In her essay on the novels of Tim Winton, Sarah Zapata notes that:

Traditional manhood requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self, a turning away from whole areas of life, that the man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half human.

While this is an extraordinarily critical viewpoint, it has some merit in the suggestion that traditional manhood requires the ignorance of an emotional perspective, and thus the suppression of a key facet of human operation.

The traditional model of masculinity which Zapata seeks to deconstruct is appropriated from Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend*, a description of which follows:

a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improver, ever willing to ‘have a go’ at anything [...]. He is a ‘hard case’, sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally [...] above all [he] will stick to his mates through thick and thin [...]. He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. (Schaffer 19)

As Zapata goes on to suggest, the new model of manhood as present in much of Winton’s works contains feminine qualities and, as such, serves as a subversion of the traditional, patriarchally positioned, images of manhood.

Zapata identifies ‘positive’ character attributes in Winton’s works as being feminine, for example, emotional responsiveness and compassion, and ‘negative’ attributes, such as emotionally discriminate rationality, as being classically masculine.

However, for a new model of masculinity to exist, these attributes that Zapata identifies cannot be ‘borrowed’ or unnatural, as that would defeat the purpose. Zapata’s new model must exist under the pretence that the qualities she celebrates are non-gender specific.

Zapata is fairly late to the debate: Adam Smith proposed an androgynous model some two hundred years prior to her work. Zapata’s suggestion that the ‘ideal human being should combine both masculine and feminine virtues’ was a response to Smith’s observation that the then-accepted model of manhood lacked propriety and civility.

Smith said: ‘the delicate sensibility required in civilized nations sometimes destroys the masculine firmness of character.’ Smith’s feeling was that the ideal man didn’t exist but *should* exist if he were to allow himself to operate with both a firmness and a sensibility. Since Smith, the traditional masculine image has evolved into a myriad of largely acceptable, albeit competing, models. According to Yvonne Wiegers:

**THE RIGHT STUFF**

**AN EXAMINATION OF MASCULINITY IN LITERATURE**

**TIMOTHY MASTERS**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE**
gay men are trying to expose heterosexual masculinity for what it is—a subjectivity that is organised within control and authority. (Wiegers 151)
The husbandless Playboy figure, an image that became prominent in the 1960s, is essentially a rejection of the husband/provider model of the previous decade.

Currently the ‘New Age Man’, ‘which advocates the development of masculinity premised upon sensitivity, caring and emotional expressiveness in men, while retaining masculinist values such as physical strength’ (Wiegers 156) is constantly criticised by the traditional, workmanlike, non-intellectual model for ‘not being manly’.

Even in many current youth-oriented films and TV programs, there are models of teenage males who possess extremely effeminate qualities (such as extreme hygiene, pampering, higher-pitched voices, and wearing makeup) but are shown to be heterosexual; the reverse is also true (for example, television programs like Glee and Oz).

The conclusion to draw from this is that there is no longer any applicable traditionalist male model, as whatever model once existed has been subverted by the development of many ‘model facets’ over the past few hundred years. This is important because of the impact it has on identity construction. Undeniably, models of masculinity such as Tom Wolfe’s ‘Chuck Yeager’ from The Right Stuff have inherent qualities to aspire to, as do the empathic, domesticated, and emotionally generous characters from much of Tim Winton’s work, or even the hypersensitive Werther from Goethe’s eponymous story. Zapata suggests of Winton’s male figures that:

The achievement of maturity is evoked as a threat and is featured as a self-discovery journey for Winton’s males. It seems the male characters in the short stories try to avoid or ignore the passing of time and consequent responsibilities of growing up and becoming an adult, a husband, a father. The image of men as lost or suffering an identity crisis recurs in many of his short stories. (Zapata 100)

This is further punctuated, as Lekkie Hopkins notes, by pervasive feelings of emasculation by society at large:

[...] these male characters are positioned as odd and different precisely because of their ‘feminine’ qualities (their abilities to love, to relate emotionally, to be intuitive, to nurture, to cry, to be hurt) and the consequent lessening of their typically masculine qualities (their lack of desire to exploit, or dominate, or to be separate or to be competitive). (Hopkins 4)

This is a deliberate positioning, as Zapata suggests, to expose the ‘arbitrariness of patriarchal ideologies.’ From a narrative point of view, it serves to suggest to the reader that these characters are forever in a state of flux—that their identities are not resolute because of the gender obligations and hegemonic ideals of the patriarchy.

