University of Alberta

Writing (Fictional) Lives: The Relationship between Biography and Fiction in the Work of Carol Shields

by

Amy Stafford

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English and Film Studies

©Amy Stafford
Fall 2009
Edmonton, Alberta

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Libraries to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only. Where the thesis is converted to, or otherwise made available in digital form, the University of Alberta will advise potential users of the thesis of these terms.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis and, except as herein before provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatsoever without the author's prior written permission.

Examining Committee

Nora Foster Stovel, English and Film Studies

Patricia Demers, English and Film Studies

Lynn Penrod, Modern Languages and Cultural Studies

Abstract

This thesis examines the intersections between biography and fiction in three novels and one biography by Carol Shields: *Small Ceremonies*, *Swann*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Jane Austen*. By writing about biography and biographers in each novel, Carol Shields foregrounds the subject of biography and emphasizes its reliance on imagination and creative interpretation. At the same time, she stresses the deficiencies in the factual records of Jane Austen's life in her biography. Although biography is considered to be the more factual of the two genres, Shields establishes that only fiction has the power to portray people's inner lives, and that certain truths are therefore accessible only through fiction. Shields is especially interested in using fiction to recover the life stories of women, which have often been lost from historical record.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 - *Small Ceremonies*: Portrait of the Biographer as a "Domestic" Woman 12

Chapter 2 - *Swann: A Mystery* - In Search of a Lost Poet 26

Chapter 3 - *The Stone Diaries*: Invisible Woman 51

Conclusion 73

Works Cited 78

Introduction

> And then she would have to write a thesis, and I would become a woman writing about a woman writing about women writing, and that would lead straight to an echo chamber of infinite regress . . . the vision multiplied, but in receding perspective. No. (Shields, *Unless* 268-9)

Carol Shields was a woman who often wrote about women writing about women's writing. This metafictional fascination with female storytellers is a defining characteristic of Shields's work in all genres, from her first biography, *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision* (1977) to her final novel, *Unless* (2002). Although Shields wrote about women writers as both a biographer and a novelist, she preferred the fictional mode. In an interview with Marjorie Anderson, she explains her belief that certain truths about women's lives can be told only through the redeeming power of fiction:

> It's through fiction that I've learned about the lives of women. And about how people think; biography and history have a narrative structure, but they don't tell us much about the interior lives of people. This seems to me to be fiction's magic, that it attempts to be an account of all that cannot be documented but is, nevertheless, true. (Anderson 71)

Later, in her biography of Jane Austen, she emphasizes that biography, too, can help to illuminate a person's life, though not in its traditional, restrictive form. Only by acknowledging and accepting its capacity for and reliance on creativity

and imagination can biography depict "the genuine arc of a human life" (Shields, *Jane Austen* 11).

It is important to pause here and define the terms of reference in this discussion. When I refer to fiction, I am doing so in its broadest sense, as "any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that in fact happened" (Abrams 94). Fiction, in this sense, includes poetry as well as short stories and novels, and is traditionally posited as the opposite of history or biography, which supposedly consists of a "sequence of facts" (Abrams 173). Furthermore, when I refer to biography I mean "the written record of the life of an individual" (*OED*), and I include autobiography in that definition because it is also the record of a life, though written by the subject herself. Unless I indicate otherwise, then, I am always referring to both biography and autobiography when I use the term "biography." I often use the term "narrative" to describe the substance of biography and fiction because, as Shields argues, they may be structured differently, but the goal of both genres is to tell stories, or narratives.

The terms "truth" and "fact" are used self-consciously in this analysis, because Shields's work challenges the meaning of those words. Biography is conventionally acknowledged to be a "true" account while fiction is explicitly "not put forward as assertion of fact, and therefore [is] not subject to the criterion of truth or falsity that applies to sentences in nonfictional discourse" (Abrams 95). However, the terms "truth" and "fact" are avowedly problematic even in terms of biography or history, since all knowledge is man-made. Facts are only facts

because most people have agreed that they are "true," so "truth" is never really objective. Shields therefore challenges the strict categorization of biography as "true" and fiction as "false" since she believes these separations to be somewhat arbitrariy. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that these generic conventions are generally considered to be useful and irrefutable.

Shields's experience as a writer of both biography and fiction gave her the opportunity to observe the similarities between the two genres and to judge their relative merits. As a result, her work is preoccupied with tearing down barriers between the two genres and emphasizing their intersections. In *Small Ceremonies* (1976), *Swann* (1987), *The Stone Diaries* (1995), and *Jane Austen* (2001), Shields reveals that biography does not merely influence or interact with fiction; it *is* fiction. Fiction, on the other hand, is the most useful form of biography for Shields and is also, in her view, the medium through which life stories can be most meaningfully told. Furthermore, Shields's characters demonstrate that we cannot think of our lives or the lives of others without fictionalizing them because, in order to process reality, we must think of it in terms of a narrative structure. Daisy Goodwill in *The Stone Diaries*, for example, is "thinking—not writing—her own life story" (Shields, "Foreword" XVIII). In other words, we are always thinking in terms of biography; we are always shaping our life stories and the stories of others into coherent narratives in our own imaginations.

There is certainly no shortage of written record on Shields's opinion about the interplay between fiction and biography. She believes that making distinctions between the two genres is "laborious and futile" because

> the two genres are inextricably locked together. It may be that there is no such thing as pure autobiography or pure fiction, but only varying degrees of assimilated and transformed experience. It may be that real events are never freed of personal interpretation or imaginary extension, just as imagination finds its definitions and reference points in individual reality. (Shields, "Three Canadian Women" 54)

However, as Shields notes, most people have trouble letting go of their preconceived notions about the distinction between biography (an accurate representation of reality) and fiction (pure invention). She says, "we continue, even today, to be troubled by a perceived dichotomy between what is called 'reality' – those quotes again – and what is known as fiction" (Shields, "Narrative Hunger" 25). Needless to say, Shields's writing relentlessly deconstructs this dichotomy. Her work illustrates the many ways that reality, our real lives, shape our writing and reading of fiction and how, in turn, fiction "dramatizes experience . . . [with] colour, interpretation, and political selection" ("Narrative Hunger" 24).

Fiction’s greatest asset, or "magic," as Shields refers to it, is to illuminate the parts of life that cannot be explored by other types of narrative or by reality itself. Thus, Shields argues, fiction is most useful when unhindered by demands of realism or generic form. Its legitimacy comes from its ability, not only to mirror the world, but also to access things not otherwise available to us.

As an academic Shields was, of course, very familiar with the large bodies of literary criticism that evolved during her writing career. It will be helpful here to provide a short, general summary of some of the theories that offer insight into

her work. One of the most obvious fields of interest in terms of the relationship between biography and fiction is biographical theory. Autobiography and biography have always been controversial genres. Theorists, as well as many biographers themselves, have been quick to point out the problems with a genre that declares itself to be a definitive account of "a stable, coherent and unified self" (Neuman 1). For example, the noted biographer, Richard Holmes, says that the "bastard form—Biography" was born when "Invention formed a love-match with truth" ("Biography" 15). In the passage below from his article "Biography: Inventing the Truth" (1995), Holmes summarizes the fictional nature of biography:

> Biographers' work is based on inherently unreliable sources. Memory itself is fallible; memoirs are inevitably biased; letters are always slanted towards their recipients; even private diaries and intimate journals have to be recognized as literary forms of self-invention rather than an 'ultimate' truth of private fact or feeling. The biographer has always had to construct or orchestrate a factual pattern out of materials that already have a fictional or reinvented element. (17)

Shields is more than aware of these pitfalls in biography, and she brings them into sharp relief in her work, as we will see.

In an interview with Eleanor Watchel in 1999, Shields explains why *Swann* makes such a significant structural departure from her previous novels. She says:

> When I wrote that book, I was reading a lot of postmodern criticism, which can be very damaging to a writer, but at the same time, it had this effect: it made me realize how accommodating the novel form is. I had written four quite traditional novels, and suddenly it seemed to me that the novel could be much more elastic, and it could contain more. (Shields, "Throttled" 118)

We can certainly see the legacy of that criticism in her agenda to blur the lines between fiction and biography. *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries*, especially, reflect a poststructuralist tendency to undermine the "traditional claims for the existence of self-evident foundations that guarantee the validity of knowledge and truth" (Abrams 238). Roland Barthes's notion of the death of the author is a particularly relevant concept in terms of both *Swann*, in which the author Mary Swann is literally dead, and *The Stone Diaries*, "from which [Daisy], the subject [of her own autobiography], had been subtracted" (Shields, "Foreword" XVIII).

In "The Death of the Author" Barthes argues that to "give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" because we look for the "single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" in the text (Barthes 188). He therefore calls for the "death" of the author, or the discounting of the author's biography and intentions in interpretations of that text. Instead, Barthes argues, the meaning of the text should be left to the readers to determine for themselves.

There is, in fact, a great deal of material in these novels that privileges the reader's responses to a given text over a reliance on a work's "achieved structure

of meaning" (Abrams 256). There are countless occasions on which a character's "objective" reading of a text "turns out to be based on a response that is not determined by the text, but is instead a 'subjective process' determined by the distinctive personality of the individual reader" (Abrams 258). In other words, there is no single, absolute truth to be discovered in a text, but multiple truths, "a proliferation of meaning," created by the readers' interpretations (Hammill 194).

It is important to note, however, that Shields never simply endorses a single theory. For example, the absence of Daisy from her own story in *The Stone Diaries* is not presented as the inevitable conclusion of a postmodernist text, but as a feminist statement on the regrettable loss of women's stories. For Shields, Daisy's absence represents an "army of women" of the twentieth century who were "mainly voiceless, they were defined by the people around them" (Shields, "Always" 51). Feminist theories are obviously highly relevant when studying the work of an author who is so preoccupied with women's lives in general and with women's writing specifically. Shields's texts are always engaged in a feminist agenda to subvert "the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women's voice, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral" (Rivkin and Ryan 528). The application of any other theory to Shields's work can always be made through a feminist lens.

I will also make note of several incidences of textual mimesis or echoes of specific words, phrases, and images, in Shields's work. These repetitions emphasize the recurring interchange between fiction and biography. I use the term "mimesis" very purposely in this instance, with the intention of bringing

Aristotle's *Poetics* to mind. I believe that, like Aristotle, Shields's work is very much concerned with the relationship between art and life and how they reflect each other, although she may disagree with his "rules about how stories must be shaped" (Shields, "Narrative Hunger" 28). Furthermore, although Shields incorporates postmodernist ideas about truth and reality into her fiction, she does not believe that fiction is devoid of truth. On the contrary, she challenges and expands traditional notions of truth because she believes that fiction is the only way to access the truths she finds most interesting: "the shape of a human life, the possibilities for self-awareness, and really, consciousness itself—the hum inside our heads" (Watchel 15).

The very fact that Shields writes so often about writers and their consciousnesses suggests that, like me, she rejects the poststructuralist ban on considering authorial intention or situation when analyzing works of fiction. As Mary Eagleton put it in her essay on Shields's short fiction, "an awareness of recent debates on authorship certainly informs her creative work," but the "theoretical language and the intellectual shenanigans of the academic author are always satirised by Shields" (70). I have therefore felt no compunction about considering autobiographical elements of her work, incorporating material from her interviews and essays into my analysis, or pondering her authorial intentions. The theories described above can be broadly applied to Shields's work, and I will draw on them throughout my analysis. However, a great deal of criticism has been written about specific novels as well, and I will therefore provide a brief overview of critical studies on each text at the beginning of the appropriate chapter.

The intermingling of fiction and biography is a theme that runs throughout all of Carol Shields's work. In her other novels and short stories there are numerous writers. We have Charleen Forrest in *The Box Garden*, Jack Bowman in *Happenstance*, Fay McLeod in *The Republic of Love*, Reta Winters in *Unless*, Meershank in "Block Out," and Camilla LaPorta in "Various Miracles," to name just a few. These characters illustrate the ways in which fiction reflects life, while it is clear that their lives are constructed, just like fiction. In *The Republic of Love*, for example, Fay searches for the "story of romance" (333) to "replace the abstract narratives she has been constructing for herself" (233). In "Blockout," Meershank borrows from his life to write his fiction, but he also discovers that he is a character in the narrative of his life. This "outrageous collision of reality and art" (93) becomes clear to him when he slips on a banana peel in Portugal and becomes “a cartoon splat” (92). As we will see, Shields writes a great deal about characters (writers and otherwise) who invent themselves just as they would a fiction. She also constantly reasserts that we need narratives to make sense of random incidents that form our lives. She argues that we need stories to avoid "smothering in our own narrative litter-bag” (Shields, "Collision" 111).

In the following three chapters, I will explore the relationship between biography and fiction in *Small Ceremonies*, *Swann*, and *The Stone Diaries*, and I will also frequently draw comparisons between these novels and Shields's biography of Jane Austen in order to emphasize the relationship between her fiction and her biographical writing.

There are biographers in all three novels: Judith Gill in *Small Ceremonies*, Morton Jimroy in *Swann*, and Daisy Goodwill in *The Stone Diaries*. There are also several academic writers—Martin Gill, Sarah Maloney, Alice and Victoria Flett—and a few fiction writers in the mix: Furlong Eberhardt, John Spalding, Mary Swann, Hilde Cruzzi, and Alice Flett. The sheer number of writer characters ensures that writing is a predominant subject. There is particular emphasis on the imaginative acts perpetrated by the biographers. In *Small Ceremonies*, especially, there is a direct comparison drawn between the inventiveness of biography and the creative act of fiction while, at the same time, there are many instances of fiction drawing on real life for inspiration. *Swann* focuses in greater detail on the fallacies of biography. It is clear that each character's attempt to grasp the truth about Mary Swann's unrecorded life is a failure. Furthermore, their interpretations of her poetry are clearly entirely subjective. By the end of the novel, however, it becomes clear that the "rewriting" of Mary Swann's life and work is just as valuable as the lost originals.

