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BIOGRAPHY

Rosemary Sullivan is an award-winning writer, a journalist, a Canada Research Chair at the University of Toronto in creative non-fiction and biographical studies, and the founding director of the MA program in English in the field of creative writing, who has taught at universities in France, India and Canada. Her recent book, *Villa Air-Bel: World War II, Escape and a House in Marseille* (HarperCollins) won the Canadian Jewish Books Yad Vashem Award in Holocaust History/Scholarship in 2007. It was published in Canada, the United States, England, Spain, Brazil, the Czech Republic and Italy.

She is the author of 12 books, including *The Guthrie Road* (2009); *Cuba: Grace Under Pressure*, with photographs by Malcolm David Batty (2003); *Labyrinth of Desire: Women, Passion, and Romantic Obsession* (2001), published in Canada, the United States, England, Spain, and Latin America; and the national bestseller *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out* (1998). Her 1995 biography *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* won the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction, the Canadian Author's Association Literary Award for Non-Fiction, the University of British Columbia's Medal for Canadian Biography, and the City of Toronto Book Award and was nominated for the Trillium Book Award. It became the basis for Brenda Longfellow's award-winning documentary *Shadow Maker* (1998). Sullivan's first biography, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart/A Life* (1991), was nominated for the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction. Her first poetry collection *The Space a Name Makes* (1986) won the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award. In 2001, Black Moss Press released *Memory-Making: The Selected Essays of Rosemary Sullivan*,

which included essays published in Canadian and international magazines. Her journalistic pieces have won her a National Magazine Awards silver medal and a Western Journalism Awards first prize for travelogue. She is the recipient of Guggenheim, Killam, Camargo, Connaught, and Jackman fellowships. In 2008, she was the recipient of the Lorne Pierce Medal from the Royal Society of Canada for her distinguished contribution to Canadian literature and culture. She was nominated a Trudeau Fellow in 2008.

A Montrealer by birth, Rosemary Sullivan received her BA from McGill University, her MA from the University of Connecticut, and her PhD from the University of Sussex.

ABSTRACT

An exciting conflation or mixing of genres has occurred in contemporary writing. We no longer insist on the comfortable demarcation between fiction and non-fiction. Novels come with bibliographical references. Works of non-fiction include fictionalized dialogue and anecdotal references. Even in journalism we have come to be interested in the autobiographical. In the old days, the *sine qua non* of journalism was that it had to be objective. Now much of the best journalism is *I* centred. Why this interest in *Intimate* revelation? I believe this insistence on intimacy has to do with the postmodern dismantling of the old orthodoxies: in an age when all ideologies have been called into doubt, the only ground left for public statement is, paradoxically, personal experience. As I look back over my writing career and the 12 books I have published, I ask myself why I have been committed to the art of creative non-fiction, that art that is centred in the potency of bearing witness, where the author records what has actually happened, tethered to history, context, time, and place, while being candid about the motives and experience of the person doing the recording, namely him- or herself. This lecture will be about the subtext to a number of my books, about the factual stories I encountered in my research, which are as compelling and complex as any fiction.

LECTURE

Confessions of a Biographer: Is Truth Stranger Than Fiction?

Sherbrooke University

JANUARY 27, 2010

The Biographer and Her Subject

To offer a retrospective glance at one's intellectual career is a daunting task! However, for me this means my career as a writer. My principal interest as a writer has been in a genre we now call creative non-fiction. I find this is a rather misleading rubric, since I do not believe there is a category of serious writing that is not creative. I prefer to speak of narrative non-fiction. I am fascinated, in particular, by biography. My imagination is drawn to that conjunction where the narrative impulse and actual events, the facts of a life, meet.

My interest coincides with an exciting conflation or mixing of genres that has occurred in contemporary writing. We no longer insist on the comfortable demarcation between fiction and non-fiction. Novels like Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* or, more recently, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* come with an acknowledgements page filled with bibliographical references that locate the novelist's research. Biographies sometimes include fictionalized dialogue. And memoirs require the narrative energy of fiction if they are to find an audience.

The question in all of this is who is speaking? As someone who writes not only biography, but also memoir, journalism, travelogues, and poetry, I am fascinated by the slipperiness of that most unmanageable of pronouns: the authorial “I.”

Even in journalism we have come to be interested in the autobiographical. In the old days, the *sine qua non* of journalism was that it had to be objective. Now much of the best journalism is *I* centred. Why this interest in personal revelation?

I believe this insistence on intimacy has to do with the post-modern dismantling of the old orthodoxies: in an age when all ideologies have been called into doubt, the only ground left for public statement is, paradoxically, personal experience. Those who write non-fiction believe in the potency of bearing witness, of recording what has happened, tethered to persons, history, context, time, and place. They are attached to the fact that something *happened* that needs recording, something that they have not invented. But they want to be candid about the motives and experience of the person who is doing the recording, namely, themselves.

I find rather puerile the old game of fighting over which is more accurate, in terms of truth value: fiction or non-fiction. It's not a competition. I would insist only that the biographer has a special contract with the reader: there must be documentary sources for everything the biographer records.

