



Thieving Facts and Reconstructing Katherine Mansfield's Life in Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Thieves*

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Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different than that from which it is torn [...] (T. S. Eliot, "Philip Massinger" 114)

ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH:

The aim of this article is to examine how the biographical material that Janice Kulyk Keefer "steals" from Mansfield's life is used to re-create a "quasi-real" life in a novel which absorbs reality, digests it, and offers an oxymoronic, semi-fictitious product: a biofiction. Keefer selected biographemes or kernels of truth on which her fictitious details and characters could be grafted: following Mansfield's physical, emotional and intellectual trail from New Zealand to Europe was an imperative part of Keefer's research plan, as essential as close reading of the modernist author's letters and journals. Besides seamlessly fusing reality and fiction, historical and imaginative truths, such hybrid products bring together the characteristics of literary and genre fiction. The article focuses on the generic aspect of *Thieves*, which "sells" a scholarly literary background by using a commercial format that borrows features from popular genres such as love stories, thrillers, mystery and detective novels. The result is a multi-layered story endowed with great narrative virtuosity and variety, with leaps in time and space and with parallel stories that finally intersect. The article ultimately concludes with more general considerations on how biofictions recreating the myth of iconic figures have proved to be a flourishing literary genre on the current book market.

ABSTRACT IN FRENCH:

Le but de cet article est d'examiner la manière dont les éléments biographiques « volés » à la vie de Katherine Mansfield par Janice Kulyk Keefer sont utilisés

pour recréer une vie « quasi-réelle » dans un roman qui absorbe la réalité, la digère, et nous offre un genre oxymorique semi-fictif : une biofiction. Keefer a sélectionné des biographèmes, des noyaux de vérité sur lesquels ses ajouts imaginaires et personnages fictifs viennent se greffer. Pour Keefer, suivre la trace physique, émotionnelle et intellectuelle de Mansfield de la Nouvelle Zélande jusqu'en Europe a été impératif pour son projet de recherche, aussi essentiel que la lecture minutieuse des lettres et journaux de l'auteure moderniste. Outre la fusion homogène de réalité et de fiction, de vérités historiques et imaginaires, ce genre d'œuvres hybrides réunit les caractéristiques des romans littéraires et populaires. L'article se penche ainsi sur l'aspect générique de *Thieves*, qui « vend » un contenu érudit à travers un format commercial qui emprunte des caractéristiques appartenant aux genres populaires, tels que les romans d'amour, les thrillers, les romans policiers ou à suspense. Il en résulte une histoire d'une grande virtuosité et d'une grande variété narrative avec des sauts dans l'espace et dans le temps et des intrigues superposées qui finissent par se rejoindre. L'article conclut par des considérations plus générales sur la manière dont les biofictions qui recréent le mythe de figures emblématiques se sont imposées comme un genre littéraire florissant sur le marché contemporain du livre.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield, biofiction, life writing, generic hybridism.

BIOFICTION: FUSING FACT AND FICTION, TRUTH AND UNTRUTH

A current popular postmodernist trend consists of not only inventing authors who strike the reader as being real (like Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte in A. S. Byatt's *Possession* [1990]), but also drawing on real authors' lives¹ and imagining a world in which they might have lived and pursued their art (for example, in one of the three parallel stories of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* [1998], during one specific day, Virginia Woolf is in the process of writing her fourth novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, and in *The Master* [2004] Colm Tóibín recreates four years of Henry James's life, focusing on his personal relationships and giving insights into his creative process). In *Thieves* (2004), Janice Kulyk Keefer tells the fictionalised story of Katherine Mansfield's life (starting with her childhood in New Zealand, pursuing her adventures across England and other parts of continental Europe, and ending with her premature tragic death in France at the age of thirty-four) and at the same time imagines a parallel storyline, set in the 1980s, which follows the attempts of Monty Mills and his father, Roger, a Katherine Mansfield biographer, to gather

material on Mansfield's life in order to write the definitive biography of the modernist writer. Roger receives a letter from a certain Cassandra Baby, who offers to show him unpublished letters relevant to Mansfield's life. After impulsively stealing this letter intended for his father, Monty eventually travels from New Zealand to Chicago and Windsor, Ontario, to meet Cassandra and lay hands on the thrilling Mansfield material.

