

# GRANDMOTHERLAND

Exploring the Myths and  
the Realities

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**KARNAC**

*firing the mind*

# GRANDMOTHERLAND

To the memory of Flo,  
my own dear grandmother



Florence Alice Catchpole

*Tho' Dead yet Dear, Tho' Dear yet Dead to me.  
Dead is her Body, Dear her Memory*

## INTRODUCTION

### In which we begin the journey and see where we go

#### *Granny takes a trip, leaving the empty rocking chair without being ‘off her rocker’*

Okay, we get in the car, we fasten our seatbelts, we switch on the ignition (or maybe press the button on an electrically powered twenty-first-century car), we’ve checked the tyres and the oil and the water, the engine fires and off we go on our exploration. We have a map (a sat nav would be far too prescriptive, we may do a fair bit of slow meandering) but our ultimate destination is a mystery. All journeys have secret destinations, of which the traveller may be unaware. This is what I have discovered in my clinical work over many years. Lots of note taking. How does a book take its shape? Do all our lives go backwards, like a rewind film, to our beginnings? While we think we are going forwards, do our individual journeys take us in the other direction on a trip within? I started writing this book with thoughts of my own grandmother (see frontispiece) and that experience then took me forward to my experience now and the experiences of many other people I have contacted. An atlas of emotions can be very helpful and my contributors have all provided pages to this atlas.

Grandparents are the parents of a person’s father or mother—paternal or maternal. Every sexually reproducing living organism has a maximum of four genetic grandparents, eight genetic great-grandparents, sixteen genetic great-great-grandparents, thirty-two genetic

great-great-great-grandparents. Our DNA takes us onwards, ever onwards. Do the maths. In the history of modern humanity, around seventy thousand years ago, the number of human beings who lived to be grandparents increased. We don't know for certain what spurred this increase in long lives—the results may largely be to do with improved medical technology and living standards—but it's generally believed that a key consequence of three generations being alive together would be the preservation of information which could otherwise be lost. More on this anon.

Grandparents are second-degree relatives of their grandchildren, as I have said, and share a twenty-five per cent genetic overlap. What do grannies offer? In cases where parents are unwilling or unable to provide adequate care for their children (e.g. financial obstacles, marriage problems, illness or death), grandparents often take on the role of primary caregivers. Even when this is not the case, and particularly in traditional cultures (see Chapter 3), grandparents often have a direct and clear role in relation to the raising, care, and nurture of children.

Looking at the 'normal' expectations of a grandmother, who has a genetic connection with her grandchildren, altruism tops the list. The most defining characteristic of effective grandparents is seen to be their altruistic orientation towards life. Altruism, an interesting word, but maybe a little exploration would be good here. It's derived from the Latin 'alter' (meaning other) and the French 'autrui' (meaning other person's). So, it's defined as unselfish devotion to the needs of others. It is quite the opposite of egoism or self-centredness. Yet there is another view: are any altruistic acts devoid of ego and sense of self? Don't we all feel good about ourselves when we do things for others? I suspect the answer is invariably yes ...

Every granny has desires about being a good granny and wants them to come true. Desires are at the heart of stories. It is almost unknown for the realisation of wishes and goals to follow a certain pattern. However, true desires and goals arise in you and fulfil you, they enrich your life in every way. Non-true wishes and goals, meanwhile, come from outside—someone else is calling the tune, they can have dangerous, even destructive, effects and are not conducive to your development. The advertising industry and social media come to mind. Like any superpower, desires can be used for 'good' or for

'ill'. These desires result in narrative fractures, and there can be an ongoing battle over whose story we adhere to. Does desire suggest lack? If I want this but can't have it, can you be allowed to have it too? 'I'm going to impose *my* fantasy on you.' A mindset is simply a collection of beliefs that shape our habits and actions: thoughts become beliefs, beliefs become 'how things ought to be'. This might be thought of as 'normal'. But whose normal?

If we accept, as many people now do, that 'being a mother' is perhaps a painted scene behind which the reality is much more varied (and maybe more interesting), will this exploration into the role of grannies help us all be free of preconceptions, change or lower our expectations, and live the life we've got rather than the one we're led to expect? I recall many years ago a mother saying very honestly to me, 'Ah yes, there's the Mothercare baby, then there's the one you get, which can be very different.' She was able to accept that her fantasies had been only fantasies and that the reality she experienced was somewhat at odds with these. If we have this yearning to be the same as other people in a rush of mimetic desire—I want to be just like her because she seems to 'have it all'—can we tolerate and accept difference rather than feeling we have 'failed' some given norm? As one of my anonymous correspondents said, 'I am always startled by people who have no memory of their grandparents. For me, they have helped make me me, they are as much a part of my identity as my arms and legs.' That's one view, grandparents seen almost as anatomical parts, but are we able to look at things up close in individual cases rather than seeing larger patterns as repeated in small lives and then seen as what we might term self-evident, both in this book and in a wider sense? As I have emphasised, each 'case' will have its own set of rules and one small change can alter the pattern.

