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Original Research Article

The Crisis of Embodied Identity: Bodily Transformation, Psychological Estrangement, and the Uncertainty of Selfhood in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract: This article reads three recent novels together to ask what happens to selfhood when the body stops confirming who we take ourselves to be: Rachel Yoder's Nightbitch (2021), Julia Armfield's Our Wives Under the Sea (2022), and Torrey Peters's Detransition, Baby (2021). I argue that each book organises bodily estrangement in its own way. In Nightbitch the body changes by intensification (metamorphosis); in Our Wives Under the Sea it loosens at its edges and slips out of reach (dissolution); in Detransition, Baby its meaning is argued over by the people with a stake in it (indeterminacy). To bring these differences into focus I set recent criticism, much of it from 2024 to 2026, against the foundational work it depends on: phenomenologies of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, Leder, Young), the monstrous-feminine and abjection (Creed, Kristeva), trans-corporeality (Alaimo, Neimanis), queer and trans temporality (Halberstam, Freeman, Edelman), and writing on recognition, credibility and ambiguous loss (Butler, Fricker, Boss). The claim is that uncertainty in these novels is a formal principle as well as a theme. It shapes voice, time, focalisation and closure, and it leaves no unchanged self waiting underneath the change. The corpus is small and Anglophone, and the account of the critical field is a bounded review, not an exhaustive survey.

Keywords: embodied identity; bodily transformation; contemporary fiction; monstrous-feminine; trans-corporeality; queer temporality; narrative uncertainty.

1. Introduction: The Unfamiliar Body

Most of the time we do not notice our bodies. They carry us through rooms and conversations, and the self we take ourselves to be seems to sit comfortably inside them. Phenomenologists have long described this quiet. For Merleau-Ponty (2012) the body is not an object we look at but the standpoint from which a world appears at all, and Leder (1990) adds that the body tends to vanish from awareness exactly when it works well, returning to view in pain, illness or sudden change. Pregnancy, birth, injury, ageing and unfamiliar surroundings all force that return. Young (1984) shows how pregnancy in particular divides the subject: the body is oneself and not oneself at the same moment, and what happens to it is watched, measured and named by other people.

The three novels discussed here begin at such a point of return. In Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch*, a mother who has put her art aside to stay home with her small son finds coarse hair at the back of her neck and tells her husband she thinks she is turning into a dog; he laughs and she does

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not (Yoder 2021). In Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea*, Leah comes back from a deep-sea mission that ran far longer than planned, and her wife Miri has to live with someone who is home and yet not quite the woman who left. In Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby*, Ames, who lived for years as a trans woman named Amy before detransitioning, learns that his boss Katrina is pregnant by him, and he asks his former partner Reese, a trans woman who has long wanted to be a mother, whether the three of them might raise the child together (Peters 2021). The plots and politics differ. Underneath all three sits one question: what is left of a self when the body no longer confirms the meanings through which a person learned to recognise themselves?

These books resist the most familiar answer, which is that beneath any bodily change an authentic inner self waits, intact. *Nightbitch* will not tell us whether the transformation is literal, and its comic, increasingly feral narration refuses to return the mother to the terms of respectable domesticity. In *Our Wives Under the Sea* the disturbance reaches us through Miri, whose recognition of Leah is split between the familiarity of love and the sense of a difference that cannot be undone. The grief of the book lives in that split. *Detransition, Baby* moves the question out among people. Identity is bargained for across relationships and reproductive possibilities, and the body is read, sometimes in incompatible ways, by those who have a stake in what it means. What emerges is not one experience of estrangement but three configurations of uncertainty.

I argue that the novels organise embodied crisis through three related but non-interchangeable modalities, which I call metamorphosis, dissolution and indeterminacy. *Nightbitch* stages metamorphosis as an intensification of sensation and appetite through which maternal subjectivity presses against the limits set for it. *Our Wives Under the Sea* stages dissolution, a loosening of bodily boundaries and of the possibility of knowing another person. *Detransition, Baby* stages indeterminacy, a social and temporal negotiation in which bodily meaning, kinship and futurity remain contested. I do not claim that the books express the same experience. I claim that their differences show how embodied identity is shaped where sensation, environment, recognition and social language meet, and that surreal comedy, elegiac withholding and shifting focalisation do more than represent uncertainty. They put the reader inside it.

The critical conversation is lopsided in a way that turned out to matter for this article. *Nightbitch* has drawn most of the attention, and much of that has gathered around the monstrous mother. Nido (2024) introduces a special journal issue on the monstrous mother in literature; Serrano Elena (2024) and Álvarez Trigo (2024) read the protagonist's monstrosity, appetite and artistic ambition against patriarchal motherhood; Haskell (2025) and Cloudt (2026), both in graduate theses, bring queer theory and Creed's monstrous-feminine to the same ground. Others turn to the human–animal line (Sharma 2026; Tångefelt 2024), to rage (Yuzadarman and Istiani 2025), to postpartum medicine (Neogi 2026), to transformation as a process (Sprengnether 2025; Tabachnikoff 2026), and to the novel's journey into Turkish translation (Süren 2026).

Our Wives Under the Sea has been read less often but with real precision. Kubáň (2024) places it, alongside Martin MacInnes's *In Ascension*, within material ecocriticism and trans-corporeality, and Jensen (2026) pairs it with Diane Setterfield's *Once Upon a River* to propose a "blue narratology" in which water shapes the form of storytelling itself. Dastidar (2023) offers an early review. *Detransition, Baby* has attracted a differently angled body of work: Haring (2024) reads it through queer temporality and the life course, Rajamohan and Vijayalakshmi (2025) through kinship, and Muzaffar (2026) through Bowen family systems theory. Two further items are not about the corpus at all but sit close to it. Sariego (2025) theorises pregnancy as a genre of political and affective expectation, and Kendrick (2025) reads feminine madness in fiction as a metaphor for resisting injustice.

Two features of this field shaped the revision. First, it is very recent. Thirteen of the twenty sources I cite date from 2025 or 2026, and eight are graduate or undergraduate theses (Figure 1). That is a sign of vitality, but it also means that the concepts carrying the most weight, such as the monstrous mother, trans-corporeality and queer time, often arrive second-hand. So I go back to where they come from, and Section 2 introduces each strand through its foundational

sources before turning to the recent criticism. Second, the field is divided by novel. Within the bibliography assembled for this study, the novels' shared concern with bodily intelligibility has received less attention than their separate thematic concerns. That is a statement about my bibliography, not a proof that no comparative study exists. Reading the three together lets me ask whether embodied crisis is only a recurring subject or whether it also shapes narrative voice, temporal organisation, focalisation and closure.

