

Writing the Self: Identity and Autobiography in Aidan Chambers' *This Is All: The Pillow*

Book of Cordelia Kenn

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July 2012

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Introduction

In 2005, acclaimed British author Aidan Chambers published his sixth Young Adult novel *This Is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn* to, mostly, rave reviews of readers and critics alike. The final instalment of a novel series named the Dance Sequence, the novel was described as “[a]mbitious, imperfect, challenging and powerfully affecting” (*Kirkus Review* 901) and “a masterpiece” (Cart 66), although some critics preferred the first part of the novel over the rest of it (*Publisher’s Weekly* 72; Lewis 130) and noted some “wearying spots” (Sutton 577), especially where the main character Cordelia’s “excruciating musings...intrude” on her narrative (Lewis 130). However, Chambers has said in the past, in reference to supposedly difficult or literary aspects of his novels, that he expects more of his readers than simply wanting to be entertained (Russell 61) and Cordelia’s reflections provide her narrative with extra depth. As a literary novel that deals with a teenager’s life, *This Is All* can be considered a crossover novel, crossing the divide between Young Adult and adult fiction (Hunt 142). Its ambitious scope, comprising over 800 pages, and its deeply intelligent narrator and story demand a close, unwavering attention of its reader, but as several internet forums evince, those young readers up for the challenge mostly react with great enthusiasm, giving *This Is All* the distinction of eliciting “the most passionate responses” of readers to the author of any of his novels so far (Chambers, “Biography”).

Aidan Chambers has long been a favourite with literary critics. He has won the Carnegie Medal for children’s literature for the fifth novel in the Dance Sequence, *Postcards from No Man’s Land*, as well as the Hans Christian Andersen Award, which is known as the Nobel Prize for children’s literature. His work has merited two book-length studies as well as a number of articles in academic journals for children’s literature, such as *The Lion and the Unicorn*. Chambers is also an author of books and essays on youth literature, reading and literary education. He has written an afterword to the Dance Sequence series for the Definitions paperback edition of *This Is All*. Apart from a number of reviews, *This Is All*, however, has only been subjected to one in-depth analysis,

which focuses on spiritual and narrative geography in Chambers' novels (Russell). This paper seeks to fill this gap.

In *This Is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn*, Cordelia Kenn, a nineteen-year-old girl who falls pregnant, writes her unborn daughter the story of her teenage years to be able to (re)live them together when her daughter reaches her teens. She writes about happy times, such as falling in love and having her first sexual experiences with her boyfriend Will, whom she marries at the end of the novel, but also about traumatic events, such as her being kidnapped by an acquaintance who is obsessively in love with her. The novel chronicles Cordelia's artistic and intellectual ambitions: she desperately wants to be a poet and looks to her teacher Julie Martins for guidance in her developing insights into language and literature. In addition, she writes about everything that comes to her mind, from bodily experiences to her spiritual aspirations. Cordelia's writing is inspired by *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, a collection of autobiographical writings by a Japanese court lady serving the empress who records her life at court at the turn of the 10th century. Like Shonagon, Cordelia has a "pillow book," "[a] notebook or collection of notebooks kept in some accessible but relatively private place, and in which the author would from time to time record impressions, daily events, poems, letters, stories, ideas, descriptions of people, etc." (Morris, qtd. by Chambers, *This Is All*). This diary, which Cordelia keeps from the age of fifteen, serves as the source material for her autobiography, while she uses poignant fragments in their entirety.

As a fictional autobiography, *This Is All* is intimately concerned with questions of identity and self-writing, questions which have generated a large amount of literary theory in the past six decades. As such, it is useful to analyse the novel from the perspective of poststructuralism (Chapter 2 and 5), psychoanalysis (Chapter 3), feminist theory (Chapter 4), reader response theory (Chapter 6) and New Criticism (Chapter 7), these being the main strands of literary theory in the twentieth century, as well as the most pertinent to the novel. In addition, this paper considers the psychology of self-writing, in Chapter 1, as well as young adults' reading practices, in Chapter 6. Finally, in the conclusion, this paper looks for common ground between these theoretical perspectives in relation

to the novel.

This paper, then, aims to place *This Is All* and the questions it poses in a framework of literary theory, elucidating in the process the paradoxical ways the novel invokes concepts of identity and self-writing. It argues that while the novel's handling of these concepts at first sight seems to suggest a traditional conception of autobiography, echoes of poststructuralist and postmodernist literary theory within the novel reveal that *This Is All* is fraught with anxieties about writing the self.

Chapter 1 - Narrative Identity and Autobiography

In the past half-century, a considerable amount of literature has been published on the connection between self-narration and identity. The self, it is said by some theorists, does not exist until it is constituted in narrative (Eakin 100). Adriana Cavarero, author of *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, uses the term “narratable selves” to signify that memory has “an uncontrollable narrative impulse” (qtd. in Anderson 117) which forms our sense of self into a story, which we may or may not recount to others. This “personal myth,” as it is also sometimes called, serves to create a whole from widely converging experiences and personas (McAdams 12), thus allowing people to make sense of their lives and of their identities through imposing a narrative frame on the chaotic experience of life. Even Facebook has recently acknowledged that people like to represent themselves not only through what they like or what they care to share with their friends in the moment but also through their autobiography, by introducing the time-line format for member’s personal pages, with the tagline “Tell your life story through pictures, friendships and personal milestones” (Facebook). In the novel, this idea is voiced by Julie Martins: “We are...only the stories – only the metaphors – we tell about ourselves” (Chambers, *This Is All* 408).

