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Friendship and Care: Women's Alternative Spaces Using Beartown

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Friendship and Care:
Women's Alternative Spaces Using *Beartown*
MA Literary Studies: Literature in Society. Europe and Beyond

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Introduction: Challenging Amatonormativity

“The single most important factor influencing our health, well-being, and happiness” (Day 11).

The social importance of friendship cannot be understated. As suggested by Ida Day in the introduction of *Female Friendships: Literary and Artistic Explorations* (2022), friendship is an essential element of our daily lives. In contemporary society and corresponding literary scholarship, however, the value of friendship is often underestimated, and romantic relationships take the upper hand. Romantic relationships are still associated with paths to happiness and success in life (Schaubroeck 371). Aside from the social preference for romance over friendship, romantic relationships are in many societies a prerequisite for legal advantages. In her book *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (2012) Elizabeth Brake argues for the importance of friendship over romantic relationships. Introducing the term ‘amatonormativity’, she criticizes the social and legal superiority that romantic and marital relationships often enjoy. She writes: “What matters is that the relationships provide emotional support, caretaking, and intimacy” (Brake 95). She argues that friendships can also provide this and therefore should not be undervalued. This thesis will follow this challenge to amatonormativity by putting friendship at the forefront of literary analysis and close reading.

Friendship is an important topic in the *Beartown* trilogy by Swedish author Fredrik Backman. From loyal teammates to political allyships, many different forms of friendship are presented and contrasted in the three books. *Beartown* (2017) follows the adolescent characters of Maya and Ana as they navigate the remote fictional town in northern Sweden. Influenced by the culture of ice hockey, the social and cultural norms in this town favour aggressive masculinity, with physical, emotional, and sexual violence as a result. When Maya is raped by the star hockey player Kevin, it is the adherence to these norms of masculinity that turns the citizens of Beartown against her instead of him. The second instalment, *Us Against You* (2019), continues the story of Maya and the divisive aftermath of the rape. Half of the hockey team defects to the neighbouring team of Hed in support of their coach David, while the lesser half stays in Beartown. In *Us Against You*, town loyalty is questioned and the

influence of political allies becomes clearer and clearer. Finally, *The Winners* (2023) is set two years after the incidents in *Beartown*. A storm destroys the hockey rink in Hed, and the teams of Beartown and Hed are forced to share a rink to train. This causes clashes and violence between the teams, resulting in death and destruction. Although many of the events in the *Beartown* trilogy are caused by the aggression and hate that spread from the hockey sphere to the characters' daily lives, there is a persistent tone of love and friendship present in Backman's writing, especially in the interactions between female characters.

The female characters in *Beartown* have to find ways to thrive in a culture that is shaped around ideas of hegemonic masculinity, that is "the current most honoured way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 838). This thesis will focus on the question: in what ways do the female characters in the *Beartown* trilogy subvert the ideological ideas that are associated with the values of the hegemonic masculinity perpetuated by the hockey culture?

In the *Beartown* trilogy, the friendships between female characters, exemplified by Maya and Ana, provide an alternative to the hegemonic masculinity perpetuated by the hockey culture and the attachment to these values through laughter and physical contact. In this thesis, I will reimagine Foucault's concept of heterotopia to analyse female friendship as an alternative metaphorical space to illustrate how it challenges the shame and silence present in Beartown's culture. In addition, female characters who do not have access to these types of friendship provide an alternative to hegemonic masculinity by prioritising care, allyship and softness in interactions.

In order to analyse the friendship between Maya and Ana in the second chapter of this thesis, it is necessary to provide a theoretical framework of the broad, ubiquitous concept of 'friendship'.

What is Friendship: Theoretical framework

Friendship has been a topic of academic study since Greek antiquity, yet it is underrepresented in contemporary media. Aristotle's ideas of 'complete friendship' which he proposed in his *Nicomachean Ethics* are still present in much contemporary work on friendship. In *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship* (2016) political theorist John von Heyking presents a synopsis of Ancient Greek theories on friendship. For instance, Aristotle finds that "the sharing of

interests in both speculative and practical concerns, for the purpose of striving for the most complete wisdom and virtue, is the highest expression of friendship” (Von Heyking 35). In other words, it is important to Aristotle that a friendship improves the moral and ethical lives of both parties, and that they are equal in their intellect and social position. Due to the patriarchal nature of the Ancient Greek society that he lived in, he viewed this ‘complete friendship’ only to be possible for men. In his view, women and children, as well as lower class men, are naturally excluded from the possibility of this ultimate virtuous type of friendship because they could not be mature enough to form a friendship on a non-instrumental basis, without interests beyond the friendship. In our current day and age, however, it is generally agreed upon that both men and women are capable of forming the deep and sustainable connections necessary for real and authentic friendships. The value of childhood friendships is less commonly agreed upon, seeing that some of the characteristics that are usually attributed to friendships may be less present in these relationships. This theoretical framework will explore three of these characteristics in more detail: friendship’s voluntariness, equality, and mutual affection and reciprocity.

The first characteristic that is common in academic definitions of friendship is its voluntary character. Well-known feminist scholar Marilyn Friedman discusses female friendships in her article *Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community* (1989). She considers friendships to be alternative relationships to the communitarian relationships based in the family and the neighbourhood and writes that “friends are supposed to be people whom one chooses on one’s own” (Friedman 286). John Kleinig also emphasises the importance of voluntariness in friendship in ‘Friendship and Loyalty’ in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Friendship*, taking it further and arguing that choosing the right friends is essential and that they should “constitute a kind of mirror into ourselves” (Kleinig 312). Monika Betzler argues that the voluntary character of friendship is one of the main identifying differences between friendship and family ties in her chapter titled ‘Friendship and Family’ (Betzler 158). In her chapter on childhood friendship in *The Routledge Handbook*, Mary Healy, while acknowledging that most definitions of friendship do include this characteristic, it is not always applicable to childhood friendships due to parental influence (Healy 82). This influence in the case of

Maya and Ana will be further explored in the second chapter of this thesis, as well as an analysis of the (in)voluntariness of their friendship.

The second characteristic of friendship that is often emphasised in definitions of friendship is the idea that friends are equals. This can be seen in the early definitions written by Aristotle, where only those who are virtuous and mature enough, and thus equal, can form ‘complete friendships’, but is carried through in contemporary descriptions. In the introduction of *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Friendship*, editor Diane Jeske writes that “true reciprocity and mutuality would seem to require that there be no power imbalance between the parties” (Jeske 4). Considering her judgement of true reciprocity and mutuality as fundamental features of real friendships, the social equality between the parties is equally significant. Both Betzler and Healy emphasise the symmetric character of friendships, where Betzler argues that this symmetry in friendships is another characteristic which sets the relationship apart from family ties; friends are often part of the same social group, whereas there often are hierarchical differences between family members. In the introduction of *The Dialectics of Friendship* (1989) by Roy Porter and Sylvana Tomaselli, equality is also emphasised. They write that “friendship tends to be a same-sex, same-class phenomenon” (Porter and Tomaselli 3). They argue that this exposes friendship as having narcissistic elements, as we look for a mirror-image of ourselves in it. Some critics challenge the idea of equality as a basic feature of friendship, however. For instance, in *XI – Equality, Friendship, and Politics* (2021) Joseph Chan criticises ‘relational egalitarians’ by arguing that equality does not fit in his definition of friendship because it constricts an otherwise informal and flexible relationship by imposing its norms on it. In the *Beartown* trilogy, however, the (in)equality between Maya and Ana becomes an important element of discussion considering their respective upbringings and their current social position in the Beartown society. A discussion on how their friendship creates their equal social statuses, supported by the arguments presented in *Inequality, Rules of Irrelevance, and Recognition in Broken Friendship* (2022) written by Laura Eramian and Peter Mallory will be part of the second chapter of this thesis.

The final feature of friendship that will be used to analyse the friendship between Maya and Ana in chapter two is that of mutual affection and preference. Although Aristotle’s definition of

friendship is based more explicitly on the moral and intellectual character of friendship, most contemporary definitions of the concept include mutual affection and reciprocity as its main pillar. Although the book is mostly focused on political friendships, which is not the main topic of this thesis, this idea of mutual affection is very present in the first chapter of Jacques Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*. He writes: "Friendship, the being-friend – what is that, anyway? Well, it is to love *before* being loved" (Derrida 8). Derrida thus frames friendship as an active process where the parties have to take the initiative in order to form a friendship bond with someone. He argues that "one must start with the friend-who-loves, not the friend-who-is-loved, if one is to think of friendship" (Derrida 9). In his conception, love is always a conscious thought and he thinks it impossible to love someone without knowing it. This perspective on friendship is shared by bell hooks in her 1999 book *All About Love: New Visions*. In the first chapter of this book, in which she introduces her need to define love instead of merely feeling it, she writes: "To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility" (hooks, ch1). By viewing friendship as an act rather than a state of being, the parties of the friendship are being made agents and given responsibility, which coincides with the importance that is given to the voluntary character of friendship in many definitions. Other scholars also attest to the importance of affection and love in friendships. Jeske writes in the introduction of the *Routledge Handbook*: "We are partial to our friends" (6). This means that we like our friends very much, and often more than other people.

This preference for our friends over others is subject of moral contestation among philosophers. Jeske writes that German philosopher Immanuel Kant sees the favouritism we exhibit towards our friends as "particularly pressing for those who live privileged lives because our friends tend also to be privileged"(6). Monika Betzler uses a duty-based analysis which argues that 'associative special duties' set our friendships apart from our daily interactions with non-friends – we owe our friends duties "on the account of the particular relationship in question" (156). In her chapter on female friendship in *The Dialectics of Friendship*, Sue Limb writes: "The particular nature of female friendship is the mixture of sympathy and instruction; of a loving heart and a shrewd eye" (56).

This presents the distinct caretaking character of female friendship that commonly, though not in all cases, sets it apart from other types of friendship.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will explore the influence of hegemonic masculinity on different groups of characters that are unable to adhere to the norms and values that this type of masculinity proposes. I will also show how Foucault's concept of heterotopia is a valuable tool when analysing alternative spaces, using the example of the Bearskin pub. In the second chapter, I will use the academic scholarship presented in the theoretical framework to analyse the friendship between Maya and Ana, and I will apply Foucault's heterotopia to their metaphorical friendship-space. In the third and final chapter of this thesis, I will look at how other female characters provide alternatives for the norms of hegemonic masculinity in Beartown.

Chapter 1: Hockey Gods: Attachment to and Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity

In this first chapter, I will provide an analysis of the Beartown citizens' attachment to the hockey club and the cultural and social values that it promotes. Although the hockey club might have a positive influence on the town's wellbeing through economic progress and by being the basis of social connections between citizens, it also normalises a culture of problematic hegemonic masculinity. Not only is this culture troubling to those who are excluded from it, such as women, but it also causes an unhealthy environment for those who are at the centre of it, like the successful hockey players themselves, which may then cause them to fail. I will explore the inefficiency of these attachments using Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011). These two texts both propose a discussion on how attachments to certain institutions create an unhealthy dependency on those institutions. I will focus on the way these attachments fail to work for women and girls and failed hockey players, and the consequences this failure has. Then, I will turn to how some spaces within the *Beartown* trilogy provide an alternative to the cultural hegemony of the hockey culture. The first of these spaces is the Bearskin, which is the pub owned by town legend Ramona. I will analyse it using Foucault's concept of heterotopia in order to explain how it can be viewed as an alternative to the way Beartown's society is structured according to the hegemonic masculinity perpetuated by the hockey culture.