In *The Stone Diaries*, her award-winning "fictional autobiography," Shields is able to demonstrate the greatest advantage of fiction by reaching beyond the limitations of traditional autobiography. In her literary biography, *Jane Austen*, on the other hand, Shields "highlights rather than concealing the speculative element in biography" (Hammill, "Review" 145), but she simultaneously demonstrates that the genre can only reveal important truths through its fictionality. *Jane Austen* is biography in what Shields believes is its most valuable and satisfying form: the book creates a coherent and illuminating

account of Jane Austen’s life by imaginatively reinterpreting the author’s work and its connection to the few things we know about her, rather than dryly listing the meager available facts of her day-to-day life.

As useful as the work of critics can be, I also intend to make frequent use of Shields's own words, gleaned from her essays and interviews, to further illuminate her theories of fiction and biography and to elucidate the novels. It seems to me that Shields, who had no choice but to delve into "the unreachable past" of Austen's life to find clues "about the nature of the creative act," would agree that an author's own thoughts about her work, if available, should be exploited in the study of that work (*Jane Austen* 5).

Similarly, although I believe the autobiographical elements of Shields's work are an important aspect of its metafictional quality, I do not wish to fall into the trap of offering a straight autobiographical reading of the texts. Shields herself disagreed with this approach and often pointed out that it is not accurate to conflate her with her protagonists. In an interview with Eleanor Watchel, for example, she says, "I'm always concerned when people mistake my novels for my autobiography, because they're not" (Shields, "Throttled" 114). Nevertheless, it is useful to make note of the many instances of autobiographical sources in *Small Ceremonies*, *Swann*, and *The Stone Diaries*, not to imply that there is a one-to-one relationship between Shields's life and fiction but rather to demonstrate that she finds inspiration for her art in her life, like so many of her writer characters.

Chapter 1

Small Ceremonies: Portrait of the Biographer as a "Domestic" Woman

> Biography, that old buzzard, is having a field day, running along behind them picking up all the bits and pieces . . . this is life. This is biography. Nothing matters except for the harvest, the gathering in, the adding up, the bringing together, the whole story, the way it happens and happens and goes on happening. (Shields, "Collision"130)

Small Ceremonies is Carol Shields's first novel, published in 1976, just before the publication of *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision* (1977), her thesis on the life and work of Susanna Moodie. *Small Ceremonies* is a story about Judith Gill, a biographer who is also writing about Susannna Moodie. Judith is married to an English professor named Martin Gill and has two children, sixteen-year-old Meredith and twelve-year-old Richard. The novel is set in Kingston, Ontario, and takes place between September, 1972 and May, 1973. Each chapter is dedicated to one month in this period, which spans the academic year. The Gills are recently returned from a year-long sabbatical exchange in England, where they lived in the Birmingham home of the Spalding family. The Gills have brought bits of England home with them, such as their Sunday high tea ceremony and Richard's regular correspondence with the Spaldings' twelve-year-old daughter, Anita.

Judith is not the only character who writes in *Small Ceremonies*. On the contrary, between Judith and the two novelists, Furlong Eberhardt and John

Spalding, there is a great deal of writing, of both biography and fiction, in the story. Although Judith writes only the Susanna Moodie biography on paper, she also writes John Spalding's biography in her head. While in England, Judith is unable to stop herself from studying John Spalding's life with a biographer's eye, piecing together her conception of the man by examining his belongings, the unpublished manuscripts of his seven failed novels, and his writer's diary. She "filtered him through the wallpaper, the kitchen utensils, the old snapshots, the shaving equipment, distilling him from the ratty blankets" (35), and then she finds in his notebooks "the real thing; the total disclosure which is what a biographer prays for, the swift fall of facts which requires no more laborious jigsaws" (36).

Then, back in Canada, Judith borrows the plot from the most original of Spalding's novels when she is unsuccessful in attempts to write her own novel. Unbeknownst to Judith, this plot is reused again by her novelist friend Furlong Eberhardt in his commercially successful and critically acclaimed book, *Graven Images*. Prompted by her misunderstanding with him when she confronts him about the novel, Judith begins to research Furlong's history. She discovers that Furlong, "Canadian prairie novelist, the man who is said to embody the ethos of the nation, is an American!" (154), so he has "invented the past on which his autobiographical fiction is based" (Levy 192). Finally, John Spalding pays a visit to the Gills in April in order to tell them that one of his novels has been published at last and that he has based the story on the details of their lives, which he gleaned from Richard's letters to Anita.

Obviously there is a lot to be said about the "multiple levels of irony in the interplay between reality, autobiography, biography, and fiction" in *Small Ceremonies* (MacDonald 149), although there has not been a great deal of criticism written on this specific topic. For the most part, Shields's first novel seems to have been written off by critics as a domestic novel, a "delicate Jane Austenish portrait of family and friends" (MacDonald 148), and given little attention as a result. A few critics have considered it seriously in terms of other subjects, however, especially in relation to studies of Susanna Moodie and Canadian literary production.

Conny Steenman-Marcusse, for example, has described *Small Ceremonies* as "another contribution to a spate of Canadian novels plays and poems examining the difficulty that women experience in juggling different roles through the resurrection of nineteenth-century pioneering foremothers" (122). Steenman-Marcusse argues that by "projecting her own experience into the mould of Susanna Moodie" Judith's narrative draws parallels and reveals differences between her life and that of Susanna Moodie in order to explore "female identity within the framework of that intimate, yet mysterious institution of marriage and motherhood" (122). Bruce F. MacDonald argues that the novel "poses two major literary questions—one about the relationship between art and life and the second about the relationship between Shields's novel and the Canadian literary tradition" (148). MacDonald's points about the relationship between art and life are more relevant to my argument than those he makes about Canadian literature.

Faye Hammill has also given some serious thought to *Small Ceremonies* in terms of its critique of Canadian literature and "the assumptions and myths involved in the production and valuation of Canadian art" (*Literary Culture* 116). Hammill argues convincingly that Shields's first novel presents a "sceptical analysis of the Canadian literary establishment of the 1970s" and "questions the underlying assumptions of the nationalist thematic approach" to Canadian literature at the time (*Literary Culture* 116, 119).

Although these readings of *Small Ceremonies* are informative and valid, I am more interested in the metafictional quality of the novel, and in the parallels Shields draws between writing fiction and biography. Faye Hammill has also written about *Small Ceremonies* in terms of its representation of Susanna Moodie, and in this context she comments on the metafictional aspect of the text:

> We learn more from *Small Ceremonies* about the fictionalizing process inherent in the writing of lives than we do about the life in question: that of Susanna Moodie. She remains an insubstantial presence in the novel, rather than a clearly delineated character, and the reader's impression of her is filtered through Judith's imagination. (Hammill, *Literary Culture* 198)

In this passage Hammill has captured the key point that Shields makes about biography in *Small Ceremonies*. By writing about a biographer in the process of her writing, Shields is able to depict biography as a creative form, a form that requires as much imaginative interpretation as a work of fiction. Furthermore, Judith's investigations into the lives of the two novelists, John Spalding and

Furlong Eberhardt, reveal that the production of fiction relies as much on reality for its sources as biography relies on the creative act for its coherence.

In this chapter I will outline the way Shields scrutinizes the relationship between fiction and biography in *Small Ceremonies*. A close reading of the text, and especially close attention to incidents of textual echoes, reveals that parallels between the two genres are constantly drawn. I will also incorporate comparisons between the novel and Shields's own biography on Austen, which can further illuminate the overlap. This comparison suggests that traditional biography, as a search for the definitive truth of someone's life, is a futile endeavour. Finally, I will discuss the autobiographical elements of this novel. The similarities between Judith Gill and Carol Shields add a further layer of self-consciousness that reinforces Shields's theory "that there is no such thing as pure autobiography or pure fiction, but only varying degrees of assimilated and transformed experience" (Shields, "Three Canadian Women" 54).

The protagonist of *Small Ceremonies,* Judith Gill, is a successful biographer and failed novelist, who returns to and feels most comfortable in the "good pastures of biography" (6). Judith, "incorrigibly curious" (34), is obsessed with other people's narratives and seems unable to stop constructing them. Judith is a "perennial observer, slightly aside from life" (Page 173). She says, "I am watching. My own life will never be enough for me. It is a congenital condition, my only, only disease in an otherwise lucky life. I am a watcher, an outsider whether I like it or not, and I'm stuck with the dangers that go along with it. And the rewards" (179). She constantly observes those around her and is unable to stop

herself, though she acknowledges that "What I am doing is common, snoopy, vulgar" (33).

Judith identifies her compulsion to write biography, to absorb and reconstruct narratives, as a symptom of her need for more stories in her life. As she says, “my own life will never be enough for me” (179) and she traces this insatiable craving to know about the lives of others back to her origins as part of a “bleak non-storytelling family” (45). She “turned to literature out of simple malnutrition” because there “just weren’t enough” stories in her childhood (47). Shields's second novel, *The Box Garden*, is about Judith's sister, Charleen. Charleen is also a writer—a poet, this time—and she, too, believes that she and her sister suffer from a lack of storytelling in their family history. Charleen says that the two sisters are both writers because they were forced into it by this silence. She says their family was:

> stamped out of rougher materials: dullness and drudgery, ignorance and self-preservation . . . our family tree was no more than a blackened stump . . . there are no family legends, no family Bible with records of births and deaths, no brown-edged letters, no pressed flowers, few photographs and even those few stiffly obligatory." (*The Box Garden* 124)

In other words, both sisters suffer from what Shields referred to as "Narrative Hunger," or a need for storytelling. Shields says that we are always striving "for the glimpse of the human dilemma, the inaccessible stories of others" ("Narrative Hunger" 20). There is great resonance here between Judith and Daisy Goodwill from *The Stone Diaries*, who also laments the "Blood and ignorance" of her

family history and "long(s) to bring symmetry" to her life (23), which she does by writing her own fictional autobiography. However, that will be discussed further in chapter three.

This hunger is the reason that Judith cannot help but "keep poking away" into other people's lives (34). When the Gills are in England for a year, for example, Judith snoops around the Spaldings' home, conjuring up her version of John Spalding's life story. Judith says that John Spalding and his family “grew inside my head, a shifting composite leafing out like cauliflower, growing more and more elaborate, branching off like the filaments of a child’s daydream” (36). The reference here to "a child's daydream" that becomes "more and more elaborate" emphasizes the prevalence of imagination in Judith's comprehension and retelling of Spalding's life. She refers to the result as a "composite," a word that evokes the idea of composition—an artistic creation. Judith elaborates on her recreation of the man based on the artifacts she finds in his home:

> Almost against the drift of my will I became an assimilator of details and, out of all the miscellaneous and unsorted debris in the Birmingham flat, John Spalding, wiry (or so I believe him to be), university lecturer, neurotic specialist in Thomas Hardy, a man who suffered insomnia and constipation, who fantasized on a love life beyond Isabel’s loathsome douche bag, who was behind on his telephone bill – out of all this, John Spalding achieved, in my mind at least, something like solid dimensions. (35-36)

Again there are specific references here to the imaginative act. Judith "believes" him to be wiry. He is taking shape "in her mind," which is the site of all creative endeavours. She does not uncover some kind of objective, irrefutable "truth" about John Spalding's life but instead offers a plausible version of his life story. This is even clearer when Judith finally meets John Spalding and he is nothing like she imagined him: he is tall and fat rather than short and "wiry."

Judith goes through the same process of assimilating details and facts about Susanna Moodie for her biography. Again it is clear in Judith's process that biography is not an exact science or a precise account of known facts. Rather "the task of the biographer is to enlarge on available data" (35). Biography, then, is a subjective interpretation or fictive composition. Though assisted by whatever details the biographer can find, it grows largely out of the biographer's imagination.

In other words, Shields's presentation of the biographical subject is not significantly different from that of a fictionalized character in a novel. The similarity is brought into sharp, ironic relief when John Spalding turns the tables on Judith and bases his novel on the Gill family. Like Judith, he "enlarges on the available data" he has about the Gills (from the letters written to Anita by Richard), but he does so in order to write fiction, not biography. It is especially ironic that Spalding uses letters, an essential tool from the biographer's toolbox, as his source for fiction. By creating this parallel between Judith's construction of John (and his family) as an exercise of biography and John's construction of Judith (and her family) for the foundation of a novel, Shields emphasizes the fact

that fiction draws on life while biography draws on fiction. The fact that this is the first of Spalding's eight novels to be published also suggests that the only way to write good fiction is to anchor it to some degree in real life.

The similarities between biographers and fiction writers are articulated again by Judith's interactions with her friend, the famous "Canadian" novelist, Furlong Eberhardt. When Judith tries to write a novel under Furlong's supervision, she is only able to start writing by using a plot from one of John Spalding's novels. She says, "unlike biography, where a profusion of material makes it possible and even necessary to be selective, novel writing requires a complex mesh of details which has to be spun out of simple air" (66). Judith is embarrassed by her attempt and asks Furlong to destroy the manuscript. Later, Judith discovers that Furlong has used the plagiarized plot in his own novel, *Graven Images*.