Biography is an exacting art, fraught with responsibilities: responsibility to the living, responsibility to the dead, responsibility to the facts. The ethics of biography are ruthlessly straightforward. Implicitly the biographer makes a pact—with the subject and with the reader: To accord the subject the respect one would demand of others if one's own life were examined. To assure the reader that nothing will be made up.

The assumption is often made that the biographer's task is to dig up secrets. During a symposium on biography at Concordia University I was asked by a young woman: “Was there a deep, dark

secret that the writer Elizabeth Smart told you, a secret she begged you never to tell? And if so, what was it?"

But as a biographer begins to tell the story of a life, offering a hypothesis about how that life was lived, the complexity of the life takes over. A biography is not about secrets. Rather, it is about the strange symbiosis between biographer and subject as the biographer undertakes her search. What is not evident in the finished book is the process itself, what the biographer experiences in the course of the research and writing. This is quite different from the record of the life that appears between the covers of the book, since it is the strange and sometimes disconcerting confluence of the biographer's and the subject's lives.

Elizabeth Smart—"Is Ego a Prick to the Muse?"

In 1987, 23 years ago, I was commissioned by Penguin Books Canada to write a biography of Elizabeth Smart.¹ Smart was the Canadian author of the novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*,² which has been called one of the half dozen masterpieces of poetic prose in the English language.³

Like a kind of female D.H. Lawrence, Smart was as famous for the story of her life as for her books. She always claimed to have lived a great love affair. The primary story, which she delighted in recounting in interviews, was that in 1937 at the age of 24, she walked into a bookstore on Charing Cross Road in London, picked up a book of poetry, and began to read. She was immediately overwhelmed. She checked the biographical blurb. The poet's name was

1. Rosemary Sullivan, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart/A Life* (Toronto: Viking Penguin Group, 1991); (Barcelona: Circe, 1996).

2. Elizabeth Smart, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (London: Editions Poetry, 1945); (London: Panther Books, 1966); (New York: Popular Library, 1975); (London: Polytantric Press, 1977); (Ottawa: Deneau Publishers, 1981).

3. Brigid Brophy, foreword to *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (London: Panther Books, 1966).

George Barker and he was the same age as she was. She instantly knew he was the “HE,” the catalytic experience she needed to get her life as a writer started. Without seeing a photograph of him, she let it be known that she wanted to meet and marry George Barker. She wanted to have his children. She set out on her hunt. In the course of my research, I actually met people who recalled Elizabeth Smart tearing around London asking how to meet George Barker. The masterpiece she came to write was based on her love affair with Barker, whom she finally met in California in 1940.

The question is why did she find this autobiographical anecdote so compelling that she continued to tell it to most interviewers even 40 years after the fact? This is where an act of historical imagination is required of the biographer. This was 1937, a time when women were still heavily constrained by conventional expectations, particularly regarding relationships between the sexes. In Smart’s anecdote, she was the initiator and the romantic. I would say that, to her, this flinging of herself into romantic extremis, what she might have called “leaping into the arms of the infinite,” was an act of courage. “To really live,” Elizabeth Smart always said, “you had to have a large appetite.”⁴ And she had models. Falling in love with the muse and writing love poetry had always been the male writer’s first assignment.

I knew Elizabeth Smart as a friend. In 1979 I had searched her down when I was living in London and her name appeared in the *Guardian*, under the heading “Come Back of the Year Award.” After 34 years she had finally published her second novel: *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals*.⁵ I wrote to her as a fellow Canadian and was invited to visit her at her remote cottage, The Dell, in Suffolk. It certainly did not occur to me then that one day I would write her

4. Comment to author.

5. Elizabeth Smart, *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals* (London: Jonathan Cape and Polytantric Press, 1978).

biography. At that time, I had, in a sense, wanted her to write mine. I had fled to London, blown across the Atlantic by the fatal winds of a romantic obsession. I needed to know how she had survived her book, for *Grand Central Station* seemed to me so potent, so flayed, that I presumed she had lived its story of loss.

It was winter, and I can still remember how desolate her cottage seemed, adjacent to an empty gravel pit. The landscape was strewn with frozen pools of water and interrupted by huge cranes rising like pterodactyls. Elizabeth Smart stood at her gate waiting for my taxi. She was dishevelled in mackinaw and gum boots. She would have been 65 then. My first impression was that she was incredibly lonely, but I would soon discover that her home was open to everyone, like Grand Central Station itself—the taxi driver was invited in with the passenger.

Though I was in pursuit of answers for my life, I cannot remember talking about myself that afternoon. Perhaps I had just wanted to see Elizabeth Smart. One among many details that sit in my mind is her answer to my question about her book. I asked her why the man in her novel with whom the narrator was in love hardly seemed to have an identity. He seemed to me faceless. “Of course he has no face,” she replied. “He is a love object.”

I was too young then to realize that Elizabeth Smart was telling me she understood the nature of her romantic obsession. She had come to recognize her collusion in what she called “all that pricy pain.” She had stranded herself in obsession. Romantic obsession is auto-erotic, a projection onto the other of all that is most valuable in the self and which one longs to claim. Such passion serves as a catalyst to get one’s life started or to kick-start it again when it stalls. When the romantic projection is ripped away or dissolves, the other standing there is almost always a stranger. “Every love story is a ghost story,” as the great Australian novelist Christina Stead once said. Still, the story of romantic obsession now feels like it comes from another

age. It is hard today to think of romantic love without irony. No man can easily live the persona of the romantic artist. No woman writer could ever be so alone. There are new narratives.