The imaginary outcry of Virginia Woolf's common reader, "Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously" (Woolf 478), is for her an opportunity to assess the state of Victorian biography before pioneering a new genre to show that imagination surely can successfully serve the two masters simultaneously. Moreover, in his *Lector in Fabula*, Umberto Eco claims that every proposition must be either true or false within a possible world: it cannot be both true and false. Postmodernist writers and critics, whose ontological concerns are at the centre of their philosophies, have re-examined the possible world theory; for them, both true and false, the real and the possible, are compatible and do coexist in postmodern narrative, which deliberately plays with the entanglement of ontological levels.² They have shown a particular interest in the collusion of two worlds, curiously "suspended between existence and non-existence" (Doležel, "Truth" 23).³ What the readers are offered is "if not *the* real world, at least *a* real world" (McHale 197): the illusion of reality is constantly activated through a series of strategic mixtures of fact and fiction.

Michael Cunningham, Colm Tóibín and Janice Kulyk Keefer have drawn from the raw material of the modernist writers' lives and novelised it. They are forgers of a hybrid genre, or an "oxymoronic formula" (Monluçon and Salha 7) of literature, biofiction, which combines both true facts and imagined details. The neologism "biofiction" (coined in French by Alain Buisine and in English by Martin Middeke),⁴ indicates that reality and fiction, likeness and imagination, blend in this kind of literary work. The portmanteau word encompasses the transfers that are operated from biography to fiction and the cross-over genre which fuses two opposed poles when narrating the imaginary lives of people who really existed. This life-writing transgeneric literary product offers the reader a simulacrum of a real life: the writer-biographer's subjective representation of his/her subject's life. This phenomenon is part of the current postmodern cultural and literary practice that manipulates the real and plays with different layers of truths and pluralism of realities.⁵ If biography itself tends to be a "bipolar genre" (Monluçon and Salha 11), where the relationships between the biographer and the biographee are displayed, confusing the limits between biography and autobiography, then the contours of biofiction as a genre is even more difficult to trace,

as it encompasses different degrees of fictionalisation of the real, which is evidently contained into a fictitious narrative frame.⁶

Contemporary writers continuously extend the limits of biography, “breaking larger and larger ‘chunks’ of reality into their works” (Shields 1) and incorporating other forms and ingredients to produce new generic literary products. The “continued proliferation of the producing and the consuming of auto/biography” (Saunders, “Biography” 286) on our contemporary literary market has given birth to numerous subcategories of the genre of life writing (“biographoid forms” [Gefen 55]), among which biofiction, which has proved to be as fertile and popular a territory as biography and fiction, the two genres it seeks to fuse.

The most successful fictitious biographies are those which combine a savvy amalgamation of historic truth and poetic license, plausibility and imagination, “no more than a pinch of” “the truth of real life and the truth of fiction” (Woolf 477); this specific life-writing genre is situated at the confluence of authenticity (conferred by biography) and imagination (as authors explore other possible avenues and give their readers access to the inner lives of the characters). Biographical fiction relies on biographemes,⁷ which lend verisimilitude to the character’s life story, but also explores the “swarm of possibilities”⁸ usually rejected by conventional biographies.