When Judith confronts him, Furlong declares that "borrowing" from other writers is so natural and commonplace that it does not even need defending. Spalding "plagiarized from real life" (164) to find the subject of his novel, so novels are not "spun out of simple air," but are inspired by life (66). As Furlong says "It's open season. A free range. One uses what one can find. One takes an idea and brings to it his own individual touch. His own quality. Enhances it. Develops it" (131). Both novelists unapologetically assert that a writer must "get his material where he can find it" (165). This is exactly what Judith means when she says biographers must "enlarge on available data" (35).

The comparison between biographers and fiction writers is repeated on a

more subtle, textual level as well. There are many examples of textual echoes between passages describing biography and those describing fiction. For example, Judith explains that Susanna Moodie "presents a stout and rubbery persona" in her self-portraits, "the whole of her life glazed over with a neat edge-to-edge surface." It is the "cracks in the surface" that Judith searches for as Moodie's biographer. Judith describes herself as searching for these moments of "unconscious self-betrayal, isolated words and phrases" and then "gluing them together, here at my card table, into a delicate design which may just possibly be the real Susanna" (7).

In this passage Judith describes herself as a sleuth, which implies that she is hunting down real, tangible "clues," or facts, in her work. However, she also represents herself as an artist or designer, gluing the pieces together in a "delicate design." She is the artistic creator of a version of Susanna that may or may not be "the real Susanna." There are many similarities between the above passage and the one in which Judith describes the substance of John Spalding's novel manuscripts: "Before long a pattern emerged from all that print, the rickety frame upon which he hung his rambling stream-of-consciousness plots. Like ugly cousins they resembled each other. Their insights bled geometrically, one to the other" (37).

There is an echo between these two passages. Judith assembles moments of "unconscious self-betrayal, isolated words and phrases" while Spalding strings together "rambling stream-of-consciousness plots." The card table at which Judith writes may not be much more stable than the "rickety frame" of Spalding's stories. The geometric intertangling of insights in Spalding's fiction may be distant

relations of the "delicate design" in Judith's biography.

Furthermore, the reference to Spalding's "rickety frame" also echoes Shields's rejection of the "rickety skeleton" of traditional biography in *Jane Austen*:

> Traditionally Jane Austen's biographers have nailed together the established facts of her life—her birth, her travels, her enthusiasms, her death—and clothed this rickety skeleton with speculation gleaned from the novels, an exercise akin to ransacking an author's bureau drawers and drawing conclusions from piles of neatly folded handkerchiefs or worn gloves. (11)

This passage criticizes "traditional" biographers like Judith on two points. First, Judith does not prove herself above actually "ransacking" drawers, medicine cabinets, and even mattress springs (where she found a copy of *The Potent Male*) in the Spalding home, and she certainly drew conclusions about the Spaldings (and their sex life) from the items she found. Of course, there is also a strong connection between Shields's sentiment in this passage from *Jane Austen* and the literal ransacking and theft of an author's belongings, not to mention other absurd acts perpetrated by biographers and literary critics, in *Swann*. But I will elaborate on that in chapter two.

Judith's biography of Susanna Moodie relies very much on Moodie's "old novelettes and serialized articles" (33) and her novel, *Flora Lindsay*. She says this novel is "Susanna's own story, or at least an idealized picture of it, an autobiography in fictional form" (152). Further, she says that, by studying this

self-portrait of Moodie, she is able to "see Susanna as a young woman. But, of course, it isn't really Susanna; it's only a projection, a view of herself" (152-3). As Shields does with Austen, Judith gleans biographical material from Moodie's writing.

The irony of Shields's biography of Austen is that, although Shields claims to be shedding "light on [Austen]'s works, rather than combing the works to re-create the author" (Shields, *Jane Austen* 175), she often relies on incidents from Austen's novels to illuminate her biography, just as Judith does with Moodie. For example, Shields reinterprets the outcome of Jane Austen's relationship with Tom Lefroy, a familiar character in Jane Austen biography. It is generally believed, based on Austen's allusions to him in her letters, that she expected him to propose marriage to her. However, he was "swiftly removed by the Lefroy family, who had greater plans for this young man than marriage to an un-moneyed clergyman's daughter" (*Jane Austen* 50). Shields hypothesizes that this "episode multiplied itself again and again in [Austen's] novels, embedded in the theme of thwarted love or lost nerve" (50).

Of course, we do not have any letters by Jane Austen, or even reports of family hearsay, in which she declares that disappointed love in her novels is a reflection of her own disappointment with Lefroy. In this instance and many others, Shields embraces the right of a biographer to approach the "facts" of Jane Austen's life imaginatively and reinterpret them creatively to assemble a narrative that illuminates Austen's work. She takes "a questioning or interrogating approach" (Reid-Walsh 241) to foreground the fictive quality of biography,

putting it forth as possible supposition rather than absolute fact. As Shields herself said so many times, this fictive tracing of a life is the most valuable kind of biography.

There is also a great deal of commentary on the process of writing fiction in *Small Ceremonies*. Take, for example, Judith's dissection of the "machinery" of Spalding's plots (37) and her relentless rundown of Furlong's plot "formula" (27). In both cases we can feel Judith's disdain for the unoriginality and repetition of the novels. She tells Meredith that she can guess what happens in Furlong's novel because, "This is his tenth novel, you know, and I've read them all. Every one. So I've a pretty good idea what's in this one. The formula, you might say, is familiar" (27). About Spalding's repetitive plots she says "The rest of the books were so helplessly conventional that it was difficult for me to credit him with creativity at any level" (37). It is ironic that Judith feels such contempt for fiction writers who use literary clichés in their writing, while she freely acknowledges the creative license she takes in writing her biographies, since biography is generally considered to be the less creative and more "truthful" of the two genres. Although she feels within her rights as a biographer to elaborate on the facts of a subject's life, she disapproves of fiction writers who reuse material. By the end of the novel, however, Judith seems to change her mind as she comes to the realization that everyone needs to get his or her material from somewhere. She also recognizes through her own fictionalizing of Moodie and John Spalding that "facts are transmuted as they travel through a series of hands" (176).

The metafictional quality of Shields's texts about women writers becomes even more significant when we consider how much autobiographical material they contain. As is already clear, Judith Gill bears a striking resemblance to Carol Shields in many ways. Carol Shields is a biographer and novelist; Judith Gill is a biographer and has tried to write a novel. Carol Shields published a study of Susanna Moodie; Judith is working on a biography of Susanna Moodie. Carol Shields was married to a professor and had children; Judith is married to a professor and has children. Carol Shields spent time living in England; the Gills spend a year in England on sabbatical (MacDonald 148).

Although Shields warns us about reading her work autobiographically, the fact that so much of her personal experience has contributed to shape the protagonist of her first novel reinforces the idea that writers must find inspiration for their fiction in their own lives. Like John Spalding, Shields may have taken certain "truths" from her own life to shape her fiction, but that "truth" will be unrecognizable to the reader. Instead, the reader will be given a transmuted version of the writer's experience in the form of a wholly new fiction, which, as we know has its own, far more valuable "truth" according to Shields.

Chapter 2

Swann: A Mystery - In Search of a Lost Poet

> My first poems (pomes) were lit with a whistling blue clarity (emptiness) and they were accepted by the first magazine I sent them to. Only I knew what paste-up jobs they were, only I silently acknowledged my debt to a good thesaurus, a stimulating dictionary . . . Never, never, never did I soar on the wings of inspiration . . . But after . . . poetry became the means by which I saved my life. I stopped assembling; I discovered that I could bury in my writing the greater part of my pain and humiliation . . . And the irony, the treachery really, was that those who wrote critical articles on my books of poetry never—not one of them—distinguished between those poems I had written earlier and those that came later. (Shields, *The Box Garden* 152)

We meet three more writer characters in *Swann: A Mystery*. There is another biographer named Morton Jimroy, an academic writer named Sarah Maloney and a journalist named Frederic Cruzzi. Together with the other characters in the novel, Sarah, Jimroy and Cruzzi help to shape the image of the newly discovered poet, Mary Swann. The novel satirizes the way in which literary critics and biographers routinely pick an author's life and work apart in a futile search for some kind of ultimate "truth." But the creators of Mary Swann are eventually forced to acknowledge this futility by the disappearance of their

treasured artifacts—the physical, "real" pieces of Mary Swann's life. The theft leaves them no choice but to bind together to recreate Mary Swann, or, more importantly, her poetry. In other words, the novel privileges the process of literary biography, which places little value on the sparse and relatively insignificant, uninformative facts or artifacts of an author's life and embraces the imaginative act of recreating the author from her work.

In *Swann*, Shields continues to blur the boundary between biography and fiction as she did in *Small Ceremonies*. In this novel, she further undermines biographical processes, and, in Jimroy, she provides an example of the wrong type of biographer. Furthermore, there are "connections and echoes between the two lines of action, the researched life and the life of the researcher" (Niederhoff 71), that illustrate the way people fictionalize their own lives, imagining themselves as the main characters in their constructed life stories. Finally, *Swann* "is a story about reading and writing, about reading which is re/writing" (Godard 60). It becomes clear that each of the characters interpret Swann's poetry in his or her own way, but this is still a valuable practice. The novel privileges the idea that there can be many truths in a single work. In the end, it is this recreation of meaning by readers that helps the Symposium participants redeem the work of Mary Swann.

I will begin my analysis of the overlap between fiction and biography in *Swann* with a brief summary of the novel's narrative structure. The novel is divided into five sections. Each of the first four parts is dedicated to one of the main characters, and the fifth describes the Swann Symposium, which brings the

four main characters together for the first time. The first section introduces Sarah Maloney, a young academic woman living and teaching in Chicago. Sarah "discovered Mary Swann," a Canadian poet from rural Nadeau, Ontario, when she came across an old copy of *Swann's Songs* (30). The essay she wrote on Swann's poetry shortly after is "responsible for bringing the poet Mary Swann to public attention" (30). Sarah's section describes her career as an academic, her uncertain relationship with her boyfriend Brownie (a rare book dealer), her passion for writing letters and her correspondence with Morton Jimroy, her research on Mary Swann, and the disappearance from her house of Swann's journal. Although we learn in the first few pages that Mary Swann had died fifteen years before Sarah discovered her poems, it is not revealed until half way through this section that she was murdered by her husband. Sarah also reveals that she destroyed Swann's rhyming dictionary, given to her by Rose Hindmarch when Sarah visited Nadeau to research Swann's life.

The second section of the book is dedicated to Morton Jimroy, a biographer who has already written successful biographies on Ezra Pound and John Starman and is in the process of writing one on Mary Swann. Although a Canadian from Winnipeg, he is in California conducting weekly interviews with Frances Moore, Mary Swann's daughter. Jimroy's section describes his antagonistic relationship with his work, his failed marriage, his infatuation with Sarah Maloney (formed through their correspondence), and the visit he made to Nadeau for his research. Jimroy also has admissions to make: he has stolen one of

the only two photos of Swann from the display in Nadeau and Swann's pen from Frances Moore.

The third section of the novel is about Rose Hindmarch, active citizen of Nadeau. Rose is the "old-maid librarian" of the town and thus had a small amount of interaction with Mary Swann during her life, when Swann came to borrow books from the library (196). Rose's account includes a description of her day-to-day activities as town clerk, librarian, museum curator, etc., as well as her versions of her meetings with Sarah and Jimroy, her health issues, her creation of the Mary Swann Memorial Room, and the fact that she is the one who recommended that Mary Swann take her poems to Frederic Cruzzi, the local publisher. Rose divulges that she has exaggerated the extent of her friendship with Mary Swann in her interview with Jimroy and that the Mary Swann Memorial Room is not "authentic."

Frederic Cruzzi is a journalist and retired newspaper editor of the *Kingston Banner*. He is also the co-founder of the Peregrine Press, which he created to publish the work of undiscovered local poets. Cruzzi, now in old age and widowed, is still writing weekly columns for the *Kingston Banner*. Cruzzi's section describes his love for his wife Hildë, his career, his interaction with his friends, the creation of the Peregrine Press, his interview with Jimroy, and, finally, the night that Mary Swann brought him her poems.

Finally, we learn the story of Mary Swann's poems. Mary Swann appears at Cruzzi's door in the middle of a snow storm on December 15, 1965, and asks him to look at her poems. Cruzzi reads them through in her presence, tells her he

wants to publish them, and drives her to the bus station. We know that shortly after her arrival home that night her husband shot her, dismembered her and threw her body into a silo. In the meantime, back at the Cruzzis, Hildë returns home from ice fishing and prepares her catch for supper. After they finish eating, Cruzzi wants to show the poems to Hildë but discovers that she has used the paper bag containing Swann's work to dispose of the fish guts.

The Cruzzis then transcribe what they can from the ruined "manuscript," but Cruzzi admits that many parts of the poems were irretrievable and that they were forced to guess at or invent much that was lost. Although the other three characters have each revealed something about their tampering with Mary Swann's life, Cruzzi's admission is "the central surprise and revelation of *Swann: A Mystery*. There never was a text of Mary Swann's poems authentic to her own words" (Thomas, "'A Slight Parodic Edge'" 120). Cruzzi's section ends with the theft from his home of his file on Mary Swann, as well as his copies of *Swann's Songs*.