In many ways, my novel The Lively follows on from the conflicted psychology inherent in many of Winton’s male characters (most notably Pikelet from Breath or Vic from The Turning), drawing to a possible conclusion. My protagonist, Sam, has formed a model of masculinity he is comfortable with, but it is not without dissonance. This model is a deliberate echo of the complex notions of masculinity present in contemporary media and culture.

Sam, admittedly, is a bit of a contradiction in engendered terms. He engages in traditionally masculine activities such as car racing, fighting, watching the cricket, and drinking beer, and he also works in a heavily masculinised environment as a country publican. These are activities endemic to a stereotypical Australian male.
His girlfriend, Sean, asks him to reveal some of his past to her, and he is initially reluctant to engage in the ‘feminine’ act of reminiscing. He chooses not to indulge in sensitivity and adopts an image of a stubborn, stoic man but eventually he engages on a private trip through his memories.

It would be easy to read much of Sam’s reminiscing as childish, overly sensitive and navel gazing, but the important thing to note is that there is a conflict in presented engendered identities. Following the hardened masculine image he initially presents, we are then offered a different aspect of him: an aspect that is inclined to feminine sensibilities. Later we are presented with instances of lovelorn fantasy and hopeless romantic dreaming. We witness his passion for the (traditionally feminine) act of gardening and his overt self-conscious nature, which stands in opposition to the initial presented image. His name ‘Sam’ could indicate female or male gender (as, of course, could ‘Sean’) and he either dislikes those whom he views as overtly masculine men or becomes sycophantic towards them. Of further note is his apparent dismissal of his father as a role model, and of his brother, whom he seems eager to communicate with but does not admire.

There is a breakdown of cohesion between these engendered forces. We never quite believe Sam’s insistence to Sean that he is a ‘manly man’ but we also recognise that he has developed a masculine strength throughout the novel, and is willing to face difficult situations without cowardice, which is an aspect that seems to belong to his original presented image of the stone-faced, non-emotive male. The novel ends with the image of the plant slowly growing, which is telling. We know Sam believes that working in the dirt is healthy to the image of a fully-developed man; but his interest in the aesthetics of the tomato, the beauty of it, speaks of his softer side. Here, his gender has knitted into a cohesive identity, but for much of the novel it is at war with itself. It is presented as scattershot and inconsistent. Perhaps this is due to my failings as a storyteller, but it is an intentional portrayal. I was interested in the suggestion that, psychologically, Sam was overcompensating for his traditionally non-masculine traits and eventually found some kind of balance in engaging in both masculine and feminine engendered activities (both physically and psychologically).

Two important characters in the novel, Tommy Kadmon and Grace Worthington, are influential in developing his personality and act as opposite forces in shaping the way Sam views himself: Tommy as the masculine pole and Grace as the feminine. It is through Tommy’s influence that he develops social confidence and through Grace’s that he develops an affinity for the sublime.

The important factor in looking at Sam and Winton’s male characters is that they possess a sensitive emotional dimension but also a degree of traditional ‘Australian maleness’ in that they persevere and demonstrate strength in the face of adversity.

Goethe’s Werther does not share these abilities. Instead, Werther is overcome by his sensitivity to the degree that it almost becomes all that he is. Igner Brodey cites Werther as an example of yet another theorised model of masculinity: the ‘Man of Feeling’:

This man of feeling valued the moment over future plans, the unspoken over the spoken, the felt over the reasoned, and process over product—all in contrast to the older ideals of man the provider and protector with his eye on the horizon. (Brodey 120)
Brodey interestingly suggests that the fragmented narrative of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is also evocative of a more sensitive mindset:

The difference is that Werther believes that fragmentation, irregularity, and inversion are all necessary to communicate deep emotions and the tumultuous existence of a man of feeling. (122)

Joyce Walker further elaborates:

The structure of the novel [...] implicitly questions Werther’s feminization within a ‘masculine’ ordering framework. Despite the fragmentary nature of Werther’s autobiographical account, the supposed deletions in fact testify to the existence of a ‘whole’ story which a detached narrator could tell. (Walker 211)

Here, Walker strongly implies that a ‘detached’ nature and the rejection of an ordered perspective/narrative are implicit to a sensitive engagement with the world. Further, the sensitive ‘man of feeling’ leaves himself open to the possibility of an insanity born from a hypersensitive perspective of the world, which could be demonstrated by Werther’s social engagement of Lotte and his ultimate suicide. Brodey declares as much outright:

[...] the new men of sensibility hover on the edge of illness, madness, impotence, inactivity, silence and death and leave themselves open to the constant charge of ‘effeminacy’ (Brodey 116).