Cunningham, Tóibín and Kulyk Keefer cleverly play with possible worlds: they have endeavoured to create imaginary biographies of real people and plunge them in a “fictitious reality” based on both fact and fiction: fiction borrows from the real, absorbing it and incorporating it to create a fully-fledged world within a narrative space. Thus, these narrative constructions offer the contemporary reader looking for realistic fiction believable and plausible worlds. The plausibility of such possible worlds depends on the author’s use of specific biographemes as well as the reader’s familiarity with the biographee (the subject whose life is imagined within a biofiction) in order to be able to recognise these biographemes. For example, *The Hours*, *The Master* and *Thieves* rely on the reader’s knowledge of Virginia Woolf’s, Henry James’s and Katherine Mansfield’s lives and works to produce the maximum effect. Because of their past and present fame, Woolf, James and Mansfield are not simple characters; the iconic and historical dimension the three writers have in reality confers realism on their fictitious counterparts in *The Hours*, *The Master* and *Thieves*. These real figures, who become characters, have the ability to support a possible fictitious world and create a plausible fictional “real” world; the real person, who inhabits the fictitious world, will inevitably impart reality to the fictitious world. Details of the biographee’s life will rub off on the fictitious world created by the

contemporary writers. Their fictitious worlds contain kernels of reality on which invented scenes, extrapolated from facts,⁹ come to graft and incrust themselves. The porous fictitious world welcomes and absorbs these details and allows the contemporary author to expand his/her imagination and embroider a realistic universe for his/her character. Cunningham, Tóibín and Keefer have managed to successfully create biofictions of iconic figures, drawing at once from their reality and at the same time inventing material to fill in the gaps in their lives. At the reception level, the most rewarded readers are those who can spot the kernels of truth, enjoy the plausibility of the fictitious world, and willingly suspend their belief and disbelief.¹⁰

In such postmodernist novels as *The Hours*, *The Master* and *Thieves*, fiction acquires a semi-permeable membrane to absorb reality, digest it, and fabricate a new semi-fictitious product with its own internal ontological structure. The newly-invented world sometimes overlaps reality (to a greater or lesser extent), and sometimes completely coincides with reality when raw facts and events are transposed into fiction unrefined, as they are found in biographies, or direct autobiographical material (letters and diaries) left by the late writers: "Far from being well-defined and sealed off, fictional borders appear to be variously accessible, sometimes easy to trespass, obeying different sorts of constraints in different contexts" (Pavel 88). Because of the fluidity of the fluctuating borders, the second, created world is highly compatible with the real world. The fictitious world is all the more plausible when the overlapping of the two is maximal or if there is perfect coincidence, if the real people who inhabit the postmodernist novel bring along with them as much biographical data as possible. As readers, we have the impression that the fictional representations of the writers in *The Hours*, *The Master* and *Thieves* are in some sense the "same" as the real flesh and blood people who once lived and created. Woolf, James and Mansfield acquire a "transworld identity" (229) in Eco's terms: if there is a one-to-one correspondence between the real prototype and its variant in another world, the fictitious replica, then the two entities can be considered identical even though they exist in distinct worlds.

These transposition phenomena allow authors to create fiction (therefore "untruth") and yet, simultaneously, to make it appear as "truth". Biographemes (concerning the writers' private lives as well as their creative endeavours) are weaved into imagined details. Cunningham, Tóibín and Keefer are constantly flirting with "the real" by welding together extant discourses: the authors' biographical facts and allusions to the production of their own fiction. The two levels are fused to form the "reality" of these novels.

Kernels of “truth” in *Thieves*

The catalyst of Keefer’s novel was a short film about Katherine Mansfield at a short story conference in Nice, France, in 1988,¹¹ the centenary of Katherine Mansfield’s birth. As a fiction reader, writer and literary scholar, Keefer was fascinated with Mansfield’s fiction: “As with any writer who fascinates you – with whom you fall in love – the more you read her fiction, the more you want to know where that fiction came from, the context.”¹² Therefore, the next step for Keefer was to explore this context and read the fifty-three personal notebooks that Mansfield filled throughout her life, as well as her journals, which unveil a captivating voice expressing both “the rawness of pain and a dazzling delight in being alive.”¹³

In an interview, the author of *Thieves* explains the attraction she had for Mansfield, the admiration for the writer’s bravery and for the way she lived her short life:

The fact that she was a born performer, wearer of masks, inventor of selves and keeper of secrets, and that she had written so openly and honestly in her journals of her conflicting emotions and desires, made her irresistible. As importantly, the fact that she had destroyed journals recording some of the most painful and puzzling events and periods in her life created a blank that, as a creative writer, I could mark-up to my heart’s content.¹⁴

The profusion of the writer’s masks and multiplicity of selves gave Keefer the license to invent yet another self, yet another persona in keeping with the personality described in her autobiographical material. In addition, the destroyed journals and letters allowed the author to give free rein to her imagination and inject new material to fill in the gaps left open by Mansfield herself.