Some individuals may also want to record their life-story in a narrative autobiography to preserve their selves in writing for themselves or others to enjoy. Autobiography as a genre was established in the nineteenth century, and was seen as a “developmental narrative” which traces the progress in time of a subject towards a certain goal and which thus gives an ordered representation of self and experience which surpasses mere diary writing (Anderson 8). Autobiography, then, is traditionally a linear, realist narrative which uses storytelling to impose a sense of unity on the chaos of life (117). Writing autobiography was, up until the 1980s, equated with “realising the self” (4), with the self being perceived in a Romantic sense as ultimately unique, unified and essential, and autobiography as an unmediated representation of that self (5). In the twenty-first century, autobiography still often fulfils the same function, as is exemplified by popular courses in

autobiography writing as well as by the hundreds of celebrities publishing autobiographies each year, who, however, may validly be suspected of employing ghost writers to do the job for them.

This Is All at first sight seems to fit this framework perfectly. Cordelia compiles her autobiography specifically to track her development as a young adult and in this way keep her teenaged self alive in writing, so she can share her youth with her daughter when she turns sixteen (Chambers, *This Is All* 1). Ultimately, Cordelia strives for self-knowledge, because “what...is life about if it’s not about knowing ourselves?” (199) and “[k]nowing [yourself] *is* life,” as she writes (87). Life itself, however, is not enough to reach this goal: Cordelia feels that it is necessary for her to write her diary to be able to reflect on her experiences and know her own mind. “I only know what I know and what I think and feel when I put it into words,” she says (630). Although she re-uses fragments from this diary, her novel goes beyond the immediacy of diary-writing through Cordelia’s reflections on her experiences and diary entries several years after the events. These reflections allow her to make sense of her experiences and her psychological make-up with the benefit of hindsight. For instance, she begins her recollections of an important event in her childhood, her mother’s death, which she now believes relates to her fear of losing the people she loves, with: “What I couldn’t see, what I didn’t understand was this:” (373).

In addition, Cordelia believes that she consists of several selves: “I’ve never, even as a child, felt that I’m only one self, only one person. I’ve always felt I’m quite a few more than one” (Chambers, *This Is All* 5). As in the cartoon image of a person with a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, she sometimes feels torn between a “stronger, wiser, more sensible self,” “Big C,” and a “weaker, sillier, ungrownup and unforgiving self,” “Little C” (66). In her more profound moments she feels, faintly reminiscent of Saint Teresa of Avila’s metaphor of the soul as a castle through which it progresses on its way to perfect communion with God, that life “is a never-finished exploration of one room after another of our *self*” (327). Her diary-writing gains more importance to her through this insight into her divided individuality: “*Who am I writing to?...* Perhaps the self who writes is writing to, and writing for, one or more of my other selves... This

must be how I tell myself about myself. This must be how I find out about myself” (202). It follows that Cordelia’s taking on the voice of the narrator in her autobiography may be an effort to adopt a standpoint from which she can regard her self with a sense of unity which surpasses her fragmentary experience, telling herself the ultimate version of her story about herself at this time in her life. Indeed, according to Dan P. McAdams, adolescence is the time when people first start to construct a preliminary, if rather self-aggrandising self-narrative (80). In this light, Cordelia’s being named after the perennially honest character in Shakespeare’s tragedy *King Lear*, is significant in that it suggests that Cordelia herself is also supremely honest in her writing, while certain self-congratulatory impulses might surely be supposed to have forced themselves upon her in the process of writing. However, with the novel chronicling Cordelia’s every thought and feeling, Cordelia, despite her humour, surely takes herself as seriously as any teenager.

Despite experiencing herself as fragmented, Cordelia does feel she has an inner core, a “most secret self,” reminiscent of Romantic notions of the self, into which she believes everyone ultimately wants to allow someone else in the experience of love (Chambers, *This Is All* 53; 455). She calls this core her soul, her “most essential self, [her] very own being” (41), “a great deep beauty” inside her (ibid.). She regards writing as her fate (22) and since she claims that she wants “to write in a way that the writing is me -- is myself. I want to write so that what I write and the way I write is *me*” (76), what she strives for in writing may be to capture her soul. However, Cordelia’s faith in language and in stories is not unlimited, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 - Poststructuralist Perspectives

As the novel progresses, readers might come to question whether *This Is All* indeed promotes autobiography as a realist, linear narrative by a unified autodiegetic narrator. In fact, the novel carries echoes of several postmodernist and poststructuralist perspectives on identity and autobiography. In postmodernist thought, the subject is not a rational and unified whole, but rather inescapably fragmented (Barry 81). Fragmentation is, in fact, celebrated, resulting in art which delights in subverting its audience's expectations of unity in structure and subject matter. In poststructuralist theory, the subject loses its footing because it is revealed to be a construct of language; a language, moreover, which cannot be grounded in reality because it ultimately floats free of the world of objects (65). In *This Is All*, some of these ideas are implicitly present. As such, it is useful to regard the novel, in Roland Barthes' terms, not as a "work," unitary in its purpose, but as "text," in which many strands of meaning collide (1327)

Unlike what the traditional formula of autobiography would suppose, Cordelia does not resort to simple narrative to express her fragmented sense of self. Instead, she divides her autobiography into five parts and adopts a different type of writing for each of them. As mentioned earlier, she also includes thematic passages and anecdotes from her diary, her pillow book, named after the above-mentioned *Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, which form nearly half of the novel. Before her writings reach their final format, consisting of five "books" or volumes, she stores the pages in five differently coloured boxes, thus giving each of the books their titles: "The Red Pillow Box," "The Green Pillow Box," etc. In the first of the five books, the text alternates between retrospective narrative and diary fragments from Cordelia's pillow book. Book Two consists of (a)- and (b)-pages, printed respectively on the left- and right-hand pages, with the (b)-pages continuing the story of Book One and the (a)-pages detailing thematic entries and stories from Cordelia's diary, as well as poems, quotes and lists, such as a list of "*Things that worry me and sometimes even make me feel afraid*" (Chambers, *This Is All* 256) or a list of "*Unusual and amusing words*" (224). Book

Three is an autodiegetic novella. Book Four, however, is ordered by theme in alphabetical order. Some of the headings are part of Cordelia's ongoing retrospective narrative; others relate again to general topics. Book Five is formed of three "scenes" concluding Cordelia's story. A sixth book is added by Will, Cordelia's husband. As Chambers writes in an explanatory note on his website, the books all show a different combination of retrospective account and pillow book fragments or reflect some part or some edition of Shonagon's writings, which have been published in their original "jumbled" form but also in alphabetical order ("This Is All"). Cordelia's narrative, then, is interspersed with diary fragments, letters, lists, poetry and general observations on language, literature, her body, everyday experiences such as sleeping, and her own identity. She does not conspicuously seek for unity in her story or in her main character, rather, like Anna in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* she seeks to build up her character, i.e. herself, through a variety of writings.

