New Fathers?
Contemporary American Stories
of Masculinity, Domesticity, and Kinship
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By

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When I began writing *New Fathers?* I lived in a nuclear family; as I complete it, I am a single mother with shared residential custody of two children whose father now lives in one of the “alternative” family constellations I write about here. My experiences of shifts in family life are by no means unique, but they illustrate the at times acute proximity of the themes and representations in literature and film discussed in this book to our own experiences in life, and to the narratives we often form in order to make sense of experience. It is my sincere hope that those who read this book will use it to reflect on literature and film, as well as on life in general.

At this point I can stop thinking about writing the book, and begin to think instead about reading it. I hope that for scholars in literary studies, American studies, gender studies, and family studies, as well as for social historians, and students in these and related fields, this book may serve as a source book, a course book, or inspiration for further research. Because its subject should be relevant outside as well as inside the academy, I hope that it will be accessible to an interested general reader. To my knowledge, no other volume to date offers a discussion of relational constructions of fatherhood, and of the intersections of masculinity, domesticity, and kinship in contemporary fiction and fictional film; this is the original contribution of *New Fathers?* To the reader who picks up this volume my recommendation is that whatever other chapter(s) you choose to read, also read Chapter One, for it is the ground from which the ideas developed in the following chapters spring.

The chapters included here were initially conceived as separate essays. An early version of Chapter Two was a paper at the Nordic Association for American Studies conference in Sweden in 2005; Chapter Three originated as a paper at the Midwestern MLA conference in Milwaukee, also in 2005. Both papers were later published as chapters in anthologies. In 2003 I presented a paper on *Smoke* at the “Father Figures” conference at John Moores University in Liverpool, UK, and although very little remains of that initial presentation, one or two of its ideas are incorporated in Chapter Four of this study, which thus can be said to represent the entire time span of my research on fathers.
My workplaces during these years have offered different arenas for research and development. At the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Gävle University I taught American Literature and Gender Studies, which allowed me to test ideas and texts in pedagogical contexts; the multidisciplinary faculty seminars also contributed to the present shape of this book. A special thankful thought goes to my former colleagues there. My present workplace, the interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University, is a research milieu that is constructive and critical, but also caring, something that is not to be taken for granted in the academic world. The seminar series on “Critical perspectives on men and masculinities” at the Centre has also been an important venue for encounters with masculinity studies scholars from Sweden, the UK, the US, and Australia. I am grateful to the members of the masculinity studies group for good discussion, and to all my past and present colleagues at the Centre for support and curiosity, inspiration and energy.

Furthermore, I wish to thank the Helge Ax:on Johnsson Foundation, The Department of Humanities at Gävle University College, and the Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University for generously funding research trips to libraries and conferences abroad. Thanks also to every helpful librarian at the libraries of Gävle, Uppsala, and Gothenburg Universities, the British Library, and the Harvard University libraries for excellent services.

Many individuals have been important for the ways that my interest in fatherhood and gender equality has developed at different stages of my life. Relatives, friends, and colleagues have shared thoughts that have helped me unpack events, narratives, and concepts related to fathers, parenthood, and the very notion of family. I extend my gratitude to all the people who have offered emotional and intellectual support throughout the writing process. Foremost among these are Liz Kella, Maria Holmgren Troy, and Annika Olsson, dear friends and workmates, whose critical thinking, astute reading practices, and generous yet honest advice I value enormously, and whose friendship I am privileged to enjoy. I am also very grateful for the unfailing support of my family. Huge special thanks go to my sister Malin, my mother Hjördis, and my father Göran. Finally, warm thoughts go to my children August and Felix, who are great thinkers, sensitive and joyful companions, and lovely human beings.
INTRODUCTION

NEW FATHERS?

This study investigates how contemporary American novels and fictional films address the notion of “new” fatherhood, especially within the context of non-nuclear families. It argues that such representations balance a desire for reformulated fatherhood with nostalgia for “traditional” or “old” fatherhood and family forms. A central question in the chapters that follow is how the family ideal as a perceived American tradition and the perceived current (nuclear) family crisis impact upon fictional representations of fathers. How is “new” fatherhood envisioned in relation to the absent yet authoritative “old” father of the American family ideal? How is fatherhood (re)defined within “alternative” families? To what extent is fatherhood envisioned as a struggle for recognition or legitimacy? And how is fatherhood constructed in relation to motherhood? To childhood? To childlessness? Applying a relational and constructionist perspective will allow me to address questions about the variety of ways in which these fictional representations of fathers function as imaginative responses to dominant family ideologies.

“New father” is in itself an ambiguous term, denoting both one who has recently become a father, as well as a new kind of father that involves a revision or revaluation of fatherhood. In addition, the currently growing critical interest in fatherhood that this study is a part of also brings meaning to the term “new,” as in “newly discovered” by those who may or may not be fathers themselves. The notion of new fatherhood that has received quite some publicity especially since the 1990s will be explored further in the first chapter of this study.

Unlike E. Ann Kaplan’s crucial study Motherhood and Representation (1992), which she wrote driven by a sense that the mother in American fictions was an “absent presence,” was “in a sense everywhere . . . but always in the margins . . . spoken, not speaking” (Kaplan 1992 3), the present study looks at representations of fathers as central, present, and speaking; the father figures explored here have gendered voice and agency. They are fictional constructions that, with some difficulty and sometimes with highly problematical results, negotiate the limits of
fatherhood. Often, too, they embody attempts at a re-formulation of the meanings of fathering as social and familial practice, against the backdrop of “traditional” fatherhood.

