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Disclosure in Biographically-Based Fiction: The Challenges of Writing Narratives Based on True Life Stories

[Donna Lee Brien](#) [Volume 12 Issue 5 December 2009](#) 'disclose'

As the distinction between disclosure-fuelled celebrity and lasting fame becomes difficult to discern, the “based on a true story” label has gained a particular traction among readers and viewers. This is despite much public approbation and private angst sometimes resulting from such disclosure as “little in the law or in society protects people from the consequences of others’ revelations about them” (Smith 537). Even fiction writers can stray into difficult ethical and artistic territory when they disclose the private facts of real lives—that is, recognisably biographical information—in their work, with autoethnographic fiction where authors base their fiction on their own lives (Davis and Ellis) not immune as this often discloses others’ stories (Ellis) as well.

F. Scott Fitzgerald famously counselled writers to take their subjects from life and, moreover, to look to the singular, specific life, although this then had to be abstracted: “Begin with an individual, and before you know it, you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing” (139). One of the problems when assessing fiction through this lens, however, is that, although many writers are inspired in their work by an actual life, event or historical period, the resulting work is usually ultimately guided by literary concerns—what writers often term the quest for aesthetic truth—rather than historical accuracy (Owen et al. 2008). In contrast, a biography is, and continues to be, by definition, an accurate account of a real persons’ life. Despite postmodern assertions regarding the relativity of truth and decades of investigation into the incorporation of fiction into biography, other non-fiction texts and research narratives (see, for instance: Wyatt), many biographers attest to still feeling irrevocably tied to the factual evidence in a way that novelists and the scriptors of biographically-based fictional television drama, movies and theatrical pieces do not (Wolpert; Murphy; Inglis). To cite a recent example, Louis Nowra’s *Ice* takes the life of nineteenth-century self-made entrepreneur and politician Malcolm McEacharn as its base, but never aspires to be classified as creative nonfiction, history or biography. The history in a historical novel is thus often, and legitimately, skewed or sidelined in order to achieve the most satisfying work of art, although some have argued that fiction may uniquely represent the real, as it is able to “play [...] in the gap between the narratives of history and the actualities of the past” (Nelson n.p.).

Fiction and non-fictional forms are, moreover, increasingly intermingling and intertwining in content and intent. The ugly word “faction” was an attempt to suggest that the two could simply be elided but, acknowledging wide-ranging debates about whether literature can represent the complexities of life with any accuracy and post-structuralist assertions that the idea of any absolute truth is outmoded, contemporary authors play with, and across, these boundaries, creating hybrid texts that consciously slide between invention and disclosure, but which publishers, critics and readers continue to define firmly as either fiction or biography. This dancing between forms is not particularly new. A striking example was Marion Halligan’s 2001 novel *The Fog Garden* which opens with a personal essay about the then recent death of her own much-loved husband. This had been previously published as an autobiographical memoir, “Cathedral of Love,” and again in an essay collection as “Lapping.” The protagonist of the novel is a recently widowed writer named Clare, but the inclusion of Halligan’s essay, together with the book’s marketing campaign which made much of the author’s own sadness, encourages readers to read the novel as a disclosure of the author’s own personal experience. This is despite Halligan’s

attempt to keep the two separate: "Clare isn't me. She's like me. Some of her experience, terrors, have been mine. Some haven't" (*Fog Garden* 9). In such acts of disclosure and denial, fiction and non-fiction can interrogate, test and even create each other, however quite vicious criticism can result when readers feel the boundaries demarking the two are breached. This is most common when authors admit to some dishonesty in terms of self-disclosure as can be seen, for instance, in the furore surrounding highly inflated and even wholly fabricated memoirs such as James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, Margaret B. Jones's *Love and Consequences* and Misha Defonseca's *A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years*. Related problems and anxieties arise when authors move beyond incorporating and disclosing the facts of their own lives in memoir or (autobiographical) fiction, to using the lives of others in this way. Daphne Patai sums up the difference: "A person telling her life story is, in a sense, offering up her self for her own and her listener's scrutiny [...] Whether we should appropriate another's life in this way becomes a legitimate question" (24–5). While this is difficult but seemingly manageable for non-fiction writers because of their foundational reliance on evidence, this anxiety escalates for fiction writers. This seems particularly extreme in relation to how audience expectations and prior knowledge of actual events can shape perceptions and interpretations of the resulting work, even when those events are changed and the work is declared to be one of fiction. I have discussed elsewhere, for instance, the difficult terrain of crafting fiction from well-known criminal cases (Brien, "Based on a True Story"). The reception of such work shows how difficult it is to dissociate creative product from its source material once the public and media has made this connection, no matter how distant that finished product may be from the original facts.

