CHAPTER IV

DUNMORE’S NOVELS OF VARIOUS THEMES

4.1 INTRODUCTION:

Dunmore’s other novels fall under many different categories of fiction such as psychological thriller, magic realism, Gothic, etc. The stories are composed of many sub-stories, episodes, and characters. Helen Dunmore’s novels of contemporary settings explore sophisticated life of the emotions. The cultural heritage has relegated certain aspects of sexuality to the social underground. Prostitution, hypocrisy, sexual exploitation and social tensions are the themes reflected in these novels.

*Burning Bright* is about challenging traditional demarcations of reality and illusion. In this novel, the women assume a role and the men pay not for sex but for the simulacra of sex. It is about a sixteen-year-old prostitute caught in a triangle between her pimp and bondage-loving lover. It is set in contemporary Manchester and London. It is a gripping story about the ruthless exploitation of love and survival of its victims. *Talking to the Dead* was about a child smothered by his sisters. These women are linked not only by birth and an arresting intimacy, but also by a mysteriously unexplained death. Dunmore peels away the sisters’ secrets. *Your Blue-Eyed Boy* is a thriller about a woman haunted by her ex-lover. Dunmore in this novel confidently mines a number of subtle themes—the emotional perils of rendering judgment, the lure of vulnerability, the surprising power of memory. It is a haunting and psychologically dense exploration. *With Your Crooked Heart* is about how an alcoholic mother allows her child to be taken from her. The fatal love of crooked hearts and an ambiguous bond of brotherhood are the central themes this novel. In *Mourning Ruby* the theme is loss, mourning, recovery-on a personal level and a much broader public level. It is about the many permutations of loss, and it is also equally about creativity-artistic as well as biological.
"Burning Bright" depicts how a different sort of young girl might become a high-class prostitute, or call-girl, in modern London. Nadine is only sixteen years old. She is doing very well at school. She has a sister, Lulu, who is retarded, genetically malformed. Therefore the parents put all their energies into Lulu. Lulu is everything. The parents are continuously exhausted from the intensive care they give to Lulu, so that nothing is left for Nadine. She lives in a vacuum, ignored by her parents. At most, they take notice of her when she disturbs the attention they are giving to Lulu. They decide to sell the house and move to an "alternative", farm-like community somewhere in southern Germany, where lots of other parents and their deformed children absorb themselves in Nature, and the Simple Life. Nadine’s parents have left the country in search of help for her disabled sister, quite happy to leave her to live ‘with friends’. They think that Nadine can just take care of herself back in England. She can be left alone to live in some apartment, getting brilliant marks in school, a scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge. Therefore Nadine falls in love with an older man, Kai, who is Finnish. Finn Kai, a wide-boy who, with his friend Tony, has taken over an old house in the provincial city where the novel is set. On the top floor, like the witch in Sleeping Beauty, lives Enid, haunted by the dreadful death years ago of her lover, Sukey.

Helen Dunmore's "Mourning Ruby" is certainly more of an assemblage of interconnected tales than a full novel. It plays the old “stories within stories” game. There are quotes from poems (Mandelstam, Byron, Dickinson and some of Dunmore's own pieces) and folk songs and nearly the last third of the book is given over to shards of a novel in progress written by one of the characters. The main characters are Rebecca, her husband Adam, and Joe, her old flat mate. Dunmore forms the intriguing sexual triangles. The story opens with Rebecca and Ruby walking along the coast road from St Just to Zennor in Cornwall. This is during the time of a visit to Cornwall with Adam to visit his relative's grave. The title confirms that it is the death of Rebecca and Adam's child, Ruby in a road accident that dominates the narrative. In the depiction of
this horrific incident, Dunmore at one point breaks into verse, crystallizing in just a few sparse, stream of consciousness lines Rebecca's agony as, impotently, she watches the tragedy unfold:

“She always stops at roads, she’s never run into a road, but look how fast she’s going Adam, she’s too far ahead, the gap between them, stop Ruby, stop Ruby, stop Rubystop” (Mourning Ruby 100).

Rebecca's loss is even greater because she is herself a lost child, a foundling who was abandoned in a shoebox outside an Italian restaurant. Dunmore unfolds the story through Rebecca's encounters with her boss, Mr Damiano, the former circus impresario turned hotelier, and Joe’s “story”.

Talking to the Dead is a compelling story of sisters, love, crime, and tragedy. Helen Dunmore has created two of the most intriguing sisters in recent literary memory. Nina and Isabel are the closest of sisters. They are bound together since childhood by the devastating, sudden death of their baby brother, Colin. Isabel and Nina know too much about one another, and their knowledge could destroy their adult lives. When Nina embarks on an affair with Isabel's husband, the fuse is lit and the past is suddenly alive. The two women have created very different lives for themselves. Dark, sensual Nina works as a London-based freelance photographer, and beautiful, remote Isabel has married and retreated to country life. But when Isabel gives birth to her first child, and Nina comes to help to look after her, images from the hidden past rush back. The new baby is so like the brother who died in his crib twenty-five years before. Dunmore has combined a dazzling perceptiveness about the darker aspects of the human psyche with her compelling style.

Dunmore’s Your Blue-Eyed Boy deals with the past. The heroine, Simone, is a judge in her forties living in a village on the English coast. She is a mother of two young boys. Her husband Donald was an architect, but he is nearly bankrupt. Maybe his clients are sub-prime people. Thus the family is saddled with huge debts. The family has moved to an obscure coastal village
in England where Simone has obtained a job as the local magistrate. Donald mopes about the house all day, isolated, jobless, occasionally shouting his frustration at Simone. Her income goes into servicing the family debts. And even worse, in her job as magistrate, she passes judgment on all the bankruptcy cases which come up in the district. Twenty years ago, when Simone was an 18 year old English schoolgirl, she took a summer job at a children’s camp in New England. There she got to know Michael, who sailed boats and built small boats in the winters. He was a Vietnam veteran, together with his friend Calvin. Simone fell in love with Michael. And Calvin was always there with a camera, filming everything: the drinking, smoking of “grass”, sexual explorations. But at the end of the summer, Simone returns to England and studies law, relegating Michael to the forgotten past. Then suddenly, twenty years later, strange letters appear from Michael, saying that he still loves Simone. He encloses some of those old photos. He is threatening to use them in order to ruin Simone's career in the English judiciary.

Simone goes walking with him along the lonely, stone-filled beach, and she gradually realizes that she still loves Michael. They again become intimate. He has bought an airline ticket for her to return to America with him to a simple, debt-free life in the woods of Vermont. But she is reserved. Michael has spent years in an insane asylum as a result of his Vietnam experiences. Simone thinks of her two small children and debt-ridden Donald. Simone realizes that she no longer loves him, while the children no longer love her. They remain attached to Donald.

*With Your Crooked Heart* tells the story of two brothers, Paul and Johnnie, one outwardly respectable, the other more blatantly criminal, and their relationship with Louise. Two brothers are born over a decade apart in an East London tenement. Sworn to protect and nurture his brother, Paul lifts them out of an indifferent background to a life of wealth and status through dubious land development deals. As a result Johnnie had what Paul never had. He had a father and a brother; all rolled into one, and a future that someone else had already paid for. But with his life mortgaged to his ever-loving
brother, the impossibly beautiful Johnnie becomes as fatally compelled by the possibilities of failure as his sibling is by success.