As mentioned before, the fictional Beartown is a town in northern Sweden, which was built on the success of the town's ice hockey team. As a small town in a rural region of the country, the inhabitants are constantly reminded of their subordinate position to the 'big city' in the south. Although the area is rich in natural resources, "all the money still ends up in the big damn cities" (Backman "Us Against You", 17). One of the main ways in which Beartown is able to assert its dominance, is through hockey. From the first few pages of the book it becomes clear how important hockey is for the town's inhabitants. As an answer to the question of how important the junior team's win in the semi-final is, Backman writes: "It would only be important to the town's economy. To its pride. To its survival" (Backman, "Beartown" 10). The ironic use of 'only' is repeated frequently throughout the series and emphasises the town's total dependence on hockey. It is therefore not at all

irrational that the Beartown citizens feel an extreme sense of attachment to hockey culture, seeing as they are economically dependent on investments from its sponsors.

From the first few chapters of *Beartown* it is apparent: if the junior team wins, investments will be made in hockey education in Beartown, which will attract the best players, who will play in Beartown's A-team, and if they win, there will be even more investments, not only in the hockey culture, but also in the infrastructure surrounding it. Besides being vital to the town's economic prosperity, hockey provides the citizens with a common interest and goal, as well as a common enemy when the team loses. When Beartown's A-Team wins one of their home games, the triumph of the crowd is described as "a roaring sense of unity" (Backman "Us Against You", 354). The cultural attachment to hockey is thus also rooted in a sense of community, strengthening the social ties between inhabitants, but also creating animosity towards those who occupy positions outside of this community.

Beartown's inhabitants idolise their hockey players starting when they are children, because they are the ones who bring success to the town. Not surprisingly, the successful hockey players are seen as exemplars of masculinity. The cultural and social norms and values of Beartown hockey perpetuate a view of masculinity that is based in the competitive nature of sports, and specifically in the violent nature of hockey as a contact-sport. In the next section, I will use the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to analyse the way in which the status of the hockey players is both a logical product of the town's attachment to hockey, but also harms those who are excluded by it. I will use Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) to explore the harm these attachments do.

1.1. Hegemonic Masculinity as Cruel Optimism

Hegemonic masculinity is a term introduced in the 1980s to describe "the current most honoured way of being a man" in a certain time in a certain society (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). In their article *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept* (2005), Connell and Messerschmidt present a re-introduction of hegemonic masculinity, using the academic criticism the concept has attracted throughout the years in order to show its relevance in modern times. For a detailed account of the

critique on the concept and the ways in which they incorporated this in a redefinition, I want to refer to their article.

Hegemonic masculinity thus refers to the way in which there exists a hierarchical plurality of masculinities, of which one is most normalised and dominant. This is the hegemonic form of masculinity, using the term ‘hegemonic’ in the Gramscian sense. It is important to note that the most prevalent form of masculinity in a society is not necessarily the hegemonic form, and that the most powerful men in a society are also not necessarily representative of the hegemonic form (Connell and Messerschmidt 838). Hegemonic masculinity is rather an ideal form of being masculine in a specific context, which can more often than not be a fantasy.

From the violent, yet highly protective ‘Pack’, to Tails’ economic dominance, masculinity presents itself in many different ways in Beartown. The character of business owner Tails shows that economic and political power does not translate into hegemonic masculinity; his nickname is even a reference to how he presented his masculinity in a different way than others – wearing a tailcoat instead of a suit to a funeral. Instead, the hegemonic form of masculinity lies in the successful hockey players, who will do anything to win. As mentioned before, Beartown is economically and emotionally dependent on the success of the hockey team, which is why the hockey players are valued to such a high degree, and with this the attitudes that they display on and off the ice. In her 2017 article *Toward sport reform: hegemonic masculinity and reconceptualizing competition*, kinesiologist Colleen English writes that key elements of the hegemonic masculine characteristic of sports are, among others, “an over-emphasis on competition that results in win-at-all-costs attitudes, poor relationships with competitors and teammates, and the loss of other values associated with athletics” (184). These three elements are pervasive not only in the sphere of hockey in Beartown, but they also infiltrate the characters’ lives outside the rink. The win-at-all-costs attitude perpetuated by the Beartown coaches, players, and audiences is introduced early in the first novel: “We love winners, even though they’re very rarely particularly likeable people... That doesn’t matter. We forgive them. We like them while they’re winning” (Backman “Beartown”, 50). This shows the conditionality of the town’s support: only if the players win are they appreciated, only if they present the desired form of masculinity.

In the novels, team loyalty and its limits is an important theme. There, however, seems to be more team loyalty with the supporters than with the players themselves, potentially because they are mainly focused on how they can become the most successful individually. When the beloved junior team's coach David is offered a job in Hed, many of the top players defect and join the Hed team they swore to hate. It can thus be argued that the win-at-all-costs attitude of the hockey players weakens their team loyalty. The win-at-all-costs attitude not only impairs the relationship the players have with their team, but it also causes poor relationships with competitors.

The poor relationship with competitors often causes violence between the supporters and the players of the teams. In *The Winners*, a storm destroys the ice rink of Hed Hockey, Beartown's neighbouring and arch-rival team. This forces the two teams to share Beartown's rink for practices, but the rivalry between the two teams is too intense for this to be possible. When the news breaks to the Beartown citizens, they spray-paint their town sign for it to say "OUR RINK IS OUR RINK!!! GO HOME BITCHES!!!" (Backman "The Winners", 214). Even so, the interaction between the teams is forced to continue, which culminates in fights between aggressive parents and other supporters. The inhospitable attitude of the Beartown team can be seen as what English described as "the loss of other values associated with athletics" (184), such as sportsmanship and respect. It is important to note that most of the physical violence between the two teams outside the rink is not expressed by the players themselves, but by the supporters of the team. This use of physical violence by Beartown's supporters can be seen as an extension of the values ingrained in ice hockey being a violent sport. Although the violence on the rink is permitted by hockey rules, the supporters, seeing this violence and win-at-all-costs attitude represented in their ideal masculine image, imitate this outside the rink in their own environments. Through this, it can be seen that, even though the hockey players themselves are not necessarily violent, their hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated through the violence outside the rink.

In their article, Connell and Messerschmidt make the difference between local, regional and global levels of hegemonic masculinity, where local is the smallest scale, located in immediate communities, and global is a transnational idea of masculinity. Regional is the level in between those, which represents either culture-wide or nation-state-wide ideas of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and

Messerschmidt 849). Although the expectation of violence and poor sportsmanship are representative of hegemonic masculinity in the hockey sphere of Beartown, this cannot be said of hockey culture as a whole. On the contrary, it is expected of the hockey players to be good, dependable people, which becomes clear when Beartown players attempt to move their career internationally. When the NHL inquires after Kevin, they ask Peter if he is “the right sort of guy” (Backman “Beartown”, 252), to which Peter responds “Kevin is the right sort of guy. He gets top grades in school. He comes from a stable family, well brought up. There are definitely no “off ice” problems” (253). Peter is here still unaware of the fact that Kevin did just rape his daughter, which can be seen as a continuation of the win-at-all-costs attitude with which he was raised by Peter’s hockey club.

Although the win-at-all-costs attitude might allow for success in the hockey rink, it becomes detrimental to many other characters when this attitude is employed outside of the rink. This shows how the winners-mentality is in part the cause of the rape and that the hegemonic forms of masculinity that are seen as ideal by many Beartown citizens are actually harmful to their society. The ways in which these forms of masculinity harm, not only those who are excluded from these forms, but also those who fit the picture, can be analysed using a combination of Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011). In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed criticises the promissory nature of happiness, where certain objects – which can be both physical or conceptual – are associated with happiness, while others are not. The objects that are associated with happiness are often objects that are expected to have a positive impact on our lives, such as marriage or success (Ahmed 22). When a group of people regard the same object as a ‘happy object’, they can be seen as forming an affective community – “We align ourselves with others by investing in the same objects as the cause of happiness” (38). Not only can objects be directly associated with happiness, certain objects can also become happy through proximity – “if something is close to a happy object, then it can become happy by association” (25). These happy objects form, what Ahmed calls, happiness scripts.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant takes the relationships between the subject and the happy objects and argues that this relationship can become ‘cruel’ when “the object that draws your attachment

actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (Berlant 1). The relationship between the subject and the object is seen as ‘optimistic’ because it promises to bring, in the case of this thesis, happiness and success; the subject keeps returning to the object because of its association with ‘feeling good’. Beartown’s citizens organise their year around the hockey season: “September is on its way. A time that belongs to those who love hockey. Our year starts now” (Backman “Us Against You”, 146). As mentioned before, hockey is associated with dominance and success in Beartown, which makes it a happy object. When looking at the social influence of hockey, however, the citizens’ relationship with hockey is, using Berlant’s concept, a cruel one. It is the basis of much of the violence in the town, because it perpetuates the values of its hegemonic masculinity.

If ‘winning at hockey’ is considered to be a happy object, then the hegemonic masculinity that is seen as ideal for the success of the hockey team can become happy by association, which is how it becomes the hegemonic form. Although the promissory nature of happiness may seem positive, it becomes problematic when the happy object is not accessible to all members of society. In the case of *Beartown*, this means that the promise of happiness associated with the success of hockey excludes, among others, women and failed hockey players.

Women and girls are excluded from the happiness being successful at hockey promises, because there is no girls’ team in Beartown, and when it gets formed in *Us Against You*, its valued less than the boys’ team, getting worse training times and equipment. Although the junior team’s coach in *Us Against You* is a woman, the politics and hierarchy surrounding the club are still decided by men. When politician Richard Theo becomes entangled in Beartown, the link between politics, economics, and hockey becomes clear: “Theo called Elisabeth Zackell because he recognised her PR value. A female coach in a club known for violent masculinity” (Backman, “Us Against You”, 124). It can thus be seen that installing a female coach and a girls’ team is a way for Beartown Hockey to compensate for its violently masculine past rather than meant to strengthen the position of girls and women in its hegemonic culture.

In *Beartown*, a distinction is established between ‘liking hockey’ and ‘liking hockey players’ where it is said that “Girls aren’t allowed to like hockey even just a little bit in Beartown” (Backman

“Beartown”, 386). Girls are, however, expected to like hockey players, which becomes clear when Maya and Ana come to Kevin’s party after Beartown wins the junior team’s semi-final. Both girls are sexually assaulted, Ana by Lyt, and Maya by Kevin. Both boys feel like they deserve to have sex with them as a reward for their win. This expectation can be seen to come from the way they have been treated by the town as hegemonically masculine, even as near-gods. In the article by Connell and Messerschmidt mentioned before, it is argued that, although hegemonic masculinity has the opportunity to re-establish gender relations to be more appreciative of women, it is often “based on practice that permits men’s collective dominance over women to continue” (839). This dominance over women can be seen in both Lyt and Kevin’s expectations of Maya and Ana. Lyt, when Ana refuses him, says: “Come on! Fuck it, I got an assist today, don’t I get anything for that?” (Backman “Beartown”, 192).

