

*Secrets and Revelations:*THEY'RE LITERATURE. THEY'RE
GOSSIP. THEY'RE LIFE

by Barbara Ardinger

The plots of the last three or four novels I've reviewed have turned on secrets. Husbands and wives keep secrets, and marriages start to crumble. Musicians tell secrets, and harmony falls into dissonance. A woman reveals a secret to a friend, and the revelation turns into a betrayal. Thinking how to review these novels, I spotted a theme.

From that terrible day when King Oedipus learned the tragic secrets of his life until the memorable day when Harry Potter found out he didn't have to hide under the stairs anymore, secrets and revelations have been major elements of literary plots. Shakespeare's dramas, for example, are filled with them. Viola, disguised as her drowned twin brother, falls in love with Orsino while Olivia falls in love with her, but then Sebastian turns up, all disguises are revealed, and the lovers are sorted out. Hamlet stages a dumb show that reveals his uncle's secret. Leontes has a fit of jealousy and banishes his wife; sixteen years later, it is revealed to him that Hermione did not die and that his daughter has grown up as the foster-child of shepherds. The tragedy of Othello's marriage turns on the revelation of a false secret, the truth of which isn't revealed until it's too late. And think of the secrets and revelations in Austen and Allende and Atwood. As Dickens wrote, it's "a wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other."

Literature is said to be a mirror of life. Sometimes it's a model. Whether we're reading a Great Book or chick lit or superhero action, we often see ourselves in the characters on the pages. More than that—in books we touch the lives and learn the secrets of people we'll never meet in cultures and societies we'll never visit. One recent example: reading about Peony, Lisa See's teenage girl who reads too much and becomes a hungry ghost, we learn that feelings, families, secrets, and revelations in seventeenth-century China are not all that different from those in twenty first-century America.

Thanks to the ghostwriters and "as-told-to" hired pens who collaborate with famous people,

and vanity and on-demand presses for the rest of us—not to mention Oprah, Ellen, and *The View*—we're all spilling our secrets nowadays. Sometimes someone writes a roman à clef, and everybody has fun figuring out who's who. More often, someone writes a tell-all that hits the streets and the shelves and the TV screens, and everyone in the world gets hits by another revelation.

Aside from the poor and/or insufficiently edited writing, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Fortunately, some secrets don't stay as well concealed as their keepers may hope. News about political campaigns and the lives of our elected officials tends to leak, and revelations of the political kind can make for a smarter electorate. There are also "dirty little secrets" that need to be exposed: abuse, rape, incest, addictions, disease. When someone reveals such a secret and tells how he or she coped, this lets people who have been suffering the same thing know they're not alone. Someone has been abused, and this is how she stood up for herself. Someone was addicted, and this is how he got into a program and got clean and sober. This is the embarrassing thing someone did, and I did it, too. Having read this revelation, maybe I can also talk about it. And get help.

While Thomas Hobbes may have said that the life of man is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," he also said, "The secret thoughts of a man run over all things, holy, profane, clean, obscene, grave, and light, without shame or blame." Modern novelists, it seems to me, agree with him. **F**

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