Louise marries Paul, and soon discovers that his “passion of protectiveness” for his brother brings Johnnie into the heart of their marriage. When their daughter Anna is born, Louise attempts to silence the clamorous burden of her secret with drink. It’s a slow progression of loss that drags into its wake her husband, her daughter and her self-esteem. Louise maps her own journey to dereliction, but the compass of all their relationships points in uncharted directions when Louise is presented with one final chance to save Johnnie from himself. Dunmore’s success is in her ability to combine sublime prose with a swift and sure-footed narrative. *With Your Crooked Heart* fuses the alchemy of poetry and plot that have justly become the hallmark of her writing with an understated, emphatic study of alcoholism, adult self-delusion and the emotional relativity of all relationships in a world where “not being able to trust yourself is the biggest thrill of all” (Dunmore 01).

Dunmore’s these novels expose the contemporary themes of urban corruption, sexual exploitation, social tensions and gross hypocrisy of society. Her novels of contemporary setting reveal the themes of fight for survival, orphanhood and parenthood, death, betrayal, food, love and sexuality.

4.2 FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL:

Fight for survival is one of the most recurring themes in all these literary novels. *Burning Bright* is set in the shady underworld of contemporary Manchester and London. It is a world where the old have to fight for survival. The two women are unknowingly linked by a politician who is rich and powerful and yet permanently scarred by his sexually repressive upbringing. Despite its focus on the ruthless and sometimes violent underworld, this manages to be a moving and optimistic novel about the strength of personal integrity. Of a man driving through the city Dunmore writes: ‘London’s all around him, like an animal in its liar. It smells of money, the way a fox smells of fox’, which reveals the crouching, pouncing, alert,
quality of a city in a few words. In this novel Nadine moves between extremes, from London, to the wild, alien country of northern Finland.

Kai seems to be in the real estate business, together with another man, Tony. They have bought a run-down town-house, and they move into it, with the idea of renovating the place. Unfortunately, there is a sitting tenant living up in the attic. Enid is an old woman of seventy or eighty whom Kai and Tony would very much like to evict. But they are away on business all day long, so Nadine makes friends with Enid.

The theme of fight for survival is also reflected in *Mourning Ruby*. The novel exposes a young mother's breakdown after the accidental death of her five-year-old daughter Ruby. Through elaborate and confusing construction, with many flashbacks, stories within stories, shifting genres (letter, poem, dream, history, journal), and self-reflexive comments the emotional impact of maternal grief is revealed. The novel shows Rebecca's individual tragedy and her struggle to cope with the loss. Rebecca herself is a foundling. She is unsure of her own parentage and past. In the aftermath of Ruby's death, Rebecca is unable to face reality. She separates from her husband Adam, a neo-natologist who specializes in premature babies. She goes to work in London as the PA to the mysterious Mr Damiano, who runs a chain of boutique hotels named after poets: Sidney, Lampedusa, Villon, Langland, Sonescu, Cavafy, Sexton, and Bishop. The hotels are spaces for wish-fulfillment.

Abandoned as a baby in a shoebox, Rebecca is the centre of the intriguing narrative strand of *Mourning Ruby*. Later, she married to Adam whom she loves passionately; Rebecca copes with tragedy by taking refuge in other worlds. The novel is less the story of a bereaved mother's grief, as suggested by the title and cover illustration, than the story of a bereaved mother's search for her own identity. This quest is apparently provoked by and intertwined with the tragic death of Rebecca's 5-year-old daughter. Then only the real substance of the novel is found in Rebecca's complex adult
relationships with the three significant men in her life. Moving fluidly between past and present, Dunmore weaves a picture of Rebecca's background, from her abandonment as a baby, through an unhappy childhood with adoptive parents, to the intellectual and emotional escape provided by Joe, flat mate and friend, but never lover.

When Rebecca, the narrator of *Mourning Ruby*, shares a flat with Joe in London, she begins to enjoy the pleasures of friendship and family for the first time in her life.

"Joe and I were a family. We weren't born into it, or adopted into it, but we made it together like a nest from what everyone else considers rubbish. We shared our shopping, our phone bills, our colds, our friends and our festivals..." (*Mourning Ruby* 35).

She was abandoned as a baby and adopted by a couple remarkably unsuitable for parenting. Joe, a historian interested in Stalin, introduces her to simple pleasures and shows her that loneliness need not be permanent. Joe has the fastest, most powerful mind. He needs five hours of sleep. If Rebecca wakes in night, there is always a line of light under his door. The computer would be on. Books and papers lay thick on the floor around his desk, gutted, absorbed, discarded. A heap of papers waiting for translation lay in a box file on the right side of the desk. And it is through Joe that she meets Adam, a neonatologist who becomes her husband and the father of their daughter, Ruby. Ruby's death is no surprise. Dunmore plumbs the consequences of loss, how does one mourn, and then accept, the unacceptable. Numbed by Ruby's death, Rebecca drifts away from Adam. She finds a diversion in a job as an assistant to a hotelier, Mr. Damiano. Adam buries himself in his work with premature babies. Ambitiously, Dunmore complements this tragic narrative with two other stories, one autobiographical, told by Mr. Damiano, about growing up in a circus where his parents were trapeze artists, and one told by Joe, a work of fiction set during World War I about a man and a woman who could be his and Rebecca's ancestors. Rebecca's own story is not told linearly, so these narrative asides are not as distracting as they sound. And they are
critical to Dunmore’s main theme: that narrative is a key to understanding and to acceptance.

Interspersed throughout Rebecca’s story is the description of Joe’s futile attempts to write a biography of Stalin. This exploration of the nature of history and memory provides a subtle metaphor for Rebecca’s desire to capture and define her own memories. The interplay of these two stories is the most rewarding aspect of this novel. Rebecca’s husband Adam appears only to function in order to provide the sexual satisfaction never accessible with Joe, and as the father of her child. Here, Dunmore writes, not about the fear of parting, but about the thing itself. Dunmore’s heroine, Rebecca, is accustomed to the idea of separation. Her life story is predicated on it. Other people have family trees beneath which to shelter; Rebecca has a shoebox and a vague description of a departing woman in a tight skirt and a pink jersey. She was found in the shoebox, which had been left near the kitchen door of an Italian restaurant by the fleeing wraith in the tight outfit. These meagre beginnings flourish into the richness of an ordinary life, cocooned with friendship and love and the arrival of a daughter, Ruby. “I’d become the woman I’d once . . . envied. A young woman in an old narrow house with a porch light that spilled yellow on the steps . . . Behind her was the sound of children playing. I was home, at home, like her” (45). Then that fragile, precious ordinariness is ruined by another kind of ordinariness; a series of chance connections, a slight alteration to any one of which could have averted a banal accident, but didn’t. And Rebecca’s safe edifice of security and love is shivered into fragments.

Rebecca lives with a guy who is in love with her, but those feelings aren’t mutual. His name is Joe and he writes historical non-fiction. He is in the middle of writing a book about Stalin’s second wife, and this story takes up a good chunk of the first part of the book. Joe tells it to Rebecca in a series of long drawn-out conversations, in which he makes clear that she is not interested in what he is talking about. Rebecca has a husband named Adam, but the relationship between them doesn’t seem very convincing. He is a
doctor who saves newborn babies, ironically. Dunmore piles on the pain, from a young mother's breakdown after the accidental death of her five-year-old daughter Ruby, to a near plane-crash, to a historical subplot about the suicide of Stalin's second wife.

One of Dunmore's themes is the need each one has to know - or invent - our own story. In the aftermath of Ruby's death, Rebecca goes to work in London as the PA to Mr Damiano, who runs a chain of boutique hotels. Damiano has realized that what people most desire is "to be given pleasure", and he creates a magical travelling fairground called Damiano's Dreamworld, in which customers have their desires for pleasure fulfilled. Damiano promises Rebecca her own Dreamworld, but on a business trip to New York, she has to endure an emergency landing when the plane's engine fails, and on the tarmac she thinks she sees Ruby in a child-sized fireman's helmet, a portent of death and a sign that the Dreamworld has not assuaged her grief. Perhaps Dunmore means that escapism is an inadequate form of mourning.

