

# Top 10 single mothers in fiction

They often get as rough a ride from books as they do from the world, but some writers, from Jane Austen to Sue Townsend, have given lone parents authentic life beyond the cliches

Single mothers have a hard time of it, in life and in fiction. Frequently they're portrayed as unhinged psychos, sex-crazed hoydens, self-sacrificing saints (often widowed), or ground-down sloggers. I can't think of that many happy, successful, yet devoted SMs in books – but maybe that wouldn't make a good story.

My second novel, [Em & Me](#), centres on a single mother called Delphine, whose life was derailed as a teenager when she fell pregnant with her daughter Emily. I've long been preoccupied by the state of single motherhood, possibly since I had my own children and realised what back-breaking effort is required to raise them. The idea of doing it alone seems unimaginable, so I wanted to imagine it; to write a story that reflected the struggle but also allowed my protagonist to fulfil her ambition and potential.

Along the way, I've been inspired by these lone mothers of literature, in all their crazy, complex glory:

## 1. [Medea by Euripides](#)

It might seem odd to start with a drama about a barbarian witch who kills her own children when her husband leaves her for a princess. But shoutout to Euripides for featuring a female protagonist who dominates the action, a chorus of Corinthian women, and a scot-free exit. Medea murders her sons in cold blood to annoy her ex, Jason. But Jason *is* maddening – a shameless social climber who rubs salt in the wound by suggesting Medea stay on as a mere mistress. Medea has the last laugh, escaping with the bodies of their sons in Helios' chariot, hinting the Gods are on her side. This is a woman scorned taking back control and getting away with it. The Athenian audience didn't react favourably to the notion, awarding the play third place (out of three) at the Dionysia festival of 431 BCE. I'm sure Euripides would be heartened to know Medea's No 1 in my top 10.

## 2. Mrs Dashwood in [Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen](#)

I always think of Mrs Dashwood as ancient, but at 40 she's four years younger than me. Perhaps it's because she's in the SM category of noble widow that she seems older. She has no name, known only as "Mrs Henry Dashwood", subsumed into the persona of her dead husband, who failed to provide for her or his daughters. Like many of Austen's mothers, her chief aim in life is to find suitable matches for her girls, who keep spraining their ankles, contracting fevers or being self-destructively repressed. It's

a sad trial for Mrs Dashwood, but she gets there in the end, and can happily retire to the bland Barton Cottage to await grandchildren.

### **3. Marmee in [Little Women by Louisa May Alcott](#)**

Mrs March is the archetypal single mother saint. Technically she's not single, but her husband's absence elevates her to the SM sisterhood. Margaret March Senior is infuriatingly perfect. As a child, I remember being very upset at the thought of only getting a Bible for Christmas, and blamed Marmee, feeling she could have spent their pennies in a more enjoyable way, rather than virtue signalling. Alcott hints at dark depths when Marmee confesses she was once as hot-headed as her daughter Jo, but learned to control her temper. I would love to have seen a tiny flare of it, the glimmer of original sin.

### **4. The Bolter in [The Pursuit of Love by Nancy Mitford](#)**

Another with no name, the Bolter is a favourite of mine, because she's *all* sin – unrepentantly feckless, without a speck of maternal instinct, “too beautiful and too gay to be burdened with a child”. I find her extraordinary flippancy radical, inspiring and chilling. The family turn her hedonism “into a sort of joke” to avoid hurting daughter Fanny's feelings, and that's Mitford to a T – just because it's funny doesn't mean it's not serious.

### **5. Annie Lee in [Cider With Rosie by Laurie Lee](#)**

Mother Lee is noble and self-sacrificing but not as irritatingly good as Marmee. She's messier and more

endearing. "Disordered, hysterical, loving ... muddled and mischievous", Annie talks too much and dawdles, can't cook or make beds, but her mothering skills are rich and varied. And, like many SMs, she stays when the father is long gone. In this tender, evocative coming-of-age, it's not Rosie but Annie who wins my heart.



The love is there ... Julie Walters as Pauline Mole in ITV's adaptation of *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*. Photograph: Fremantle Media/Rex/Shutterstock

## **6. Pauline Mole in [The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13¾](#) by [Sue Townsend](#)**

Adrian's world is densely packed with detail and full of warmth despite the failings of his family. His mother Pauline is a philanderess who uses the family allowance to buy gin and cigarettes, locks the dog in the coal shed, sings *My Way* at 2am at the top of the stairs and runs off to Sheffield with another man. Ruthlessly unsentimental unless she's drunk, on the rare occasions she reveals her maternal

streak, it's very special. When she turns up at Adrian's bedside before he has his tonsils out, he dispassionately notes how old and haggard she looks. The love is there; it's just locked in the coal shed with the dog, only let out occasionally.

### **7. Fiona Brewer in [About a Boy by Nick Hornby](#)**

Hornby's skill is making this chronically depressed and tiresomely earnest woman engaging and sympathetic. What Fiona does at the beginning of the book is startlingly selfish on one level, but also a painful reflection of the pressures of single motherhood, and the bone-crushing flatness of depression. Fiona is ground down by it all – being a mum isn't enough, mothering alone isn't enough, and that's the trouble.

### **8. Jess Thomas in [The One Plus One by JoJo Moyes](#)**

A heart-tugging example of the long-suffering slogger, Jess juggles two jobs in an attempt to keep things together for her kids, occasionally Skyping Marty, their father, to suggest he contribute to their upkeep. When it's later revealed exactly what Marty's been up to since he left the family home, I relished Jess's demented rage. In the end, Jess gets a worthy plus-one, just as she deserves.

### **9. Mia Warren in [Little Fires Everywhere by Celeste Ng](#)**

Mia's guarded quality makes her fascinating, both to the reader and her landlady Mrs Richardson. Mia is Pearl's mother, a listener and a watcher, intuitive and empathetic, but also distant. Elena Richardson's rebellious daughter Izzy

recognises Mia's subversive spark and reacts to her subtly provocative challenge – "what are you going to do about it?" – ultimately resulting in a conflagration. An enigmatic figure, Mia's magnetism puts her right at the heart of the fire, even if she's not there to see it.

## **10. Desiree Vignes in [The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett](#)**

The tale of light-skinned Black twins who take very different paths forces you to look one way, then the other, confounding expectations. Shy, introverted Stella boldly passes herself off as white. Desiree, the headstrong extrovert, returns to their dull home town with her daughter to escape an abusive relationship. But it's Desiree who has the dignity that Stella craves and fails to find in her desperate sham of a marriage. Yin and yang, when Stella vanishes, Desiree stays – because that's what single mothers have to do. They stick around.

- Em & Me by Beth Morrey is published by HarperCollins. To help the Guardian and Observer, order your copy from [guardianbookshop.com](https://www.guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply.