Introduction

“Do you write about real people?” . . . “Did those things really happen?” . . . People go on asking these same questions because the subject really does interest and bewilder them. It would seem to be quite true that they don’t know what fiction is.

And how could they know, when what it is, is changing all the time, and we differ among ourselves, and we don’t really try to explain because it is too difficult?

—Alice Munro, “What Is Real” 223

The imagination gets to work. It is not a pleasant sight. The imagination is pitiless, brutal and cruel. It lacks common decency, discretion, manners, loyalty—yes, it lacks even compassion. The imagination has a conscience all its own; you wouldn’t want it as a friend.

—Philip Roth, National Book Critics Circle Award Acceptance Speech 3

Imagine an author who agrees to a meeting with his former lover. At this meeting she tells him she recognizes herself as a character in one of his novels. She accuses him of violating their prior intimacy by appropriating private conversations that were joint property and publicizing details that she thought would remain confidential. She says mutual acquaintances who have read the novel are offended on her behalf. She tells him he has borrowed too closely from the facts in certain respects, while in others he has been unfaithful to them, distorting them cruelly and misrepresenting her. This skewed portrait suggests to her that he had a warped perception of her even during their relationship and that he has displaced his own problems onto the fictional version of her. Moreover,
she suspects he wrote the novel as an act of revenge. She tells him she feels abused. In response, the author defends himself by saying that his novel had many sources of inspiration and that the character with whom she identifies was not necessarily based on her. He also claims that fiction has a transformative effect, so her putative alter ego should not be taken as a reflection of his real opinions about her. He says his purposes in writing fiction are not interpersonal, much less vindictive, and her sense of having been abused by him is really a displaced resentment of other people who have abused her in more literal ways. She fails to be convinced by these arguments, and the two of them reach a stalemate. Still, they continue to feel an intimacy with one another, and they end up sleeping together one more time. Then, as the author returns home to his family, he feels compelled to jot down notes about the day’s encounter, knowing that soon he will turn them into yet another fiction, further betraying both his current wife and his ex-lover, but also managing literally to have the last word in the earlier argument.

This narrative is related in “That Was Then,” a short story by the British writer Hanif Kureishi that appeared in his 1999 collection, *Midnight All Day*. The fact that Kureishi himself had been publicly rebuked by his ex-partner, Tracey Scoffield, the previous year for fictionalizing their relationship in his novel *Intimacy* does not mean one should take “That Was Then” to be autobiographical, but it does suggest that the conflict depicted in Kureishi’s story is not uncommon and that the relationship between life and fiction is often contentious, especially in the case of autobiographical fiction: that is, narrative prose labeled as fiction but identified as drawing significantly on its author’s life. Most people would agree that all writers of fiction make use of their lives in some way, but certain authors do so more conspicuously than others. When they do, frequently they draw on the lives of others as well, and often friends, lovers, and family members take umbrage when they find themselves transfigured, however obliquely, into literary characters without their collaboration or consent. Accordingly, the authors’ fiction becomes bound up in complicated ways with intimacy, infidelity, ethics, and desire. In “That Was Then,” the writer-protagonist’s ex-lover believes authors are supposed to be “wise, with enough honesty, bravery and conscience for us all” (71), but they are sometimes accused of libeling their intimates and invading their privacy. Given these possible transgressions, authors must weigh their desire for self-expression against the wishes of their closest relations. However, when a published fiction causes offense, nuanced consideration of the matter is often neglected in the ensuing exchange of accusation and self-justification.
A more complex account of autobiographical fiction’s production and reception is needed, one that considers the perspectives of writers and their alleged victims, as well as the reading habits of a culture that is eager to view fictional stories as the veiled confessions of their authors. Autobiographical fiction betrays much about why people read literature, how they talk about it, and how they discipline it through laws as well as informal moral codes. An investigation into why some individuals become upset when they see themselves represented in fiction also needs to examine such broader issues as the status of authors in society and the challenges facing intimacy in a confessional age. Accordingly, this book explores autobiographical fiction not to condemn or celebrate it but to consider the discourse of ethics surrounding it, a discourse that configures such fiction alternately as an injurious failure of authorial responsibility and as a heroic infidelity to stifling norms of decorum.

INFIDELITY, FICTION, AND DESIRE

In a sense, all writing is a betrayal, not least of its authors. As an act of communication, to write is to “betray” oneself in the sense of the word’s root, tradere, meaning “to hand over.” It is a surrender of words to the page and, by extension, to readers, a relinquishment of private thought into the public medium of print. Once there, writing betrays the writer again through language’s proliferating meanings. What is more, from a psychoanalytic perspective, writing inevitably betrays the authorial mind, which unwittingly freights every sentence with the rumbles of the unconscious. In a culture that particularly values acts of confession, though, some texts are more traitorous than others. The “tell-all” memoir, for one, seems to traduce the intimacy of the author’s closest relations by recounting experiences that were once privately shared. And when a story is labeled “fiction,” frequently the sense of betrayal is only heightened: although names may be changed and details altered, in the eyes of the people who have been affronted, these transformations can be yet another infidelity—namely, to the truth. In fact, the violation is often double-edged: people are wounded by the invasion of privacy entailed in the details that are true, while they are equally hurt by what seems false, or “fictionalized.” From their perspective, the very inventions that ostensibly cloak their identity also risk creating a defamatory impression of them in readers who identify them with their fictional counterparts.

For people like the ex-lover in “That Was Then,” their literary doppel-
gangsters can be equally upsetting insofar as they have been produced unilaterally in the wake of shared private experience, such that their authors appear to have been less participants in intimacy than observers of it, sufficiently detached and disloyal to depict their loved ones on the page. Given this appearance, it is not a surprise that descriptions of autobiographical fiction's betrayals often invoke the language of adultery. For many people, bonds of intimacy are predicated on exclusivity in terms of shared stories as well as shared experience; as a result, when such narrative monogamy is sacrificed for the public intimations of fiction, authors’ seeming indifference to their intimates can be devastating. In fact, autobiographical fiction has also been described as a metaphorical rape. Taking that trope into account, this book considers whether there is something intrinsically sexual about the processes of reading and writing—something Roland Barthes suggests when he refers to “the reader’s pleasure” as involving jouissance, with its connotations of orgasmic bliss (Pleasure 10)—as well as something intrinsically exploitative.

Central in answering this question are the role and character of desire. If intimates see authors of autobiographical fiction as unfaithful, the third party in the love triangle is the reader, and one needs to ask what kinds of intimacy and infidelity take place when authors “cheat” on their intimates with their audiences. For that reason, in the chapters that follow I develop an account of the various, sometimes conflicting desires that are expressed or disrupted by autobiographical fiction. In particular, readers of fiction often manifest what I call biographical desire: a desire to connect with authors through their texts, which are read in terms of their possible autobiographical content.¹ Authors are compelled to confront and satisfy this desire, even while they also exploit and confound it. As they do so, fiction has a tendency to turn flirtatious, proffering intimations that are both candid and coy. Along with authorial commentary in the mass media, fiction serves as a mediator in the phantasmatic relationship between authors and their audiences. A consequence is that the ethics of autobiographical fiction is closely related to its erotics, not to mention its semantics and commercial aspects. Attention to the history and mechanisms of the confessional culture in which author–reader relationships are carried out promises to facilitate a better understanding of the issues underlying instances when authors’ fiction offends their intimates.

Among these issues are fiction’s relationship to reality and authors’ rights to use the lives of others in their work. Although both issues have

¹ For a discussion of biographical desire that focuses on its manifestation in scholarly discourse, see McGill, “Biographical.”
been considered separately by scholars—the first by philosophers, the second by critics of life writing—there are particular, compelling questions that are raised only when the issues come together in autobiographical fiction. For instance, at stake is the matter of whether authors have the right not merely to tell other people’s stories, as in the case of memoirs and biographies, but also to transform them. Furthermore, while in nonfiction it is a given that the author’s personal perspective has shaped the text’s portraits of others, fiction can present an illusion of authorial detachment by ascribing opinions to some fictional narrator, causing the models for characters to feel frustrated by what seems to be a lack of accountability. Because authors of fiction can always claim their stories are not referential, intimates may worry further that they will be seen as tilting at windmills if they contest the narratives. There is also the risk that by identifying themselves as figures in fiction, they will only invite more extensive biographical readings of the text. Intimates may even feel frustrated or confused by the very labeling of the text as “fiction,” a term sometimes associated with purely invented narratives. With an eye to such confusions, in this book I present a more rigorous vocabulary to discuss autobiographical fiction’s infidelities. If the definitional and ethical issues attending such fiction are laid out more precisely, readers and writers alike will be better equipped to discuss them without talking past one another.

DEFINING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

The first point of vocabulary that merits attention is the term “autobiographical fiction.” Above I have called autobiographical fiction “narrative prose labeled as fiction but identified as drawing significantly on its author’s life,” but this definition requires elaboration, not least with regard to the definition of “fiction” itself. In a certain sense, all literary texts are fictional, insofar as they are all discursive constructions—not the world but representations of it. What is more, critics have observed that nonfictional forms such as autobiography involve “fictions” in the sense that they include “lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.” (Lejeune 22). However, to call all texts “fiction” is to fail in providing an account of how the distinction between fiction and nonfiction shapes readers’ approaches to texts. One needs to be able to explain why readers of

---

James Frey’s bestselling memoir *A Million Little Pieces* were so incensed to discover in 2006 that experiences recounted in his book never actually happened, even while the same readers were no doubt perfectly content to accept that the events of Stieg Larsson’s novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* were likewise invented. Therefore, rather than referring to all texts as “fictional” in virtue of their status as representation, it is more appropriate and precise to describe as “fictive” those aspects of texts that are imagined and not referential. Meanwhile, “fiction” can be reserved for a narrower use: that is, to name the category of prose texts that are granted the prerogative to be nonreferential or counterfactual in some respects, even as they may contain much factuality and truth. Generic contracts as to the limits of invention do arise between authors of fiction and their audiences—for example, most of Agatha Christie’s readers would not countenance Bilbo Baggins appearing in Miss Marple’s sitting room—but authors of fiction have a unique license to make things up.