In the “Acknowledgements” inserted at the end of her book, Keefer finally untangles the fact and fiction mix offered to the readers in her novel. She first enumerates the different echoes to Mansfield’s work. She confesses that her novel, especially in the “Beyond the Blue Mountains” sections, includes “abundant quotations from or paraphrases of passages” (“Acknowledgements”, *Thieves* 319) from Mansfield’s oeuvre for which she obtained copyright permission to reproduce extracts. She also reveals the importance of biographies she read which provided her with material for her novel, especially those of Antony Alper and Claire Tomalin, as well as Ida Baker’s memoirs. The critical influence of Mansfield academics (Gillian Boddy, Mary Brugan, Vincent O’Sullivan and Angela Smith) appear in the numerous insights of the fictitious characters who mouth their scholarly analyses. They provided the author with “richly informed and perceptive accounts and interpretations of Mansfield’s work and the

contexts in which it was written" ("Acknowledgements", *Thieves* 320). Keefer also points out what has been altered: "the quotation from the New Zealand Mail has been slightly altered from the original article published there on October 29, 1902" ("Acknowledgements", *Thieves* 322); or completely invented: "I should admit to authorship of Garnet Trowell's farewell letter to Kassie, at the novel's end"; "While Monty and Roger Mills and Cassandra Baby owe many of their insights into Mansfield's life and work to these critics, they do have me to thank for a number of their speculations and analyses" ("Acknowledgements", *Thieves* 320). The fictitious characters are thus mouthpieces of Mansfield scholars, published critics renowned in the academic milieu and the author herself (Keefer's expert scholarly discourse¹⁵ appears in many of her characters' opinions, analyses and speculations). These borrowed and invented discourses are tightly and intricately woven together in the fabric of Keefer's fiction. For Keefer, respecting reality was "a rule of thumb":

My own rule of thumb in writing *Thieves* has been to respect, scrupulously, the facts and known limits of the writer's life—there is nothing in the "Beyond the Blue Mountains" sections of *Thieves* that hasn't been documented in or that can't be verified by any of the biographies of Mansfield or the journals she left behind [...] On the other hand, I have happily experimented with the possibilities that the blanks in that life have created.¹⁶

Truth (based on researched autobiographical material) is thus respected, but re-telling it involves reprocessing and reconstructing it: Keefer thus creates a whole new cast of characters to accompany and prolong reality and ultimately takes advantage of the possibilities the blanks which remain in Katherine Mansfield's life offered her.

In order to write *Thieves*, Keefer also immersed herself in the physical reality of Katherine Mansfield's journeys from New Zealand, through Europe, to Britain,¹⁷ and this first-hand experience enabled her own characters, Monty and Roger, to do the same pilgrimage on the trail of the late author. Keefer travelled to New Zealand to meet Mansfield scholars in Wellington and Christchurch and pored over Mansfield's personal effects, photographs and private papers. She also went to Chicago, Cornwall, Glasgow, Paris, the South of France, Italy and Switzerland. She followed Mansfield's peripatetic life, and the process of discovering her, intellectually but also through geographical exploration, was a necessary step to better grasp the author's life so as to be able to give it a fictitious spin in her novel. Finding kernels of truth – private and public – from Mansfield's life and work was essential for the author, as these biographies support the plausibility of the fiction she invented and contribute to the novel's success with the reading public.

