From Threshold, to Living Room, to Kitchen: On the Architectonics of Books

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Abstract

This article is the keynote speech given at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, *The Book at the Crossroads of Diversities*, 28–29 May 2018, Regina, Saskatchewan. Demers reminds readers of the joys of discovering books and stories for the first time and suggests that we should not forget that joy as adults, especially those of us who have chosen careers studying stories—either books or films or theatre—rather than just loving them as we did as children. As academics, critics, librarians, and the like, we begin to read new, sometimes forgotten writers, enter into the conversation about them and, if we are lucky, work our way into the kitchen to discover how their texts are made, finding ourselves on a journey “from curiosity, to revelation, to experimentation.”

Résumé

Cet article reprend le discours prononcé à la Rencontre annuelle 2018 de la Société bibliographique du Canada, *Le livre à l'intersection des diversités*, tenue les 28-29 mai 2018 à Régina, Saskatchewan. Demers rappelle aux lecteurs les joies de découvrir les livres et les histoires pour la première fois, et suggère que nous ne devrions pas oublier cette joie comme adultes, surtout ceux et celles d'entre nous qui avons choisi comme carrière d'étudier les histoires – qu'il s'agisse de livres, de films ou de théâtre – plutôt que de simplement les aimer comme nous le faisons dans notre enfance. En tant qu'universitaires, critiques, libraires et autres, nous commençons à lire de nouveaux auteurs, parfois des auteurs oubliés, nous amorçons la conversation à leur sujet et, si nous avons de la chance, nous nous dirigeons vers la cuisine pour découvrir comment leurs textes sont construits, nous retrouvant dans un voyage «de la curiosité, à la révélation, à l'expérimentation».

I had my first experience of a gift book, a repurposed book, the ideology of classism, the difference between hall and cottage, the phonetics of cockney speech, narrative as a form of historical fantasy, and the book as a medium of character revelation, when I was four. And I was unaware of most of it, beyond the joy of holding an object in my hands. I'd broken my arm, news of which my sister, a page at the local public library branch, had reported to the children's librarian. I was almost fully recovered—the cast was going to be removed soon—when a lady in a navy blue suit and hat came onto the verandah and knocked at our door. Miss Adams, the head of the children's division, introduced herself and gave my mother the present for me. Dark green painted linen covers with a typed title in a white banner in the middle of the front cover, pasted sheets of text and illustration on each of the inside pages. The book was *Ameliaranne and the Green Umbrella*,¹ which I assumed Miss Adams had written, illustrated, and made for me. I loved the minimal, engaging story and especially the illustrations about a resourceful little girl, the eldest of washerwoman's Mrs. Stiggins' children, going to the Squire's tea party with the aim of bringing home special treats in the umbrella for her sick siblings. The round-faced crew of young Stigginses did everything together—sitting in a ring with their feet in a tub of mustard and water and propped up in a single bed drinking hot gruel. When the Squire's angular and angry-looking sister, Miss Josephine, thrust open the umbrella in an attempt to expose Ameliaranne as a greedy thief, the more rubicund and amiable Squire understood immediately since he'd noticed that the girl herself had not eaten at all but had transferred everything to her umbrella. He ensured that a special basket be prepared for the Stiggins' cottage. The thrill of holding the stiff, almost cracking covers, turning the heavily pasted sheets, whisking my Canadian self an ocean, and several decades and registers of language away, travelling with Ameliaranne to the splendid tea party with tiered plates of delicate tarts and cakes, stayed with me as a visual and gastronomic dreamscape.

Of course while admiring Ameliaranne and thinking about all those sugary delights, I had nagging persistent questions. Why is the Squire's sister so cross? Shouldn't she apologize? Where is Mr. Stiggins? How does Mrs. Stiggins manage to feed her household of seven? She must work very hard. There are no thermometers to take

¹ Constance Heward, *Ameliaranne and the Green Umbrella* (Philadelphia: G.W. Jacobs, 1920).