Cordelia also notes the ambivalent nature of language. With regard to prose, Cordelia notes that recording life while staying true to experience is "the art of the impossible" (Chambers, *This Is All* 492). "The only description worth anything," she remarks with regard to sex and love, "is *doing them*" (ibid., emphasis in original). She knows that stories cannot tell everything (3; 447). In this way, *This Is All* expands on a theme which was central to the previous five novels in the Dance Sequence, according to Victor Watson, namely "the difficulty of accurately communicating truth" (qtd. in Russell 61). Cordelia often experiences a sense of belatedness. "[Is] there anything new to say about anything?" she wonders (Chambers, *This Is All* 161). Maybe there is not, she adds, but then again, "[e]verything in life is a surprised repetition of the already known" (162). When she recounts her affair with a married, older man in Book Three, she rather abruptly interrupts the narrative at the point where it becomes obvious that she and Edward will become lovers: "Stop. Wait. You know what's going to happen next...Stories are like that, even true stories like mine" (447). Rather than attempting to record new experiences, then, Cordelia tries to tell her own story in such a way that it justifies its importance to her: "So here I am...telling the old old story again,

because it's *my* story" (161).

As a matter of fact, Cordelia feels that poetry is more expressive than prose, because "behind the simple words and between the few short lines there lies much more that cannot be said, or is best left unsaid" (Chambers, *This Is All* 20). Her poems "tell [her] more about [herself] than anything" (202), but evidently she realises that to her prospective reader, her daughter, her prose offers a more accessible entrance into her personality, despite its drawbacks. When she writes her "mopes," as she calls her poems, she feels that "thoughts that couldn't be expressed in straightforward words...accompanied by surges of feeling that came whirling through [her] body" slowly "gather...into a mope, as if attracted by a magnet into a verbal forcefield" (279). She feels that her poems "arrive like gifts from nowhere" (ibid.) and likens words to music. In this respect, she calls poetry "the most written of all writing" (76).

Cordelia does realise that some experiences exist in a realm completely outside of language, even in the shape of poetry, such as meditation ("Disembodied thought. No words could express it" (Chambers, *This Is All* 41)) and beauty ("There is something unspeakable, something beyond the power of words to describe beauty" (491)). She sometimes perceives a quality of aliveness and activity in silence, which leaves her lost for words ("I couldn't find the way to express it" (255)). At one point, she mentions silence as one of three things that are essential to her heart, mind and soul, the other two, maybe surprisingly, being sex and Shakespeare (678). Moreover, it is not language which lifts her out of her depression after her traumatic experiences with her kidnapper, but meditation and activity (697). However, characteristically, Cordelia does not usually give in to her wordlessness: her comment on meditation quoted above is, quite paradoxically, followed by a description of the experience.

As much as Cordelia claims to love silence, then, her love for words seems even more profound and sometimes even takes on tones of mysticism or addiction, such as when she asks her close friend Izumi, who first introduced her to Sei Shonagon and to Chinese poetry, to write words on her body until she is completely covered in them (Chambers, *This Is All* 136-7). This scene may,

incidentally, allude to Peter Greenaway's film *The Pillow Book*, which finds its source of inspiration in Shonagon's diaries as well. In it, a young Japanese woman asks her lovers to write calligraphy on her body, to allow her to relive the experience of her father painting her name on her body when she had her birthday as a child (1996). Cordelia, after she has been given Alexander Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon* by her father, starts sticking pieces of tape with words on them inside her clothes so they will figuratively brush off on her body during the day (Chambers, *This Is All* 132-3). This obsession lasts a number of months. What is more, she feels she is most alive in words: "I live in words and words are where I belong" (13) and "There is nothing like words. I want to live with them, I want to live through them, I want to live because of them. I want to live in them. Really *in* them" (76-7). Her boyfriend Will does not share her passion for words, however, and instead prefers trees over anything else. He says: "Words words words...I don't trust them" (159).

However ambivalent Cordelia's own trust in words and prose may be, she evidently still relies on them to reach self-knowledge. According to Paul de Man, however, an individual's quest for true self-knowledge by means of autobiography is compromised by the fact that reading oneself into the text is like staring at a fiction which displaces the self. The trope of "prosopopeia," literally "to make a person," is a figure of speech in which a writer adopts the voice of an absent or imaginary person to speak to his or her audience, which in the case of autobiography entails endowing the personification of *oneself*, absent in body from the text, with as many life-like characteristics as possible (Anderson 12). This trope, however, calls attention to the fact that this self established in language is in reality a fiction based on metaphors, because language can only ever represent likenesses, or "pictures," in language and not reality itself, and is therefore essentially mute (De Man 930). Prosopopeia, the giving of a face to one's own character in a text, ironically entails the "defacement" of the real-life autobiographical subject, since the subject in the text is only a false personification (ibid.). Self-writing, Roland Barthes claims as well, according to Linda Anderson, never offers a reflection of an authentic, real self, but only offers the possibility to add more and more attributes to as many spectral reflections of the self (67). This may explain the

length of Cordelia's novel: she wants her book to contain "all" of her and therefore continuously adds more anecdotes and more observations to perfect the picture.