As for Kevin and Maya, Kevin bets a hundred kronor with Lyt on him being able to have sex with Maya, and Kevin is by now clearly characterised as being a sore loser, both in hockey and in life. It is due to this bet that Kevin forces himself onto Maya and rapes her, because he cannot stand to lose the bet with Lyt. Not only are Lyt and Kevin culturally privileged by being the most popular guys in the school, they are also physically privileged. In *The Winners*, the physical privilege of the hockey guys is mentioned when Maya sees a group of them on the train: “They’re already so big, so loud, so used to being physically privileged: everywhere belongs to them” (Backman “The Winners”, 191). Kevin’s physical privilege also becomes clear in the scene of the rape, where he is much stronger than Maya and thus able to pin her down easily. From a young age, Kevin has learned to use his physical strength and perseverance to get what he wants, training every day and punishing himself with more practice when he loses. In this case, however, his physical and social privilege become detrimental to Maya’s happiness. This shows the cruel relationship between girls and women and the values associated with hockey.

Another group within the Beartown society that is excluded from the happy object of ‘winning at hockey’ is the group of former hockey players that did not continue their career into the A-team or further. Many of them have continued their lives working at the Beartown factory or at other jobs like

Hog's car repair shop. The character of Robbie in *Beartown* is an example of one of these players who was pushed too far by the hockey culture and ends up occupying a liminal position in Beartown. When Robbie is compared to Peter, Backman writes: "One player achieved his dreams while the other now finds himself stamping his feet in the snow until the pub door finally opens" ("Beartown", 68).

Robbie's failure to become a hockey player can be explained using Berlant's 'cruel optimism' – it is the pressure that is associated with becoming successful that ended up being his demise. Robbie, who used to fit the picture of hegemonic masculinity in Beartown, was moved up the hockey hierarchy before he was ready for this mentally. The insecurity and fear that this installed in him prevented him from scoring, which excluded him from the hegemonic masculinity that is vital for the thriving of the hockey player in Beartown. It is thus the optimism, Robbie working to be a successful hockey player and moving up too quickly, that stands in the way of his success and is therefore cruel. This is in line with Berlant's description of scenes of cruel optimism as "scenes of conventional desire that stand manifestly in the way of the subject's thriving" (Berlant 45), with the conventional desire being the success that comes with hegemonic masculinity and the subject's thriving being Robbie being a successful hockey player.

From these two examples it can be seen that the hegemonic masculinity present in the Beartown society is a site of cruel optimism, and that it creates happy objects that are not accessible to all layers of society. Especially women are excluded, but hockey players who initially fit the hegemonic view of masculinity also become alienated when they are unable to keep up with the crowd's expectations. The exclusion of these groups of people within the Beartown society produces a need for alternative objects of happiness and sites of inclusion.

In the next section, I will analyse the way the Bearskin, Beartown's pub, becomes such a space for men who have not benefitted from hockey culture, but for whom the attachment to it has turned cruel. I will do this using Foucault's concept of heterotopia, as proposed in his 1986 paper *Of Other Spaces*.

1.2. 'The Bearskin' as Heterotopia: Alternatives to Hegemony

In *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault writes about utopias and heterotopias as spaces outside of 'real' spaces, that, although related to real spaces, contradict them as well. Although the concept of heterotopia has been criticised by scholars for being too vague and rudimentary, it can be a useful tool for looking at the way spaces function in relation to hegemonic ideas in society. For a critical reflection on the concept, I recommend the book *Spaces of Crisis and Critique: Heterotopias Beyond Foucault* (2018) by Faramelli, Hancock, and White. For this thesis, the concept of heterotopia is essential to analyse the spaces that are occupied by those who do not fit within the picture of hegemonic masculinity. One of the spaces in *Beartown* that can be seen as a heterotopia is Ramona's pub, the 'Bearskin'. It is situated outside of the hegemonic structure of Beartown's society and can serve as an alternative for the happiness that others find in the hockey rink.

According to Foucault's conceptualisation, a heterotopia has to adhere to six principles. Firstly, heterotopias are found in every culture in one of two ways: a heterotopia of crisis, which is reserved for those who occupy a space of crisis in a certain society, and a heterotopia of deviation. It is interesting to note here that Foucault suggests a sense of passivity and enforcement when writing about the heterotopia of deviation: "those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault 25). It thus seems that Foucault's definition of a heterotopia of deviation presupposes the idea that it can only be entered when one is forced to be there. This is supported by the examples he gives, which include prisons and psychiatric hospitals. If we see the Bearskin as a heterotopia of deviation, however, then this definition should shift to a more active way of occupying that space, as the characters, although emotionally alienated, ultimately choose to go there. If this definition is shifted to include entering the heterotopia of deviation as a voluntary action, then the Bearskin can be seen as one. The Bearskin is clearly a space where undesirable bodies go, a place where those who occupy a liminal position in society, such as The Pack, find a home. Ramona, as the owner and an extension of the Bearskin "has always had room in her heart for those who have succeeded in life, but the space she spares for those whose lives have gone to Hell will always be infinitely larger" (Backman "The Winners", 116). The Bearskin can thus be seen as a heterotopia of deviation, where those who deviate from the hegemonic view of masculinity and success find shelter.

It could, however, also be seen as a heterotopia of crisis. Taking Robbie as an example, it is revealed that he lost his job at the factory and now spends most his time at the Bearskin. In this way, the Bearskin becomes a refuge for those in crisis situations.

The second principle of heterotopia is that the function of the space is determined by the time in which it is situated – and that the function of a heterotopia can change throughout time (Foucault 25). In the case of the Bearskin, the pub becomes more and less liminal throughout the day. This is described as Peter enters the Bearskin during the day: “It’s empty now, of course. Peter never comes here in the evening; it isn’t a healthy environment for the GM of an underperforming A-team” (Backman “Beartown”, 124). During the day, when it is empty, the Bearskin is more of a heterotopia of crisis; only those who have no other place to be will be there, exemplified in the previous section with Robbie. Other reasons why people come to the Bearskin during the day usually have less to do with the Bearskin as a space, but rather with Ramona as the pub owner. Ramona can be seen as an extension of the Bearskin, and thus of its heterotopia, as she represents the same form of inclusivity yet distance that is represented by her pub.

The third principle of heterotopia is that it “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 25). For this, Foucault presents a garden as a microcosm, in which different sorts of vegetation from different places of the world co-exist in a single space where they are not naturally occurring. The plurality of the Bearskin is attested to in *The Winners*: “the Bearskin is the district’s watering hole, but it’s also its unofficial census office” (Backman 115). It is the centre of gossip, information, and celebration, which is juxtaposed to the liminal position it occupies as a ‘watering hole’. The Bearskin can thus be seen as central yet liminal and inclusive yet threatening. As a space, it is accessible to anyone, but the clientele – the Pack – is said to “emanate a silent fury” which makes it a dangerous space for someone like Peter, who represents the economic hegemony, but who is also still heavily associated with the hegemonic masculinity, and a reminder of the other customers’ failure (Backman “Beartown”, 125). There is thus a contradiction between Ramona’s equal treatment of anyone who enters the Bearskin, and the threat of violence that emanates from its customers. As a heterotopia of deviation, the level of

deviation is thus, at least in part, determined by those who occupy the space, rather than by the space itself – juxtaposing its central and liminal positions.

The fourth principle of heterotopia is that they take place outside of regular time. Foucault conceptualises this in two different ways: there are heterotopias of “indefinitely accumulating time” and heterotopias linked to “time in the mode of the festival” (Foucault 26). Foucault names the museum as an example of this first type, where time keeps on accumulating in the form of an increasing amount of artifacts. The Bearskin can be seen as a form of museum, accumulating Beartown history through decades. While everything around it changes, the Bearskin stays the same, mainly for its regular clientele, who feel left behind by Beartown’s modernisation. After the Bearskin is burnt down in *Us Against You*, its history is destroyed but returned to it in the form of photos: “pennants and scarves and the hundreds of photographs that people in the town collected for her after the fire. Silent greetings of a life lived in and around a hockey club” (Backman “The Winners”, 130). In a similar vein, the most valuable objects Ramona lost in the fire were photos of her late husband Holger. The Bearskin is thus an accumulation of time, from the photos at the bar to the cigarette stains on the walls from when Ramona’s grandfather still smoked inside. In the Bearskin, time both stands still and accumulates.

The fifth principle of heterotopia that Foucault proposes is that a heterotopia always presupposes “a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault 26). Heterotopias are thus associated with doors or rituals that gives one access to them. The door to the Bearskin is mentioned multiple times throughout the trilogy, and its entrance has a metaphorical significance to its customers. The Bearskin is described as being in a basement with only a few small windows, and through this it is physically lower than the rest of the town, but also separated from everything else. “A short flight of stairs leads down to the bar. From there you can’t see the roof of the rink” (Backman “Beartown”, 69). Although most of the customers in the Bearskin are hockey supporters and the pub is littered with hockey paraphernalia, through its location, a distance is created between the rink, where the success stories take place and the pub, where those without a success story go. Another way in which this fifth principle can take shape is that those who enter a

space are excluded “by the fact that [they] enter” (Foucault 26). Although Foucault states that these types of heterotopias have nearly disappeared, I want to argue that the Bearskin may function like this: by entering into the Bearskin, everyone is equalised, because Ramona treats everyone the same no matter their status within the general Beartown society. By entering into the Bearskin, a person is immediately excluded from the rest of the population, which is represented by the descent into the basement.

The sixth and final principle of heterotopia that Foucault proposes is that they exist in relation to all other spaces – as a space that exposes citizens’ fantasy lives or structures them in a way that makes them make sense. He writes: “their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space...as still more illusory” (Foucault 27). Foucault himself offers the example of the brothel, where people’s inner domestic fantasies are exposed to the outside world. Another way in which this principle may take shape in his view is through the structuring and ordering of the chaos and jumble of the real space. Although there is discussion on what Foucault exactly meant with this among scholars, it can be interpreted as heterotopia being a space in which rules are followed differently and more rigidly than in the real world, making it more ordered and exposing the chaos of the real world. This interpretation is suitable to the analysis of the Bearskin as heterotopia, because Ramona applies the same rules to everyone, which can be seen as ordering the chaotic hierarchies present in hockey culture. “Ramona swears at you if you take too long to order...then she swears just as much if you try to rush her” (Backman “The Winners”, 127). It is said that Ramona treats everyone badly, everyone feels slightly unwelcome yet included, and this equalises and structures the relationships between the characters in a different way than in the ‘real world’.

