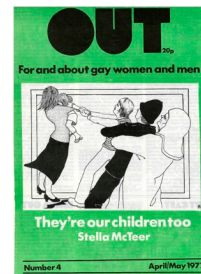


## Dear Reader,

At book groups or events for my memoir *Small*, the story of how my wife and I had our children, I met women who were keen to tell me about a different generation of queer mothers. Some of these women would wait until the event was almost over, finding a moment to catch me alone just before I left. Others would bravely put up their hands, sharing their experiences with the whole room. Women only ten or twenty years older than me reminding me that the happiness I was describing within my family, the hope I felt, was really a question of good timing.

I was ashamed of myself for not knowing these stories, for not understanding a history that could have been mine. In the years that followed I searched for these families in community archives, in newspapers, in PhD theses, and in court papers. I read their stories, and I cried over them. One piece, the cover image from *OUT* magazine, April/May 1977, spoke to me so powerfully that I printed it out and pinned it to the wall above my desk.

The image shows a mother holding a small child as the combined strength of her husband, the police, and a judge try to pull them apart. In the associated article, a lesbian mother describes packing a suitcase for her three-year-old daughter. As she packs, the mother keeps up the pretence of a normal bedtime routine, knowing that in the morning the child will be taken from her and sent to live with her father and grandparents under their legal custody. The article is a plea to be heard, to be understood.



The more I researched these cases, the more prevalent I understood them to be. **I learnt that 90% of the lesbian mothers in the UK who faced this kind of divorce case in the 1980s lost legal custody of their children.** Exact numbers are almost impossible to trace since most mothers, knowing the likely outcome, didn't even get as far as the courtroom.

Now I knew. I understood precisely what had happened to mothers like me. I knew what was said by politicians in the Houses of Parliament, by columnists in newspapers. I had read the transcripts of judges and barristers and social workers. What I didn't know, of course, was what people said privately over kitchen tables, what they thought and felt and hoped as they fell asleep each night.

Through the characters in *A Family Matter* I have tried to let myself, and I hope, the reader, imagine that part. I have tried to forget the statistics and to think instead about what it would have been like to live through this, and to wonder what might happen next. The novel takes place in a quiet British suburb where people act, as people almost always do, according to the rules, unwritten and otherwise. I am deeply attached to every single character in this book because, whatever the consequences, they do what they believe is best. I think of *A Family Matter* not as a story about historical prejudice, but one shaped around good intentions.

I have lived through both of the time periods in which the novel takes place, 1982 and 2022; the first as a daughter, the second as a mother. Dawn's story is not my own, nor is Maggie's, but I have been profoundly changed by living alongside them in the writing of this novel. Thank you for reading it.

Claire