Rebecca leaves her job and moves to Cornwall, near Ruby's grave. She works as a waitress, broods on her own family origins. Rebecca rewrites her own story. Her ex-lover Joe, a scholar of Russian history, abandons his research on Stalin's wife Nadezhda Alliluyeva. He begins to write a novel about his father, an RAF pilot killed in the First World War and his imagined romance with a prostitute who may have been Rebecca's grandmother. Part II of Mourning Ruby is composed of chapters from this unfinished novel, and Joe's letters to Rebecca explaining it. Reading the story, and confronting its lyric images of flight, help Rebecca to reconcile to Ruby's death.

Mourning Ruby is about loss and recovery. It is packed with literary allusions. The prologue, Rebecca's dream of walking with Ruby on the Cornish coast, evokes Offred's dreams of her lost daughter in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. There are poetic epigraphs to most chapters from Hardy, Byron, Dickinson, Keats, and Dunmore herself, as well as snatches of nursery rhyme, music hall song, and ballad. The Russian poet Mandelstam, one of Dunmore's favourites, is cited defining poetry as "an aeroplane in full flight.
giving birth to another aeroplane” (21). Joe told Rebecca that Mandelstam never wrote about baby ‘Tube Trains’. He may be killed before they built the Leningrad metro. Even the book's cover image, of a little girl in a red coat, suggests another work, Schindler’s List. In her epilogue, Dunmore asserts that “without your imagination, the story would die”. Constantly straining for tragic insight, Mourning Ruby is finally less about insight than strain. The novel is constructed as a series of interlocking stories - punctuated by emails, fairy stories, political biography, dreams, even Joe’s prototype novel about the wartime affair between an airman and a French prostitute.

Mourning Ruby is full of the hot sharp prose: “I mistrust sensitive people. In my experience what they are mostly sensitive about are themselves” (P.15), or when Rebecca, torn between Joe and Adam, feels the sweet/sour tang of desire: “My eager greedy heart wanted him for the first time. “You can have them both," it whispered to me” (15) it’s hard to imagine a better description of female sexual appetite. The structure is complex. It leads through its rich layers of stories within stories within stories without putting a step wrong. The main story is about a mother (herself an abandoned child) and father trying to deal with the death of their young daughter. The awful moment when Ruby races from one parent to another into the path of an oncoming car is heart stopping in its shocking finality. Mourning Ruby, although it is laced with grief, is also about hopes and dreams. It is not about death, but about the joy and pain of living.

The idea of “fight for survival” is the most recurring theme in Helen Dunmore’s Talking to the Dead. Reflecting on their childhood, Nina explained the way that she and Isabel marveled at their personality differences. Nina recalls,

“It’s always seemed so complicated to me, being a woman. I hear other women talking about ‘my size’ and ‘what suits me’, swopping tales of smears and tests and samples. I’d like to be that confident. I’d like to believe those things were part of me, and I was part of them. Maybe that’s why it suits me to take
pictures. No one looks at the person behind the camera” (Talking to the Dead 14).

Growing up, each sister played upon her variance from the other as if it were “a game that eventually played us,” as Nina says. Richard and Edward figure prominently in the novel in that they extract unique information about Nina and Isabel. These men bring out of each of the sisters truth. As in a psycho-theatre, the various relationships emerge. The house is filled with tension. Isabel is a thin, nervous, yet physically beautiful woman. She can no longer tolerate the physical presence of Richard. He is a famous economist, continuously flying away to important meetings around the globe. Isabel spends endless hours with Edward in her room, having secrets together, apart from the others. Nina recalls her childhood together with Isabel, and she thinks she loves her. But Nina and Isabel are very different people. Nina is an earthy person who loves cooking. All of this leads to torrid love scenes together with Richard in the hot, dry summer garden.

In fact, twenty five years ago when Nina and Isabel were children, they had a baby brother, Colin. And Colin died of cot death. Nina is an artist and suddenly, when seeing Isabel bending over the cot of her baby, she sees the scene of long ago. Nina was only four years old, while Isabel was seven. And she sees Isabel bending over Colin’s cot, smothering him to death. But this vague memory of her early childhood may not be true. She confronts Isabel. But Isabel says no; in fact Nina herself killed Colin and she (Isabel) has been covering up for Nina all these years. The question of truth remained unanswered. Or perhaps the small, four year old Nina, out of jealousy, told Isabel that she wished Colin were dead, and Isabel fulfilled that wish. Anthony may suffer a similar ‘cot death’. The tension builds.

The theme of fight for survival shapes the story of Your Blue-Eyed Boy. Simone presents an image of success and self-realization. She is a judge, not a high court bigwig, more of a lowly but still be-wigged settler of domestic disputes and small claims. Simone is a judge in her forties living in a village on the English coast, and Michael, her lover twenty years before in a
village on the New England coast. When Simone left Michael and returned to England, she became a lawyer. She married Donald, an architect, and now has children, Matt and Joe, still boys. She accepted the judgeship to make more money, as Donald’s business has failed. So has his spirit, and this has infected their marriage, though not Simone's love for their children. Simone says,

"I’d been sitting as a deputy district judge for four years. I knew I was good. I did it five or six days a month, and the rest of the time I worked in my own practice. It was mainly a legal aid practice, so there wasn't much money in it, and it was tough and tiring. But I liked it and I had plenty of clients" (Your Blue-Eyed Boy 28).

The idea of survival functions in With Your Crooked Heart to develop the plot. The characters, Paul and Johnnie, two brothers grew up in relative poverty in London. Louise is Paul’s wife, and Anna, the daughter. Paul’s second wife, Sonia, hovers in the background, trying to tidy up the mess made by the other characters, and in the end giving up and instead having an affair at the riding stables. Paul escapes from poverty by hard work, dealing with real estate. Johnnie is twelve years younger than Paul, and so Paul is the big brother, helping Johnnie through everything, giving him all the money he needs. Unfortunately, Johnnie becomes dependent upon Paul, yet resents everything that Paul represents. While driving the flash cars, wearing the expensive clothes, looking good with all the money Paul provides, Johnnie tries to obtain his own success by dealing with the criminal elements of the big City.

Paul, Louise and Johnnie live in a fashionable town house in London. Paul is always away. Johnnie is also away most of the time, associating with his crowd. After ten years the marriage with Louise remains barren, but this is altered in a torrid scene where she is taken by Johnnie, thus creating poor little Anna. Of course everybody says that Paul is Anna's father, yet everybody knows that that is not true. Also everybody pretends that if Johnnie could only understand what is good for him, then he will become a wonderful, upright member of society. And everybody knows that that will never happen.
Thus Louise, who was formerly an attractive woman, takes strongly to drink. Louise gazes at herself in the mirror being slightly overweight:

“Her image looks at her angrily, as if it blames her for what it has become. We used to like each other, you and me. Look at what you’ve done to us” (With Your Crooked Heart 13).

She is an alcoholic, to such an extent that she is often unable to make it to the toilet in time. And so the house smells of urine. It is a mess. She is a mess. Paul leaves, taking Anna with him, and Louise is allowed two hours of visiting rights per week. A driver brings her, and picks her up at the precise time. But even this is too much for Paul. He buys a house up in Yorkshire, taking Sonia and Anna away from London and telling Louise that he will no longer tolerate her influence upon Anna.