Patricia Demers (Photo by Ruth-Ellen St. Onge)

the children's temperature, no doctor visits, no prescriptions are issued. What do mustard water and gruel do, I wondered. Could the Squire not help this family more regularly? It took a few years for me to realize that Miss Adams had not written this story for me. She had, however, reassembled a remaindered book, likely read to pieces by youngsters before me. She had cropped the colophon, painted, pasted, sewn, and presented *Ameliaranne* as a gift, a repurposed text, a scrapbook, arguably an early form of artist's book. My discovery of Constance Heward (1884–1968), for whom no *DNB* entry exists, as the author, and of Susan Beatrice Pearse (1878–1980) as the better-known illustrator did not diminish my gratitude to Miss Adams because her gift opened up a whole vein of inquiry much later. This first of the twenty *Ameliaranne* books, published in 1920, launched the adventures of the generous young heroine as she goes to the farm, keeps school, camps out, gives a concert, and goes touring. Heward authored eight instalments of the series, which lasted for thirty years, with Pearse contributing illustrations throughout; Eleanor Farjeon wrote two titles.

My childhood home furnished one of several threshold moments. In the case of *Ameliaranne* the limen for me was full of misunderstandings, unanswered questions, and sobering realizations about the circulation and reproducibility of authorship. The long journey from not getting it to the slow and continuous scaling of Alps on Alps began with the book—mine but not for me alone,

in its own way multimedial, shaping and for a time distorting a reading experience in its representation of inherently kind-spirited, picturesque poverty. Gradually I have discerned many thresholds of interpretation through an attentiveness to the materiality, circulation, and resonance of the text, to paratext and peritext, virtual research environments and access, geographic mapping, and qualitative analysis of music, images, and text as expression and adaptation. The metaphor of domestic architectural blueprints can trace this passage from the doorstep of excited curiosity, to the living room of critical discourse, and into the kitchen of combinative, experimental creation and re-creation.

For me the awareness begins with the book and understanding the Baconian distinctions among tasting, swallowing, chewing, and digesting. The synaptic signal between the reader and the page—watermarked vellum, news stock, lemon-juice coded, or mass market print—is the motif threading together these remarks on the cognitive architecture of the plan, design, construction, and emotional effect of multimedia textuality. Of course architecture itself exerts powerful responses. As we know from bold designs for libraries in Halifax, Regina, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton, the material reality of buildings where texts reside—which encompass sites for gathering, reading, disputation, making, teaching, shelter, and retreat—affords the physical and virtual space to discover, discuss, or reconfigure texts. In the midst of the battle over the Central Library Plan of the NYPL to remove the stacks to off-site storage and de-accession art, Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic Louise Huxtable, at age 91, entered the fray, reminding readers of *The Wall Street Journal* that the seven floors of the stacks, on top of which the Rose Reading Room stands, actually hold up the building. She stressed the architectural logic: “All of Carrère and Hasting’s elegant classicism is not just window dressing. Their wonderful spatial relationships and rich detail are intimately tied to the building’s remarkable functional rationale.”² In his study of reading in the electronic age, Andrew Piper prefaces his analysis of pages as windows, as frames, as mirrors, and as folds that lead to a gradual unfolding by commenting on the importance of the page as the “text’s architecture ... that plays as much a role in shaping our reading experiences as the underlying material profile of the book or screen, ... the basic unit of reading” allowing us to enter

² Louise Huxtable, “Undertaking Its Destruction,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 December 2012.

“into new conceptual terrain.”³ Concentration on the page’s offer of a new terrain is evident in the serene but detailed interior of the monk’s cell of Dürer’s “Saint Jerome in His Study.” The engraving conveys the contemplative atmosphere through recurrent horizontals of repose and harmony that the subjective spectator encounters. Bursts of colour surrounding a heart-shaped face in Picasso’s “Reading” suggest the power of reflection to look beyond the viewer. The page or collections of pages can address the reader eye to eye to reveal corroborating evidence and uncover concealed information. In *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, the summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,⁴ it is remarkable how recorded testimony corroborates, intensifies, and personalizes the reality of photos and documentation housed in religious, provincial, regional, and national archives about kitchens, laundries, classrooms, dormitories, punishment rooms, and cemeteries. Rehearsing his own journey through books and encounters with elite libraries as “custodians of culture and civilization”⁵ offering “the lost a gesture of belonging,”⁶ *PMLA* editor Simon Gikandi documents some of their “subtle form[s] of concealment,”⁷ as in the Codrington Library at All Souls College, Oxford, donated by Christopher Codrington, “a major slaveholder in Barbados,”⁸ and Princeton’s Firestone Library, the bequest resulting from Harvey Firestone’s huge rubber plantation in Liberia.

