Of mothers and their daughters

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Anne Summers and I go back along way.

That can be a bit of a worry for a reviewer, especially if you don't like what you're reading.

To my great relief and boundless pleasure then, I can confidently say that *The Lost Mother* is an absolute treasure of a book.

I was a publisher's rep in l972 when Summers was holed up in a room in Sydney, working on a manuscript that became *Damned Whores and God's Police*. It came out two years later, in 1975, at the tail end of International Women's Year and around the time of the Whitlam government's dismissal.

By then I was a public servant, head of Prime Minister's Women's Affairs Branch. Malcolm Fraser was the caretaker prime minister, which meant that no real work could be done in the department. I came to West Block each morning, sat down at my file-free desk, and gobbled up-the pages of Summers' book.

Eight years later, by a funny reversal of fortune, I had published *West Block*, set in the department, and Summers was heading its upgraded Office of Women's Affairs. She left after the sex discrimination legislation was in place, but in 1993 joined Paul Keating's staff in the run-up to that year's election. Many attribute his victory to the women-friendly policies Summers had put up to him.

Summers' achievements for women have been substantial but, like your reviewer, she is fundamentally a writer. *Damned Whores and God's Police* was a groundbreaking book, arguably the earliest general history of Australian women. She was awarded a doctorate on the strength of it, and it's been reprinted and set on course syllabuses ever since. It's had its detractors - what book doesn't? - but there is no denying its importance. There have been other books, including her memoir *Ducks on the Pond*, but somehow, to my mind, none quite measured up to that first one. Until now.

The Lost Mother is an act of resurrection. It opens with the death of Summers' mother. The death of a mother is a life event, stirring a host of feelings and regrets. No matter how loving, mothers and daughters have a vexed relationship, with each of their lives a comment on the other's. A whole generation of baby boomers is now at that stage when their parents are dying, and a raft of new books, fiction and non-fiction, have been published on the subject. (Gabrielle Carey's *The Waiting Room*, Susan Varga's *Headlong* are just two.) But with Summers and her mother the issues were played out in high relief.

From her daughter's perspective, Tuni Cooper was a repressed suburban housewife whose potential was crushed the minute she married and embarked on Catholic motherhood. As for Tuni. she was harsh on her only daughter; critical of her hair, her dress, above all her life choices. Summers herself was deeply resentful that her mother had once chosen her father over her - a choice she exposed, as

a memoirist would, in *Ducks on the Pond*. It was over this revelation that a truly serious breach occurred, only beginning to heal when Tuni suddenly died.

Summers was bequeathed her portrait, which arrived in a crate a soon after her death. Painted when the sitter was l0 years old, it was arguably her mother's most prized possession, and for years had hung on her dining room wall, witness to years of family meals and disputation. When Summers opened the crate and undid the wrapping, she was struck by the painting as she never had been before, by the expression in the girl's grey eyes, and the large book she held in her hand. She saw, for the first time perhaps, her mother as a girl - a special one at that.

The receipt of the painting sent Summers down the rabbit hole immortalised in the book in her mother's hand, leading her into a wonderland she had never known existed. Who was the painter, and why had she chosen this one girl to paint? It was the beginning of the unravelling of more than one mystery, and the recovery of a hefty slice of Australian cultural history.

The signature was that of C. Parkin, later Constance Stokes. Stokes was a modernist, one of those accomplished women painters who, after a career of achievement and critical endorsement, dropped out of the canon of 20th-century Australian art. The ones we are acquainted with - the Grace Cossington Smiths and Margaret Prestons - had to be resurrected through the work of dedicated curators, and writers like Drusilla Modjeska and Janine Burke. The process was complicated in Stokes's case by those longstanding Sydney-Melbourne rivalries that held particular sway in Australian art.

It took many years for Tuni Cooper to acquire her portrait, and there is more than one story in that. The woman who bought it was a Melbourne society figure, married to a wealthy businessman who spared his young wife no expense. When Tuni's mother happened upon a picture of the portrait in a newspaper, she wrote to the woman asking if she could buy it, but was refused. It was only many years later, after the Melbourne mansion that housed it had been sold to the Catholic Church, and the Church in turn had sold it, that the painting was retrieved and hung on the Coopers' dining room wall.

What Summers retrieved was much more. Through it, and the search for its provenance, she acquired a deeper appreciation of the complex woman who was her mother and, inevitably, a deeper understanding of herself. But we, her readers, are perhaps the most favoured of all. The book that has resulted from this journey is richly layered, excitingly paced, and so full of amazing coincidence that, if it weren't for the research that went into it, you might well wonder if it hadn't written itself.

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