Figure 1. The recent criticism leans on Nightbitch and on very recent, thesis-heavy work
The 20 secondary sources in the reference list, classified from their titles and abstracts

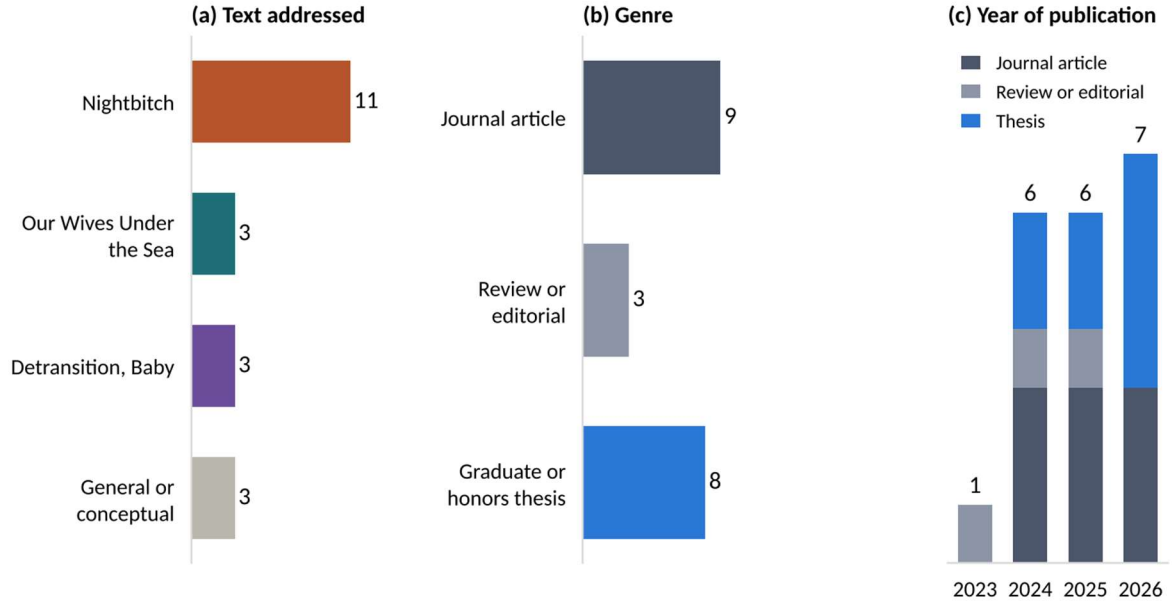

Figure 1. Classification of the 20 secondary sources in the reference list, made from their titles and abstracts. Cloudt (2026) is counted under *Nightbitch* because this article cites it for that novel; Nido (2024), Kendrick (2025) and Sariego (2025) address none of the three novels in particular. This is a descriptive map of the present bibliography, not the result of a systematic search.

1.1 Scope and method

The study is an interpretive comparative close reading, not a systematic review of evidence. I chose the novels because each puts bodily change or bodily interpretation at the centre of a crisis of selfhood while locating that crisis in a different place: sensory experience, the relation between body and environment, or the social field of recognition and kinship. I attend to narrative voice, focalisation, temporal organisation, recurring bodily images and closure. Secondary criticism sets out the conversation to which I am responding. It sharpens the interpretation without replacing it.

Because the bibliography mixes journal articles, reviews and theses, I weigh its parts differently. Theses are evidence of where the conversation is heading, and I use them mainly to map it. Wherever an argument carries real weight I anchor it in peer-reviewed work or in the foundational theory discussed in Section 2. I make no claim to exhaustive coverage.

Page references are to the editions listed in Table 1 and the reference list. Where a close reading depends on a particular scene, I cite the page; the scenes are described closely enough that a reader with a different edition can find them. The article proceeds in the following order. Section 2 sets out the framework and how its strands are used without collapsing the novels into one model. Sections 3 to 5 take each novel in turn, and Section 6 compares them. Section 7 draws out implications and limits.

Novel	Narrative situation	Publisher (edition cited)	Setting	Pages in edition
Nightbitch (Yoder, 2021)	Third person, close on an unnamed mother	Doubleday	American suburb	256 (hardcover)
Our Wives Under the Sea (Armfield, 2022)	First person (Miri), with chapters returning to the expedition	Picador	A coastal home; the deep sea	240
Detransition, Baby (Peters, 2021)	Third person, shifting between Reese, Ames and Katrina; non-linear	One World	New York	[confirm]

Table 1. Primary texts and the editions to which page references refer.

2. A Composite Framework

No single vocabulary describes all three novels. A framework built only on the monstrous-feminine would illuminate *Nightbitch* and distort the environmental and relational crisis of *Our Wives Under the Sea*. One built only on trans-corporeality would turn *Detransition, Baby* into a story about permeability and miss its concern with recognition, gendered language and kinship. The framework here is therefore plural, but I hold it together with a single question: how is selfhood sustained, shaken and renegotiated when the body can no longer be taken as an unquestioned ground of identity? Each strand below is introduced through its foundational sources first and the recent criticism second, because the second reads better once the first is in view. Table 2 summarises the moves, and Figure 2 shows where each strand comes from.

2.1 Embodiment, recognition and credibility

Embodied identity is neither simply located inside the body nor freely chosen outside it. It is sustained through relations among sensation, memory, social recognition and the routines by which a person inhabits the world. The face a partner recognises, the name a family uses, the bodily capacities taken for granted: all of these feed a sense of continuity. When they become unreliable, estrangement is more than physical unfamiliarity. It unsettles the terms on which a person understands and is understood. Leder's (1990) account of the body that "dys-appears" in disruption and Young's (1984) account of pregnant embodiment give this unsettling its bodily form. Butler (2005) supplies its ethical side. If the self is partly opaque to itself and can only give an account of itself to someone else, then the limits of self-knowledge are not a defect to be repaired but a condition of relation. Recognition, in Butler's (2004) work, is never neutral either, because the norms that confer it decide whose life is livable.