My own movement from curiosity, to revelation, to experimentation within the timespan of a continuing project on contemporary women’s writing in Canada, which extends from the Massey Commission to the Sesquicentennial, has involved moments perched on the threshold, in the conversation of the living room, and in the observation of kitchen mixings. With the page drawing me in each instance, I was initially attracted to writers of fiction, poetry, and drama who appear to be forgotten, for different reasons excluded from an inner circle.

³ Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in the Electronic Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 48.

⁴ The 388-page report can be downloaded at http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/trc/IR4-7-2015-eng.pdf (Ottawa: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

⁵ Simon Gikandi, “The Fantasy of the Library,” *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

Two novelists, Grace Irwin and Patricia Blondal, summoned me from the threshold. Though contemporaries of Gabrielle Roy, Anne Hébert, and Ethel Wilson, as well as Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro, their work explored the introspective space of identity in rare, arresting ways. The first three of Irwin's seven novels appeared in the 1950s. Set in the Toronto of her own childhood and adult life, *Least of All Saints* (1952) and *Andrew Connington* (1954) revolve around Emmanuel College at Victoria University and the intellectual struggles of a young minister in a well-heeled downtown parish. Later publications include a dramatized biography of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, the autobiography *Three Lives in Mine*, and, when she was in her late nineties, the novel she wrote as a 20-year-old undergraduate at Victoria College, *Compensation*. A Classics major at the University of Toronto, Irwin was a high-school teacher of Latin for 39 years, all but one of them at Humberside Collegiate, experiences reflected in teacher Aran Waring in the novel *In Little Place* (1959).⁹ With a protagonist who opts for living "fully and excitingly in a fairly circumscribed area," Irwin takes her title from the Prologue to *Henry V* praising the imaginary force of the theatre in which a single zero or "the wooden O" of the stage may multiply a number or "attest in little place a million." Her evocation of this little place conveys the synecdochic importance of Aran's life and decisions, so rooted in and loyal to her family background and milieu. The opening scene of *In Little Place* serves as a frame for what Andrew Piper calls the "material arguments of individualization." During a University of Toronto reception at the Royal Ontario Museum, as guests wander from the Chinese galleries to the refreshment table, 45-year-old, self-possessed but "manless" Aran surveys the scene and observes that "shameful to admit and dark with abnormal portent since Freud made Kinsey possible, was her own [unmarried] state."¹⁰ Longing to "remove her frozen expression of animation" and struggling with "her Methodist conscience between what she wanted and what was, she felt, expected of her," Aran acknowledges that she herself is an exhibit, a curiosity, as awkward in this gathering as she would be in a Harlequin romance. Yet Irwin ensures that her protagonist's rational position resonates with a joint conviction:

Why did people not realize that an incurable tendency to be guided by the head did not indicate lack of heart; that an instinctive

⁹ Grace Irwin, *In Little Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

prescience concerning the passing and dissipation of unguided emotion by no means quelled the violence of the emotion itself?

In the first of Blondal's two posthumously published novels, *A Candle to Light the Sun*, the agony of the quest for identity leads protagonist David Newman away from his native Manitoba small town of Mouse Bluffs, modelled on Blondal's own home town of Souris, to college in Winnipeg. In her title this "poet's novelist"¹¹ echoes both the Bible's apocalyptic promise of eternal light to obviate candle and sun¹² and William Blake's reduction of presumed knowledge to "only hold[ing] a candle in sunshine."¹³ Shuttling back and forth between realism and symbolism in weaving its meaning, the novel exposes the lack of substance in the light of the candle and the sun. In broad strokes the preface, serving as a mirror for what Piper calls "the logic of iterability,"¹⁴ introduced Depression-bound Mouse Bluffs:

How thin we were upon the land. 1936. How untouching we were, with all the miles between us. How thin the land made us, parching our lips, stretching fine the bones to unmuscl'd waiting. [...] Our sins stood thick upon the thinness of our worth, thick between us and the low red sun.¹⁵

The novel's large cast of characters, with cautionary examples and scarring episodes exerting their effects in both settings, constitutes the tissue of reality and the wells of loneliness, loss, and frustration. As Aritha van Herk has observed, the "untouching" quality of the couples in Mouse Bluffs is perceptible, especially in view of the explicit treatment of sexuality, "the strangely contemporary ... examination of the psychological and the sexual."¹⁶ Irwin's novel has not been reprinted; Blondal's has been re-issued as part of OUP's Wynford Books series.