This study, then, wants to problematize current understandings of “new” fatherhood as identity and practice. The social context of families in the US has shifted in the past few decades in ways that have led scholars in various disciplines, as well as politicians, activists, and others, to claim that both family and fatherhood are very different concepts today than they have ever been before in American history. This contention will be investigated further in the chapters that follow. This is not to say that fictional representations offer “the truth” about American fatherhood; what I investigate here is how contemporary discourses about American fatherhood operate also in fictional representations, and the ways that such fictional representations can both incorporate and resist such contemporary discourses.

Importantly, too, representations of fatherhood will be read in relation to representations of motherhood (or the lack thereof) in the films and novels selected, in order to explore the ways that representing “new” fatherhood either necessitates (specific) representations of motherhood, or erases motherhood in order to give fatherhood central stage. I also feel obliged to stress, at this point, that this book is not intended as a “celebration” of fatherhood (nor of anything else, for that matter) but as a critical investigation of a figure that is ubiquitous in fiction, yet that has been conspicuously absent from literary criticism.

The mode is which this study analyses selected fictional representations in the context of broad cultural discourses on family, parenthood, and domesticity in the United States is inspired by, and builds upon, the work of literary scholars, but also the work of scholars in other fields, notably film and media studies, history, and sociology (e.g. Coontz 2000; Doucet 2006; Griswold 1993; Johansen 2001; Lewin 2009; Lupton and Barclay 1997; McCarthy 1997; Stacey 1998; Thorne and Yalom 1992; Weston 1991). Fiction is thus understood as participating in, and simultaneously contributing creatively to, a culturally specific dialogue about contemporary meanings of family and fatherhood. Importantly, such meanings have bearing on the ways that literature is read, analysed and critiqued, but also in a much broader sense on various kinds of kinship work inside and outside of the academy.

The study investigates the following novels: Jayne Anne Phillips’ *MotherKind* (2000), Michael Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), and Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News* (1993), as well as the film *Smoke* (Paul Auster and Wayne Wang 1995), and a selection of
texts on “househusbands,” including Ad Hudler’s novel *Househusband* (2002), and the film *Mrs Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus 1993). Clearly, while these can all be termed “popular” texts, they can also be variously defined in terms of genre. Importantly, they envision kinship arrangements other than the normative nuclear family, within which fatherhood can be relationally (re)constructed. Also, they all—albeit in different ways—express ambivalence about this paternal project of “re-invention.” Given the limitation of the sample of texts dealt with here, this study can only be seen as beginning the work to explore fictional father figures as relational constructions.

While the selected novels and films are united by the centrality of their concern with fatherhood and domesticity, they formulate this concern in various ways, and they are also different in terms of thematic focus and emphases. The texts introduce different kinds of “alternatives” to the nuclear ideal, including gay or queer fathers, single fathers, divorced and remarried fathers in “extended” families, as well as househusband fathers, and represent practices ranging from individual and biological fathering to communal and social fathering. Because of these differences, rather than sweepingly treat all the selected texts as examples of the same phenomenon (or the same story), each chapter examines how the narratives relate differently to the concepts of “old fatherhood,” “new fatherhood” and the family ideal. The chapters also involve different interdisciplinary sets of critical sources, in order to best explore the ways that these fictional representations struggle variously with notions like family nostalgia, queer kinship, parental legitimacy, and domesticity, which circulate in social and academic discourses at their time of production.

Whereas the family ideal undeniably wields tremendous social and cultural force, I contend that fiction can function as a site where the ideal can be confronted, questioned, and undermined, a space where “alternative” fatherhood stories can take form. Sometimes, the stories investigated here use the breadwinner father of the nuclear American family ideal as a springboard for re-inventing fatherhood in new terms, at other times to express nostalgia for the perceived stability of “traditional” fatherhood and kinship arrangements. Hence, as these texts abandon the nuclear patriarchal model of the American family ideal, they nevertheless often struggle with nostalgic traces of that family, even as they formulate other families that can house the father.

The novels and films included here represent a wide spectrum of responses to a specific cultural ideal of family, yet are united by their insistent explorations of fatherhood and domesticity as complex notions.
What the texts suggest, and what this study will primarily be focusing on, is that fatherhood and fathering are concepts that can denote many forms of identities and practices. Importantly, the relative multiplicity suggested by the various ways that fatherhood is mediated in these narratives also challenges the father stereotype of absent “breadwinner” only. Nevertheless, fathers in these stories also typically struggle with issues of limitation and legitimacy, which signals that fatherhood is never unproblematical. Some of the selected texts offer fathering envisioned as communal practice, that is, as work that men share. Others function as textual vehicles for thinking fatherhood in non-biological terms, away from heterosexual norms, or in contexts of extended (semi)biological kinship relations.

Although some critics contend that there is “no a priori or necessary relationship between maleness, masculinity, heterosexuality and ‘the father’” (Lupton and Barclay 1997 16), I only agree on the point of sexuality—that is, there is no a priori link between heterosexuality and “the father”—but I will consistently be using fatherhood and fathering to discuss men’s parental practices, in social reality as well as in fiction. The reason for this is that I do see interesting links between masculinity and fatherhood, and I want to argue that fatherhood is a site where masculinity and domesticity intersect. I also find it important to, if possible, broaden the understanding of “fathering,” unlike some scholars who prefer to refer to men’s caring parental practices as “mothering” (Ruddick 1992; Silverstein 1996); I discuss my reasons for this choice further in Chapter One.

Masculinity is a contested critical term, which due to its elusiveness and messiness has been suggested to be “dead” as a critical concept (Hearn 1996). However, this suggestion seems to have been premature, to put it mildly. Especially in analyses of symbolic representations in film and fiction, masculinity is a crucial concept, which I will use to denote the multifarious means by which men’s gender is constructed practically and ideationally.

