Chapter 1

Why do we worry about children?

Baby on board

Worrying about children is a national vocation. When I had my first child, I was technically an adult. But I looked young, and remember hearing older women tut tut in the street. 'Look,' they would say, 'children are having children these days.' In many ways I was still a child, as are many first-time parents right up until the moment they stake a claim on the audacious conceit of parenthood: here is a person I am ultimately responsible for, and about whom I will worry until my dying day. This realisation, through which one finally – just in time or perhaps a little too late – takes on the mantle of parenthood, is supposed to extinguish the last remnant of one's own childhood. The moment of worrying about children is, for the parent, adulthood's defining moment. It marks an irrevocable passage: at once an assumption of duty, and the loss of an innocence that, sadly, we didn't know we possessed.

This book is concerned with this relationship between the worry about children and adult identity. Although there are obviously

other ways of experiencing adulthood than as a parent, the parent–child axis increasingly regulates our ideals of legitimate social participation. Fear for children and childhood, especially, is a significant feature of contemporary Australian self-awareness. We are aware of the risks posed to children today because these concerns are continually worked over in our newspapers and weekend magazines, on radio and television, and even in parliament. In an increasingly risk-averse and litigious world, ever more attention is paid to the dangers children face in the schoolyard, the local playground and the amusement park. Lately, even the grocery aisle is a source of anxiety – a gingerbread house that lures children to hyperactivity, obesity and an early grave. Children playing in the street outside the family home are prey to roving paedophiles, children watching television are vulnerable to cynical advertisers and suggestive music videos, and children surfing the internet are liable to stumble across pornography, virtual stalkers or bullies. Our modern world appears positively hostile to children, and parents feel acutely vulnerable in the face of the corrupting influences of contemporary culture.

Of course, it is eminently reasonable that parents should want to protect their children. And we can easily comprehend the special consideration given to children's lives over others', such as the sense of fragility that motivates the placing of a baby on board sign in a car window. What is perhaps questionable about the focus on children's vulnerability is our rigid understanding of childhood as unworldly, incapable and pure. Prevailing opinion is not only that children are at risk, but also that childhood itself is in crisis, that children are being denied their childhood, an increasingly secluded, sentimentalised, innocent experience to which they have a special right.

Such lamentation only thinly obscures the claims on childhood of its protectors. My question is: What does childhood mean to us, beyond the rich variety of feelings, attitudes, behaviours and experiences of actual children? Australians hold dear to their belief in a way of being that can be secured from the worries and hang-ups of ordinary life, and children are representatives of such

otherworldly existence. We have a stake in innocence, which shapes not only adult, but also Australian identity. The group of individuals who are placeholders for innocence play a crucial part in defining the meaning and value of Australian community. We protect the innocent child because they are vulnerable, but they also act as proxies for our vulnerability. The baby on board sign says that we are important, and not only the child.

Ironically, the Australian investment in innocence has perverse effects for children, who are both valued and resented for the very same reasons, because they represent an escape from the responsibility and tedium of everyday life that is closed to adults. Resentment of children is something to which most adults do not freely admit. Perversely, it usually comes into the open only in relation to children whose circumstances place them beyond the scope of innocence. A barely hidden resentment of teenagers and underprivileged children is directly proportional to the overvaluation of innocence. The importance of innocence permits ignorance of, for instance, the mortality rates of adolescents, which are today fourfold that of small children.[1] Precisely at the point children are seen to lose their innocence, adults forget that they, too, are vulnerable, and so their value to us is also lessened. It is the symbolic equivalence between children, innocence, vulnerability and cultural value that worries us so about children. But what does this worry really signify? And what does the innocent child really mean to us?

Young and free: the innocent Australian

Although concern for children is rising across the Western world, the chord struck by threats to childhood innocence in Australia is curiously resonant. Politicians, charities and marketers regularly exploit its emotional significance to great effect – to secure our votes, to tweak our consciences or to sell a product. No scandal is greater than the possible violation of a child's innocence, and the more abstract this violation, the more vociferous is Australians' outrage (take the Bill Henson controversy over the portrayal of naked children, which will be discussed in chapter 6). It is innocence

that is at issue, and not only children's, but an innocence that also represents a national way of life and a relationship to other nations.