Poet Edna Jaques is not associated with the Modernist group of Dorothy Livesay, P.K. Page, Anne Wilkinson, and Miriam

¹¹ Laurie Ricou, "Patricia Blondal's Long Poem," in *The Winnipeg Connection: Writing Lives at Mid-Century*, ed. Birk Sproxtton (Winnipeg, MB: Prairie Fire Press, 2006), 294.

¹² Revelation 22:5.

¹³ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, introduction and commentary by Sir Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), plate 22.

¹⁴ Piper, *Book Was There*, 49.

¹⁵ Patricia Blondal, *A Candle to Light the Sun* (1960), introduction by Laurie Ricou (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), 10.

¹⁶ Aritha van Herk, "Second Thoughts: A Nation Reflected in the Tensions of a Small Town," *The Globe and Mail*, 7 September 1991: C 17.

Waddington. She stands alone as a popular poet, based largely on her vernacular directness and windows onto a prairie world. For all its beneficent cheer, the homespun style is not interested in "little foolish trivial things" like "curtains or the polish of a floor,"¹⁷ but rather wants to probe beneath the surface.

I wanted to reach down and touch her heart
Beneath the thin veneer that shut me out,
And let our true selves speak ... to hear her tell
The secret hidden things she dreamed about.¹⁸

Most of Jaques's twelve books were published by Thomas Allen in Toronto, although undated chapbooks such as *Verses for You* and *Drifting Soil* were printed in Moose Jaw. In genuinely populist work, Jaques spoke directly to women, yet, as Carole Gerson has remarked, her popularity was dismissed "among primarily male by gender and values" members of the academic literary establishment.¹⁹ E.K. Brown in his "Letters in Canada" review disliked her "cosiness," fearing the emergence of another "Eddy Guest,"²⁰ while his successor Northrop Frye judged her work as part of "the doggerel school." Gerson points to these assessments as evidence of "some of the biases of class, gender and ethnicity that have been unquestioningly accepted by the profession that constructs literary value."²¹

Some might argue that Gwen Pharis Ringwood,²² the first Canadian playwright to be anthologized, is hardly neglected, since the establishment of the Gwen Pharis Ringwood Award for Drama by the Writers' Guild of Alberta and the naming of the theatre in Williams Lake both honour her. Yet she is not widely known or performed today. For this foremother of women's dramatic writing in Canada, whose career spanned four decades, the recurring issue in her award-winning plays of the 1940s, *Still Stands the House*, *Pasque Flower*, *Dark Harvest*, and beyond was sharp, irreconcilable, and often

¹⁷ Edna Jaques, "At a Tea," in *Aunt Hattie's Place* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1941), 4.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Carole Gerson, "Sarah Binks and Edna Jaques: Parody, Gender, and the Construction of Literary Value," *Canadian Literature* 134 (Autumn 1992): 66.

²⁰ E.K. Brown, "Letters in Canada," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 5 (1935-36): 367.

²¹ Gerson, "Sarah Binks and Edna Jaques," 70.

²² Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *Collected Plays*, edited by Enid Delgaty Rutland, biographical note by Marion Wilson, prefaces by Margaret Laurence and George Ryga (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1982).

tragic contrasts in character. Atmospheres of repression involving implacable or taciturn people are prominent. As Margaret Laurence wrote of Ringwood's plays, "she saw, early on, the need to write out of our own people, our own land, and she has remained true to that vision."²³ Situated in a variety of settings, Ringwood's later plays continue to explore ruptures within relationships and communities. *The Stranger* captured my attention, its pages as folds that lead to a gradual unfolding. The arrival of the Chilcotin woman Jana on a Palomino stallion signals trouble for the Shuswap, who insist that she leave. The realization that her common-law partner for five years and father of her child is engaged to marry the white ranch owner further isolates the Chilcotin woman. Ringwood penetrates to the heart of the woman's despair, overlaid with a sense of invasion of a homeland by a settler. Jana's curse of her former lover and his "white whore" is charged with the vehemence of a discarded woman: "Tell her I wish your children born blind and hideous and twisted with hate as I am now."²⁴ With an interspersed lullaby in Chilcotin and the chants of a chorus, the play fulfils its gruesome *Medea* prophecy.

