Georgette and my mother were cousins. They both lived in Paris and used to see a great deal of each other in their youth. They had quarrelled one day over an absurd question of family inheritance … In her anger, my mother had called Georgette a grabbing harpy, but Georgette took this observation rather badly. She had no doubt hoped no one would ever discover this flaw in her character … (1)

A vain hope indeed, as readers will realise upon their first encounter with Georgette in this story. Set in postwar Paris, Chalk, Cheese & Caviar is an autobiographical work where the author remains on the periphery, observing the lives of Georgette and her family. Accordingly, the title refers to the vastly different natures of Georgette’s three daughters Claudette, Justine and Nicole; the narrative details their growing up and the separate turns their lives take in adulthood. In her dual role of author and narrator, Etienne Fennell illustrates clearly that although you cannot choose your family, you can still love them, and forgive them their faults.

The self-styled matriarch of the family, Georgette is petulant, spiteful and grasping by turns. Motherhood is both the shield behind which she hides her insecurities, and the weapon she wields without compromise against her daughters, seeking to bend them to her will: ‘They were told so often they were failures, that they were beginning to believe it. Their mother being the person they trusted most, she must have been right’ (24). In the great cultural centre of Paris, the girls lead a cloistered existence dominated by Georgette, who does not allow them to pursue interests outside the home: ‘[Until] they married, the girls’ days, outside of school, would be spent with household duties … That was the best training they could have since that was what their lives were going to be about’ (24). Georgette also subscribes to antediluvian ideas of class and racial superiority, which surface sharply after her middle daughter Justine brings a black schoolmate home to play one afternoon. Bewildered by her mother’s prejudice, and confined by the restrictions placed upon her daily life, Justine begins to foster a rebellious attitude, but fearing Georgette’s repercussions, keeps it to herself.

Only Nicole, the youngest daughter, manages to break free of her mother’s sphere of influence. At the age of six, she heard a violin played for the first time and was enthralled by the music, but her request for violin lessons was rebuffed stridently by Georgette. Two years later, little has changed. Nicole, beginning to understand that her mother, ‘instead of being a loving mother, was setting out to undermine her and what she wanted to do with her life’ (3), appeals instead to her quiet and unassuming father. Alfred, who was married to Georgette ‘not quite against his will, but without enthusiasm’ (5-6), is far more sympathetic to Nicole’s needs, and arranges the necessary violin lessons without Georgette’s knowledge. Georgette never forgives her daughter for what she sees as a flagrant act of disobedience, and maintains an attitude of hostility towards her ever after. Claudette and Justine, too, are jealous of their sister’s achievements and disparage them wherever possible, dismissing her as a ‘misfit’ (31). Claudette goes further by culling some of Nicole’s precious books (she is the only one in the family who enjoys reading), and informing on her to Georgette for reading when she should be doing chores. However, Nicole’s music and her innate strength of character sustain her even within her emotionally starved and abusive home environment; she blossoms into a confident young woman and skilled performer, and embarks upon a successful career as a violinist.

The family’s fortunes change when Georgette inherits a fortune from an elderly countess, having befriended her with some such ends in mind. Etienne Fennell enters the picture now; as mentioned earlier, her mother and Georgette were cousins, and Etienne has fond childhood memories of her uncle and her mother’s cousin. The family is now no longer dependent on Georgette and her inheritance. Claudette and Justine’s hatred of Nicole’s musical talent intensifies, so much so that Claudette even goes so far as to burn some of Nicole’s books. The family’s financial situation improves, and Nicole is finally able to pursue her musical dreams without her mother’s interference. However, Georgette never forgives her daughter for what she sees as a flagrant act of disobedience, and maintains an attitude of hostility towards her ever after. Claudette and Justine, too, are jealous of their sister’s achievements and disparage them wherever possible, dismissing her as a ‘misfit’ (31). Claudette goes further by culling some of Nicole’s precious books (she is the only one in the family who enjoys reading), and informing on her to Georgette for reading when she should be doing chores. However, Nicole’s music and her innate strength of character sustain her even within her emotionally starved and abusive home environment; she blossoms into a confident young woman and skilled performer, and embarks upon a successful career as a violinist.

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memories of playing with Claudette, Justine and Nicole. After so many years apart, their reconciliation is not what Etiennette expects at all. She finds Georgette and her elder daughters greatly changed in personality, and wonders whether this is a direct consequence of their sudden wealth. All three women impress her as selfish and materialistic, ‘bound by convention and the false niceties of the bourgeoisie’ (68). As adults, both Claudette and Justine have become domineering and overbearing, reducing even Georgette’s presence during their superficial conversations. Meanwhile, Nicole has married and is rapidly attaining fame and success as a musician; she enjoys a full and fruitful life quite alien to that of her sisters.

The strength of this tale lies in its characters, some sympathetic and likeable, some odious and tiresome, but all, ultimately, very human. We see this most early in the adult Justine, with her frustration of an unfulfilled life and a deep-seated fear of being alone. She attempts to give her life meaning by taking an aromatherapy course (and ostentatiously referring to herself as ‘Doctor’ ever after), and seeks the love she desperately craves by adopting a bohemian, sexually adventurous lifestyle. Her selfishness, vanity and lack of consideration for others are not merely a façade for the greater good within; she is a thoroughly flawed character. Yet her behaviour is understood, if not justified, by her longing to be loved, to matter to someone. She also demonstrates a kindness and tolerance at odds with her upbringing; she has never subscribed to her mother’s xenophobia, and is completely unruffled when her daughter Lara gives birth to a black son: ‘I will love him whatever shade he turns out to be. I can’t see what difference the colour can make to a person’ (150).

Claudette is the other extreme case in point. She is the daughter most like Georgette, and has inherited her mother’s opinions and prejudices in full. Parsimonious to a fault, she never dines out, never attends a concert or visits a museum, and walls herself up as closely as Georgette always did. Yet after the birth of Lara’s baby boy Guillaume, Claudette feels an unexpected rush of love, and is mortified by how hollow and insular her life and views now seem. She begins to question her childhood treatment of her sister Nicole, and to wonder how much of herself is the result of blindly following Georgette’s example. She warms to Lara’s black in-laws and begins cultivating a new tolerance, as well as an appreciation for music and beauty. Claudette’s awakening, and the transformation that takes place under her determined efforts, is deeply moving, and when little Guillaume expresses a desire to play the violin like his aunt Nicole, Claudette’s response is very different to Georgette’s.

Nicole is always lovely, and even Georgette redeems herself somewhat in later life, when she ‘becomes the type of loving mother with Lara, giving her a stable and happy life, that she should have done with her own daughters’ (74), but it is the complex portrayals of Claudette and Justine that resonate most powerfully. Etiennette Fennell has delivered a formidable insight into not only the relationship between mothers and their children, but also the lasting damage that can result from a mother who is, in many ways, still a child herself.

Kate Hayford