So what is the white Western received wisdom about being a good-enough grandmother? How should we play the part? Should we be a character rather than a caricature? Rule number one seems to be to offer to babysit. If you're not up for it because disabilities prevent you from taking on the task, that's already a strike against you. Of course, if you work and don't have the time, that's another strike. You should offer to help around the house and never, ever talk about how the baby resembles your side of the family, unless you are specifically asked to

comment. Don't talk about the baby loving you, and tell mum she's doing a great job. (I recall an observer who became upset when the baby's aunt tried to get the baby to call her 'Mamma' when Mamma was out of the room. It was a covert tussle for ownership, and was of course confusing for the baby.) When you're out shopping, call and ask if the child's mother needs anything. Don't show anyone the pictures you may get sent of the grandchild. Oh, that *is* hard!

We all come to grandparenting with different expectations, different internal stories, often derived from our own grandparents (see Chapter 7). Some grandparents want to be involved in every aspect of their grandchildren's lives. They post the ultrasounds of the little germinating soul on social media. As this poem by one of my contributors indicates, some grandparents are there for every internal development:

Hello Hello  
You're there I know  
Each day I see your Mother grow  
Heavier  
More beautiful and slow.

Deep, deep  
You sleep  
And stretch and swim  
In secret waters warm  
Where archetypal dreams arise  
And float before your unborn eyes  
And feet and fingers form.

To you in there  
So close, so far  
The dead are no more distant  
Than the living are.  
You are a part of them  
And us.

Red hair perhaps  
Grey eyes?  
An upturned nose?  
A tendency to giggle?  
Your Grandpa's toes?

You are a mixture and a mystery  
 Unique, brand new and ancient history.  
 Wisely you bide your time  
 You wait and grow  
 I know you're there  
 Hello Hello.

Some grandparents wish to be present at the birth of this 'mixture and mystery'. Hello hello! They want a front row seat for everything that happens then and subsequently. Some sons and daughters and in-laws are fine with this. And some are not.

Other grandparents are more distant, even hands-off, in their approach. They don't want day-to-day reports about sleeping and poo-ing and teething and rolling over. They've done that once and are not interested in repeating the experience. They don't want to make video calls every night. And they certainly don't want to babysit. Some sons and daughters and in-laws are fine with this, too. But not all of them.

It's when the grandparents want one thing and the parents want another that there's trouble in the garden. Then everything in the garden will not be lovely, at all. As one correspondent said, 'Honestly, we all try to do our blooming best but can still be thwarted, as every situation has a different chemistry.' Indeed.

But here's the vital thing to remember about grandparenting: it is not a one-size-fits all, a Grandmother Brand. You can't just pick one off the shelf. Many sons and daughters and in-laws fiercely disagree with their mothers and mothers-in-law. These relationships are custom made every time, in every family, with every individual. What works for one family may well not work for another. The one thing that all grandparents need to remember, whether they are intimately or only occasionally involved in their grandchildren's lives, is that the grandchildren are not theirs. They are the children's kids. They don't belong to the grandparents, except by extension.

Which means grandparents don't get to make the rules. None of them. They don't get to decide what time their grandkids go to bed. What they eat and how they eat it. How they address the adults in their lives. What they wear, the length of their hair, or whether or not they should get their ears pierced. Or get a tattoo.

Their parents make all these decisions. Unless we are raising our grandchildren, unless we are their official caretakers, we are categorically not in charge. We've had our turn. We ruled the roost with our own children. Now our children get to rule the roost with theirs. It's that simple. Except, of course, it isn't, don't they know that? Because we know things. Because we've been down this road and we have insights and experiences we want to share with our children to make things easier for them. We might want to say, 'It's easier if the kids go to bed early, if their clothes are chosen for them, if they sit and eat breakfast and not run around all over the place.'

As one of my anonymous correspondents said,

For many years, my tongue was nearly raw from biting it so much, from saying nothing to my grown-up, full-fledged adult children who clearly were not raising their children the way I would raise them. *Why are you giving him sweets when you told him nine times already that he couldn't have any? What do you mean, she dresses herself? She can't go out looking like that! What a fright! He's knows enough words to tell you exactly how you should wipe his bum. Don't you think he's ready to be toilet-trained?* I said none of these things. But I wanted to.

