

# Book of Abstracts

Family Fictions:  
Generations and Genealogies in European Culture  
(Leuven, 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> May 2025)

## **Jennie Bristow (Canterbury Christ Church University): “Toxic Pasts and Stolen Futures? Generational Conflict and the Modern Culture Wars”**

In the first two decades of the 21st century, overblown claims about generational conflict – captured in narratives of ‘Boomer blaming’ – have reimagined today’s social, economic, political and cultural problems as the fault of generations who came of age in the mid- to late 20th century. This has fuelled a paradoxical antagonism towards the recent past. On one hand, the 20th century is imagined as the final instalment of good times: in this narrative, the young have had their futures ‘stolen’ by the mistakes of their elders. On the other hand, the values and attitudes associated with older generations are considered to have left an enduring imprint of inequality and injustice on the young, whose struggles for identity require the energetic repudiation of all that has gone before. This context of ‘temporal crisis’ (Leccardi, Jedlowski and Cavalli, 2023) underpins the sense that different generations exist in competing realities in the present day, lacking shared language or values. A prevailing mood of cultural pessimism regarding the past and present stretches forwards, in an insecure, risk-aware orientation towards the future. This paper explores why the current ‘culture wars’ take the form of a conflict between living generations, and the ways in which relations between living generations also mediate and limit the reach of cultural conflicts.

## **Ruth Van Hecke (KU Leuven): “Narrative Constructions of Female Adolescence through Generational Conflicts in Dutch-language Interwar Literature”**

Adolescence is a remarkable and transformative stage of life, marked by profound physical, physiological, emotional, cognitive and social changes (Alexander & Sleight 2022: p.4). Although it may seem evident today, the perception of adolescence as a separate stage of life is a relatively recent development. Scholars like John Neubauer (1992), Jon Savage (2007) and Kent Baxter (2011) argue that adolescence emerged as a socio-cultural construct around the turn-of-the-century. Its appearance is closely tied to modernity and societal shifts, such as urbanization, industrialization, the expansion of secondary education, and evolving family dynamics (Lesko, 1996). Different discourses, like in psychology, sociology and pedagogy, about adolescence began to form, which played a pivotal role in shaping the perception of adolescence.

In this contribution, I will show that these dominant ideas were negotiated in literature. As literary texts both reflect, shape and question the ideas circulating in other discourses, studying the narrative constructions of adolescence can offer valuable insights. While interest in adolescence was not confined to a single nation or literature, I will focus on the figure of the adolescent in Dutch and Flemish narratives between 1918-1945, specifically on how the adolescent identity is constructed in relation to adult authority figures, such as parents and teachers. By analyzing how these generational conflicts and power structures are narratively constructed, we can gain deeper insight into the broader question of the construction of adolescence in this period.

For this contribution, I will mostly focus on the novel *Waren wij kinderen...?* (1933) by Fré Dommissie. Through the adolescent protagonist's struggles with family hierarchies and adult expectations, the novel reveals underlying tensions regarding authority. Using a cultural narratology approach (Herman & Vervaeck, 2017; Caracciolo, 2024), I will analyze how narrative techniques shape those portrayals. Doing so, I want to contribute to broader discussions on family fictions by showing how interwar Dutch literature uses the adolescent, a symbol of transformation and a site of generational conflict, to reflect on and shape the changing views on modernity and family dynamics.

**Sara Villamarín-Freire (University of Santiago de Compostela): “‘A kind of an unmovable, iconic position’: Narrating a Father’s Death in Contemporary Literature”**

Is paternity inherently patriarchal? Individual fathers, paternity and the patriarchal order appear firmly entangled in what Kaja Silverman (1992) has termed the dominant fiction, or the discursive form adopted by this confluence. Within the confines of the dominant fiction, fathers are presented as both figures of authority and authors of their children's lives and identities. However, individual acts of narration —such as those articulated in literary representations— can challenge the paternity-patriarchy conflation by presenting fathers who do not accommodate to the monolithic image of the absent father as the epitome of patriarchal might. Many narrative subversions of the dominant fiction have been articulated around the event of the father's illness and/or death —a surprisingly common trope found in narratives that revolve around fathers. In fiction, non-fiction, and everything in between, paternal demise has been obsessively chronicled. This paper examines the representation of paternal illness and/or death, paying close attention to depictions of the paternal body and the transformations it undergoes, in a series of contemporary texts that portray the end of fathers' lives from the perspective of their children; namely, Karl Ove Knausgård's *A Death in the Family* (My Struggle, book 1), Sharon Olds's *The Father* and Anne Pauly's *Avant que j'oublie*. Considering that paternal asomia, or 'bodilessness', is one of the defining elements of the dominant fiction, recuperating the paternal body as a fragile, ill, or vulnerable presence may be a solid first step towards undoing the paternity-patriarchy conflation and the dominant fiction undergirding it.