Although the terrain of women dramatists was very sparse at the beginning of the 67-year period of my research, it was even less developed in filmmaking. Since I place film on the "same semiological plane as literary art,"²⁵ addressing social relations and identity formation, my last example of a threshold moment is *The Far Shore*²⁶ by painter, mixed-media artist, and filmmaker Joyce Wieland, who had been only known to me through her experimental landscape documentary *Reason over Passion*.²⁷ Set in 1919, *The Far Shore* narrates the escape from a doomed marriage between the Québécoise Eulalie, who dreams of earning a living as a concert pianist, and Ross, a Toronto industrialist. Their arrival, on a rainy evening the day after the marriage, in Ross's Rosedale mansion, heavy with mahogany and rosewood, presages the entrapment of stiffness and convention. Eulalie's artistic talent is admired by painter Tom McLeod, a fictionalized version of Tom Thomson. Unappreciated at the time of its release in 1975 by avant-garde and popular critics alike, *The Far Shore* impresses today as a remarkable achievement.

²³ Margaret Laurence, "Preface" in Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *Collected Plays*, xi.

²⁴ Ringwood, "The Stranger" in *Collected Plays*, 397.

²⁵ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, translated by Michael Taylor (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 96.

²⁶ Joyce Wieland, *The Far Shore* (Far Shore Inc., 1975).

²⁷ Joyce Wieland, *Reason Over Passion* (Corrective Films, 1969).

The iris shots in the film are exceptional and revelatory. When she and Tom meet in his studio-cabin, each in turn uses a magnifying glass to talk to the other, a soundless but intimately magnified communication, with their animated faces filling the circle. The final chase scene between Ross and the now-united lovers, shot on Lake Mazinaw and its magnificent rock face in Bon Echo Provincial Park, is itself the far shore. After two gunshots are heard, Tom's blood-soaked body appears but the only evidence of Eulalie is her floating hat. Of this ambiguous ending Lauren Rabinovitz concludes that Eulalie, "not integrated into the dominant order," only accedes "to an as yet unactualized territory."²⁸ The contrasts between Tom's philistinism and Eulalie's "cultured modernism" lead Kay Armatage to view Wieland's melodrama as "a radical understanding of Canada's political and cultural history throughout the period of industrial modernization."²⁹

While the threshold experiences have clearly been extended and influenced by critical comment, in the living room section of this talk I will concentrate on the work and discursive analysis of one writer, dramatist Judith Thompson.³⁰ Admittedly this choice complicates an understanding of the page as play texts always gesture toward, enable, and envision a staged performance. Thompson's fourteen multi-act stage plays, along with one-acts and screenplays, force us to look inside ourselves to acknowledge the pettiness, explosive anger or aloneness we usually keep muffled and concealed. The repressed returns with visceral intensity in her work. As Craig Stewart Walker argues about Thompson's glimpses of death, judgement, heaven, and hell, "to transcend the barrier between our conscious selves and these four last things hidden deep within marks the first step towards transcending the barriers between us and our fellow human beings."³¹

From the striking début of *The Crackwalker* (1980) with its fool saint Theresa to her one-woman *Watching Glory Die* (2014),

²⁸ Lauren Rabinovitz, "The Far Shore: Feminist Family Melodrama," in *The Films of Joyce Wieland*, ed. Kathryn Elder (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999), 127.

²⁹ Kay Armatage, "Fluidity: Joyce Wieland's Political Cinema," in *The Gendered Screen*, eds. Brenda Austin-Smith and George Melnyk (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 108.

³⁰ Judith Thompson, *Late 20th Century Plays 1980–2000* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2002).

³¹ Craig Stewart Walker, *The Buried Astrolabe: Canadian Dramatic Imagination and Western Imagination* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 411.

fictionalizing the Ashley Smith tragedy in which a teenager took her life in an Ontario correctional centre, the dark corners of her plays, which have won two Governor General's Awards, continue to shock some readers. Thompson expresses her own surprise at this reaction:

I am always very, very shocked when people are shocked. The last thing I ever want to do is offend. ... It just doesn't occur to me that these characters would offend anybody because they're people and I care about them. And you just don't care about people because they're nice or they're pretty.³²