Fatherhood as identity and fathering as practice are explored as sites marked by tensions between nostalgia and reinvention. An important question guiding the analyses is what space there is for fathers in non-patriarchal and non-nuclear families. An additional question is how fatherhood is constructed relationally in “alternative” families. In order to

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1 The development in studies on men and masculinities has been tremendous since Hearn posed his question. For an overview, see e. g. *Handbook on Studies on Men and Masculinities*, Ed. Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell (2005).

2 In other words, in this study masculinity is linked to men, and not used in the sense of, for example Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998).
explore these questions the study employs perspectives from feminist studies, masculinity studies, and queer studies on family, fatherhood, and masculinity, as well as on domesticity in the United States. Placing these discourses on fatherhood and gender alongside fictional representations the study aims to contextualize contemporary fiction and fictional film to demonstrate their embeddedness in, as well as their resistance to, cultural debates about family, and about “new fatherhood” especially.

The initial chapter offers a context for the fictional representations discussed in the chapters that follow. This context involves popular contemporary discourses on nuclear and “alternative” family and fatherhood in the United States, as well as academic and other discourses on the “new father.” This chapter also discusses the interesting conflict between the importance of fathers and nuclear families in national political discourses, and the seeming irrelevance of family and fathers in national literary discourses, that is, the literary canon. I argue that it is largely because of the critical focus on masculinity as “domophobia” that links between masculinity, fatherhood, and domesticity in fictional texts remain largely unexplored; partly this is also a result of the power of the American nuclear family ideal, which is further explored in this chapter.

Chapter Two addresses Michael Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), and the ways that paternal identity intersects with sexual identity and gender. The novel envisions possibilities of creating queer forms of family life and parenthood, especially through the protagonist Jonathan, a gay man who is struggling for familial legitimacy, and experiencing a decidedly gendered lack of parental entitlement. The novel is clearly written into contemporary debates in the 1980s and 1990s over shifting family values and family formations, particularly gay adoption and surrogate parenting, and seems to stake a claim for the non-heteronormative family.

In Chapter Three, I turn to a selection of stories about fathers who are also househusbands, including Ad Hudler’s *Househusband* (2002) and Chris Columbus’ film adaptation *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993). I also return to Cunningham’s *A Home At the End of the World* and the “housewife” figure Bobby, an example of domestic masculinity that stands apart from the heterosexual matrix. In these texts, breaking gendered boundaries impacts profoundly upon the sense of identity of the homebound men. It is important, I think, to ask the question why the househusband figure appears at precisely this point in time, and also to consider the relationship between the contemporary househusband and (the history of) the American housewife, a figure inevitably linked to nostalgic longing and the family ideal.
Chapter Four explores two fictional narratives, Paul Auster’s and Wayne Wang’s film *Smoke* (1995) and Annie Proulx’s novel *The Shipping News* (1993). While there are clear differences between the ways that fatherhood is represented in these two narratives, they have in common that they envision fathering as a shared project for men rather than as an isolated, individual project. The discussion focuses on how fathering practices are represented as part of the everyday, but also on to what extent paternal community excludes or marginalizes women. Moreover, it addresses how these two fictions position themselves in relation to the much publicized “problem” of American fatherlessness.

Finally, Chapter Five investigates Jayne Anne Phillips’ novel *MotherKind* (2000), and the protagonist Kate’s attempts to position and understand masculinity and fatherhood within the context of the late modern, extended American family. The chapter explores how Kate’s ideas about gender and fatherhood coincide and conflict with the practices of her husband and her father, and how the novel relates the practice of parenting to American cultural memory. The novel also inserts the contemporary family into imagery from white, mainstream popular culture in the US, a space where femininity and motherhood are typically erased, while masculinity and fatherhood are overwhelmingly present.

In a sense, this chapter revisits some of the issues that were central in my previous research on cultural ideals and representations of men in women’s liberation novels (Wahlström 1997). I find it crucial to include the perspectives of women—both in terms of authors and protagonists—on men as fathers, simply because these are often left out of studies on men and masculinities. I see such inclusiveness as an important part of the feminist project of cultural critique; largely, it is thanks to the work that feminist critics have done to scrutinize and problematize representations of women and femininity that it is possible today to also investigate women’s novels as texts that envision masculinities as gendered constructions.³

As is evident from the chapter outline presented above, there will be substantial differences between the chapters in this book, depending on whether fathers are envisioned in the mode of tragedy or comedy, and whether they are perceived from a male or a female perspective (in terms of both author and character/narrator). Taken all together, the examples included here suggest diversity in representations of fatherhood, and they all concern themselves in different ways with the links between

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³ As Margaret Atwood has claimed, “[w]omen’s novels are about men” (Atwood 1984 34), and as I have also argued elsewhere, the “different point of view” on men and masculinity that women’s novels present can be a productive field for feminist investigation (Wahlström 1997 129).
masculinity, parenthood, and domesticity. However, despite this diversity, some ideas recur in several narratives, and these will be addressed in the Conclusion. Importantly, while the novels and films are treated as written in dialogue with contemporary discourses on shifting family patterns in the United States, and on the meaning of “father,” this does not automatically mean that they express progressive ideas regarding parenthood, kinship, or indeed gender. In other words, the implications of the presumed “newness” of the new father is a notion that will be treated with some caution.
CHAPTER ONE

COMPLICATING KINSHIP, FATHERHOOD, AND DOMESTICITY IN THE US

Fatherhood (like motherhood) is in one sense universal, always and everywhere intricately linked to identity formation, social practice, and gendered power. But more importantly, fatherhood also signifies in particular ways depending on cultural and historical contexts. Fatherhood has been described by philosopher Thomas Laqueur as lacking the corporeal element of motherhood, and therefore as more highly valued than motherhood throughout the history of Western thought, in accordance with the Western tradition of privileging mind over matter. Only with late twentieth-century feminism has motherhood become more “real” than fatherhood, he argues further. However, his writing around 1990 suggests that the time has come to reassess fatherhood and investigate its contemporary meanings.