Fricker (2007) sharpens the point about whose word counts. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker is given less credibility than she deserves because of prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice occurs when a gap in shared interpretive resources leaves someone unable to make sense of her own experience. Both will turn out to matter. A mother who cannot make her estrangement credible, and a family trying to name itself in a language that keeps offering the wrong words, are in this sense closer to each other than they first appear.

Recent criticism confirms that estrangement here rarely stays private. Neogi (2026) reads *Nightbitch* through the pathologising of the postpartum body under medical patriarchy, which echoes Young's older point that pregnancy is lived under other people's authority. Kendrick's (2025) honors thesis, which reads feminine madness in published and personal fiction as a metaphor for resisting injustice, offers a useful warning against treating psychological

disturbance as an individual defect detached from its conditions. I use that warning cautiously. I do not diagnose the protagonists or equate their experiences. I ask how each novel represents the pressure on selfhood when the available categories cannot hold what a person is living through.

2.2 The monstrous-feminine

No concept has done more for this corpus, and none needs more careful handling. Creed (1993) argued, from horror cinema, that woman is made monstrous almost always in relation to her reproductive and maternal functions, and she built the argument on Kristeva's (1982) account of abjection, the horror that arises when borders between self and other, inside and outside, are breached. The maternal body is for Kristeva the place where those borders are least secure. Creed's later work (2022) turns to recent films in which the monstrous-feminine becomes a liberating figure, and it is this later turn that many readings of *Nightbitch* inherit. Two further foundations matter. Rich (1976) separated motherhood as lived experience from motherhood as a patriarchal institution, a distinction that grounds Serrano Elena's (2024) and Haskell's (2025) readings. And for the dog, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) treat becoming-animal as an alliance with a pack or multiplicity and not as imitation, while Haraway (2008) insists on the dog as a companion with its own significance, not a stand-in for a human feeling.

Recent criticism is dense here. Nido (2024) frames the monstrous mother as a live critical category; Cloudt (2026) reads the mother and the witch through Creed and queer theory as a resource for resistance, while noting that Creed's framework can itself reinforce gender binaries; Álvarez Trigo (2024) follows appetite and artistic identity; Haskell (2025) argues that the novel queers motherhood; Yuzadarman and Istiani (2025) read the protagonist's rage through Butler's performativity and Friedan's feminine mystique; Sharma (2026) and Tångefelt (2024) take up the human–animal line; Sprengnether (2025) and Tabachnikoff (2026) emphasise transformation as process.

The concept nevertheless carries risks. If the maternal body is treated as inherently abject, criticism may reproduce the biological essentialism it means to contest, and Creed's own evidence is cinematic, so extending it to prose fiction is an interpretive step and not a given. The category also explains some bodies better than others. *Detransition, Baby* makes the limit visible: its central problem is not maternity as monstrosity but parenthood as a contested social arrangement. Trans theory has claimed monstrosity for itself (Stryker 1994), but Peters's novel is not organised around that claim. I therefore apply the monstrous-feminine where it clarifies a novel's specific operations and refuse it as a master explanation. And *Nightbitch* leaves the literal status of the transformation open. That openness is not a gap for criticism to fill. It is part of the novel's method.

2.3 Trans-corporeality and oceanic embodiment

If *Nightbitch* gives us a body that sharpens, *Our Wives Under the Sea* gives us one that permeates. Alaimo (2010) coined trans-corporeality for the movement of substances and agencies across human bodies, nonhuman creatures and environments, which makes the human body permeable and dissolves its stable outline. In her essay on the sea (Alaimo 2012) the ocean becomes the limit case, a place of suspension where the human is held in an undecided state. Neimanis (2017) pushes the thought toward water itself, treating human beings as bodies of water continuous with the waters around them.

Kubáň (2024) reads Armfield's novel through material ecocriticism and trans-corporeality, and his keywords of hybridity, ocean and interconnectedness indicate the stakes. This does something the monstrous-feminine cannot: it makes dissolution structural and not symbolic. Leah does not stand for the sea. She becomes continuous with it. Jensen (2026) then asks what happens to narrative when its subject behaves like water. Her thesis argues that aquatic logics organise storytelling at the level of form, and describes the novel's structure as fragmented and descending. Taken together, these sources let me make the central formal claim about Armfield:

embodiment and narration are the same problem. Animality in Yoder is sharp, hungry and outward. Water in Armfield is slow, deep and permeable. One transformation refuses containment, and the other submits to it.

2.4 Queer and trans temporalities

The fourth strand moves the question from space to time. Halberstam (2005) describes queer time as a way of living outside the logics of reproduction, family and inheritance that organise conventional lives, and Freeman (2010) names the social ordering of bodies toward those milestones chrononormativity. Edelman (2004) gives the political form of the same pressure in his critique of reproductive futurism, the habit of organising the future around the figure of the Child. Prosser (1998) shows how the standard transsexual narrative has its own shape, with a before, a passage and an arrival, and this is the shape against which *Detransition, Baby* can be measured. Uncertainty of selfhood is so often felt as a problem of the future: who will I be when this is over, when the child comes, when the body has finished changing?

Haring (2024) reads Peters's novel through queer temporalities and the life course, relying on Halberstam and on Butler, and argues that form and content together unsettle the linearity of normative biography. Rajamohan and Vijayalakshmi (2025) carry the question into kinship, using kinship theory to set chosen families against given ones. Muzaffar (2026) adds a family-systems vocabulary of differentiation, triangulation and projection, which spreads selfhood across a triad instead of locking it inside one character. Sariego (2025) is a different kind of source. It is a theoretical article that argues for pregnancy as a genre of political, aesthetic and affective expectation and not merely a biological fact, and I use it as a concept, not as criticism of any one novel. If pregnancy is a genre in that sense, then the pregnant body in *Nightbitch*, the returning body in *Our Wives* and the prospective body in *Detransition, Baby* are all bodies whose futures are being written for them in advance. Time is not a theme laid over embodiment. It is how embodied uncertainty is felt.

2.5 Narrative form, loss and the limits of knowing

Narrative form is not just the container for these crises. It is one of the ways they become intelligible, or stay resistant to explanation. Genette's (1980) distinction between who speaks and who sees is useful at once: Yoder keeps the mother's perception at the centre while refusing to certify it; Armfield separates the voice that tells from the person who cannot be known; Peters distributes sight among three characters and gives none of them the last word. These choices ask readers to experience the limits of certainty and not only to watch characters who are uncertain.

