

ONLY AN ONLY CHILD

Stories

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By

BRANDON FICK

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Department of English
Room 408
9 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7N 5A5

or:

Dean, College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
Room 116, Thorvaldson Building
110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7N 5C9

ABSTRACT

Only An Only Child is a collection of eleven short stories that examines masculinity in predominantly rural settings, emphasizing complex familial and romantic relationships. These stories respond to – and in certain respects, challenge – twentieth century narratives of masculinity by highly-acclaimed, male writers. They depict some of the same emotions and insecurities I have experienced in life, though in no way are they autobiographical. The collection chronologically charts masculine experience, with the protagonists’ ages ranging from four to seventy-five. Almost all the protagonists are of relatively privileged backgrounds, but despite this privilege, they are unable to live up to longstanding masculine “ideals.” Though present in the collection, there is less emphasis on toxic masculinity than there is on “afraid,” “confused,” and “passive” masculinity. While drawing inspiration from writers like Ernest Hemingway, John Updike, Philip Roth, and especially Guy Vanderhaeghe, *Only An Only Child* forges its own singular path.

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DEDICATION

For my mom and dad,
Debbie and Linden Fick.

And in memory of my grandparents,
Mary and Gordon Grest and Myrtle and Elmer Fick,
who live on through stories.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
ARTIST STATEMENT.....	vi
WORKS CITED.....	xxi
ONLY AN ONLY CHILD.....	1
BREEZE.....	9
CASEY.....	22
BETWEEN.....	39
A FORM OF UNEXPECTED CLOSURE.....	61
A FUNNY STORY.....	70
JOE NORMAN.....	88
TRIP TO LITTLE BIGHORN.....	107
HEART OF STONE.....	121
THE BIRDHOUSE.....	140
LIFE WITH KEIRA.....	158
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	214

ARTIST STATEMENT

Only An Only Child is a collection of eleven short stories that examines masculinity in predominantly rural settings, emphasizing complex familial and romantic relationships. These stories respond to – and in certain respects, challenge – twentieth century narratives of masculinity by highly-acclaimed, male writers. The stories are also a product of my personal experiences, emotions, and insecurities. I do not mean to suggest that any of these stories are autobiographical. Elements drawn from my life are situated in imagined conflicts, or simply serve as authenticating details. But as a young man who grew up in small town Saskatchewan, aware of certain pressures and attitudes, I have written what I know.

Reflecting my experience, in seven of the eleven stories, the protagonist is an only child. Being an only child engenders a distinct way of seeing and interacting with the world. Combined with personality and home environments, it is the primary source of conflict for a number of my characters. They act or do not act because of their position in life – a position that can be lonely, stifling, or strange. On top of being an only child, there is the inherent difficulty of parent-child relationships and male-female relationships. Within narratives of men struggling to live up to fathers or connect with women, sub-themes also emerge: guilt, death, and loss of innocence. From four-year-old Jared in “Only An Only Child” to seventy-five-year-old Gilbert in “The Birdhouse,” my stories chronologically chart masculine experience. And even though “Life With Keira” is out of this order, it closes the collection for a couple reasons: it is arguably a novella, and it encompasses all of the collection’s themes.

Before discussing themes and craft concerns in greater detail, I must clarify that when I speak of “masculinity,” the term is a shorthand, not intended to uphold monolithic concepts. According to R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, the world contains a plurality of

masculinities, arranged into hierarchies. Research shows “that certain masculinities are more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power, than others. The concept of hegemonic masculinity presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities, and this is a process that has now been documented in many settings, internationally” (Connell and Messerschmidt 846). None of my stories are written from the perspective of gay, transgender, disabled, or minority men: those historically subordinated by hegemonic masculinity. But my intention is not to celebrate hegemonic masculinity, but rather to show how even for men of privilege – white, heterosexual, middle-class – masculine “ideals” are typically out of reach.