The final section of the novel recounts the events of the Swann Symposium, which each character has been preparing to attend. Rather than a more traditional form of narration, this final section is written as a film script, complete with stage directions and director's notes. The first director's note informs us that the film, "lasting approximately 120 minutes," may be described as a "thriller," that the main characters are "fictional creations, as is the tragic Mary Swann, *poète naïve*," and that a "subtext focuses on the more subtle thefts and acts of cannibalism that tempt and mystify the main characters" (293). As this

direction indicates, this is the section in which the mystery promised in the novel's title finally takes shape. The thefts and disappearances of Swann paraphernalia suddenly escalate, and the characters find themselves in a full-blown detective story, complete with blackouts, night prowlers, brazen burglary, and the revelation that the "villain(s)" who have been stealing the artifacts are Brownie and Lang.

Although Shields had already published two books of poetry (*Others* and *Intersect*), her biography on Moodie, a collection of short stories (*Various Miracles*) as well as four other novels (*Small Ceremonies*, *The Box Garden*, *Happenstance*, and *A Fairly Conventional Woman*), it was not until she published *Swann* in 1987 that "international readers and critics awoke to the quality of her writing—the first really glowing review Shields received came from that novel's publication in England" (Thomas, "Carol Shields" 153). Indeed, compared to the handful of articles written about *Small Ceremonies*, the amount of criticism that has been written about *Swann* seems almost overwhelming. Thanks to its experimental structure and its self-conscious critique of literary production, *Swann* readily lends itself to various theoretical interpretations. I have provided a brief summary of some of the most relevant criticism below.

Nearly all criticism focused on *Swann* acknowledges the novel's metafictional qualities and agrees that it is "centred wholly upon the question of literary origins and textual authority" (Gamble 52). Critics are extremely interested in the postmodern ideas at work in this "self-conscious parody of literary criticism" (Buss 427). In his study of Foucault's author function in *Swann*,

for example, Brian Johnson argues that the "relentless search for the dead woman 'behind' the work firmly locates the disappearance of the author as the text's central mystery" (209). Faye Hammill has written about *Swann* in the context of its parody of the "overvalorizing of Canadian authors and their elaborate quests for traces of national and regional identity in the texts" (*Literary Culture* 128), but she also recognizes that the novel "explicitly considers the relative merits of author-centred as against politically defined reading strategies" (*Literary Culture* 196). As Hammill points out, *Swann* "demonstrates [Shields's] awareness of contemporary ideas about the decentering of self and text" (*Literary Culture* 195-6).

However, many scholars have also acknowledged Shields's refusal to be hemmed in by poststructuralism or to "endors[e] a particular school of criticism at the expense of others" (Niederhoff 76). Alex Ramon, for example, notes *Swann*'s use of a "variety of postmodernist narrative strategies for its own, ultimately humanist ends" (*Liminal Spaces* 73). Ramon explains that Shields uses "postmodern elements" to "develop a fresh approach to character construction and to engage directly with moral themes" (92). Kathy Barbour agrees that *Swann* "laments the lack of personal concern, the lack of depiction of everyday realities and people, and the overemphasis on divisiveness of both postmodernism and realism" (267). Sarah Gamble has qualified the morality identified by Ramon and Barbour as an affirmation that humans need to connect with each other, and that narratives help them make those connections. Thus, for Gamble, the "true significance of the blank space left by the absent author [in *Swann* is] waiting to

be filled with a multitude of voices exchanging stories, and through them building communities, families, and lives" (59).

Similarly Burkhard Niederhoff has identified the humanizing aspects of *Swann*'s conclusion. He notes that although the search for Mary Swann's history often "seems more like a concerted effort to erase and obliterate her voice than to make it heard and understood by a wider audience . . . the final scene amounts to a surprising and paradoxical affirmation of this activity" (Niederhoff 73-5). Through their collaborative, regenerative act at the end of the Symposium, the Swann researchers are redeemed. Their recreation of Swann's work is "presented in an affirmative way, as a fundamentally important and humane activity" (Niederhoff 81). Heidi Hansson argues that the biographical impulse is also redeemed by this final scene. Her analysis of *Swann* concludes that, although there may be multiple truths about a person's life, it remains true that "the past is of vital importance to the present, and the biography of the author – however incomplete – is irrevocably bound up with our understanding of the work" (Hansson 367-8).

Swann illustrates very clearly how unreliable and tenuous the sources of biography can be. All four characters in the novel are guilty of altering the facts of Mary Swann's life by stealing, hiding, destroying or fabricating the few artifacts she leaves behind. Of course, the Cruzzis are the first offenders. They alter the poems when they transcribe the damaged originals. They "puzzled and conferred over every blot, then guessed, then invented" the missing words, lines and stanzas. In fact, the alterations go to the extent that Hilde says she can "feel what

the inside of Mary Swann's head must look like. She seemed to be inhabiting, she said, another woman's body" (281). As Helen Buss puts it, "Hilde's act of displacing Mary Swann as both poet and body begins the abduction that the others complete" ("Abducting Mary" 433).

Next Sarah destroys Swann's rhyming dictionary to protect the notion that Swann's genius is natural and unassisted. She also will not share Swann's journal with the other Swann scholars because she finds it so disappointing. She wants it to show "elucidation and grace and a glimpse of the woman Mary Swann as she drifted in and out of her poems," but it is "no more than the ups-and-downs accounting of a farmer's wife" (55).

Rose "never meant to be untruthful," but she, too, has altered the facts of Mary Swann's history. She accidentally exaggerates her friendship with Swann in her meeting with Jimroy because she is flattered by the thought that Jimroy considers her an authority (189). "They had *not* discussed—not even once—the books Mary Swann borrowed from the library. Mary Swann had *not* given Rose Hindmarch copies of her poems to read and comment upon. They had *not*—not ever—discussed their deeply shared feeling about literature or families or about nature" (190). Rose also exaggerates the "authenticity" of her Mary Swann display, which is a "visual biography of Mary Swann, and as such participates in the same impulse towards fiction and narrative" (Hammill, *Literary Culture* 197) as does Judith Gill's or Morton Jimroy's work. Due to Mary's poverty, there are very few items in her home for Rose to draw on for the display. Thus Rose was "forced to use her imagination when it came to furnishing the Mary Swann

Memorial Room" (204). Even the table, which is actually from Swann's house, is repainted. Thus every aspect of Swann's life is fabricated to some degree. But Rose believes that the "charm of falsehood is not that it distorts reality but that it creates reality afresh" (205). In other words, the act of creation is what matters, not the exact representation of reality.

Last not but least is Jimroy. As in *Small Ceremonies* Shields foregrounds the process of writing biography through her presentation of a biographer, Jimroy. As her biographer we would expect Jimroy to be Mary Swann's greatest champion, the most avid preserver of details about her life. Certainly he declares that this is his intention. However, Jimroy is possibly the worst offender in terms of excluding or misrepresenting the details he uncovers in his research about Swann. He edits Swann's letters, excluding one about mail-order underwear and another about a "nigger family" because he does not want to "deal with the peculiar ordinariness of those letters" (104). He is disturbed by the disconnect between the ordinariness of her life and the extraordinariness of her poetry: "What can be done with such unevenness? Nothing" (104). Jimroy's response to this dilemma is to exclude the details that cause this unevenness. He focuses instead on the material he can use to support his argument for the genius he wants to find in Swann's history.

We sense a disapproval in the novel for Jimroy that goes beyond his dishonest biographical tactics. He is quite an unsavoury character. He is chauvinistic but also pathetically inept in his dealings with women; he is extremely arrogant and egotistical about his work; and he is often deceitful and

malicious towards others. He delights in treating his wife Audrey condescendingly, so much so that he finally drives her away. He "amused himself by mumbling inanities to her . . . Then he would watch her face in canny delight as these remarks bounced off her like rubber bullets" (124).

He stalks both Audrey and Sarah, calling them in the middle of the night and hanging up. He feels nothing but jealousy and bile for the other academics around him. For example, after his talk at Stanford he dismisses those in the audience who dare to question him; in his thoughts he admonishes, "Crapshooter! Dunce!" in response to their questions (96). He also objectifies the attractive female questioner: "This from the slenderest of young women, lovely, lovely, those frail shoulders. Crushable. And such hair. A voice clear as bouillon. Pour forth, my beauty" (95). He condescendingly uses his "most tender, questioning manner" in his response to her (95). He blindsides Sarah during her talk at the Symposium, viciously and publicly attacking her about Swann's missing Journal. Sarah, thinking that their long correspondence has made them friends, is completely unprepared for the assault, which is brought on by Jimroy's disappointment relating to his unrealistic fantasy about her.

Worst of all, Jimroy steals the photo of Mary Swann from Rose's display in Nadeau and Swann's pen from her daughter's house. Taken all together, Morton Jimroy is not a flattering portrait of a biographer. Why then does Shields, a biographer herself, portray Jimroy in such a negative way? Does she really believe that all biographers are, like Jimroy, "greedy . . . Scavengers. Brutes" (32)? Clearly not, since neither Judith Gill in *Small Ceremonies* nor Daisy

Goodwill in *The Stone Diaries* are unlikeable. In fact, the alterations they make to their biographies are presented as justifiable and illuminating.

Our misgivings about Jimroy stem from his attempt to consume and possess Swann's life or reduce it to "one central cathartic event" (135). Despite all evidence to the contrary, he insists that this cathartic event "must exist. It is what a good biography demands, what a human life demands" (135). His thefts of the picture and pen symbolize Jimroy's greedy, consuming nature. Over and over again he proves himself untrustworthy as the warden of facts about Swann. When he finds out that Swann liked to read Edna Ferber, nursery rhymes and the Bobbsey Twins, "Of course he is disappointed. Has he foolishly hoped for Jane Austen? Yes, though he knows better" (111). He wants Swann to seem more sophisticated than she is, so he simply disregards this information altogether. Instead, he makes her "the handmaiden of Emily Dickinson" (32) or Jane Austen, just as Sarah Maloney predicts he will:

> Of course he can surmise certain things, influences for instance. He is almost sure she came in contact with the work of Emily Dickinson, regardless of what Frances Moore says. He intends to mention, to comment extensively in fact, on the Dickinsonian influence, and sees no point, really in taking up the Edna Ferber influence; it is too ludicrous. (135)

Sure enough, on Christmas day, we find Jimroy, at work on the Swann biography, writing, "*It is highly probable that Swann read Jane Austen during this period*

because . . ." (145). He has decided "not to reconcile Swann with her background, but to separate her from it, as the poetry has done" (131).

He refuses to heed Rose's explanation for Swann's absence from church as well. Rose tells Jimroy that Swann did not have nice enough clothes to come to church, but once again, he ignores his first-hand source and chooses to interpret her life in the way he thinks will be most compelling. He insists that "Swann felt her spirituality was, well, less explicit than it was for regular churchgoers in the area . . . it was outside the bounds, as it were, of church doctrine" (184).

Jimroy always ends up distrusting and disliking his subjects. In the case of both Pound and Starman, he grows to hate them because he recognizes his own failings in them—"the pettiness, the fatuous self-stroking" (99), the "childish misogyny" (100) and "gaping self-absorption" (101). By the end of the Pound book he realizes "he had been mesmerized by Pound's sheer awfulness, by his *own* sheer awfulness" (100). The same process occurs with the Starman biography. He admires Starman's poetry at first, and believes him to be "less detestable" than Pound (100), but is once again totally disenchanted with his subject over the course of the project. And in both cases, the root of disgust with the subjects is his realization that he shares their faults: "Once again he seemed to be looking in a mirror" (101).

His disgust with the two erudite, modernist male poets is what drives him to a very different subject in the untrained, provincial poet Mary Swann.

> Here was Mother Soul. Here was intelligence masked by colloquial roughness. Her modesty was genuinely endearing and came as a relief after two monomaniacs. (103)

But soon enough he begins to turn on Swann as well.

> Jimroy has come to distrust Mary Swann slightly. In recent weeks he has felt his distrust turn to dislike. Here was an impenetrable solipsism. One was always straining to catch her tone. Furthermore, she was unreliable about dates, contradictory about events, occasionally untruthful. (104)

When he cannot find "the moment in which she broke her way through to life" (132), he begins to think of "defeat"—reducing his project on Swann from a book to "a long article" (133). Ultimately it is his misunderstanding of the nature of biography that causes Jimroy's frustration, ulcers and disgust with the poets he studies. He is destined to feel unsatisfied with and miserable about his work because his expectations are unrealistic. He tells Sarah that "the oxygen of the biographer is not, as some would think, speculation; it is the small careful proofs that he pins down and sits hard upon" (54).

Later, when he has forced his way through the inconsistencies in Swann's biography and is drawing near his conclusion, he attempts to shape his work into a cohesive whole:

> The disjointed paragraphs he is writing are pushing toward that epic wholeness that is a human life, gold socketed into gold. True, it will never be perfect. There are gaps, as in every life, accidents of silence and misinterpretation and the frantic scrollwork of artifice, but also a seductive

> randomness that confers truth. And mystery, too, of course. Impenetrable, ineffable mystery. (146)

His insistence that a biographical subject can be scientifically excavated, that there are "careful proofs" to be found in the first place, and that these pieces can be pinned back together, "gold socketed into gold," is completely undermined by his disrespectful omissions and perversions of the real facts. It is the "frantic scrollwork of artifice" that degrades Jimroy's work. His greatest flaw as a biographer is that he thinks he needs to reproduce the "seductive randomness" of life, when he should just let the "ineffable mystery" of his subjects speak for itself.

