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Maligning Mothers and Forgiving Fathers:

Maintaining the Motherhood Mandate in Response to Parents in Two Young Adult Novels

"What is it about our gendered parenting roles that we cling to so tightly?"
—(Hauser, 2015, p. 329).

From an early age, children are presented with media messages, parenting models, and direct instruction that shape their conceptions of and expectations about the employment options and parenting roles that will be available to them. Since the Industrial Revolution, middle-class, heterosexual parents have been assigned and confined to the breadwinner-caregiver model, wherein the father's primary responsibility is to work outside the home to provide for the family's financial needs, and the mother's primary responsibility is to care for and nurture their children (Fulcher, Dinella, & Weisgram, 2015). This model of gender-linked parenting is still transmitted from parents to their children, who learn that the expectations for involvement in and commitment to childrearing are different for mothers and fathers (Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2016). The preservice teachers whose responses I share in this article articulate and perpetuate these gender-linked expectations for mothering and fathering. This mindset will influence their feelings about their own work lives and their parenting roles as well as how they view their future students' parents.

Although contemporary women have more employment and parenting options than those of past generations, most little girls still dream of becoming mothers. The mothers of young children in Hauser's (2015) study indicated that becoming a mother "signified some sort of dream fulfillment" (p. 336) and reported developing an ideology of motherhood long before they actually became mothers; they idealized maternal identity. This is not merely a personal or biological yearning, but a socially constructed and shared expectation. In 1976, Russo wrote that childlessness was viewed as "a deficient condition" (p. 149), and that perspective largely holds true today. Bays (2017) studied others' perceptions of women based on their parental status and found that mothers were admired, women who were involuntarily childless were pitied, and women who were childless by choice evoked both envy and disgust. Being a mother is still part of a woman's "prescribed performance of gender" (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2016, p. 514).

Good mothering is perceived to be biologically naturalistic, but is actually a patriarchal construction inextricably tied to social, cultural, and political concerns. Russo (1976) articulated the "motherhood mandate" (p. 148) by which women are judged: women should first and foremost be mothers, a good mother has at least two children, and the quality of a woman's mothering is measured by the amount of time she spends with her children. Furthermore, nurturance is fundamental to motherhood, and women are expected to put their children's needs (and their husband's needs) before their own. The motherhood mandate is evident in contemporary "intensive mothering ideologies and perfectionistic parenting practices" (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2016, p. 514), and the pressure to meet these impossibly high expectations contributes to women's feelings of guilt, anger, and stress. These cultural narratives that idealize and standardize good mothering result in mother-

blame for children's behavioral, moral, or intellectual shortcomings—with little to no corresponding father-blame (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2016).

Current statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016) regarding married parents' employment statuses problematize the perpetuation of the breadwinner-caregiver model and the accompanying motherhood mandate. In married couples with families, 76.3% of mothers and 95.6% of fathers are employed full time. Mothers of young children are less likely to work outside the home than those with older children: employment rates are 58.6% for mothers with children under 1 year of age, 64.7% for mothers with children under 6 years of age, and 75% for mothers of children between the ages of 6 and 17. While mothers of young children are less likely to work full time than are mothers with older children, the employment status of fathers is not tied to the age of their children. These statistics indicate that mothers are still the primary caregivers for the married couple's children.

It is evident that the number of families with dual wage earners has not resulted in significant expectations for egalitarian childrearing practices; the breadwinner-caregiver model of parenting and the motherhood mandate persist.