LITERARY AND POPULAR SUCCESS: FUSING GENRE AND LITERARY FICTION

The authors of the acclaimed novels *Possession*, *The Hours*, *The Master* and *Thieves* seem to have found the perfect recipe for successful readable novels: a specific structure as well as a skilful combination of genre and literary fiction.¹⁸ The structure of these novels follows the same pattern of combining past and present parallel stories: characters from different historical and ontological spheres co-exist and the narrative weaves unexpected links between stories and characters. In *Thieves*, for example, there are four stories told with a variety of narrative techniques. Mansfield's "official" story is told in turn by Roger Mills in the "Beyond the Blue Mountains" sections and by the other characters Monty, Roger, and Miss Baby in their respective sections. The narrative slides through past and present, moving from one personal sphere to the other. The "Beyond the Blue Mountains" sections present events in Mansfield's life from 1898 to 1923 and are told by a third-person narrator who recounts past action by using present tense. Secondly, Roger's story and obsession with Mansfield is told in a one-way conversation with Katherine Mansfield herself. First-person narrator Roger addresses the dead author directly. In these chapters set in 1986, past tense is used for present action. Thirdly, Monty's story is addressed to Edna, a waitress who made him promise to tell her his life story: it is told by a third-person narrator using past tense for present action. Lastly, Miss Baby's ten-point "Vindication" is told with the character's idiosyncratic voice and colloquial oral style. The speculations and interrogations are voiced using present tense interspersed with passages told in the past tense. This kind of multi-layered novel, which offers the reader great narrative virtuosity and variety, with leaps in time and space and with parallel stories which finally intersect, has also proved successful for *The Hours* and *Possession*, which exploit the gold mine of iconic figures, real or imagined.

These novels "sell" a scholarly literary background by using a commercial format, which borrows features from popular genres such as love stories, thrillers, mystery and detective novels. Such generic hybridism has the advantage of attracting a wide variety of readers. The intellectual or scholarly material (literary criticism, biography, the account of the genesis of an author's particular literary work told within the body of the story of the author's adventures and exciting events) is coated in a layer of popular fiction. What seems to appeal to contemporary readers is literariness watered down by genre fiction in order to be "consumed"¹⁹ by the reading public who enjoys popular entertainment. This type of novel, commercially

attractive for readers fascinated by accounts of famous writers' lives, seems to have become a customised literary product on the book market.

In *Thieves*, the stolen letters and the discovery of Cassandra Baby's new Mansfield collection provide secrecy, thrill and interest. Monty and Roger separately hunt Mansfield's legacy: they are truth-hunters, plunderers and voyeurs looking for clues and making hypotheses. Beyond the exciting story and compulsive page turning, Keefer explores her characters' (readers, collectors and researchers) extreme relationships with Mansfield, their obsessions and enthrallment. Mansfield's life looms over their lives, obliterates all other interests and passions, crushes their existence and encroaches upon all their activities. Mystery is also created by the exciting revelations to be found in the unexplored blanks left in Mansfield's life. It has become a fashionable literary tendency to transform real cult figures with an iconic status into characters with a secret, mysterious life unknown until now by biographers. Present-day invented characters (passionate, or even obsessed readers) investigate these secrets and delve into the personality of the past authors. They are hunting for long-lost biographical material that sheds a different light on the writer's life and career. They are obsessed with finding a different truth, the ultimate truth.²⁰

Cassandra Baby is one such character. In her "Vindication", Baby resurrects and rehabilitates a "footnote" in Katherine Mansfield's life: Garnet Trowell, a violinist and father to her miscarried child, with whom she had an affair in her early twenties. Baby claims access to an ultimate truth and set of facts:

When without those common, ordinary people, Mr. Mills, there wouldn't have been anyone to love or care for the famous ones, or remember them as they really were. (*Thieves* 104)

Critics, biographers, they'll all have you believe that what follows is tragedy: a naïve, eager, innocent girl falling madly in love, betrayed by the heartless seducer who knocks her up and then abandons her. What I'm going to show you is that the shoe is on the other foot. It's a naïve, eager, innocent boy who falls madly in love, and is heartlessly abandoned by an actress playing many roles, taking on different selves, and keeping her friends and lovers in separate compartments. (*Thieves* 117)