As the field of biography continues to evolve for writers, critics and theorists, a study of one key text at a moment in that evolution—Jill Shearer's play *Georgia* and its reliance on disclosing the life of artist Georgia O'Keeffe for its content and dramatic power—reveals not only some of the challenges and opportunities this close relationship offers to the writers and readers of life stories, but also the pitfalls of attempting to dissemble regarding artistic intention. This award-winning play has been staged a number of times in the past decade but has attracted little critical attention. Yet, when I attended a performance of *Georgia* at La Boite Theatre in Brisbane in 1999, I was moved by the production and admiring of Shearer's writing which was, I told anyone who would listen, a powerfully dramatic interpretation of O'Keeffe's life, one of my favourite artists. A full decade on, aspects of the work and its performance still resonate through my thinking. Author of more than twenty plays performed throughout Australia and New Zealand as well as on Broadway, Shearer was then (and is) one of Australia's leading playwrights, and I judged *Georgia* to be a major, mature work: clear, challenging and confident. Reading the Currency Press script a year or so after seeing the play reinforced for me how distinctive and successful a piece of theatre Shearer had created utilising a literary technique which has been described elsewhere as fictionalised biography—biography which utilises fictional forms in its presentation but stays as close to the historical record as conventional biography (Brien, *The Case of Mary Dean*).

The published version of the script indeed acknowledges on its title page that *Georgia* is "inspired by the later life of the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe" (Shearer). The back cover blurb begins with a quote attributed to O'Keeffe and then describes the content of the play entirely in terms of biographical detail:

The great American artist Georgia O'Keeffe is physically, emotionally and artistically debilitated by her failing eyesight. Living amidst the Navajo spiritual landscape in her desert home in New Mexico, she becomes prey to the ghosts of her past. Her solitude is broken by Juan, a young potter, whose curious influence on her life remains until her death at 98 (*Georgia* back cover).

This short text ends by unequivocally reinforcing the relation between the play and the artist's life: "*Georgia* is a passionate play that explores with sensitivity and wry humour the contradictions and the paradoxes of the life of Georgia O'Keeffe" (*Georgia* back cover).

These few lines of plot synopsis actually contain a surprisingly large number of facts regarding O'Keeffe's later life. After the death of her husband (the photographer and modern art impresario Alfred Steiglitz whose ghost is a central character in the play), O'Keeffe did indeed relocate permanently to Abiquiú in New Mexico. In 1971, aged 84, she was suffering from an irreversible degenerative disease, had lost her central vision and stopped painting. One autumn day in 1973, Juan Hamilton, a young potter, appeared at her

adobe house looking for work. She hired him and he became her lover, closest confidante and business manager until her death at 98. These facts form not only the background story but also much of the riveting content for *Georgia* which, as the published script's introduction states, takes as its central themes: "the dilemma of the artist as an older woman; her yearning to create against the fear of failing artistic powers; her mental strength and vulnerability; her sexuality in the face of physical deterioration; her need for companionship and the paradoxical love of solitude" (Rider vii). These issues are not only those which art historians identify as animating the O'Keeffe's later life and painting, but ones which are discussed at length in many of the biographies of the artist published from 1980 to 2007 (see, for instance: Arrowsmith and West; Berry; Calloway and Bry; Castro; Drohojowska-Philp; Eisler; Eldredge; Harris; Hogrefe; Lisle; Peters; Reily; Robinson).