From this section it has become clear that the Bearskin as a heterotopia serves as an alternative to hegemonic masculinity and its values for men who are not represented by this form of manhood. Another group that is excluded from hegemonic masculinity is women. There is, however, no similar space to the Bearskin for women in the *Beartown* trilogy, especially for Maya and Ana after Maya has been raped. School is unsafe, they are bullied online, and Maya is even attacked in her own bedroom. In the next chapter, I will therefore explore their friendship as an alternative to forms of belonging that

are exclusive to men in Beartown, and I will explore whether the friendship between Maya and Ana can be seen as a metaphorical heterotopia. Although Foucault's theory focuses on physical spaces, the principles of heterotopia may be a useful tool to look at the way female friendship provides an alternative to the hegemonic masculinity ingrained in Beartown's values.

Chapter 2: Maya and Ana: A Heterotopic Female Friendship

In the previous chapter I have shown how the hegemonic masculinity in the *Beartown* trilogy, rooted in the hockey culture and its win-at-all-costs attitude, becomes a source of cruel optimism for many of the characters who are unable to conform to this image of masculinity. For the male characters who fall into this category, there is the space of the Bearskin where they can find an alternative to this hegemonic masculinity. For female characters, however, there exists no such space. Taking the character of Maya, for example, she is shunned from Beartown society after she speaks up about being raped. Afterwards, there is no space where she is safe – she is bullied online, threatened at school, and her family is even attacked at home. Women's spaces in Beartown are far and few, and even when they exist, they are imbued with the influence of Beartown's masculinity, like Jeanette's martial arts school in *Us Against You* forming as a response to masculine violence.

In this chapter, I will argue that, for female characters, their friendships provide this heterotopic space that the Bearskin provides for the male characters. In order to do so, I will first propose a definition of friendship based on existing literature. Then, I will look at how the friendship both challenges and is challenged by the social norms and values within the Beartown society that have been analysed in the previous chapter. Finally, I will show how this friendship can function as a heterotopia where it provides the characters an alternative to the hegemonic masculinity in Beartown.

2.1. Defining Friendship: Maya and Ana as (a)Typical

The most important relationship in the *Beartown* trilogy is the friendship between Maya and Ana. The two girls are fifteen when the events of *Beartown* take place, and *The Winners* takes them into early adulthood. The *Beartown* trilogy thus provides a detailed exploration of female friendship through adolescence, but Maya and Ana's friendship in their early childhood is also elaborately reflected on. To gain a more thorough understanding of Maya and Ana's friendship, this section will draw on existing academic definitions of friendship and analyse to what extent these definitions apply to Maya and Ana's bond.

In the introduction of this thesis, I have analysed existing scholarship on friendship with a focus on female friendships. Although there are many different academic approaches to friendship, I

have focused on the scholarship that takes Aristotle's idea of 'complete friendship' as the basis of their definition. Three elements returned in many of these definitions: firstly, the voluntary character of friendship as opposed to the involuntariness of familial relationships and other kinship ties. Secondly, the equality that is often seen as an essential element of a complete friendship, and thirdly, and maybe most importantly, the reciprocal and mutual affection between friends that is necessary for an intimate relationship. This section will apply these three characteristics to a close reading of Maya and Ana's friendship to find out whether their friendship can be seen as a typical or atypical friendship, and judge its position within the hegemonic structures in Beartown society.

The first characteristic of friendship that can be analysed in relation to the *Beartown* novels is its involuntariness. This involuntariness is an important characteristic of adult friendship to many scholars, but its applicability in childhood friendships can be questioned. Maya and Ana met when they were young children. According to Mary Healy in her chapter on children's friendships in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Friendship*, friendships between children are less voluntary than those between adults, because they are somewhat determined by the way their parents position them socially and hierarchically (Healy 83). Maya and Ana's relationship is representative of this phenomenon: even though Maya was not born in Beartown, she and her family moved back there because her father returned to a job in his hometown. Their meeting is therefore determined by their parents' place of residence. This involuntary character of their friendship is emphasised by the way in which the two characters met as kids: Maya went out to skate on the lake as a six-year-old on her own and fell through the ice, and Ana managed to pull her out of the water. Their friendship was therefore initially based on necessity and, as Backman writes: "You can't keep two girls apart after a thing like that" (Backman "Beartown", 91).

The involuntariness of the friendship between the two characters is reinforced in *Us Against You*, when Ana reflects on the strength and deepness of their bond, saying "you can't cultivate that kind of friendship, it only grows in the wild" (Backman "Us Against You", 21). The focus on the involuntary, wild, and almost predetermined character of the friendship between Maya and Ana is reflective of the environment in which it takes place – the Beartown citizens are constantly reminded

of the strength of natural forces, with the freezing winters throughout the series and the extreme storm in *The Winners*, for example. Considering the involuntariness of their relationship, it is unsurprising that the two characters are often referred to as sisters. Ana spends more time at Maya's house than at her own, mostly due to the instability of her own home. In doing so, she obscures the boundary between friendship and family even more.

In her chapter on friendship and family in *The Routledge Handbook*, Monika Betzler explores the difference between family and friendship using the different kinds of associative duties that one owes in a relationship, and she concludes that the exact normative difference between the two types of relationship remains unclear (Betzler 154). Associative duties can be defined as duties "owed on the account of the particular relationship in question" (156). These duties are thus relation-specific and are only owed to those we share a particular type of relation with, such as our friends or family. Although the main differentiator between family and friendship is the way in which family is biologically determined and friendship is not, the line is blurred when, such as the case of Maya and Ana, the existence of the friendship is more or less involuntary.

Ana's role in the Andersson family changes throughout the series. When Ana is first introduced, she wreaks havoc in the Andersson kitchen, preparing a smoothie without putting the lid on the blender. Maya's father Peter, clearly exasperated by her constant presence in the house asks how long she has been staying at their house, and when Ana happily replies that most of her clothes are at their house anyway, he "really does try to look as delighted at this as Ana does" (Backman "Beartown", 21). From his further questions and the descriptions of his body language, as well as the narrator's ironic tone, he does not consider Ana to be family at this point of the trilogy.

After the rape, even though it first creates a distance between Maya and Ana, their sisterly dynamic eventually becomes more apparent, especially since Maya has lost all of her social status and is ruthlessly bullied by her peers. When Maya speaks out about her experience and gets attacked online immediately, her mother Kira, in an attempt to protect her family, sends Ana home, saying that she loves her like one of her own but that she has to "go home for a little while, Ana. We need to be...on our own as a family" (Backman "Beartown", 313). In this utterance, there is a juxtaposition

between Kira loving Ana ‘like’ on of her own and yet excluding her from the family unit. This shows the fine line between friendship and family and the slight difference in associative duties between friends and family, where in this case, the associative duty of including a someone in a particularly hard time is reserved for family rather than friends.

In the end, however, when the family has gone through the worst of the threats Ana is reunited with the Anderssons and the narrator comments: “The Andersson family are sitting in their kitchen. All five, including Ana” (Backman “Beartown”, 431). In this scene, Kevin’s mother recognises the signs of rape on Maya and acknowledges her son’s guilt; and accordingly, Ana is physically present and ‘part of the family’ in this very important moment for Maya. Coming back to the principle of voluntariness in friendship, it can be argued that Maya and Ana’s friendship does not adhere to this characteristic of the ‘ideal’ friendship, which shows that voluntariness does not have to be a determining principle of friendship in the fictional world of the *Beartown* trilogy. However, in being involuntary, their relationship comes to resemble a sisterly bond that has characteristics of being family. Through this, the girls challenge existing norms about friendship both in Beartown and outside of it.

The second characteristic of friendship that is often included in academic definitions of friendship is that of equality. As seen in the introduction of this thesis, the social symmetry of friendship is often emphasised: most friendships form between people who are socially and demographically equal. In their 2022 article *Inequality, Rules of Irrelevance, and Recognition in Broken Friendship*, Laura Eramian and Peter Mallory argue however that although friends may be socially unequal, their friendship will promise “the opportunity to develop self-identities that do not rely on statuses like employment, kinship, socio-economic status, race, or gender” (420). In other words, it is not that friends have to be equals in a broader picture of society, but that through their friendship, they can create a new type of equality based only in their friendship. The authors, however, also pose that forming friendships that transcend societal hierarchies can expose those inequalities and cause ruptures in friendships. Although Maya and Ana are demographically equal – they are both

female adolescents and as such occupy a similar position in society, their inequalities are clear from the start and become a point of insecurity between them.

Since their childhood, Maya has been more privileged than Ana. Growing up in a stable household, her father was the General Manager of Beartown Hockey, her mother was a lawyer and she had a friendly relationship with her younger brother Leo. Meanwhile Ana grew up as an only child in a home with an alcoholic father and a mother who left after their divorce. Maya immediately recognised this inequality when they met: “The first time Maya was over at Ana’s and heard her parents arguing, she understood that Ana was on thin ice in ways all her own” (Backman “Beartown”, 91). The girls were aware of their dissimilar upbringing and recognised that it was safer spending time at the Andersson household. This reflects the argument that Eramian and Mallory propose in their article: “friendship is a space where equality is *produced*” (420). Through Ana spending most of her time with the Andersson family, the different upbringings of the girls are negated and they create an equality between them that makes them more like sisters than friends. The produced character of the equality between them is discussed after the scene at Kevin’s party, where Ana reflects on their friendship: “The most important promise they made was never to leave each other, not because of safety, but because the promise made them equals. They’ve never been equals in any other way.” (Backman “Beartown”, 233). She thus confirms that the equality between her and Maya only exists because they themselves made a promise that bound them together. As long as this promise is kept, they can, referring to Eramian and Mallory, develop self-identities that are formed around the equality between them.

This equality is threatened, however, when a miscommunication causes Ana to believe that Maya left her alone at the party in order to sleep with Kevin. When Ana is alone, her subordinate social position is exposed, which supports the argument in the Eramian and Mallory article which asserts that these trans-hierarchical friendships may expose the societal inequalities between the parties when ruptures occur. Ana is ridiculed at the party by girls older than her, and leaves to spend time in the forest, where she is much more comfortable than at the party. Ana reflects on the position she occupies at that point, thinking that, whereas Maya would be lost if Ana left her alone in the forest

at night, Ana feels the same when Maya left her at the party. This shows the inherent inequality between the two girls, where Maya is much more adept socially due to her upbringing than Ana. It is important to note that Maya did not choose to leave Ana at the party, but she was pulled away by forces stronger than her, namely the hegemonic masculinity and the social privilege that comes with that from Kevin. In the next section of this chapter, I will explore how this hegemonic masculinity that has been discussed in the previous chapter challenges the friendship between Maya and Ana, as well as other challenges that the friendship has to endure.

The final characteristic of friendship that is seen as a basic, maybe the most important, feature in most contemporary definitions of friendship is that of mutual affection. Friends have to love or like each other in order to be able to call their relationship a friendship. Different ways in which mutual affection can be conceptualised have been discussed in the introduction. Both Jacques Derrida and bell hooks emphasise the active character of love and friendship. In order to analyse the friendship between Maya and Ana as an act rather than a state of being, we have to look at a particular way in which love and mutual affection are displayed.