The breadwinner-caregiver model creates a double standard regarding employed mothers and employed fathers. It is egregious for mothers to engage in employment that interferes with their role as a mother, yet it is demeaning for fathers to move from full-time to part-time employment to care for their children. Thus, the motherhood mandate creates role conflict as women try to balance work and family life, and it explains why women have traditionally limited their employment choices to occupations such as teaching, nursing, or secretarial work to minimize this conflict. As contemporary women enter a broader range of professions, however, the expectation for mothers to spend significant time with their children "is at its apex" (Borelli, et al., 2016, p. 357), and mothers who transgress this expectation are criticized for not being committed to their roles as mothers. There are two narratives to which women resort to resolve their work/family conflict: the full-time domestic mother and the employed supermom (Riggs, 2005). It is evident that the number of families with dual wage earners has not resulted in significant expectations for egalitarian childrearing practices; the breadwinner-caregiver model of parenting and the motherhood mandate persist.

Feminist scholars call for a dismantling of the breadwinner-caregiver model (Hauser, 2015). Yet parents who aspire to degender parenting often conform to traditional roles through "acts of subjection" (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011, p. 80), because those who deviate from traditional parenting roles risk the disapproval of family, friends, and society at large. The presumption remains that mothers should be nurturing, attached to, and invested in their children, regardless of their employment status, while fathers may play a secondary role in childrearing. These assumptions are evident in the responses of the preservice teachers in this study as they hold mothers and fathers to different standards of parenting. Faulting the mothers for their transgressions and excusing the fathers for theirs, they maintain the motherhood mandate.

Study Methods

This analysis combines data from two studies conducted in undergraduate young adult literature courses I taught within an Education department. The first study involved students who read *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* (Mackler, 2003) and their reactions to a fat, female protagonist. The second study included students who read *Luna* (Peters, 2004) and their reactions to a transgender character (Parsons, 2012; Parsons, 2015). The students in both studies were traditional and nontraditional students from the surrounding local, mainly rural, community in one of the most economically depressed counties in the state. All students were working toward a degree leading to teacher licensure in either early or middle childhood and typically enrolled in the course during their junior or senior year. The course wherein students read *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* was comprised of 20 females and 2 males. Twenty-four females and 4 males were enrolled in the course iteration during which students read *Luna*.

Students read a young adult novel each week; *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* was

assigned about halfway through the course, and *Luna* was the final reading. Throughout both iterations of the course, students submitted a written, three-part response to each assigned novel. The first two sections encouraged students to adopt an aesthetic stance followed by an analytic, efferent stance (Rosenblatt, 2005). The prompts for the first section were: "How did you feel as you were reading this book? What struck you forcibly? What did you find especially interesting, annoying, puzzling, frightening, familiar, or unfamiliar?" Prompts from which students could choose in the second section included: "What does this text assume about your beliefs, values, and/or experiences? Are there aspects of the text you feel compelled to resist? Which parts of the story seem 'obvious' or 'natural' to you? Did the book challenge any of your beliefs or prompt you to think about something in a different way? What issues does this text explore?" (adapted from Apol, 1998, & Rosenblatt, 2005). These two sections transitioned students from "being in and moving through" to "stepping out and rethinking what one knows" (Langer, 1995, p. 17). Students wrote these responses prior to class.

During class, students first discussed the novels in small groups of approximately five students. After these open-ended discussions, students moved to whole-class discussion and critique of the novel and of life-questions it raised. Students wrote their responses to the third section of the three-part response at the end of the class: "What effect did discussing the book with others have on your personal understanding?" As Langer explains, readers' responses are "subject to change with additional thought, reading, discussion, writing, and living" (1995, p. 15), so students were encouraged to consider these changes in this final section of their written responses. I purposefully structured this movement from aesthetic to efferent response and combined that with guidance and discussion so students would arrive at a "critical reading of the text as a social and political construct" (Cai, 2008, p. 216). These three-part written responses comprised the data for analysis in each study.