According to Jacques Derrida, too, the mediation of the self in written language displaces the presence of the self in the text (Anderson 74). Writing, he says in his analysis of Rousseau's autobiography, takes the place of speech where speech has failed to express the self (49). Writing is, for Derrida, a mediation of something that is not there in the first place: words that were not spoken, a self that was not expressed. The self can therefore never be present in writing, because it only comes into being through writing and does not exist in reality (ibid.). Since she concludes that she cannot know herself but through her writing, what is true for Rousseau also seems true for Cordelia. She feels she comes closer to her "real" life through her writing about it than through her living it: "I write to read the life I cannot live otherwise" (Chambers, *This Is All* 698). Arguably, she lives vicariously through her writing: writing is her gateway into her most profound experiences of self-knowledge. In as far as Cordelia believes her identity to be constituted in language, then, her notion of selfhood is entirely poststructuralist, since poststructuralism questions the existence of a natural, unmediated selfhood in the first place. "[W]e are," Cordelia says, "what our language allows us to be and to become" (630).

Chapter 3 - Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Cordelia's quest for self-knowledge through writing may also be illuminated from the point of view of poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory. Two aspects appear to be particularly pertinent to the novel. Firstly, according to Jacques Lacan, a child only arrives at a sense of selfhood when it sees itself reflected as a whole in a mirror for the first time, in what is known as the mirror stage. It recognises this whole as something it wants to be, but because the child's own perception of the self does not provide this sense of unity in identity from this moment onwards it has to look to significant others and society as a whole to act as mirrors that reflect back a unified image of the self (Culler 115). The unified self, according to Lacan, then, is always only a fantasy, a mirror image, towards which the subject continually strives and the Other is always implicated in the subject's sense of self, because the subject will look to others to ratify his or her identity (Anderson 62). As Linda Anderson explains, the Other thus becomes "the locus of meaning and identification" for the self (ibid.). In *This Is All*, the Other may be identified as Cordelia's addressee, the implied reader who is Cordelia's daughter. Arguably, it is through directing her autobiography to her daughter that Cordelia arrives at a coherent self-image that transcends her fragmentary sense of self. Her daughter becomes Cordelia's point of departure for her own sense of unity within herself, allowing her to adopt the voice of an authoritative "I" who reflects on experience. According to Barthes, too, the self can only be thought of as coherent when seen through the eyes of an Other, argues Linda Anderson (68). Indeed, in one of her poems Cordelia writes, quoting Descartes: "*I think, therefore I am. / I am, therefore I am observed. / Being observed, / you exist*" (Chambers, *This Is All* 233). When she writes about her English teacher, Julie Martin, who becomes a close friend in the course of the novel, she writes that she feels that Julie knows more about her than she knew about herself, which does not make her uncomfortable, but rather makes her exclaim: "I wanted Ms M. to know me" (263). Miss Martin herself is quoted as saying a little later: "we don't really know who we are, or what we are, or what we could be, until we see ourselves, and the things

that matter to us, through the eyes of someone else” (339). Finally, referring to Prospero’s observation “They have changed eyes” in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1.2.436), Cordelia writes about seeing the world and yourself through a lover’s eyes: “I can only remain in love with someone who knows how to re-vision me” (Chambers, *This Is All* 169).

Another aspect of psychoanalytic theory that may have some bearing on Cordelia’s narrative is that her love for writing and her reliance on words to outlive the body may originate in the early loss of her mother, who died when she was very young. Psychoanalytical theorists, such as Lacan and Julia Kristeva, believe that for the subject to become an individual, it needs to separate itself forcibly from the mother by entering the “symbolic order”, which effectively means entering language. The mother’s body is then lost, but substituted with words (Anderson 74), which takes on a quite literal meaning in *This Is All* for both Cordelia and her daughter, as will be explained later. Cordelia’s obsession with attaching words to the inside of her clothes, in fact, starts right after she has visited the ancient White Horse of Uffington^[1], where she was conceived, and has scattered her mother’s ashes in the wind. For Derrida, who also writes about the importance of the mother figure to language, the mother represents the “natural, living mother tongue” (qtd. in Anderson 78), while the father represents formal language. Cordelia’s mother, then, is arguably present in Cordelia’s lively writing, but is also anonymous because she cannot speak for herself, as Derrida claims is always true for the mother (ibid.).

Chapter 4 - Feminist Perspectives

What is quite perspicuous about *This Is All* is that it is the autobiography of a young woman, whose femininity is, naturally, part of her view of herself. Aidan Chambers writes in his afterword that the six novels of his Dance Sequence move “from the male to the female, or more accurately, from the masculine to the feminine,” and indeed, the novel is the only one in the sequence which has a single, female protagonist. One aspect in which Cordelia’s self-awareness echoes poststructuralist and postmodernist feminist thought is precisely her awareness of herself as fragmented. The unified and complete self that expresses itself in a “singular I,” writes Virginia Woolf, who has been called a deconstructionist feminist *avant la lettre* (Anderson 88), may be considered to reflect a male subjectivity, whereas women may feel more comfortable presenting a multiplicity of subjectivities (92). Autobiography as a genre has favoured masculine conceptions of subjectivity that posit the “I” as unified and singular (3), even though, as Derrida remarks, “genre” always evokes “gender” because the terms are semantically very similar (10). Like Cordelia’s, Woolf’s autobiographical writings are, in contrast, “unstable” and “provisional,” with Woolf prioritising sketches, letters and diary fragments over formal autobiography, as Linda Anderson notes (88). These writings represent, according to Julia Kristeva, not a fixed subject expressing its essential self, but a “subject-in-progress” which is “constantly called into question” (qtd. in Anderson 88). Similarly, Cordelia realises that she is constantly changing (see the heading “Changes” in Book Four, Chambers, *This Is All* 568). Of course, this is common to Bildungsromans, under which header *This Is All* could be classed, but Cordelia’s awareness of these changes within herself provides the novel with an extra layer of perception.