For *Our Wives* two further sources do more than any recent article. Boss (1999) describes ambiguous loss, in which a person is physically present but psychologically absent, grief has no clear object and closure is withheld. Freud (1917) separated mourning, where one knows what has been lost, from melancholia, where one cannot say what has gone. Miri's grief belongs to neither category cleanly. Muzaffar (2026) shows, for Peters, how a triangulated structure produces an emotional system that no single perspective can see whole. In all three books uncertainty is not a hole in the text for better criticism to fill. It is the text's argument.

The framework therefore works as a set of linked questions, not a grid. What has changed in the body, and what has been lost of its former reliability? Who is authorised to recognise or describe the change? What temporal expectations press on the character? And how does the novel's form reproduce, complicate or resist the limits of knowledge set by its plot? The answers differ across the corpus, and that difference is the comparative argument (Figure 3).

Strand	Foundational sources	Recent criticism used here	What it clarifies	Where it strains
Embodiment, recognition, credibility	Merleau-Ponty 2012; Leder 1990; Young 1984; Butler 2004, 2005; Fricker 2007	Neogi 2026; Kendrick 2025	Why bodily change unsettles identity; whose account is believed	Risks treating all three as one experience
Monstrous-feminine	Creed 1993, 2022; Kristeva 1982; Rich 1976; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Haraway 2008	Nido 2024; Serrano Elena 2024; Álvarez Trigo 2024; Haskell 2025; Cloudt 2026; Yuzadarman and Istiani 2025	Maternal refusal; appetite; the dog as capacity	Essentialism; cinematic origins; little purchase on Armfield or Peters
Trans-corporeality	Alaimo 2010, 2012; Neimanis 2017	Kubáň 2024; Jensen 2026	Permeable bodies; water as form	Cannot account for gendered recognition and kinship
Queer and trans time	Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2010; Edelman 2004; Prosser 1998; Stryker 1994	Haring 2024; Rajamohan and Vijayalakshmi 2025; Muzaffar 2026; Sariego 2025	Futurity, kinship, refusal of the transition arc	Says little about sensation or the sea
Narrative form and loss	Genette 1980; Boss 1999; Freud 1917	Jensen 2026; Muzaffar 2026	Focalisation; grief for someone present	Needs the other strands to say what is withheld

Table 2. The framework: each strand is introduced through its foundational sources and then tested against recent criticism.

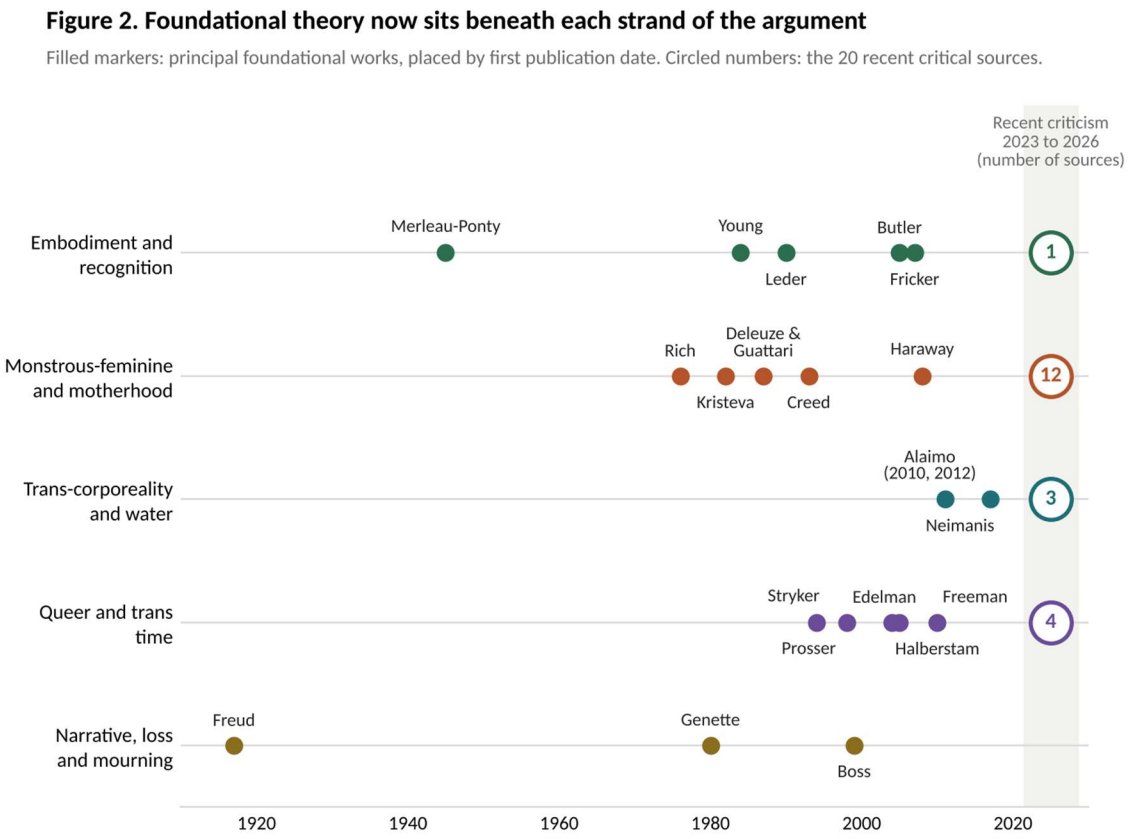

Figure 2. The theoretical genealogy of the framework. Filled markers show principal foundational works by first publication date; circled numbers show how many of the 20 recent sources fall under each strand.