The primary influence on my writing is Guy Vanderhaeghe. Aside from the fact that he is an acclaimed writer from Saskatchewan, it is the particularity of his characters, the situations they find themselves in, that resonates with me. Many of his characters are only children, deeply observant of the world around them. A prime example is eleven-year-old Charlie in “The Watcher” (*Man Descending*). Charlie is a curious boy thrust into the strange, adult world of his grandmother’s farm. Similarly, in my story, “Only An Only Child,” Jared’s mind “grope[s] for knowledge” well beyond his age. Because of a schoolyard bully, Jared considers the fact that he is an only child, and a creeping fear of being alone sets in. In an interview, Vanderhaeghe states that his characters tend to be outsiders: “Their experiences are not my experiences, but they are also trying to figure themselves out and trying to figure out where they’re positioned in the world” (Rosenwald). The only child as outsider is a recurring motif in my collection. In “Casey,” David is so self-conscious of his position relative to his hometown that it prevents him from acting. Joe in “Joe Norman” has been treated like an outsider his entire life, in part, because of his close relationship with his mother.

Because many of my protagonists are only children, it makes sense that their parents loom large in their lives. Besides “Joe Norman,” where the focus is a mother-son relationship, father-son relationships dominate my stories. In the history of fiction, this is nothing new. Regarding Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Marc C. Conner identifies an overarching pattern: “[A] father-figure places an overwhelming burden on his son; the son is either unable or unwilling to assume this burden; the son then rejects his father and flees Winesburg” (209). Anderson also influenced one of my other influences: Ernest Hemingway. Conner states that while “Anderson shows in *Winesburg, Ohio* a [subtle] reconciliation with the father,” Hemingway “tended for years to follow the grand pattern of strife and alienation between father and son,” and only in later works such as “‘Fathers and Sons,’ the final story (chronologically) in the Nick Adams sequence,” is reconciliation hinted at (231). Most of my stories’ endings are melancholy and the conflict between fathers and sons is not neatly resolved. In “Breeze,” the implication is that Albert’s whole life has been haunted by what his father forced him to do as a boy. In “Trip to Little Bighorn,” Keith only reflects on his grandfather and father’s attitudes years after they have died. Austin in “Life With Keira” belatedly realizes that trying to live up to his father has not served him well. None of these characters achieve true reconciliation. On the surface, “Heart of Stone” is similar, but I would argue that the main characters come closest to achieving mutual understanding. August Welch, like Rupert Kelsey in Vanderhaeghe’s “Man on Horseback” (*Things As They Are?*), is a hard-nosed, traditionally masculine father who makes his son feel inadequate. But in both stories, there is a moment of vulnerability when father turns to son. While August dies in “Heart of Stone,” the journey his son Stanley embarks upon reveals that there was a complicated love between them.

An equally important theme in the collection is male-female relationships. Specifically, men failing women. There are stories about failing to act (“Casey,” “The Birdhouse,” and “Life With Keira”) and stories about actions that result in failure (“Between” and “A Funny Story”). My goal is to realistically show how men can be their own worst enemy. Inexperience, inadequacy, and wavering between passiveness and aggression get in the way of meaningful romantic relationships. In “A Funny Story,” the failure of Eric’s father’s marriage contributes to the disintegration of his own. In “Casey,” David fails to respond to Casey’s appeals because he is afraid of being trapped in Burgess, and stepping outside his own narrowly-defined identity. These are two examples of themes intersecting. But all this is seen on a larger scale in “Life With Keira.” Austin is a relatively smart, sensitive teen, but in his feelings for his stepsister Keira, he is caught between desire and social norms, dreams and reality. He plays hockey like his father wanted, but is not particularly good, especially compared to Brady Morton. In the story’s key moment, Austin knows he should protect Keira from Brady, but he does not. I liken this story to two of Vanderhaeghe’s: “Drummer” and “Cages” (*Man Descending*). Regarding these stories, Francis Zichy states: “With their distinct, vivid colloquial language and revealing depiction of the sorry plight of an intelligent, sensitive male adolescent growing up in a Saskatchewan small town, these stories of Billy [Simpson], “Drummer” and “Cages,” are... evocative of a larger, North American-wide, social development: the advent of social progressivism” (47-48). While Austin is generations removed from Billy, similar values are at war within each character, namely, how to live “in a society dominated by brutality, masked by a progressive ethos that seems unable to recognize and deal with the realities of life” (Zichy 45).