But the story of Elizabeth's life as a writer interested me deeply. It was a story of *silence*. Smart had experienced a painful writer's block of 30 years between books. How had she lost her sense of herself as a writer—that obsessive compulsion the artist feels to write? Once she had hoped to be as good as Emily Brontë. What had happened to the writer's necessary ego, which she had had in large enough measure to write a masterpiece like *Grand Central Station*? Puzzled by her own paralysis, she asked in a poem: Is there a difference between the "muse, his & hers?" "Is ego a prick to the muse?"⁶

In one of our conversations she told me that when she was young she had felt the "maestro of the masculine sitting on my shoulder, telling me I would never be good enough." Smart left Canada in 1943 and did not return for 40 years. "At the London literary table," she said, "the male writers allowed me a seat at the table, but they would never talk to me one on one."

The central issue for the pioneer female writer in the 1930s and 1940s was one of confidence. Where was it to be found? When *Grand Central Station* was published in England in 1945, it was issued on war-rationed paper and was printed in such small type that it was only 45 pages long. It got good reviews, including one by Cyril Connolly. Then it sank like a stone. Elizabeth Smart had no one telling her just how good a writer she really was.

When six copies of *Grand Central Station* were shipped to Canada and showed up in an Ottawa bookstore, her mother bought them up and burned them. She asked her neighbour, then Prime Minister Mackenzie King, to prevent the book's importation into Canada under the laws of wartime censorship. The book was too

6. Elizabeth Smart, "The Muse: His & Hers" in *A Bonus* (London: Polytantric Press, 1977).

intimate and revealed family secrets. Smart was by then the mother of three “bastard” children by George Barker and Mrs. Smart needed to protect the family reputation from her daughter’s hysterical excesses. Needless to say, Elizabeth was devastated.

After her death in 1986, I wrote a memorial article about Elizabeth Smart titled “Muse in a Female Ghetto” for *This Magazine*, as a consequence of which Penguin Books approached me to write her biography. Had the idea been my own, it would have felt like trading on a friendship, but a commission was another matter. As a biographer does, I followed her story, a process that took several years of research.

My first task was to visit Elizabeth Smart’s family in London to ensure that I would have their permission to write a biography, but that I would be free to offer my own interpretation of her life. Her son Sebastian Barker told me that his only demand was that the book be well written. Her daughter Georgina said: “Write about my mother, but don’t romanticize her. She would not have wanted that.” Then I headed to the National Library in Ottawa to read the Elizabeth Smart papers, a collection of more than 90 boxes of material.

Archival research is fascinating. To quote only one example, it had always puzzled me that the lovers in *Grand Central Station* are arrested at the Arizona border. The novel was largely autobiographical. I wondered if this had actually happen to Elizabeth Smart and George Barker?

I wrote to the FBI. Yes, they had a file on Elizabeth Smart, but it could not be released in the interests of national security. Elizabeth Smart who had been the most a-political of creatures! When I demanded an explanation, the FBI replied that she was cross-referenced with a person whose name was still a threat to public security. Were there political refugees from the Spanish Civil War under FBI surveillance on the west coast of the U.S. in 1940? Were Smart and Barker, then living at a writers’ colony in Big Sur,

inadvertently caught in their net? Could Elizabeth Smart's friend Henry Miller have been of interest to the FBI? Despite repeated efforts, I never managed to obtain Smart's FBI file.

I had many extraordinary experiences while I was researching and writing Smart's biography. One encounter in particular sums up the impact the writing of biography can have on the biographer.

George Barker had taken the notion of the priapic, bardic poet—womanizer, drinker, and agonized romantic—that his society offered as mandatory for the authentic poet and lived it to the hilt. When Elizabeth Smart met him he was married, though this was not recorded in the biographical blurbs in his books. After his relationship with Smart ended, he had another three "wives." In all, he had five wives and 15 children. I needed to meet the children from his first marriage who had been lost to him 50 years ago. I needed their permission to quote from the letters their mother, Jessica Barker, had written to Elizabeth Smart. Jessica had been the woman whose place Smart usurped in George Barker's life.

After a long and circuitous search I finally found the daughter I was looking for. She was called Anastasia Barker and lived in Kentucky. I phoned to ask if we could meet.

I found myself travelling to a remote farm district in the blue hills of Kentucky to meet a complete stranger, carrying to her the stories of a father she had never known. Her mother had told her in her childhood: "Your father was a poet. He went to a poetry reading at Harvard and never came back." "It was said in such a way that you knew the conversation was over," Anastasia told me. "You weren't allowed to ask anything more." She and her twin brother had grown up in Greenwich Village. Though they lived in England for a year when she was a teenager, it had never occurred to her to look up her father. George Barker was only a poet they had read in school.

I gave Anastasia photographs I had brought of her father—she had never seen them. It was astonishing. I, an outsider, was the carrier of her family history, at the moment the only one who could,

however awkwardly, pull the threads together. Had I come to visit a few years earlier, she told me she probably would not have been willing to meet me. But her mother was dead—she had nursed her through several years of Alzheimer's. Giving in a way that you must to someone so sick had been the most transformative experience of her life.