[The father’s] claims, like [the mother’s], arise from the intense and profound bonding with a child, unborn and born, that its biological kinship might spark in the moral and affective imagination, but that it does not entail . . . The ‘facts’ of such socially powerful and significant categories as mother and father come into being only as culture imbues things, actions, and flesh with meaning. This is the process that demands our continued attention. (Laqueur 1992 173-74)

Whether one finds Laqueur’s contentions provocative or reassuring, it is clear that fatherhood carries tremendous cultural value, but this cultural value is ambiguous (Segal 1990).

Fatherhood is, on the one hand, privileged in all patriarchal societies. In the United States, a patriarchal culture where the link between the (white) family and the nation has been rhetorically and ideationally maintained throughout the past 400 years, the father obviously holds a
central position both as myth and as reality. Founding fathers, paternalistic antebellum slaveholders, and the post-WW2 breadwinner father in the grey flannel suit are all examples—albeit variously charged—of particularly American father figures in which paternity, paternalism, and patriarchy intersect.

Yet, on the other hand, fatherhood is also secondary to motherhood when it comes to actual parental care, nurture, and responsibility; this is true not least in the United States, due to the perceived “naturalness” of motherhood in that culture. One critic notes that “[e]ven modern twenty-first century America generally views fathers as secondary parents (if present at all)” (Mallon 2004 1), and goes on to enumerate “[t]he images that [US] society has had of men parenting children” such as “the divorced dad who sees the kids on weekends, the workaholic dad who just writes checks, and Mr. Mom, who pitches in with child care but still defers to the child’s mother as the expert on what the child needs” (Mallon 2004 135). Despite the prevalence of such imagery of fathers as secondary parents, the father is indisputably a powerful figure in US culture.

Before going into analyses of fictional representations of “new fathers” it is vital to explore the ways that the concept of new fatherhood has been generated in the late twentieth century, and also to address the meaning of “old” fatherhood. I draw upon gender studies scholarship in fields like sociology and history to outline the discursive developments against which I will read narratives about fathers and fatherhood in the following chapters; weaving a web of socio-historical developments with questions about fathers in fiction and fictional film is also the method that I will use throughout this study. The aim of this initial chapter is thus to contextualize the fictional representations of fatherhood and fathering that will be the subject of subsequent chapters, and to juxtapose the critical absence of fathers from studies of American literature and film with the

1 See especially Natasha Zaretsky, No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980 (2007). See also Coontz, who discusses the ways that presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Ronald Raegan have argued that strong families are the basis of a sound American society (Coontz 2000 94).

2 See for example Michael Kimmel’s discussion of the place of fathers in American culture in the 2006 edition of Manhood in America. Kimmel notes:

While some think of the republicans as the “Daddy Party” and the democrats as the “Mommy Party,” it is probably more accurate to think of them as representing two different visions of paternal masculinity. What sort of father do we want . . . a “nurturing parent” or a “strict father”? Democrats such as Bill Clinton nurtured; they felt our pain. George W. Bush offered a harsher, punitive style but promised safety and security under his wing. (Kimmel 2006 252)
overwhelming presence of fathers in other areas of contemporary life. The contexts within which I wish to place fictional representations are contemporary popular discourses on family and fatherhood in the United States, as well as academic discourses in Gender Studies, American Literary Studies, and Film Studies.

**Family and fatherhood in America**

There is a perceived “crisis” of family, masculinity, and fatherhood in the United States, a crisis that is formulated both within political and academic discourses, as well as in the popular media. The period since 1990 has been one of intense debate concerning the status of the American nuclear family, often dramatized in terms of downfall and/or survival. In American political discourses the contemporary demise of the nuclear family is rhetorically set against an ideal family and a historical past when traditional values were shared by all (Bennett 2001; Carlson 2003; Llull 2003). Such rhetoric was once again mobilized in the 2008 presidential campaigns, as it was in the aftermath of 9/11, when a “back to order” approach emerged in the mass media that typically derided feminism for “trying to make boys more like girls” and, by extension, for trying to make men more like women, and hailed the return of “real men” as well as stable familial roles for all (Faludi 2007 23).

But “family” and parenthood have not only been urgent subjects of reactionary or normative discussion in the past few decades. On the contrary, as historian Betty Farrell notes, in the 1990s “family” was an established item on the agenda both in liberal and conservative debates (Farrell 1999). Marriage rights for gays and lesbians, the rights of adults to adopt children, the impact of heterosexual marriage on national social stability, the threats and possibilities of new reproductive technologies, the commercial aspects of surrogate mothering, and anxieties concerning the effects of “paternal absence,” all these issues and many more were circulating in liberal and conservative discourses, all of which, despite their political and ideological differences, worked to maintain the centrality of “family” and “parenthood” to understandings of contemporary American identity. Similar debates, although perhaps in

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3 Zaretsky also notes that, after 9/11, “an earlier, more ominous vision of the post-Cold War world returned with a vengeance. In the days that followed the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the symbol that had been so prominent between 1968 and 1980—that of a family under siege—also returned” (Zaretsky 2007 244).
different terms and a different tone, are ongoing globally, not least in other western nations (Ehrenreich 2003).