Another aspect of the novel that calls to mind feminist thought is that Cordelia often feels that her behaviour constitutes a performance. She is aware that her behaviour is unintentionally modelled to scripts circulating in culture. When she falls in love, she needs to be comforted with the idea that her own “flush of love” is “not just a repeat performance” which re-enacts all the clichés

of romance (Chambers, *This Is All* 20). What Cordelia, in the twenty-first century, likes about being a woman is that she can change her appearance every day and thereby choose to inhabit different stock characters of female identity (108-9). This strongly evokes Judith Butler's ideas on gender as performance: there are no "categories of true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality" (Butler 2542) rather women make themselves into women by taking on the performance of a female gender, as it is conceived of in a given society. In postmodernism, identity in general does not exist, "only, at best, aesthetic self-fashioning via performances drawn from the repertoire of the current codes of representation of subjectivity available at any given time and place" (Fullbrook 75). Since there are many conceptions of femininity in society today, Cordelia is at liberty to experiment with her appearance, her behaviour and her sexuality. She remarks that as a girl, she can kiss her best girlfriend Izumi without a problem (Chambers, *This Is All* 20) and indeed her friendship with Izumi takes on lesbian undertones when, after she has written words on Cordelia's body, Izumi undresses and they hug and kiss so the words will be printed on Izumi's body too (137), suggesting that Cordelia's sexuality, too, is fluid rather than fixed.

To further establish the text as feminine, Chambers makes a conscious effort to represent the female body in the text. With the body traditionally being the undervalued, female connotated term in the binary dyad body-mind, feminists from Simone De Beauvoir onwards have tried to theorise embodiment. The body is seen as the originator of *écriture féminine*, an imaginative, inconclusive style of writing that, unlike traditional "logocentric" writing, allows room for heterogeneity and multiplicity, including the repressed poles of the binaries that structure Western thought (Introduction, Cixous 1940-1). Although Cordelia's writing is arguably too rationally reflective to be considered *écriture féminine*, as suggested she does show a certain fluidity in her sense of self and her behaviour and writes in a very lively style. More obviously, a rather large portion of her pillow books is dedicated to her descriptions of her body and its processes. She writes about menstruating, breasts, being pregnant, sex and masturbation. Admittedly, she does not stop at these female aspects of her physical life and also describes flatulence and the joys of sleep, and indeed "a

powerful sense of adolescent physicality—an inquisitive fascination with bodies" is the other central theme which Victor Watson discerns in the previous five Young Adult novels by Aidan Chambers (qtd. in Russell 61). To some reviewers, however, Chambers' insistence on Cordelia's musings on her body was estranging to the point of causing offence, "reek[ing] of male fantasy" (Lewis 130), and of course, it is clear that Chambers does not speak from personal experience. The novel's dedication indicates that Chambers thanks his knowledge of the female body to the women he spoke to in preparation of his novel and to Natalie Angier's *Woman: An Intimate Geography*, a book that has elicited mixed reactions from feminists because of its "flowery" descriptions of female biology (Hubbard 14). Although Chambers relies on what women have told him, however, arguably, there is no female body behind the novel, informing the text and implicating itself in its language. Rather, behind the text are other texts.

Finally, consciously and unconsciously, Cordelia takes her place in a female genealogy of affection on the one hand and artistic ambition on the other. In *Of Woman Born*, feminist author Adrienne Rich writes that in patriarchy, the rule of men over women, mother-daughter relationships are perceived as based on strife. In Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, mothers and daughters are said to compete for the father's affection. When patriarchy is disarmed, however, a relationship of loving reciprocity is possible between women (van der Tuin 27). In addressing her autobiography to her daughter, it seems that Cordelia hopes for just such a relationship for herself and her daughter, to such an extent that her daughter will not turn away from her when she reaches her teens but will be willing to identify with her mother as a teenager. Cordelia's real readers appear to be mostly girls and young women who feel very affectionate towards Cordelia as well, as will be discussed in Chapter 6. Between women artists, too, write Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, strife in the form of Harold Bloom's male-oriented "anxiety of influence," which causes an author to define himself aggressively against a precursor, has no place. Rather, an "anxiety of authorship," because most artists have been men rather than women, leads women artists to actively seek out a female precursor with whom to identify in their bold efforts to create art (Gilbert and Gubar 1930).

Although this idea is particularly applicable to female authors before the twentieth century, Cordelia's literary role models are still mostly women: most of the novelists mentioned in the novel are women, as are the poets Sei Shonagon, Izumi Shikibu, after whom, significantly, Cordelia's best friend Izumi was named by her mother, and Emily Dickinson, of whom Cordelia remarks: "I must study ED's poems very carefully" (Chambers, *This Is All* 210).

Chapter 5 - Poststructuralism Revisited: Writing from Beyond the Grave

Tragically, Cordelia dies of an aneurysm shortly after giving birth to her daughter, as is revealed in Book Six, written by her husband and father of her child, Will. Of course, Cordelia always meant for her book to keep her teenaged self alive in words, because she knows this self will be lost as she matures into an adult and words, on the other hand, “never die,” as she says elsewhere (Chambers, *This Is All* 134), but little did she know that this written self would soon be the only version left of her. This puts her writings in a new perspective, which makes certain remarks of both Paul de Man and Derrida about autobiography and death highly pertinent. De Man’s idea that autobiography is always “epitaphic” in nature, creating a personality that speaks from “beyond the grave” because it speaks for someone who is absent from the text, namely the real-life author (De Man 77), suddenly becomes not only figuratively, but literally true. Derrida, as well, regards autobiography as “thanatography,” written by a dead author rather than a living one. As Linda Anderson explains, “[f]or Derrida, the question of the proper name or signature quickly takes on overtones of death since the name with which one signs will always outlive the bearer of that name” (76). Because autobiography means that the author, according to Derrida, is the addressee within the text, because she tells her story in the first place to herself, and she will only after the fact become the “I” who is established in this text, the “I” who writes is not the same as the “me” who receives the story and there is a space of difference between the two (77). For this space to exist and for the “me” of the author to return to herself, it is necessary for the author to send her text out into the world by actually writing it, so that, once written, there is a space for real others to step in. The text will only then effectively be “signed” in the author’s name when these others discern the writer in her writings and so “decipher” her signature (78). In Cordelia’s case, these others are in the first place her husband Will and her mentor Julie, and in the second place her daughter, who will be given her autobiography to read when she is sixteen but whose name is not mentioned. Only when they recognise Cordelia in her writing, will her writing, the fiction she has created about herself, truly

come to stand in for her self and will her name be regarded to live on in her writing.