If we look to the founding narratives of Australian identity – stories we continually tell ourselves in search of a national essence – innocence lies at their core, and the privileging of innocence as a defining feature of being Australian is sometimes a remarkably creative achievement. Australians joke that we descend from convicts, for instance, and wear this ignoble origin proudly as indicative of a deep-seated larrikinism. Yet what enables us to rejoice in this status is a firm belief in the innocence of our ancestors' intent: our larrikinism is harmless because they were innocent of any serious crime. Rather, they were victims of poverty in unjust, authoritarian times. This qualification is central to how we perceive our past and its relation to the present.

Other narratives of our origins reaffirm this commitment to innocence, for the most part through tales of abandonment that echo the concern for the vulnerability of children. Britain, the mother country, neglected early Australian settlers, who were placed at the mercy of a harsh, unknown climate and infertile soils. Australia was again abandoned, we tell ourselves, at Gallipoli – our second birth as the innocent progeny of negligent parenthood. But this storyline is evident from the beginning of Australian nationhood. As Richard White argues in *Inventing Australia*,[2] when first forging means of positive self-representation, emerging Australians reached for images of pure and innocent young women and children. Drawn upon by politicians and social reformers, and drawn in cartoons in popular publications such as *The Bulletin*, these pictures of innocence, through which a population came to understand what it means to be Australian, consolidated a sunny, wholesome sense of identity. But they also served to conceal deeper tensions within Australian society – class, gender and racial differences, for instance – and to mobilise a sense of vulnerability to a hostile outside world that defines Australian notions of identity and self-interest even today. Significantly, for Richard White, the first legislation of the newly constituted federal parliament was defensive, enacted

to protect a youthful and fragile nation from the yellow peril, predation by aggressive trade partners, and foreign disease.[3] The Australian innocence represented by the image of the young woman or child, then, was inextricably bound to a sense of vulnerability. This figure 'often found herself in difficult situations, modestly blushing at vice, naively shocked at corruption, or in imminent danger of being raped'.[4] The purity of Australia's innocence was connected to her youth, but also to fears of being defiled by foreign interests and (cultural or pathological) contagion.

These national icons of (an imperilled) innocence and purity had emerged from earlier fears and fantasies, already depicted in terms of children's vulnerability. In *The Country of Lost Children*, Peter Pierce demonstrates the powerful hold of fears for children upon the colonial imagination.[5] Pierce documents a remarkable volume of stories about children lost to the hostile Australian bush (*Picnic at Hanging Rock* being one of the more famous). That the natural landscape is liable to swallow up our children suggests a discomfort about our very presence here. These stories, Pierce argues, indicate that at the core of Anglo–Australian identity is a sense of not belonging, and a sense of risk to which this not belonging exposes us. But what else does this identification with the lost, innocent child conceal?

There is an alternative Australian narrative about mislaid children that has only recently found voice, and it threatens to destabilise Australians' easy identification with innocence. The children referred to as the Stolen Generation – Aboriginal children removed from their families by government officials allegedly because of parental neglect – now form a significant component of our national story, a component with which we are yet to come to terms. Emotional investment in the ideal of Australian innocence must always be considered in relation to our forgetting of this critical page of Australian history. Taking their cue from the second line of our national anthem, Australians insist they are young and free, and unlike others on the world stage, without the baggage of history. Our innocence establishes a moral authority – the peculiar acumen

of the child who sees the emperor's nakedness, who can call out other nations' hypocrisies and cut through their hedging political correctness. But this claim to an uncomplicated innocence obscures a dense and contested history, about which we protest too much.