I analyzed the students' written responses by moving between inductive and discourse analysis. In the inductive phase, I repeatedly read through the responses to identify preliminary categories and arranged responses accordingly (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Data reduction during this phase involved identifying "response statements [reflecting] a focused thought" (Hancock, 1993, p. 341). Any paragraph, indeed any sentence, within a response often included thoughts pertaining to more than one catgegory. As a result, I organized the response statements into meaningful and ever more precise categories. Once data were reduced in this manner, I moved to a discourse phase of analysis, identifying recurrent words or phrases within each statement and facilitating more accurate placement of statements and coherence within categories. I made iterative passes through the data and refined categories until I arrived at "a relatively small, manageable, and maximally relevant" set (Kamberelis & de la Luna, 2009, p. 251) and reached saturation when no new categories emerged.

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Parenting was not the articulated focus of either of these two studies, but a category regarding parenting emerged in both; readers had different expectations for and reactions to mothers and fathers. A significant number of students in each study expected parents to embody gender-linked parenting consistent with the breadwinner-caregiver model. It is this unanticipated category that I explore and develop here. In the discussion that follows, I begin with a summary of each novel and my analysis of each parent's role, followed by a discussion of readers' inclination to malign the mothers and forgive the fathers. I use participants' real first names with their permission, and I have maintained the language of the participants' written responses.

The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things

Story Synopsis

The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things (Mackler, 2003) is the story of Virginia Shreves—overweight and out of place in her perfect family as

well as at school, where the popular girls call her "that chubby girl" (p. 28). Her family's idealized façade cracks when Virginia's older brother is accused of date rape and expelled from Columbia. As Virginia begins to see chinks in her family's perfection, she comes to believe that she herself may be closer to perfection than she imagined. Virginia's journey to self-acceptance begins when she defies her mother and spends Thanksgiving in Seattle with her best friend, and it continues with the support of an understanding physician and a sympathetic teacher. Yet it is when Virginia starts kickboxing, gets an eyebrow piercing, dyes her hair purple, and rejects her mother's fashion dictates that she truly comes into her own.

Good mothers are expected to be nurturing and supportive, and readers censured Phyllis for lacking these qualities.

Virginia's mother, Phyllis Shreves, is a successful adolescent psychologist. Formerly heavy, she is obsessed with not gaining weight. She constantly monitors Virginia's food choices and suggests clothing styles she believes complement a fat body. Virginia wants to shop at a trendy store that displays all sizes together, but her mother insists she shop at plus-size Salon Z where "the dresses look like gunnysacks and the mannequins resemble embalmed grandmothers" (p. 187). Virginia eventually rebels, opting for "More colors. More curves. Maybe even a little flesh exposure" (p. 188).

Dubbed "The Queen of Denial" (p. 158), Phyllis Shreves wields euphemisms like a shield. She never refers to Virginia as fat but as "heavy" and "like I used to be" (p. 35). Virginia believes her mother's intentions are good, as evidenced when Phyllis takes Virginia to Dr. Love to discuss her weight and tells him, "It's so hard being overweight. I want to do everything I can to make life easier for Virginia" (p. 65). By the end of the novel, Phyllis finally seems to accept that Virginia can be happy and healthy just as she is, and she even admires Virginia's transformation, telling her, "I do admire your chutzpah" (p. 214).

Virginia's father, Mike Shreves, is a high-powered software executive who frequently travels for his job and openly admires thin women. After Virginia's appointment with Dr. Love, Mike tells her, "You've got a great face, Ginny. Think how much prettier you could be if you lost twenty or thirty pounds" (p. 67). When Virginia subsequently goes on a diet, Mike gives her "a tell-all, show-all, full-length mirror" (p. 75), thinking it will inspire her to reach her weight goal. This mirror, however, is the catalyst for Virginia's self-inflicted abuse.

Like Phyllis, Mike wants what is best for Virginia and works to improve his relationship with her. Although Phyllis initially forbids Virginia's trip to Seattle, her father takes her to the airport and gives her spending money. He and Virginia agree to talk about rather than ignore the family's problems. Toward the end of the novel, Virginia and her father go to a Knicks game, and her father comments that she looks like she's slimming down. Virginia tells him, "I have to tell you that I'd rather you don't talk about my body. It's just not yours to discuss" (p. 237). Mike apologizes and indicates that he will respect her and her wishes in the future.

Maligning Phyllis and Forgiving Mike

Fifteen of the 20 female students in this class wrote response statements finding fault with Phyllis Shreves, and none approved of her. Good mothers are expected to be nurturing and supportive, and readers censured Phyllis for lacking these qualities. In light of Phyllis's former weight issues, Jean criticized her for having "little or no empathy for her own daughter's situation," while Sarah thought she should have been "more supportive and more concerned about Virginia's feelings." Rather than showing empathy, Charity thought Phyllis "ostracized" Virginia for not having, and not striving to have, the ideal body. These students might have interpreted Phyllis's actions as motherly concern for her overweight daughter's future health and welfare, but instead accused her of not being empathetic and supportive. Phyllis violated the motherhood mandate by not being nurturing in the right way.

Phyllis breaks the breadwinner-caregiver model by being a successful adolescent psychologist to the detriment of her role as mother, and readers harshly criticized her for this transgression. Some found her to be "only concerned with her public image" or "too busy with her own life to take the time to get to know her own children." Readers saw Phyllis as "a family

therapist who did not understand her own family," and they criticized her for not integrating her professional knowledge with her mothering: "An adolescent psychologist should understand more than anyone her daughter's needs. Instead, she ignores her own advice and basically robs Virginia of a true mother–daughter relationship." These readers resisted the possibility that Phyllis might be both a successful psychologist *and* a good mother or that she might conscientiously separate her professional identity from her motherhood. They accused her of work/family conflict because she created and maintained a professional, public image inconsistent with the image of a good mother; they felt she neither put Virginia's welfare before her own nor employed her professional expertise in her familial relationships.

Readers continued to criticize Phyllis for not integrating her professional identity and her mothering, and they faulted her for being the "Queen of Denial" (p. 158). Sarah wrote:

> It amazes me that a renowned adolescent psychologist could miss everything that is going on in her home, and if she does realize it, how she could just push it under the rug like it doesn't exist. If anyone should know the ramifications of not talking things out and a lack of communication it should be her.

She also expected Phyllis to have her finger on the pulse of the family, wondering how she could be "so clueless and in such denial." Several readers believed her denial "caused a lot of problems in the family." Marcia criticized her for calling the rape allegation "'the Incident' rather than talking about [it] and resolving the problem." These criticisms mother-blame Phyllis for her children's actions. They did not hold Brian responsible for committing date rape; they blamed Phyllis, whose denial compounded her family's problems and who was expected to resolve everyone's problems. If Phyllis had just brought her professional expertise to bear, had she not been in denial, she would have been a better mother.

Readers also criticized Phyllis for exerting excessive control over her daughter, and several thought Virginia "needed to stand up to her mother and let her know how she was feeling." One student celebrated Virginia defying her mother and going to Seattle as the act that "gave her the courage to continue to stand up to her mother's abuse," and Rachel praised Virginia for confronting her mother over her "inability to use the word *fat*." Linda labeled discussing Virginia's weight with Dr. Love as "misguided love" and mediating Virginia's clothing choices as "unfair." None of these readers entertained the possibility that Phyllis was a good mother who wanted what was best for her daughter and who actively provided support and guidance. What they saw was "abuse" and "misguided love." They felt so strongly about this that they celebrated Virginia's acts of disrespect and defiance. They criticized Phyllis because her professional life interfered with her role as mother even as they criticized her for being too controlling and involved in her daughter's life.

It was impossible for Phyllis to redeem herself in [the students'] eyes.