Critical commentary on national and international performance of her work underscores the range of her innovative theatre and its unsparing language. Her characters "get into *our* blood," Robert Nunn observes, "they become the Other-within-us, and in the moment of recognition they remind us of something we are likely to resist: that we too are Other."³³ Analyzing British reviews of *The Crackwalker* and *Lion in the Streets*, Ann Wilson notes that reviewers' voyeuristic focus on what is perceived as "new-world despair" misses essential elements: "The failure to recognize the underlying religiosity of Thompson's work blinds the English reviewers to the notions of redemption, grace and forgiveness."³⁴ Claudia Barnett concentrates on the dead or ghostly characters to whom Thompson gives voice, allowing them—despite their incorporeality—to gain the insight and agency after death, which they were denied in life.³⁵

The intriguing pursuit to gain forgiveness and raise a ghost consumes the figure of Patsy in *Perfect Pie* (2000),³⁶ who labours to re-create a fast friendship of two girls, possibly to expiate her own sense of guilt. Patsy recalls that she and Marie "hung around together

³² Judith Rudakoff, "Judith Thompson: Interview," in Ric Knowles, ed., *The Masks of Judith Thompson* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2006), 29. See also Judith Thompson, "Offending Your Audience," in Knowles, ed., *The Masks of Judith Thompson*, 50–51.

³³ Robert C. Nunn, "Strangers to Ourselves: Judith Thompson's *Sled*," *Canadian Theatre Review* 89 (1996): 29. See also Robert C. Nunn, "Spatial Metaphor in the Plays of Judith Thompson," in Ric Knowles, ed., *Judith Thompson* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2005), 20–40.

³⁴ Ann Wilson, "Canadian Grotesque: The Reception of Judith Thompson's Plays in London," *Canadian Theatre Review* 89 (1996): 27.

³⁵ Claudia Barnett, "Judith Thompson's Ghosts," *Canadian Theatre Review* 114 (2003): 33–37.

³⁶ Judith Thompson, *Perfect Pie*, in *Late 20th Century Plays 1980–2000* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2002), 407–90.

near Marmora, Ontario, like Siamese twins till you left town when you were fifteen or sixteen.”³⁷ Patsy also knows from the first scene that Marie, ventriloquized as Francesca, an actor living in an urban high-rise for the rest of the play, is dead. “I know in my heart that you did not survive, Marie. So how is it? How is it that I see you there, out there, in the world?”³⁸ The play, which began as a monologue for Patsy, explores the lasting imprint of the event twenty years ago on the train tracks when both friends agreed to a suicide pact, but Patsy either reneged or was pushed aside by Marie as the train approached. Patsy’s act of kneading the pastry for her pie is the accompaniment or impetus for the series of revelations about their friendship, the rape and abuse of Marie by the boys at a party, and Patsy’s sense of loss. She admits in the closing scene that her conversation with Francesca is “like you were a dream”³⁹ punctuated by the kneading of the dough. “I think I’m like making you. I like ... form you; right in front of my eyes, right here at my kitchen table into flesh.”⁴⁰

Thompson’s themes of ambiguous subjectivity and the haunting power of the past propel *Perfect Pie*. Walker pursues the implications of Francesca’s presence being a dream. “Is Patsy’s relationship to Marie more than a memory; is it a dark place of awful power hidden within herself that she revisits privately to reacquaint herself with the thrilling terrifying experience of being open to the ‘unimaginable world’?”⁴¹ Drawing connections between Patsy’s description of her epileptic seizures (transferred from Marie) and Thompson’s own experience of epilepsy,⁴² Jenn Stephenson sees Patsy creating herself as an artist and a storyteller, as “a metafictional autobiographer, a playwright within the play, whose subject is her own life with a blank hole at its centre.”⁴³ Although Marlene Moser presents epilepsy as a motif of the “dissolution of self”⁴⁴ in the play, she is one of the few readers who maintains the reality of Marie/Francesca who, as a character, seeks subjectivity to the same degree and in the same way as Patsy does.

³⁷ Ibid., 407.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 490.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Walker, *The Buried Astrolabe*, 406.

⁴² See Judith Thompson, “Epilepsy and the Snake: Fear in the Creative Process,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 89 (1996): 4–7.

⁴³ Jenn Stephenson, “Kneading You: Performative Meta-Auto/biography in *Perfect Pie*,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 31 (2010): 62.

⁴⁴ Marlene Moser, “Identities of Ambivalence: Judith Thompson’s *Perfect Pie*,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 27 (2006): 93.