Similarly, anxiety about threats to our children's innocence increases as we continue to neglect those children we refuse to see as innocent, because they were never sheltered from life. The unpalatable truth is that the value of a child's innocence depends upon their capacity to be protected. Children born to conditions of poverty or abuse, children who need to work – in short, children deprived of the privilege that would confer innocence upon them – unsettle the parameters of our self-understanding. When we look beyond Australia, the existence of such complicated children signifies a way of life that challenges our own: if someone is to blame it must be their parents, types we would not want to admit to our shores (the children overboard incident will addressed in chapter 5). More locally, we deem underprivileged children threats to childhood innocence more generally, as bad seeds from whom we need to quarantine our own, more fortunate children.

The unfortunate consequences of favouring childhood innocence in our culture are not only borne by children who fall short of this ideal, however. The strictures of innocence limit what even the most privileged of our precious offspring can do and how they can be. This is because innocence performs a social function. The child, embodying innocence, safeguards the innocence of the community. The child is for Australian society a synecdoche – a part that represents the whole[6] – for our most venerable meaning. For this very reason, children's conformity to innocence is closely monitored and worried over. The innocent child, as a figurehead for the innocence of a nation, carries an excessive social burden.

If this cultural trend is left unchecked, and children come to be valued only by virtue of their innocence, we risk losing the capacity to value them in any other respect. It is critical that we begin

to explore alternative avenues for understanding and experiencing children. It is hoped that this book will contribute to such a process.

Innocence in word and deed

In the beginning was the word, and the word was 'innocence.' In Western mythology, life begins innocent and wants to return to innocence, which thereby summarises all that is culturally valuable. Of humble origins, the word 'innocence' derives from the Latin *innocere*: 'to do no harm'. *Innocere* is itself a derivative term, a combination of *in*, meaning 'not', and *nocere*, 'to harm'. We might ask, then, what's so venerable about the quality of doing no harm? How could this negatively defined, insipid concept occupy such a prominent place in the hierarchy of value? And what must a culture have suffered or have feared suffering – what vulnerability must it feel – to so esteem the condition of doing no harm? As we have seen, the innocent, blameless, victim plays a key part in Australia's most potent identity-forming narratives. The power of innocence's resonance for Australian identity in part explains why our relation to children is so decisive. Innocence also features in the imagined prehistory of Western humanity more generally, as even a passing acquaintance with the Old Testament reveals. As we shall see, the place of children in this story of innocence is not as straightforward as it might at first appear.

The Bible begins with Genesis with a narrative of the loss of innocence that defines human being. Adam and Eve are cast out of paradise for disobeying God's only moral law: a prohibition against eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This fall from grace, figured as a fall from heaven to Earth, is a metaphor for the primordial separation from divinity that brings forth human terrestrial life. Humanity is abandoned by God, left to stumble in a desert of uncertainty, to find for itself the right way to live. Not only, then, had a place in paradise been lost, but notably also innocence – and the protection and guidance afforded the innocent. After gaining moral knowledge, fallen humanity transitions

from innocence to a state of being able to do harm. This loss of innocence is our original sin, an indelible stain of guilt inherited from Adam and Eve as part of the human condition. Innocence had been a state of blissful oneness with God's will. But it is also an unsustainable condition, yielded once one lives in a world rife with harm and compromise. To be agents of one's own life one must cast off innocence. Living a mortal life involves getting one's hands dirty. Or so the story goes.

This story endures through a particular conception of human nature and its possibilities – and importantly, of innocent children as potential, and somewhat ethereal, human beings. Innocence is regarded with a sense of nostalgia, an otherworldly contentment of which mere mortals are unworthy. Our story begins where innocence is already lost, our being already spoiled and broken. This loss not only separates us from our origins, but also drives a constant and tragic effort to rebuild a place of uncorrupted innocence on Earth, and to populate this space with half heavenly, half terrestrial creatures. Such is the social function of childhood. By dint of the story of human meaning in Genesis, children represent what we once were and still ought to be. The story of the fall privileges the innocence children resemble, which apparently belongs to humanity at the point of its origin.