The fact that Garnet held onto those reckless, passionate letters proves just how tender and faithful a lover he was, and how badly treated he's been. Not just by Miss Beauchamp, but by all those biographers of Katherine Mansfield, too. (*Thieves* 125)

Baby suggests that the biographers' work on Mansfield has been tainted with subjectivity, but, because of her relationship years later with her music teacher, Garnet, so will be her own "Vindication" and version of what happened between Katherine and Garnet. In her story, in which she claims to unveil certitudes about what "really" happened in a precise period in Mansfield's life, Baby uses sentences such as: "it is my belief that" (114); "let's try and find out what really happened next, and who's to blame" (126); "in my humble opinion" (136); "let us imagine" (137); "I'll conclude my case" (143); "I put it to you that..." (143), which shows her whole process of investigation and demonstration. Monty will have to polish her story in a scholarly fashion, by providing more solid academic backing, references and footnotes:

[...] there are technicalities to be taken care of: proper footnotes, checking of quotations, listing of sources. (*Thieves* 167)

In spite of himself he felt a strong degree of satisfaction in shaping the mess of manuscript into something clear and cogent, while keeping, as much as possible, the pithy vernacular of the Baby style. (*Thieves* 168)

The biographers-thieves and biographers-detectives are fascinated with the tiniest details of the author's life, which are precious for the definitive biography that they intend to write. They become engrossed with "possessing" the author. The double aspect of possession present in *Thieves* is also at the heart of A. S. Byatt's *Possession*: on the one hand, the biographer desires to possess his subject through an exhaustive knowledge of facts, events and details from his/her life; on the other hand, the obsession with the subject will little by little consume or "possess" the biographer himself/herself. In both *Possession* and *Thieves*, writers, critics, biographers or academics yearn to find new, unexplored material and be the first ones to exploit it and to write about their author in a new light. They steal, lie and employ unscrupulous methods²¹ in order to reach what they consider a noble aim. Cassandra Baby speaks her mind about the whole phenomenon of biography writing:

As for that biography you're working on, you ought to know that biography's worse than useless. Stealing people's privacy from them, and giving what in return? Pinning people down to being this, doing that, feeling and thinking maybe a hundred things when they've thought and felt hundreds of thousands. Making you believe you can know somebody else just by turning a page – when the person you're reading about probably didn't even know himself. (*Thieves* 104)

The character poses as a critic of the genre when arguing that biographers never grasp the whole truth. They can only attempt to give the public a minute part of their subject's life, but never manage to render the complexity of his/her life: the subject always escapes his/her biographer.²²

Fictitious biography or biography written by characters in novels is a genre which gives licence to authors to create a complex life, explore the subject's mind, thought process, blend facts, real details and actual words into fiction, without inserting footnotes which would establish the frontiers between fact and fiction. When discussing Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, Hermione Lee pointed out the difference between a biographer and a novelist:

Biographers don't, on the whole (unless they're Peter Ackroyd) invent their subject's conversations, or take their clothes off and put them into bed, or fantasise their secret memories and unacted desires. Biographers (if they have any decency) don't freely paraphrase their subject's writings, or quote from their letters without footnotes. But novelists are allowed to make free.²³

On the one hand, a biographer must scrupulously research his material and document it with sources, references and footnotes. On the other hand, novelists who invent fictional universes give free rein to their imaginations. Practitioners of biofiction enjoy an in-between creative stance, as they use an amalgamation of poetic licence and documentary evidence: in biofictions such as *Thieves*, *The Master*, *The Hours*, because of the nature of the genre, they can ignore "decency" and "honesty" and can freely "steal" material with complete impunity.