"I'm tired of secrets. Secrets destroyed my mother's life," she said. Her mother had remained embittered about George Barker, locking that bitterness in her heart. She never spoke of him but her children all lived under the weight of his unspoken existence. And their lives became a geography of lost and missing pieces. "Publish anything you need to tell the story." What she was saying to me, I understood, was profound. It is the secrets that keep us locked inside private agonies. But the secrets turn out to be ordinary lived experience. George Barker's mistress, as Anastasia called Elizabeth Smart, had been freer than her mother. She had spread her life generously.

The biographer does not own her own book until the hurdle of permissions has been crossed. When I sent the galleys of *By Heart* to George Barker to get his permission to quote from his diaries, he said my book was rubbish. He then published a brief notice in the *London Times* warning that this execrable book was about to appear. He would not bother suing, but he would do something spectacular when it came out. I removed his diary entries.

I travelled to London for the publication of *By Heart*. I remember picking up the *Times* and looking at the title of the review of my book: "Writer Without a Clue." I thought, I might as well go home now, but the review was, in fact, favourable. The writer without a clue turned out to be Elizabeth Smart, clueless for being in love with someone as mercurial as George Barker. Then I glanced at the adjacent page. There was Barker's gesture. He had died the day before. Astonishingly, the Barker/Smart family still came to my book launch; they were able to celebrate their mother at the same time as they mourned their father.

Gwendolyn MacEwen—Elusive Secrets

I went on to write two other biographies of women writers. They completed my story of the female writer's struggle for confidence, a story about how you find the courage to believe in yourself as an artist. As my second subject, I chose the Canadian poet Gwendolyn MacEwen because she had been so productive, writing over 20 books in 30 years. But I wrote this biography differently. Sabotaging the illusions of the magisterial biographer who claims to know, I included my own voice as a biographer searching for the narrative of MacEwen's life, a strategy even more essential, since MacEwen lived her life secretly, separating her friends into different pockets of her life. I also included the voices of the people to whom I spoke as they tried to recover for me the Gwendolyn MacEwen they had once known. I wrote in my preface to *Shadow Maker*:

I decided to follow the clues as they came, recording the voices that surrounded Gwendolyn MacEwen, all those versions of her life she had left behind. It would mean that I would not be able to pretend, as biographers sometimes do, that one can turn a childhood into a seamless narrative when one is following forty years after the fact, and constructing a childhood from the multiple versions of the survivors who are left behind. I would have to track down her lost lovers, from whom there would be no letters and whom friends remembered only as a shadow or a name. Even then who was to say that the man I would meet and the man Gwendolyn had loved bore even the slightest resemblance to each other. What debris had gathered in the pockets of memory? To be faithful to the mystery that was Gwendolyn, I would have to lay bare the bones of my search for her, with little of the biographer's illusions of omniscience or objectivity.⁷

Gwendolyn MacEwen was a great poet who died at the age of 46 in mysterious circumstances. Some people suspected suicide. How was I to write about her? Above my desk I kept an extract from a

7. Rosemary Sullivan, *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), xiii-xiv.

poem by the German poet Nelly Sachs to remind me of the complexity of what I was doing:

When someone lifts us
He lifts in his hand millions of memories
Which do not dissolve in blood
Like evening.⁸

We believe the roots of a lifetime are hidden and entwined in childhood. A biography begins its archaeology there. In my first chapter “Thirty-eight Keele Street,” the address of MacEwen’s childhood home, I offered a meditation on the very notion of a house.

The houses we are born into are always more than domestic architecture. They are mental spaces that define the power dynamic of the world we enter unwittingly; those houses will surface repeatedly in our dreams and we will reconstruct them throughout a lifetime. Thirty-eight Keele was the first universe fate offered Gwendolyn. It was complex and full of secrets.⁹

The essential secret at the core of MacEwen’s childhood was that her mother suffered periodic bouts of mental illness. Neither her father nor her aunt and uncle, with whom the MacEwens lived, would speak of this shameful secret. Gwendolyn and her sister Carol only knew that from time to time their mother disappeared from home. When they asked why, they were told: “You are too young to understand.”

In order to encounter Elsie MacEwen, I needed to visit the Queen Street Mental Health Centre where she would check herself in when life became unbearable. I obtained permission to read the extensive files kept by her doctors recording the details of her breakdowns. But I felt it was essential for the reader to confront,

8. Nelly Sachs, “Chorus of the Stones,” in *The Seeker and Other Poems*, trans. Ruth and Matthew Mead and Michael Hamburger (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

9. Sullivan, *Shadow Maker*, 3.

along with me, the mystery of madness. And so in my biography I wrote:

We are terrified by madness, perhaps because we feel it nascent in ourselves, ready to spring. Perhaps it is a biological fear—our genes are coded for madness. Yet I must attempt to know this woman. As I head to the records room of the hospital in search of Elsie MacEwen, I watch her confraternity. A man paces the huge reception hall where patients gather for coffee...¹⁰

In writing *Shadow Maker*, I was deeply aware that I was entering the lives of *real* people. The first person with whom I spoke was MacEwen's sister Carol Wilson. On our first encounter, I sat across from her in her small-town Ontario kitchen and examined her face. Eight years older than her sister, she looked exactly like Gwendolyn would have looked at that age. Carol described how, in 1950, when her family moved to Winnipeg, she had witnessed her mother's attempts to commit suicide by slashing her throat with a razor. Carol recounted the story to me in a halting voice full of pain. "This is not easy for me," she said. She had tried to close the door to prevent her sister from seeing. She still wondered whether Gwendolyn, nine years old at the time, had seen what had happened in the bathroom that night.