**Moritz Senft-Raiß (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität): “Linking the Generational Chain through Narration: Concerning two Texts by Adalbert Stifter”**

In Adalbert Stifter's novel “Der Nachsommer” and the story “Nachkommenschaften”, a remarkable narrative constellation occurs at a crucial point: Older male paternal characters, one generation removed, recount their own life stories to the young protagonist, thereby contextualizing the previous plot, the found world, the found order of domesticity and the constellations of characters. These narrative insertions by Risach and the old Roderer prove to be central to the examination of the themes of family and generational succession in Stifter's work and beyond.

At the center is the question of how Stifter shapes integration into the “Generationenkette” - “generational chain” (Begemann) in literary form. The concept of generation, which exceeds the unit of measurement of one human life, requires specific forms of representation, which are also intertwined with non-literary texts, in order to be intelligible at all. Family texts (grandfather's stories, wills, family chronicles, etc.) always contribute to the family and create its coherence. In the 19th century, for example, the social scientist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl recommended keeping a family chronicle in order to avoid falling into isolation.

The retrospectiveness with which the protagonist is introduced into the generational chain is inherent in the texts. Similar to structural psychoanalysis, in which symptoms only acquire their meaning retroactively in the course of the analysis, the meanings of the generational chain are also only established retrospectively through the narrative. This retroactivity creates the linearity of the preceding generational sequence and at the same time undermines the linearity of the narrative. Using a discourse-analytical reading based on Foucault and Kittler, the family dispositives and texts in Stifter's works will be examined. The focus will be on the specific function of these texts within the literary genres and the social functions of literary and non-literary texts in the writing of the family and generational succession.

**Maria Menzel (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität): “Discovering roots, discovering routes: Genealogy tourism in Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* and Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara*”**

This paper investigates “narratives of return” by Black diasporic authors, specifically *Homegoing* (2016) by Yaa Gyasi and *Lara* (2009) by Bernardine Evaristo. In both of these texts chronicling a family genealogy, young people travel to the (imagined) homelands of their ancestors. These journey serves as a topos through which I examine how genealogical relationships and links are imagined in two different diasporic contexts. I read these literary texts within the larger cultural context of the increasing popularity of “genealogy tourism”, examining what type of memory politics they advocate. I draw on Sara Ahmed’s figure of the “melancholy migrant” to trace the affective relationships between the generations presented in the novels and further develop Ahmed’s idea of the melancholy migrant as a “haunting” figure.

In both texts, return travel is presented as being motivated by the family: on the one hand, because there exists a feeling of intergenerational indebtedness, on the other because of the desire to gain knowledge about and feel part of a larger, more complete family through one’s return to the/a country of origin. In *Homegoing*, the family becomes an intimate space of forgetting, whereas in *Lara*, the gaps and generational trauma left by experiences of diaspora are not completely resolved by a “return”, advocating for the creation of “texts with the poetic power to induce and continue haunting” (Kirss 41) dominant narratives of nation and the linearity of history. By situating these literary works within contemporary cultural preoccupations with ancestry and return, this paper sheds light on how diasporic fiction negotiates generational identities, challenging dominant frameworks of history, identity, and nationhood.

**Works Cited:**

Kirss, Tiina. ‘1. Seeing Ghosts: Theorizing Haunting in Literary Texts’. *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*, edited by Philipp Schweighauser et al., University of Toronto Press, 2013, pp. 21–44, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442664197-002>.

**Hogara Matsumoto (Sophia University, Tokyo): “Transnational Family Genealogies in Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows*”**

Pakistani-British novelist Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* (2009) interweaves transnational family romances and reconfigures the genre of family fiction in British Literature. The present paper argues that Shamsie’s novel links the household with the transnational and reimagines a sense of community, by focusing on the concept of generation as the construction of historical and cultural memory and by historicizing the transnational family genealogies in the novel from the viewpoints of the Nagasaki atomic bomb.