Thieves, as the title indicates, is a novel about thieves of all sorts: stealing from reality, transforming and re-presenting the stolen ideas is usually the job of a novelist.²⁴ The *mise en abyme* situation is ironic enough since the contemporary author (Keefer) "steals" from a previous author (Mansfield) to create a realistic world in a novel. She is plundering another life, incidents, people and dialogues to re-imagine it in her own novel, which thus acquires verisimilitude. What is more, Keefer steals from a thief: Katherine Mansfield herself is, in Cassandra Baby's view (she borrows the opinions of other real-life biographers²⁵ and condenses them in her particular colloquial verbal style), a liar and a thief:

[...] it doesn't hurt to remember just what a constant, brazen liar Katherine Mansfield was, from start to finish. Or, if you prefer the diagnosis given by one of her schoolteachers, how Kassie Beauchamp was "imaginative to the point of untruth".

She was also a thief. That first book of hers, the one she refused to have republished during World War I on account of the cheap and easy shots it took at the Germans? She'd play no part in any hate-mongering, she said. But is it that simple, that noble? Let's go back to those busy biographers. Lots of them have pointed out that one of the stories in the first book is a copy of a Chekhov tale. They speculate it was because of this "borrowing" that Mansfield was blackmailed years later by a shifty Polish journalist. She instructed her husband to pony up, and they never heard from Floryan the Extortionist again. But she wasn't finished with stealing plots – towards the end of her life she took another Chekhov story and changed it into "Marriage à la Mode." She was at the death's door, she had big doctors' bills, and the glossy magazines paid good money for such stories. Even so, the word "plagiarism" comes to mind, in spite of the opinion of one of her contemporaries that great writers don't borrow; they steal. (*Thieves* 141–142)

Thieves is thus a biofiction which contains metabiographical comments. Its characters are both obsessed with the ultimate biography, in which each new detail is capital, and offer harsh comments of such practices. In Monty's opinion, the biographer is also a thief, his/her mission being to rummage through a subject's life in order to reveal to the reader what is true and false: "Didn't people have the right to know what was true and what false in Mansfield's life – wasn't that the work of a biographer?" (307–308). The failed academic looking for scholarly glory steals the letter intended for his father. This letter offers the promise of new Mansfield material, "things no one's ever laid eyes on before" (54), which will "tell a different story about Miss Pure and Innocent than the one [the public has] been spoon-fed all these years". Cassandra Baby herself had stolen Mansfield's letters to Garnet Trowel from the Rare Book Collection of the University of Windsor Library and kept the unopened final letter from Garnet to Katherine. Monty is unscrupulously ready to pounce on this material and be the first one to make use of it. Like the two academics in *Possession*, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, he will then embark on an odyssey to follow and explore Katherine Mansfield's love affair with Garnet Trowell. When finally in possession of this highly coveted letter, he ruthlessly considers the potential of such material:

A private collector would pay a small fortune for this letter; scholars would fight for the chance to light up one of the murkier hallways of Mansfield's life. If he were to publish the contents of this envelope, it would be a coup that could launch him, make his name. Did it matter what the letter would reveal about Garnet or Kassie? (*Thieves* 307)

He even at one point contemplates plagiarism, that is to say stealing Cassandra Baby's ideas and publishing her "Vindication" as his own work:

And if Garnet came off as the hero of the piece, Monty could do exactly what Miss Baby had wanted – publish her *Vindication*. Hadn't he worked on it hard enough to make it, at least in part, his own? He could work out some explanation for how he'd come by the letter; he could hop on a plane to New Zealand tomorrow with everything he'd hoped for from this journey safe in his pocket. (*Thieves* 308)

Monty will finally decide not to publish this letter and he will not plunder and appropriate Cassandra Baby's version of "Vindication". The letter will be given to Roger, whose whole life has been dedicated to loving and studying Katherine Mansfield and who will honour such a priceless private document:

You see, I didn't, as you may have feared, publish Garnet's letter along with my own version of Cassie's *Vindication*. And though the letter is no longer in my possession, I didn't destroy it unread, either, but gave it to the one person I could trust to honour it. (*Thieves* 310)

The multitude of thieves in the novel leads to a series of research and investigation, from the characters themselves but also from the reader, thus triggering the detective and mystery elements of the book. *Thieves* has been marketed as an investigative novel: on the Flamingo edition back cover we can read that the story, inspired by the real theft of "Katherine Mansfield's most poignant letters", deals with two "unlikely" Katherine Mansfield fans obsessed by her. In their pursuit of the truth, they will be confronted with "darker impulses of ambition and self-seeking".