Readers were skeptical when Phyllis expressed her admiration of Virginia at the end of the novel. Rather than commending Phyllis's change of heart, those who noted it factually recounted the event. For instance, Sarah appreciated the "importance of the scene where Phyllis tells Virginia she 'admired her chutzpah' (p. 214)." Others remarked that Phyllis finally recognized that "Virginia has courage and strength" and that Virginia finally "received a positive response from her mother." Yet Rachel wrote:

> I wonder if Virginia's mother will ever completely accept her daughter, and her past self, for being fat. She seems to start to accept Virginia for who she is by saying that she wished she had had her daughter's nerve when she was younger, but she was also drunk at the time. She gave Virginia an eyebrow ring, but does that mean she accepts Virginia's whole appearance, or just the fact that she has an eyebrow ring?

These readers would not accept Phyllis's admiration and affirmation as genuine nor as an example of good mothering. The fact that she had been drinking nullified her compliment while it could just as easily have been seen as enabling her to be more unabashedly honest with Virginia. It was impossible for Phyllis to redeem herself in their eyes.

Mike conforms to the traditional, gendered father role, and I believe this is why students made very few comments about his relationship with Virginia or about his competence as a father. Only four female students wrote statements about him, and the lack of statements seems to indicate tacit approval. No one

criticized that his job as a software executive involved frequent travel that took him away from the family. No one criticized him for attempting to control Virginia by constantly commenting on her weight or for giving her the full-length mirror. Charity was reminded of her own struggle with weight when she wrote, "I too, have felt the way Virginia did after her father's comment [that she had a pretty face but would look better if she lost weight], like 'I've been punched in the stomach' (p. 65)." She stopped short, though, of condemning Mike for his insensitivity or for his superficial connection with Virginia. One reader observed that Mike always made comments about Virginia's body and left her out of sports outings, making her feel unloved, but she did not criticize him for not being nurturing and supportive. In stark contrast to the harsh criticism leveled at Phyllis for denying family problems, one student wrote without judgment that Mike was someone who "didn't want to rock the boat." In other words, readers maintained the motherhood mandate by not censuring Mike for the same behaviors that earned Phyllis their contempt.

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Luna

Story Synopsis

In *Luna* (Peters, 2004), 15-year-old Regan negotiates high school and a new crush while keeping her brother's transgender identity a secret from their parents and peers. Regan reveals, through flashbacks, that Liam identified as a girl from an early age, that their mother feigned ignorance of his transgender identity, and that their father both denied and railed against it. Regan is the only witness to Liam's despair as he contemplates life as a male and attempts increasingly public transitions to Luna. On his eighteenth birthday, Liam comes to breakfast as Luna for the first time, and her father demands that she assume her male identity or never return home. Liam's income as a beta game tester enables him to move to Seattle, as Luna, to pursue a new life under the mentorship of transgender Teri Lynn.

Regan and Liam's mother, Patrice O'Neill, is an enterprising wedding planner. Although Regan and her father resent Weddings by Patrice, Liam recognizes that their mother is smart and would have pursued a professional career sooner if she had postponed marriage and children until she finished college. Regan, however, thinks mothering is "the most important job in the world" (p. 60) and does not understand her mother's dissatisfaction. She recounts overhearing an argument during which her mother yelled at her father that full-time motherhood was "mindless" and "stifling" (p. 136) and that she was "dying inside" (p. 137). So, Patrice saves herself by immersing herself in her work.

On the morning Luna reveals herself to her family, Patrice looks directly at Luna and then turns away to continue her phone conversation with her assistant. After confronting Patrice for not defending Luna, Regan realizes that her mother always knew about Liam's transgender identity. She also suspects that her mother made her medications, particularly her hormones, available to Liam. Regan resents her mother, believing she could have made Luna's life easier by acknowledging the situation, helping Jack come to terms with it, and raising Luna as a girl. As they sit together at the airport awaiting Luna's flight to Seattle, Luna confirms Regan's suspicions and encourages her to recognize that Patrice supported Liam to the best of her ability. Regan wonders if she has been wrong to criticize her mother so harshly: "Was she a monster, or a martyr? Or just a mother?" (p. 241).