Now, after twelve years of grandparenting, she said, her tongue is never sore. Why? Because she doesn't bite it any more. Because she (finally!) understands what her role is. It's absolutely not on to say, 'Do it my way. My way is the right way.' It's not her place to offer advice, unless she is asked directly. And she mustn't walk around with disapproval on her face. 'My kids must raise their kids the way they choose,' she admits. This is the mindset she has finally achieved. Even unvoiced disapproval can be felt, by the adults and by their children too.

She continues the story.

My old aunt used to say, 'Look at all the adults in the world. Are any of them still sucking dummies?' It was her way of saying, 'Hey, life changes, they'll be okay. Children eventually give up their dummies. They stop jumping around on the furniture. They learn how to chew with their mouths closed and say please and thank you without being reminded.'



Is it bad to have expectations for family relationships? It is if you expect to be in charge. This is the news: you're not! But if you can go with the flow, as the saying goes, if you can trust that your kids are doing the best they can, if your expectations are small, simply to be part of your children's and grandchildren's lives, you can find joy even in what can seem to you like chaos.

So what we can cull from this is that there are ways to be good, to survive, to transit from being a parent to being a grandparent (particularly a grandmother), to doing this 'practically perfectly'. Mmm. Do some myths need revisiting here? Can we learn some new lessons and abandon some preconceptions? Can we venture 'outside the norm', treating it with respectful disregard, and find some different ways of developing a positive spiral?

The slew of books on grandparenting exists in a crowded market. They all subscribe to the myth of being 'good' or 'perfect'. What about those grandparents who don't read these books (though I am sure they make very edifying reading) and instead rely on their own instincts and still somehow get it wrong? Is there a myth that needs to be looked at, beyond the conventional rosy picture: is it cultural, is it familial, is it personal? Grandchildren give their grandparents an assurance of the continuation of life beyond their own death ... but does how books are read rely on history or geography? Where you live and how your own history played out? Two sets of feelings about the same 'facts' may be felt as 'madness' if they do not agree with previously accepted norms and are accordingly disliked, but often some unpicking and disentangling can offer a way forward. Thoughts can happily fly around without any one person being responsible for them. These thoughts may seem to exist without a thinker, but they then get corralled into particular narrative tropes. We may be unconscious of how these develop, and over time they can begin to rule the lives of those who espouse them. Dropping our desires is not a bad way forward.

There are of course conscious factors, but we leave out the unconscious at our peril, or so I believe after many years of working with families. As Marilyn Monroe said in a *Guardian* interview in 1962, 'You're always running into people's unconscious.'

Maybe we need to open some doors here, to let in some new air. This may provide some relief. This book may answer no questions

but pose even more: as the great psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion said, it is important to keep our questions in good repair. There may be many repetitions of the word ‘but’ in this cloud of unknowing. When does a fantasy become a myth, and has that myth wrapped within it a core, a kernel, a grain of ‘truth’? The first sentence of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* is ‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’. Well yes, indeed, financial security, good health, good relationships—these are the conscious rational factors which make all happy families alike, whether nuclear or extended. But deeper down, I suggest, there may be other streams at work. An apprehension of unhappiness may exist deep down in all families. What is common to unhappy families, however constituted, is precisely that: unhappiness *is* the stream, with its many tributaries, which run down rivers of grief into the sea of sorrow. So what do grannies believe? What do they want? What do they need to do in order to have a reasonable, even happy, relationship with their grandchildren? Can we revisit and revise the meme, attempting (not always successfully) to empty it out of preconceptions and replace it with other ideas?

Here are some thoughts from the grandchildren themselves.

A grandmother is a remarkable woman. She’s a wonderful combination of warmth and kindness, laughter and love. She overlooks our faults, encourages our dreams, and praises our every success. A grandmother has the wisdom of a teacher, the sincerity of a true friend, and the tenderness of a mother. She’s someone we admire, respect and love very much.

A grandmother is a lady who has no children of her own, so she likes other people’s little boys and girls. [*Well she did have children of course, but way back beyond the child’s time, which is perhaps too far for the young mind to stretch.*]

Grandmas don’t have to do anything except be there. They’re old, so they shouldn’t play hard or run. It is enough if they drive us to the market where the pretend horse is and have lots of little money ready. Usually grandmas are fat, but not too fat to tie kids’ shoes. They wear glasses and they can take their teeth out and gums off! They don’t have to be smart, only answer questions like why dogs chase cats and how come God isn’t married? They don’t talk Baby Talk like visitors do because it is hard to

understand, and, when they read to us, they don't skip words or mind if it is the same story over and over again. Everyone should try to have a Grandma, especially if they don't have a television, because grandmothers are the only grown-ups who really ever seem to have any time for children!