One way in which Maya and Ana show their love and friendship to each other is through physical touch. The two share beds, hug, and lean on each other frequently, which shows emotional and literal support, as well as comfort between them. The non-sexual physical intimacy between Maya and Ana in the events of the trilogy mirrors their first meeting, and later this physical intimacy is also mirrored in other events, emphasising the mutual affection and reciprocity. The first meeting of the two characters, as mentioned before, happened when Ana saved Maya from drowning when they were six years old. The significance of physical touch immediately becomes clear: “They held hands before they saw each other’s faces” (Backman “Beartown”, 90). Not only does the physical act of holding hands immediately create a bond between them, it is also a necessary act in saving Maya, therefore being a necessary start to their friendship. The physical touch at this moment is mirrored in two significant moments, which also mirror each other; two moments of physical support after personal tragedy.

The first of these moments occurs in *Beartown* after Maya has been raped by Kevin. Initially, because of jealousy on Ana's part, and because of Maya's urge to protect Ana, they force themselves to stay out of contact with each other. This period of no contact will be further explored in the next section of this chapter. When Ana notices that Kevin is terrified looking at her, however, she concludes that something is wrong and goes to visit Maya. As Maya opens the door and sees her, "she falls apart in Ana's arms, and Ana holds her as if her life depends on it, and wishes with all her being that they could trade places with each other" (Backman "Beartown", 260). This event is similar to the first encounter between them; it is again Ana holding Maya in order to save her, which in this case means supporting her through emotional hurt in a physical way. Although in *Beartown*, it is mostly Ana supporting Maya, Maya is able to reciprocate this physical support in *Us Against You*. When Ana's boyfriend Vidar dies in a car crash, she is devastated: "When Ana falls apart and just screams and cries, Maya holds her best friend tight" (Backman "Us Against You", 396). The fact that both girls are able to fall apart in the vicinity of the other shows the comfort between them, but also the trust that they will be caught as part of their mutual affection.

Additionally, in *Us Against You*, the intimate and physical connection between Maya and Ana is contrasted to the superficial 'friendships' Richard Theo proposes to other characters in order to further his political ambitions. When trying to convince Peter to cooperate with him, he says: "All I want is your...friendship. That's not too much to ask, is it?" (Backman, "Us Against You", 100). These two sentences make the reader doubt whether his friendship is a true friendship, or merely a relationship based on political gain. Theo's character as a slick politician, and the way in which he proposes this same friendship to both Ramona and Teemu, further cement the idea that the friendship he is after cannot be seen as a complete friendship. Referring to Aristotle's concept of complete friendships, it is written in *The Routledge Handbook*: "Only in complete friendships do the friends care about each other for their own sake rather than merely instrumentally" (Jeske 3). Not only are Theo's friendships politically and instrumentally motivated, it is unclear whether he truly cares about anyone he proposes friendship to. There is thus a complete absence of mutual affection in his

friendships. This shows that mutual affection, which includes physical intimacy, may be a defining character of a complete friendship, setting it apart from politically motivated friendships.

From this section, it becomes clear that Maya and Ana's friendship in the *Beartown* trilogy is mostly based on mutual affection, trust, and produced equality. Although these elements strengthen their friendship, they are very different from the values of hegemonic masculinity that are characteristic of the broader Beartown culture. In the following section, I will examine how friendship and hegemonic masculinity interact as challenges to each other.

2.2. Challenges to Friendship: Sandpapered into Silence

The friendship between Maya and Ana and the dominant culture of hegemonic masculinity in Beartown as analysed in the first chapter of this thesis are in constant flux with each other. In this section, I will look at how the friendship between Maya and Ana is challenged by these patriarchal values yet also challenges this same value-system.

There are two main ways in which the hegemonic masculinity and its values present in Beartown culture challenge the friendship between Maya and Ana. Firstly, there is a constant discussion of inequality which runs through the friendship that gets exposed at the Kevin's party. Secondly, Maya's rape and the consequent distance between Maya and Ana can be seen as a direct consequence of hegemonic masculinity.

Although the inequality between Maya and Ana reaches its climax at Kevin's party, it is discussed before this event, when Maya reflects on how Ana has changed throughout the years in order to fit into the Beartown society better, something Maya is more adept at. Maya describes past-Ana as a tornado, and as a "jagged, hundred-sided peg in a community where everyone was supposed to fit into round holes" (Backman "Beartown", 92). As mentioned before, Ana grew up in a dysfunctional household, having to find her place in society on her own. As a child, she spent most her time in the forest with her dogs. This made her a rough, idiosyncratic person, which did not fit into the Beartown culture, especially not as a girl. Children in Beartown are taught to work hard and keep their mouths shut, and the motto of Beartown hockey is described as "high ceilings and thick walls" (16)

which refers to the way in which fights, embezzlements, and disagreements are kept inside the building, out of the public eye.

This culture of silence also affects the other inhabitants however, and as Kira reflects on her move to Beartown with Peter, she argues that: “In Beartown silence always goes hand in hand with shame” (Backman “Beartown”, 36). The inhabitants are shamed into being silent, and are told to fall in line for the greater good, the success of the hockey team. Ana wanted to be a professional hockey player when she was a child, but even her father was ashamed of how different she was to the other players and refused to drive her to the rink anymore. As she grew up and started high school, “she learned that girls were more than welcome to like sports in Beartown – just not the way that she did. Not that much” (261). The shame that the town put on Ana’s intense character and love for sport changed her personality into someone smaller and quieter. This does not make her more popular among her peers, however, and at the party at Kevin’s house, she realises that “no matter how hard she sandpapers herself, how small she makes herself, she’s never going to fit in here” (192).

This development can be analysed using Lauren Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism as introduced in the previous chapter. Cruel optimism is a description of “the very vitalising or animating potency of an object or scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place” (Berlant 25). In Ana’s case, the object of desire is fitting into Beartown society. In order to do so, however, Ana feels as if she has to make herself smaller and smaller, hollowing herself out. Instead of this making her more appreciated, however, she is still bullied online and at school. Therefore, the desire for fitting in can be regarded as a cruel desire, because no matter what Ana does, she will not be able to achieve it.

Another consequence of Ana’s desire to fit in is the obstruction of her friendship with Maya. When their friendship is being introduced, it is written that “Maya hates being a teenager, hates sandpaper, hates round holes. Misses the girl who pretended to be a knight in the forest” (Backman “Beartown”, 92). Using Berlant’s argument in *Cruel Optimism*, it can be seen that it is precisely the object of desire for Ana, which is to fit into the round holes of Beartown society, that contributes to the weakening of her friendship with Maya, which is where she finds most of her connection and

happiness. Ana's realisation that she will never fit into Beartown society at Kevin's party comes at the same moment where Maya is seemingly accepted into it. This exacerbates the inequality that Ana feels between them, which has been analysed in the previous section. Even though Ana has tried so hard to fit in, this comes naturally to Maya. When Ana leaves the party on her own, she reflects on their relative positions: "it's unbearably cold standing in the shade of someone who's a bit more popular than you" (208). This divide between them is one of two low points of their friendship in the trilogy, and it has developed because of the influence hegemonic masculinity has on both Maya and Ana. For Ana, the dominant culture of masculinity has convinced her there is something wrong with her which she has to change, which makes Maya question their friendship and mutual affection.

In Maya's case, the hegemonic masculinity rooted in hockey culture is personified in the character of Kevin. The win-at-all-costs attitude that the hockey players are raised with has been explored in depth in the first chapter of this thesis, and it is one of the reasons why Kevin rapes Maya: he cannot stand to lose the bet with his friend and he feels like he deserves sex after his hockey success. By taking Maya hostage in his bedroom and raping her, he physically forces her apart from Ana at that specific moment, but the distance he creates between them also becomes emotional in ways described in the previous section.

It is, however, not only Ana who feels left out when Maya disappears at the party. As Maya realises what is happening to her, she trusts that Ana will come to save her, even though she has already left the party. After the rape, Maya keeps out of contact with Ana, despite her knowing that Ana is the only person who will be able to comfort her. She wants to call her, but refrains from doing so because she "can't drag her into this. Can't force her to carry this secret" (Backman "Beartown", 232). Although this urge to protect Ana is coming from a place of love, it negatively influences their relationship, setting the tone for the secrets the two keep from each other out of shame further into the trilogy. The unnaturalness of this distance is emphasised by Ana having to exhaust the battery of her phone because "she knows that before the morning is over she won't be able to resist calling Maya any longer" (238). This constructed distance between the girls is a result of the hegemonic masculinity that

informs the culture of Beartown, in which shame accompanies the silencing of anyone attempting to speak out.

This shows that most challenges the friendship between Maya and Ana has to endure are either directly, in the case of the rape, or indirectly in Ana's desire to fit in, caused by the hegemonic masculinity in Beartown. This further supports the idea that women and girls do not have their own space in Beartown society like the men have with the Bearskin. In the fourth section of this chapter, I will argue that in the absence of this space, the friendship itself has to be the heterotopic space. First, however, I will take a look at how the Maya and Ana's friendship functions as a challenge to the hegemonic masculine character of Beartown's value system.

2.3. Giggles and Laughter: Friendship Challenging Hegemony

Although Beartown values silence and rigidity, the friendship between Maya and Ana is full of laughter and loudness. This is one of the main ways in which the friendship challenges the hegemonic masculine value-system. Maya, other than most other characters in the novels, values Ana's jaggedness and misses the old Ana when she starts making herself smaller, as explained before. In scenes where just Maya and Ana are present, Ana is often as loud as ever, able to show her genuine personality. Many of the interactions between them are characterised by sarcastic comments and insults, paired with genuine concern and affection for the other. Much of the communication between Ana and Maya takes place in the form of banter.

In their article *Banter Versus Bullying: a University Student Perspective* (2021), Sarah Bugless et al. write about the fine line between banter and bullying among university students. They define banter as "reciprocal exchanges of jocular humour, mocking, insults, and teasing between friends" (287). In this definition of banter, it is important to emphasise the reciprocity that is essential to differentiating banter from bullying. This reciprocity ensures a sense of equality between friends, which, as mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, is a fundamental part of friendships. In one of the first interactions between Maya and Ana in *Beartown*, the two play a game of 'would-you-rather'. When Ana asks Maya if she would rather be blind or deaf, she responds jokingly with: "I can't live without music, but I can live without seeing your stupid face every day" (Backman "Beartown",

32). This mock-impoliteness between them carries through to *The Winners*, which is set two years after the events in the first two instalments. Even though there is more physical distance between Maya and Ana, as Maya has moved away from Beartown to study, their communication is still similar to their first interaction, insulting each other's clothes and makeup. After exchanging banter, they "roar with laughter. Roar and roar. Two minutes and everything is normal" (Backman "The Winners", 255).

When taking the silence and shame that are definitive of the Beartown culture into consideration, the normalisation of laughter in their friendship is a way in which they challenge this culture. 'Roaring' with laughter implies a loudness that is not generally appreciated in Beartown. There are, however, also instances of banter that do fit into the Beartown values of hegemonic masculinity: there are many examples of similar behaviour in the locker-room talk at the ice rink. What differentiates these instances of banter from the banter between Maya and Ana however, is that, although jokingly, the utterances in the locker-room are consistently 'punching down', meaning that they are jokes at the expense of someone in a lower hierarchical position than the joker.