Usually fiction is marked as such from the outset by some element of the apparatus accompanying the text: a publisher’s blurb, for example, or a cataloging note—material that Gérard Genette calls “paratexts.” In this book I will expand the application of Genette’s term to refer to other kinds of authorial performance that supplement and comment upon literature, from interviews to literary readings. Like other paratexts, these performances play a crucial role in classifying a text and orienting readers toward it. This orientation is necessary because the “central” text is radically unstable, unable to adjudicate its own status as fiction or nonfiction. For instance, at the intratextual level there is nothing to distinguish an autobiography by a real human being from a first-person autobiographical narrative by an imagined character. As Philippe Lejeune argues, the only thing guaranteeing for readers the nonfictionality of the former is the “autobiographical pact” enacted by the correlation of the author’s name with the name of the narrator (3). But as is clear from examples such as Philip Roth’s novel *Operation Shylock*, in which the narrator claims to be the real Roth but has unlikely experiences that would cause any reader to question the story’s authenticity, even this pact may be disrupted. As a
result, suspicious readers inevitably rely on paratexts for confirmation of the text’s referentiality. The role of paratexts in this regard indicates that they are not merely supplementary to fiction but intrinsic to the process of its signification. At the same time, the manner in which they orient readers toward texts is not always straightforward: in the case of autobiographical fiction, for instance, paratexts often encourage readers to accept the text as possibly nonreferential and also as significantly related to its author’s life.

But how “significantly” autobiographical must fiction be for one to consider it autobiographical fiction? On the one hand, it is sometimes said that all fiction is autobiographical, at least insofar as it is an expression of its author’s mind. On the other hand, a narrow definition might limit discussions of autobiographical fiction to romans à clef that are essentially memoirs with only the names changed. To broaden the definition slightly, one might point to the case of a novel such as Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar, where nobody would dispute that the protagonist bears more than a passing resemblance to her author. If one considered such examples alone, it might be attractive to define autobiographical fiction as fiction that takes autobiographical form, narrating a life that resembles the author’s own. Lejeune more or less follows this logic, defining the “autobiographical novel” as a fictional text “in which the reader has reason to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and protagonist” (13). However, this definition does not accommodate texts that seem intriguingly autobiographical in other ways: for instance, J. M. Coetzee’s book Elizabeth Costello, in which the South African male author’s titular counterpart is an Australian female novelist and in which the strongest presumptive parallels between them are of philosophical perspective. Many writers lurk in their fiction with even greater obliquity, manifesting themselves through a line of dialogue, a scenic description, or a narrator’s aperçu. For example, one might say that Raymond Carver’s short story “Errand,” about the death of Anton Chekhov, is autobiographical in a figurative rather than a literal manner and that Carver’s depiction of the Russian writer is also a meditation on Carver’s own literary
career, influences, and mortality. To include such a story under the rubric of “autobiographical fiction” might seem to throw open the definitional doors so wide as to weaken the usefulness of the term, but, conversely, to exclude this species of text risks impoverishing the notion of what counts as autobiographical.

If a definition of autobiographical fiction in terms of its content will not suffice, it may be tempting to accord authors the right to decide whether their texts should be considered autobiographical. After all, no one is in a better position to know the extent to which a particular fiction is based in personal experience. No doubt due to such reasoning, authors are customarily granted the prerogative to categorize their texts as fiction or nonfiction, and if they do declare their fiction to be autobiographical, the texts are usually treated as such. However, even authors’ authority can be contested. For instance, after Tracey Scoffield read Hanif Kureishi’s *Intimacy*, she proclaimed it to be “not merely a novel. You may as well call it a fish. Nobody believes that it’s just pure fiction” (qtd. in Johnston 8). When quoted in *The Observer*, this comment spurred a debate in the British press over the referential character of fiction in general and of *Intimacy* in particular. It would seem that for authors to identify their fiction as self-referential is sufficient but not necessary for the text to be considered autobiographical fiction.