Helen Dunmore describes this whole situation from the points of view of the different characters from chapter to chapter. In the end, Johnnie is overwhelmed with debts to some very dangerous characters in the London underworld, and he comes to Louise for help. They escape together - two losers - and they are thrown off the deep end. Meanwhile, Anna is growing up. She learns about life, death and the appreciation of a stable household with Paul and her stepmother. Anna saves herself with single-minded devotion to newborn kittens and by accepting the touching friendship of her deeply loyal school chum, David.

4.3 ORPHANHOOD AND PARENTHOOD:

Parenthood is one of the recurring themes in Dunmore’s Burning Bright. Paul Parrett is an adoptive child of Mr. and Mrs. Parrett. Dunmore writes:

“His adoption could only have happened just immediately after the war when there were so many children to be had. Bombed-out children, evacuated children, refugee children. A river of children whose parents had lost touch with them or with life. All these displaced kids to be slotted back into some sort of home” (Burning Bright 09).
Nadine is also a neglected child in her home. She says:

“The home is for my sister. She has cerebral palsy—you know what that is? The home runs a programme for people with cerebral palsy. My mother works in the kitchen, and my father works in the office and on the farm, and so that pays for Lulu’s keep there... The work is tough, but this place is wonderful for Lulu, and that’s what counts. It’s her turn now” (94).

The theme of orphanhood appears in *Mourning Ruby*. Rebecca, the narrator, is herself deprived of both father and mother, having been found in a shoebox outside an Italian restaurant. One likes her immediately for not turning out the way her adoptive parents hope but for mistrusting sensitive people: “In my experience what they are chiefly sensitive to is themselves. My adoptive mother had nerves as rare as orchids” (*Mourning Ruby* 15). Rebecca’s adoptive parents never struck her as frivolous people, but there is something frivolous in their decision to adopt. They really do not want a child. They do not like children, or they do not know what they like. *A baby... A little baby*—her adoptive mother have hypnotized herself with these words. When she was eight, she dug out from the bottom of the sideboard a bag full of baby cloths: cobweb cardigans, silky romper suits, and a white dress with coral embroidery—folded, new, and untouched.

By the time Rebecca survives an emergency plane landing and sees her child Ruby in the second of touchdown. It is a tale of unbearable tragedy. Rebecca has a best friend, Joe, who introduces her to her future husband, Adam. Joe is obsessed by Stalin and by Stalin’s wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva. And part of the novel revolves around the question of whether it was suicide or murder that left Nadezhda’s children motherless. Ultimately, Rebecca’s story dissolves into a novel that Joe has begun to write, about a prostitute and a pilot in the First World War. “You take a flight inside yourself when reality becomes unbearable,” as Joe says, and the novel enacts Rebecca’s state of mind.

Rebecca recounts the discovery of herself as a foundling by Lucia, after she is abandoned by her young mother outside an Italian restaurant. She
knows that the time that surrounded birth might be dangerous. She wouldn’t be safe until Ruby knows who she is, and how to get back to her if they were ever parted.

This is at a time when she is working for Mr Damiano, a mysterious ex-circus owner who has set up a chain of boutique hotels that Rebecca helps to manage. On a flight back to England, one of the plane’s engines fails and it is forced to return to New York. It is whilst standing on the tarmac that Rebecca decides to hand in her notice, having lost all zest for her work. Rebecca’s story goes back to the time when she was sharing a flat with Joe, an intellectual who is writing a book about Nadezhda Alliluyeva, the thirty one year old wife of Stalin who committed suicide in 1932. He befriends Adam through a shared interest in chess and he and Rebecca fall in love and then marry. Joe decides to move to Moscow to further his research and lives with Olya, and Rebecca and Adam decide to visit him with Ruby. In the end, though, the story sheds a kind of light on Rebecca and Joe’s own odd association. It shows, too, how stories can be places of refuge from the disappointments of real life.

Rebecca is adopted by a couple so featureless that they leave no mark on her, not even that of sensual deprivation, which is surprising, since the only food she eats as a child comes out of tins. But these adoptive parents are not important. The formative character for Rebecca is her flat mate Joe, whose father and grandfather were pilots, or “flyers,” in two world wars. He is writing a biography of Stalin’s second wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva. Rebecca has built a life for herself. More than thirty years later – married Adam and had her own wonderful daughter, Ruby. But when Ruby is involved in an accident, Rebecca’s life tumbles down and she is forced to face her loss – both as a mother and as a daughter. She reaches out to those around her, listening to the stories of their lives, in an attempt to understand her own.

The theme of parenthood and orphanhood appear in Talking to the Dead. The characters struggle hard, but they are deeply marked, by the death of the baby and by the lack of maternal and paternal care they have received.
The whole thing starts to roll when the girls realize that their mother can be maternal, but not towards them. When their brother is born, suddenly they see it. Children can accept having parents who are fairly indifferent towards them, because they assume they don't know any other way to be, but if they see the parents suddenly clinging on to a child of the other sex that is very wounding, and that is what ignites the whole thing.

Isabel has just given birth to the baby Anthony, but with such complications that she has had a hysterectomy. Her sister Nina is summoned to look after her. Susan is a young woman serving as a kind of nanny while Isabel recovers. And there is Richard, the husband and father, and Edward, who is homosexual. Nina is the narrator. The baby screams and is brought to Isabel, who despite her weakness, insists on breast-feeding him.

Motherhood is reflected in Dunmore’s *Your Blue-Eyed Boy*. Simone went to America, telling her mother it was safe- a job in a summer camp organization. After she came back, she wasn’t returning her mother’s plan. She dumped the idea of a teacher training course and started to study law. Her mother was afraid of Simone's decisions. Simone remembers her student days and her trip to the USA in the era of hippies, dope and cheesecloth dresses. She recalls the way-out things she did with Michael and Calvin, the pair of post-Vietnam drop-outs she lived with. Michael was her lover. Calvin had a penchant for photography. The photos of Simone's youthful sexual experimentation disturb her career. Now she has a law degree, a husband, a house, two lovely sons and a career. Simone’s already unstable and highly internalized world is threatened at its core.

4.4  DEATH:

The idea of death and its consequences undertone the narrative of *Mourning Ruby*. Rebecca saw the accident:

“The blue car skidded. The brakes screamed and the wheels tore at the road. I saw the blue car go sideways past me with Ruby on its bonnet. The driver's mouth was wide open. Then the car hit the side of a plane tree, and Ruby was thrown off. I watched her
fall on her back, on the back of her head. Her body convulsed”
(Mourning Ruby 101).

Ruby died aged five leaving both her parents Rebecca and Adam completely heartbroken and bereft. After Ruby's death, Rebecca in particular is struggling and is estranged from Adam. The novel is not just about Rebecca's grief. It is also about her hopes for the future. The subject matter of Mourning Ruby is heartbreaking. Ruby has seen both through flashbacks and through Rebecca. Rebecca is dumped in a shoebox at the back of an Italian restaurant by a mother. Mourning Ruby is about a death, the worst and most dreaded death of a only child.

Dunmore examines the aftermath of this tragedy, what it does to people; how grief can create a gulf between them when a bridge is needed most. Maternity is a recurring theme in Dunmore's novels and poems. After Ruby's death at the age of five, Adam, who is a neonatologist (more babies), concentrates on saving the lives of other people's newborns. So often Rebecca thought that their bed was a ship and they were voyaging together. Everything that is in them made up the voyage- their body heat, their dreams, the taste of Adam's sweat, the juice of sex, the pang of Ruby's conception. “We would die in that bed, I believed” (111).