*Burnt Shadows* is focalized principally through a Japanese woman Hiroko Tanaka, who was affected by the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and lost her German fiancé. She visits India, where she falls in love and marries an Indian man and moves to Pakistan with him; in India she also forms a lasting friendship with Ilse Burton, the half sister of her former fiancé. The friendship between Hiroko and Ilse continues after Ilse moves to New York City because it is inherited by the second and third generations. The bonds between the families are loosened and strengthened resiliently when the characters encounter the historical catastrophes: the atomic bombing in Nagasaki (1945), Partition of India (1947), nuclear bomb tests in Pakistan and India (1998), and 9.11 in New York City (2001).

*Burnt Shadows* has been interpreted as a novel that “reconfigures the ‘hijrah’ as an oral story that is circulated among displaced Muslims and non-Muslims to construct an alternative ‘ummah’” (Mehta 420). Building on this postsecular reading of the novel, my reading analyzes the novel through the viewpoints of Walter Benjamin’s concept of history and Sigrid Weigel’s argument of “the biblical idea of relationship between generations as relationship of debt or as a propagation of debt and the hope of salvation in the succession of generation” (267), and argues that Shamsie puts a question of the responsibility of war crimes to the father figure, the nation-state.

#### Works Cited:

Mehta, Suhaan Kiran. “Reimagining Journeys and Communities: A Postsecular Reading of Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows*.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 52, no. 4, Winter 2020, pp. 419-433.

Weigel, Sigrid. “‘Generation’ as a Symbolic Form: On the Genealogical Discourse of Memory since 1945.” *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, vol. 77, no. 4, 2002, pp. 264-77.

#### **Andree Michaelis-König (University of Antwerp): “On Siblings, Twins, and Friends. Shifting Genealogies in Contemporary German Jewish Writing”**

German Jewish writing after 1945 has been profoundly shaped by genealogies of memory and the enduring aftermath of the Shoah. For many Jewish authors, questions of belonging are intertwined with the gaps in their family histories, marked by loss and absence. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” underscores the genealogical dependency of Jewish identity on prior generations’ experiences, a theme that has long dominated German Jewish family novels. Works by authors like Robert Schindel, Eva Menasse, Barbara Honigmann, and Vladimir Vertlib explore protagonists’ relationships with their parents, embedding their narratives in intergenerational trauma. Scholarly discussions have further categorized these works generationally, reflecting “genealogical accounting” (Quayson), with distinctions drawn between first, second, third, and now fourth-generation writers (see Banki/Schirrmeister 2023; McGlothlin 2006).

In recent years, however, younger Jewish authors writing in German have begun to reimagine genealogies and family narratives. Against the backdrop of a post-migrant society, many of these writers – often with Soviet backgrounds and patrimonial rather than traditional matrilineal Jewish genealogies – focus on alternative familial constellations. Authors like Kat Kaufmann, Sasha Marianna Salzmann, and Dana von Suffrin emphasize relationships with siblings, twins, and often also non-Jewish friends, challenging established notions of Jewish genealogy. This shift reflects broader changes in contemporary German Jewish identities and their positioning within multicultural and transnational contexts.

This paper examines how these emerging narratives transform representations of family in German Jewish literature, moving beyond traditional genealogical frameworks. By situating this trend within the discourse of post-migrant identity and contemporary literature, it explores the evolving politics of genealogy and its implications for understanding belonging, memory, and family dynamics in a globalized world.

**Guillaume Etienne (UNamur): “Zu Fuß durch die Ruinen der europäischen Vergangenheit: Physische und emotionale Rekonstruktion der Familiengeschichte in Christiane Hoffmanns *Alles, was wir nicht erinnern. Zu Fuß auf dem Fluchtweg meines Vaters* (2022)”**

Im Rahmen der Tagung „Family Fictions: Generations and Genealogies in European Culture“ an der KULeuven möchte ich einen Beitrag zu Christiane Hoffmanns Reisebericht „Alles, was wir nicht erinnern. Zu Fuß auf dem Fluchtweg meines Vaters“ (2022) vorschlagen. In ihrem transgenerationalen Reisebericht verwebt Christiane Hoffmann Gegenwart und Vergangenheit, indem sie die Flucht und Vertreibung ihres Vaters aus Schlesien 1945, in den letzten Wochen des Zweiten Weltkriegs, und zugleich ihre eigene Reise zu Fuß im Jahr 2019 auf den Spuren der verlorenen Familienvergangenheit beschreibt.