Yes, to behave irrationally or mad within male cultures is to be labelled in complete gendered opposition—to be ‘un’ male—as it is a behaviour that does not align with the normative definitions of ordered and rational male behaviour. The hypothesis here is that this behaviour must stem from being overemotional, experiencing the world too much which in turn results in an emasculated fragility. Even Bourjaily’s Quincy from *Confessions of a Spent Youth*, who is a much more assertive individual than Goethe’s Werther, suffers from this rational diffusion due to an inflated sense of sentimentality. It is important to note too that Quincy’s heavily sentimental account is told as a fractional narrative, assigning specific emotional importance to key sequences rather than playing the narrative account consecutively and therefore defusing some of the remembered importance.

Again, it could be seen that my character Sam stands at a crossroads: it is not him but his girlfriend-of-the-past Grace who responds to the world with this hypersensitive ‘effeminate’ madness, characterised by bipolar moments of effeminate ‘gossiping’ and masculine stoicism.

Sam responds by adopting a ‘masculine’ madness, in that he is withdrawn and emotionally unresponsive, standing as an engendered reflection of Werther’s excessive monologuing about his unrequited passions and observed sublimity.

In stark contrast to both of these characterisations stands Chuck Yeager from Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*—who possesses what Wolfe came to call “The Right Stuff”—that is, the stuff of the ideal man: courage, determination, unwavering resolve, unfailing morality and fully in charge of ‘their own destiny’. As Wolfe puts it:

[‘The Right Stuff’ is] nothing less than manhood itself. [...] Manliness, manhood, manly courage ... there was something ancient, primordial, irresistible about the challenge of the stuff, no matter what a sophisticated or rational age one might think he lived in. (21: Wolfe’s emphasis)

Wolfe chose to demonstrate these qualities in the character of US Air Force Captain Charles Yeager, WWII hero and one of the first men to break the sound barrier. Wolfe’s ‘Right Stuff’—the essential masculinity—is all about exploring new frontiers and
demonstrating unfailing resolve. This man is not set to be simply ‘master of his domain’ but is driven to discover new domains and then master them.

The following passage describes the moment Yeager breaks the sound barrier—here the voice is direct, informative and unquestioning. There is no suggestion of the fragile sentimentality that features in the other works discussed:

He was going faster than any man in history [...] and he was so high in such a vast space that there was no sensation of motion. He was master of the sky. His was a king’s solitude, unique and inviolate, above the dome of the world. It would take him seven minutes to glide back down to land. (Wolfe 44)

Yeager, alone and unaided, is undeniably in control of his world, in possession of ‘The Right Stuff’. The Right Stuff is not a fleeting quality, neither is it temporarily given, nor something to be developed after a certain amount of worldly experience: it is innate to the few men lucky enough to possess it. In one of the final sequences, Yeager pilots an experimental craft that suffers a malfunction and crashes, severely burns himself, and appears as a horrific sight to a passing boy. Yet he is inviolate:

The medics found Yeager standing out in the mesquite, him and some kid who had been passing by. Yeager was standing erect with his parachute rolled up and his helmet in the crook of his arm, right out of the manual, and staring at them quite levelly out of what was left of his face, as if they had an appointment and he was on time. (343)

He is on time, that is, because he creates his own time. Yeager is indeed the ‘Alpha’ male—master of both space and time and appearing to all as the prototypical model for husband/leader/warrior and in the above instant as a pilot—‘Right out of the manual’—in spite of his marred appearance.

This is the model that Sam aspires to follow, but as the ‘Right Stuff’ is a rare and unattainable quality for those who do not already possess it, Sam must consent to ‘pretending’ and pursuing this image—his drifting and dirt-racing are examples of his trying to extend his mastery of a particular domain, his trying to earn the ‘Right Stuff’.

Wolfe is no stranger to playing with models of masculinity. We see an obvious subversion of this in I am Charlotte Simmons, where it seems that the eponymous Charlotte is the only character in possession of the Right Stuff (she is beautiful, determined, assertive, morally infallible, and highly intelligent) but succumbs later to the effeminate madness of ‘hypersensitivity’ when she loses her virginity. Ultimately she is corrupted by the social hierarchy of Dupont University (the novel’s setting), where she appears as a ‘poseur’, largely concerned with social politics and reputation.

Perhaps in Wolfe’s mind the ‘Right Stuff’ is the domain of the man only, and again in Simmons he highlights its rarity or perhaps its complete unattainability—its status as a conceptual myth—by presenting three diametrically opposed masculine models. Preppy fratboy Hoyt Thorpe is wealthy, popular, and successful in sexual conquests (but not in possession of the Right Stuff due to a lack of morals); Adam Gellin, highly intellectual with aspirations to grandeur (but not in possession of the Right Stuff due to lack of social stature, physical stature, moral resolve and courage); and Jojo Johanssen, star basketball player with an interest in broadening his horizons (but not in possession of the Right Stuff due to his lack of intelligence).

