing rooms ('She has white velvet sofas... and a white rug so soft she sinks into it up to her ankles'); into the fabulous penthouse apartment imagined by Mandy and Tanya in *Bad Girls*, 'with white furniture and white carpets and a heart-shaped white bed and a huge swimming pool on the roof with real dolphins'; and, finally, into Lily's imaginary bedroom in *Lily Alone*: 'a pure white, utterly sound-proof bedroom [with] white walls and white carpet so soft it was like fur... I sat on a white velvet stool'.<sup>54</sup>

This affectively and materially coherent world is first created in the OUP novels, which set the parameters for the emotional, narrative, and material

possibilities of Wilson's later books. Even *Tracy Beaker*, framed as a turning-point in Wilson's work, in fact reworks material from the OUP novels. *Tracy Beaker* is the first of Wilson's novels to be actually set in a care home, but in the very first of her OUP novels, *Nobody's Perfect*, we learn almost parenthetically that Sandra was in care for ten weeks when she was five. What she remembers of the experience is bad food, fear of bedwetting, fear of smacking, and unsatisfactory cuddles<sup>55</sup> – precisely the elements that structure characters' experiences, fears, and fantasies of care in the Sharratt novels. In *The Illustrated Mum*, Dolphin's mother Marigold 'was in one foster home where the mother used to put the sheets over [her] head if [she] wet them'.<sup>56</sup> Dolphin's own fears about foster care centre on smacking and bedwetting,<sup>57</sup> and although her experience is contrasted to Marigold's and shown to be much more benign,<sup>58</sup> the contrast still focuses on cuddles ('cuddled in close like I was one of the babies'); bedwetting (her foster mother is 'not the littlest weeniest bit cross' when Dolphin wets the bed); and food (Dolphin mistakes Marmite for chocolate spread but 'Aunty Jane was sympathetic even though I spat my mouthful right out... She understood').<sup>59</sup> *Tracy Beaker*, too, retains these co-ordinates: Tracy's own foster mother Aunty Peggy 'smacks hard and serves up frogspawn for... pudding', and her friend Peter wets himself.<sup>60</sup>

The remarkable consistency and coherence across the OUP and the Sharratt novels is reflected in and operated through the books' style. Wilson's vocabulary is highly distinctive. Throughout her work, she has a fondness for certain unusual, old-fashioned adjectives and verbs and certain archaic usages, including 'wondrous', 'fingered', 'peeped', 'fashioned' (meaning 'made/created'), 'fancied' (meaning 'imagined', rather than 'was sexually attracted to'), and the conjunction 'and yet'. These striking words are not used to position particular characters or types as old-fashioned or upper-class: they are used both in the narrative voice and in dialogue, by characters of different ages, sexes, and classes, across both the OUP books and the Sharratt novels. Similarly, Wilson regularly uses striking and old-fashioned adverbs and alliteration, often in combination: 'utterly obsolete' (*Amber*); 'positively perverted' (*The Power of the Shade*); 'positively paranoid' (*The Dream Palace*); 'amazingly atrocious' (*The Lottie Project*).<sup>61</sup>

Although her characters speak colloquially, the slang they use is an idiosyncratic mixture of words from multiple decades, classes and subcultures. Roy, a boy who works as a fitter at the Fulwell works in *Nobody's Perfect*, says 'You're a right nosy bird, aren't you?' and 'the engine's just all to cock', but also 'She's got a smashing personality, your friend'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, *The Illustrated Mum's* Dolphin says 'goody-goody wimpy little brainbox Oliver' and 'he's dumped you on the Social' but also 'blub' ('You'll think I blub all the time') and 'absolutely super-duper'.<sup>63</sup> As with the old-fashioned verbs and adverbs listed above, these slang terms are used by characters of all ages, sexes and classes: Dolphin says 'blub', but so does Barbara's taxi-driving father in *Deep Blue*.

Wilson seems to have solved the problem of writing contemporary novels for children in a fast-changing linguistic landscape without becoming dated very quickly by developing her own undatable, stylized language, an idiolect which mixes archaicizing words with words of more recent vintage and which remains remarkably stable over the thirty-two years between *Nobody's Perfect* and the time of writing. Some words do appear and disappear according to the changing speech patterns of contemporary children ('blub' is not used after *The Illustrated Mum*), but 'ultra' first appears in the second OUP novel, *Waiting for the Sky to Fall*, and is still in use in the most recent Sharratt book, *Four Children and It* (2012). It appears in her autobiography, *Jacky Daydream*, and her novel *Queenie*, which are set in the 1950s; it even appears in *Hetty Feather*, which is set in the nineteenth century, underlining the lack of connection between Wilson's stable idiolect and the changing speech patterns of real-life children.<sup>64</sup>

Wilson's idiosyncratic but coherent style, and especially the language spoken by her characters, thus serves not to mark her works as realistic reflections of an extratextual world but, on the contrary, to create a stable and internally consistent textual world. It is here that both the continuity and the difference between the OUP novels and the Sharratt books ultimately lie.

### **Conclusion: From Realism to Romance**

In the OUP books, Wilson discovered her material, which is that of the

adolescent problem novel: working-class characters, absent, violent, and/or domineering fathers, inadequate mothers, blended families, half- and step-siblings, foster care, illness in the family, difficult friendships, peer pressure, bullying. The adolescent problem novel is very strongly associated with realism as a genre or mode, and Wilson begins her work for OUP, as noted above, with a metatextual commitment to realism over romance. The Sharratt books, however, are problem novels in the mode of romance. They employ the iconography and the subject matter of the problem novel, but their optimistic narratives are structured around emotional states and interpersonal relationships, rather than around social systems and moral dilemmas, like the OUP novels. In the Sharratt books, the world Wilson created in the OUP novels is freed from the constraints of realism to become an alternative reality, which its readers can inhabit and enjoy on its own terms and for its own pleasures.