Because a text’s fictionality can often be established only by appeals beyond the text itself, and because authors’ claims about the counterfactual character of their works can be contested, it seems appropriate to think of autobiographical fiction, like fiction in general, not as a formal quality but as a hermeneutic orientation toward a text. In other words, “autobiographical fiction” is a lens through which one reads. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen argue along these lines in asserting that a text’s fictionality is determined by whether its readers assume a “fictional stance,” consenting to the author’s implicit request that they suspend their disbelief and allow the text to depart from reality (32). In the case of autobiographical fiction, readers assume a similar stance, but not necessarily one that follows the author’s intentions. For some readers—especially the intimates of authors who, like Tracey Scoffield, find their alter egos occupying a text—it can be impossible to view the text as

---

6. Lejeune has similarly identified a “fictional pact” (14), while Genette refers to “the bilateral contract” that exists between authors and readers of fiction (182), and H. Porter Abbott observes that “the difference . . . between an autobiography and a novel lies not in the factuality of one and the fictiveness of the other but in different orientations toward the text they elicit in the reader” (603).
“fiction” at all, insofar as they refuse to grant the author any imaginative license. Others may follow the model of reading supplied by Lamarque and Olsen, who argue that “the primary response to fiction qua fiction is concerned with internal relations of sense rather than external relations of reference” (122–23). For most people, though, to see a text as autobiographical fiction is to see it doubly, with an eye to both its participation in make-believe and its possible echoes of the author’s life. Every time a work of fiction is read, there is the possibility that to some degree it will be approached in this doubled manner.

Although autobiographical fiction so conceived is an expansive category insofar as it applies potentially to all texts, in practice it is a strongly delimiting one that brings into focus particular issues, such as fiction’s relationship to its authors and those authors’ right to draw on the lives of people they know personally. In this respect, autobiographical fiction both parallels and differs from several other types of literature—historical fiction and documentary fiction, among them—that similarly incorporate both the factual and the imaginative. For instance, in the eyes of some, historical fiction threatens dangerously to mix facts not only with hypotheses but with outright fabrications, thereby effacing the “real” historical record, and descendants of the figures represented in such fiction may feel affronted if their forbears are rendered in ways they find exploitative or defamatory. Likewise, people may take offense if an author of documentary fiction has told their story without consulting them. And it is not uncommon for members of a particular community—for example, a religion or a nation—to be upset if a fiction portrays one of their members in a manner that seems to cast a poor light on the group as a whole. For instance, consider people’s charges against Philip Roth that he was a “self-hating Jew” because they disliked his depictions of Jewish characters. Roth reflects on this phenomenon in his novel *The Counterlife*, where the author Zuckerman is told that because of his similar fictional creations, “Everyone is now prepared to listen to all kinds of zany, burlesque views of Jews” (157). An even stronger reaction greeted the French author Pierre Jourde, who in 2005 was attacked by inhabitants of the village where he summered after they encountered his fictionalization of local life in the novel *Pays Perdu*. And a year later, Monica Ali was criticized for what some Bangladeshi Londoners saw as a misrepresentation of their community in her novel *Brick Lane*. The question of what responsibility authors of fiction have to such groups is a pressing one, especially in a literary culture where authors are often construed as what Timothy Brennan calls “native informants,” with their texts offering intimate, apparently
authentic access to the world of a particular community (41). However, it is one thing when people believe an author has created an offensive character who shares their communal identity, and another when they think an author has misrepresented them personally by fictionalizing their experiences.

Accordingly, my focus in this book is fiction that draws on authors’ intimates, the kind of people whom Paul John Eakin calls “the proximate other” (“Unseemly” 171). Those who experience intimacy together share an interrelational state involving a certain degree of exclusivity as well as affect, if not love, and thus are vulnerable to one another in some way.\(^7\) However, the question of who counts as an intimate cannot be easily answered in the abstract. Instead there is a spectrum of acquaintance with no clear demarcation line between intimates and nonintimates. In the case of the contemporary Spanish writer Javier Marías, the people offended by his novel *All Souls* included his ex-colleagues at Oxford University, who felt he had appropriated their stories after the narratives were communicated to him through personal revelations as well as communal gossip. The greater detachment and indirectness associated with the latter mode of communication arguably takes the text beyond autobiographical fiction and puts it on a par with documentary fiction. However, the difficulty of distinguishing the two at such a juncture is a reminder that intimates are not the only people who can feel wounded by fiction and that autobiographical fiction’s issues are rarely exclusive to it.

Similarly, autobiographical fiction is not the only art form to problematize the border between fictiveness and autobiography. But, because prose is unique in its division into fiction and nonfiction, the issues it raises are also distinct. In contrast, other art forms tend either to conflate the two categories or to offer a more complicated taxonomy. In the latter camp, film and television have embraced a proliferation of subcategories, from the “docudrama” to the use of tags such as “based on” or “inspired by.” In the former camp is lyric poetry, which offers speakers who may or may not be identified with their authors. Likewise, painting and photography can blur the line between artist and subject, as well as the one between fact.