The myth of the downfall of the family builds upon a continued idealization of the patriarchal nuclear family as “traditional” and stable. However, the family ideal “not only departs considerably from the actual realities of contemporary families, but it also distorts family experiences of the past” (Andersen 1991 239). The American family ideal, that is, a family consisting of a married housewife-mother and breadwinner-father, and their biological children, is actually a rather recent development, that, according to historians began in the late nineteenth century for the middle class, and was typical across social class only in the period between 1945 and the late 1960s (Hawes and Nybakken 1991; Coontz 2000; Farrell 1999). Historian Stephanie Coontz’s The Way We Never Were (2000) deconstructs the myth of the harmonious nuclear family, as well as the mythologizing of “family decline” in the US in recent decades, demonstrating what other historians have also observed: the crisis rhetoric is as old as America itself (Coontz 2000).

While the biological nuclear family structure is thus not actually “traditional” in a historical sense, it nevertheless carries status as tradition. This can be explained by the extremely powerful presence of the American family ideal in political rhetoric, the collective imagination of the American people, and in American art. “Family” is a concept that contributes vastly to the construction of the United States as an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006). Indeed, as Farrell points out, “[t]he mere fact that family structures other than the nuclear are conventionally termed ‘alternative’ or ‘experimental’ demonstrates the power that the ideal still has to shape thinking about what constitutes a ‘normal’ family” (Farrell 1999 6). Clearly, the family ideal does not reflect the actual kinship arrangements of most Americans, nor does it reflect representations of family in American literature. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the family ideal has tremendous impact both on the lived lives of actual people and on the ways that kinship and parenthood are represented in art, film, and fiction. Importantly for the present study, envisioning alternatives to the family ideal will always also entail some form of positioning in relation to the ideal as such.

Particularly important insights into the functions of the American family ideal have been offered by feminist sociologists and historians (Andersen 1991; Coontz 2000; Farrell 1999; Zaretsky 2007). Sociologist

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4 See also Tyler May (1988).
Margaret Andersen delineates the American family ideal as made up of three sets of criteria: first, the family is placed exclusively in the private sphere; second, family is a site for harmonious and companionate interaction and nurture; and third, the family is nuclear and heterosexual, and follows a prescribed sexual division of labor (Andersen 1991). Throughout the twentieth century, while the American family ideal has positioned the mother as homemaker and primary parent, it has positioned the father above all as the family’s breadwinner, but also paradoxically as both authoritative and secondary parent. When I speak of the husband or father of the family ideal, I refer to “patriarchal masculinity” (Schoene Harwood 2000), that is, an enactment of masculinity that functions to conserve a stereotypically gendered assignment of responsibilities, positions, and space, rather than to challenge them.  

Although, as gender studies scholars have argued, there is no necessary link between “family” and procreation or multigenerational kinship (Lehr 1999; Weston 1997), many Americans do not perceive of themselves as belonging to a “family” unless they have children (Lewin 2009 48). It follows that understandings of fatherhood and motherhood have been implicitly or explicitly present in the ongoing debates about family in all political camps. What is clear from a review of these debates is that both fatherhood and motherhood are commonly perceived as concepts that have undergone tremendous change, especially in the past thirty years.

But even where there is consensus today that gender relations and family formations are shifting in the post-postmodern era, there is no consensus on the significance, or value, of these shifts. Some critics are morally outraged and seek someone to blame, feminism always a likely candidate. However, as some feminist critics have pointed out, the supposed “downfall” of the American family, as manifested in increased numbers of divorces and single-mother families, may not always be seen in such dystopian terms by women themselves (Andersen 1991). It has also been observed that poverty is a more probable cause of family “dysfunction” than is women’s participation in paid work outside the home (Coontz 2000). The work of historians also tempers the image of contemporary “broken” families by reminding us that families in the past were often “broken” too, albeit more often by death than by divorce.

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5 Literary scholar Berthold Schoene Harwood notes the importance of continuing to speak of “patriarchal masculinity” and “the insidious impact its inherent conceptual contradictions and inconsistencies continue to exert on the individuation and self-formation of both men and their other” (Schoene Harwood 2000, xi).
(Coontz 2000; Hawes and Nybakken 1991). In other words, both interpretations and evaluations of current developments differ.

So do uses of “family” as a critical term. Family is a highly politicized concept in the US, but as anthropologist Kath Weston has observed, “[p]olitics do not inhere in the term family per se, but in its deployment in particular contexts” (Weston 1997 200). Queer critic Judith Butler, on the other hand, has argued that “family” is always already heterosexual (Butler 2004). According to the feminist sociologist Judith Stacey, gay and lesbian families represent “a new, embattled, visible and necessarily self-conscious genre of postmodern kinship . . . [that exposes] the widening gap between the complex reality of postmodern family forms and simplistic modern family ideology that still undergirds most public rhetoric, policy and law concerning families” (Stacey 1996 108). Indeed, in queer criticism, some have argued for abandoning the term family, and privileging instead terms like kinship or friendship (or compañera, as in Lehr 1999) to refer to familial relations in non-heterosexist terms. However, while theoretically interesting, such shifts in linguistic practice seem unwieldy. I would suggest instead, that using the term “family” to refer to a wide range of kinship arrangements may slowly but surely undermine the dominance of the nuclear family ideal as the referent of this term.

To summarize, although in the mid-1990s a mere 7% of American families actually conformed to the nuclear family ideal (McCarthy 1997 1), numerous discourses still use “family” as shorthand for nuclear patriarchal family. While the American family ideal has been shown to “lag behind” social developments (Andersen 1991; Collier 1995; Farrell 1999; Hawes and Nybakken 1991; Sandell 1994), there is also evidence that some fictional genres, notably television and film, demonstrate a similar “cultural lag” in terms of their representations of family and parenthood. White nuclear families are clearly overrepresented in family sitcoms in the US (Cantor 1991), and several films in the past few decades seem to make it their urgent business to uphold the sanctity of the white middle-class nuclear family (Bruzzi 2005; Levy 1991).