Thompson's characters, ambivalent yet recognizable, and environments, both natural and surreal, fashion ethical encounters for her viewing and reading audiences. In paying tribute to "the beautiful people who inspired" *The Crackwalker*, she also neatly pinpoints the continuing resonance of her whole gallery of subjects: "looking at and engaging with those whose very existence illuminates our insularity, our selfishness and greed, and worst of all, our abject fear of the Crackwalker in all of us."⁴⁵

The move to the kitchen of combination and adaptive experiments illustrates the openness of living room and kitchen, the overlap of many figures, and the constant mutation and afterlife of stories in the human imagination that make adaptation, Linda Hutcheon observes, "the norm, not the exception."⁴⁶ Since, as Peter Dickinson argues convincingly in his study of adapting Canadian literature to film, "different institutional and cultural codes" can be called upon, "questions of *infidelity*, *incoherence*, and *non-equivalency* often provide more productive starting points for adaptation studies than the traditional measuring sticks of *fidelity*, *coherence*, and *equivalency*."⁴⁷ Three examples, Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed* (1996),⁴⁸ an adaptation of Barbara Gowdy's short story "We So Seldom Look on Love," Léa Pool's *Lost and Delirious* (2001),⁴⁹ as adapted by Judith Thompson from Susan Swan's novel *The Wives of Bath* (1993), and Sarah Polley's multi-vocal, multifaceted recreation of family memories in *Stories We Tell* (2012)⁵⁰ are the focus of this kitchen group observation.

Stopkewich (b. 1964) made *Kissed* as her MFA thesis at the University of British Columbia. The figure of the female necrophile in Gowdy's story, Sandra Larson, is still prominent in the film; no longer a first-person narrator, she fills the role of voiceover, telling the viewer mildly and softly that she has always been "fascinated with death" wanting "to get inside it" and "understand perfection." Instead of the middle-aged independent Sandra of Gowdy's story, the film presents a 20-something Sandra along with recalled childhood scenes of Sandra wrapping a dead bird in toilet paper, burying a mouse, and massaging

⁴⁵ Judith Thompson, "The Crackwalker Thirty Years Later," in *The Crackwalker*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2010), vii.

⁴⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 177.

⁴⁷ Peter Dickinson, *Screening Gender, Framing Genre: Canadian Literature into Film* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 211.

⁴⁸ Lynne Stopkewich, *Kissed* (Samuel Goldwyn Company, Orion Pictures, 1996).

⁴⁹ Léa Pool, *Lost and Delirious* (Cité-Amérique, 2001).

⁵⁰ Sarah Polley, *Stories We Tell* (National Film Board, 2012).

a dead chipmunk's blood on her throat. The fascination leads to her study of embalming and her job at the funeral parlour, as well as her encounter with the sometime med student, Matt, who becomes a sexual partner. "One of the most radical narrative treatments of non-normative heterosexual female desire in Canadian film," *Kissed* also succeeds in presenting "a more youthful and accessible figure of deviant desire" in line "with late feminism's preference for female icons who combine various degrees of surface empowerment with sexual availability."⁵¹ The visual medium is especially riveting when the funeral parlour owner demonstrates to a rapt Sandra how to vacuum the liquids by thrusting a cannula into a corpse and when a naked Sandra, experiencing orgasm over a body, tells us "I'm out of myself." The most startling image is the hanging naked body of Matt who, having been convinced that "love is about crossing for transformation," finally offers his corpse for Sandra's delectation.

Homosexual female desire centres both Swan's *The Wives of Bath* and *Lost and Delirious*, the first English film by Swiss-Québécoise filmmaker Léa Pool (b. 1950). The three teenaged girls, Paulie, Victoria, and Mary, students at a private boarding school, are present in both texts. But differences in time, characterization, and plot, with which Swan declared herself in the introduction to a re-issue of her novel "shamelessly satisfied,"⁵² separate them. The film, shot on the campus of Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec, sets the novel's 1960s narrative in the present. The combination of dramatist Thompson and filmmaker Pool, not concentrating on Paulie's desire to be seen as a man, turns the novel's murder and castration of the janitor into Paulie's suicide from the parapet of the school building in the film's breathtaking conclusion. Each girl experiences alienation: Paulie, adopted at birth, searches for her "blood mother"; Tori chafes against parental expectations that she will be "the perfect Junior League girl"; and Mary, initially "Mouse" and then "Mary Brave," mourns her dead mother. The newcomer to Paulie and Tori's room of "lost girls," Mary observes their lovemaking and narrates as the heterosexual other. Seeing Mary's role as working to "expel same-sex desires," Catherine Silverstone also interprets Paulie's borrowings from *Twelfth Night* and *Antony and Cleopatra* to try to regain Tori's

⁵¹ Lee Parpart, "Feminist Ambiguity in the Film Adaptations of Lynne Stopkewich," in *The Gendered Screen*, eds. Austin-Smith and Melnyk, 43–66.