But just as Genesis splits humanity in two – between the exalted and the fallen – our conceptions of children, and the lives they are permitted to live, are also organised by this divide.

This is because innocence so defined is unliveable without an overlord to protect, surveil and control the innocent's every movement. Innocents are secluded from any resources that would enable them to make a decision for themselves. As in the Garden of Eden, the safeguard that ensures incorruptibility is the regulation of information, a control of knowledge that separates innocence from worldliness. After eating the fruit of knowledge, Adam and Eve's fall was inevitable. The maintenance of innocence requires the absence of moral knowledge, as well as of harm and desire. The garden we create for the innocent must be more perfect than

God's: a walled garden, with no snakes and no fruit. To maintain children's innocence, we invent internet filters, censorship regimes and abstinence-only sex education.[7] We rush past billboards advertising longer sex hoping the children won't ask awkward questions. We fear children are not ready developmentally to encounter 'adult themes'. A contamination anxiety is at work here, and a purity fetish for childhood innocence. No everyday issue can be allowed to intrude upon this purity: children must neither know nor experience the kinds of thoughts and feelings the rest take for granted.

In fact, this narrative structure – and the order of values it supports – places children always on the verge of a fall. It allows them to be either angels or fallen angels, either innocence personified or in need of a good spanking. It ignores the broad range of behaviours, opinions and appearances that belong to children but which jar against the ideal of innocence. When adults value the innocence children represent over actual children, they come to downplay aberrant childhood experience so as to maintain this faith. They read behaviour that falls outside the strict parameters of innocence as morally ambiguous – even tending towards evil. This perverse effect of applying the ideal of innocence to children often passes unnoticed. Disadvantaged children, for instance, are regularly depicted as bestial little deviants and prescribed harsh discipline in the guise of tough love. By dressing our children as fairies or in Anne Geddes' originals we momentarily forget how much they enjoy playing in mud, fighting, nose picking and masturbating.

Not so long ago children were seen as little better than untrained animals, and the path to their education and spiritual cultivation was laid with pain. It is not so acceptable to abuse children in the name of their improvement now that we are enlightened to the value of childhood. Yet the physical discipline of children is still an explosive issue today that is regularly ignited in the popular media, as the recent New Zealand referendum about smacking demonstrates.[8] The idea of their inherent goodness slips easily into disgust and violence in the face of bad behaviour. This dissonance produces the spectre of the monstrous child, which huddles in the

long shadow cast by innocent childhood. Stories of child bullies, torturers and murderers are so darkly fascinating because through them we can dwell upon ambivalence felt towards children when they don't conform to innocence. These opposing views of children – as either natural innocents or harbourers of original sin – take root in the same soil, according to the rationale of the fall. They do not belong so much to different epochs as to different moments of the same cultural formation of childhood innocence. There must always be failures, children who fall short of such a demanding ideal. A commitment to upholding the innocence of childhood, then, may not best serve children's interests.

The importance of innocence in the social imaginary

The story of Genesis is so culturally potent that it still influences secular views of social relations and identity. These narratives structure ways of seeing and valuing, and have concrete effects for individuals within a social group. The Edenic story contributes to what's called the 'social imaginary': the stock of images, metaphors, rituals and symbols through which we are able to negotiate a shared understanding of the world.[9] We borrow from a repertoire of signs and practices that are culturally constrained, 'mapping' the social sphere so that others know what our actions mean and their behaviour can make sense to us. The biblical primal scene informs assumptions about the innocence we lost there, and behaviour in relation to that loss. We do not cease telling varieties of this story. A modern iteration, Nabokov's *Lolita*, brings out our ambivalences about innocent children in telling ways.

Lolita is a fractured love story told from the perspective of a middle-aged paedophile, about his infatuation with a 12 year old girl. Nabokov invites the reader to identify with its monstrous protagonist, to see from his perspective, but also to see within Humbert Humbert's narration the gaps in his own conscious knowledge and his control of the scene. Peeking through these gaps is Lolita's own point of view, which Humbert at once conceals from himself and