Looking in the Mirror:
Biological Sisterhood, Doubleness, and the Body in Krissy Kneen's *Steeplechase*

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Abstract:
Biological sisters share genetics and are born (often) in the same womb, therefore encouraging a sense of similitude. When a sister looks at her sister, then, she sees not 'Other' but simply 'mine', or, as Toni McNaron suggests, a sister is "someone who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves—a special kind of double" (7). Through close textual analysis, this paper examines how the doubleness of biological sisterhood encourages the understanding of a sister's body as simultaneously 'self' and 'other' within *Steeplechase* (2011) by Krissy Kneen. *Steeplechase* explores the relationship between estranged, middle-aged sisters Bec and Emily as they reunite at the opening of Emily's art exhibition in Beijing. The relationship between Bec and Emily demonstrates that by understanding a sister's body as simultaneously 'self' and 'other', sisters in literary fiction are able to challenge and disrupt the established boundaries of the body. This paper explores the unique perspective that biological sisterhood offers to reading the female body in literary fiction. This paper also argues that interrogating the corporeal bond between sisters can contribute to dismantling the predominant literary representations of biological sisters as rivals or as an idealizing metaphor, and can reveal deeper complexities of fictional biological sisterhood.

1 Sisterhood has long been a strong, recurrent theme in women's literature. Such pervasion indicates the importance of the bond for women. Within literary criticism, however, there is scarce attention given to the relationship between biological sisters and the body, despite the fact that sisterhood exists in a unique corporeality. Biological sisters share genetics and are born (often) in the same womb, therefore encouraging a sense of similitude. Unlike with the gender difference of brother and sister bonds, and the unavoidable hierarchy of vertical familial bonds such as those between mother and daughter, the adjacency of sororal bonds encourage sisters to see each other, as suggested by Toni McNaron, as "someone who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves—a special kind of double" (7). This paper examines how the doubleness of biological sisterhood encourages the understanding of a sister's body as simultaneously 'self' and 'other' within close textual analysis of one text of Australian literary fiction—*Steeplechase* (2011) by Krissy Kneen. *Steeplechase* explores the problematic but intensely loving relationship between two Australian sisters, Bec and Emily. After engaging in an intimate, often sexual, relationship as adolescents due to their shared psychosis born from Emily's schizophrenia, the sisters grew estranged after Emily was incarcerated in an institution. They reunite in their middle-age, however, when Emily invites Bec to the opening of her art exhibition in Beijing. The doubleness of Bec and Emily

facilitates their understanding of the body of their sister as simultaneously 'self' and 'other': an understanding which encourages complexity as well as solidarity within their bond. Alongside examining these nuances, this paper will also explore how by understanding a sister as both 'self' and other', the sisters in *Steeplechase* are able to challenge and disrupt established body boundaries. Much work has been done by literary scholars of biological sisterhood to dismantle the opposing representations of sisters as rivals and of sisters as an idealizing metaphor; their work has revealed the complexity and nuances of biological sisterhood within fiction. This paper seeks to situate itself among this important scholarship, and contributes by shifting the emphasis to the question of biological sisterhood and the body.

2 There is limited scholarship about biological sisterhood and the body as represented in literary fiction. Indeed, there is relatively limited scholarship about fictive biological sisters in general. The scholars that *do* examine sisters suggest various reasons for this. In her influential text *The Sister Bond: A Feminist View of a Timeless Connection*, Toni McNaron, for example, suggests that it is the exclusively female nature of the relationship (a threat to patriarchy) which has discouraged critical attention to sisters (5). Helga G. Braunbeck echoes this when she argues that sisters are passed over in favour vertical bonds and the bond between brothers because, quite simply, "sister interactions take place outside of the male experience" (159). Similarly, Amy Levin suggests that the silence around sisters may be because the relationship does not adhere to the patriarchal script that the primary role of women is maternal; the sister relationship therefore, which is often built on mutual caregiving and friendship, is considered excessive and without value (20). Another reason might be due to the popularity of the feminist 'sisterhood' within Western public discourse in the latter half of the twentieth century. Sisterhood was a unifying, empowering notion within feminist movements, and Levin, like Downing (4), argues that critics avoid discussing biological sisters because of "the frequent friction among biological sisters that is so much at odds with ideals of sisterhood" (16).