On one of my visits, Carol handed me a sealed envelope, on the back of which Gwendolyn had scrawled her name in large childish letters. Carol told me it contained a pencil. Gwendolyn had saved it because it was the pencil with which she had written her first poem when she was 10. She also told me that Gwendolyn changed her name. The family had always called her Wendy, but at age 12, she insisted that her name henceforth would be Gwendolyn. She said she thought one day she might be important and Wendy was not the name of somebody important.

10. *Ibid.*, 7.

The astonishing thing is that, out of the pain of this childhood, Gwendolyn MacEwen was able to construct such a powerful life for herself. For her, it seems that art was a way to make sense of life. It required training, discipline, love. And she had a remarkable mind, perpetually in gear.

I went to libraries and searched through city directories to locate the many places MacEwen had lived. I found her letters in writers' archives across the country, echoes of her lost voice. I consulted the Mormons in Salt Lake City to trace her genealogy. I phoned Edinburgh searching for details about her father's life. I wrote to hospitals for files. And I tracked down many of the witnesses who shared, however peripherally, in her life.

The story grew. After quitting high school just one month shy of her graduation, she wandered the streets of *High Park* [in Toronto] until she found a small *chaidar*, or Hebrew school, and walked in asking them to teach her Hebrew. She was a brilliant autodidact. If she was to know the Bible, the *Zoar*, the Gnostics, she must read them in the original language. Unsupervised by parents whose lives were disintegrating, she roamed the back streets of Toronto late at night. Once, when she was at the Wah Mai Café on Queen Street, the police raided. As they hauled in the prostitutes, they inquired about the kid in the brown corduroy jumper. Gwendolyn told them she was there because she was training to be a writer: "I'm just a page now but one day I'll be a book."¹¹

I found letters to and from her father, whose life had begun with such promise, though it degenerated into alcoholism. Margaret Atwood, who had been Gwendolyn's friend, gave me copies of their correspondence, which amounted to almost a 100 letters. These offered a portrait of two young female mavericks, poets confronting the world together at a club called the Bohemian Embassy. I began to watch

11. Gwendolyn MacEwen, "The Wah Mai Café," *Afterworlds* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 34.

magic shows. Gwendolyn loved magicians. “Poets are magicians without quick wrists,” she said.

In dialogue with the multiple voices swirling through my biography, I created my version of Gwendolyn MacEwen. It is the portrait of a poet, of a woman of creative depth whose very mystery leaves one breathless.

Margaret Atwood—a Biography of an Era

After I published *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen*, much to my surprise I received an extraordinary number of letters. Many people identified with the tragic life of Gwendolyn MacEwen. I was moved that they would take the time to write, and that so many told me they had gone out and bought her poetry and were reading her entire work. But there was something disturbing me. Some people began to ask why I identified with dark, self-destructive, romantic female extremists. But that was not how I saw either Gwendolyn MacEwen or Elizabeth Smart. They were writers of remarkable courage who had succeeded against the odds, as all writers must, and the difficulties of their lives had come from where most difficulties do: in large measure from the patterns scripted in childhood. Theirs were individual stories and it was risky to use their lives to generalize about the Ur-pattern of the artistic life.

I remembered Margaret Atwood once commenting that there is no common pattern to artists’ lives. The only thing that writers have in common is that they write. I found myself thinking of writing a book about Margaret Atwood. Would that be possible? And why would I presume? I had two motives. First, this would be another kind of story, a narrative about a woman who had managed to take control of her artistry *and* her life. And, secondly, she would be there to talk back. This intrigued me. I was skeptical about the way many biographers claim to know the motives of their subjects after they are dead.

I decided to write a portrait of Margaret Atwood's early career. My book would be about confidence, about how you find the courage to believe in yourself as an artist. It would be a cultural history. It would also be about the creative process itself.

In my head I thought of this book as a not-biography. There would be no intimate journals or letters as sources. These were still in private hands, though Margaret Atwood allowed me to read her restricted files in the Thomas Fisher Library that houses her papers. I interviewed her and we had a lively e-mail correspondence. I also knew that people would be guarded and protective of her. Why, then, write the book? I wanted the third version of the female artist's life. Elizabeth Smart had been trapped in silence—after her masterpiece she had lost her nerve as a writer. Gwendolyn MacEwen had been deeply damaged by the secrets behind which she hid. Margaret Atwood had produced a brilliant and extensive body of work and was content in her life.

I knew this would be as much a biography of an era as it would be the record of an individual writer's life. Margaret Atwood came of age as a writer at a time when the currents of feminism and Canadian nationalism met. She was central to that period in the late sixties and early seventies when Canadian writers established themselves in the national imagination. Compelled by Northrop Frye's suggestion that the Canadian writer was not so much engaged in the pursuit of personal identity "Who am I?" but rather cultural identity, "Where is here?," they were engaged in articulating the myths and landscapes that have shaped our culture.¹²

In the course of writing my previous biographies, I had experienced the nostalgic, elegiac feeling of following after. Writing about Margaret Atwood was, of course, completely different. I was driven

12. Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), 220.

by curiosity and intrigue, and found myself saying: “Ah, so that’s what it was like.”