Jimroy feels, mistakenly, that there must be a definitive "truth" to a person's life, and that his job as a biographer is to unearth this truth. But while he resents Swann's unreliability, he himself hides the facts of her life that do not fit into his version of Swann, such as the underwear and the letter. In her own biography of Jane Austen, Shields struggles with the same kind of unevenness between Austen's life and work that Jimroy frets over:

> What is known about Jane Austen's life will never be enough to account for the greatness of her novels, but the point of literary biography is to throw light on a writer's works, rather than combing the works to re-create the author. The two "accounts" – the life and the work – will always lack congruency and will sometimes appear to be in complete contradiction. (Shields, *Jane Austen* 175)

Occasionally Shields herself is guilty of using Austen's work to illuminate her life. Nevertheless, it is clear that she believes it to be a biographer's job to accept these incongruencies and creatively work around them, suggesting possible explanations, rather than altering the few known facts there are about a person's life in order to eliminate the inconsistency altogether.

Mary Swann's is not the only life story being told in *Swann*. All of the four main characters also construct their own life narratives in which they play the principal roles. They all have several constructed "selves" that they present on different occasions. Sarah Maloney often describes tableaus of her life featuring different versions of herself in third-person narrative voice. This switch from her regular first-person narration highlights the separate, staged nature of these "indelible moments" because it is clear that she is looking into "that quirky narrative I like to think of as the story of my life" from an observer's point of view (17). Thus, we know that she does not consider these versions to be the "real" Sarah.

One version of Sarah is the clothes-loving, professional self, "a feminist writer and teacher who's having second thoughts about the direction of feminist writing in America" (1). She says, "Ms. Maloney is a cheerful woman, ah indeed, indeed! And very busy" (6). When she describes another self, the "Queen of Correspondence" letter-writing self, she describes how she loves to plan "what epics out of my ongoing life I'll select, touch up, and entrust to the international mails" (21). This version of herself is

> far more graceful and agreeable than I am in my face-to-face encounters. My concern, my well-governed wit, my closet kindness all crowd to the fore, revealing that rouged, wrinkled, Russian-like persona that I like to think is my true self. (Pick up a pen and a second self squirms out.) (22)

She actually has two versions of her letter-writing self as well: "It's a guilty secret of mine that I write two kinds of letters, one-drafters and two-drafters" (23), the former being for her close friends who will read the letters "charitably" and the latter being for those she wishes to impress with a more sophisticated self. For these letters she says, "I keep myself humble, am mindful of paragraph coherence, and try for a tincture of charm" (23).

In response to her mother's malaise, Sarah has also shaped a strictly cheerful version of herself: "the old Sarah Maloney, dimly remembered even by me, is far behind—that mild Catholic daughter, that reader of Thomas Hardy, with shoulder-length hair and wide pleated skirts. Another Sarah has taken over, twenty-eight, sanguine, expectant, jaunty, bluffing her way. Her awful sprightly irrepressible self appalls me" (37). She also seems to have a more domestic version of herself that appears when she is with her boyfriend Brownie. "It happens fairly often, this sensation of being a captive of fiction, a sheepish player in my own *roman-à-clef*. My dwarfish house is the setting. The stacked events of the day form the plot, and Brownie and I are the chief characters" (39).

Jimroy also has multiple versions of himself. There is his "caustic self" (142), which surfaces most brutally during his attack on Sarah at the symposium. It is probably this arrogant version of himself that he sees reflected in Pound and

Starman. He also has a letter writer persona, which he very carefully constructs for his correspondence with Sarah. For instance, he always includes "some minor failing or misadventure, for he knows he is most likeable when he is being second rate" (121).

Rose describes the different versions of herself in terms of the different "hats" she wears. She is the Nadeau town clerk, librarian, museum curator, church elder, village councillor, and council recording secretary; so she is "one of the starring actors" at town council meetings (153). Rose's part of the novel is divided into titled sections. The titles—"Rose's Hats," "Here Comes Rose Now," "Where Rose Lives," "Rose and Homer Take a Sunday Drive"—describe precisely which aspects or events in Rose's life are about to be disclosed.

Rose has also made herself the town expert on Mary Swann. Originally she was assigned this role simply because, as the librarian, she had the most frequent contact (that is to say, still not much) with Mary Swann before her murder. However, by lying to Jimroy and creating the Swann Memorial Room, Rose herself continues to build up her role as "*local expert on Mary Swann, a woman with an extraordinary memory and gift for detail, able to remember whole conversations word for word"* (189).

In some sections of Rose's story such as "Here Comes Rose Now," the narration switches to second-person narration. On these occasions we as readers become characters in the novel, living in the town of Nadeau, and Rose addresses us directly: "As you stand talking on the corner . . . She asks about your bronchitis and whether you've been into Kingston lately to see the new shopping centre"

(161). The effect of this interpellation is to self-reflexively draw attention to the fictionality of the text by "disrupting the narrative of her text [and] exposing its construction" (Godard 56). Furthermore, the narrator tells us that Rose does not share her secrets with us but sticks to "casual, peripheral chitchat" instead (162). Again the suggestion is that Rose has different versions of herself; this "acquaintance on the street" version sticks to idle chitchat and keeps her secrets to herself.

Cruzzi's section of the novel begins with a list of his roles, much like Rose's list of "hats." He is "Frederic Cruzzi of Kingston, Ontario, former newspaper editor, journalist, traveller, atheist, lover of women and poetry, tender son of gentle parents, scholar, immigrant, gardener, socialist, husband, and father" (221). The sections of Cruzzi's chapter describe aspects of his life, such as "Frederic Cruzzi: A Few of his Friends," "His Dreams," and "The House in which He Has Lived for the Greater Part of His Life."

The most interesting titles, however, are the extremely ironic titles that refer to the "unwritten" sections of Cruzzi's life. For example, "His (Unwritten) One-Sentence Autobiography" manages to sum up his birth, parents, youth, education, travel, marriage, career, his child's birth and death, his wife's death, and a reference to the mysterious secret he has regarding Swann, all in under two pages. "An Unwritten Account of the Fifteenth of December, 1965," in which the story of Mary Swann's poems is finally revealed, is a very important section, not least because it remains "unwritten." The irony of Cruzzi's section is that these unwritten parts of his life are now written, since they are transcribed in the novel.

Cruzzi's journalistic self changes from article to article. He admits that he does not really believe in the various positions he posits in his weekly column, that these are false representations of his own beliefs. He explains to his editor that he has been condemning things he actually likes: "As you can see, my venting of spleen, now that it has become an artificial exercise, is depriving me of those beliefs and pleasures that have sustained my life" (237). In a way, Cruzzi's journalistic self is holding his real self captive.

The exposure of each character's self-constructions "foregrounds the process of the fabrication of 'truth'" in *Swann* (Godard 61); it illustrates once again that people think of their lives (and the lives of others) in terms of narratives and shape them imaginatively whenever necessary. Similarly Sarah, Jimroy and Rose's conflicting interpretations of Swann's poetry is a reflection of how "critics and readers (influenced by their own personal biases) take an active part in constructing the meaning of text" (Hammill, *Literary Culture* 196). Each character has a unique response to Swann's poems, which leads him or her to interpret Swann's life in a specific way. For example, Sarah reads meaning into one poem based on the fact that Swann was murdered soon after, inferring that she must have felt some kind of growing threat from her husband. She says it "points to her growing sense of claustrophobia and helplessness" (48). Of course there is no conclusive proof that the murder was premeditated or that her husband's behaviour was any different than usual leading up to the event. As Sarah herself somewhat contradictorily points out, "No one knows for sure what happened between them" (47).

The best example of subjective interpretation at work is in each character's responses to the blood poem. Each character finds meaning in this poem through the filter of his or her own personal concerns. Sarah is close with her mother. She believes "women carry with them the full freight of their mothers' words. It's the one part of us that can never be erased or revised" (53). As a result she is certain that the blood poem is about mothers:

> one thing I'm sure of: Mary's poems are filled with concealed references to her mother and to the strength and violence of family bonds. One poem in particular [the blood poem] turns on the inescapable perseverance of blood ties, particularly those between mothers and daughters. It's a poem that follows me around, chanting loudly inside my head and drumming on the centre of my heart. (57)

Rose, who suffers constant hemorrhaging due to undiagnosed fibroids, naturally interprets the poem as a description of menstrual bleeding. "She was sure, a hundred per cent sure, of what Mary Swann had been talking about. Rose supposed she had made do with old rags as country women still did occasionally" (188).

Jimroy, as Sarah predicted, uses the blood poem to "bend [Swann] into God's messenger" (32), arguing that the poem is "a pretty direct reference to the sacrament of holy communion. Or perhaps, and this is my point, perhaps to a more elemental sort of blood covenant, the eating of the Godhead, that sort of thing" (185). These conflicting readings constitute what is probably one of the most humorous parts of the novel. It is so deliciously ironic that each reader is so

certain about his or her interpretation, because, as we find out at the end of Cruzzi's section, the blood poem was the most damaged of all the manuscript copies and was therefore the most heavily altered by the Cruzzis. The last poem, and the most severely damaged, began

> "Blood pronounces my name." Or was it "Blood renounces my name"? The second line could be read in either of two ways: "Brightens the day with shame," or "Blisters the day with shame." They decided on blisters. The third line, "Spends what little I own" might just as easily be transcribed, "Bends what little I own," but they wrote *Spends* because—though they didn't say so—they liked it better. (282)

In other words, none of these interpretations can possibly be the "correct" one in terms of Swann's meaning, since the words are not even Swann's. "The fact that virtually nothing is known about Mary Swann—together with the corrupted nature of the text—makes a farce of the scholars' grave attempts" to pin down a single meaning in the poem (Hammill, *Literary Culture* 132). Furthermore, it is clearly the "political and personal agenda of the reader which defines her" (Hammill, *Literary Culture* 132).

The author's meaning is completely obscured and the readers construct their own meaning in the poem; therefore, the poems have multiple meanings. As Roland Barthes puts it, the "text's unity lies not in its origin but its destination" ("The Death of the Author" 189). Although there is a great deal of irony at the academy's expense here, the novel does not suggest that inventive and subjective interpretations of literature are meaningless. Rather Shields suggests that the point

of analyzing literature is to find our own meaningful connections to the text without imposing that meaning as an absolute "truth" on anyone else.

At the end of the Symposium, faced with the disappearance of every meager artifact of Mary Swann's life, as well as all the copies of her poems, the scholars finally have no choice but to perform literally the act that they've each been figuratively committing throughout the novel. They rewrite the poems together, finding meaning through their own subjective lenses, just as the Cruzzis rewrote them the night of Swann's murder, and just as literary scholars do every time they reinterpret the poems. The symposium participants sit in a circle, "joined in a ceremonial act of reconstruction, perhaps even an act of creation," as they "laboriously reassembl[e] one of Mary Swann's poems" (396). The poem they recreate is called, appropriately, "Lost Things." The death of the author has now been fully achieved. She is dead, and the readers share their memories of the texts in order to create what will be a new text, "made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader" (Barthes 189).

Mary Swann's life story has been scattered, obscured, consumed, and deleted. It is irrevocably lost to history, as Jimroy discovers to his chagrin. Swann is fundamentally unknowable, but the larger implication is that so are all people. Even traditional biography, by the time it makes it to the page, has been so altered and reinterpreted that it is no longer an exact portrait of the subject's life story but

a version of that story told through the lens of the biographer's own "assimilated and transformed experience" (Shields, “Three Canadian Women” 54).

However, the point of *Swann* is not to argue that there is no value in interpreting literature or reading and writing biographies about people. The point is to argue that our ideas of truth in both endeavours need to be more elastic and accommodating. As Shields suggests, we need to "set aside our attachment to truth-telling" in order to rescue our stories from the "fat farm, where they've learned to take nano-bites out of their own flesh in order to maintain a sleek literary line" ("Narrative Hunger" 26, 28).

Shields’s depiction of Jimroy illustrates her belief that biography must not be restricted by generic limitations from depicting "the mysteries of individuals and the strange synchronicities of real lives" (Thomas, "Reassembling" 199). Jimroy should reinterpret Mary Swann’s life in his biography and add to the store of knowledge about her rather than hoard pieces of it for himself. He should not be censoring the narrative, but shaping or reinterpreting her life in order to suggest possible "truths" about her.

The attempt to recover Mary Swann is "important, not because it has any hope of succeeding, but because it forges a connection, however fleetingly, among a disparate group of individuals" (Gamble 58). It is true that none of the characters in *Swann* can help but project their own subjective views onto the life and poetry of Mary Swann. However, their diverse interpretations are as valuable as the original "true" version. All of the characters have many versions of themselves, and there are as many versions of Mary Swann as there are readers of

her work. Shields's "emphasis on multiplicity and indeterminacy" (Ramon 89) in this novel reaffirms once again her belief that there are many truths rather than a single truth about a person's life.

Chapter 3

The Stone Diaries: Invisible Woman

> Even if the English barmaid had left a written record, he would never be able to bring himself to trust it . . . what she would put down would be something altogether different from her actual experience in the tall grass; the minute her pen touched the ink, a second self would begin to flow, conditioned, guarded, forgetful, ecstatic, vain, lyric, discursive, the words becoming what all recorded history becomes eventually, a false image, bannered and expository as a public freize, a mixture of the known and the unknowable. (Shields, *Happenstance* 110)

In *The Stone Diaries*, Carol Shields shifts from drawing attention to the similarities between biography and fiction to conflating the two. *The Stone Diaries* is a fictional autobiography of Daisy Goodwill, whose life spans most of the twentieth century. As Shields wrote in her foreword to the 2002 Vintage Canada edition, this novel is "about the subject of autobiography, about the central question of whether or not we can know the story of our own lives. How much of our existence is actually recorded, how much invented, how much imagined, how much revised or erased?" ("Foreword" XVII).