Despite this clear focus on disclosing aspects of O'Keeffe's life, both the director's and playwright's notes prefacing the published script declare firmly that *Georgia* is fiction, not biography. While accepting that these statements may be related to copyright and privacy concerns, the stridency of the denials of the biography label with its implied intention of disclosing the facts of a life, are worthy of analysis. Although noting that *Georgia* is "about the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe", director of the La Boite production Sue Rider asserts that not only that the play moves "beyond the biographical" (vii) but, a few pages later, that it is "thankfully not biography" (xii). This is despite Rider's own underscoring of the connection to O'Keeffe by setting up an exhibition of the artist's work adjacent to the theatre. Shearer, whose research acknowledgments include a number of works about O'Keeffe, is even more overtly strident in her denial of any biographical links stating that her characters, "this Juan, Anna Marie and Dorothy Norman are a work of dramatic fiction, as is the play, and should be taken as such" (xiii).

Yet, set against a reading of the biographies of the artist, including those written in the intervening decade, *Georgia* clearly and remarkably accurately discloses the tensions and contradictions of O'Keeffe's life. It also draws on a significant amount of documented biographical data to enhance the dramatic power of what is disclosed by the play for audiences with this knowledge. The play does work as a coherent narrative for a viewer without any prior knowledge of O'Keeffe's life, but the meaning of the dramatic action is enhanced by any biographical knowledge the audience possesses. In this way, the play's act of disclosure is reinforced by this externally held knowledge. Although O'Keeffe's oeuvre is less well known and much anecdotal detail about her life is not as familiar for Australian viewers as for those in the artist's homeland, Shearer writes for an international as well as an Australian audience, and the program and adjacent exhibition for the Brisbane performance included biographical information. It is also worth noting that large slabs of biographical detail are also omitted from the play. These omissions to disclosure include O'Keeffe's early life from her birth in 1887 in Wisconsin to her studies in Chicago and New York from 1904 to 1908, as well as her work as a commercial artist and art teacher in Texas and other Southern American states from 1912 to 1916. It is from this moment in 1916, however, that the play (although opening in 1946) constructs O'Keeffe's life right through to her death in 1986 by utilising such literary devices as flashbacks, dream sequences and verbal and visual references.

An indication of the level of accuracy of the play as biographical disclosure can be ascertained by unpacking the few lines of opening stage directions, "The Steiglitz's suite in the old mid-range Shelton Hotel, New York, 1946 ... Georgia, 59, in black, enters, dragging a coffin" (1). In 1946, when O'Keeffe was indeed aged 59, Steiglitz died. The couple had lived part of every year at the Shelton Towers Hotel at 525 Lexington Avenue (now the New York Marriott East Side), a moderately priced hotel made famous by its depiction in O'Keeffe's paintings and Steiglitz's photographs. When Stieglitz suffered a cerebral thrombosis, O'Keeffe was spending the summer in New Mexico, but she returned to New York where her husband died on 13 July.

This level of biographical accuracy continues throughout *Georgia*. Halfway through the first page "Anita, 52" enters. This character represents Anita Pollitzer, artist, critic and O'Keeffe's lifelong friend. The publication of her biography of O'Keeffe, *A Woman on Paper*, and Georgia's disapproval of this, is discussed in the play, as are their letters, which were collected and published in 1990 as *Lovingly, Georgia* (Gibiore). Anita's first lines in the play after greeting her friend refer to this substantial correspondence: "You write beautifully. I always tell people: 'I have a friend who writes the most beautiful letters'" (1). In the play, as in life, it is Anita who introduces O'Keeffe's work to Stieglitz who is, in turn, accurately described as: "Gallery owner. Two Nine One, Fifth Avenue. Leader of the New York avant-garde, the first to bring in the European moderns" (6). The play also chronicles how