The jokes in the Beartown locker-room are, although not always with intent to bully, often sexist or homophobic. After a particularly offensive series of jokes containing lesbians and rape, coach David wonders whether he has let the players go too far. He wonders "whether a joke was always a joke ... whether there are different rules inside and outside a locker room" (Backman "Beartown", 158). He refrains from stopping his players, however, and motivates this choice by arguing that the jokes encourage team cohesion. Nevertheless, these jokes also reinforce the hegemony of hockey-player masculinity that is prevalent in Beartown, and through this, these jokes are part of the culture of hegemonic masculinity by punching down.

In contrast, the banter between Maya and Ana is purely reciprocal and enhances their personal friendship. This positive cohesive impact of banter is confirmed by the article by Burgless et al.: "a banter culture can facilitate interaction, enhance affiliation, and increase compliance to group norms" (288). The banter between Maya and Ana strengthens their relationship, and can thus be seen as a way of challenging the existing norms and values of hegemonic masculinity.

A second way in which the laughter shared between Maya and Ana challenges Beartown's masculinity, is through giggling. In many interactions between them, there is a focus on giggling and on how much this means to Maya especially. In contemporary Western culture, giggling is often associated with childhood, particularly in girls. In the article *Feeling Girl, Girling Feeling: An Examination of "Girl" as Affect* (2011), Monica Swindler writes about the prevalence of the terms 'girl' and 'girlhood' in contemporary media and their implications. According to her, women miss "the experience of those easy giggly friendships of youth" (Swindler §17). Additionally, in the book *Becoming Female: Perspectives on Development* (1983), it is argued that, whereas boys laugh and initiate jokes more, girls smile and giggle more, often in response to the boys' humour (McGhee 185). This responsive humour becomes characteristic of women's giggles into adulthood, where giggling is often associated with flirtatious behaviour directed towards men (Wade et al. 3). Most of the giggling and laughter between Maya and Ana however, even as young adults in *The Winners*, is not in response to a male character but in response to each other. Therefore, their shared giggles challenge the harm that the hegemonic masculinity has done to them.

After Maya is raped, she is consistently treated as an adult: "She's fifteen, above the age of consent, and he's seventeen, but he's still 'the boy' in every conversation. She's the young woman" (Backman "Beartown", 275). This difference in treatment is characteristic of the hegemonic masculine culture that is eager to protect Kevin, framing him as innocent: the success of the hockey team depends on his innocence. Having been forced into adulthood, it should therefore be expected that Maya and Ana are unable to giggle anymore, having their childhood been taken away from them. As Maya and Ana rekindle their friendship after their distance caused by the rape, however, they start talking about the future. When Ana jokes about becoming Maya's manager "Maya starts to giggle, she didn't believe she still had that sort of laughter left in her, but it just bubbles out" (393). These giggles seem to be an involuntary response to Ana's joke, something that 'bubbles out' of her without giving it any thought or expecting it to happen. This means that they can be seen as a way of claiming back her childhood.

This carefree character that is associated with giggling returns later in the series, when Maya and Ana meet again after Maya moved away for college. Ana does not have to greet Maya when she sees her: ““Help me with the bags!” she just giggles” (Backman “The Winners”, 255). Even though Ana is dealing with her father’s addiction by throwing away bags of empty bottles as she says this, the innocence that is associated with giggling colours this interaction, which is followed by the banter that has been discussed previously. Additionally, as analysed in the first chapter of this thesis, the Bearskin and the corresponding alcoholism can be seen as spaces inhabited by failed hockey players, and thus associated with characters that have failed to conform to the hegemonic masculinity. Ana, giggling while throwing away signs of her father’s addiction, therefore challenges hegemonic masculinity in two ways – both by dealing with her father’s alcoholism and by doing so while conversing with Maya in a carefree, light-hearted way.

The humorous character of the interactions between the two girls, combined with the care and affection that has been discussed in the previous section, makes their friendship a challenge to the hegemonic masculinity that shapes the norms and values in Beartown. Even though this culture forces them into adulthood and silence, their friendship is a light and caring space. In the next section, I will be using the concept of heterotopia that has been discussed in the first chapter of this thesis to explore how friendship functions as an alternative space for women and girls in Beartown.

2.4. Alternative Space: Female Friendship as Heterotopia

In the first chapter of this thesis, I have introduced and used Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia in order to analyse the Bearskin pub as a space that works as an alternative to the dominant masculine culture in Beartown. The Bearskin is, however, socially inaccessible for most women. Without any alternatives, women in Beartown are left without a physical space that functions specifically for them. In this final section of this chapter, I will explore the way friendships between women satiate this need for an alternative space. I will do so using the same principles of heterotopia I used to analyse the Bearskin in the first chapter.

Firstly, a heterotopia has to be found in every culture as either a heterotopia of deviation or crisis. This is certainly the case for friendships, which have been proven to exist even in Ancient times,

where they were an important topic of discussion. A heterotopia of deviation exists in order to provide a space for those who express undesirable behaviour in regards to the hegemonic norms or values. Friendships can provide this space for deviation. In 1989 Marilyn Friedman writes: “friendship is more likely than many other close personal relationships to provide support for people who are idiosyncratic” (286). In *Beartown*, Ana is described as such an idiosyncratic, deviant person, who has to make herself smaller in order to fit into the round holes that Beartown society provides for her. In her friendship with Maya, as explored in the previous section, her idiosyncrasies are appreciated and even celebrated. This makes the friendship between Maya and Ana a clear heterotopia of deviation.

Secondly, the function of a heterotopia is time-dependent and able to change. This is in line with the reciprocity of Maya and Ana’s friendship. When Maya crumbles emotionally, their friendship has the function of being her support system, and when Ana falls apart after Vidar’s death, the friendship is focused on her mental wellbeing. This reciprocity and mutuality is a fundamental characteristic in many academic definitions of friendship, as discussed before. In addition, the function of the friendship itself also changes throughout time.

At some points in the trilogy, the friendship’s main function is to provide entertainment to either character. For instance in the beginning of *Beartown*, Ana and Maya are in Peter’s car, and Ana complains about being bored and proposes playing a game. As they play would-you-rather, the friendship between them functions as a source of enjoyment and laughter. Later, however, the friendship takes on a more serious caretaking function, when the two girls have to comfort each other after their respective personal tragedies. In her chapter in *The Dialectics of Friendship* (1989), Sue Limb argues that one of the most important functions of female friendship is that of the alibi, where friends use each other to cover up their illicit activities to their parents or partners (51). Maya and Ana also discover this function of their friendship, when they tell Peter and Kira they will be studying at Ana’s place, but instead have plans to attend the party at Kevin’s house. It can thus be seen that the function of the friendship changes throughout time, depending on what either party within the friendship needs.

The third principle of heterotopia argues that in a heterotopia, several different spaces are juxtaposed that should be incompatible. This is certainly the case for Maya and Ana. In the novels, there is a lot of focus on how different the two characters are: “The two women have never really had much in common, the princess and the child of nature, the musician and the hunter” (Backman “Us Against You”, 40). This can be compared to how Foucault uses the example of the garden for this principle, where different species of plant from different parts of the world can be cultivated to form one cohesive whole. Maya was not born in Beartown, and although Ana grew up there, she never fit into the society. In *Beartown*, it is argued that their mutual understanding is rooted in the fact that “they’re both unfathomably complex” (261).

Later, when Peter reflects on their friendship, he states that the only thing Maya and Ana had in common as girls was their protectiveness over their names (Backman “Beartown”, 315). As children, Maya preferred to stay inside in the warmth, while Ana thrived outside in the forest. In their friendship, therefore, inside and outside are juxtaposed through characterisation. These different spaces are in themselves incompatible, but through mutual affection and acknowledgement, it is possible to combine them into one space of friendship. Ana teaches Maya how to be outside in the forest, taking her out to hunt and drive in snowmobiles, whereas Maya makes inside more comfortable for Ana by playing her music. Their personal safe spaces therefore approach each other when they spend more time together. When they are separated, for instance after Kevin’s party, however, they can be seen to retreat to their own spaces. Ana takes comfort in the forest, in the vicinity of her dogs, while Maya stays in her bed under the covers. This shows how the heterotopia of their friendship combines different spaces that seem to be incompatible, but complement each other in the context of the friendship.

The fourth principle of heterotopia states that a heterotopia has to be a space outside of regular time. In the case of the girls’ friendship, this is done through indefinitely accumulating time in the form of memories of their younger selves. This accumulation of time can be seen in the way the characters often reflect on their childhood friendship and how their lives have changed since then. The accumulation of time is tied to the physical spaces the characters inhabit. In *The Winners*, Maya comes

home from studying when she hears Ramona has died. Maya and Ana walk to the funeral together, over the jogging track where Maya threatened to kill Kevin as revenge two years before: “The two young women trample over the memories and two invisible little girls pad after them. Because they’re always walking behind us: the children we were before the worst that has happened happened” (Backman “The Winners”, 319). The accumulation of time becomes a physical phenomenon here, and later the ‘little girls’ are said to be sitting next to Maya and Ana drinking a beer. This juxtaposes the present and the past, comparing their childhood innocence to their adult experiences, creating an experience of time outside of regular time as posed by Foucault. This can also be related to the fourth principle of heterotopia; in the heterotopia of Maya and Ana’s friendship their seemingly incompatible pasts and presents are juxtaposed. This creates an indefinite accumulation of time, which will continue to expand as the characters grow older.

The fifth principle of heterotopia is that there has to be a threshold to access, which can be achieved through rituals or doors. Doors and entrances are an important literary element in the friendship between Maya and Ana. As mentioned before, Maya and Ana’s personal spaces of comfort are vastly different: Ana is most at home in the forest, and Maya would rather be inside next to the radiator. As such, many important moments happen in doorways. For instance, when Ana visits Maya for the first time after the rape, Maya is in bed: “There’s a knock on her bedroom door and Maya pretends to be asleep, until she sees who’s standing in the doorway” (Backman “Beartown”, 259). Their first moment of reconciliation after the party therefore happens on the threshold between Maya and Ana’s spaces.

In addition, much of their friendship takes place at Maya’s house, because it is safer than Ana’s. Therefore, in order to have access to the friendship, Ana has to physically step into Maya’s space, through the door, with an additional obstacle to access being Kira and Peter, who, although they clearly love Ana, also feel a need to protect their family as a unit. After Kira has sent Ana home for a while in order to spend time as a family, Maya goes to Ana’s house. Here, her discomfort at being outside becomes palpable; as Ana opens the door to her house she sees Maya “standing outside with her arms wrapped tightly around her chest” (Backman “Beartown”, 391). This is another point of

reconciliation that occurs in a doorway, emphasising the significance of both their separate worlds and the way they interact, but are still separate entities. The last moment of reconciliation between Maya and Ana, after their fight when Ana outs Benji as queer online, also happens in Ana's doorway, after Benji has told Maya to forgive her. Maya knocks on Ana's door and without stepping foot inside, orders her to put on her running gear, which Ana does without questioning it and this is said to be what "saves their friendship" (Backman, "Us Against You", 361). The importance of doorways as a connecting element between Maya and Ana's own spaces shows the way the heterotopia of their friendship is formed through thresholds to access, which can only be achieved by knocking on each other's doors and standing in each other's doorways.