In diesem Beitrag gilt es zu zeigen, inwiefern Christiane Hoffmanns Fußreise ihr die Möglichkeit eröffnet, die Vergangenheit ihrer Familie nachzuerleben und sich gleichzeitig mit dem generationenübergreifenden Familientrauma auseinanderzusetzen. Hoffmanns Fußreise kann tatsächlich als symbolischer Versuch verstanden werden, sich der Fluchterfahrung ihrer Familie physisch und emotional anzunähern. Daher soll zunächst untersucht werden, wie es der Autorin auf ihrem Weg gelingt, sowohl die private Geschichte ihrer Familie zu rekonstruieren bzw. ergänzend zu erfinden, als auch das kollektive Gedächtnis der Vertreibung zu bewahren.

Des Weiteren erfüllt ihre Suche eine selbsttherapeutische, emanzipatorische Funktion, da sie der Autorin ermöglicht, das Schweigen ihres Vaters zu überwinden und das ererbte Trauma der Flucht und Vertreibung zu bewältigen. In diesem Zusammenhang soll eruiert werden, wie die transgenerationale Weitergabe und Aufarbeitung von Erinnerungen und Traumata als Hintergrund des Textes eingewebt werden.

Schließlich spielen auch Hoffmanns eigene Familienfotos in ihrem Reisebericht eine zentrale Rolle, da sie temporale Grenzen überschreiten und die Lebensrealität der Familie scheinbar greifbar machen. Wie diese Fotos im Sinne von Marianne Hirschs Konzept der „Postmemory“ gelesen werden können, soll im letzten Teil meines Beitrags erörtert werden.

Auf diese Weise soll das Zusammenspiel von Familiengeschichte, Gedächtnis und Fußreise in diesem Text beleuchtet und eine Seite der deutschen Geschichte in den Fokus gerückt werden, die lange Zeit verdrängt wurde.

**Joke Struyf (University of Antwerp): “*The death of Vivek Oji* (2020)”**

Although it is a work of fiction by a Nigerian author about a Nigerian context, the fact that Vivek Oji is trans (or what we would call trans) makes it recognisable across cultures. The themes of family rejection, chosen family and the paradoxical expectations society has of mothers are reflected in LGBTQ+ stories from all over the world. In my presentation, I will explore three threads: 1/ I want to look into the relationship between Vivek and their mother Kavita, and the opposing expectations in mothering (to love, to protect and at the same time to teach society's values). Mothers of LGBTQ+ children in a homo/transphobic society will especially experience

frictions between these expectations, as is reflected in Kavita's story. 2/ Vivek has a special bond with their paternal grandmother, who died the day Vivek was born. It is suggested that they are partly the same person, which influences the relationship between Vivek and their father. In a way, generations collapse in the person of Vivek. 3/ Although Vivek's friend group is their 'chosen family', Vivek cannot completely be themselves with them. The love Vivek's friends feel for Vivek is as protective as Kavita's, and thus equally limiting. The theme of protective love and its role in the narratives around (chosen) family will be critically explored. I will also reflect on the ways in which protective love prevents you from really getting to know your loved ones.

**Ana Bessa Carvalho (University of Minho): “On Binders and the Ties that Bind: Alternative Systems of Kinship in Transgender Narratives”**