\(^7\) A narrower, more idealistic definition of intimacy might require the relationship to involve consensual participation and a reciprocity of affection. For instance, Rochelle Gurstein defines intimacy as involving “love, affection, tenderness, fidelity, trust, gratitude, and the mutual baring of souls” (29). However, intimate relationships do not always achieve these qualities: for instance, children have little choice over the intimacy they share with their families, and after the end of a romantic relationship, neither partner may have much affection for the other. Nevertheless, both sorts of relationship often involve considerable amounts of shared experience as well as mutual vulnerability.
and fantasy, not least in the case of “disguised self-portraits” that, like the 
*Mona Lisa*, have been seen as representations of their creators.\(^8\) Although 
each of these media engenders questions about fictiveness and self-repre-
sentation, their respective formal qualities and conventions mean that each 
must be dealt with on its own terms.

If there are reasons to reserve the label “autobiographical fiction” for 
narrative prose, there are also good ones to focus on contemporary texts 
when considering the ethical issues involved. Every documented culture in 
history has accepted some distinction between factual and fantastic sto-
ries, as well as between the public and the private, but the precise nature 
of these distinctions has varied, and as conventions of literary fiction have 
evolved over time, so have the semantic and ethical debates attending 
these conventions. A result is that conflicts related to autobiographical fic-
tion have never been so conspicuous as in the contemporary West, with 
its privileging of juridical and empiricist discourse, its collective compul-
sion to separate fantasy from facts, and its preoccupation with privacy and 
confession. The capitalist insistence on individual ownership of ideas and 
narratives, too, has led to changes in the relationship between authors, 
their texts, and their audiences. Accordingly, in this book I examine auto-
biographical fiction in the context of contemporary confessional culture, 
with its rampant production of paratexts, its manifestations of biographi-
cal desire, and its appetite for scandal. I also consider the implications of 
this culture for contemporary intimacy, which itself is distinctive not least 
in terms of the psychoanalytic vocabulary it has available to it and the 
dyadic exclusivity it often privileges.

**TREACHEROUS ETHICS**

Given the frequency with which autobiographical fiction is viewed as 
unethical, it might seem surprising that there has been virtually no seri-
ous study of the subject.\(^9\) Instead, debates about the matter have occurred 
principally in gossip and private conversation, in angry letters, sometimes 
in newspaper columns, and very occasionally before judges, almost always 
in the context of one emotionally laden dispute or another, when the inter-
ests of the parties concerned are forefront and divert attention from the

---

\(^8\) See Bal 13.

\(^9\) To my knowledge there is only one article that treats the topic at any length: Clau-
dia Mills’s “ Appropriating Others’ Stories: Some Questions about the Ethics of Writing 
Fiction.”
cultural circumstances that gave rise to the situation. A few creative writers have articulated personal rules with regard to what stories they will or will not tell, but there has been little effort to explore the possibility of a shared ethics. For some authors, the very idea of such an ethics might seem fundamentally misconceived insofar as it would require submission to a normative code, when they consider it a writer’s duty to stand apart and critique such codes. As for literary scholars, they have discussed at length the ethics of autobiography and biography, but they seem reluctant to address autobiographical fiction. Perhaps they think of fiction as sufficiently bound up with fantasy to stand beyond ethical reproach, or perhaps they view fiction’s offenses as trivial ones blown out of proportion by bourgeois overvaluations of privacy and personal reputation. However, such a perspective fails to recognize that not only the bourgeoisie invest considerable psychosocial capital in their public image, their privacy, and their closest interpersonal relations. Intimacy and the circulation of stories about oneself are things in which virtually everyone has an interest. Indeed, there is sufficient investment in these matters that when people feel aggrieved by fiction seeming to depict them, usually they are not eager to draw attention to the problem and risk further disseminating the injurious representation. Consequently there is a relative dearth of material about intimates’ reactions that is publicly available for study. There is also the problem that to scrutinize cases where privacy has been invaded risks being itself invasive, a replication of the initial transgression through the act of “publishing the deed.”

With an awareness of that danger, in this book I avoid the historiographical detective work of the sort one finds in volumes such as Louise DeSalvo’s *Conceived with Malice*, which uncovers previously unpublished information about modernist authors and their intimates, correlates that information with the authors’ fiction, and documents the sense of injury felt by the authors’ intimates when they perceived those correlations themselves. In DeSalvo’s defense, she is dealing with people who are no longer alive. Here, given my focus on contemporary literary culture, I limit the discussion of examples to high-profile cases that involved public state-