The sixth and final principle of heterotopia is that it has to exist in relation to all other places, creating a space of illusion. In the case of Maya and Ana's friendship, this space of illusion can be related to the way in which the equality that is characteristic of their friendship, as well as a fundamental element of friendship in academic literature, is constructed through their friendship. This phenomenon has been described in the first section of this chapter. I argued there, that the produced character of this equality emphasises the societal inequality between the Maya and Ana when a rupture occurs. As the two characters retreat to their own spaces, their unequal status becomes more clear. In this sense, the equality between them can be seen as a space of illusion, which only exists in context of the friendship, and is upheld by their own invented rituals and promises. Therefore, alternative rules apply within their friendship compared to outside of it, which is characteristic of a heterotopia.

This chapter has shown how the friendship between Maya and Ana functions as an alternative to the hegemonic masculinity rooted that is at the forefront in Beartown norms and values. I have argued that, in absence of a physical alternative space such as the Bearskin, the female characters have to resort to other types of alternative spaces, such as friendship. Although this is not a physical space, it can be analysed using Foucault's concept of heterotopia, and as such can serve as one. In the next and final chapter of this thesis, I will explore other female characters' alternatives to Beartown's masculinity, focusing on Ramona and Kira.

Chapter 3: Other Feminine Challenges to Hegemony

The second chapter of this has focused on the way friendship provides an alternative space for female characters in the masculine culture of Beartown society. Not every character in this trilogy, however, has a similar friendship to that of Maya and Ana. Therefore, a question that can be asked is; in what ways do the other female characters in the *Beartown* trilogy challenge hegemonic masculinity, and how do they cope with the absence of space for them?

In this chapter, I will explore three ways in which the dominant masculine culture in Beartown is challenged by other women in the novels. Firstly, the movements and interactions of many of the female characters are described as being soft and fluid, compared to the harshness and violence of a contact sport like ice hockey. Secondly, the female characters show up for each other in hard times, despite their differences. Important instances of this are Kira doing household tasks for grieving families after funerals and the women of Beartown forming a circle around Alicia to protect her from any harm in *The Winners*. Lastly, it is the women in *Beartown*, specifically Kira and Hannah, who take the initial steps in reconciling Beartown and Hed after years of mutual hate.

3.1. Gentle and Tender: Women's Soft Movements

The first way in which the women of the *Beartown* trilogy challenge the hegemonic masculinity present in Beartown culture is by moving and interacting with each other in tender, soft ways. This is in direct contrast with the rough interactions and violence that are characteristic of forms of masculinity encouraged by ice hockey culture.

In their 2020 book *The Tough Standard: Hard Truths About Masculinity and Violence*, Ronald F. Levant and Shana Pryor analyse the roots of this violent character of male interactions. They argue: “By rejecting anything stereotypically feminine, men and boys wind up rejecting, suppressing, and feeling ashamed of essential parts of themselves that are considered feminine – such as empathy, kindness, and compassion” (Levant and Pryor 103). This finding is supported in Martin D. Schwartz’s article “Masculinities, Sports, and Violence Against Women: The Contribution of Male Support Theory”. He writes that “boys are taught that failure is synonymous with anything feminine” (Schwartz 692). The shame that is associated with failure and femininity is clearly present in

Beartown. Players are pushed to play through any injuries, because showing pain shows weakness: “they’re not afraid of it, but are actively looking forward to it” (Backman “Beartown”, 219). When they fall in practice, they are told to “stand up like a man” (115). When Kevin is introduced in *Beartown*, this toughness is discussed. The first introduction of his character talks of when, after missing a shot on an open goal during his first match, he went out on the ice at night and practiced for hours out of frustration and shame, getting frostbite as a seven-year-old. Rather than being consoled however, this behaviour was celebrated: “He was seven years old and everyone already knew that he had the bear inside him” (8). Afterwards, his parents installed a small ice rink in their garden to encourage him to train more, which shows that over-training is stimulated.

All these instances show that any weakness shown by Beartown hockey players is frowned upon, creating hard and rough people. When preparing the boys’ team for their match against a much stronger opponent, coach David is “punching his clenched fists in the air” (Backman, “Beartown”, 159). The team is described as “a stamping, banging, panting horde” and they are said to take the ice by storm (160). These descriptions show that the movements of the characters are aggressive and violent, although not necessarily in a negative way; this aggression can be seen as an essential characteristic of ice hockey. When this violent way of moving is transferred from the sphere of ice hockey into the characters’ daily lives, however, it becomes detrimental to those around them. The violence causes fights between different groups of characters, for instance between Hed and Beartown supporters. The most extreme example of these rough and violent movements is the rape, where Kevin’s movements are described as tight and forceful, depriving Maya of oxygen and tearing open her blouse: “he touched her body as if it didn’t belong to her” (205). This shows how the rejection of femininity and the embracement of hegemonically masculine ways of interacting cause harmful situations for the women in Beartown.

In contrast, the movements of the female characters in the *Beartown* trilogy are softer and more fluid than those of the men. When Ana consoles Maya after she has been raped, she “cups her friend’s face gently” and Maya “wipes Ana’s tears” (Backman “Beartown”, 263). This shows a direct contrast with the harsh movements of Kevin a few pages earlier. Later, even though Maya is treated

badly by most of Beartown's citizens after she speaks up about her experience with Kevin, Ann-Katrin, the nurse in the hospital, treats her in a friendly way, similar to the interactions between Ana and Maya. Even though Ann-Katrin is normally distant to her patients out of professionalism, she now introduces herself softly and "puts her hand tenderly against the girl's cheek" (288). This shows that the gentleness of Beartown's female characters is not limited by friendship, but is also shared between characters that cannot be seen as friends when applying the definitions proposed in the introduction of this thesis.

The most explicit way in which the respectful physical interactions between women in *Beartown* are portrayed, is through the martial arts school that Jeanette sets up. Jeanette, although being a teacher in Beartown when the novels are set, used to be a professional fighter. After Maya is raped, she believes that the town needs to diversify its range of sports, starting with martial arts. When Maya's brother Leo realises the extent of her trauma, he introduces her to Jeanette and martial arts. Although martial arts are also characterised by rough movements, in which it is similar to the violence of hegemonic masculinity, its intentionality differentiates it. Jeanette emphasised the importance of trust and love in martial arts, arguing that these are essential elements "because we borrow each other's bodies" (Backman "Us Against You", 285). This directly contrasts martial arts to the violence of hegemonic masculinity. Whereas Kevin took Maya's body away from her, "as if it didn't belong to her", here the term 'borrowed' is used (Backman "Beartown", 205). Not only does this emphasise consent and trust, it also implies reciprocity. This reciprocity enables the two parties to react to each other in a respectful way, fostering trust and love between them. When Maya first meets Jeanette in the martial arts studio, she does not respond well to aggressive physical contact. Sensing this, Jeanette "reaches out her hand and touches her" (Backman "Us Against You", 385). This gentle physical contact allows Maya to start healing from her trauma. In this way, the soft movements of Jeanette and the consent associated with martial arts are direct challenges to hegemonic masculinity in the way it is presented in *Beartown*.

3.2. Acts of Service: Showing Up for Each Other

The second way in which the female characters in *Beartown* challenge the hegemonic masculinity is by showing up for each other in hard times, despite their differences. A recurring instance of this, is Kira helping grieving families cook and wash dishes after funerals. When Ann-Katrin, the nurse and mother of one of the hockey players, dies, she helps Ann-Katrin's friend Fatima in the kitchen to cook for her grieving husband and children. This process is repeated when Vidar, Ana's boyfriend, is killed and Kira helps his family wash dishes.

Although Ann-Katrin and Kira can be seen as friends, or at least allies, this is not the case for Kira and Vidar's family. Vidar is Teemu's younger brother, and Teemu is the leader of the gang called 'The Pack' in Beartown. The Pack consists of men in Beartown who are mostly excluded from the hegemonic masculinity as described in the first chapter of this thesis. They are nonetheless big hockey fans and do take part in the violence and aggression that is typical of Beartown's hegemonic masculinity. When they are introduced in *Beartown*, it immediately becomes clear how violent they are: "there are never more than thirty or forty of them, yet that's enough to require extra police at A-team games in order to guarantee security" (Backman "Beartown", 125). Teemu, although childhood friends with Peter, is opposed to his influence in Beartown hockey and is the mind behind the threats to the Andersson family in *Us Against You*.

When sponsors threaten to pull their investments out of Beartown hockey due to its violent reputation, Peter offers to demolish the standing area in the rink – the unofficial space dedicated to The Pack. In one of the opening chapters of the book, Kira is called by a moving company, and finds out that Teemu has put their house up for sale. Later in the novel, The Pack leaves a box containing a rifle cartridge on the Andersson's doorstep, clearly insinuating hate and violence. Although directed to Peter, it is Kira who finds the cartridge and confronts Teemu about it. Threatening him with legal repercussions she warns: "If you come after my family, I'll come after *your* family", intimidating him with her knowledge of his mother's drug addiction. (Backman "Us Against You", 300). Aside from challenging the gender norms of Beartown, where Kira is regarded only as 'Peter's wife', by claiming her role as a mother and a lawyer, she also takes back the space of her house. In a society where

women, as mentioned before, have no designated space, this is a challenge to the hegemonic form of masculinity by taking back a space that she has made to be her own.

The animosity between Teemu and Kira is put aside after Ann-Katrin's funeral, when Teemu offers her and Fatima to help them cook. Kira allows him in the kitchen, proposing a sort of truce: "They don't make peace, but they take a break" (346). Then, when Vidar dies, this scene is repeated. Kira is waiting on Teemu's doorstep when he returns home after the funeral, and immediately goes to the kitchen to help him cook and wash the dishes, without speaking to him or his mother. At this point, although Kira shows up for Teemu and helps him practically, their relationship cannot be called a friendship. There is no sign of mutual affection between the two parties, and the motives for their relationship are instrumental. Still, by recognising Teemu's need for care, Kira challenges ideas of hegemonic masculinity, which would frame this need as a weakness, as mentioned in the previous section. In addition, by overcoming the hate and animosity between characters that represent different social and cultural positions within Beartown, she challenges a system that perpetuates violence between these groups.