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Alana S. Portero's *La Mala Costumbre* (2023) and Roberta Marrero's graphic novel *El Bebé Verde: Infancia, Transexualidad y Héroes del Pop* (2016), focusing on the ways in which transgender individuals construct networks of kinship that extend beyond the traditional nuclear family. Specifically, it examines how these individuals forge connections through popular culture and solidarity with other transgender and queer people. Portero's novel offers an intimate portrayal of a young transgender woman navigating life in 1980s Madrid, where she strives to fulfill the role of a dutiful son in a family that fails to understand her. Set against the backdrop of the heroin epidemic that ravaged the San Blas neighborhood, her journey also leads her to Chueca, Madrid's renowned queer district, where she discovers a community of like-minded individuals. In contrast, Marrero's graphic novel presents an autobiographical account of growing up as a transgender woman and seeking out a genealogy of similar figures in pop culture, notably through the figures of gender-bending icons such as David Bowie and Annie Lennox. This paper posits that, in the face of familial rejection, the absence of role models, and a lack of positive transgender representation, these individuals turn to art and cultural artifacts to construct legacies and genealogies that are rooted in kinship and affective bonds. These networks of kinship not only include, but also transcend, biological connections. Additionally, they give rise to systems of care, exemplified by the relationship between Portero's protagonist and an older transgender woman. These systems are grounded in vulnerability, an ethics of care, and the recognition of other transgender individuals as ancestral figures, offering an alternative framework for belonging and community outside of conventional familial structures.

**Cato Defoer (Ghent University): “Elective kinship in 21st-century (German-language) literature”**

The period from the 1970s to the 2000s marked a significant transition in the conceptualization of family structures. Within the framework of detraditionalization, the conventional nuclear family—comprising father, mother, and child—was increasingly problematized and interpreted by gender studies, postcolonial approaches, and sociological theories as a restrictive and repressive social institution (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2000). By the late 20th century, this transition was reflected in literature, where a shift became visible from critiques of traditional family models toward a deeper exploration of alternative family structures and their impacts. This project hypothesizes that literature from the 1990s onward not only explores non-traditional family structures—such as patchwork families, single-parent families, rainbow families, and elective kinship—as alternatives, but also examines the dynamics within these structures. Elective kinship, defined as self-chosen families that transcend biological and marital bonds, is positioned at the centre of this project as a socially and literarily relevant

concept. The project focuses on the question of how elective kinship is represented in contemporary German-language literature and what implications it has for the portrayal of familial connectedness. Are these self-chosen family structures depicted as resilient and positive alternatives, or do they reveal the enduring influence of biological family bonds? To address this question, theoretical perspectives are examined, such as those of Ivan Böszörményi-Nagy (1920–2007), who argues that intergenerational traumas, guilt, and loyalty are inevitable aspects of familial relationships. At the same time, Barbara Bleisch’s (1973–) perspective is considered, which contends that children bear no moral debt to their parents solely due to their birth or upbringing and that parent-child relationships should instead be based on voluntary reciprocity rather than obligatory service. The tension between these opposing views forms a critical framework for analysing how literature represents elective kinship. This project posits that elective kinship in literature not only offers alternatives to traditional family bonds, but also reveals a tension between autonomy and the persistent influence of biological family. By analysing these dynamics, the project aims to provide insights into how contemporary German-language literature portrays alternative family structures—not only as solutions to, but also as reflections of enduring familial tensions and traumas. In doing so, the project seeks to contribute to the broader debate on the possibilities and limitations of alternative family forms, as well as the role of literature in imagining and critically reflecting on these structures.

**Beatriz Seelaender (University of São Paulo): “Robert Graves’s “I, Claudius” (1934) : The Early Roman Empire as a (Cursed) Generational Saga”**

As Gregory Aldete (2022) put it, Robert Graves’s “I, Claudius” (1934) reframed history as the product of the whims and desires of individuals as opposed to individuals as a product of their historical circumstances. By inverting this logic, Graves is in accordance with the classical historians his novels are based on, particularly Tacitus, who delineated his “Annals” around the Julio-Claudian dynasty, from the death of Augustus to that of Nero. Graves covers almost the exact same period (starting earlier and ending on Claudius’ death, for obvious reasons), which makes it work as a sped-up generational saga. From the very beginning of “I, Claudius”, we are informed of the Julio-Claudian Curse, a prophecy supposedly professed by the Oracle of Delphi (and completely made up by Graves) which provides framing for the entire narrative. This makes it by far the most inventive and consequently literary element of Graves’s novels.

The conspiracy aspect comes straight from the historiographical sources’ reporting of rumors, as we come to find out that the premature demise of several of Claudius’s family members is no coincidence but, in fact, the result of murderous plots by Empress Livia in order to clear the way for her son Tiberius to become Augustus’s heir. The tragedy of the Julio-Claudians is therefore reframed as an infectious genealogy of matriarchal power: the next in line had to die, and the sprawling prole of imperial intentions was to become extinct in only four generations. Furthermore, As illustrated by John D. Grainger in “The Roman Imperial Succession” (2020), this unresolved issue of electing heirs would go on to permeate the entirety of subsequent Roman history. It may even be said that it contained the gene of the Empire’s downfall.