3 Despite this deterrence, there has still been a few key scholars[1] who discuss biological sisterhood in fiction. Within their scholarship, one common interest is on interrogating the representation of biological sisters as rivals. While Roesch suggests that sisters are "shown as rivals who follow the dichotomies of the female and male gender patterns" (134) from the nineteenth century, Levin's scholarship argues that many older, establishing sister stories also endorse rivalry between sisters, such as between the stepsisters in *Cinderella*, or between kind, honest Cordelia and her ambitious sisters in *King Lear* (22). In turning to the Bible, we

[1] Some of whom are mentioned above, and I would like to add Eva Rueschmann and Bridgette Dawn Copeland in particular to this cohort.

find Genesis a world "where brotherhood is seen almost entirely in *human* terms, and where sisterhood is almost entirely ignored" (Downing 107). The one sister relationship that does appear is, unsurprisingly, also shrouded by rivalry: Leah and Rachel, both wives of Jacob, compete to have Jacob's children although eventually only Leah is able to carry a child. Their rivalry, notably, is primarily *corporeal.* Leah and Rachel compete in the physical capacity of their bodies, and their physical capacity to serve the desires of Jacob. Their rivalry—like between the sisters in *Cinderella* and *King Lear*—is for the love of a man, or, as Rueschmann suggests in her doctoral dissertation, "for the property or position of power that the male represents" (2). The rivalry between sisters in fiction is almost always over a male (Bernikow 76), and as such sister rivalry is often (at least somewhat) corporeal in nature as their competition for a male delimits their rivalry to aspects that a male desires. Arguably, as a large part of a male's attraction to a female in these establishing texts is determined on the female's ability to both sexually satisfy and provide children for the male (or, in the case of a father, his daughter's ability to be 'marketable' as a 'good' potential wife), corporeality is often a large part of sister rivalry. The potential for corporeal-related rivalry without the prize of a male is rarely seen in representations of biological sister relationships in fiction. This is representative, perhaps in part, of a history of social valuing that ignores female bonds unless they are in relation to men.

4 Given the understanding of sisters as rivals, sisters are often represented as a dichotomy in order to generate plot (Levin 19). Alongside canonical texts such as *Little Women* (1869) by Louisa May Alcott and the novels of Jane Austen, there are many texts of Australian literary fiction which also follow the established trend of representing sisters as competing opposites. Examples include the mischievous Judy and naive Meg in Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* (1894), the adventurous Caro and the milder Grace in Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* (1980), the sisters described only as 'the artist' and 'the cartographer' in Lara Fergus' *My Sister Chaos* (2010), and irresponsible April and serious Esther in Georgia Blain's *Between a Wolf and a Dog* (2016). While the oppositional nature of these sisters introduces tension and conflict into the texts, I argue, alongside Rueschmann (12) and the psychological and sociological studies of biological sisters discussed forthcoming, that is it not the difference between sisters that induces the most tension: rather, it is the similarity. That is, it is the unresolvable tension between a woman desiring to mirror her sister while simultaneously desiring to assert her difference.

5 This tension partly emerges from experiences unique to the upbringing of biological sisters. In *Sisters: Love and Rivalry Inside the Family and Beyond*, Elizabeth Fishel describes

the "shared, private and, in some cases, primitive language between sisters which expresses their interwoven scripts, the stories of their growing up" (214). Sisters are also often a woman's "first role models, allies, and friends" (Millman x), and can thus be influential to a woman's life both in actual, physical presence, and in internalized experiences from memories of earlier years together (Jones 5). Additionally, the potential for the relationship to last longer than almost any other facilitates a "continuing shared experience" (ibid.). Sarah E. Killoren and Andrea L. Roach, in their sociological study of sisters as confidants, argue that this shared experience may encourage sisters to occupy a mentorship role in matters of body experiences, dating, and sexuality (237-238), where knowledge is communicated through the secret physicality shared between biological sisters since birth. Born (often, except in the case of some half-siblings and surrogate pregnancies) in the same womb, sisters share a unique body experience. Unlike with a brother, where a sister would be unavoidably 'other' due to pervading gender dichotomies, and unlike with a parent, where the vertical hierarchy between parent and child is difficult to dismantle, a sister sees a version of herself when she looks at her sister. That is, she sees someone of the same gender who is biologically almost exactly like her, and nothing like her: "a special kind of double" (McNaron 7). Such an experience is, of course, especially resonant for twins or for sisters that are close in age. In addition, sharing the same pregnant body may encourage sisters to understand that they have been, in some sense, birthed *beside* each other. This genetic adjacency, the *horizontal* bond rather than the *vertical*, is where the sororal bond is different to other strong female bonds—particularly the bond between mother and daughter. Downing suggests that unlike the "overwhelming, somehow sacred difference that separates mother and infant child" (11), the difference between sisters is, generally, more relative and subtle (11). Though there is some hierarchy in birth order, age difference, or parental favouritism, there is a symmetry between sisters that is largely unachievable in mother/daughter bonds. McNaron argues that this symmetry, this *doubleness*, is the reason why many biological sisters harbour the "desire to be one, juxtaposed against the necessity to be two" (7).