Figure 3. Each lens fits one novel well and strains against the others

The framework of Section 2, judged by the argument of Sections 3 to 5

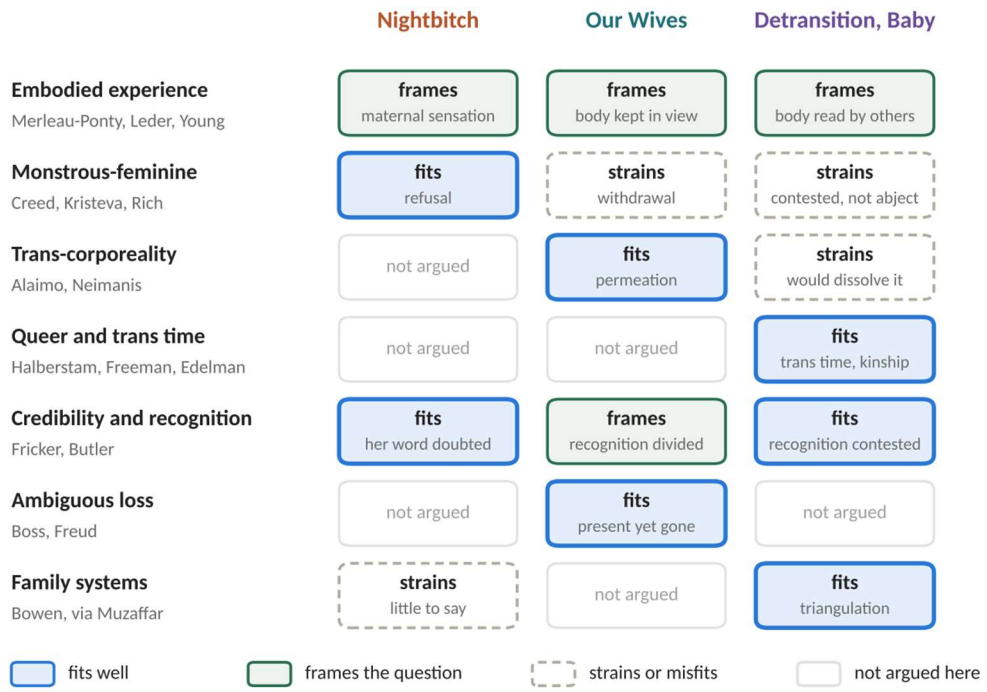

Figure 3. How well each lens fits each novel, judged by the argument of Sections 3 to 5. "Frames" marks a lens that sets up the shared question without settling it.

3. Nightbitch: Maternal Metamorphosis and the Monstrous Body

The crisis begins in the ordinary run of a day at home. The mother, who is never named, finds a patch of coarse hair at the base of her neck and says to her husband, back from a week away for work, that she thinks she is turning into a dog (Yoder 2021). Her senses sharpen, her appetite outgrows anything the family's meals can satisfy, and the changes arrive in small steps and not in one spectacular event (Yoder 2021). The reader is pulled into her uncertainty about whether her body is changing, whether her perception is, or whether the difference can still be held onto. What interests me is less that a woman becomes an animal than how hard the novel makes it to say what is happening.

That difficulty matters because so much of the criticism is in a hurry to dispel it. Readings of the book as a monstrous-mother narrative tend to assume the metamorphosis is real, or real enough to interpret. Nido (2024) treats the monstrous mother as settled ground, Serrano Elena (2024) reads the change as a rescue from an institution that had already wounded her, and Cloudt (2026) supplies a Creed-derived theoretical footing. I find these accounts persuasive and lean on them. But they share a willingness to decide a question the novel keeps open.

The mother reads about women who become animals, finds a book of folklore that seems to give her experience a language, and takes the name Nightbitch with a mixture of irony, defiance and relief (Yoder 2021). Yet the narration never offers independent confirmation that fur is growing or that the community of mothers around her shares her condition as she perceives it (Yoder 2021). Here Fricker's (2007) distinction does real work. If the mother names an experience that exceeds accepted domestic language, she risks the credibility deficit of testimonial injustice; if she stays silent, the conditions producing her estrangement stay invisible, and the gap in available words is the hermeneutical injustice. The novel makes the reader stand in that unresolved position. Readings that take the change as a figure for something else, whether madness, rage or exhaustion, have a long pedigree, and Kendrick (2025) offers a

recent restatement of the madness-as-resistance version, though not one specific to this book. The novel's own strategy is more complicated than allegory, because it never lets the figurative reading close the literal one.

The transformation is also marked by pleasure, which complicates any account that treats it only as pathology or victimhood. Álvarez Trigo (2024) traces the protagonist's hunger for raw meat and for a life beyond domestic self-erasure, tying her feeding anxieties to the threatened identity of the artist (Yoder 2021). Her desire is not a rejection of care so much as a demand that care stop requiring the disappearance of the caregiver. Rich's (1976) distinction is useful here: what the mother resists is the institution, and the novel does not pretend that her love for her son is part of the institution. Animal imagery gives bodily force to a longing for creative agency, appetite and time of her own, and the novel never makes that longing simple. It declines to call it shameful.

Haskell (2025) reads the book as queering motherhood, and the argument holds against the text. This mother is not a bad mother who misses a standard. She finds that the standard was never a description of anything, only a demand. The house, the playgroups, the other mothers with their smooth arrangements of snacks and naptimes are conventions she has been asked to inhabit (Yoder 2021). Yuzadarman and Istiani (2025) add that naming herself is a performative act in Butler's sense, a refusal of an identity assigned by repetition. That is why her change reads as feral and not merely monstrous. She does not become something unnatural. She stops performing the natural.

The dog carries much of this argument. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) becoming-animal is an alliance, not a disguise, and it comes with a pack, which makes the novel's other mothers, whatever they are, structurally significant. Sharma (2026) troubles the human–animal binary, and Tångefelt (2024) reads the book beside Woolf's *Flush* as a study in anthropomorphism and metamorphosis. Haraway (2008) would add that the dog is not a symbol of degradation but a companion species with its own competences. In that spirit, the dog stands for capacities that adult life and motherhood demanded she suppress: acuity, instinct, appetite and a willingness to bite. The humans around her are less honest than the animals, and the exposure is uncomfortable because the reader has been giving those capacities up too (Yoder 2021).

The estrangement is therefore not only from the body but from the whole arrangement the body was placed in. Neogi (2026) reads it through the pathologising of the maternal body under medical patriarchy, and the account is a useful counterweight to the more exuberant monstrous readings. Young (1984) anticipated the point: pregnancy and early motherhood are lived under the authority of those who define what is normal. The mother searches for explanations of her symptoms, and the vocabulary she is offered is not hers (Yoder 2021). That alienation is not chosen and not liberating. It is administered. Beside the celebratory readings, Neogi's essay reminds us that *Nightbitch* contains two kinds of bodily alienation, the one done to her and the one she chooses, and Yoder keeps them in the same house.

The rage that runs through the book has been well served. Yuzadarman and Istiani (2025) place it in a feminist lineage of anger as a challenge to the feminine mystique, which is apt though it risks flattening the comedy. This is an angry novel that is also very funny, and the humour does not defuse the anger. It gives it room to move. Sprengnether (2025) reads the book as motherhood experienced as transformation, and Tabachnikoff (2026) as a process across novel and film, something that keeps happening, which is what the form is built to carry.