Regan and Liam's father, Jack O'Neill, "had been downsized by Sears and had to take a flunky job at the Home Depot" (p. 7). That, along with the fact that Patrice's successful business elevated her "from Wife and Mother to More Significant Other" (p. 7), compromises his patriarchal position as breadwinner. He is adamant that Regan and Liam perform gender traditionally. Jack expects Liam to rebuild cars with him and play sports; he even goes so far as to meet Liam after class and sit in the bleachers while Liam tries out for the baseball team. Jack confides to Regan that all he ever wanted was for Liam "to be like every other kid" (p. 103), and Regan feels a "sudden surge of sympathy for [him]" (p. 122) when Jack asks Regan if Liam is gay. Even though Jack tells Luna she is "sick" (p. 222) on the morning she comes out to her family,

Regan sympathizes with him because he feels "inadequate as a father" (p. 228).

Maligning Patrice and Forgiving Jack

Twelve of the 24 females and 1 of the 4 males in this study wrote response statements criticizing Patrice O'Neill, and no one approved of her as a mother. Readers sharply criticized her for transgressing the motherhood mandate by prioritizing her business over her children. One reader thought she was "selfish," one "just wanted to punch her awake," while another believed she was "disengaged" from her family because of her business. Rebecca censured Patrice for work/family conflict, writing that she was "furious" when Patrice continued talking with her assistant after Luna appeared at breakfast. Even though Liam talks with Regan about their mother's intelligence and need for meaningful work beyond childrearing, these readers agreed with Regan that motherhood fulfills *good* mothers—but not Patrice. These responses support the notion that mothers are supposed to engage in work that allows them to be emotionally and physically available to their children; good mothers spend significant time interacting and connecting with their children. These readers faulted Patrice for escaping into her work (and her medications) rather than being present for her children.

The motherhood mandate also dictates that a mother must be nurturing and put her family's needs before her own. Readers believed Patrice failed in this area, as well. Several readers were angry with Patrice because "she should have been more supportive" and should "love her child unconditionally." Chelsie expressed anger toward Patrice because "she immerses herself in work and takes antidepressants, stimulants, and everything in between so she can pretend not to notice the struggles within the family. Mothers are supposed to be more nurturing and supporting." Gina's extended response addresses several aspects of the motherhood mandate, but particularly encapsulates the expectation that a mother must be self-sacrificing to the extent that she willingly gives up *her* identity:

> I was angry at the mother, Patrice. . . . Her attitude was such that she felt it was beneath her to fulfill the traditional role of mother. . . . Instead of helping Liam, she turned away from the problem and allowed him to steal her estrogen and wear her clothing in secret. So not only does she scorn the role of mother, which is horrible to me, she also emasculates her husband, emotionally abandons her children, and is self-absorbed. Isn't family above self, especially when it is your very own child? Wouldn't you do anything for your child? By undertaking the sacred vow of marriage, don't you agree to lose a part of yourself to be part of something greater?

Some readers were furious that Patrice knew about but did not deal directly and openly with Luna's identity, despite the fact that Luna reveals that she and Patrice maintained an "unspoken truth" (p. 241) for the good of everyone in the family. Kalla felt this denied Luna the support she deserved: "That pissed me off so much because [Patrice] didn't handle it at all. She didn't try to help Luna through this struggle in her life, and she didn't try to inform her husband and keep her family together. What was she thinking?" Readers ignored that Patrice "handled it" by covertly making her medications available to Luna and secretly giving her feminine birthday presents.

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Regarding the medication, another student alleged, "I really do believe that Luna's mom tried to kill her indirectly [by] leaving the pills out where she could get to them easily." Accusing Patrice of attempted filicide goes far beyond faulting her for transgressing the motherhood mandate. It would undeniably have been better if Patrice had taken Luna to a physician for the appropriate hormones, but Luna repeatedly states that Patrice did the best she could. Readers did not see this as good enough, though. They believed it was up to Patrice to educate Jack about transgender identity, to mediate the conflict between her husband and Luna, and to support Luna openly and unconditionally.