What is highly significant to the reader about this revelation near the end of the novel, is that because of her death, Cordelia as the person behind the words becomes one step further removed: her project was left unfinished and her writings, stored in the five coloured boxes mentioned above, have subsequently been edited by her close friend and former teacher, Julie, to culminate in the text of the book readers have before them. According to Cordelia's husband, Will, some of the vivacity which was bursting from her original text ("I discovered in what I was reading that my beloved Cordelia was vividly alive" (Chambers, *This Is All* 776)) has been lost in the process of editing. "It isn't the whole of Cordelia – it's like looking at someone in profile rather than full-face," he remarks (805). Still, he says, since only one of the boxes contained a finished manuscript, Book Three in the novel, it was necessary to impose some kind of order. The object was to present Cordelia's story as well as possible, while not compromising her "voice" (804), but because of the chaos of the boxes, the editing process needed to be quite extensive. Her original writings, the reader learns, were even more fragmentary than the novel, whose intricate order is not Cordelia's work, but Julie's. Cordelia's character and story, then, are revealed to have one further layer of mediation than readers originally supposed while reading the novel. "[I]t is her, and it is in focus, sharp and clear," says Will (805), who with these words seems to sign, in Derrida's terms, the edited version of Cordelia's autobiography in her name as well, albeit somewhat reluctantly. The focus which has created the illusion of a unified personality, however, has not been directed by Cordelia herself. Ironically, she writes in the first pages of her book: "If anything is to be left of me, I want it to be of me alone" (2).

Nevertheless, Will's remarks about Cordelia's writings suggest that Cordelia's belief that she was most alive in words was not far off the mark. Where she wrote, "I want to write so that what I write and the way I write is *me*" (Chambers, *This Is All* 76), he remarks: "To me these pages *are* Cordelia" (777). And: "When I read anything she has written I always feel I am meeting the *real* Cordelia. There is something of her deepest self behind the words – under the words – conveyed by

the words – held in the words” (777-8, emphasis added). He then goes on to say that Cordelia would say that this real self was her soul, or “the essence of herself” (778), which takes this paper away from poststructuralism right back to where it started: a Romanticist notion of the self as an essential being which represents itself in autobiography.

Chapter 6 - The Reader in the Novel

In reader-response theory, as theorised by Stanley Fish, the mental experience of a reader in the process of reading is taken to represent the meaning of the work (1977). When applying this idea to *This Is All*, it has to be taken into account that although it has been called a crossover novel, it is aimed at young adult readers who, scholars studying the psychology of reading have noted, respond to novels in a way that is very specific to their stage of psychological development. What young adult readers, aged between twelve and eighteen, look for in fiction in the first place appears to be the possibility of identification with the characters in the novel (Appleyard 106). Identification has the best chance of succeeding when a character mirrors the young adult reader's self-image as a "sensitive, misunderstood outsider, no longer a child and not yet an adult" and shows a complexity in her/his inner life which matches the reader's sense of self (ibid.). "Similarity identification" (Andringa 209) can easily merge into "wish identification" when the reader becomes aware of a gap between "the me I am" and "the me I'd like to be" (Appleyard 105) who may both be simultaneously represented by the main character of the novel being read. Ideally, then, the main character in a young adult novel is as complex as its reader and is both reassuring in its similarity to the reader and alluring in its attractive otherness.

What identification presupposes is that a character is drawn in a realist mode, however fantastic a story might be. The character has to feel sufficiently round and real for readers to be able to recognise themselves. Cordelia, in her many-sidedness and in her musings on life, as well as her idiosyncratic expressions ("lordy" for "o boy"), meets these requirements. Readers of *This Is All* have remarked that the novel has helped them discover "so much" about themselves (brennalianne, Tumblr) and has changed their lives (theliterarydreamer, ibid.). One girl writes: "Sometimes you get lucky and you find a book that is so good, so truthful, so beautiful, that when you finish the last page you want to cry because it's as if somebody you love has left you. *This Is All* by Aidan Chambers is such a book" (Sylvia-speaks, ibid.). Another writes: "I love Cordelia so much and want

to be her” (hannahhacq, *ibid.*). Many of these readers are aware of the irony that Cordelia’s creator is an older man, but they admire him all the same for capturing “so completely and perfectly what growing up as a woman feels like” (shaynasaur, *ibid.*). Onagoodmixture writes: “Very rapidly I found myself identifying with the protagonist, Cordelia, which you might think strange, since the accurate (in my eyes) portrayal of a teenage girl was constructed by an elderly man” (*ibid.*) The most quoted passages of the novel on Tumblr, a blogging site which allows everyone to create their own blog, include a remark on being in love:

Love, being in love, isn’t a constant thing. It doesn’t always flow at the same strength. It’s not always like a river in flood. It’s more like the sea. It has tides, it ebbs and flows. The thing is, when love is real, whether it’s ebbing or flowing, it’s always there, it never goes away. And that’s the only proof you can have that it is real, and not just a crush or an infatuation or a passing fancy (Chambers, *This Is All* 520)

and on Cordelia’s love for words:

There is nothing like words. I want to live with them, I want to live through them. I want to live because of them. I want to live in them. Really in them. And I want to procreate with them. I want to make and remake the world with them. I have thought about this a lot. If I have a creed, this is it: My god is language, written and read. And there is no other god but this. (76-7)

The first quote, in fact, seems to have gone viral on Tumblr, although it is not to be supposed that all members reblogging it have read the novel. In the novel, the words are not Cordelia’s, but Edward’s, the middle-aged man with whom she has an affair. Nevertheless, both Cordelia’s experiences and the way she wants to use language to (re)create her world in writing apparently feel

real to her readers, who may themselves very well be in the process of constructing a self-narrative to sustain their sense of self. The novel itself arguably claims to be encyclopedic with regard to life as a teenager by including an index in its paperback edition.