All three look to cultivate an image that projects more than they are, an image of possessing these ‘Right Stuff’ qualities, but eventually they are relegated to the roles that
have been defined for them by their specific ‘Stuffs’. The Right Stuff remains ever-elusive.

It is this image cultivation—this ‘Right Stuff’ pursuit—that is best represented in *The Lively* by the character Tommy Kadmon. As stated in the book, ‘Kadmon’ is taken from ‘Adam Kadmon’, a phrase from the Kabbalah religion roughly meaning ‘Primal Man’ (as in the progenitor for Mankind), which is symbolic of Tommy’s significance to Sam. Having dismissed the previous male role models in his life as being either too aggressive (his father) or without motivation (his brother Paul), Sam fixates on Tommy because of a magnetic quality that Sam purports Tommy to possess: an ease in social situations which Sam admires and a relaxed, uninhibited attitude to life which seems to be the answer to Sam’s current grief-stricken situation.

It seems that Tommy does not possess the ‘Right Stuff’. He is deviant, corruptible, unmotivated, and demonstrates a fluid system of allegiance in relation to his friends. Tommy, in my reading of him, does not (to summon a colloquialism) ‘give a shit’ about anyone but himself, which is not indicative of the moral fibre required for one to be of ‘the Right Stuff’.

But in Tommy, Sam sees an ideal to aspire to and Tommy, seemingly no stranger to this type of recognition, responds in turn—he cultivates the image of an ideal man (popular, good-looking, capable, unafraid) while secretly lacking what is really required of the ideal man (the Right Stuff). Sam’s fixation on physical appearance is also representative of his pursuit. In Susan Bordo’s essay on the physicalisation of masculinity she suggests that a commitment to one’s physique:

 [...] operated as a symbol of successful aspiration to those who have the ‘right stuff’. The muscular body is representative of those who sacrifice personal conveniences and transcend physical and psychological pain in order to achieve goals such as an aesthetically pleasing masculine persona and success in worldly affairs. (157)

Wiegers, to counter, suggests that popular sociological theory argues that ‘the physical body symbolically reproduces the vulnerabilities and anxieties of the social body’ (Wiegers 149).

This is not to say that an unhealthy body reflects an unhealthy mind, but rather that the state of one’s physical body can be an indicator of their larger psychosocial behaviour. Barry Glasner notes that the ‘desire for muscles reveals men engaged in a passionate battle with their own sense of vulnerability’ (292). Alan Klein echoes this, describing bodybuilding men as being ‘neurotically insecure’ and engaged in a ‘futile search for a hyper-masculine body image’ (138). This pursuit of a comfortable masculine image that is in sync with hegemonic demands is intrinsic to male development—the cultivation of the image of manhood, of being purportedly in possession of the ‘Right Stuff’ speaks of the insecurity of the male gender as a whole. It seems unfair patriarchal demands have neutered the self-esteem of generations of ‘unworthy’ men and resulted in misdirected systems of ambition.

In befriending Tommy Kadmon, Sam is trying to appropriate his image (and we see this develop), only to be ultimately abandoned by Tommy. In trying to capture some of Tommy’s ‘Stuff’ Sam is really in pursuit of a higher sense of self-esteem and a feeling of being ‘male appropriate’—someone who fits into the masculine hegemonic discourse.

The novel, like *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Confessions of a Spent Youth*, is a fragmented narrative. It is told in recollection—we first witness Sam pushing his ‘stoic
image’ to his current girlfriend Sean. Then we digress to Sam’s eighteenth year and we see a very sensitive adolescent boy who is trying to play the role of a sensitive, caring, doting boyfriend—here he’s responding to what he believes is the female cultivated image of the ‘ideal man’—he is trying to be a Mr. Darcy. Later, we see him begin to adopt a different image—the reckless partyer—which he believes to be a male-appropriate image.

It is not until the very end of the book that we perceive Sam to have some comfort in his gender identity. He is still under the pressure of patriarchal obligations and subscribing to a certain view of what a man should be, but he is confident with his masculinity, which is not something that he appeared to be in the earlier sections. As the phrase goes, he is his own man.

Sam was my response to these varying images as presented in the literature discussed. Sam’s pursuit of Tom Wolfe’s ‘Right Stuff’ as well as Sam’s engagement with Werther’s ‘sensitive Madness’ are key themes in the book. But where Sam fits best in this lineage is alongside the conflicted engendered images of Winton’s characters.
WORKS CITED.