As a consequence, “alternative” families are typically rendered invisible. By the wayside fall one-parent families, multigenerational families, childless families, foster families and adoptive families, lesbian and homosexual families, and numerous other kinship arrangements. Taken all together, these “alternative” families in fact make up the majority of families in the United States.

When ostensibly alternative families fall outside of representation, it follows that “alternative” ways of being a father also become invisible.
Fathering outside of the norm of biological-father-as-breadwinner is rhetorically erased at the moment that “family” denotes only the nuclear family of the American family ideal. It is a major concern in this project to explore such alternatives, as these are represented in fictional narratives. Here, I use “family” to denote a set of meaningful relations, and a form of social process, rather than a strict set of individual relations and a form of blood. However, since my object of investigation is fatherhood, there will be some form of multi-generational aspect involved in all the families investigated here.

6 To date, fatherhood has not been a prioritized area in literary studies (with the exception of psychoanalytic criticism, see Yaeger 1989; Bueno et al. 2000), nor in film studies. Motherhood, meanwhile, especially mother-daughter relations, has been a very large discrepancy in actual family practices . . . most Americans desire family life for themselves (Strach 2007:9).

7 Patricia Strach notes that “Americans think about family differently than about other institutions, and they desire family relations for themselves. . . . Though there may be a very large discrepancy in actual family practices . . . most Americans desire family life for themselves” (Strach 2007:9).
In addition, as historian Robert Griswold has observed, the multitude of discourses that attempt to define and control the meaning of fatherhood in contemporary American culture serve to uphold the centrality of fatherhood to conceptions of American identity. Because of the strong tradition of privileging the patriarchal family form in the US, it comes as no surprise that contemporary anxieties about the downfall of the patriarchal nuclear family in the United States become strongly linked to anxieties concerning a perceived “crisis” of fatherhood, and, by extension, of masculinity. Although this contemporary trend cannot be isolated to the 1990s, but in fact begins during the 1970s (Griswold 1993), it has intensified since the 1990s to the extent that it now seems to be part of “common sense” discourses in the US.

The anxiety concerning the current state of American masculinities has manifested itself, for example, in the growth of a Fathers’ Rights Movement (Gavanas 2004), and discussions about the effects of paternal failure (Faludi 1999). In fathers’ rights movements, as in conservative political rhetoric generally, the failure of the American family is often explained as resulting from women’s liberation and men’s loss of control. To remedy this development, men are typically encouraged to re-establish themselves as heads of families, as husbands and fathers—always within the framework of the heterosexual family—and this is one means by which they will reassert their masculinity. Father absence is portrayed as the greatest social problem in the US and the main cause behind violence, crime, and other social ills, overshadowing poverty, racism, sexism and other structural inequalities. Such suggestions barely mask a desire among conservative commentators, as well as among activists in Father’s rights groups and organizations like the Promise Keepers in the US, to reassert and legitimize patriarchal power of men over women and children. Meanwhile, they also reiterate an individualism that places the responsibility for social change on individuals rather than on government.

The suggestion that American fathers should assert their masculinity by reclaiming familial authority over women and children also points to the narrow range of emotions and responsibilities that are conventionally coded “manly” in men’s familial relationships; typically, these are control, authority, discipline, and breadwinning. As Gender Studies scholar Valerie Lehr has observed, proponents of active (biological and heterosexual)

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8 Fathers’ rights activists have claimed that men “suffer terrible discrimination in divorce court.” However, some studies reveal that “success rates of fathers in contested cases range from 40 to 50 percent ... That women receive custody in 90 percent of divorce cases obscures the fact that most men do not request custody” (Griswold 1993 263).
fatherhood in the 1990s shared with Moynihan’s infamous report in the 1960s “an understanding of gender as dichotomous” (Lehr 1999 108). It is worth noting that such narrowness in cultural constructions of fatherhood serves to make non-conforming ways of fathering either “deviant” or invisible.

American fatherhood is also typically rhetorically constructed—even in scholarship—as heterosexual, always positioned within marriage, white, and middle class. Single fathers, although certainly a minority among US single parents, do nevertheless exist, but are typically erased in the public debates (Mallon 2004 135), as are homosexual fathers, fathers in extended families, and stay-at-home fathers.

But what is the meaning of fathering? There is a noteworthy linguistic dimension to definitions of parenthood in terms of practice. While “mother” and “father” exist only as nouns in my native language Swedish, in English they function as both nouns and verbs. According to the Webster Dictionary, the verb “mother” denotes “to give birth; to produce; to care for, cherish, or protect in manner of a mother.” The verb “father,” meanwhile, denotes “to beget; to be founder, creator, or author of; to produce by education or training; to place responsibility for origin or cause of; to care for as a father might” (emphases added). The boundaries of mothering and fathering are thus linguistically defined in ways that foreground the more natural nurturing aspects of the one, and the visibly more conditional aspect of the other; this also seems to point in the direction of current understandings of “father” as a noun that, as Laqueur discusses, might involve, but does not entail, intense bonding with a child. In the light of such linguistic and cultural restrictions, understanding “fathering” in other terms than as “producer” or “educator” in some sense, or as someone who “might” care for another but does not have to, requires an active effort.