Of the sub-themes in the collection, guilt is the most potent. Guilt in “Breeze” is made tangible through Albert’s return to the scene of “the execution,” and decades later, his dream

about Breeze while in the throes of dementia. The birdhouse in “The Birdhouse” is the focus of Gilbert’s guilt regarding Carol. Ben’s abrupt departure in “A Form of Unexpected Closure” can be read as self-preserving, guilt-driven, or a mixture of both. “Casey,” “Between,” and “Life With Keira” all end with their young protagonists wracked by guilt over what they did, or did not do, in their relationship with a teenage girl or woman. My goal is to make characters’ guilt as specific as possible, tied to the pain of another character, rather than simply about themselves. An example is Reid from “Between,” whose guilt stems from the fact that he physically and emotionally hurts Maia during sexual intercourse. In the end, Reid feels bad about himself, yet his overriding emotion is guilt: that he could hurt someone who cares for him, and that in trying to make up for his initial “shortcoming,” he does not treat Maia as a distinct person.

Death is a universal theme, and in my stories it shows up as it does in life: sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually, always presenting challenges for those left living. Few writers write about life and death in such a primal way as Hemingway, whose male characters seek “if not immediate death, at least a way of life which brings close at hand the prospect of immediate death” (Burnam 23). This is not the case for my male characters. Death, the loss of loved-ones, is something that happens to them, provoking grief, incomprehension, and guilt. “Joe Norman” and “The Birdhouse” focus on deaths that precede their narratives. “Casey” and “Heart of Stone” end with deaths, forcing each protagonist to consider the depths of their relationship with the deceased. “Breeze” is unique in that it ruminates on the death of an animal, and the death of childhood. Vanderhaeghe states: “My perspective has always been that life is mostly endurance. I’ve always had the sense that that’s the most important thing: to bear up as well as you can in any circumstance” (Rosenwald). My characters are not actively challenging death like Hemingway’s, but in their own way, they endure its long shadow.

Loss of innocence works in tandem with guilt and death. “Breeze” is a prime example of this intersection under the broader theme of father-son relationships. When Albert disobeys his father, he is forced to kill Breeze, and out of this death comes guilt and initiation into the adult world. “Only An Only Child” is a pseudo-coming-of-age story even though Jared is four and relatively innocent throughout. The old man’s fall, conflated with Jared’s own fall, raises a primal fear in him that will not be easily forgotten. “Casey” and “Life With Keira” depict male teens navigating awkward relationships with a girl. From their first-person perspective as older men, it is clear that David and Austin are haunted by the mistakes they made in these relationships. Again, I think of Vanderhaeghe and stories like “Koenig & Company” (*Daddy Lenin*) that “trade in men experiencing uncanny encounters with past mistakes, uncertain futures or their own ungovernable natures” (Morgan 5). My stories do not linger in the mind of the older, reflective protagonist as much as Vanderhaeghe’s, but what is shared is enough to know that the past, the loss of innocence, is never far away.

Straddling the line between theme and craft concern is my treatment of place. All but one of my stories take place in rural settings: farms, small towns, Little Bighorn Battlefield. As the setting of multiple stories, Hardwick is informed by my hometown of Lanigan, though it is not a carbon copy. Hallmarks of prairie realism like emotional isolation and agriculture are present in my fiction, though I do not consider it prairie realism. As Alison Calder explains, for prairie realists like Sinclair Ross, “The land and climate are everything. The prairies exist in a permanent, drought-produced dust storm, the tedium of which is broken only by the occasional blizzard” (55). I address geography and climate when necessary, but my focus is characters’ emotional geography. Even though these stories largely take place in Saskatchewan, they are not defined by the landscape, and with minor changes, could take place in rural Ontario or British

Columbia. In striving for universality, I am inspired by *Winesburg, Ohio*, which resonates well beyond Ohio. But to be clear, my characters *are* defined by place. In her essay, “Place in Fiction” (1956), Eudora Welty states: “Paradoxically, the more narrowly we can examine a fictional character, the greater he is likely to loom up. We must see him set to scale in his proper world to know his size. Place... has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it” (46). Gilbert from “The Birdhouse” could be in another province, but he could not exist apart from his empty house on its dead-end street because, “Location pertains to feeling” and “feeling profoundly pertains to place” (Welty 47). Welty also calls “regional” writing “an outsider’s term” that “has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows he is simply writing about life” (58). “Trip to Little Bighorn” could be read as a “regional” story about Montana or Western Canadian attitudes, but I see it as a story of subtle awakening, relevant to a wide audience.