⁵² Susan Swan, *The Wives of Bath* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), ix.

love as “markers of unhappiness and melancholy.”⁵³ While Sara Ahmed views Paulie’s descent as ascent, arguing that “she and the bird [the falcon whom Paulie nurses to health] rise above the heads of the teachers and schoolgirls who look upon the scene with passive horror and disbelief,”⁵⁴ Silverstone sees the ending quite convincingly as sacrificing the threat to the community, occluding “Paulie as an embodied desiring queer subject.”⁵⁵ By tracing the philological root of “lost” to the Germanic root for “cut apart” and “delirious” to the Latin *delirare* “to go off the furrow,” Maria Anita Stefanelli concludes that *Lost and Delirious* “hints at a disjunction, a separation leading to somewhere off: off space, off time, off the mind.”⁵⁶

Sarah Polley’s filmography reflects her decades of involvement in television series and full-length features. As an actor she is recognizable in her large body of work, from roles in *Road to Avonlea* (1994–1996) to movie roles in, among many others, Atom Egoyan’s *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ* (1999), Thom Fitzgerald’s *The Event* (2003), and Isabelle Coixet’s *The Secret Life of Words* (2005). Her filmmaking art in the screenplay for *Take This Waltz* (2011) explores the routes and impasses of communication in a marriage. Her adaptations of Munro’s “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” as *Away From Her* (2006) and of Atwood’s *Alias Grace* for a CBC miniseries (2018) have been award-winning. My interest here, however, is in the ways she adroitly hybridizes the genre of autobiography to fashion an accumulation of mediated yet personalized truths.

Polley spent five years documenting family history in her NFB production *Stories We Tell*. Being told at age thirteen that Michael Polley was not her father and later having this fact confirmed with DNA analysis are the pretexts for this question-filled exploration of parents, family, and connections. Disclosing the secret of her own paternity, the film splices interviews with actor-turned insurance man Michael Polley, Montreal producer Harry Gulkin, her siblings, and her mother’s confidantes along with Michael’s narration of his own

⁵³ Catherine Silverstone, “Shakespeare, Cinema and Queer Adolescents: Unhappy Endings and Heartfelt Conclusions,” *Shakespeare* 10, no. 3 (2014): 309–327.

⁵⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 105.

⁵⁵ Silverstone, “Shakespeare, Cinema and Queer Adolescents.”

⁵⁶ Maria Anita Stefanelli, “Queering Spectatorship in Léa Pool’s and Judith Thompson’s *Lost and Delirious*,” in *Modes and Facets of the American Scene: Studies in Honour of Cristina Giorcelli* (Palermo, Italy: Ila Palma, 2014), 364.

scripted memories, all of which Polley directs and edits. Recreated home movies in which look-alike actors stand in for Polley's mother Diane (Rebecca Jenkins), Michael Polley when younger (Peter Evans), and Harry Gulkin (Alex Hatz) during his brief affair with Diane when she was appearing in a Centaur Theatre production impart a sense—a manufactured sense—of memories obscured by sadness. Although Gulkin delights in connecting with his long-lost daughter, he does not like her pursuit of what he sees as “very woolly” documentary that “never touches bottom.” Most engrossing for me about this filmmaker's pursuit of family secrets are the ways in which discrepancies and the inclusion of so many participants and witnesses, from different angles and time frames, bring someone to life through stories.

Whether the person is a recognized, nonfictional human being like Diane Polley, or an authorial stand-in and reflection like Aran Waring and David Newman, or excluded, occluded outsiders like Jana, Eulalie, and Paulie, or a remorseful figure seeking forgiveness like Patsy, the text—in print, on the screen, or vivified on stage—invites us to come to know them. Through filters of memory, exposures of fear, and intimate encounters, stories excite our curiosity on the doorstep, usher us into a living room discussion, and welcome us to the kitchen of re-mixings and new tastes.

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