On one of my many journeys, I trekked down to Harvard, where Atwood had gone to graduate school, and visited the Lamont Library, where, as a female student, she was not allowed to work. Apparently it was felt that the presence of females would distract the young male students. And I saw where Founder’s House, her graduate residence at Radcliffe, had once stood. I thought of her description of the sexual perverts who, like aphids, had scaled its walls. In Boston, she would later say, she learned about urban violence. And I thought of the costume party she and her friend Jim Polk had organized at Founder’s House.

According to Polk, they announced it as a Roman orgy: she went as Cleopatra’s breast, wearing a birdcage covered in a flesh-coloured towel, and he went as the asp. Later, however, she would stage a more significant rebellion. As I walked through Harvard, I saw what Margaret Atwood would come to make of that intimidating institution. It would provide the locus for the fundamentalist dictatorship in her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Villa Air-Bel—a Collective Biography

In my recent book, *Villa Air-Bel: World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille*,¹³ I undertook an experiment in a collective biography. Though I narrate multiple stories, the book centres on a man named Varian Fry, a young American journalist of 33. When the German

13. Rosemary Sullivan, *Villa Air-Bel: World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille* (Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2006); (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); (London: John Murray, 2006); (Barcelona: Debate, 2008); (Prague: Mladá fronta, 2008); (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Rocco Ltda., 2008); (Rome: Edizioni dell’Altana, 2008). For the 15-minute documentary film *The Road Out*, based on *Villa Air-Bel*, see Rosemary Sullivan Online, <http://www.rosemarysullivan.com>.

army was poised to invade France in the spring of 1940, it was apparent that there were thousands of political refugees on the Nazis' most wanted list who were trapped in France. They had to be rescued. A civilian committee called "Emergency Rescue Committee" was immediately formed in New York. At a fundraising dinner at the Commodore Hotel, Erika Mann, Thomas Mann's daughter, stood up and said that it was all very well to send money, but someone had to go to France to get the refugees out. Varian Fry immediately volunteered.

On June 22, 1940, the Vichy collaborationist government signed an armistice with Hitler, dividing France into the German-occupied and the so-called free zone. Marseille was the largest port city in unoccupied France.

In August, Fry travelled to Marseille, arriving at the Saint-Charles train station with \$3,000 taped to his leg, a summer suit, and a list of 200 people he was meant to save. Expecting to stay six weeks, he lasted 13 months before the Vichy government arrested and expelled him from France, shutting down his rescue mission. In that time, he saved 2,000 people and helped thousands more with food and shelter, finding them places to hide when the always-anticipated German occupation eventually occurred.

Much of that time Varian Fry lived at a large manse called the Villa Air-Bel in the suburbs of Marseille. Living with him were the Surrealist artist André Breton and his wife and daughter; the Belgian writer Victor Serge and his girlfriend and son; his primary assistants Danny Bénédite and his wife, Theo; and an American heiress named Mary Jane Gold. As people left, either legally with their numerous travel documents in order, or illegally by the secret escape routes Fry had set up, others joined the household, including Max Ernst, Peggy Guggenheim, Victor Brauner, Remedios Varo, and Benjamin Péret. Many visited, including Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, and Jacques Lipchitz, each of whom Fry helped to get out of France.

Villa Air-Bel begins in 1932 and charts the rise of Fascism in France. It ends in 1942, with the beginning of the French Resistance. Counting the number of people whose experiences I recorded, one reviewer said there were at least 40 stories of dramatic escapes.

As I wrote *Villa Air-Bel* I discovered how much of my own experience informed its subtext. I have always been interested in totalitarian systems. Wanting to understand first-hand how a totalitarian regime functions, in 1979 I visited the Soviet Union and, with the help of a friend at the BBC, visited a number of dissidents. Through the connections of another friend, the novelist Josef Skvorecky, I also travelled to Czechoslovakia where I saw Joseph's work being passed around in samizdat.¹⁴ After returning to Canada I organized an international congress called "The Writer and Human Rights" in aid of Amnesty International. When the congress was finally launched in 1981, 70 authors from 30 countries attended. The congress gave me insight into just how many writers and artists around the world are censored, exiled, imprisoned, tortured, or killed.

But there was another experience that informed my thinking. As I was completing *Villa Air-Bel* and still struggling with the preface, my husband, Juan Opitz, thinking to help me, asked me where the idea for my book had started. I spontaneously said: "In Chile in 1985." I was surprised myself, but indeed this is what immediately came to my mind.

My husband worked as a theatre director in Chile in the early 1970s. Under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, he was arrested

14. The term *samizdat* means "self-published." Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a crucial form of dissident activity was the circulation of samizdat literature. Across the Soviet Bloc, books that had been officially censored, such as Josef Skvorecky's novels, were printed by hand and circulated among friends. To be caught with samizdat books was, of course, a punishable offence.

for putting on a play that was condemned as defamatory of the military. He was jailed for three months. After his release, he fled from the country illegally, eventually making his way to Canada.

