

Minor characters,
secrecy, and toxic
masculinity:
conveying significant
themes in...



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Favell Parrett's novel *Past The Shallows* is the chilling and hard-hitting story concentrated on the lives of brothers Harry and Miles as they grow up and experience the many hardships of life with their father in rural Tasmania. This book focuses on several powerful issues and ideas including the toxicity of traditional masculinity, parental relationships, and, the negative effect that secrets can have on a person. The expression of these ideas is aided in the book by the introduction of several minor characters who help the main characters to express themselves, grow, and provide a point of contrast. The character Jeff is used by Parrett to enable the reader to reflect of the ideas of toxic masculinity; and the violent outcomes that can come as a result of traditional expressions of masculinity.

Jeff is erratic, unhinged, and destructive; his actions towards both children in the book, brutal and shocking. He fuels the fathers' alcoholism, and provides encouragement for the continuation of the pairs violent actions. In a drunken stupor after a two-day binge, the men torment young Harry. "It's the littlest retard" Jeff says, and pours him a large alcoholic drink. When Harry refuses to drink this, his father lashes out and angrily says "you'll bloody drink it". Fuelled by alcohol, this sick game continues, neither man willing to back down and forfeit, until Miles steps in to break them up. It is obvious that the two men are competing in a show of masculinity and fighting the fear of appearing as weak. The societal expectation for men to be tough having exaggeratedly manifested into this vehemence and callousness. This can be seen further in Jeff's actions and attitude throughout the book, such as when "he grabbed Harry in a headlock, wrapped his thick arm around Harry's neck and pulled tight". To see someone removed from the family act in this

unnecessarily cruel way towards a child and have their own father look on with nonchalance and even at times encourage these actions highlights the negative aspect of their relationship and the issues men can have with confronting each other.

The idea that parental relationships can be toxic and difficult to escape is shown through Parrett's introduction of several minor characters including Mrs Phillips and Mr Roberts. Whilst only a small act of kindness, Mrs Phillips "always" putting "hot water bottles" into Harry's bed shows her treating him as an equal to her son. Similarly, Mr Roberts putting "his hand on" Miles's "shoulder" in a time of desperation is a comforting and kind gesture, nicer than any action of the boys' own father in the book. Parrett's inclusion of these 'faux-parental' figures and their fleeting moments of compassion towards the boys illustrates an idealised world. It shows what their relationship with their father should be like and thus emphasises the cruel reality. Mrs Phillips' concern for Harry can be seen through her moment of hesitation at the prospect of him returning to his abusive home environment. "Maybe you should come home with us, sweetie" she suggests. At this point, the internal conflict that she feels at her lack of ability to help him is palpable. This conflict is once again paralleled in Mr Roberts warning "don't you get stuck here with your dad...you've had it rough enough". Despite the sympathy from those around them the boys receive no real help and continue to battle through their attempts to leave home. The struggle communicating the fact that even with support, escaping an abusive parental environment is extremely difficult.

While the characters themselves play no real role, the secrets left behind by Uncle Nick and the mother in *Past The Shallows* are used by Parrett in building the idea that secrets can have a negative effect on people. Through the slow reveal of segments of these secrets within Miles's flashbacks as the story progresses Parrett has utilised these characters as a platform to aid in the character progression of the more major characters. The inner torment felt by Miles in withholding and not being able to understand the fractured secrets in his memory can be seen in the extract 'I know what happened to Mum,' he said, 'You think I don't but I do'. This shows that Miles has been concealing this knowledge for some time and it is distressing to him. As more information about Nick and the mother's relationship and deaths are uncovered throughout the novel it also becomes clear the effect that this has had on the father. The withholding of the secrets led to the creation of more secrets, which the father was dealing with on his own. The weight of his knowledge caused him significant emotional trauma. These secrets were the root of his alcoholism, shaping him into a bitter and angry man who struggled to express himself. They catalysed his downward spiral into abhorrence which ultimately resulted in the murder of his own son.

Almost all of the negative events that take place in 'Past The Shallows' can be tied back in to the initial withholding of secrets, and as such Parrett has effectively shown the idea that keeping secrets can have a negative effect. While only minor characters, Jeff, Stuart and Mrs. Phillips, Mr. Roberts, and Uncle Nick and the mother play a vital role in the progression and expression of ideas in *Past The Shallows*. Parrett's inclusion of these characters allowed the ideas of toxic masculinity, the negative effect of secrets and the toxicity

of family relationships to develop in intensity, and ultimately come to fruition.