Since the late twentieth century, fatherhood discourses have also formed within the academic disciplines. It is clear that no singular, homogeneous meaning can be gleaned from a survey of scholarly and popular writing on fathers, but that several meanings of fatherhood co-exist that are variously formulated, and more or less strictly engendered, ranging from the authoritarian father who begets, disciplines, and supports his child financially and morally, to the democratic and nurturing father who supports his child socially, physically and emotionally. While some scholars would refer to the latter as “mothering,” for reasons I will soon

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9 Griswold’s study is a case in point, for he sometimes glides from “father” to “husband” (227), and he focuses almost entirely on white heterosexual men.
clarify further, I support a usage of “father” and “fathering” that is more inclusive, although this is not a choice intended to “celebrate” or otherwise glorify fatherhood.

Masculinity studies has been a growing field in academic gender studies especially since the 1980s. This productive scholarly field has developed simultaneously, but seldom in accord with, the fathers’/men’s movements, and often in explicit (feminist or profeminist) opposition to the claims of such (typically antifeminist) movements. (Connell 1995; Gardiner 2002; Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005; Segal 1990). Within masculinity studies, fatherhood studies has been a growing subfield since the 1990s, and at the present moment “research on fathering is . . . a well-established area of cross-disciplinary and international scholarship” (Doucet 2006 8). To date, fatherhood studies has not had strong representation in literary scholarship, but has had a strong empirical focus, exemplified above all by the research of sociologists (Marsiglio and Pleck 2005; Pleck 1981, 1997) and historians (Griswold 1993; Johansen 2001; Tosh 1999). The field of fatherhood studies is developing rapidly, and is also diverse in terms of scholarly interests and methods; it is by now almost too rich to be easily summarized, nor is that the object of this

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10 Raewyn Connell’s theorization of masculinity as a relational construction has been influential in this field, although later critics have typically addressed relationality in homosocial contexts rather than investigating male-female relations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Connell has also been important in promoting the critical use of the term “hegemonic masculinity” as denoting the “most honoured or desired” form of masculinity (Connell 2000 10), which can also be defined as “the opposite of femininity”—other masculinities in Connell’s schema are either subordinate to or complicit with hegemonic masculinity, or completely marginalized, although few actual men in practice can be said to embody hegemonic masculinity. See Beasley (2008) for an interesting critique of “hegemonic masculinity” that offers a rethinking of the term as discursive. My use of “hegemony” in this study is in line with Beasley’s argument, that is, I use “hegemonic” only to refer to an ideational level of gender construction.

11 See for example Collier (1995); Hobson (2002); Gavanas (2004); Lupton and Barclay (1997); Marsiglio and Pleck (2005); Siedler (2003).

12 See however Yeager (1989); Knights (1999); Schoene Harwood (2000); Bueno et al. (2000).

13 Also, it has focused almost exclusively on relationships between fathers and sons. A notable exception is Rachel Devlin’s study on fathers and teenage daughters in the 1950s, Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters and Postwar American Culture. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005.
However, I will point to scholarship that is particularly relevant to the focus of the present study, and in the analytical chapters that follow, I also return to selected critical studies of family, masculinities, and fatherhood.

In her important study *Masculinities* (1995), Raewyn Connell proposed that masculinity is a relational construct, always with femininity as a counterpoint that defines what masculinity is not. Although Connell does not focus on fatherhood particularly, her model is adaptable for investigating fathers. According to this constructionist perspective, while masculinity is typically formed in opposition to femininity, fatherhood is often similarly formed in—sometimes oppositional—relation to motherhood, in ways that produce differences rather than similarities in parenting across genders. Whereas absolute distancing of fatherhood from motherhood is a typical feature in conservative writings on parenthood (Blankenhorn 1995; Popenoe 1996, 2009), there are a range of standpoints also among gender studies scholars concerning this point.

An important recent contribution to social scientific studies of fatherhood is Andrea Doucet’s study *Do Men Mother?* (2006), the title and main research question of which are inspired by the way that feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick has chosen to term caring parental work “mothering” whether performed by men or women, in an acknowledgement of the historical and continuing work done by women (Ruddick 1992; 1995). The problem with Ruddick’s framing of men’s parental work and responsibilities is that it does not allow for any shifts in definitions and understandings of fatherhood as a critical concept. As Doucet demonstrates, men themselves reject definitions of their parental responsibilities and practices in terms of mothering. Although she finds that fathers themselves “rely profoundly on mothers to define their own fathering” (Doucet 2006 216), she notes that “fathers do not identify themselves as mothers or refer to the work they do as mothering. . . . Thus, while it is not always clear what the essence of fathering is, what is certain for men is that it is not mothering” (217). Importantly, referring to men’s

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14 For a good overview from the mid-1990s, see for example Louise B Silverstein, “Fathering is a Feminist Issue” (1996); for a decent summary from the early twenty-first century, see Marsiglio and Pleck (2005).

15 While Doucet observes that “[t]he position that men can and do mother is rooted in equality feminism and has developed mainly in the work of sociologists researching gender divisions of labour or primary-caregiving fathers, and more recently in some fathers’ rights groups” (23), Sara Ruddick’s talk of men’s (potential) mothering is grounded in a radical feminist stance that wants to acknowledge the parenting work of women.
parenting as mothering also “may render invisible other mothers who are also in the picture” (224), which would certainly be counterproductive for women. Gender and parenthood are intertwined concepts; together they may function to uphold or to deconstruct the significance of gender difference to understandings of parenthood.

Whereas Ruddick represents one point on the similarities-differences spectrum, in choosing to refer to all caring parenting work as “mothering,” Doucet represents another alternative, in attempting to broaden the definition of fathering, and refusing to refer to care in feminine terms. Although I am also interested in acknowledging the fact that mothers still do most of the caring work of parenting, like Doucet I choose to employ “fatherhood” and “fathering” to refer to the parenting that men do, and intend these terms to encompass both caring and nurture, as well as other aspects of men’s parental identities and practices. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, fictions vary in their uses of gendered terms for involved parenting.