**Dagmar Reichardt (Latvian Academy of Culture): “Transcultural Genealogical Bounds between Fiction and Metahistory: The Matriarchal HERstory of the Maraini Family from Italy’s Risorgimento to Postmodern Times”**

This talk will focus on five generations embedded in the family history of Italy’s internationally best-known female writer Dacia Maraini (\* 1936) within a time range spanning from the nation building period to late postmodernism. The subject of my presentation pinpoints the female

generational Other as a leitmotiv of Dacia Maraini's oeuvre. At the same time, I will contextualize it with the biographies of further female members of her family, all of them creative travelers and artists: Yoi Maraini (1877–1944), Topazia Maraini (1913–2015), Dacia Maraini (\* 1936), Toni Maraini (\* 1941), and Mujah Maraini-Melehi (\* 1970).

This will happen in four steps. First, I will give attention to the literary genre of travel literature and to the travel topos which all five female figures work with. The extent to which their travel activities help to construct their own individual female self-concepts is directly questioned from a biographical, philosophical and sociocultural perspective. In a second step, the emancipatory parameter and its rich transformation potential will be critically deepened not only regarding its European but also its transnational visibility.

Thirdly, the extensive transcultural characteristics will be highlighted, as the Maraini family disposes of an outstanding cosmopolitical genealogy. Connecting literature, theatrical, cinematographic and musical modes of expression in a kaleidoscopic, transmedial way, I will trace the nomadism (Deleuze & Guattari 1980) traditionally practiced in the family as well as the genosociogram resulting from it. After having touched on the general lack of engagement with female literature and artistic creation throughout European history on a macrolevel, in a last and fourth step I will pinpoint the necessity to revisit, reread and reenact its canon.

By resorting to the term of HERstory the matriarchal branch of the Maraini family clearly unveils the incomplete representation of the past and missing narrative links to understand ambiguities and fill blind spots of history.

#### **Lauren Ottaviani (KU Leuven): 'Catching the right expression': Amateur Women's Photography in the *Woman at Home* [1893-1918]**

This paper will explore the positioning of amateur photography in the monthly women's magazine the *Woman at Home* [1893-1918]. Considering the topic across feature types including photo competitions, nonfiction profiles, and advertisements, it will hold that the magazine 'domesticates' photographic technology by emphasizing its ability not only to record, but also to enhance and reflect family bonds, specifically those between mother and child.

#### **Helen Kingstone (Royal Holloway): "Generational thinking in nineteenth-century Literature"**

The cultural significance of the generations concept lies in the intersection of its two dimensions: familial (pointing backwards and forwards through time) and social (pointing outwards across peer groups of contemporaries). It can therefore shed light on fundamental questions of structure and agency, and open up 'meso' scales of analysis between individual and society.

This paper draws attention to the ways that both dimensions of generational thinking were present during the nineteenth century, before the World War One period that other scholars (Erll; Hynes) have read as the origin of cohort-based generational identities. This can open up a longue durée chronology of generational analysis (see also Crosbie; Walsham; Hewitt), and allow us to see how the generations concept has changed over time.

My paper showcases generational discourses in the fictions of Margaret Oliphant (1828–1897), who during her lifetime was compared to Jane Austen and George Eliot, and whose reputation is now having a renaissance. Oliphant shows how generational categories create a concertina of temporalities that expand and compress from different perspectives and life-course positions. She also argues that ageing is partly defined through familial and social generation.



I examine Oliphant's poignant coming-of-age novel *Hester* (1883), the family tragedy *Kirsteen* (1890), and a short story "Mr Sandford" (1888). These works show us (1) how the binary category "old" often comprises several distinct generations, (2) the need to embrace a multi-generational society where people are financially and socially supported to transition into new life-stages, (3) the dangers of thinking one can control intergenerational transmission, and (4) the value of intergenerational relationships that go beyond vertical family ties. Historian David Gange has warned that Geography rather than Humanities is leading the way in theorizing temporality. It is time for a "temporal Humanities", and generational thinking is intrinsic to how people make sense of their lifespans and lifetimes.