Also positioned between theme and craft concern is my handling of female characters. In writing about masculinity, it is impossible to exclude female characters. I consider John Updike and Philip Roth lesser influences on my writing, but their work is often misogynistic, associating age with “the inevitable demise of masculinity and virility,” and depicting male characters attempting to “prove their manhood by compulsively seeking sex with younger women” (Armengol 358). While I admire their rhetorical skills, Updike and Roth’s masculinity in relation to women is very different than mine. On the opposite side of the spectrum is Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), where “men are the bit-players, featuring in single episodes rather than informing the whole, and reduced in status by being made subject to judgement” (Beer 126). In terms of gender representation, my fiction is not as one-sided as Updike, Roth, or Munro’s work; the women are much more than “bit-players.” Ashley in “A

Form of Unexpected Closure” is co-protagonist with Ben, and while this story is inspired by Hemingway’s “The Sea Change” (1931), it provides more interiority and closes on Ashley’s perspective. I have great empathy for her and other female characters, whether it is the concerned mothers in “Only An Only Child” and “Life With Keira,” Maia from “Between,” or even the deceitful Jane in “A Funny Story.” While some of my female characters are victimized, I reject the notion that they are passive victims. In fact, characters like Casey and Maia are more active than their male counterparts. Vanderhaeghe states: “I make no claims to be able to occupy a woman’s perspective. The only claim I can make is to locate women in men’s lives” (Rosenwald). This statement resonates with me, because while these are “masculine” stories, in most cases, there is no “story” without the women.

In terms of craft, causality and character motivation are my chief concerns. They should be for all writers, but being a young writer still learning the craft, I put extra emphasis on them. As Michael Kardos states in *The Art and Craft of Fiction* (2017): “Often, stories by new writers lack sufficient causality. One event occurs, then another, then another” (54). A story like “Joe Norman” is broken into distinct sections, but it is not episodic. Joe losing his job causes him to disregard his medication, causing him to hear voices telling him to go to the cemetery, and from this beginning the story escalates. Kardos also believes “the chain of causality requires more than two links” (55). Joe losing his job is not the sole reason he attempts to dig up his mother’s body. Guilt that he did not visit Arlene’s grave sooner, his deep love for her, loneliness, a lack of social support, and defiance of the town all contribute to what happens.

Honing motivation was a significant part of my revision process. In “Between,” this meant more details about the emotional distance and longing Reid felt in Europe, as well as an incident where he misinterprets a woman’s intentions. In “The Birdhouse,” this meant Gilbert

thinking more directly about the ways he had failed Carol, and what the birdhouse meant to her. In “Life With Keira,” this meant closing the story from the older Austin’s perspective, and having him consider why he did not protect Keira. The common denominator is characters considering, if not stating, why they are the way they are. Most of the time, this means interiority, as a “story that focuses exclusively on the external situation at the expense of its characters and what motivates them will not be compelling... The story must always be personal to the protagonist” (Kardos 127). All my stories are personal and have moments of reflection. Even “A Form of Unexpected Closure,” inspired by Hemingway, goes into the minds of its characters. While I can appreciate stories like “Hills Like White Elephants” (1927) – where there is no interiority and the language is spare – I can relate much more to Vanderhaeghe’s stories, where the psychological complexity is on full display.

My choices regarding point of view are indicative of writerly intention and personal comfort. Eight of the stories are written in third-person limited, with “Breeze” and “The Birdhouse” including sections outside the protagonists’ perspective, and “A Form of Unexpected Closure” split between its two protagonists. “Only An Only Child” is closest to omniscient third-person, but I still consider it limited, as it signals the shift between Lindsay and Jared through wording rather than a section break. This is necessary due to the narrative’s brevity. And I consider both sides – concerned mother and worried child – critical to the story. My use of free indirect discourse is more liberal than Vanderhaeghe’s, as I like holding characters at a distance, then zooming in at key moments for a thought. When this thought is a character’s voice verbatim, I usually emphasize it with italics. “Casey” and “Life With Keira” are written in first-person because I am familiar with David and Austin’s youthful perspective. “A Funny Story” is first-person because I wanted to channel a particular masculine voice: flippant,

sardonic, but also apprehensive. In Eric, there is a trace of Updike's Rabbit Angstrom, and Vanderhaeghe's Ed from "Man Descending" and "Sam, Soren, and Ed" (*Man Descending*).