But what are the links between fatherhood and (hegemonic and other) masculinities, especially when fathering is defined by caring work that is typically referred to by most critics as “conventionally feminine”? To speak with Doucet, we need to ask whether “fathers’ caregiving disrupt[s] the smooth surface of hegemonic masculinity?” (Doucet 2006 38). A fundamental assumption of this study is that like masculinity, fatherhood is also relationally constructed and hence must be understood as varied and depending on encounters and juxtapositions with other identities and practices, notably motherhood, childhood, and childlessness, as well as other masculinities.

Historical scholarship has analysed shifts and continuities in meanings of fatherhood, and this scholarly work in itself has contributed to an understanding of fatherhood as a socially constructed identity. In these histories aspects like authority, control, discipline, and involvement, but also absence, are often emphasized as central to fatherhood (Griswold 1993; Marsiglio and Pleck 2005, Rotundo 1993; Tosh 1999).16 However, recent research has also redressed fatherhood in other terms than authoritarianism and/or absence. One example is historian Shawn Johansen’s Family Men (2001), which explores the active at-home

16 English historian John Tosh’s A Man’s Place (1999) analyses Victorian middle-class men’s lives in their homes, thereby unlocking the gendered private/public dichotomy so common in earlier critical thought about family and parenthood in the 19th century. Feminist scholars have of course also problematized and, in the past decade, refuted the private/public dichotomy. See for example Cathy Davidson, No More Separate Spheres! (2002).
parenting of nineteenth-century fathers as captured in diaries and letters. Importantly, Johansen juxtaposes the picture created by these narratives of lived experiences with previous historical research based on books of proper conduct, the “how to” books of the Victorian age. Interestingly, if not very surprisingly, Johansen’s research uncovers lives and situations that did not conform to the father figure promoted by the conduct books, but that more often deviated from the ideal, and the norms it generated; the study defines nineteenth-century fathering as marked by deep emotional attachment, concern, and care.

Attempts to trace a development in fatherhood over the past few centuries have worked with various definitions of tradition and renewal. In his important study *Fatherhood in America*, historian Robert Griswold claims that until the 1980s, supporting a family was a central and taken-for-granted component of mature manhood, whereas in the late twentieth century American fatherhood has lost its centrality, its “naturalness,” and furthermore is marked by diversity as well as confusion. (Griswold 1993:242). However, many scholars have noted that the development of American fatherhood should not be understood as linear and gradual—from uninvolved and authoritarian to involved and nurturing, or from homogeneous to diverse—but as fluctuating and complex in the ways it incorporates emotional as well as practical qualities and emphases (Coltrane 1996; LaRossa 1997; Wall and Arnold 2007). Regardless of whether the perspective on fatherhood is “linear” or “flexible,” it seems that the current state of affairs urges many—scholars and others—to attempt a (re)definition of fatherhood in late postmodernity as indeed “changed”; this is the image of the contemporary “new father.”

The emergence of “new father” discourses

The 1990s saw a “rediscovery of family values’ indicated in national polls,” and *Newsweek* pointed out that the new favourite male icon for advertising was “Dear old Dad,” although “[a]dvertisers admitted that commercials featuring domestic fathers did not reflect substantive change in male roles as much as they tapped into women’s wishful thinking” (Coontz 2000:95-96). Nevertheless, in the early twenty-first century,
Canadian fathers account for 10 per cent of all stay-at-home parents. . . in Britain there are 189 000 men staying at home to look after the home and family . . . in the United States stay-at-home fathers make up nearly 18 per cent of all stay-at-home parents . . . Also in 2001 [in Canada men are] 16 per cent of all lone parents . . . One in six custodial parents in the United States are fathers (15.6 per cent) . . . In Britain, the number sits at approximately 10 per cent. (Doucet 2006 14)

These figures are higher than ever before, which indicates that actual changes have occurred. In themselves these figures say nothing, however, about whether or not these shifts coincide with the “wishful thinking” of women or men (or their children).

Opinions about the centrality of fathers in the American family differ tremendously. The late twentieth century has been described by feminist critic Lynne Segal as a time when “men’s hold on their status as fathers was less firm and secure than ever before” (Segal 1990 27). Another critic observes that, ironically, “the emphasis on fatherly nurture of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s arose precisely when fatherhood for young men was becoming demographically less salient in American society” (Griswold 1993 230). According to Valerie Lehr, because of men’s loss of their role as breadwinners, “throughout society, it is no longer clear what role, if any, men are to play in the family” (Lehr 1999 117). Other critics have claimed that there are only “unclear models of how men should be fathers” (Aitken 2009 34), or that fatherhood has “lost cultural coherence” (Griswold 1993 244).

To others, the role of fathers has been very clear. In the face of the research on men’s abuse of women and children (Stacey 1983; Daniels 1997; Kilmartin and Allison 2007) commentators like David Popenoe and David Blankenhorn have been widely quoted on the necessity of biological fathers for the production of sound families and healthy, successful children, and for society to “persevere” at all (Popenoe 1996 15). According to Blankenhorn, the father, unlike the mother, “protects his family, provides for its material needs, devotes himself to the education of his children, and represents his family’s interests in the larger world” (Blankenhorn 1995 122) However, as sociologist Michael Kimmel aptly observes, in this definition,

the real father is neither nurturing nor expressive; he is neither a partner nor a friend to his wife, and he sleeps through most of the young baby’s infantile helplessness, oblivious to the needs of his wife and child. Men are fathers, but they are not parents; They don’t actually have to do any child care at all. . . . [Blankenhorn lists] behaviors that do not require that he ever set foot in his child’s room. The notion that men should be exempt