Seven of the 24 females and 2 of the 4 males wrote statements excusing Jack O'Neill's behavior, and no student criticized him without justifying his actions. This is more than double the statements written about Mike Shreves, and the statements were forgiving rather than factual. It is possible that more students responded to Jack and did so in this merciful way because Regan repeatedly expressed empathy for her father. Students may have echoed Regan's

sentiments without critiquing or interrogating them. Whatever the reason, readers expressed a level of understanding of Jack's actions that were absent in the comments about Mike and certainly absent in the comments about both mothers.

Many students identified Jack as sexist, but seemed to accept it as a naturalistic rather than as an offensive, cultural construct. Jocelyn stated, "The dad came off as a typical father figure, pressuring their boys into sports and following their footsteps." Chelsie simply stated, "Their dad was overbearingly masculine and traditional. He felt that there were specific jobs for women, like laundry and cooking, and specific jobs for men, like playing sports and yard work." Even though she used the phrase "overbearingly masculine and traditional," she did not fault Jack for his views. As readers recognized Jack as a "typical father figure," they accepted and upheld the breadwinner-caregiver model of gender-linked parenting; they forgave him for his sexist attitude because it fits the traditional stereotype.

I was surprised by the vehemence with which these students upheld the breadwinner-caregiver model and the motherhood mandate as they maligned mothers and forgave fathers.

Readers also justified Jack's enforcement of gender-linked behavior. They sympathized that he simply "wanted the perfect son," and they believed he insisted that Liam perform traditionally male activities because he actually knew about Liam's transgender identity and "had hopes of changing him," but "was frustrated with his lack of progress." None of these readers faulted Jack for not accepting Liam as Luna. Evidencing a flagrant double standard, they didn't expect him to display unconditional love and acceptance toward his child but noted his wish for the "perfect son," a "regular boy," or a "masculine male." No readers expected Jack to nurture or support Luna; they just noted his frustrated hope that Liam would change to meet *his* expectation.

Students also drew on cultural narratives that value sons over daughters to forgive Jack. Chelsie believed Jack thought that by allowing Liam to break with the male stereotype, "he would be forced to accept that he was 'losing' a son and could not bear the emotional disappointment he would have." Lyndsey also "found some sympathy for [Jack] because he just wanted a son." Ethan "felt pain and a sense of loss" for Jack who was "searching for his son, trying to find out who he is, wanting to understand." This statement is particularly glaring, since there is no evidence in the novel that Jack made any attempt to understand Luna. Ethan further believed Jack wanted "only the best for his child." This implies that Jack knows what is best and ignores that Jack threw Luna out of the house. Thus, Jack was forgiven time and time again for his unrelenting, gendered expectations. He was seen as "losing a son," yet no one censured him for not celebrating the fact that he was gaining a daughter. And, unlike Patrice, he was forgiven for putting his own emotional needs before Luna's.

Implications

I find myself returning to Hauser's (2015) question, "What is it about our gendered parenting roles that we cling to so tightly?" (p. 329). I was surprised by the vehemence with which these students upheld the breadwinner-caregiver model and the motherhood mandate as they maligned mothers and forgave fathers. Turning to existing literature, I found only one study involving ninth and tenth graders' views of parents in realistic and historical fiction (Harmon & Gonzalez, 2003). These students expected parents to serve as role models, to be supportive and caring, and to balance mandates with opportunities for independent decision making. This dearth of research indicates the need for studies involving preservice teachers' cultural models of parenting. Those of us who teach know what a demanding profession it is, and my students' responses set them up for mother-blame and the very real problems associated with work/family conflict. I am also concerned about the implications of upholding traditional parenting roles on teachers' perceptions of their students' parents. Too often, I hear mother-blame expressed when children's homework is not done or when they come to school without necessary supplies or appropriate clothing, and I now recognize this criticism as an expression of the motherhood mandate. Hopefully, this study will lay the ground-

work for further research regarding parenting models and cultural expectations.