Another moment in which the women in the *Beartown* series show care for each other is in the final pages of *The Winners*. Rather than acting individually like Kira, however, in this moment the women form a collective challenge to Beartown's violence by protecting Alicia. Alicia is first introduced at the end of *Beartown*, and is the first member of the newly formed girls' hockey team. At four years old, she shows great talent, but she is held back by her physically and emotionally abusive parents. Sune, the old hockey coach, takes her under his wing and she becomes partial to Benji. Throughout *Us Against You* and *The Winners*, the bond between the little girl and Benji intensifies, and in the end they call each other their best friends. A domino effect of violence and destruction that has its roots in hegemonic masculinity results in the killing of Benji as he attempts to tackle a shooter to the ground in the locker room before a game between Hed and Beartown. Alicia witnesses this event, and as everyone gathers around Benji, Maya carries her away from the scene: "Maya just wants to protect her from the blood and the images and the memories" (Backman "The Winners", 645). As she takes Alicia into the forest and embraces her, she is followed by an entire herd of women from both

Hed and Beartown as they form a ring of bodies around the two girls: “mothers and big sisters from the whole forest ran here to protect her...it’s [evil] going to have to go through every last one of them” (646). In this scene, the women in *The Winners* collectively take a stand against the violence that is perpetuated by hegemonic masculinity by prioritising care over retribution.

3.3. Reconciling Hed and Beartown

In the first chapter of this thesis, I have explained how hegemonic masculinity in Beartown results in a poor relationship between the hockey teams of Hed and Beartown. Throughout the entire trilogy, this rivalry is cause of violence beyond the ice rink, but it comes to a climax in *The Winners*. Set two years after *Beartown* and *Us Against You*, Beartown Hockey has accumulated sponsors and other financial aid, while Hed Hockey is struggling financially. The novel opens to a storm that destroys the roof of the Hed rink, leaving their teams without a space to practice. As a result, the two clubs have to share the rink in Beartown, cutting down on their practice times, which creates even more friction between the teams. As Hed Hockey struggles to financially recover, and politicians try to reconcile the two clubs, plans are made to merge the two clubs into a new one. This is, however, not made public and instead the narrative is spread that politicians want to shut down Hed Hockey and keep Beartown. This intensifies the hatred between the two clubs. In the end, the women in *Beartown*, in particular Kira and Hannah, take the lead in reconciling Hed and Beartown, allowing the clubs to take a stand against the local politicians. On a personal level, both women set aside their mutual animosity in order to help Ana and Hannah’s daughter Tess.

The Winners centres a similar family to the Anderssons living in Hed. Although they are of minimal significance to this thesis, it is important to note that this family serves as a mirror-image to the Anderssons. Peter and his counterpart Johnny are both former hockey players, and although Peter stayed in the environment of hockey while Johnny became a fire fighter, they are both still passionately involved in their respective clubs. Kira is mirrored by Hannah, who is a midwife at the hospital in Hed, and both women struggle with the growing distance in the relationship to their daughter: Maya moved away to study music in the south of Sweden, while Tess aspires to study law. Both mothers feel as if they are insufficiently able to support their daughters due to their different

interests and high demand jobs. This similarity between them helps them connect to each other, and reconcile Hed and Beartown.

After an accidental physical altercation between Johnny and Peter, Kira visits Hannah to reconcile and propose a way of uniting Hed and Beartown to save both of their clubs. When Kira first approaches Hannah, Hannah is hesitant and Kira notes that “even the women in Hed speak as if they’re ready to start fighting at any moment” (Backman “The Winners”, 571). This shows that despite her intent of reconciling with Hannah, she does share Beartown’s prejudice against the inhabitants in Hed. Using the word ‘even’ in this phrase implies that Hannah’s hesitancy surprises Kira, expecting the animosity of Hed towards Beartown to be less explicit in women. This expectation may exist because of the idea that the violence between Hed and Beartown is rooted in their competitive relationship in the sphere of hockey which has penetrated daily lives. As argued in the first chapter of this thesis, the sphere of hockey is mostly determined by male voices, perpetuating the hegemonic masculinity that favours the image of masculinity presented by hockey players. As such, women have little space in this environment.

This interaction, however, shows that even though women are excluded, hockey’s culture does influence their perceptions of each other. During the conversation, Kira discovers that the girl who approached her about studying law is Hannah’s daughter, which allows her to relate to her more: “she knows how it feels to have a child who lives in a world you don’t understand” (573). Hannah, however, still doubts Kira’s intentions, displaying jealousy when she mentions her daughter and her willingness to help her in ways Hannah is unable to. When Hannah mentions Ana, who helped her at a birth during the storm, and finds out Kira’s personal connection to her, however, a sense of equality is found between the two women: Hannah is able to help Ana further her interest in healthcare, while Kira will be able to support Tess while studying law. As such, the two women reconcile through being able to care for the girls in their opposite communities, which can also be seen as the first step in reconciling the supporters of Hed and Beartown hockey.

Kira’s intentions of reconciling Hed and Beartown go further than her personal reconciliation with Hannah, however. The accident between Johnny and Peter, although unintentional, looked violent

in the context of riots at a hockey match between the two clubs. Knowing the importance of both men in their respective clubs, Kira tells Hannah that she is “worried that people will think they were fighting. That could trigger even more trouble” (Backman “The Winners”, 574). To prevent more violence between the clubs, Kira plans to announce the merger plans to the citizens of both Beartown and Hed. This would, instead of fuelling the hate between the clubs, direct the animosity towards the politicians that proposed the merger, and in addition, give the two clubs a common imperative of saving both clubs.

As word of the plans spreads, Kira and Hannah start leading a torchlit procession through both towns, with hundreds of fans of both Hed and Beartown protesting the merger together. Both groups shout the same slogan: “a classic war cry between the towns, but it’s being aimed in another direction now” (584). The demonstration is joined by every layer of Beartown and Hed society, including women and failed hockey players, who are normally excluded from the hegemonic masculinity of the hockey culture. As Maya joins the procession with her friends she realises that in Beartown and Hed “a hockey club isn’t a hockey club, it’s everyone you know” (586). This shows how Kira and Hannah, at least momentarily, have succeeded at creating an inclusive environment surrounding hockey, where everyone can be involved in the same way. As such, Kira and Hannah opened up the space of hockey for women, who are normally excluded because of hegemonic masculinity, by personally reconciling through care and compassion for each other.

This shows that the previously mentioned characteristics of empathy, kindness, and compassion that Levant and Pryor presented as feminine attributes representing weakness in masculine cultures in their article, in the end allowed for (temporary) inclusivity in the hockey environment and reconciliation between Hed and Beartown. As such, it can be argued that the women in *Beartown*, in particular Kira and Hannah, cope with the absence of space by infiltrating it with their own values of care and support.

Conclusion

Academic attention to friendship has come and gone throughout the years, from being centred around the male experience in Greek antiquity, to becoming a central form of community in feminist scholarship, as for instance Marilyn Friedman and bell hooks have shown. This thesis follows the thought that female friendship can be a disruptive force in societies where women are marginalised. Further inquiry into male friendship and its potential for disruption can be useful when addressing friendship in general, but has not been part of this thesis. Instead, this thesis has explored the ways in which the female characters in the *Beartown* trilogy by Fredrik Backman subvert the ideological ideas that are associated with the values of hegemonic masculinity perpetuated by hockey culture.

The friendship between Maya and Ana subverts the values of hegemonic masculinity in two main ways. First of all, the friendship between Maya and Ana forwards equality and affection. Even though the girls are not of equal economic or social status outside their friendship, they have created a produced sense of equality between them that challenges values perpetuated by hegemonic masculinity, which is a hierarchical system that prefers one type of masculinity above all others. The mutual physical affection between Maya and Ana creates an atmosphere of comfort and care, both of which are not part of hegemonic masculinity in *Beartown*.

Secondly, the loudness in Maya and Ana's relationship in terms of laughter and giggles is in direct contrast with the culture of shame and silence that is perpetuated in the hockey environment. In addition, the girls are able to take back their childhood when giggling, even though the violence that accompanies hegemonic masculinity has forced them into adulthood. It can thus be concluded that a different set of rules apply to Maya and Ana within their friendship and outside of it. I have argued that this is akin to occupying a separate space, something that the female characters in *Beartown* are rarely able to do.

Therefore, the friendship between Maya and Ana can be seen as a heterotopia, using Foucault's term from his essay *Of Other Spaces*. The men in *Beartown* who do not fit into the picture of hegemonic masculinity have the heterotopia of the Bearskin, as analysed in the first chapter of this thesis. The Bearskin, as a space outside of regular space, becomes a space where the undesirable male

bodies of Beartown can go. In the second chapter of this thesis, I have shown how the friendship between Maya and Ana can be seen to fit every principle of heterotopia that Foucault proposes in a similar way to the Bearskin. In creating a space that is personal to Maya and Ana, they satiate the lack of space they are given with friendship, and give themselves an alternative to hegemonic masculinity.

Most female characters in *Beartown*, however, are not written to have this kind of friendship on the page. They can be seen to subvert the values of hegemonic masculinity in ways similar to friendship, yet fundamentally different. First of all, the female characters in *Beartown* are characterised as being softer and more gentle than hegemonic masculinity permits the men to be, which can be seen specifically in their movements and interactions. Whereas the movements and interactions between male characters are generally forceful and violent, the female characters interact in ways that are foregrounded by tenderness and care for each other. This can be seen in the interactions between Maya and Ana within their friendship, but also by female characters that do not have this bond, such as Ann-Katrin and Jeanette. As such, this gentleness between female characters can be seen as a challenge to the violence of hegemonic masculinity in *Beartown*, when women refuse to act in the aggressive ways of ice hockey.

Another way in which women in *Beartown* challenge hegemonic masculinity is by showing up for each other despite their differences, both individually and collectively. Whereas hegemonic masculinity is motivated by the success of the individual, resulting in a win-at-all-cost-attitude, the actions of the women in *Beartown* are more communal. The competitive character of hegemonic masculinity creates animosity between different groups of people, as becomes clear between the supporters of Beartown and Hed, but the women of Beartown show an incentive for reconciliation and mutual care. This care is undervalued in Beartown's hegemonic masculinity, creating the possibility for the women of Beartown to subvert its violently masculine values.

Finally, in *The Winners*, Kira and Hannah take the initiative in the reconciliation of Hed and Beartown by first reconciling on a personal level, and then cooperating to organise a joint demonstration with the two towns. By including all citizens of Hed and Beartown, instead of only the

players that fit within the mould of hegemonic masculinity, they subvert the values of hegemonic masculinity and create a space that belongs to everyone.

From these findings, it can be concluded that even though friendship is an effective way of providing alternative spaces to female characters who are excluded from the mainstream spaces that have values of hegemonic masculinity present in Beartown attached to them, it is not a prerequisite. Female characters can also challenge these values by foregrounding care, mutuality, and reconciliation despite the absence of friendship. These three characteristics are, however, also part of a ‘complete friendship’, as seen in the second chapter of this thesis. This shows that affection and equality are essential in differentiating a regular interaction between characters from a true friendship. Voluntariness is in this case less significant, because most of the interactions between the characters as analysed in the third chapter of this thesis have been voluntary. In addition, it can be concluded that the interactions between the characters are the basis of their challenge to hegemonic masculinity, rather than the characters individually. This suggests that the female characters in the *Beartown* trilogy pose a challenge to the individualistic hegemonic masculinity most visibly and strongly when cooperating, both as friends and as acquaintances.

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