So there is the idealised version of 'being a grandmother' writ large by the kids who have had the experience. She's old, she's fat, she may be toothless, gum-less (?) but she has *time* for the grandkids. This is the 'you' you should aspire to be.

Then there are the perennially pervasive and largely male 'mother-in-law' jokes, not at all 'funny' to anyone except the men involved. The mother-in-law, of course, is also the grandmother. But how do we make sense of this split? This book aims to look at the contradictions rather than be 'comfortably numb' to the paradoxes deeply rooted in our way of life and our thinking.

With apologies for the mixed metaphors here, I want to enter the multidimensional web of roads and explore the paradoxes which lie at the heart of this idea of 'being a grandmother'. Is this about 'being' or 'doing'? Do we turn left or right here? Or keep straight on? Turning left or right may not be what the roadmap recommends, but we may find out something about new areas, previously unexplored. We'll be going slowly. How far do we travel outwards in the 'specifically experienced environment'? How much influence does that have? I will not only look at the conventional and largely white Western ideas about 'the good grandmother' but also visit cultures around the world to find out how this meme is seen in various culturescapes. New understandings of the culturescapes often give us new inner-standings. By the way, eating with your hands is absolutely fine in some cultures, in Africa, India, and the Middle East. The collective thought forms gather weight and it's important to think about who is controlling the narrative.

We orient ourselves within a narrative in order to have an idea of who we are. However, narrative 'coherence' can be a trap in itself, as coherence gathers round a point of view which may be only one among many assigned to the topic. Whose 'coherence'? Knowledge of anyone else has to be partly invention: the person at the heart of the 'invention' is constructed as well as invented. David Kessler (2019), who worked

with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross on *Death and Dying*, has an instructive way to think about narrative. He advises that we take three facts, two bad, one better. Then think of three bad outcomes from all three, good and bad. Then think of three good outcomes from all three, including the ‘bad’ ones. Different narratives will be formed, although the facts remain the same. So ‘narrative coherence’ can depend on point of view. I hope this will be an unsensational but nevertheless interesting account of personal and social phenomena around ‘being a granny’.

As parents, those of us who have reproduced ourselves (‘Look what I’ve made,’ we may proudly proclaim) have heard about the importance of positive parent–child relationships in the social and emotional development of children. There are countless research studies and supporting statistics (look them up if you wish) that highlight the many benefits that come from strong parent–child bonds. What isn’t always recognised, however, is the positive impact that a close relationship between a grandparent and grandchild can have on the happiness and wellbeing of the entire family. Simply put, having grandparents around is good for everyone. A healthy connection between a grandchild and grandparent is beneficial to both sides of the relationship. Grandparents truly impact their grandchildren’s lives.

A vast number of adult grandchildren feel that their grandparents influenced their beliefs and values (see Chapter 7). A child’s perspective of what constitutes a healthy, normal relationship is shaped by the relationship that they hold with a grandparent. Through regular contact, a sense of emotional intimacy and unwavering support, children can experience what a true, positive relationship should look like. But research shows that more elderly grannies may feel even older rather than younger if they have sole responsibility for active grandchildren.

A 2014 study at Boston College in the United States found that ‘an emotionally close relationship between grandparent and grandchild is associated with fewer symptoms of depression for both generations’. For kids, having grandparents around means having the perfect companions to play with and have fun when parents may be too busy with the physical business of life. Grandparents are some of the best partners when it comes to using creativity and imagination to discover the wonders of life. No room for depression here! And in turn, most grandparents

truly love their role. Grandparents Apart UK has a focus on putting the children first and conflict second. The group aims to help parents lower legal costs, ease the stress of separation, and help reduce the pain for the whole family. According to the American Grandparents Association (2012), seventy-two per cent of grandparents think being a grandparent is the single most important and satisfying thing in their life.

Nice work if you can get it.

Grandparents are a valuable resource because they have so many stories and experiences from their own lives to share. And kids love to hear what Mum and Dad did when they were little. Oh, were they ever little like us? We just wanna be BIG! Often children will listen to grandparents even when they are not fans of listening to their parents or other adults. Grandparents also offer a link to a child's cultural heritage and family history. This is especially true, of course, when they come from a dual-heritage family. Children understand more of who they are and where they come from through their connection with their grandparents. So it follows that adopted children do need to know something, if at all possible, about their birth family.