The ending divides readers, and the division is instructive. Yoder does not resolve the change into a verdict. The mother neither wakes up human and chastened nor disappears into the animal. Her anger is turned toward art-making and toward a renegotiated household, and the question of what she has become is left standing (Yoder 2021) (Yoder 2021). Süren's (2026) study of the novel in Turkish translation supplies a caution. In those editions "bad motherhood" is rewritten through translation and packaging until it becomes marketable and carefully contained. This is an Anglophone novel with a particular argument about American suburban motherhood, and I should not universalise it.

For the comparative argument, *Nightbitch* offers a modality of crisis characterised by intensification. Sensation sharpens, appetite expands, and the body seems to acquire capacities that the mother's former social role had suppressed. The self does not dissolve. It becomes more forcefully present, though the meaning and literal status of that presence stay uncertain. That differs sharply from *Our Wives Under the Sea*, where bodily boundaries loosen and identity emerges through the difficulty of recognising another person.

4. Our Wives Under the Sea: Oceanic Dissolution and the Grief of Not Knowing

If *Nightbitch* imagines a body that sharpens, *Our Wives Under the Sea* imagines one that becomes harder to delimit. Leah returns from a deep-sea mission that has lasted far longer than anyone expected (Armfield 2022). She comes back, but the return does not restore the ordinary terms of domestic life. Her silence, her altered bodily needs and her relation to water unsettle Miri, her wife and the novel's narrator. The change is registered through small domestic details and not through a fully explained event: a bath that lasts too long, a body that seems never to dry, a silence where conversation used to confirm that two people knew each other (Armfield 2022).

The narrative design moves much of the crisis from the changing body to the person who watches it. Whereas Yoder keeps the reader close to the mother's sensations, Armfield filters Leah's transformation through Miri's account of the marriage, which alternates with chapters that return to the expedition (Armfield 2022). In Genette's (1980) terms, the voice that tells and the person who is seen are deliberately kept apart. The event that might explain Leah's condition stays inaccessible, and readers occupy a position much like Miri's: they receive the altered body without a definitive account of what has happened to it. The result is a crisis of recognition as much as a mystery about bodily change. Intimacy does not guarantee access to another person's experience, and Butler's (2005) point about opacity applies to others as much as to ourselves.

That is why grief is the book's true subject, and why it is such a strange grief. Miri is mourning a woman who is still in the house. In Boss's (1999) terms she is living through ambiguous loss, with a physical presence and a psychological absence that leave no ceremony and no closure; in Freud's (1917) terms she cannot say what exactly she has lost. She is neither bereaved nor simply married, and the novel lives in that impossible middle. The monstrous here is not a threat from outside the relationship but something that has come home to occupy it. The horror lies less in Leah becoming a monster than in the small habits by which Miri keeps the marriage going, such as setting the table for two (Armfield 2022). Dastidar's (2023) review is worth consulting for the novel's early reception.

Trans-corporeality gives a productive way to read this altered embodiment. Alaimo's (2012) sea is a place of suspension, where bodies hang between categories, and Neimanis (2017) asks us to think of ourselves as bodies of water. Kubáň (2024) approaches Leah's transformation through material ecocriticism, and the reading is stronger than one that treats the sea as a metaphor for an existing psychological condition. The environment is not a screen for inner feeling. It takes part in the novel's imagining of bodily change. The boundaries between inside and outside, human and nonhuman, familiar body and unfamiliar element become hard to hold. Where Yoder's animal imagery intensifies the body, Armfield's aquatic imagery makes it permeable.

Jensen (2026) takes the step that matters most for this study. Her thesis asks how water organises storytelling, and finds in Armfield's novel a fragmented, descending structure that mirrors the ocean's inscrutability. On that view form follows the body into the deep: explanation is withheld, the chapters settle and accumulate, and closure is refused because the shore is exactly what the book will not give. It is the most persuasive account I know of why the novel feels the way it does, slow, submerged and resistant to summary. The withholding is loyalty to a limit. Miri cannot tell us what Leah is because Miri cannot know, and the text will not know on her behalf.

The crisis of embodiment is inseparable from a crisis of knowledge. The novel is less interested in classifying what Leah has become than in what it means to care for someone whose experience has become inaccessible. Miri's attention turns to routines, bodily signs and attempts to get help (Armfield 2022). Care continues, but the knowledge that once gave it a reciprocal shape has weakened. The novel distinguishes physical presence from relational availability. Leah is in the house, yet the shared world through which the marriage was organised is no longer fully open to both of them.

There is a danger in reading it this way. If dissolution becomes an allegory for queer loss, the specificity of Armfield's prose disappears, including the sentences that are funny, the ones that are petty, and the ones in which Miri is simply annoyed by her wife's smell (Armfield 2022). It is a story about a marriage in which the ordinary negotiations of shared life have become impossible because one partner is no longer the kind of being one can negotiate with. Cloudt's (2026) monstrous-feminine as resistance does not quite fit, and I should say so. Leah is not refusing an institution. She is withdrawing from the terms of relation altogether, and withdrawal is a different act.

The ending sustains the novel's epistemic restraint. Miri takes Leah to the sea and Leah goes into the water, and the text offers no final key that decides whether this is death, return, release or something beyond those categories (Armfield 2022). The ambiguity follows from the narrative's own established limits. A novel that has denied Miri full access to Leah's condition cannot credibly give the reader an omniscient explanation at the close. Its refusal of certainty is tied to the ethical problem of claiming knowledge about another person's experience.

Beside *Nightbitch*, the contrast is sharper than any synthesis could make it. Yoder's body intensifies and Armfield's permeates. Yoder's crisis is felt inside the changing flesh, Armfield's from the bedside. One narrator is angry and the other grieving. Both books decline to resolve, but in different registers: comedy against elegy, appetite against salt water, the pack against the deep. What neither supplies, and *Detransition, Baby* will, is a body whose uncertainty is social all the way down, a transformation conducted not away from other people but entirely among them.