When we returned to Chile in 1985, I encountered the fear that military dictatorships create in order to control people. That year was still a few years before the end of Pinochet's dictatorship. My husband and I were in the town of Talca where he was born, a very conservative town. In the first days of the coup d'état, so many people were arrested that the only place large enough to confine the prisoners was the empty municipal swimming pool.

It was December, high summer, and Talca was under curfew. One night we went to a café. When the café closed at 1:00 a.m. and the doors were locked, a young guitarist came on stage to sing the illegal songs of Victor Jara. Twelve years earlier, Jara had been murdered in the national stadium in Santiago. There was a legend that the guards had cut off his hands to prevent him from playing his music to the other prisoners.

A group of young people at the café invited us home. They would have been as young as 12 when the coup happened. I remember slinking through the dark streets, watching soldiers shoving people caught out after curfew into the backs of paddy wagons. At the house we drank cheap wine, and as the atmosphere warmed, one young man suddenly left the room. He returned carrying some objects carefully bound in cloth. When he unwrapped them, I saw they were books. One was by Oriana Fallaci. I do not remember the title. Another was Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*. These were banned books. To be caught with them would mean immediate imprisonment.

The young man turned to my husband: "We were kids at the time of the coup. We live in a dictatorship, but we don't know how it all happened. You are the first person we have met who has come back. What can you tell us?" There was silence. All my husband said

was: “Who do you think I am?” I remember how, at that moment, the air froze as solid as ice. Cold, cold fear. Terror. Suddenly the young people realized they had revealed themselves, given away their secrets, and they had no idea who they were talking to.

My husband immediately put them at ease, but he had delivered his lesson in the most dramatic way possible. He was saying that his generation had been too trusting, too innocent. In 1973, the government of Salvador Allende was a democratically elected government. The students were demanding reform, not revolution. After the coup they discovered that the watchman at the university was an informant for the DINA, the Chilean secret police, as was the woman in the cafeteria, and the student who sat beside them. For me, that moment, when the world turned from amicable comfort to terror, grafted itself onto my mind, permanently. That was the feeling I wanted to reproduce in *Villa Air-Bel*.

The ground research I undertook for my book made a lasting impact on me. I visited the Camp des Milles internment camp outside Aix-en-Provence, set up by the French government for “undocumented aliens” in September 1939. I traced the secret escape route of refugees crossing the Pyrenees from Banyuls-sur-Mer in France to Port Bou in Spain. But archival research also had a profound impact, particularly researching the life of Victor Serge.

Victor Serge was one of the people who had sat at the dinner table at Villa Air-Bel. His efforts to escape France were the most desperate. I had read his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* and knew his story. He was born in Belgium and travelled to Russia as a young man to fight in the Russian Revolution. But it did not take him long to see that, under Stalin, Russia had turned into “the most terrifying state machine conceivable.” Serge was probably the first to call the Soviet Union a totalitarian state.¹⁵

15. Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, trans. Peter Sedgwick (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society, 1984), 281.

For his dedication to truth, Serge spent years in exile in Siberia before he was finally released and fled to France. Trapped in Marseille in 1940, he waited for Varian Fry to secure American Emergency Rescue Visas for him and his family. But he never received the visas. This fiercest of anti-Communists was never allowed into the United States on the grounds that he had *once* been a Communist.

I had written to Yale requesting copies of the correspondence between Serge and his American supporters Nancy and Dwight Macdonald. Macdonald was then editor of *Partisan Review* in New York. One day two huge padded envelopes arrived in the mail. They contained about 800 pages of correspondence between 1938 and 1942. I read avidly. Through these letters I felt more deeply than from any other source the desperation, fear, and hunger that was the life of a refugee in Marseille—not second-hand through books but from Serge’s own candid words to his friends.

Under the Freedom of Information Act, I had earlier applied to the FBI for the file on Victor Serge that I knew must exist. I had to wait a year, but finally a large manila envelope arrived at my door. The 331 pages of material it contained were shocking. There were copies of some of the private letters between Serge and the Macdonalds that I had just read. There were also surveillance reports by agents and copies of interviews they had done with Serge. The man had been hounded by the FBI from the moment he was brought to their attention by his first letters to the Macdonalds until the day he died in Mexico in 1947. I felt a terrible sadness for the sufferings of this extraordinary man.

I sought out Serge’s son Vlady who had been 20 years old when he resided with his father at the Villa Air-Bel. He was now one of Mexico’s most colourful artists. We corresponded and had several amusing phone conversations. I made arrangements to visit. The very evening I arrived in Cuernavaca and phoned Vlady’s residence, I was informed that he had just suffered a stroke and had been rushed

to hospital in Mexico City. I left Mexico shortly thereafter. I did not want to disturb the family's grief. Vlady died within weeks.

If you are lucky, the life of a book persists long after it is published. I continue to receive letters about *Villa Air-Bel* from people, or those close to them, who lived its tragic story. I encountered Walter Gruen in Mexico, where he had sought asylum in the early 1940s. In 1938, he had suddenly found himself a stateless refugee in his native Austria. As a Jew, his passport was confiscated and he was imprisoned in an internment camp. Through the intervention of the Swiss Red Cross, he was released in 1939. "I never knew why they let me out," he told me. He remembered two brothers in the camp. "One brother was released, one brother saved," he said. "I mean that exactly. My God, that was a parting."¹⁶

Walter Gruen made his way to Switzerland and then worked as a gardener in a vineyard in the south of France. Eventually he obtained an Emergency Rescue Visa for America, but the day he went to the US consulate in Marseille to collect his visa was the very day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The consulate was closed. He went into hiding in France and survived.