6 The doubleness of biological sisterhood is thoroughly explored within Krissy Kneen's *Steeplechase*. Kneen's novel explores the relationship between two estranged Australian sisters, Bec and Emily, as they arrange to meet for the opening of Emily's art exhibition in Beijing. Though close growing up, the protagonist Bec recalls their shared psychosis during adolescence that resulted in their engagement in physically intimate and sexual activity together. These events caused Emily to be incarcerated in an institution for schizophrenia which prompted the estrangement between the sisters, though it revealed late in the narrative

that Bec attempted to visit Emily in the institution but she was prohibited by the institution staff and their grandmother.

7 Throughout the novel, Bec and Emily are consistently represented as 'doubles'. The novel begins with Bec, while she is recovering from an operation in hospital, receiving a phone call from her older sister Emily. Upon answering the phone call, Bec hears her "own voice" (Kneen 8) echoed back to her, and the concept of Bec viewing Emily as a second self, or an extension of self, is established. Emily asks Bec to accompany her to the opening of her art exhibition in Beijing and, though hesitant, Bec agrees. Bec immediately recognizes herself reflected in the body of her sister upon her arrival in Beijing, despite their years of estrangement:

> I am shocked to see her this way, blown out and hidden under her own flesh…This moment is also a mirror and I am reflected: I am this size, this weight. I am this same embodiment of jet lagged exhaustion. In her eyes I find my own loneliness and insecurities. (Kneen 139)

8 Bec understands that the body of her sister is her own. The sisters, then, might be seen as *sharing* a body. Emily has a strong desire to cement the shared nature of their bodies, as seen in her insistence on physical similarity. This desire reflects the aforementioned tension intrinsic to biological sisterhood: the necessity to be two bodies, but the yearning to be one (McNaron 7). Emily, for example, suggests that they wear the same coloured dress to her exhibition opening "to prove that [they] are sisters" (Kneen 139). She also recites knowledge about Bec's physical appearance— knowledge that Bec believes would be "impossible that she would know" (148)—such as that Bec had an asymmetrical haircut for months. She also knows, perhaps instinctually, that Bec does not like sweet cocktails despite Bec remembering that there was "never a drop of alcohol" throughout their childhood (157). Likewise, Bec knows her sister without *actually* knowing her. While eating lunch at a restaurant with Emily's friends, no one seems to know that Emily "is taking the piss" (156) but Bec, and earlier, when she realizes that "[her] vague half-smile is the same expression as [her] sister's" (154). Their shared childhood, and shared biology, facilitates an intrinsic connection where both women know their sister's body almost more than they know their own. For Bec and Emily, the body of their sister *is* their own body, despite not having a relationship with each other as adults.

9 Their understanding of each other as 'self', against the physical reality of being 'other', renders the body boundaries of the sisters unstable. The established boundaries between self and other, internal and external, are blurred between Bec and Emily. As such, the parts or functions of a sister's body that would traditionally be considered 'out of bounds'—and

therefore rendering the female body inferior than the contained, pure (male) body (Grosz 14)—in Western patriarchal ideology are no longer actually 'out of body bounds' in the presence of a sister. Rather, they remain within the boundary of the self. When Bec arrives in Beijing and sees her "blown out" older sister (Kneen 139), the "round swell of her hips, the thick set of her shoulders" (146), she does not judge her sister's body. The larger figure of her sister, which 'trespasses' the Western patriarchal boundaries of an ideal "small, slender, and taking up little space" female body, is not abject and deserving of "stigmatisation" (Anleu 367) to Bec in the same way that it might be to the eyes of an outsider or an 'other'. To Bec, Emily's larger figure is also her own—the internal is not trespassing into the external, just shifting inside the special, sister delimitations of the self. This suggests that in the eyes of a sister, where the boundaries between self and other are already blurred, a female's body is able to transgress (and disrupt) established body boundaries that are restrictive (and damaging) for women.