The theme of death is also seen in the sub-story of Stalin's wife. Joe has finished his book on Stalin's wife. Rebecca loved the way Joe talked when he told her about Nadezhda Alliluyeva. She died in 1932, when she was only thirty-one years old. The official cause of death was appendicitis. It was suicide, say the history books, but she drank a glass of poisoned wine intended for her husband. She did not shoot herself, but was shot. Dunmore writes:

“She died because she had been naïve, like millions of other idealistic young women at the heart of the Party. She thought that if Stalin were given the full facts about the murderous impact of collectivization, the policy would change” (40).

He is now trying to write about Stalin himself and Hitler's invasion of Russia.
“It’s June. There are birch trees growing around dacha and it’s warm. The German army’s advancing; he ought to have known it was going to advance. He’s the leader. He’s the heir of Lenin, the father of the nation, the guardian of the revolution … He and Hitler go and make a gentleman’s agreement between dictators and Hitler doesn’t keep it”(55).

Joe tells about Joseph Stalin’s character and the wave of fear that gripped Russia during his dictatorship. On the return to England, they decide to visit Adam’s grandmother’s grave at Barnoon Cemetery in Cornwall and Rebecca is happy that Ruby will have ancestors that she herself can never have. Dunmore gives us a glimpse of the richness and warmth that Ruby brought to her parents, Rebecca and Adam. And then she shows us the isolation which Ruby’s death brings to Rebecca, the lack of meaning or purpose which accompanies her.

Mr Damiano, Rebecca’s employer serves primarily to deepen the philosophical exploration of memory. Dunmore weaves the novel to show how one story gives life to another, and all stories are connected. Rebecca is trying to find her own life story. But she quests for her birth and her upbringing as an adopted child. Ruby’s death is the only main theme that continues throughout the book.

The idea of death is another feature reflected in Dunmore’s Talking to the Dead. The characters are deeply marked, by the death of the baby. Dunmore was interested in tapping into very passionate child life, where she believes that somebody can almost carry out magical acts - she means Nina ascribes to Isabel all kinds of magical powers: she’s not just an elder sister, she’s a magical being, and that still lingers when they’re adults: she mythologizes Isabel.

The following scene is in the graveyard. It refers to two graveyards - the Firle graveyard and Barnoon graveyard in St Ives, a beautiful place overlooking the sea, which is where, in the novel, Colin is buried.

“People idling through graveyards always stop by the graves of the young. Hundreds of miles from here there’s another grave
with the same surname on it as yours, a tiny grave in a steep
cemetery above the sea. There's a path through the cemetery
which tourists use as a short cut down to the beach. They stop,
read the inscription, the name and dates, and the two lines of
poetry. Often there's a jamjar of flowers left on the grave. If the
tourists have children with them, they'll grasp their hands
tightly as they walk on. I haven't been there for years..." 
(Talking to the Dead 02).

4.5 BETRAYAL:

The theme of betrayal reinforces the narrative of Mourning Ruby.
Rebecca is betrayed by her mother as she is dumped in a shoebox at the back
of an Italian restaurant by a mother and never sees her again. Rebecca is
adopted by a couple remarkably unsuitable for parenting. She has an unhappy
childhood with adoptive parents. More than thirty years later she has built a
life for herself – married Adam and had her own, wonderful daughter, Ruby.
But when Ruby is involved in an accident, Rebecca’s life tumbles down and
she is forced to face her loss – both as a mother and as a daughter. Rebecca,
the mother who loses not only a beloved child but the only blood relative she
knows. Thus she is betrayed by her own misfortune. The prologue reveals
how Rebecca's fate betrays her:

“A car comes up, with lamps full-glare,
That flash upon a tree:
It has nothing to do with me
And whangs along in a world of its own,
Leaving a blacker air” (Mourning Ruby 01).

Joe, the historian loves Rebecca platonically. Joe is obsessed by Stalin and by
Stalin's wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva. He unfolds how Stalin treated his wife and
betrayed her love.

“He treats her brutally. He crushes her and the children and she
knows there is no way she can possibly escape him. If she hadn't
loved her it wouldn't matter so much- or at least it'd be a
different kind of tragedy. She kills herself out of knowledge of
what he is and what she's become” (42).
Joe tells Rebecca that Nadezhda Alliluyeva is Stalin’s wife and she must have known what he was like:

“There is another possibility. She kills herself in revenge. She knows what it will do to him, and he knows what she’s intended to do him. She has wanted to punish him, and she’s succeeded, and he can’t bear the idea that anyone’s had that degree of power over him... Once she’s dead, he changes and becomes more and more isolated. He’s suspicious of everyone. Friendship and family are finished— he’ll be sentimental to his daughter but he’ll never let anyone get close to him again” (42).

The novel revolves around the question of whether it is suicide or murder that left Nadezhda’s children motherless. Joe, now, is writing of Stalin at war, Stalin at fugue. He wants to write of Stalin at the end of his life- Stalin, toxic with rage, suspicion and the terror of death. Joe keeps going back to his earlier days. But it is not easy to get away from Nadya- a young woman in the heart of the Kremlin, mother of two children and step-mother of a son. She and Stalin have just celebrated the fifteen anniversary of the October Revolution. At the party that night, Stalin shouts, insults Nadya. She is now thirty-one and loved her husband so passionately at seventeen that all her family was afraid for her, with no barriers, nothing held back. There is nowhere in Nadya’s body or her heart or her mind that he has not penetrated and made his own. Her family knows her nature and her seriousness and idealism. She makes him perfect in her own mind so that he is the ideal revolutionary who would lead her. She could not destroy Stalin- within her without destroying herself.

The next morning, Nadya is found dead, shot through the heart with a pistol that her brother has given her. Her daughter is six, her son eleven. After her death, everything changes. Family life ends. Stalin reads the terrible letter his wife has left for him. He sees her lying in her blood. There is something deep in him that feels more than shock and anger and grief for the end of a woman he has loved. There is a humiliation in his mind. She has had the choice between life with him in the heart of the Kremlin, and death. She has
chosen death. Stalin wants revenge. When his first wife died, he thought he had lost the one person capable of melting his heart. Now he knows it wasn't true. She has left her children behind to suffer. She had failed in the most important thing parents have to do— to make their children believe that life is good, life is bearable.

Against the backdrop of the hottest summer for a century, a drama of suspicion and betrayal unfolds in Talking to the Dead. Each sister claims to possess knowledge that could destroy the other. As the past becomes alive and dangerous, it forces Isabel to commit a shocking, transforming act. Nina says:

“We aren’t the kind of sisters who talk about their childhood together. If we did we might find we hadn’t got many shared memories. And here’s Antony, who won’t have a brother or a sister at all. No one to cover up for and no one to betray. Isabel hasn’t talked about that. She showed me the scar but she hasn’t talked about what the hysterectomy means to her...” (Talking to the Dead 32).

Bonds of love and shared history are stretched to the breaking point as Nina begins an illicit affair with Richard. Thus she betrays Isabel’s faith.

After Collin’s death, Nina recalls her childhood memory; her mother never became happy again. She worked, she looked after them, she smiled, she had friends, but her happiness had gone. Her wish of having a baby-boy was shattered. Thus her fate betrayed her. Nina’s father had a woman in London, Amy Ludgate. He married her for a year after her mother’s death, before he died too. Her mother had expected to die, as she’d had breast cancer for two years. Her father had been with Amy before Colin was born. He betrayed his mother. Colin was born, and then he died, and his death brought them closer than his life had done, for a while.