Manipulation of time must serve a story's larger aims. "Only An Only Child" and "A Form of Unexpected Closure" both span no more than a hour. In the case of the former, this emphasizes the ordinary transformed into the extraordinary in a single moment, while in the case of the latter, it imparts a sense of realism, and increases tension. On the other hand, "Life With Keira" takes place over the course of two years, as time is needed to show the ebb and flow of Austin and Keira's relationship. Rather than a flash of insight or a single extended moment, it works through an accumulation of moments. "Heart of Stone" is largely told through flashbacks, a type of story, Kardos warns, where "the main character [does not often] do anything significant in the story's present" (126). This is not the case in "Heart of Stone" though, particularly once Stanley's car goes off the road. Then he must face the elements, and to a certain degree, the past – his dead mother, fear of dogs, and inability to swim – manifests in the stormy present. My biggest experimentation with time is in "Breeze," where more than halfway through the story, the narrative jumps forward eighty-two years. This is jarring, but it is no mere gimmick. If this story has a message, it is how deep-seated guilt, and love, can outlast almost anything. While spanning decades in short fiction is not without precedent – an example being Munro's "A Wilderness Station" (1994) – "Breeze" takes a risk by subverting expectations.

Symbolism is tricky to pull off for seasoned writers, so when it shows up in my stories there is no vagueness. As "The Birdhouse" progresses, it is implied that the birdhouse's inability to attract purple martins, its unfulfilled promise, symbolizes Carol and Gilbert's childless marriage. The empty birdhouse crashing to the ground is a visual representation of Gilbert's hollow life. Discussing Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" (1983), Chris J. Bullock states:

“Through the implied metaphor of [a] castle... ‘Cathedral’ portrays what we might sum up as the *isolation* of the masculine ego, its pushing away of relationships with others and with other parts of the psyche” (345). The story’s climax though, where the narrator and a blind man draw a cathedral, is “a metaphor for building, or at least designing, a kind of masculinity different from the [empty] masculinity of the castle or the Panopticon” (Bullock 347). “The Birdhouse” ends on a bleaker note than “Cathedral,” but in a similar way, it uses architecture to explore the ego of an aloof male character. As for other instances of symbolism, “Heart of Stone” repeatedly mentions stones to depict Stanley’s austere early life, and the “hardness” of his father. The word “between” in “Between” is imbued with multiple meanings. The symbolism of Keith and Nate meeting at the battlefield in “Trip to Little Bighorn” is fairly self-explanatory. But again, when it comes to symbolism, better to be obvious than vague.

Over the last half-century, once accepted notions of masculinity have been questioned, and in some cases, completely rejected. The majority of these changes have been beneficial to society, yet this is not to say that masculinity has been irrevocably changed, or that the changes have been seamless. In another interview, Vanderhaeghe states that he was raised in an almost “preternaturally masculine way,” and discusses how societal shifts throughout the 1960s and 1970s caused upheaval in men:

My generation was often described as particularly masculine, which meant physical prowess (sometimes regrettably associated with violence) and tended to be thought of as atavistic in some sense. So there were a whole series of things considered to be male identity markers that suddenly disappeared. Then the question that arrived was “What is left to define a male over and against what defines a female?” The women had, I think, arrived at a very strong definition of themselves. The men weren’t sure what it meant to

be male. Now, I grant that's a huge, sweeping generalization. But it came to be a question of "What are masculine virtues that are valuable virtues?" And that's very problematic. (Faieta 265)

What Vanderhaeghe is describing is a struggle that, while not as overt, still exists today: the reality of being a man versus unrealistic ideals. Today, the "ideals" enacted by Hemingway's protagonists, or the sexually aggressive behavior of Updike's Rabbit Angstrom and Roth's Alexander Portnoy, would be deemed examples of toxic masculinity. One definition of toxic masculinity, from the psychiatrist Terry Kupers, states that it is "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (Salter). The extent to which this is a problem in society can be debated, but generally, contemporary literature dealing with masculinity addresses toxic behaviour. The reason I have avoided mentioning toxic masculinity until now is that while there are toxic characters in my thesis – Brady and Greg Morton, Gilbert Jeffries, perhaps Harold Murray and August Welch – the majority of the protagonists do not fit under this label. In fact, the younger protagonists recognize and condemn toxic behaviour, and if they act aggressively, like Reid in "Between," it is because they are confused or embarrassed. My thesis is less an exploration of toxic masculinity than it is an exploration of "afraid," "confused," and "passive" masculinity.