On one of my visits, Walter and his wife, Alexandra, invited me to dinner at an Argentinean restaurant in downtown Mexico City. As we emerged from the restaurant, we encountered a man with his dog, a Rottweiler, black, broad-shouldered, with brutal teeth. The dog was straining fiercely at its leash, as if about to pounce. Alexandra and Walter froze and Walter said: "Alexandra doesn't like those dogs. They used them in the camps." The terrible poignancy of his remark moved me deeply. *The Pianist* was playing in the local cinema. I asked him: "Can you see films like this?" With a catch in his breath, he said: "No." The memories were engrammed in their minds, still waiting to attack after 60 years.

16. Author's interview with Walter Gruen, Mexico City, 2003.

After reading *Villa Air-Bel*, Alfred Ament wrote to me with an inquiry.¹⁷ As a Jewish orphan hiding among a group of French orphans, he had lived at a villa outside Marseille from June to November 1942, at which point German soldiers occupied the villa, mounting machine guns on its terraces. Could that villa have been the Villa Air-Bel? It will take further research at the Bouches-du-Rhône Archives to know for sure, but it might well have been. The French representatives of the Emergency Rescue Committee had been forced to vacate the villa at precisely that time.

As our correspondence continued, Alfred sent me a 20-page autobiographical account of his experiences, titled “My Lost Childhood.”¹⁸ He had been born and brought up in Austria. In December of 1938, as his parents became aware of the Nazis’ murderous intent, they fled to Belgium with 10-year-old Alfred and his four-year-old brother Hans. After the German invasion of Belgium in the spring of 1940, they made it to Paris, but his father, Max Ament, was arrested and interned in a French detention camp. In the spring of 1941, hoping to be reunited with her husband, his mother arranged to get herself and the children to Marseille. Meanwhile Max Ament had requested a transfer to the Camp des Milles outside Aix-en-Provence. Freed briefly on a pass, he met their train. Then he returned to his camp.

By 1942, Alfred’s mother was suffering from tuberculosis and entered the sanatorium L’Espérance in Hauteville. Eight-year-old Hans was sent off to a children’s home and Alfred went to a home for teenagers. After a number of moves, including to the villa outside Marseille, Alfred came under the care of a French Jewish humanitarian organization, the OSE (Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants). In March 1944, the OSE secured trucks to take a convoy of about 30 children, including Alfred, to the French-Swiss border. With false

17. Alfred Ament, e-mail inquiry, September 20, 2009.

18. Alfred Ament, “My Lost Childhood,” typewritten manuscript.

identity papers, they were purportedly French children going to a spring camp. When their guides indicated that the coast was clear, the children ran to the border, scaled a 10-foot-high fence, and fell onto the free soil of neutral Switzerland.

Only later did Alfred learn the fate of his family. In early 1943, Max Ament had been transported from the Camp des Milles to Drancy. On March 4, he was deported to Germany and was murdered in either Sobibor or Maidanek. On August 7, 1944 Ernestina Ament, Alfred's mother, died in the prison section of the French hospital where she had been relocated because she was Jewish.

Alfred's brother, Hans, had been living in a farmhouse in Izieu, a remote village in the Rhône valley. The farmhouse was registered as a "Settlement for Refugee Children from the Hérault." The locals protected its disguise, including two Vichy officials who helped the director, Sabina Zlatin, by providing ration cards and false identification papers. The adults had improvised an alarm system, telling the children that they were to ring bells if any suspicious vehicles approached, at which point everyone would run to the woods. But April 6, 1944, was a holiday and vigilance was low. That morning the Gestapo raided the farm.

At 8:10 p.m. that night, SS First Lieutenant Klaus Barbie, commander of the Gestapo in Lyon, sent a telegram to his superiors in Paris: "This morning a Jewish children's home [...] in Izieu was cleaned out. In total 41 children, aged 3 to 13, were captured. In addition the arrest of the entire Jewish staff, or 10 individuals, including 5 women, has taken place [...]. Transport to Drancy will take place on April 7, 1944." One week later the children and their minders were deported to Auschwitz. None of the children, and only one adult, survived.¹⁹

19. Printed document provided by Alfred Ament.

Writing *Villa Air-Bel*, I lived in the past for years. But it did not feel like the past. It felt as real as anything gets. I learned about courage from the people whose stories I recounted.

The genre of biography is about the role of memory in our lives. “To be alive is to be made of memory,” as Philip Roth has put it.²⁰ We are shaped by the past. To submit to collective amnesia, effacing individual stories, inevitably distorts our humanity. I think of biography as a rebellion against the impossible fact that a life can so easily disappear—all that energy, passion, individuality that constitutes a person can one day simply stop, or be brutally ended. Biography is a form of revenge against effacement; the responsibility of the biographer to come as close to the truth as is humanly possible could not be higher.

20. Philip Roth, *Patrimony: A True Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).