**David McAllister (University of London): "Inter-Generational Resentment in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*"**

Born in 1812, at the end of a long baby boom, Charles Dickens reached adulthood in a society characterised by a demographic bulge. Mid-Victorian census returns showed that, for the first time, older generations now outnumbered the young. In both demographic accounts of the nation, and in Dickens's fictional depictions of British society, the bulge generations of elderly and middle-aged men occupied the commanding heights of politics and the economy, and their increasing longevity meant that the young remained in junior roles for longer than expected. In the opening lines of *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), Dickens describes a scene of generational formation as the middle-aged Paul Dombey Sr gazes proudly on his new-born son:

Dombey was about eight-and-forty years of age. Son about eight-and-forty minutes....On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, as on a tree that was to come down in good time—remorseless twins they are for striding through their human forests, notching as they go—while the countenance of Son was crossed with a thousand little creases, which the same deceitful Time would take delight in smoothing out and wearing away with the flat part of his scythe, as a preparation of the surface for his deeper operations.

By figuring Time and Care as woodsmen, Dickens compares society to a forest containing trees of different ages. Contemporary forestry management held that mature trees should be felled to create conditions in which younger trees could thrive. In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens shows how Dombey and his peers marginalise and exclude the young whose energy might help reinvigorate an ailing nation, and it is only when Dombey is symbolically felled that vitality and prosperity return. Drawing on both demographic accounts of the nation and forestry manuals, this paper will argue that Dickens advances a biopolitical argument against the domination of British society by these older generations, and offers a plea for national renewal through a process of radical generational transition.

**Stefan Willer (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): "Family Inheritance and How (Not) to Escape It: Fictions and Non-Fictions in Contemporary German Literature"**

The subject of inheritance is of great appeal to literature. It combines narratives of origin with family emotions and fantasies of individual enrichment, but also with attempts to break out of predetermined traditions and renounce what has been inherited. The power of fascination ranges from the patriarchal stories of the Hebrew Bible and Shakespeare's "King Lear" to series such as "Downton Abbey" and "Succession".

Contemporary literature is confronted with a situation in which inheritance and legacies have taken on a new dynamic. On the one hand, more private wealth is being inherited than ever before, while on the other, bourgeois inheritance law is being criticized as the orders of marriage,

family and reproduction become increasingly diversified. Added to this is the shift of inheritance assets into the immaterial, virtual and digital realms, as well as the redefinition of collective heritage in the context of globalization and “world heritage.” The debate on heritage therefore concerns issues of social justice, generational and gender relations as well as cultural policy and post-colonial perspectives.

In my lecture, I would first like to outline this current background. In the main part, I will then examine three very different representations of the connection between family, society and inheritance in contemporary German-language literature. In her volume of interviews “Wir Erben” (“We Inheritors”, 2015), Julia Friedrichs creates a collective portrait of rich heirs, thus underlining the social inequality favored by inheritance and, for her part, argues strictly meritocratic (and monetarist) with the opposition of earned and unearned wealth. In “Father's Box” (“Vaters Kiste”, 2022), Lukas Bärfuss writes a memoir about his disinherited and heirless family, and from there undertakes far-reaching explorations into the long and interdisciplinary history of knowledge about inheritance and heredity. Finally, Anne Rabe's 2023 novel “Die Möglichkeit von Glück” (“The Possibility of Happiness”) is the first-person narrative of a woman, born in 1986 in the late GDR (like the author), who painfully traces her family's stories of violence and loss back through three generations to the 1930s. This creates a parallel between mechanisms of oppression in family, society and state regimes, but one that remains incomplete and refuses simple resolutions.

**Sarah Sosinski (Ludwig-Maximilians-University): “The Generational Project of Emancipation: German Jewish Family Novels as Transnational Narratives of Belonging”**

This paper examines the nuanced depiction of belonging and identity in three key German Jewish family novels from the turn of the 20th century: Friedrich Wrede's *Die Goldschields* (1898), Ulla Wolff-Frankfurter's *Der Patriarch* (1903), and Auguste Hauschner's *Die Familie Lowositz* (1908). These works illustrate the intersection of genealogical narrative with the cultural imperatives of Jewish emancipation, gender roles, and transnational identity. By situating these novels within the framework of the German Jewish experience, the analysis highlights how they discuss assimilation, explore the tensions of modernization, and offer innovative narratives of familial and societal belonging and emancipation. In particular, these novels cross imaginative borders, framing an intra-German discourse through settings in Prague, Silesia, Berlin and Vienna, reflecting regionally and politically diverse yet interconnected perspectives on Jewish life before 1914.