Like *Small Ceremonies* and *Swann*, this novel foregrounds the problems with writing (auto)biography and illustrates how it inevitably relies on misleading artifacts, subjective accounts, and "an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgable

gaps" (75-6). It is clear throughout the novel that Daisy cannot be trusted as a narrator to provide anything but an "edited hybrid version" of her life story (283). Furthermore, "she is like so many women of this century who became, in fact, nothing" because they were "mainly voiceless" and "defined by the people around them" (Shields, "Always" 51). Daisy's voice fades in and out of the story and is overpowered altogether for a period. Through the power of imagination, however, she is able to assert control over her story by the end of the novel, which once again underscores the ability of fiction to "redeem what otherwise might be lost" (Shields, "Always" 52).

I will begin my analysis of *The Stone Diaries* by providing a summary of the narrative structure, including a sketch of the narrative shifts in each chapter. Because the narrative voice is a crucial part of my argument about Daisy's control over her own story, it is very useful to trace the way in which her voice weaves in and out of the narrative. The unreliability of the narrator exemplifies the unreliability of biography in general and is also integral to the study of the relationship between fiction, biography and "fact" in the novel. Next I will provide a brief overview of some critical approaches to *The Stone Diaries* in terms of critics' commentaries on biography. Finally I will discuss the way that Daisy's voice is excluded from her own story by the structure of biography but given its own space through the redemptive power of fiction.

When describing the plot of *The Stone Diaries*, Shields wrote, "My plan was to cut into Daisy's life every ten years or so, just to see what she was doing" (Shields, "Foreword" XVIII). And this is exactly what she did. Each chapter

glances at a period of Daisy's life, and we get a snapshot of that phase of her existence. These chapters are labelled like an "old-fashioned nineteenth-century biography" (Shields, "Foreword" XVII). Chapter one, for example, is called "Birth, 1905." In fact, the beginning of the story actually precedes her birth and describes Daisy's parents' history (both her biological parents, Mercy and Cuyler, and her adopted parent, Clarentine Flett). The events leading up to and including her birth are clearly narrated by Daisy herself, somehow able to look back in time. The first line of the novel announces its autobiographical stance: "My mother's name was Mercy Stone Goodwill" (1). Daisy's first-person voice is intermingled with third-person narration at times. I believe this third-person narrator, who also seems to have omniscient knowledge of other characters' thoughts, is Daisy looking in at her past from outside of her story and reimagining the parts she cannot know or does not like. In this chapter Daisy's obese mother Mercy, not even aware that she is pregnant, is suddenly seized by labor pains while cooking and gives birth in her kitchen; then she dies.

Chapter two, "Childhood, 1916," is still narrated by Daisy in first-person mixed with third-person voice. In this chapter we get to know Barker Flett. Barker is Clarentine's eldest son, a Professor of Botany, Daisy's adopted "Uncle" when she is a child, and the man who will ultimately become her second husband. We learn that Clarentine had adopted Daisy after her mother's death, then left her husband Magnus (after he refused to pay for a necessary dental procedure), and moved to Winnipeg to live with her son. Much of the chapter, including a brief overview of Daisy's development and the introduction of major events, such as

her serious case of the measles, the growing celebrity of Cuyler's tower, Clarentine's death and the resulting transfer of Daisy's care to her father, is told in the form of letters from Barker to his father and those from Clarentine to Cuyler. The rest of the chapter, which delves with greater detail into each of these major events, is again in the first-person voice of Daisy, interspersed with an omniscient narrative recounting of the other characters' internal lives.

The next chapter in Daisy's life is "Marriage, 1927" and is told without interruption in third-person omniscient narration. It seems that Daisy's first-person voice has been lost by this point in the narrative, but the third-person narrator Daisy continues to report her thoughts as well as those of the other characters. This chapter recounts the story of Daisy's brief, ill-fated marriage to Harold A. Hoad, who gets drunk and falls out of a window to his death on their honeymoon in Europe, before the couple has even consummated their marriage. Chapter four, "Love, 1936," switches back to the first-person narrative in its opening line. Daisy says, "The real troubles in this world tend to settle on the misalignment between men and women—that's my opinion, my humble opinion, as I long ago learned to say" (121). The remainder of this chapter returns to third-person omniscient narration. The chapter briefly summarizes Daisy's nine years of widowhood, and explains how the story of her first husband's death has subsequently shaped her life. The chapter ends with the reunion of Daisy and Barker Flett and their hasty marriage.

Chapter five, "Motherhood, 1947," describes, as expected, Daisy's children. More specifically, perhaps, this period is described from the point of

view of Daisy's children and various other characters, still in third-person omniscient narration. Daisy is referred to only as "Mrs. Flett" in this section. There are occasional subtle intrusions by Daisy the narrator, however. For example, she reminds us of her presence by suggesting two versions of Fraidy's reaction to Daisy's domestic life. The narrator first says that Fraidy is jealous of Daisy because Fraidy is "missing out on this business of being a woman" while Daisy is not (184). But then the narrator says, "Or else Fraidy thought: oh, poor Daisy" (184). The "or" in this case not only reminds us of the narrator's presence, it also self-reflexively comments on the unreliability of this narrator. This is good evidence that the third-person narrator is really Daisy, who has to guess and invent how others viewed her. If the narrator were truly omniscient, there would, of course, be no equivocation.

The next chapter, "Work, 1955-1964," is in epistolary form and recounts many events, including Barker Flett's death, Cuyler Goodwill's death, the development of Daisy's career (as weekly gardening columnist Mrs. Green Thumb), her niece Beverly's pregnancy and moving in with the Fletts, her friend Beans's divorce, her friend Fraidy's marriage, her daughter Alice's marriage, a brief romantic relationship with her editor, and finally, the abrupt end to her career as Mrs. Green Thumb when a male colleague annexes her column. Significantly, not one of the letters in this chapter is written by Daisy. They are all written to Daisy by others. Thus Daisy's voice in any form is notably silent in this chapter and her life story at this point is told by others.

"Sorrow, 1965" recounts Daisy's breakdown in the spring and summer of 1965. Besides brief third-person omniscient narration by Daisy at the beginning and end of the chapter, this entire period of Daisy's life is again recounted by other voices. This time, Daisy's family and friends take turns giving their explanations for Daisy's depression, each in first-person narration. Daisy's first-person voice is absent from the next chapter as well, so we never hear her explanation of her own breakdown.

In "Ease, 1977," she is mostly referred to as "Victoria's Great-aunt Daisy," though she is occasionally called Mrs. Flett. Referring to her primarily as Victoria's aunt is appropriate, since the story in this section is almost more about Victoria's life than about Daisy's. The chapter finds Daisy, now recovered from her depression, retired and living in a condominium in Florida. She then takes a trip to the Orkneys with Victoria, where Daisy visits the ancient Magnus Flett, and Victoria forms a romantic attachment to her colleague Lewis Roy. The chapter also contains a detailed account of Cuyler Goodwill's last thoughts before his death in 1955, which is told in third-person omniscient narration like the rest of the chapter.

The last years of Daisy's life are recounted in "Illness and Decline, 1985." In the final chapter, "Death," Daisy goes beyond her death and imagines how she will be remembered. As her body begins to fail her, Daisy is referred to by the narrator as Grandma Flett. But as her frame grows weaker, her voice suddenly resurfaces, strong again, in first person form. When the chaplain comes to visit her in the hospital and she is pondering the meaning of God, the Son and the Holy

Ghost, she asks, "what is it they do, these three? What do they actually do? I used to know, but now at the age of eighty I've forgotten" (313). Although much of the final two chapters are in third-person omniscient narration, Daisy speaks to us directly again on several occasions, including from beyond the grave: "I'm still here, inside the (powdery, splintery) bones, ankles, the sockets of my eyes, shoulder, hip, teeth, I'm still here, oh, oh" (352).

Even her "final (unspoken) words" are also in the first person: 'I am not at peace'" (361). The most interesting part of the final chapter is that it occurs after Daisy's death. Again we know that this is Daisy as the narrator, projecting into the future, stretching beyond her own death to imagine/write the story of her death: she "knows that what lies ahead of her must be concluded by the efforts of her imagination and not by the straight-faced recital of a throttled and unlit history" (340). This final chapter also contains a collection of other people's conversations about Daisy and lists that summarize her life. The lists are varied: there are unfinished to-do lists and grocery lists, as well as catalogues of the places she lived, the books she read, and the things she never experienced.

As with *Swann*, the postmodern metafictionality of *The Stone Diaries* has garnered a great deal of attention from critics. For example, David Williams argues that "what is truly postmodern" about this novel is "its use of the form of autobiography to decentre the figure of an autonomous subject" (128). Winifred Mellor concurs in her study of narrative ambiguity in *The Stone Diaries*. She says that Daisy is "beautifully resonant of the poststructuralist age, challenges the old

rules, conformities and requirements of genre to dismantle the humanist concept of identity as the absolute self" (Mellor 96).

This novel is not just concerned with the problems of the presentation of the self in biography, however; it is also "engaging with feminist theories of life writing" (Roy 114). As Wendy Roy argues in "Autobiography As Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*," *The Stone Diaries* is particularly focused on "women's silencing and on their erasure from the centre of their own lives" (Roy 138). Many critics have noted the contradictory position of the novel as an autobiography, given that "Daisy's dominant characteristic is silence" (Mellor 100). Chiara Briganti argues that the loss of women's stories is at the heart of *The Stone Diaries*. She says that "Daisy can never be found" (191) because the narrator

> has taken us through a journey that turns out to be a series of disappearing acts, as though she has been making sure that all the traces left behind will not cohere into a whole, that her life will not be open to the meddling of whimsical interpretations. The centre, or that which is assumed to be the centre, is made purposefully and relentlessly void. (190-1)

Although it is certainly true that Daisy's narrative is a reflection of a cultural loss of women's voices, I do not think that her own story is completely negative. Instead, I believe, as Lisa Johnson does, that we can find "redeeming, even optimistic, moments of the novel, along with its trajectory toward hope and self-knowledge" (202). Johnson disagrees with Briganti that Daisy's voice is irrevocably lost. She argues that the novel is not about the "impossibility of telling

a self-authored woman's life story" (202), but about "women's imaginations as agents of personal and social transformation" (Johnson 222). In other words, by imagining her autobiography into existence, "Daisy offers her own defense of fiction as part of life" (Williams 135).

Narration is a central issue in *The Stone Diaries*. Daisy the narrator "consciously theorizes autobiography in a post-modern way" (Roy 118-120) by foregrounding her own unreliability and therefore questioning the validity of biography in general. This is certainly one of the most exhaustive autobiographies ever written: Daisy has omniscient powers that extend into the thoughts of other characters and also stretch, even more impressively, beyond her own birth and death.

As already mentioned, the opening line, "My mother's name was Mercy Stone Goodwill" (1) firmly establishes Daisy as the narrator of her life story, starting where all life stories begin, with her mother. This makes it seem as if we can expect a traditional recounting of facts about her life, in a chronological order. Almost immediately, however, it becomes clear that Daisy is reporting an omniscient knowledge of her mother's thoughts and feelings, and in the present tense, as if she were a witness to her own birth. Daisy shares her mother's internal thoughts. For example, we know that she is ashamed of how little her husband eats (1) and that while cooking it gives her "thrills to see the dish take form as she pours the stewed fruit into the fancy mold" (2). The question we are forced to ask ourselves is how could Daisy know the thoughts and feelings of her mother on the

day she was born if her mother died on the same day, before she had a chance to see Daisy grow up and share this story with her?

Furthermore she tells us that "It is a temptation to rush to the bloodied bundle pushing out between my mother's legs, and to place my hand on my own beating heart, my flattened head and infant arms amid the mess of glistening pulp. There lies my mother, Mercy Stone Goodwill" (23). Again, we are hard pressed to understand how Daisy could be witnessing her own birth. The narrative voice continues to perplex us as it switches from Daisy's first-person point of view to a third-person omniscient voice; the conflation of Daisy and the narrator's voice is "alternately obscured and suggested" (Mellor 98).

Furthermore, Daisy frequently highlights her own unreliability. She seems to go out of her way to give us reason to doubt her. For example, among the witnesses of her birth is "The doctor—whom I am unable, or unwilling, to supply with a name" (74). She hints here that she has the power to withold information from this story and that she is not opposed to doing so. She says, "Maybe now is the time to tell you that Daisy Goodwill has a little trouble with getting things straight; with the truth, that is," and warns us to "take Daisy's representation of events with a grain of salt, a bushel of salt" (148).

The answer to this narrative puzzle is that Daisy is imaginatively shaping her life story, not recounting a definitive series of dates and facts. Her version of events "is the only account there is, written on air, written with imagination's invisible ink" (149). There are many examples of "speculative, exaggerated, wildly unlikely" events (148), to which the narration repeatedly draws our

attention. Daisy's self-reflexive intrusions into the text often explicitly state that she is making things up. I have already discussed her description of her birth and mentioned that she imagines her death as well. In fact, she tries out more than one method of rendering her death scene: "Her initial vision was theatrical, the usual pastel coffin, droning sculpture, and shuddering pipe organ" (358). Next she tries to see herself "transformed to biblical dust or even funeral ashes," but she does not think that works. In the end, "Stone is how she finally sees herself" (358).