Nevertheless, the identification of the reader with Cordelia may be compromised by the revelation towards the end of the novel that she has died and that her writings have been edited by someone else. This focuses attention on the fact that Cordelia is first and foremost a construct of language: her own language as an autobiographic author rather than an autodiegetic narrator, her editor's language, and of course ultimately the language of her creator. As Mary Harris Russell remarks, "[w]e are not looking at a fully rounded illusionistic realism but at a constructed artefact" (71). Russell argues that Cordelia's constructedness is there "to puzzle us, to ask of us the energy of re-reading. We are watching a character's powerful ability to change and to produce a narrative record of that change" (ibid.), and indeed, one reader writes: "Now that I finished it's like all I... want [is to] read the whole thing over and over again" (Tesni). The tension between realism and "constructedness" which the novel reveals to attentive readers is part of their experience of the novel and can therefore be said to form part of the meaning of *This Is All*, which is then experienced as destabilising narrative identity rather than confirming it. In retrospect, the novel stresses that characters in fiction are constructs of language. This may open its young readers' eyes to the fact that all fiction and all characters, and even the stories real people narrate of their own lives, are such constructs. It also demonstrates, however, that it may still be rewarding to follow their unfolding, even if the illusion of a real subject with which to identify is shattered.

Chapter 7 - Theory in the Novel

This paper has made extensive use of modern literary theories to analyse Aidan Chambers' *This Is All*. However, there is also actual theory present in the novel in the shape of New Criticism, specifically Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay "The Intentional Fallacy." It is in this essay that they quote American poet Archibald MacLeish, who wrote in a poem called "Ars Poetica" "a poem should not mean but be" (1233) which was in its turn quoted by the poet Veronica Forrest-Thomson in the title of her poem "Cordelia: or, 'A Poem Should not Mean, but Be'," which, in the novel, Cordelia is given by Julie to inspire her. "I'm not giving it to you just because of your name," Julie says, "but because of what it says about a poem: that it should *be* and not *mean*" (Chambers, *This Is All* 266-8). In the words of Wimsatt and Beardsley: "A poem can *be* only through its *meaning* – since its medium is words – yet it *is*, simply *is*, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant" (1233-4). This prompts a three-part reflection on Cordelia's part on the nature of poetry in contrast to prose. After Julie suggests she tries to think of herself as a poem, Cordelia reaches the conclusion that she is a being "because of how [she] is made, and when and where [she] was made...and by whom [she] is made" and that if she has a meaning, she means what she is because in order to understand her a person should know who she is (Chambers, *This Is All* 286). If the same is true of a poem, she argues, it is a poem "because it is made of words put together in a particular kind of way in a particular time and a particular place by a particular person" and to understand the meaning of the poem, one should know what the poem is, in terms of its language (286).

With this in mind, Cordelia analyses one of her own poems, not wanting to burn her fingers on a great poet's work. Since she is the author of the poem, her point of departure is her own intention in writing the poem, but she admits that there may be more possible meanings in her poem than she is aware of (358). In defiance of Julie, who had judged a reader-response view of literature ridiculous, Cordelia concludes that her poem is as much created by her reader as by herself (358-

60), although in her discussion of the poem she is of course her own reader. Her final conclusion is: “a poem is an object (like a piece of sculpture or a painting) as well as a message...what matters most about a poem is the special ways it uses language” (362), which immediately calls to mind the title and theme of another famous New Criticist work, Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Cordelia herself then makes a distinction between poetry and prose by saying that “[p]oetry means what it is. Prose is what it means” (ibid.), which she does not further explain but which seems to suggest that in prose the meaning of words and sentences is prioritised over the aesthetic composition the words form together. Although the status of reader-response theory in Chambers’ view is not entirely clear, with Julie despising it and Cordelia defending it, then, in these reflections on Cordelia’s part the novel ardently advocates a New Criticist view of poetry as aesthetic objects formed of words. As such, the novel and its author may also be expected to subscribe to the New Criticist expectation that the parts of a work of literature, and therefore the parts of this novel, together represent a unity of meaning (Culler 136). This paper, however, has argued otherwise.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to engage with literary and psychological theory to analyse Aidan Chambers' Young Adult novel *This Is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn* and the way it deals with issues of identity and self-writing. *This Is All* was shown to fit a framework of narrative psychology and traditional conceptions of autobiography. In these perspectives, respectively, identity is conceived of as a self-narrative which brings unity to the diverging experiences of life and self, and the self as an essential being, a soul, that is both directly represented and brought to its fullest actualisation in autobiography. However, although the responses of young readers suggest that in their identification with the novel's autodiegetic author, Cordelia, they take these notions at face value, and although the novel itself promulgates a corresponding New Criticist view which looks for unity in literary works, there is an undercurrent to the novel which compromises this neat perception of the novel's main themes. Rather than taking the novel at its word and regard it as a "work," to speak with Barthes, this paper has aimed to analyse it as "text." The poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, including psychoanalysis and feminism, used to disentangle this particular text, in addition to a narrative psychological and a reader response approach to the novel, implicate, reinforce and undermine each other, as will now be discussed.

Significantly, Cordelia's experience of herself as fragmented, an experience considered, in narrative psychology, the starting position from which an individual begins to construct an integrated self-narrative, is also an integral aspect of selfhood as conceived of in psychoanalysis as well as postmodernist theory. However much psychotherapy may in practice aim at establishing a healing, unifying narrative of the self, in origin psychoanalysis conceived of the subject as "essentially divided, confronted by a constant struggle between the competing elements of the human psyche forged in early childhood, and driven by contradictory drives towards sexual fulfilment and death" (Moran 99). The unified self, according to Lacan, is never more than a comforting fantasy. In postmodernist thought, too, this fragmentation is considered inescapable.