---


11. The phrase is Judith Butler’s. She writes of confession: “To say ‘Yes, I did it,’ is to claim the act, but it is also to commit another deed in the very claiming, the act of publishing one’s deed, a new criminal venture that redoubles and takes the place of the old” (*Antigone’s 8*).
ments from multiple parties about the fiction in question, as in the dispute between Hanif Kureishi and Tracey Scoffield. These cases are sufficiently well-known that simply to draw attention to them once again seems minimally invasive, especially when the concern is not to link real people with characters but to examine arguments about literary ethics made in texts such as reviews, biographies, and legal decisions. Also open to scrutiny are interviews and essays in which authors identify the rationales underlying their decisions about what to write. But in deference to D. H. Lawrence’s dictum, in some respects it seems better to trust the tale than the teller. Therefore, fiction itself is my principal object of attention—in particular, texts that explicitly raise the question of autobiographical fiction’s ethics. Like Kureishi’s “That Was Then,” these are fictions featuring protagonists who are typically writers of autobiographical fiction themselves, ones who have offended their intimates by writing about them. This sort of metafiction has affinities with the philosophical dialogue, creating scenarios in which characters reflect on and debate the ethical dilemmas they confront; it finds a dramatic impetus in the interplay of accusation and self-defense between intimate and writer. In these texts one might hope to find real-life authors more honest and deliberative about fiction’s autobiographical transgressions than they can be in the course of promotional performances.

Although my choice to approach autobiographical fiction’s ethics by examining metafiction is itself ethically motivated, still it must be said that there is something risky in writing about ethics at all. One confronts the danger of slipping into stringent moralizations or an overly detached treatment of issues that are quite visceral for those dealing with them directly. One of the first volumes devoted entirely to the ethics of literary production, H. M. Paull’s 1928 book *Literary Ethics,* furnished future critics with a less than salutary model by falling precisely into the trap of conservative prescription. Surveying practices such as plagiarism, libel, and invasion of privacy, Paull makes condemnations along the way that are often paternasonic, reductive, and skewed by idiosyncratic assumptions about literary ideals, not least when damning *roman à clef* outright on the grounds that it is a novelist’s business “to create a character, and a copy cannot claim to be a creation” (251). In a more recent account of literary ethics, *The Company We Keep,* Wayne Booth is wisely more interested in reflecting on the impulse to judge fiction than in actually judging it. However, he sets aside the question of autobiographical fiction’s ethics, writing: “Biting as it may be for a given author, it does not arise for readers except when they have more or less accidental knowledge about the author’s life” (130–31). In
making this judgment, Booth fails to recognize that the desire to treat fiction as autobiographical often extends well beyond an author’s intimates, especially in a confession-oriented, scandal-obsessed culture where authors can be as of much interest as their literary texts. In suggesting that a reader’s knowledge of an author’s life is “accidental,” Booth ignores the fact that such knowledge is often sought out by audiences and easily found in a culture that in manifold ways generates information and innuendo about the people who write fiction.

Accordingly, with this book I seek to fill a significant gap in ethical criticism. Taking on board the meta-ethical approach developed by critics such as Booth, I avoid prosecuting or defending individual cases. Instead I examine the production, content, and reception of autobiographical fiction for their social and ideological underpinnings on the assumption that understanding these factors breeds the possibility for better encounters between readers, authors, and their intimates. My work is also informed by two further principles: first, that the consideration of an ethical poetics cannot proceed without regard to the ethics of hermeneutics; and second, that literary ethics requires attention to the social and historical contexts in which ethical issues become manifest.

With these principles in mind, the main concern of chapter 1, “A Short History of Transgression,” is to establish how autobiographical fiction has evolved through a dialectical game that involves exploiting readers’ expectations of literature’s referentiality. Surveying instances of apparent authorial trespass from antiquity to the present, I argue that although the explicit opposition of “fiction” and “nonfiction” is a recent one, fiction has long playfully crisscrossed the border between fact and fabrication, while readers have developed complex strategies for discerning texts’ truthfulness and inventions. More particularly, readers have been conditioned to read fiction with an eye to identifying traces of the author’s private life. The consequence is that fiction constitutively involves multiple transgressions: not least on the part of authors, who are taken to embed details about real lives in ostensibly nonreferential narratives; and on the part of readers, who commit the “biographical heresy” by looking for such details despite authorial and critical insistences that fiction should not be treated as significantly referential. I argue that at least since the eighteenth century, readers have been taught to be skeptical about such insistences, and a key master plot of fiction has been one of biographical detection: that is, a crucial question propelling readers through a fictional narrative is not just “What happens next?” but “How autobiographical is this story?” The fact that a fictional text is itself unable to answer that
question—any avowal or disavowal might be itself fictive and ironic—means there is something inherently scandalous about fiction. I argue further that fiction’s scandalous quality has been a longstanding part of its appeal and that authors have exploited this quality, provoking or dramatizing attempts to pin down their work and take it to task for its referential slipperiness as well as its possible ethical failings. In this regard, important to fiction’s development has been the evolution of various devices for catalyzing scandal, from magazine interviews to talk-show revelations. If fiction itself does not evoke outrage in intimates and reviewers, frequently its authors produce paratexts to do the same, or they write metafiction that dramatizes such outrage. As they do, they compel their readers to take an ethical and referential interest in their fiction.