Especially during tough times, such as the Covid-19 pandemic which hit the world in 2020, having an extra layer of support can make a big difference in a child's life. I found in my clinical work that close grandparent–grandchild relationships during the teenage years when kids want to 'divorce' their parents are associated with fewer behavioural and emotional problems and fewer social difficulties with peers. Grandparents offer an extra ear when kids need someone to talk to, because sometimes children just find it easier to open up and share their difficulties and problems with one generation removed.

Grandparents may also offer an affordable childcare option. Well, if they are able to without pushing themselves as well as the pushchair and then exhausting themselves. With both parents in many families working outside of the home, it is often the grandparents, particularly grandmothers, who play a vital role in raising today's children. No longer are they sitting in rocking chairs, knitting. Many are still working, and that's what keeps them young, and going. But it may make things trickier. According to the UK's 2010 Census, roughly 2.7 million grandparents provide for the basic needs of a grandchild, while even more

take care of their grandchildren on a regular basis. If they are willing and able, having a grandparent act as either an occasional babysitter or a paid childcare provider gives many parents a great sense of comfort, knowing that they are leaving their children in capable and caring hands. But it may take a toll on the grandparents in terms of energy expenditure beyond which they can really manage.

So first we have of course the 'good' grandmother, with some stories about how they have 'survived'. Is this really 'studied carelessness', *sprezzatura* as the Italians have it, or does it involve more subtle adjustments which go on beneath the surface? Interestingly, there was quite a reluctance for 'good grandmothers' to tell their stories, as if the apparent equanimity of that smooth surface might be broken even by talking about it. Many of them, however, found the actual experience less unnerving than they had thought it might be. Did they have small expectations? (There is more about this in Chapter 3.)

Then there are grandmothers as seen in stories (one in particular, *Little Red Riding Hood*, which has fifty-eight versions in different countries), followed by a chapter about the women who either choose not to have children and thus no grandchildren, or have the choice thrust upon them. How do such women manage the societal expectations and what do they do to compensate (if it can be called that) rather than just carry on being in their own way? Is carrying on the gene the only way? Could they be called 'non-practising Grannies'? These stories put flesh on the bones of habit. There are also stories about women's fraught relationships with their own mothers-in-law. It's a multi-faceted business. Maybe there are conclusions, maybe not, but at least we will have had a conversation which is rounded and grounded.

In my time as a child and adolescent psychotherapist, I've seen a lot of unhappy families and have come to understand more and more how history affects what happens in the present, whether we like it or not. Talking sure does help. I myself wrote a memoir, *Pieces of Molly*, to revisit my own ghosts. Those ghosts of the past can rise up and make the present a bit tricky, if not downright impossible. But even quite apparently static conditions can be moved along over time with some thinking and some talking and some changing all round.

So grandmothers from heaven and from 'hell' (or who have experienced hell) will benefit from reading this book, as well as all those

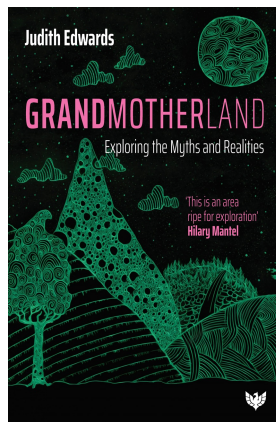
in between, including women who have had no children either by choice or because of supremely painful necessity, and thus no grandchildren. This book is written not only with years of professional experience but also with the wish to explore the realities often hidden behind ‘the painted scene’. Just like the ‘happy happy’ pictures on Facebook (now scientifically proven to enhance *un* happiness), even the ‘happiest’ of grannies might have moments where life doesn’t feel so rosy. This book is for them as well as for those who find they don’t conform to a stereotype, and those who don’t have children anyway so they never experience this particular ‘life transition’.

Many of these ideas may be new, or we may only be partially informed of what is involved in the twenty-first century in this way of ‘being’. I hope to avoid psychoanalytic terminology only understood by academic readers, as well as a great parade of academic references.

This book is, in a sense, to misquote the artist Paul Klee, a way of taking an idea for a walk: a thought excursion. The ideas may take you, rather than vice versa, or as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, ‘Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.’ He also reflected about the purpose of life ‘not to be happy but useful, honourable, compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well’. I hope to do that here.

***Grandmotherland: Exploring the Myths and Realities***

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