There are a few more ways my thesis is distinct. As I have previously alluded to, my female characters are often more active than the male characters. Vanderhaeghe's quote applies to what I am doing, as characters like Casey, Maia, and Jane know what they want, while their male counterparts are confused and hesitant. They also speak their mind, which is best illustrated by what Maia tells Reid after their sexual encounter has gone awry: "But then it was all you. You *alone*. I felt like a means to an end. Like you were using me." The men

sometimes idealize the women in their lives, but I have done everything I can to present compelling, yet imperfect female characters. Reading characters like Del Jordan from *Lives of Girls and Women*, Morag Gunn from *The Diviners* (1974), Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and Grace Marks from *Alias Grace* (1996) has been helpful in this regard. Also, while “Between” includes a sex scene and “Life With Keira” a scene of sexual assault, there is nothing lascivious about their depictions. They are vividly described, but they do not veer into the “male gaze” territory that Updike and Roth’s work often does.

A second distinction is that my thesis contains minimal physical violence. In keeping with the focus on “afraid,” “confused,” and “passive” masculinity, this makes sense. It also makes sense that “Life With Keira,” which contains the most toxic characters, contains almost all the violence. Tom Gerry says this about Vanderhaeghe’s early short fiction: “Whereas in *The Trouble With Heroes*... violence inheres in the various situations but rarely is expressed directly, in *Man Descending* violent actions are central to most of the stories’ effects. In common, though, in both collections, the violence is physical” (204). Gerry goes on to say that “the physical violence is often concomitant with psychological violence” (204). “Life With Keira” grapples with psychological violence in Austin’s guilt over not protecting Keira, and Keira’s reaction to being sexually assaulted. “Breeze,” “Casey,” “Joe Norman,” and “The Birdhouse” also see the protagonists’ psyches come under assault. “Trip to Little Bighorn” sees Keith tentatively grapple with colonial violence. If my stories lack physical violence in comparison to Vanderhaeghe’s, perhaps it is because he was “brought up in what is now an antiquated code” where “if you’re backed into a corner, you have to [take physical action]” (Faieta 267).

Lastly, my protagonists tend to be self-aware. They know exactly who they are by the end of the stories, if not sooner. For example, David and Reid know that they do not measure up

to masculine “ideals,” and maybe even recognize that the “ideals” are ridiculous. Yet when faced by embarrassment, social pressures, or something new, they fall into the trap of doing nothing at all, or doing too much, in an attempt to overcompensate. Therein lies the problems my thesis is addressing. How to achieve balance as a man? How to act without overreacting? How to connect with little experience or an introverted nature? As I have previously mentioned, my thesis does not celebrate hegemonic masculinity, but neither does it portray men marginalized by class, race, ability, or sexual orientation. Recent masculine fiction by Canadian writers Nabeh Ruthnum, Kevin Hardcastle, Andrew F. Sullivan, and Kris Bertin often “focuses on life at the margins of society” or deals with “small-time crooks and liars” in desperate circumstances (Hosking). In this context, what I am doing is different, more elemental. Besides Joe Norman, ostracized because of his mental illness and physical appearance, my characters are relatively privileged. And so their main opponent is their own nature. Unlike a Hemingway protagonist, they are not testing themselves in a great external struggle. The “war” is a war within, waged quietly, often without anyone else noticing.

At this point in my life, the stories in *Only An Only Child* are the only stories I could have written. More than just a collection about only children, these stories are populated by characters striving to connect, to impress, to reconcile. They seek love and affirmation, but their desires are frustrated by cruel circumstances and personal shortcomings. Just as my characters grapple with longstanding masculine “ideals,” my thesis grapples with the long history of masculine fiction. Yet, while these stories are tinged with Modernist melancholy and sixties bravura, they are clearly products of the twenty-first century. *Only An Only Child* owes a debt to writers like Hemingway and Updike, but forges a path that is less traditional, and certainly less toxic. By writing men who are afraid, confused, and passive, I have stayed true to my own experiences,

and hopefully, made a small contribution to the increasingly nuanced portrayal of masculinity in literature.

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