Fiction’s unclear relationship to reality has allowed it to court controversy in other ways as well: for instance, by venturing into the world of private life before other cultural forms dared to follow. As it has done so, authors have repeatedly situated their work at the borders of the permissible. They have also adapted to cultural developments affecting autobiographical fiction’s reception, from Romantic poetry’s self-expressive ethos to Hollywood’s creation of a star system preoccupied with artists’ private lives. In the present confessional age, when people are publicly disseminating personal narratives all the time, privacy is at once rampantly defended, relinquished, and invaded. In this context, autobiographical fiction’s currency emerges less from the revelations it makes and more from its strategic ambivalence: the simultaneous disguises and confessions it offers reproduce a broader social ambivalence about public disclosure and private life.

This ambivalence manifests itself not least in the relations between authors of fiction and their audiences, relations that are both highly mediated and rendered apparently proximate through textual and paratextual confessions. Indeed, if this book documents a love story, it is one involving a fraught triangle between authors, their intimates, and their readers. Chapter 2, “Biographical Desire,” focuses on the side of that triangle involving authors and readers, with each reaching out to the other through the phantasmatically interpersonal activities of writing and reading. From this perspective, it is not surprising that so much autobiographical fiction deals with love affairs, for it is modeling the kind of relationship into which readers and authors enter together: one involving intimacy, secrets, and desire. However, for readers this love affair is distinguished by the absence of authors from the very texts that evoke them. The poverty and promise of fiction in this regard send readers and authors
alike into the realm of paratexts, where authors supplement their fictions with further confessional stories. I argue that while literary critics have largely neglected the role of paratexts in fiction’s circulation and semantics, it is an estimable one, and it is crucial to apprehending the power of readers’ biographical desire. In turn, that desire is an insufficiently recognized motor of contemporary literary culture. To make sense of it, I track the remarkable reception history of one book, Elizabeth Smart’s “cult” novel, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, through the second half of the twentieth century, investigating the processes whereby the author, narrator, and text came to be identified with and subjugated to one another. In this investigation, I pay particular attention to paratextual performances. Through such performances, authors maintain a flirtatious intimacy with readers, both satisfying and stimulating biographical desire. I argue that a striking transformation in the twentieth century lies in the proliferation of mass-media paratexts, such that present-day fiction cannot be considered an autonomous discourse so much as one node of a confessional matrix in which the authors circulate as texts alongside their literary work. Accordingly, paratexts are fundamental to the semantics of fiction, as well as to the marketing, ethics, and erotics of it. In particular, they are a key mediator of the author–reader relationship, fostering a sense of intimacy that both supplements and informs the intimacy of reading fiction.

Alongside the twentieth-century proliferation of paratexts was a growth in metafiction commenting on the ethical issues attending autobiographical fiction. Often this metafiction challenges readers’ sense of intimacy with authors even as it nurtures it. I give special attention to the metafiction of Philip Roth, who presents readers with innumerable fictional versions of himself. As he does so, he suggests that such doppelgängers instantiate modes of self-invention in which everyone participates and that the self is always performative, fragmentary, closely bound to fantasy. I do not take up the task of taxonomizing the various self-representations and self-improvisations in Roth’s work. Instead I argue that he tempts his readers into doing so precisely in order for them to fail in their attempts. He practices a poetics of exhaustion that underscores the ultimate indeterminacy of fiction’s referentiality, as well as the endlessly proliferative character of self-fashioning. But although Roth’s writing might seem to deconstruct the border between fiction and autobiography, I argue that this border remains a predicate of his work and of other border-blurring autobiographical fiction. For all the conflations of fact and fantasy enacted by such texts, the controversies they create inevitably produce reaffirma-
tions of the boundary between fact and fabrication in the mass media, if not in courts of law. Consequently, I argue, autobiographical fiction operates not outside the conventional hermeneutic order but as part of it, serving as a foil against which verificationist discourse defines itself.

In a sense, the first two chapters of this book are instrumental to the latter two, providing the historical and cultural contexts necessary for an examination of conflicts between authors and their intimates. In another sense, though, the first chapters inaugurate an argument that chapters 3 and 4 take up: namely, that ostensibly dyadic conflicts between authors and intimates are imbricated with the biographical desire and paratextual production attending literature in a confessional culture. It is with these phenomena still in mind that chapter 3, “Fiction’s Betrayals, Intimacy’s Trials,” turns to the matter of how intimates are offended by fiction and how authors justify giving such offense. For intimates, fiction can suggest a cruel detachment on the part of authors, and it can threaten a paralyzing loss of control over one’s life story. Moreover, fiction’s ambiguous referentiality and depictions of its characters’ inner lives can make it even more mortifying than nonfiction. Through a reading of A. S. Byatt’s novel *The Game*, I argue that fiction also wounds insofar as it rehearses and hyperbolizes preexisting struggles for intimacy and autonomy. In that respect, writing fiction based on intimate experience can involve a desire not only to engage with otherness but also to efface and diminish it. Similarly, although metafiction addressing such desires might seem ethical insofar as it presents multiple perspectives on the harms and benefits of autobiographical fiction, it can be a further appropriation of intimates’ voices.