(unknown to O’Keeffe) Steiglitz exhibited the drawings Pollitzer gave him under the incorrect name, a scene which continues with Steiglitz persuading Georgia to allow her drawings to remain in his gallery (as he did in life) and ends with a reference to his famous photographs of her hands and nude form. Although the action of a substantial amount of real time is collapsed into a few dramatic minutes and, without doubt, the dialogue is invented, this invention achieves the level of aesthetic truth aimed for by many contemporary biographers (Jones)—as can be assessed when referring back to the accepted biographical account. What actually appears to have happened was that, in the autumn 1915, while teaching art in South Carolina, O’Keeffe was working on a series of abstract charcoal drawings that are now recognised as among the most innovative in American art of that time. She mailed some of these drawings to Pollitzer, who showed them Steiglitz, who exhibited ten of them in April 1916, O’Keeffe only learning of this through an acquaintance. O’Keeffe, who had first visited 291 in 1908 but never spoken to Steiglitz, held his critical opinion in high regard, and although confronting him over not seeking her permission and citing her name incorrectly, eventually agreed to let her drawings hang (Harris).

Despite Shearer’s denial, the other characters in *Georgia* are also largely biographical sketches. Her “Anna Marie”, who never appears in the play but is spoken of, is Juan’s wife (in real life Anna Marie Hamilton), and “Dorothy Norman” is the character who has an affair with Steiglitz—the discovery of which leads to Georgia’s nervous breakdown in the play. In life, while O’Keeffe was in New Mexico, Steiglitz became involved with the much younger Norman who was, he claimed, only his gallery assistant. When O’Keeffe discovered Norman posing nude for her husband (this is vividly imagined in *Georgia*), O’Keeffe moved out of the Shelton and suffered from the depression that led to her nervous breakdown. “Juan,” who ages from 26 to 39 in the play, represents the potter Juan Hamilton who encouraged the nearly blind O’Keeffe to paint again. In the biographical record there is much conjecture about Hamilton’s motives, and Shearer sensitively portrays her interpretation of this liaison and the difficult territory of sexual desire between a man and a much older woman, as she also too discloses the complex relationship between O’Keeffe and the much older Steiglitz.

This complexity is described through the action of the play, but its disclosure is best appreciated if the biographical data is known. There are also a number of moments of biographical disclosure in the play that can only be fully understood with biographical knowledge in hand. For instance, Juan refers to Georgia’s paintings as “Beautiful, sexy flowers [... especially] the calla lilies” (24). All attending the play are aware (from the exhibition, program and technical aspects of the production) that, in life, O’Keeffe was famous for her flower paintings. However, knowing that these had brought her fame and fortune early in her career with, in 1928, a work titled *Calla Lily* selling for U.S. \$25,000, then an enormous sum for any living American artist, adds to the meaning of this line in the play. Conversely, the significant level of biographical disclosure throughout *Georgia* does not diminish, in any way, the power or integrity of Shearer’s play as a literary work. Universal literary (and biographical) themes—love, desire and betrayal—animate *Georgia*; Steiglitz’s spirit haunts Georgia years after his death and much of the play’s dramatic energy is generated by her passion for both her dead husband and her younger lover, with some of her hopeless desire sublimated through her relationship with Juan.

Nadia Wheatley reads such a relationship between invention and disclosure in terms of myth—relating how, in the process of writing her biography of Charmain Clift, she came to see Clift and her husband George Johnson take on a larger significance than their individual lives: “They were archetypes; ourselves writ large; experimenters who could test and try things for us; legendary figures through whom we could live vicariously” (5). In this, Wheatley finds that “while myth has no real beginning or end, it also does not bother itself with cause and effect. Nor does it worry about contradictions. Parallel tellings are vital to the fabric” (5). In contrast with both Rider and Shearer’s insistence that *Georgia* was “not biography”, it could be posited that (at least part of) *Georgia*’s power arises from the creation of such mythic value, and expressly through its nuanced disclosure of the relevant factual (biographical) elements in parallel to the development of its dramatic (invented) elements. Alongside this, accepting *Georgia* as such a form of biographical disclosure would mean that as well as a superbly inventive creative work, the highly original insights Shearer offers to the mass of O’Keeffe biography—something of an American industry—could be celebrated, rather than excused or denied.

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