In Your Blue-Eyed Boy, when a letter arrives from the other side of the ocean, Simone, a thirty-eight-year-old judge, suspects that a long-ago lover has targeted her for “the most intimate of crimes,” blackmail. The prospect shatters an already tenuous peace: Simone is shouldering the burden of her
husband's breakdown, her family's mounting debts, and the unexpected demands of a new job. Soon the ripple of terror that flows through Simone's world like the ghost of a former self threatens to propel her public and private lives onto a harrowing collision course. Simone thinks,

“If it’s money Michael wants, that’s one thing... But I don’t believe it’s money. Michael never cared about money. I wasn’t in his nature. He could have made plenty if he’d wanted, with the boats and the summer people... Michael worked enough to keep himself in food and drink and grass, and that was all” (Your Blue-Eyed Boy 99).

After twenty years, Michael, the lover of Simone reappears. He sends her letters and photos of their loose life together, that lead her to suspect blackmail. She finds herself stuck between a past that could destroy her present, and a present that wants nothing to do with her past. Michael betrays her love. Michael confronts Simone when she is out walking near the sea, and from then on she feels him watching her house in the dark.

Then Michael tells her that what he really wants is her and the past they had together. He even has a plane ticket for her to return with him to Annassett, the village where he still lives. In exchange for sex with him on the beach, he lets her tear up the photos he has brought. The sex has a sour magic to it. Simone finds the strength Michael’s body that has never lost. She cannot go with him, but she cannot do without him. Thus Simone betrays her husband and children.

As the title, With Your Crooked Heart seems to indicate all manner of chicanery; self-delusion and betrayal await the characters. It is about a doomed triangle involving two brothers and the woman they both love. Dunmore introduces Louise, the sturdy, sensuous anti-heroine, in her garden, where she lolls in the sun, revealing in her role as the pregnant wife of the prosperous older brother, Paul. She is pampered and spoiled, with little to do but lie naked outside where no one can see her. Her baby was conceived during a night spent with her husband’s brother, Johnnie, the self-destructive opposite of his well-to-do sibling.
Louise knows that she has betrayed Paul and, basically, wrecked her own marriage. She has a great sense of guilt and slips deeper into despair. It is very interesting to look at the different stages of her life as a woman: the young radiant beautiful woman where she seems to have a lot of power; then the stage where she seems almost contemptible in the eyes of the world, addicted to drink, her beauty lost and about to lose her child. In fact, that is not the end of her story. It is not just a mother’s ruin story. The most individual part of her story takes place at the end when she goes off on her journey and has a chance to redeem herself.

Dunmore tells the story of Louise, the brothers and her daughter, Anna, in a nonlinear fashion, jumping back and forth in time. Though the close but tangled relationship between the brothers is often poisonous, it is Louise who is the most crooked. She descends into alcoholism, loses custody of her daughter and finds only the saddest of redemptions when she flees the country with Johnnie. “There’s no real dark in cities,” Louise thinks to herself at one point.

4.6 FOOD:

Helen Dunmore depicts the natural world of food and bodily pleasures. Food is the most rumbling theme in all Dunmore’s novels of contemporary settings. Dunmore's *Burning Bright* throws light on its infectious sensuality. Food is set out with the artistry of a Japanese chef: “veal ribbons peel away - beautifully from one another . . . They look like the gills of oyster mushrooms.” (P.52) The boning knife that Tony brings back to the house comes straight out of Bluebeard's rack, a knife for which Nadine can’t imagine a use. It’s long and thin and flexible. Nadine collected carrier-bags from Tony. She delves.

“Veal. Flour. Oil. Cheese and herbs in transparent wrappings. A net of tight-skinned peppers, red, orange, yellow, purple. A fat scented cantaloupe melon. A thick bar of expensive plain chocolate, and a dozen eggs which are slightly too big for their cardboard box. White briny cheese, and a jar of plum tomatoes.
Plump olives, a mophead of endive. And more. She spreads out the stuff on the table and breaks off a piece of chocolate” (*Burning Bright* 53).

Kai always have something for Nadine to eat. Dunmore writes:

“He brought food in white carriers from the delicatessen: tunafish sandwiches with mayonnaise, chicken tikka, gherkins, fat black olives... And always cakes. Greek honey cake and a cake with poppyseed paste in the middle and small bitter-chocolate cakes with almond slivers sticking out of them” (79).

In *Mourning Ruby*, Dunmore observes history as a sensation – a smell, or a touch. The novel opens with the shoebox in which Rebecca is laid. In fact every detail of that scene is clear: the smell of leather and cardboard and new baby, the gusts of cooking smell from the restaurant extractor fan, the thick, warm darkness and the lights shining out into the yard. This scene is very sharp and powerful.

An onion, firm to the touch, turns out to have a "grey fust in its seams", while a simple sentence like "It's cool and the dew is on the grass in the orchard" evokes a whole world of rustic tranquility, just a few miles from the battle front of 1917. Dunmore writes like this:

“Joe had watched me eat my usual food without comment, for the first few weeks. He never criticized it, but he brought me into the pleasure world step by step. He’d taught himself everything and then he taught me. I’d been living with half nothing, believing I was lucky if I had a cheese roll for lunch, and the hot water didn’t run out before I had my bath. Joe taught me to go into shops I’d walked past automatically all my life. I went inside and bought wine and flowers and books and music” (*Mourning Ruby* 48-49).

Rebecca prepares food for Joe and Adam. She fries chicken in oil, adds stock and wine and the vegetables. The pan spits and a plume of savoury steam goes up to the low ceiling. It is Joe who teaches her to cook. She only knows about beans on toast, pizza and toasted sandwiches before she meets him. One day, to make Joe smile, she writes out the menus which her adoptive
mother fed to them on a two-weekly rotation. She rememberes every meal by heart. *Week one, Monday:* Corned beef, tinned peas and tinned new potatoes. Strawberry Angel Delight.

“Each morning we measured out our cornflakes with an off-white melamine cup. To drink there was hot Ribena, or hot Bovril, or good fresh water from the tap” (49).

The glory of Rebecca’s adoptive mother’s housekeeping is that she is never hostage to the seasons. They fill the boot of their Mazda with tins and packets once a month. She is particular about where the tins came from. Corned beef from Argentina is no good even if it is on special offer. To buy Heinz baked beans is to spend money for the sake of spending money. Only fools buys instant mashed potato, which has no food value compared to the tinned variety. She teaches Rebecca that potatoes are waxen and slippery and comes ready-peeled, carrots grow in cubes and corned beef has to be warmed under the hot tap to loosen its coat of fat so that it would glop out of the tin. At Christmas they have a Plumrose Ham from a bigger tin. The strip of metal that wound onto the key-opener is so long that it sometimes breaks under the tension, slashing a thumb.

Day by day, Joe undid Rebecca’s good housekeeping. Rebecca says, “I got soil on my fingers, and I sliced up meat which bled. I learned to check the eyes of fish before I bought them, to see if they were full and bright, and then not to look into them again. We picked shot out of pheasants, and I leaned that hares, like horses, have saddles”. (69). Olya and Rebecca eat the meat patties with beetroot, pickled cucumbers and potatoes. Olya has made dill sauce and there was cranberry relish. Afterwards, they have a jar of preserved pears, and ice-cream. The pears are whole, with their stalks still on, and their cheeks has been stained red with cochineal.

Dunmore in *Talking to the Dead* offers the descriptions of food, cooking, and movable feasts very gorgeously. Dunmore thinks food in families is so powerful because so many registers of emotion are enacted through meals. In the very opening scene Nina describes the food:
"... And then the food. After a funeral you have to eat, to prove you're still alive. There are foods which are suitable, and foods which are not. The suitable ones turn out to be ham, or cold chicken. Quiche is very popular, and Australian wines. The unsuitable ones would be anything which required last-minute attention from drunk or weeping people. I was hungry myself. I ate the chicken sandwiches, and drank wine" (Talking to the Dead 01).