The paper highlights how the German Jewish family novel functions as a vehicle for exploring Jewish identity on the brink of the twentieth century. This includes analyzing the ways in which these texts negotiate the spectrum of assimilation, emancipation and Jewish diaspora within the German and wider European socio-political milieu. Furthermore, the paper interrogates the role of gender and generational dynamics by showing how these novels present a multifaceted exploration of women's emancipation and the broader emancipation of the Jewish community, revealing intertwined narratives of progress and constraint. Finally, the paper seeks to reread the literary contributions of Wrede, Wolff-Frankfurter and Hauschner. Their realistic novels challenge and expand the conventional boundaries of the family novel genre, combining realism with a critique of social norms and a quest for belonging in the German 'Literarische Moderne'.

**Fatima Borrmann (KU Leuven): “From Genetics to Female Genealogy and Generation in Lou Andreas-Salomé's *Das Haus* (1921)”**

In Lou Andreas-Salomé's *Das Haus* (1921), Anneliese, troubled by her son's nervous disposition, seeks an explanation in the family's past. Recalling childhood stories about an eccentric great-grandfather, she consults inherited family letters but instead uncovers the diaries of her great-grandmother. This discovery redirects her focus from her son's health -symbolizing a concern for national future- to a matrilineal investigation, in which her daughter, Gitta, assumes a participatory role. However, the triad of great-grandmother, mother, and daughter soon dissolves into generational tension, as Gitta, embodying a more emancipated ideal, repudiates her mother's domestic model.

This paper situates *Das Haus* within a broader shift in women's fiction in post-World War I Germany and Britain. It contends that many women writers began to move away from narratives aligned with the future-oriented agendas of early feminist activism around 1900, turning instead toward the excavation and reinterpretation of female genealogies in both familial and literary contexts.

Rather than idealizing matrilineal genealogies, these writers anticipate the problems facing a feminist rewriting of history. They underscore, on one hand, the urgency of what Luce Irigaray (1991) terms the recovery of the suppressed familial and literary histories of "mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers" from the symbolic exile imposed by "the father-husband". On the other hand, they expose the risks involved in such recovery, particularly the tendency to impose a homogeneous, transhistorical identity on women across generations.

### **David Amigoni (Keele University): Generations, Ageing, and the Resourceful Fictions of Middle England: performing family sagas from Arnold Bennett to Jonathan Coe**

The generous invitation to speak at this timely and important conference invites me to reflect upon the many intellectual strands that have led me to develop my approach to ageing, literature and culture. These strands include Darwinian ideas about inheritance grounded in relationships between literature and science; contemporary fictions about intergenerational relationships and place-making; and participatory practices of theatrical making and engagement that involve older people. The critic, theorist and writer Raymond Williams provides, I shall argue, a constant intellectual thread, from his cultural theory of generational production and innovation ('structures of feeling' in *The Long Revolution*); to his recognition that 'social Darwinism', in being derived from Darwin, was always already social, grounded as it was in Malthusian ideas linking demographics and resources: key contexts of 'resourcefulness', in other words, for thinking critically about ageing, literature, the social, and the struggle to develop and sustain a democratic culture that includes older people.

In this keynote lecture I shall explore the context of literature's democratic 'resourcefulness' through a focus on fictional family sagas of ageing and intergenerational relationships, focusing on the English Midlands in the period that Williams plotted the unfolding of 'the long revolution'. Thus, the lecture will explore Arnold Bennett's seminal novel about ageing, *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), as well as its much later theatrical adaptation at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent in 1971, a case study in the power and purpose of regional, community theatre (and the focus of our *Ages and Stages* project, 2009, which is still active). Finally, the lecture will focus on our present by exploring Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), a family saga spanning two earlier fictions (a trilogy comprising *The Rotters' Club*, *The Closed Circle*) that culminates in Britain's Brexit moment, and its particular (and ongoing) crisis of intergenerational relationships and politics.