Daisy the narrator steps in and signals her tampering presence once again in "Illness and Decline, 1985," when she remarks on the absence of Warren's daughter Emma, who has Down's syndrome. She conjectures, "Little Emma is dead. Or perhaps she has been put into an institution with other Down's syndrome children" (340). Then in the obituary that Daisy imagines for herself, there is a question mark beside Emma's name in the list of Daisy's mourning grandchildren (343). Again, the fictionality of the story is foregrounded by her uncertainty about which version is "true."

She takes a second stab at the conclusion of her daughter Alice's story as well when she doesn't find her own first version believable. At first she states that Alice has married Daisy's doctor and moved to Jamaica, but she catches herself: "No, none of this is true . . . How do these spurious versions arise? Think, think, she tells herself. Be reasonable" (341). And so, instead, Alice returns to England and carries on her life in a less dramatic way. Furthermore, it seems that Daisy passes the fictional autobiographical torch on to her daughter Alice, the "noted Chekhov scholar" (345). As Alice goes back to England, Daisy informs us that the

"pattern of her life is unfolding, a long itinerary of revision and accommodation. She's making it up as she goes along. This is not how she imagined her middle years, but this is the way it will be" (342).

In another instance, Daisy narrates her father Cuyler's last thoughts before his death as if with omniscient knowledge until she suddenly pulls back and says, "The thought of his only daughter either did or did not occur to him in his final moments, a daughter who is now seventy-two years old and living in a luxury condominium in the sun-blessed state of Florida" (279-80). Again we have a reminder that Daisy does not really know these things to be facts, but is merely speculating. Furthermore, this passage demonstrates the way she "takes great jumps in time" (148) between "the real and imagined episodes of her life" (358), as if they are part of a film clip that she can rewind and fast forward, though they are "brighter by far than those she sees on the big TV screen" and she can "tune in any time she likes" (337). By projecting forward from the moment of Cuyler's death in 1955 to her own retirement in Florida in 1977, she "imposes the voice of the future on the events of the past, causing all manner of wavy distortion" (148).

At one point Daisy suggests that she may also be guilty of "dreaming [Cuyler's] limestone tower into existence" (76). This is a significant admission since, if true, it would mean that Cuyler’s entire story after the time of his wife's death is complete fabrication. After Mercy's death Cuyler builds a freestanding tower out of small pieces of limestone as a monument to his wife. When the tower becomes famous, Cuyler's life dramatically changes. He becomes a sought-after carver, then an expert speaker on the subject, and then a businessman. Thus we

see yet another example of an instance in which Daisy may have taken great liberties with her life story.

Clearly Daisy's unreliability as a biographer is firmly established in *The Stone Diaries*. She leaves us in no doubt that she takes a great deal of creative license with her life story. Although this is an exaggeration of the sort of imaginative acts performed by biographers in general, the suggestion is that all biography is subject to the same kind of narrative shaping on a smaller scale. The suggestion is reinforced by the echoes we hear between Daisy's descriptions of her autobiographical impulses and those of the biographer in *Small Ceremonies*, Judith Gill. When imagining her death, Daisy "lingers over each detail of her frozen state, adding and subtracting, refining, polishing" (359). Earlier in the novel, she describes how she changes the facts in her life:

> She enlarges on available material, extends, shrinks, reshapes what's offered; this mixed potion in her life. She swirls it one way or the other, depending on—who knows what it depends on?—the fulcrum of desire, or of necessity. She might drop in a ripe plum from a library book she's reading or something out of a soap opera or a dream. Not often, but occasionally, she will make a bold subtraction. (282-3)

There are textual echoes between the passages above and those describing Judith's work. Judith, too, declares that the "task of the biographer is to enlarge on available data" (*Small Ceremonies* 35). She also says that life's stories are shaped by the same kind of "adding and subtracting" that Daisy mentions: "It's the arrangement of events which makes the stories. It's throwing away, compressing,

underlining. Hindsight can give structure to anything, but you have to be able to see it. Breathing, waking and sleeping; our lives are steamed and shaped into stories" (*Small Ceremonies* 51). The repetition of these ideas and phrases in Shields's work supports her argument that biography relies on the imagination of the biographer for its shape.

Daisy presents several different versions of herself as well as different versions of events, which makes her an even more difficult biographical subject to capture. Like the characters in *Swann*, she plays different roles for different people and in different periods of her life. Each version of Daisy is assigned a name. She is "Daisy" as a child and young woman, "Mrs. Flett" as a wife and mother, "Mrs. Green Thumb" as a career woman, "Great-aunt Daisy" or "Grandma Flett" as an old woman. Alice recounts her observation of Daisy's transformation from Mrs. Flett to Mrs. Green Thumb: "But then, presto, she became Mrs. Green Thumb. Her old self slipped off her like an oversized jacket" (239) and "she was, suddenly, a different person, a person who worked" (237).

In an interview with Eleanor Watchel, Shields describes her belief that we all play self-invented roles in our own narratives all the time: "I think we all dress up every day of our lives. We have to get up in the morning, and we have to reinvent ourselves . . . The self never seems to me to be a static thing. It's ever-changing and literally changing from moment to moment, as the rest of the world bounces off us." (Shields, "Throttled" 102, 106). Daisy, too, understands that everyone has to play different parts to deal with day-to-day life:

> It's hard to say whether she's comfortable with her blend of distortion and omission, its willfullness, in fact; but she is accustomed to it. And it's occurred to her that there are millions, billions, of other men and women in the world who wake up early in their separate beds, greedy for the substance of their own lives, but obliged every day to reinvent themselves. (283)

Thus we are faced with the certainty that biography will always be filtered through these different selves. There is no unifed identity to be found through biographical research, as Morton Jimroy asserts in *Swann*. Rather people will always present themselves to the world in a variety of ways. Daisy, for example, will always be someone's wife, someone else's mother or grandmother or aunt, somebody's friend or ex-lover or advice columnist. Once again, we see that there is no single truth to be uncovered, but multiple valid versions of a life story.

Furthermore those "someones" in Daisy's life, her children and friends, all have different interpretations of who she is. It has already been established that Daisy is silenced throughout much of her story, including all of "Work 1955-1964" and "Sorrow, 1965." As a result, large parts of her "autobiography" are recounted by others. Like a text read by several different readers, Daisy's life can be interpreted in several ways, depending on the subjective lens of the "reader."

In "Sorrow, 1965," the chapter about Daisy's breakdown, her family and friends each take turns narrating their own theories about the source of her depression. Like the various interpretations of Mary Swann's blood poem in *Swann*, each person's theory about Daisy's depression is coloured by his or her

own personal experience and obsessions. For example, Alice sees her mother's grief through the lens of her own revelation during college about the "storm of [her] own will" (234). She describes the event that changed her life, the day she painted her bedroom ceiling, as the day she realized her own control over her life. She says, "In one day I had altered my life: my life, therefore, was alterable" (233). Alice believes that Daisy gained something like this knowledge of her own ability to change herself when she became Mrs. Green Thumb, and her depression is a result of losing that independence. "She was Mrs. Green Thumb, that well-known local personage, and now she's back to being Mrs. Flett again. She knew, for a brief while, what it was like to do a job of work. The shaping satisfaction" (240). It therefore seems natural to Alice that her mother would sink into a depression after the loss of that satisfaction.

Daisy's girlhood friend, Fraidy, on the other hand, assumes Daisy is suffering from an unsatisfying love life. Highly sexual herself, with her "army of fifty-four" lovers (245), Fraidy sees Daisy's depression as the result of a "terrible yearning she's been suppressing all her life. Sex is what I'm referring to, what else?" (244). Jay Dudley, her editor, also sees the depression as a symptom of Daisy's disappointing love life, though he sees himself at the centre of the mischief as Daisy's recently estranged lover. He says, "it seemed best to put a little distance between us. I had no idea she'd take it so hard" (254).

Like the characters in *Swann*, the characters in *The Stone Diaries* interpret this episode of Daisy Goodwill's life according to their own biases. This places Daisy's life in the same category as Swann's poems; it is a literary creation that

can be read and analyzed just like a text. Although she writes her life (by imagining it), her life will inevitably be inscribed with myriad meanings by those around her, just as any writer's texts would be by its readers. Of course, we already know that Daisy's life story is fiction, but the suggestion by extension is that all biographies are subject to slanted readings by the biographer, the people around the subject (who often provide "first-hand" material for biographers in their research, like Mary Swann's daughter or Rose Hindmarch in *Swann*), and even the subject herself.

Subjective accounts and faulty memories are not the only unreliable biographical sources, however. Letters, photographs, diaries and journals are the other traditional biographical paraphernalia. *The Stone Diaries* has all of these, which, given that this is a fictional autobiography, reinforces the unreliability of such artifacts. None of the letters in *The Stone Diaries* are written by Daisy; she stopped writing in her diary when she got married; she lost her travel journal; and Daisy herself is not pictured in any of the photos. Typically, the inclusion of such items in a biography would lend the work a sense of historical legitimacy. In Daisy's case, however, their absence only serves to emphasize her absence from her own autobiography.

As yet another example of the blurred boundaries between fiction and biography in Shields's work, it is interesting that *The Stone Diaries*, a fictional autobiography, conforms to the structural conventions of the genre, while *Jane Austen*, a "real" biography, does not. *The Stone Diaries* contains "artifacts" and is divided into chapters that suggest a chronological, linear narration of Daisy’s life.

Jane Austen, on the other hand, is consciously “neither linear, historical, nor factual but is rather the result of a jumble of simultaneous interests and influences glimpsed only through the smudged lens of biographical interpretation” (Eden, "Subjunctive Mode" 155).

The non-traditional structure of *Jane Austen* reflects Shields's belief that the traditional tools of biography are not necessarily particularly illuminating or "true." For example, she comments on the unreliability of Austen's letters as a biographical source in *Jane Austen*: "Somehow we never hear quite enough of Jane Austen's off-guard voice. Her insistent irony blunts rather than sharpens her tone. Descriptions of herself are protective when they are not disarming" (6). Just as Daisy is missing from the "factual" records of her life—the photos, the letters, the diaries—Shields senses that the "real Austen" is absent from her letters.

If there is a single truth to be found in Daisy's life, it is this very absence, the fact that she has been "blinded, throttled, erased from the record of her own existence" (76). Daisy remembers discovering the emptiness within herself while confined to a sick room as a child:

> This had to do with the vacuum she sensed, suddenly, in the middle of her life. Something was missing, and it took weeks in that dim room, weeks of heavy blankets, and the image of that upside-down tree inside her chest to inform her of what it was. What she lacked was the kernel of authenticity, that precious interior ore that everyone around her seemed to possess . . . Other people were held erect by their ability to register and reflect the world—but not, for some reason, Daisy Goodwill. (75)

As many critics have established, Daisy's life-long silence represents the silence of countless women of her generation whose stories were never recorded and are therefore now lost to history. Daisy herself realizes this. She says, "She is powerless, anchorless, soft-tissued—a woman. Perhaps that is the whole of it, that she is a woman. Yes, of course" (150). Her son Warren also reflects on this loss when he discovers that she was college educated and had an intellectual life: "She must be in mourning for the squandering of herself. Something, someone, cut off her head, yanked out her tongue" (252). This image calls to mind the physical and metaphorical dismemberment of Mary Swann. In both cases, women have been silenced. However, it is also true that both women have been reconstructed through fiction, *Swann* through the recreation of her poems at the end of the Symposium, and Daisy by her fictional autobiography.

In order to counteract the erasure from her own life, Daisy realizes she needs to invent her story to fill in the gaps:

> She understood that if she was going to hold on to her life at all, she would have to rescue it by a primary act of imagination, supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections, conjuring the pastoral or heroic or whatever, even dreaming a limestone tower into existence, getting the details wrong occasionally, exaggerating or lying outright, inventing letters or conversations of impossible gentility, or casting conjecture in a pretty light. (76)

Daisy acknowledges the creative license she takes in reporting her own narrative and openly admits that she is an unreliable narrator; she may have made up parts

of the plot, such as Cuyler's tower. However, she also points out that fictionalizing it is the only way to possess her life, the only way to shape it into a coherent narrative that reveals important truths.

Fiction, in other words, is Daisy's saving grace. Daisy is often silent as a character, but as a narrator she is in control of her life story. This is fiction's magic and "redeeming" power. The fictional form gives Daisy a voice, and gives her the license she needs to fill the voids in her life with invention. By studying a final example of textual echoes between Daisy's vision of her birth scene and her death monument we can see how completely Daisy has reclaimed her story. When describing her birth, she says:

> There lies my mother, Mercy Stone Goodwill, panting on the kitchen couch . . . she's on her side, as though someone has toppled her over, her large soft trunky knees drawn up, and her woman's parts exposed. Like seashells or a kind of squashed fruit . . . I long to bring symmetry to the various discordant elements, though I know before I begin that my efforts will seem a form of pleading. Blood and ignorance, what can be shaped from blood and ignorance?—and the pulsing, mindless, leading jelly of my own just-hatched flesh, which I feel compelled to transform into something clean and whole with a line of scripture running beneath it or possibly a Latin motto. (23)

And then she describes her "stone self" after death:

> The folds of her dress, so primitive and stiff, are softened by a decorative edge, a calcium border of seashells of the kind sometimes seen on the

> edges of birthday cakes. A stone scroll dips gracefully across her slippered feet, the date worn away, illegible, and a stone pillow props up her head, the rigid frizz combed smooth at last. (359)

The echoes between these two passages are clear. There is repetition of the seashell image, in the first instance to describe Mercy's "woman's parts," from which Daisy has just emerged, and in the second to describe the dress that encloses her body in death. Her desire for "a line of scripture running beneath" the birth scene is fulfilled by the "stone scroll [that] dips gracefully across her slippered feet." These echoes draw attention to the parallels between the two scenes that bookend Daisy's life, bringing a satisfying sense of cohesiveness to the story. More important, however, is the fact that Daisy has achieved in the second passage the artistry as a storyteller that she longs for in the first. She has transformed the bloody, pulpy mess of her birth into the clean, smooth lines of stone. There is no blood, no bodily fluid at all in stone. She has perfected her ability to synthesize a scene of her life and she is finally satisfied with her own rendering of the scene: "Her final posture, then, is Grecian. Quiet. Timeless. Classic. She has always suspected she had this potential" (359). In other words, her imagined death is Daisy's artistic masterpiece.