5. Detransition, Baby: Indeterminacy, Kinship, and the Body Under Negotiation

The crisis begins with a collision between bodily possibility and social expectation. Ames, who once lived as a trans woman named Amy and has since detransitioned, learns that Katrina, his boss and lover, is pregnant (Peters 2021). The pregnancy makes a possible future newly concrete, but it also unsettles the categories through which the characters understand gender, parenthood and family. Peters does not present the situation as a puzzle of anatomy or identity. She asks how a body comes to signify within relationships and social conventions, and how those meanings can be disputed or revised.

The distinction from the other novels is decisive. *Nightbitch* stages metamorphosis as an intensification of embodied experience, and *Our Wives Under the Sea* stages dissolution as a disturbance of bodily and relational boundaries. *Detransition, Baby* presents indeterminacy as a social condition. Ames's body is interpreted within different relational contexts, and those interpretations carry consequences for recognition, intimacy and the imagined family. The uncertainty is not reducible to an internal psychological state. It is distributed among people whose desires and expectations do not coincide. Peters's shifting focalisation, in Genette's (1980) sense a movement of sight among Reese, Ames and Katrina, gives that distribution a formal shape (Peters 2021).

Here Haring's (2024) reading does its most important work. She argues, with Halberstam (2005) and Butler behind her, that Peters unsettles the linearity of heteronormative biography in form as well as content. The point is not just that the book contains trans and detransitioned characters. It is that the structure, moving among Reese, Ames and Katrina and refusing any of them a stable vantage, rejects the biographical arc that cisheteronormativity treats as natural.

Prosser's (1998) account of the transsexual narrative, with its journey toward arrival, shows what is being refused: there is no before-and-after here and no clean destination, only positions being renegotiated, and the renegotiation is still under way when the book ends. Freeman's (2010) chrononormativity names the pressure the characters push against. The self is uncertain because its future has not been written, and the people writing it disagree.

Rajamohan and Vijayalakshmi (2025) carry this into kinship, setting chosen families against given ones through kinship theory. Their account corrects readings that make the pregnancy the book's central event. The pregnancy is the occasion, not the subject. The real question is who gets to be family to whom, and on what terms, when the terms are being negotiated by people who have each been hurt by the arrangements they are trying to replace. Edelman's (2004) reproductive futurism helps here, because the novel imagines a child without letting the Child organise everyone's future. Reese's long wish to be a mother gives that negotiation its ache (Peters 2021). The selves are held in place by other people, and when those people shift, the selves shift with them.

The same scenes show recognition at work. Butler's (2004) argument that recognition is conferred through norms, and Fricker's (2007) hermeneutical injustice, both describe a family trying to name itself in a language that keeps offering the wrong words (Peters 2021). What Peters adds is that this uncertainty is carried out in rooms with other people, and it is never private.

Muzaffar (2026) offers a relational vocabulary through Bowen family-systems theory, particularly differentiation, triangulation and projection. This framework can clarify how emotional tension moves among the three characters instead of remaining inside one of them. It should, however, be used as a supplementary heuristic and not a clinical diagnosis of fictional persons. The novel's shifting chapters likewise distribute knowledge and emotional pressure, so that no single perspective gives a complete account. The form asks readers to assemble a provisional understanding while staying alert to the partiality of each account.

Sariego (2025) bridges to the maternal cluster, though as theory and not as criticism of Peters. If pregnancy is a genre of political, aesthetic and affective expectation, then Katrina's pregnancy is not hers alone (Peters 2021). It belongs to Ames, to Reese, to the child's imagined life, and to cultural expectations about what a family should look like. It is neither Yoder's monstrous body nor Armfield's dissolving one but a body under speculative pressure, its future written in advance by people with strong opinions. Sariego lets me name that without borrowing the language of abjection.

A further caution is needed. If indeterminacy is treated as a figure of queer liberation, the novel's difficult interpersonal texture is lost. Its characters are not consistently generous or self-aware; they make mistakes, defend themselves and sometimes wound one another. These qualities are not obstacles to a celebratory reading. They are part of Peters's account of how kinship is made under uncertainty. The monstrous-feminine is again inadequate as a general category, since the bodies here are represented not primarily as abject but as socially interpreted and relationally contested.

The ending follows suit. The novel closes without settling the shape of the family that may or may not form (Peters 2021). A book that has spent its length showing that no single perspective can see the arrangement whole will not hand us a vantage point outside it. This is also a novel about a particular place and moment, a New York of queer and trans kinship, and I do not suggest its family forms travel unchanged.

So the triad is complete. Yoder's body intensifies, Armfield's permeates, Peters's is negotiated. Yoder's crisis is felt from inside the flesh, Armfield's from the bedside, Peters's from the middle of a conversation with no end. Comedy, elegy, argument; appetite, salt water, the pronoun.

6. Three Modalities of Embodied Crisis: A Comparative Reading

Read together, the novels show not one model of bodily estrangement but three different places from which embodied identity becomes unstable. In *Nightbitch* the disturbance seems to start inside the body, through appetite, heightened sensation and possible animal transformation. In *Our Wives Under the Sea* it is entangled with an outside environment and the unexplained event of the expedition. In *Detransition, Baby* it is produced and contested through social relations, gendered language, pregnancy and the possibility of kinship. These distinctions, interior, environmental and relational, are analytical emphases and not sealed categories. Each novel crosses its own boundaries (Figure 4), but the pattern helps explain why their formal strategies differ.

Figure 4. Three places where embodied identity becomes unstable

Analytical emphases, not sealed categories: each novel also reaches into the neighbouring territory



Figure 4. Three places where embodied identity becomes unstable. The overlaps and the italic notes mark how each novel also reaches into neighbouring territory.

The location of the crisis also shapes the kind of knowledge available. In *Nightbitch* the problem is partly testimonial: the mother's account of her body is hard to assess within the conventions that define acceptable maternal conduct, and the refusal to confirm or deny her transformation puts the reader inside that credibility problem. In *Our Wives Under the Sea* the limit is epistemological: Miri cannot know what Leah has become, and a definitive explanation would exceed the novel's chosen vantage. In *Detransition, Baby* the problem is recognitive and social: Ames's body is read differently across relationships and no neutral standpoint can settle all the meanings at stake. These are not interchangeable forms of uncertainty. Each is produced by a different relation among body, witness and interpretive authority.

Time behaves differently in each. *Nightbitch* is accretive: small episodes pile up, each a little less deniable than the last, until the present has become something other than it was. *Our Wives* is suspended, its chapters settling and not building, and Jensen's (2026) blue narratology captures how time in Armfield deepens instead of advancing. *Detransition, Baby* is futural, oriented toward a child not yet born and a family that may not form, and Haring's (2024) reading explains how its structure refuses the biography that would tell us in advance what the future should look like.