This is a striking intervention into the conventions of the adolescent problem novel, which has traditionally legitimated itself by its reference to a 'reality' left unaddressed by other children's literary genres (Cart 1996; Nilsen and Donelson 1993, 100-139). The pleasure and value of Wilson's work, however, lies elsewhere: in her development of a stylized world and a stylized language. This is precisely what Evelyn Waugh valued in the work of P.G. Wodehouse, writing:

Mr Wodehouse's characters... live in their own universe like the characters of a fairy story... their language has never been heard on human lips.. It is a world that cannot become dated because it has never existed. (1939: 786-787)

Like Wodehouse, Wilson has 'made a world for us to live in and delight in' (Waugh 1961). Its iconography and characters are drawn from the traditionally realist world of the adolescent problem novel, but it is a fantasy world nonetheless. The Sharratt books give us sustained access to this world, and allow us to enjoy it on its own terms: it was the OUP novels, however, that built the Wilson world.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the OUP novels, *Falling Apart*, was republished in Australia in 2011. The Australian teen magazine *Girlfriend* wrote: 'After years out of print, we're glad to see this popular read return for a new generation of fans!' (<http://textpublishing.com.au/books-and-authors/book/falling-apart/>); the rhetoric highlights just how striking it is that the other eight OUP novels have *not* returned for Jacqueline Wilson's 'new' fans.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson 1982: 104.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson 1982: 97.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson 2003:171.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson 1986a: 45.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson 1986a: 152.



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<sup>7</sup> Selina both acknowledges and disavows the erotic elements of their magic when May asks her to send away two visiting boys so that 'we could do some more – you know...', and Selina responds: 'Really, May. You sound positively perverted' [128]). Similarly, when Violet first sees Jasmine she says 'I fell in love with her instantly' (59), but when she is asked who she would choose for a love affair, she says 'I thought of Jasmine. I loved her, but not in that way' (147).

<sup>8</sup> Wilson 1988: 178.

<sup>9</sup> Presumably this meant the first *British* lesbian teen novel: Nancy Garden's *Annie On My Mind* was published in the US in 1982, and Jenny Pausacker's *What Are Ya?* in Australia in 1987. *What Are Ya?* was published as *Get a Life!* in the UK in 1990, two years after *This Girl* and fourteen years before *Sugar Rush*. Tamzin Cook suggests that the obliquity of Wilson's references might be a consequence of the notorious Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988), which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality in schools (personal conversation, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Wilson 2011a: 78.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson 2011a: 238-9.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson 2011a: 277.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson 1991: 233.

<sup>14</sup> Greg and the other squatters are consistently called 'hippies' in *The Dream Palace*, although I think they would have been called 'New Age travellers' or 'crusties' in the UK in 1991. Wilson's use of slang is discussed below.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson 1982: 86.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson 1995: 155.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson 1995: 148.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson 2013a: 298.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson 2008a: 79.

<sup>20</sup> Wilson 1987: 20.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson 2007: 18, 215.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson 1982: 1. The story that Wilson gently parodies here bears a striking resemblance to the actual plot of *The Dream Palace*, which also features a romanticized 'Rosamund'.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson 1982: 27.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson 1986a: 173.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson 1991: 103.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson 1991: 236.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson 1991: 237.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson 1991: 249.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson 2000: 123.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson 2000: 175-181; Wilson 1982: 53-55.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson 1986b: 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson 2000: 158.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson 2000: 157, 159.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson 1986b: 11-29.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson 1986b: 15-16.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson 2000: 157-164.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson 1986b: 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson 1986b: 29.

<sup>39</sup> Wilson 2000: 159-164.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson 1988: 76-77.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson 1988: 150.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson 1988: 165.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson 1998: 62.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson 1991: 237.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson 2009: 143-144.

<sup>46</sup> Wilson 1995: 168-69; 2003: 201.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson 1987: 188; 2000: 38.

<sup>48</sup> Wilson 1991: 61.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson 1991: 272-73.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson 2005b: 253.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson 2005b: 264. Ellipses original.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson 1986: 16; 2000: 54; 2005a: 17.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson 1987: 8; 2000: 90; 2011b: 240-42.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson 1982: 4; 1986: 9-11; 1992: 205; 1997: 117; 2011b: 137.

<sup>55</sup> Wilson 1982: 6.

<sup>56</sup> Wilson 2000: 56.

<sup>57</sup> Wilson 2000: 198.

<sup>58</sup> As Lucy Pearson pointed out to me in her extremely helpful editorial comments to a draft of this chapter (personal communication, 2014).

<sup>59</sup> Wilson 2000: 203, 203, 210.

<sup>60</sup> Wilson 1992: 45, 54.

<sup>61</sup> Wilson 1986a: 25; 1989: 128; 1991: 175; 1998: 173.

<sup>62</sup> Wilson 1982: 21-23.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson 2000: 280, 219, 195, 42.

<sup>64</sup> Wilson 2008b: 168, 237, 321, 342; 2013b: 6, 90, 327; 2010: 22, 119.