Nina's sensuousness in food and sex is contrasted with Isabel's anorexia and frigidity. Also Isabel is out of it, she is drifting farther and farther away, and she is courageous because she keeps trying to seem normal. Nina sees right through her, which is painful. And Isabel will sit there, and she clearly has a huge problem with food and she will pretend she hasn't, and her retreat from the senses is so far gone.

4.7 LOVE AND SEXUALITY:

Helen Dunmore's most recurring theme is that of love and sexuality, and the consequences of repressing it. Her novels are the exploration of women's sexuality and social roles. Helen Dunmore writes about women caught between passionate love and social repression, which have to choose between following real feelings whatever the consequences and accepting emotions which are corrupted by greed, fear or manipulation.

Her characters are often ordinary people. In their voices Helen Dunmore ponders some of the bigger issues of life - death, birth, marriage and sex - as well as the everyday politics of relationships and friendships. Burning Bright centres on Nadine, overlooked by her preoccupied parents, desperate for affection, and Enid, an indomitable old woman who lives half her life in the past, reliving her own story of forbidden love. The two women are unknowingly linked by a politician who is rich and powerful and yet permanently scarred by his sexually repressive upbringing. Their stories become interwoven. Nadine is naive and dependent on pimps and dealers. Enid is haunted by the woman she once loved, and the bitter jealousy and murder which dramatically ended their affair. In the evenings, Kai and Nadine
have torrid sexual encounters on the large double bed in their room. Dunmore writes:

"Warm used-up air moves deliciously against her, while the insides of her thighs catch as she walks, sticky with Kai’s semen, her body leaking with Kai, her nipples dark and swollen from his sucking" (Burning Bright 41).

Nadine thinks that Kai is her boyfriend, and that life can just go on like this forever. She does a bit of work as an usher in the local cinema. But both Kai and Tony seem to have lots of money - always cash, never credit cards. They buy extravagant things. One evening Kai brings an extremely expensive, off-white silk dress, and Nadine becomes an unimaginably desirable object of beauty and self-possession. But Enid, up in the attic, knows what is going on.

One day, Tony invites Nadine to accompany him to a dinner in a fashionable London restaurant to meet a "business partner", the ministerial-level politician, Paul Parrett. As with that real-life public figure, Max Mosely, he is interested in sado-masochistic experiences, yet of a much milder variety than those which entrapped Mosely. Nadine knows nothing of all this. She finds Paul Parrett to be a very nice man, and so she accompanies him after the restaurant in his chauffeured limousine to his luxurious apartment, high over the streets of London. But she is shocked when he proposes what she could do. They talk a bit, and she leaves. It is the lover who is a threat to Nadine, especially since he intends to rent her to a cabinet minister with specialized sexual needs. Paul Parrett makes up his mind that he has never find a woman willing to put up with him on a long term or unpaid basis. Tony and Kai are reliable for this work. They are building up a reputation for dealing with specialist clients.

In Mourning Ruby, abandoned as a baby in a shoebox, Rebecca has a shaky sense of identity. Redemption comes in the form of relationships with two men - Joe (the platonic brother substitute) and Adam (the sexual lover). Rebecca says:
“I had shared the flat with Joe for three years. It was the kind of love that keeps you safe, and sex never entered it. We knew too well what other things would have flown out of the box then. Fear, disappointment, rage. Just friends, as people say, lingering stickily on what they touch. But in my view friendship can be rarer and tenderer than love” (*Mourning Ruby* 34).

Here is Ruby, washed up on the shore of her body. It is only eight hours since Rebecca had turned into a mother. Joe touches her hand. They are two separate people, touching. They are not a family any more. But Rebecca wants more, “I was greedy and selfish, wanting him to feel for me what it wasn’t good for him to feel. I was a glutton for intimacy” (61).

The maternal love overwhelms the story. In the deepest of circles of bliss, Rebecca felt Ruby’s touch she is very possessive about Ruby:

“My girl, my daughter. I hadn’t thieved this love, though I was still fearful that someone would come in and denounce me for taking a baby that didn’t belong to me. The midwives called her my daughter straight away and I wondered how they dared, how they could be so certain” (62).

Ruby must have her own life, right from the beginning. It is Rebecca’s job to look after Ruby- her hearing test, her vaccinations, her difficulty in moving on to solids, her weight-gain. With the other mothers, she clucks and deprecates baby life. But after six years of her marriage to Adam, the couple faces every parents’ worst nightmare - the death of their five-year-old daughter. Rebecca’s life comes apart at the seams. *Mourning Ruby* is full of the sensual minutiae of family life, but this time the narrative is jagged with grief. Dunmore describes the fading scent of a child’s pyjamas to the terrible, familiar dreams where one appears to be reunited with the dead. She presents a picture of a couple deeply in love; a marriage shaken to the foundations by the death of their daughter, that ultimately survives. Yet she provides no basis for this relationship other than sexual attraction, with the real love affair continuing to be between Joe and Rebecca. The story he writes is clearly an attempt to analyze their complex relationship. Dunmore interweaves it with Rebecca and Adam’s reunion. There is an epilogue:
“So often I’d thought that our bed was a ship and we were voyaging in it together. I would roll over in the bed and imagine the waves leaping around us, and the fathomless water. Everything that was in us made up the voyage. Our body heat, our dreams, the taste of Adam’s sweat, the juice of sex, the pang of Ruby’s conception. We would go on and on, pushed where the waves took us. We would die in that bed, I believed” (111).

She is living together with Joe, but in a platonic way, as if they are brother and sister. Joe is writing a book about Stalin’s first wife, and her unpleasant mysterious death. He writes:

“She marries him at seventeen. Her name’s Nadezhda that means hope. She is full of hope and zeal and revolutionary favour. She loves Stalin. He’s older and stronger and he’s enormously powerful, and the wonderful thing is that he loves her back. He wants her. He’s her leader as well as her husband. She idealizes him. He loves her too, that’s important” (42).

Joe is also interested in writing a book about the time when Stalin retreated to his dacha for a couple of weeks, closing himself in, working out what to do after Hitler invaded Russia in 1941. He thinks of this as a kind of fugue - of death. Joe does know who his relatives were, but he tells Rebecca that the essential information is encoded in persons’ DNA; the rest, the relatives - the ancestors - are just a story, a narrative which a person carries about with himself. This lost love colors his life, as does Rebecca and Adam’s loss of their child. Dunmore lets Ruby reach age five, to become a person on her own (“She had her life, and it was her own life”), before she is struck down by a speeding car. Questions of guilt and responsibility haunt Rebecca and Adam’s relationship, and both must try to rebuild their lives. Joe and Adam are charming ciphers, while Mr Domanio, a European hotel magnate who befriends Rebecca and recounts his own early life as a circus artist. Rebecca’s husband Adam appears only to function in order to provide the sexual satisfaction never accessible with Joe, and as the father of her child. Mourning Ruby is thought-provoking. Grief and anger drive a wedge between Rebecca and Adam for three years, even though there is hope that, by coming together
to mourn their dead daughter, they will have a future together. The small joys of having a child, the total immersion of the self in love, are sensitively described. Overwhelming love brings with it a fear of harm so intense that parents often fantasies about their child's death as a release. The novel focuses only on the beauty and charm of a young child, and the devastation of the bereaved parents. Although Dunmore began her career portraying flawed, richly sexual beings, her characters have become increasingly "good" people in terrible situations arising from external rather than internal forces. At the end Rebecca and Adam both reach a point where they can mourn their daughter together without destroying them. They can remember her life without the overhanging regret of what she lost.