Against these charges of betrayed intimacy, authors such as Hanif Kureishi have argued for the need to challenge the privileging of intimacy itself, given its associations with censorship, repression, and possessiveness. From this perspective, fiction’s infidelities are not ethical failures but remedial actions exposing problems with norms of intimacy. Autobiographical fiction so conceived stands as a repudiation of narrative monogamy and its demand that people owe to their intimates an exclusivity with regard to the stories they tell about themselves and each other. Kureishi, Roth, and other authors of autobiographical metafiction insist that this narrative monogamy traps people in single, static identities leading to deceptions and self-deceptions. In contrast, fictional self-representation embraces the multiplication of selves and the freedom to fantasize. However, I argue that authors who position themselves as social rebels are often reliant on the very norms they are protesting. Even while they identify their fiction as speaking out against a culture of reticence, they make
use of reticence themselves to deny their texts’ referentiality and court readers’ biographical desire. What is more, if there is a tendency among authors to claim for themselves a special ethical license as dissenters, their privilege with regard to the public dissemination of their words means they have greater, not fewer, responsibilities to their intimate relations.

With an eye to those responsibilities, in chapter 4, “In Bed with an Author,” I scrutinize various strategies that have been enacted or suggested to help authors and their loved ones get along. The chapter begins by examining the options available to intimates who wish to correct what they see as misrepresentations of them in fiction. A reading of Alice Munro’s metafictional short story “Material” makes it clear that public responses risk further betraying the very intimate relationships the respondents wish to preserve. Moreover, when intimates attempt to write corrective narratives, they often reveal themselves as prone to the same sorts of misrepresentations, elisions, and caricatures that have upset them. Similarly, the controversy that arose from Claire Bloom’s publication of *Leaving a Doll’s House*, a memoir partly about her relationship with Philip Roth, speaks against retaliatory publication as a productive way of responding to injurious fiction. Although intimates might be attracted to gaining a voice through the same confessional field that authors have exploited, a lesson one might draw from Bloom’s example is that this field has its own coercive narrative predilections. In particular, the public’s biographical desire includes a taste for scandal and third-party judgments of all parties concerned, such that intimates who speak out subject themselves to more of the misunderstandings, condemnations, and invasions of privacy they felt the initial fiction inflicted on them.

At the same time, the confessional field offers possibilities for authors in terms of ethical action with regard to their intimates. Taking a cue from Munro’s story, chapter 4 conceptualizes a collaborative, creative model of intimacy that exploits biographical desire and the erotics of fiction. This is an intimacy wherein authors and their intimates take pleasure from interrogating and embracing fiction’s fantasies together in private discussion and public performances. Even if fiction’s currency depends in part on its tantalizing ambiguity and the staging of conflict, I argue that authors need not fear this currency’s debasement through private reckonings in which they and their loved ones jointly untangle lines of referentiality, making productive use of misunderstanding to augment rather than detract from intimacy. In imagining such relations, I posit a poetics of responsible indiscretion, one that does not see ethical intimacy as an impediment to the creation of socially transgressive literature. Indeed, I argue that for those
authors who identify themselves as social rebels, their very stance against repression and silence demands such a poetics. While autobiographical fiction always risks being unfaithful, many of the conflicts arising between authors and their close relations might be minimized or avoided through greater self-consciousness on the part of both. I call for ethical engagement that is especially attentive to particularity, unpredictability, and contingency, not only due to the variety and mutability of intimate relations but also due to the nature of fiction itself, in which the unconscious colors the text’s production and reception, the narrative’s referentiality is indeterminate, and the text’s effects in the world are unpredictable.

By considering historical, theoretical, and practical aspects of autobiographical fiction together, I hope to facilitate better dialogue about such fiction. In the most fundamental terms, this book represents an attempt to determine why fiction continues to matter: how it manifests compelling, ongoing social concerns about truth and reality, about intimacy and infidelity, and about the public and private realms. The pages that follow present a complex picture of the causes, functions, and effects of biographical desire. They have implications for how people read, write, and talk about literature, whether in scholarship or gossip. In attending to such matters, I also aim to shed light on how people conduct themselves in their most intimate relationships, with all the storytelling, silences, and desire those relationships involve.