Their political grammars differ accordingly. The monstrous-feminine, as developed in the scholarship on *Nightbitch*, is most useful as a grammar of refusal: the mother's animal identification unsettles the institutionally prescribed terms of motherhood. It has limited explanatory value for Armfield, where the crisis is less a refusal than a withdrawal from familiar forms of relation. In *Detransition, Baby* the central grammar is contestation: bodily meanings and family roles are negotiated among people with overlapping but unequal stakes in the future.

The comparison therefore needs a plural vocabulary. Its contribution lies not in forcing the novels into one theory but in showing what becomes visible when distinct theories are placed in productive tension (Table 3).

Dimension	***Nightbitch***	***Our Wives Under the Sea***	***Detransition, Baby***
Modality	Metamorphosis	Dissolution	Indeterminacy
Where the crisis begins	Within the body: appetite, senses, teeth	Between body and environment: the sea, the expedition	Among people: naming, pregnancy, kinship
Kind of uncertainty	Testimonial (her word is doubted)	Epistemological (Miri cannot know)	Recognitive (no neutral vantage)
Narrative situation	Close third person on the mother; transformation never certified	Miri's account, with chapters returning to the expedition; explanation withheld	Shifting focalisation among Reese, Ames and Katrina; non-linear
Time	Accretive	Suspended and descending	Futural, aimed at an unborn child
Ending	Anger turned to art and a renegotiated household; no verdict on what she has become	Leah returned to the water; no key to what that means	The shape of the family left open
Political grammar	Refusal	Withdrawal	Contestation
Register	Comedy and rage	Elegy and grief	Irony and argument
Most useful foundational lens	Creed, Kristeva, Rich; Young; Fricker	Alaimo, Neimanis; Boss, Freud	Halberstam, Freeman, Edelman; Butler

Table 3. The three modalities compared. Entries for narrative situation and endings should be checked against the cited editions.

Reading them together also changes how each reads alone. *Nightbitch*'s comedy looks different beside Armfield's elegy, less like liberation and more like a tonal strategy for surviving an unbearable present, since the alternative register is Miri's patience, and patience is worse. Peters's irony looks different beside Yoder's rage, as the tone of people who have already lived through what the others are still dramatising. And Armfield's refusal of explanation stops looking like a modernist affectation and starts looking like the honest form for a situation in which explanation has run out. Comparison is not finding the common theme and illustrating it three times. It is letting each text revise the others.

What the three share is a refusal of consolation: none offers a self beneath the transformation that could be rescued and declared unchanged. Yoder's mother does not return chastened, Leah does not surface as the woman Miri married, and Peters's triad does not settle into a family that fits in one sentence. Muzaffar's (2026) systems reading, Tabachnikoff's (2026) processual account and Jensen's (2026) narratology converge on this from different directions. In these texts uncertainty is structural, not incidental.

The argument has two principal limitations. First, the claim that the three novels have not been read together rests on the sources assembled for this article, not on a documented systematic review of every database and language, so it is a qualified account of the article's intervention and not a claim of priority. Second, the corpus is small and culturally bounded. These are

contemporary Anglophone works, and the maternal and queer kinship norms they address are historically and geographically specific. Süren (2026) is a pointed reminder, for *Nightbitch* at least, that such norms are rewritten when a book crosses into another language.

7. Conclusion: Bodies That Will Not Stay Still

This article began from a familiar experience: the body recedes from attention until the continuity between bodily life and personal identity becomes uncertain. *Nightbitch*, *Our Wives Under the Sea* and *Detransition, Baby* turn that experience into three distinct literary problems. In Yoder's novel the mother's body no longer fits the expectations attached to maternal identity. In Armfield's, Leah's altered embodiment makes recognition and reciprocity difficult for the wife who remains beside her. In Peters's, bodily meaning is negotiated through gendered language, intimacy, pregnancy and the possibility of kinship. In each case the body matters not only as a site of change but as a medium through which social relations and self-understanding are organised.

The comparative reading proposes three modalities: metamorphosis, dissolution and indeterminacy. They are not exhaustive categories or fixed properties of the novels. They name the dominant ways in which each text organises embodied crisis, through accretive sensory transformation in *Nightbitch*, through suspended knowledge and permeable boundaries in *Our Wives Under the Sea*, and through relational projection and an unsettled future in *Detransition, Baby*. The pattern is formal as well as thematic. Each novel's voice, temporal structure and ending shape the reader's access to bodily experience and to the meanings others attach to it.

That changes how the endings read. All three refuse to resolve, and the refusal has too often been taken for a failure of nerve or a fashionable ambiguity. A novel that has spent its length establishing the limits of knowledge cannot close by pretending to know. Yoder's mother turns her anger into art, Leah goes into the water, and Peters's triad ends mid-negotiation. Each ending is the argument in formal dress.

A further contribution is methodological. The three novels do not call for one theoretical apparatus applied uniformly. The monstrous-feminine clarifies the politics of maternal refusal in Yoder but cannot explain Leah's altered relation to the sea or the social negotiation in Peters. Trans-corporeality illuminates Armfield's destabilisation of bodily and environmental boundaries but should not displace the questions of gendered recognition and kinship in *Detransition, Baby*. Family-systems theory can describe the relational pressures among Peters's characters, but it does not explain the sensory and formal logic of *Nightbitch*. Returning to the foundational sources, from Merleau-Ponty and Kristeva to Alaimo and Halberstam, made these limits easier to see, because each concept could be read against what it was first built to do. The value of the comparative framework lies in that controlled plurality.

Two limits bear repeating. The comparative claims are provisional, and future work will need to test them against other novels and other languages. And the crisis described here is Anglophone, contemporary and historically located.

The article does not offer a final verdict on what these bodies have become. It proposes instead that their uncertainty be read as part of the novels' intellectual and formal work. To decide too quickly that the mother has literally become a dog, that Leah's fate can be named with certainty, or that Ames's identity can be reduced to a single social reading would be to close questions the novels deliberately keep open. A more attentive reading asks what forms of selfhood and relation become possible when the body no longer guarantees a stable meaning. These novels do not answer that question. They make its difficulty available to thought, feeling and critical interpretation.

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