Cordelia, however, does not seem to feel the anxiety that psychoanalytic theory ascribes to this experience, nor does she feel especially liberated by it, as postmodernism supposes (Barry 81). Rather, it is to her a fact of life. This corresponds to the feminist idea that a fragmented self-awareness is common to women, who do not feel the need to assert an authoritative “I” and favour unfinished writings which express a multitude of subjectivities.

Nevertheless, however fragmentary the structure of her writings, in adopting a retrospective, reflective voice in her autobiography, Cordelia does take a step back from her fragmentary self and seems to have some idea of herself as an ultimate whole which she can reach through self-writing. Indeed, according to Linda Anderson, Roland Barthes would agree that trying to reflect an inherently fragmented self-image, as he does in his experimental autobiography *Barthes by Barthes*, still depends on an imaginary wholeness for this representation to make sense to both the author and the reader (Anderson 71). In Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, this imaginary wholeness is seen as emanating from an Other who reflects the self back to the subject. Cordelia’s daughter, the implied reader of her autobiography, arguably provides Cordelia with this external perspective from which she can perceive herself as a whole.

The name of this implied reader, Cordelia’s daughter, is, however, conspicuously absent from the novel. On the one hand, this may be in recognition of the young readers who have identified themselves throughout the novel with Cordelia’s addressee. On the other hand, in psychoanalytic terms, one might wonder whether her mother’s memoirs, standing in for her physical body quite literally, will stand in the way of Cordelia’s daughter’s own individuation in the symbolic order and whether she will therefore ever be able to adopt truly a proper name of her own. The question is whether she will be able to murder her mother symbolically by stepping into the symbolic order of language when her mother is now contained solely in that order in hundreds of pages of writing. The novel ends with Cordelia and Will’s wedding, after the birth of their child, and with a ceremony in which Will, Cordelia and the child’s godparents, Julie and Arry, each in turn speak the girl’s name, without Will’s including this name in the narrative (Chambers, *This Is All*

808).

To Cordelia, who feels she cannot know herself but through writing, self-writing equals self-actualisation, as it does in the traditional notion of autobiography. In that regard, even this Romanticist notion may be considered poststructuralist *avant la lettre*: identity does not precede or exceed language; rather language precedes and exceeds a sense of self, as Jacques Derrida argues (Anderson 6). Indeed, the Romanticist notion of autobiography as both a means to self-actualisation and at the same time an unmediated representation of a unique and unified self that precedes the text can be deconstructed as harbouring within itself the anxieties about identity and self-writing that poststructuralism has subsequently foregrounded. Derrida, Barthes and De Man consider it impossible for autobiography to represent the real self, because on the one hand, language is always an approximation of the reality of experience, and on the other hand, there is no essential self outside of language. In a comment that captures the poststructuralist spirit of the novel, Shari Benstock writes that autobiography “reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins in the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction” (11). Still, in *This Is All*, this fiction stands in for Cordelia’s person in her own eyes; the eyes of her present readers, Will and Julie; and, presumably, the eyes of her prospective reader, her daughter, as well as her real readers.

In postmodernist thought, identity, again perceived as a construct rather than an essential self, is not so much a matter of language as a matter of performance. Cordelia notes the performative aspect of her behaviour when she writes about impersonating different styles of femininity. However, Cordelia’s writing itself may also be considered to constitute a performance, in which she performs herself, not only as a young woman, but as an intelligent, ambitious and perceptive writer. Authenticity in writing, then, may be as elusive as authenticity in behaviour.

The matter of authenticity also evokes the place of allusion and intertext within the novel. Although *This Is All* consciously alludes to *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, as a text the novel may also be intertextually related to Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, in which a woman sets

out to portray herself, like Cordelia, in words and uses differently coloured notebooks which divide the novel in parts, questioning language as a mediator of experience in the process and concluding with a revelation which makes the novel circle back on itself (Sutton 577), although Chambers was not aware of the similarities while writing his novel (Chambers, "RE:"[\[2\]](#)). A striking forerunner to Cordelia may also be found in the scandalous memoirs which nineteen-year-old Mary MacLane published in 1902, chronicling with a startling frankness every aspect of herself, "right down to her gastric juices" (Daniel 36).

In summary, many echoes of the literary theories which rebelled against New Criticism are discernable in the novel. In a poststructuralist vein, the novel reveals anxieties about language and stories and their ability to represent reality and the self, as well as a preoccupation with autobiography as the work of an author who can only be confirmed in his being in the text by others. In a poststructuralist psychoanalytic vein, it suggests that the Other is always implicated in a perception of one's identity as a meaningful whole and that the forceful separation of Cordelia and her mother through death may have been the cause of Cordelia's ardent desire to capture herself in language. In a postmodernist feminist vein, the novel is preoccupied with multiple subjectivities, as well as with identity as performance and the female body in the text. Finally, the shock ending of the novel reveals the extent to which Cordelia is a construct of language, both her own and others', to wit her editor and her creator, Aidan Chambers, which destabilises the reader's response of identification with her character.

In conclusion, the novel merely poses as a traditional, realist, albeit fictional, autobiographical document which puts its trust in language as a medium for the self. On closer inspection it undermines conventional conceptions of identity and autobiography by calling into question language as a mediator of experience and the self, as well as the unity of identity, which may, on the contrary, be both fragmented and subconsciously motivated. While *This Is All* appears to deal with a character representing herself authentically in language, then, it simultaneously echoes postmodernist and poststructuralist anxieties with regard to language and identity as

combined in self-writing, ultimately undermining the novel's supposed certainties.

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[1] A prehistoric hill figure made of trenches filled with white chalk, situated in Oxfordshire and managed by the UK's National Trust.

[2] In preparation for a previous paper on the intertextual relationship between *This Is All* and *The Golden Notebook*, I wrote Mr. Chambers an email to which he responded with answers to my questions concerning his inspiration for the novel.