Introduction: Rethinking Gender

In 1977 Gene Kemp's book *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* was published. The book was an immediate hit and it seems all readers at the time, including me, were surprised by what is often described as a ‘twist’ in the ending. Throughout the book, the eponymous Tyke embarks on numerous escapades with loyal sidekick and not-so-bright friend Danny Clover. Tyke is messy, reckless, smart, quick-thinking, agile, fearless, and always in trouble at school. It is little wonder then that when readers discover at the end of the book that Tyke is a girl they feel they have fallen subject to a narrative deceit. Kemp avoids, until the postscript, the use of gendered pronouns when referring to Tyke, and gives her main character a gender-neutral first name; it seems this simple evasive tactic is enough to make readers feel that Tyke must naturally be a boy. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* serves as a useful marker for thinking about gender and, in particular, the theme of this book, the dilemmas that surround gender and sexuality.

The dilemmas I explore in this book do not centre simply on cases of mistaken identity, although these do occur in some chapters. Rather, my interest lies in teasing out and understanding what I see as key dilemmas arising from the contradictions and tensions between traditional gendered subject positions and new gender relations, and the dilemmas that emerge with respect to sexual difference. To rephrase the 1960s Virginia Slims cigarette slogan, ‘we’ve come a long way, baby’, and at a wider societal level we could list the social and cultural gains that have been made in the past 25 years since Kemp’s book was published with respect to gender equality, anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, paid maternity (and in some places paternity) leave, gay marriages and adoption rights. However, as we all know, these gains are far from universal, and the gaps within social policy, the
law, education, politics, and everyday social practices become chasms for many whose gender and sexuality remain outside the normative or privileged limits. When problematisations have their bases in the tensions and contradictions within a binary system of gender, sex, and sexuality, people are faced with dilemmas.

Many of the dilemmas, and underlying contradictions, problematisations, and subjective anxieties remain located in the often polarising and popularising discourses that inform theoretical, institutional, and wider societal understandings about changing gender relations. Post-feminism is an example of a contradictory discourse that the media often use as the scapegoat for myth-conceptions about gender in an advanced consumer culture of individualism and excess. As the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s Women's Movement and Second Wave Feminism, post-feminism is often appropriated as a celebratory discourse in a range of cultural resources for children and young adults to assert female independence and agency while exposing males and masculinity as weak, flawed, and directionless. The new battle-of-the-sexes rhetoric of popular culture and other media-driven outlets now spins on the dialectic of lost boys and empowered girls. However, these extremes of gender ‘realities’ become part of the circulating ‘truths’ that have accompanied the social and cultural changes of the past three decades. In response to feminist gains and advocacy, the proponents of the ‘men’s movements’, that gained momentum during the 1990s, offered ‘solutions to the damage ... suffered by men’ (Connell, 2002, p. xi). However, as Connell notes, there is a contradiction at work as social movements usually arise from discontent, but ‘men questionably remain the principal holders of economic and political power in the contemporary world’ (p. xi). Despite this continuing hierarchy of gender and privilege, the lives of men and boys are certainly not trouble-free as high levels of violence, injury, ill health, and imprisonment are the realities for many men in countries across the globe. The effects of these gender practices ‘may also produce toxic effects in the lives of others’ (Connell, p. xii), both males and females, who become the victims of rape, domestic violence, racism, and homophobic attacks.

These examples of competing gender discourses highlight how any attempt to change gender relations is not a simple matter of amending legislation, though this is a necessary step in the process. The central dilemma as I see it with respect to competing gender discourses is how to avoid perpetuating further contradictions by contributing to preserving and reproducing traditional gender relations and hegemonies. Simply inverting hierarchical conventions and power relations does