10 Such blurred body boundaries between the sisters also, however, facilitate alternative complexities. For example, Bec visits her studio in Brisbane before traveling to Beijing. Both sisters are painters, though they differ in success: Emily is "a national treasure" (Kneen 97) and Bec feels as though her exhibitions are essentially "shouting into the wind" (Kneen 31). Bec, heavily intoxicated, unlocks a safe in her studio. She takes out several canvases that she has painted to replicate Emily's celebrated painting style. Bec believes that she knows how to paint indistinguishably from her sister as "[she] has spent hours watching [Emily] do it, hours doing it [herself]" (99). She signs her paintings with Emily's signature, which is "perfect", an exact replica of her sister's (ibid.). Bec feels when she first began her "Emily Reich period" that it was "impossible for [her] to see where Bec ended and Emily began" (100). Bec imagines, perhaps fantasizes, that she "becomes Emily" (ibid.). Here, Bec not only desires to share the body of her sister, but desires to reject her own body and exist in Emily's body *as Emily*. This desire is perhaps due to the rivalry that sisters are taught since birth, as aforementioned. Bec, unable to reconcile that she is not as successful as her older sister, might desire to become Emily. However, if this desire is due to rivalry, it is different to the sororal rivalry traditionally represented as it is not entirely for the love, wealth, or property of a man (unlike the rivalry between sisters in the aforementioned establishing sister texts of Rachel and Leah in Genesis, *King Lear*, and *Cinderella*). While Bec is jealous of the admiration her lover, John, has for Emily's paintings, Bec has been privately 'painting as Emily' long before she met John. Arguably, then, Bec's desire could simply be an intense manifestation of the desire that McNaron argues is inherent in biological sister relationships; the desire to be one

(7). Bec's desire to exist as Emily when painting speaks to a more complex, darker implication of the blurred body boundaries between biological sisters. Here, biological sisterhood is clearly not always an idealizing metaphor: the uncertainty of 'self' and 'other', particularly in regards to corporeality, accommodates the transgression of boundaries in ways that threaten an individual sense of self.

11 The complexity of the blurred body boundaries between Bec and Emily is most acute, however, in Bec's memory of the childhood events that ignited their estrangement. Throughout their childhood and adolescence, Emily had shown schizophrenic traits that were similar to those of their mother. Emily harboured a delusion that a man named Raphael visited their isolated property during the night and that she had developed a friendship with him. After Emily grows increasingly distant from Bec, her younger sister longs to reclaim Emily's attention and is distraught to be excluded from experiencing Emily's secrets—"I want to share him with her. Raphael has stolen my sister from me and I want so much to join them in their game" (Kneen 95). Bec eventually convinces herself that she can also hear Raphael "breathing between the flat tones" of the telephone receiver (2011, 83). Emily and Bec develop a shared psychosis, or, as Bec describes it, "a shared madness, a folie á deux" (194), and Bec begins to wish that Raphael would visit her like he visits Emily. On the first night that Raphael visits Bec, Raphael takes her on horseback to a nearby public school and kisses her (128). It is revealed late in the narrative that Emily is Raphael, and that both Emily and Bec were under the delusion that Emily's change in clothes, physicality, and voice when she 'became' Raphael was a seperate person. Here, the transgression of body boundaries shifts from metaphorical to actual physical intimacy. As an adult, Bec "wonder[s] about [her] nights with Raphael which must have been nights with Emily. What terrible things [they] did. How cleverly [they] hid this from [themselves]" (202), and she remembers their continuous physical, often sexual, intimacy. Here, the sense of an individual corporeality is so unstable that the established (and 'acceptable') body boundaries between Bec and Emily are incredibly disrupted. By viewing the bodies of each other as simultaneously 'self' and 'other', the sisters within Kneen's text demonstrate the potential for biological sister bonds to transgress and shift the established boundaries of the body in ways that are incredibly psychologically and physiologically complicated. Here, the often ignored, 'taboo' shades and nuances of the relationship between biological sisters and corporeality are revealed.

12 The relationship between biological sisterhood and the body as represented in literary fiction is undeniably complex. Though sisters as rivals and sisters as an idealizing metaphor have dominated literary representations of the bond, sisters Bec and Emily within Kneen's

Steeplechase disrupt such traditions. The 'doubleness' of biological sisterhood encourages Bec and Emily to understand the body of each other as simultaneously 'self' and 'other': an understanding that facilitates solidarity and empowerment *as well as* conflict and complexity. Bec and Emily demonstrate that in the eyes of a sister, where the boundaries between 'self' and 'other' are already blurred, a female's body can transgress established body boundaries that are restrictive for women. Such blurred body boundaries between Bec and Emily, however, also have the potential to accomodate the transgression of body boundaries in ways that threaten an individual sense of self and reveal the nuances of sororal physical intimacy that are often taboo. Through close textual analysis of biological sisters as represented in *Steeplechase*, this paper has explored the potential for fictional biological sisterhood to challenge and disrupt (in numerous, alternative ways) the established boundaries of the female body. In doing so, this paper has contributed to the important work started by literary scholars of interrogating and dismantling the dominant literary representations of biological sisters as rivals and biological sisters as an idealizing metaphor in literature. By shifting emphasis to the *body*, and to the corporeal bond of biological sisters, this paper explores some of the complexities of biological sister relationships that have yet to be extensively examined in literary scholarship.

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