In *The Stone Diaries,* Daisy Goodwill understands the creative act of biography and does not shrink from it. Rather she embraces the opportunity to "narrate [herself] into a particular way of being in the world, absorbing [her] surroundings through touch, taste, and personal testimony, then enlarging on available materials" (Johnson 224). Daisy's story serves as evidence that “the only

truth an autobiographer is obliged to observe is her own truth, however idiosyncratic that truth may be" (Shields, "Three Canadian Women" 50). In fact, Daisy's autobiography illustrates that fiction is the best way to tell a person's story. Only fiction has the freedom and elasticity to capture "the genuine arc of a human life" (Shields, *Jane Austen* 11).

Conclusion

Carol Shields never makes a single point in her writing; she always achieves a multitude of things at once. She questions the silence of women in literature while giving them a voice through her writing. She writes biography while undermining its conventions. She shapes her characters' lives into chapters that form a smooth narrative arc, while positing that real life does not follow a single trajectory but is a collection of random events. In other words, there is no single truth in her work. Instead, there are multiple truths, sometimes contradictory, but all valid nonetheless.

As an experienced writer of both biography and fiction, Shields clearly felt that biography and fiction are inextricably connected and often interchangeable. As a result, the boundaries between the two genres are blurred or even erased in her work. *Small Ceremonies*, *Swann*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *Jane Austen* foreground the imaginative act of "tracing the arc of the human life," which consists of assembling the everyday happenings of life into a narrative. As she argues in "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard," it is part of the human personality to crave other people's stories. Whether told in biographical or fictional form, narrative "questions experience, repositions experience, expands or contracts experience, rearranges experience, dramatizes experience" (24).

As Shields said in an interview with Eleanor Watchel, we are drawn to life stories, other people's experience, because it's "the only story we've got. The only story with a nice firm shape to it is the story of a human life" (Shields, "Always" 41). However, she also said:

> I like fiction because fiction can go where biography can't. It can go where most of it happens, which is inside the head. It's where nine-tenths of your life goes on. So I can see the weaknesses of biography, but I'm very attracted to the shape of it. I love novels that cover very long periods of time so that a person's life can be traced." (Shields, "Always" 41)

Thus we understand why biography is so integral to Shields's novels. In her fiction she wants to write about people's lives, and that, after all, is exactly what biography does. But, since biography "is subject to warps and gaps and gasps of admiration or condemnation," she can only explore all the truths of human experience by writing fiction, which "respects the human trajectory" (Shields, *Jane Austen* 10-11).

Small Ceremonies, *Swann*, and *The Stone Diaries*, therefore, do what biography and autobiography cannot do alone; these novels are filled with "randomness, with side stories, surface details, plotted histories, drifting thoughts—the whole raw material, in fact, of our lives" (Shields, "Framing the structure of a novel" 3-6). All three novels test the boundaries between biography and fiction, but each novel puts a slightly different emphasis on the discussion. *Small Ceremonies* draws parallels between the sources and processes of writing biography and fiction. Judith Gill's biographical process depends on imaginative interpretation, while John Spalding draws on the life story of the Gills, demonstrating that fiction draws on life, while all life stories are somewhat fictional.

Swann reflects on the fallacies of biographical writing and literary

criticism that insist on finding a universal "truth" about an author or her work. Each of the four main characters is guilty of altering a part of Mary Swann's story. Thus, the novel carefully deconstructs the traditional biographer's sources and artifacts, establishing the unreliability of "facts" when it comes to interpreting a person's life. The story also privileges the reader as writer, arguing that every reader will interpret a text according to her own subjective experience and that those interpretations should be valued as creative acts in their own right. Thus, *Swann* champions the process of literary biography, which embraces the imaginative act of recreating the author from her work.

In *The Stone Diaries*, biography and fiction are melded, which allows Daisy to stretch beyond her own life and death and to construct the narrative of the history of herself that she feels to be most true. Daisy focuses on the core question of biography:

> And the question arises: what is the story of a life? A chronicle of fact or a skillfully wrought impression? The bringing together of what she fears? Or the adding up of what has been off-handedly revealed, those tiny allotted increments of knowledge? . . . It's an indulgence, though, the desire to return to currency all that's been sampled and stored and dreamed into being. (340)

Daisy has to re-imagine her life in order to recover her voice and to fill “the emptiness she was handed at birth. In the void she finds connection, and in the connection another void – a pattern of infinite regress which is heartbreaking to think of – and yet it pushes her forward, it keeps her alive” (281). Only fiction

allows Daisy the creative capacity she needs to recover her life story. Biography, with its insistence on facts and physical artifacts, would erase her existence.

By self-consciously focusing on writing in her novels, Shields conducts "sophisticated metafictional experiments that heighten the reader's awareness of the tenuousness of knowledge" (Eden, "Introduction" 6). Shields incorporates postmodernist theories, such as "the death of the author," into her work and exploits them in terms of structural freedom for the novel form. However, she also "finds a way past" the nihilistic conclusions of postmodern thinking "by affirming the ties that bind reader and writer, world and text, language and the real world" (Eden, "Introduction" 10). Although it is true that there is not a single, unified meaning in a literary work or a person's life, there are many possible truths. Often the only truth that can be learned with any certainty is that the truth itself is unknowable. In such cases, "People must be preserved with their mysteries intact" (*Small Ceremonies*), not boiled down to reductive and meaningless lists of dates and places.

In a letter to Eleanor Watchel in January 2001, Shields mentions a mistake she made in the Jane Austen biography. She wrote that Austen's Aunt was accused of stealing lace from a shop in London, but the event actually occurred in Bath. She writes: "A small point, but noticed at once by my friend Joan Austen-Leigh. The worst part is that I knew it was Bath. I think I am happier writing fiction" (Watchel 123). This is precisely why Shields prefers fiction to biography. Little factual details such as this are considered significant in biography, although they may do little to illuminate a subject's real experience or personality. Only in

fiction, where she is not expected to adhere to some kind of objective "truth," can Shields explore the only truths she holds dear: the mysteries of people's lives.

I drew the titles for each chapter in this thesis from M. H. Abrams's entry on auto/biography in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (seventh edition, 1999). Near the end of the entry, Abrams explains that, "In recent years, the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become more and more blurred, as authors include themselves under their own names in novels and autobiographies are written in the asserted mode of fiction" (23). He also gives examples of notable "autobiographical works of prose fiction" that focus on the "author's discovery of his identity and vocation . . . as a poet or artist" (23). His examples include James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Adapting the titles of each of these works to Carol Shields's novels is my way of suggesting that Shields belongs in this list of great writers who blur the boundaries between biography and fiction in order to explore what it means to be a writer.

Works Cited

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999.

Anderson, Marjorie. "Interview with Carol Shields." *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life*. Ed. Neil K. Besner. Winnipeg: Prairie Fire Press, Inc., 2003. 57-71.

Barbour, Kathy. "The Swann Who Laid the Golden Egg: A Cautionary Tale of Deconstructionist Cannibalism in *Swann*." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2003. 255-82.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. 4th ed. Eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. New York: Arnold Publishers, 2001. 185-9.

Briganti, Chiara. "Fat, Nail Clippings, Body Parts, or the Story of Where I Have Been: Carol Shields and Auto/Biography." 175-200.

Buss, Helen M. "Abducting Mary and Carol: Reading Carol Shields's Swann and the Representation of the Writer through Theories of Biographical Recognition." *English Studies in Canada* 23.4 (Dec. 1997): 427-441.

Eagleton, Mary. "What's the Matter? Authors in Carol Shields' Short Fiction." *Canadian Literature* 186 (2005): 70-84.

Eden, Edward. "Introduction." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2003. 19-36.

Eden, Melissa Pope. "'The Subjunctive Mode of One's Self': Carol Shields's Biography of Jane Austen." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2003. 19-36.

Gamble, Sarah. "Filling the Creative Void: Narrative Dilemmas in *Small Ceremonies*, the *Happenstance* Novels, and *Swann*." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2003. 39-60.

Godard, Barbara. "Sleuthing: Feminists Re/Writing the Detective Novel." *Signature: Journal of Theory & Canadian Literature* 1 (Summer 1989): 45-70.

Hammill, Faye. *Literary Culture and Female Authorship in Canada 1760-2000*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003.

—. "Review Essay: 'My own life will never be enough for me': Carol Shields as Biographer." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 32.1 (2002): 143-8.

Hansson, Heidi. "Biography Matters: Carol Shields, *Mary Swann*, A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, Deborah Crombie, *Dreaming of the Bones*." *Orbis Litterarum: International Review of Literary Studies* 58.5 (2003): 353-370.

Holmes, Richard. "Biography: Inventing the Truth." *The Art of Literary Biography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Johnson, Brian. "Necessary Illusions: Foucault's Author Function in Carol Shields's *Swann*." *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life*. Ed. Neil K. Besner. Winnipeg: Prairie Fire Press, 2003. 209-28.

Johnson, Lisa. "'She Enlarges on Available Materials': A Postmodernism of Resistance in *The Stone Diaries*." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2003. 201-29.

Levy, Ellen. "'Artefact Out of Absence": Reflection and Convergence in the Fiction of Carol Shields." *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary*. Eds. Marta Dvorák and Marian Jones. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. 191-204.

MacDonald, Bruce F. "Quiet Manifesto: Carol Shields's *Small Ceremonies*." *International Fiction Review* 3 (1976): 147-150.

Mellor, Winifred M. "'The Simple Container of Our Existence': Narrative Ambiguity in Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en Littérature Canadienne* 20.2 (n.d.): 96-110.

Neuman, Shirley. "Introduction." *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*. London: Frank Cass & Co., 1991.

Niederhoff, Burkhard. "How to Do Things with History: Researching Lives in Carol Shields' *Swann* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.2 (2000): 71-85.

"Biography." *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (*OED*).

Page, Malcolm. "Small Ceremonies and the Art of the Novel." *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 28-29 (1980): 172-178.

Ramon, Alex. *Liminal Spaces: The Double Art of Carol Shields*. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2008.

Reid-Walsh, Jacqueline. "Tracing the Arcs of Jane Austen's Life." *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life*. Ed. Neil K. Besner. Winnipeg: Prairie Fire Press, 2003. 239-49.

Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan. "Feminist Paradigms." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998.

Roy, Wendy. "Autobiography As Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2003.113-46.

Shields, Carol. "'Always a Book-Oriented Kid': The Early Interviews 1988-1993." *Random illuminations*. Ed. Eleanor Watchel. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 2007. 29-56.

—. "Blockout." *The Orange Fish*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1990. 90-109.

—. "Collision." *The Orange Fish*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1990. 110-30.

—. "Foreword." *The Stone Diaries*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002.

—. "Framing the structure of a novel." *Writer* 111.7 (1998): 3-6.

—. *Happenstance: The Husband's Story*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1997.

—. *Jane Austen: A Penguin Life*. New York: Viking, 2001.

—. "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard." *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*. Ed. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2003.19-36.

—. *Small Ceremonies*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1995.

—. *Swann*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996.

—. *The Box Garden*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1990.

—. *The Republic of Love*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1994.
—. *The Stone Diaries*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002.
—. "Three Canadian Women: Fiction or Autobiography." *Atlantis* 4.1 (1978): 49-54.
—. "'Throttled by Astonishment': October 1999." *Random illuminations*. Ed. Eleanor Watchel. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 2007. 101-19.
—. *Unless*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2003.
Steenman-Marcusse, Conny. *Re-Writing Pioneer Women in Anglo-Canadian Literature*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2001.
Thomas, Clara. "'A Slight Parodic Edge': *Swann: A Mystery*." *Room of One's Own: A Feminist Journal of Literature and Criticism* 13.1-2 (1989): 109-122.
—. "Carol Shields: *The Republic of Love* and *The Stone Diaries*. 'Swerves of Destiny' and 'Rings of Light'." '*Union in Partition': Essays in Honour of Jeanne Delbaere*. 153-160. Liège, Belgium: L3-Liège Language and Literature, 1997. Accessed through EBSCO. 28 August 2009. WEB.
—. "Reassembling Fragments: Susanna Moodie, Carol Shields, and Mary Swann." *Inside the Poem: Essays and Poems in Honour of Donald Stephens*. 196-204. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1992.
Watchel, Eleanor. *Random illuminations: conversations with Carol Shields*. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 2007.
Williams, David. "Re-imagining a Stone Angel: The Absent Autobiographer of *The Stone Diaries*." *O Canada: Essays on Canadian Literature and Culture*. Ed. Jorn Carlsen. Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1995.