In *Talking to the Dead* Nina is sensuous in sex. Once she did a series of self-portraits. In one she was naked. She thought that she did justice to her flesh and blood. Richard and Nina are both hungry. They are both starving. Richard is Mr Successful, he is Mr Businessman. He has got his hands on the outside world, but Isabel has rendered him fatally unsure of himself. The sad thing with him is that he is going to open up to the opportunity with Nina and then she is going to slam the door as well. Richard and Nina have a good fuck. The following conversation reveals their act of sexuality.

"I'm not like Isabel... I like food and I like fucking"
"How many men have you slept with?" asks Richard.
"Ninteen", I say immediately.
"Ninteen? You're sure about that?"
"It could be twenty. Ask me again tomorrow"
"We can't do it here."

"You're not taking off your cloths, are you? Said Richard. Why not? It's still fucking even if I leave my bra on, so why not let's do it properly? (*Talking to the Dead* 120).

Nina wants Isabel to tell her what the hell has been going on. Isabel got pregnant. She is frightened, and Nina realizes that her life has taken on a dimension of unreality. However, she is mentally ill in some way and maybe
she thought if she had a baby it would be all right. It is always a sign of hope to have a baby.

Dunmore, in *Your Blue-Eyed Boy* deals with a complex and resonant portrait of a woman’s bruising confrontation with her past. At age 18, Simone had an autumn romance with Michael, a Vietnam vet. Simone held Michael as he cried out in his sleep, and fantasized about not returning to her native England, but some intangible combination of Calvin’s dogged intrusions and Michael’s inconsolable sense of loss wore her down, and she returned home.

Twenty years later Michael appears in her life. Now, Simone is a district judge in an English seaside village, hearing bankruptcies and custody cases, working hard to support her debt-ruined husband and two young sons. Then an ominous letter from Michael arrives, containing semi-lewd photographs, and announcing that he has been searching for her for a long time. As Michael's letters and calls escalate, Simone is severely shaken: Not only does she suspect career-damaging blackmail, but she's flooded with stirring memories of her time with her troubled lover, and of her lonely childhood and the death of her father. And then Michael shows up in her remote village. He has turned bulky with age, after years in a mental hospital; he is as compelling in his pain as he is menacing. While Simone struggles to protect her family from disruption, she also reluctantly opens herself to her former lover and in so doing, experiences the full weight of the losses she has been running from for her whole life.

The idea of love and sexuality is present in *With Your Crooked Heart* to frame its narrative. The title *With Your Crooked Heart* comes from a poem ‘As I Walked Out One Evening’, by WH Auden. It seems to be saying 'Don’t wait for perfection, do what you can in the present'. The lines are: You shall love your crooked neighbour /With your crooked heart. In other words, don’t expect things to be perfect; don’t wait until people are lovable until you start loving them. So it is a love story where everyone’s love is somehow deformed. It is about the power of love as well. It is an examination of different types of love:
the love of brothers; the sexual love of Louise for Johnnie; the almost
redemptive love Louise shows in the end, sacrificing herself; and the
children's innocent love for one another.

Paul sticks to Johnnie through thick and thin. Paul clearly knows that
Johnnie is Anna's father. He wants to be father to Johnnie and Anna. He is the
kind of person who is dominant in his relationships with his family. It is a tale
of two brothers, one driven to succeed, the other to fail, and of the woman
whose affections they shared and the daughter who looked to them all for
love. In a superbly pregnant and piquant opening scene in a London garden,
Louise is poised to give birth to Anna, the child conceived after ten years of
trying with her husband Paul—though the child's father is really his much
younger brother Johnnie.

A kaleidoscope of scenes jumps the story forward ten years. Louise is
divorced and forced to give up Anna. She has gone to seed and abandoned
hope to alcohol. Paul takes the child to live in far-off Yorkshire with his frosty
new wife, Sonia. Paul left her largely to her own devices while he relentlessly
makes his millions in the purchase and sale of contaminated land.

Johnnie, meanwhile, has rejected every golden opportunity his
increasingly successful, overly protective brother has offered him. Johnnie
prefers the thrills that come with cocaine trafficking and life on London's
mean streets. One day he makes a big mistake, however, and has to get out of
town. As days go by, Louise realizes that she needs more from her pathetic
life, so when Johnnie finds himself in trouble with the mob, she decides to go
with him into "hiding". Louise, who still loves him and has nothing to keep her
where she is, offers to go with him. All their travelling comes to a tragic end.
Their trip sets in motion inevitabilities that have smoldered beneath the
surface from the beginning, a dire and redemptive chain of events that
devastates every branch of this crooked family tree. Paul is left with the
realization that, in one way or another, he has lost everything he held most
dear.
Thus, Dunmore’s novels expose the contemporary themes of urban corruption, sexual exploitation, social tensions and gross hypocrisy of society. The major themes in these novels are fight for survival, orphanhood and parenthood, death, betrayal, food and love and sexuality. These novels highlight how social hierarchies and restrictions capture the personal lives of the citizens. *Burning Bright* is distinguished by a moving portrayal of a young girl’s conflicting vulnerability and strength. Despite its focus on the ruthless and sometimes violent underworld, this manages to be a moving and optimistic novel about the strength of personal integrity. Dunmore plays off past against present and rubs together contemporary themes of urban corruption with far-off memories. *Mourning Ruby* is an intensely emotional, fiercely intelligent story. This is a fiction with the power to offer redemption. Dunmore's drama of loss and regeneration pieces together shattered lives through alternate dramas of war, death and, most important, survival. Around her central catastrophe, Dunmore folds layers of other stories: other families, other losses and other recoveries. There is something prodigal, even wayward, about this lavish deployment of material - particularly the inclusion of a novel-within-a-novel, supposed to have been written by Rebecca's mentor and friend, Joe. Dunmore complements this tragic narrative with two other stories, one autobiographical, told by Mr. Damiano, and the other told by Joe, a work of fiction set during WWI about a man and a woman who could be his and Rebecca's ancestors. The novel has elaborate and confusing construction with many flashbacks, stories within stories, shifting genres (letter, poem, dream, history, journal), and self-reflexive comments. The central story of maternal grief connects individual tragedy to universal loss. *Talking to the Dead* is a fast-moving, complex, and exquisitely crafted novel. It reveals the truth at last - a truth that will stay with long after the last page is consumed. The novel has a compelling narrative and dreamy, sexy style. Helen Dunmore's *Talking to the Dead* is both language driven and suspense driven. Her special skill is in creating diversionary tactics within the narrative itself, looping both backward and forward in time past, present, and future. The novel offers descriptions of food, cooking, and movable feasts gorgeously
at every turn. Your Blue-Eyed Boy features Simone as an image of success and self-realization. While Simone struggles to protect her family from disruption, she also reluctantly opens herself to her former lover. In doing so, she experiences the full weight of the losses she has been running from for her whole life. With Your Crooked Heart centers around the life of Louise, a once-beautiful and coveted woman who finds herself trapped between two brothers of opposite personas. Married to the responsible rich brother, Paul, she is irresistibly drawn to his younger and reckless brother Johnnie. Anna is the result of a one-night stand between Louise and Johnnie but is raised by Paul, who can provide a better life and stability for Anna. Louise drowns herself in alcohol. Self-destructiveness and possessiveness are major themes handled in a psychologically convincing study of human strengths and frailties. The depictions of love and happiness, of deep sensual contentment, are luxuriously alive.