Admittedly, this study looks only at white, middle-class, heterosexual, two-parent households, which are only a subsection of the array of family structures and parenting styles. Future research looking at readers' responses to a range of family and parenting models is needed. YA novels featuring nontraditional families abound and would be valuable venues for studying preservice teachers' responses to diverse families and parenting. *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) features an overweight female protagonist in a household headed by a single mother, while *Husky* (Sayre, 2015) features an overweight male protagonist in a multigenerational household comprising his mother and grandmother. *I'll Give You the Sun* (Nelson, 2015) is a novel featuring a single father and a gay adolescent, and *If I Was Your Girl* (Russo, 2016) features a trans protagonist living with her father. LGBTQ parents are represented in novels from the classic *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1997) to the two moms in *Saving Montgomery Sole* (Tamika, 2016). Additionally, in *Piecing Me Together* (Watson, 2017), Jade lives with her single mother and uncle, and Katie lives with her single mother, special-needs brother, and aging grandmother in *Unbecoming* (Downham, 2016).

Finally, these preservice teachers' responses led me to reconsider my teaching pedagogy. My students did not arrive at a "critical reading of the text as a social and political construct" (Cai, 2008, p. 216) as I had intended. I am still committed to the movement from aesthetic to efferent response, but realize I must be more purposeful in guiding my students to critical reflection. Critical reading extends from aesthetic response when readers become aware of their "misconceptions, biases, and prejudices" (Cai, 2008, p. 217) and scrutinize them for their sociocultural influences. This occurs when students identify how texts position them and how the cultural contexts and ideologies they bring with them to their reading shape their responses (Connors & Rish, 2015; Lewis, 2000; Schwartz, 2014). I believe that achieving this deep, critical reflection requires purposefully and strategically guiding students to recognize their "otherwise unchallenged cultural assumptions" (Hancock, 2008, p. 95) by front-loading instruction about cultural ideologies and posing more teacher-initiated questions during discussions so cultural storylines *are* deconstructed and disrupted.

To begin to encourage student critique of the cultural assumptions they bring to their reading, I have revised the second-section writing prompts as follows (adapted from Apol, 1998; Connors & Rish, 2015; & Rosenblatt, 2005):

- Which of your beliefs or values did you become aware of while reading? How did you develop these beliefs and values; where did they come from?
- Which aspects of the story seem "obvious" or "natural" to you? What cultural narratives did you bring to your reading that made these parts of the story seem familiar?
- Did the book challenge any of your beliefs or prompt you to think about something in a different way? What does this indicate about the author's ideology and your own?
- Describe who the text seems to be addressing. How are you like and unlike this implied reader?

Conclusion

The students in my young adult literature courses were preparing to become licensed teachers of early or middle childhood students, and many will likely become parents. It is also likely that they and their partners will not conform to the breadwinner-caregiver model, though they clung tightly to the motherhood mandate, faulting Phyllis and Patrice for being dedicated to their professions, for not being self-sacrificing enough, for not being nurturing and supportive enough, and for exerting both too much and too little control over their children. While they commented on the fathers' negligence in relating to and supporting their children and for their traditional, sexist behavior, their observations were devoid of blame, and those who commented about Jack O'Neill actually forgave him for his transgressions. Focused interrogation of the breadwinner-caregiver model of parenting and the motherhood mandate, as well as what they mean for both mothers and fathers (and teachers) today, may enable readers to identify their personal beliefs, explore why they hold those beliefs, and determine if such beliefs serve them well now and if they are likely to serve them well in the future. Through critical reflection, we might discover why we cling so tightly

to gendered parenting roles and ask a new question, "What model of parenting makes the most sense for me and for my family?"

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