Like A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, *Thieves* stages three biographers whose ambitions and obsessions with the "truth" about their subject push them to constantly cheat and plunder the author's life in order to reveal sensational stories. Fictitious "biographers-thieves" like Cassandra Baby, Roger and Monty Mills may find a counterpart in the author who, rather than stealing information, imagines and reconstructs facts and events to fill the gaps missing from Mansfield's previous biographies. Mansfield's own destruction of parts of her personal evidence (journals which contained intriguing accounts of her life) triggered Keefer's imagination as she set out to recreate these episodes deliberately left blank by Mansfield herself.

However, unlike the biographers chastened by Cassandra Baby because they are thieves who give nothing in return, Keefer takes facts from Mansfield's life and gives back a compulsive biofiction to her contemporary readers. In this light, we could suppose that re-inventing Katherine Mansfield's life is a means to preserve her memory in the twenty-first century and make contemporary readers read and discover the past and

her literary heritage through fiction, even if this implies embellishing the facts, making them more exciting and appealing. Keefer's feat was to dress reality in attractive narrative and generic attire and dream up enthralling stories in order to make the public want to know who Katherine Mansfield was and what she wrote.

Thieves, as a generic hybrid – a detective biofiction interspersed with literary scholarship and metabiographic comments –, poses questions concerning its target audience: is the book destined for and “consumed” by middle-aged women²⁶ or was it written with a more ambitious aim? Is it a refined version of popular fiction, which enables the writer “to showcase her research and penchant for literary criticism”?²⁷ Is Kulyk Keefer over conscious of postmodernist literary technique, parading her knowledge as a writer and as a critic?

Different readers may enjoy the book in various ways, depending on the knowledge they already have of Mansfield. For those readers familiar with the modernist author's oeuvre, they will certainly appreciate the intricate mixture of fact and fiction and recognise the facts and events transposed by Keefer in her novel; they will also identify the quotes and paraphrases from Mansfield's autobiography and short stories so skilfully and seamlessly woven into a fabric of fictitious episodes. Other readers may read it simply as a novel with no particular scholarly echo: they will only enjoy the mystery and investigation that will arouse their curiosity and make them turn the pages of the novel. It may incite others to read Mansfield's own fiction or read biographies to discover her as an author and a person depicted in a different light.

Lastly, the current postmodernist trend of drawing on real-life writers prolongs a tradition of life-writing initiated by modernist authors.²⁸ Postmodernist writers revive the modernists' engagement and experiment with the “forms and boundaries of biography and autobiography” (Saunders, *Self Impression* 294), by offering more “celebratory and playful” (293) versions of the genre. While critics such Saunders discuss the infinite potential of a genre rooted in a solid tradition, others raise questions concerning the contemporary authors' creativity and craftsmanship. They wonder if novels such as *Thieves*, *The Hours* and *The Master* are homages to respectively Mansfield, Woolf and James or if they are evidence of present-day authors' drying inspiration.²⁹ Despite their interrogations, there is no doubt that this writing practice implies a uniquely narrative virtuosity and mastery of a skilful, complex fictionalising process. In their acclaimed novels,³⁰ the practitioners of biographical novels re-examine past lives to produce a doubly hybrid literary product: an amalgam of biography and fiction, as well as genre and literary fiction. These authors have the absolute merit of crafting a powerful, resourceful and fascinating

genre: they dig into authentic historical and personal documents in order to get a faithful assessment of what happened and offer the public an account which satisfies both its “hunger”³¹ or “appetite” for the real and the pleasure of reading a literary text.

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NOTES

- 1 The postmodern propensity of retelling and making new stories from old ones has been pointed out by numerous critics who have discussed the way reality is taken over by "a culture of recycled images" (Brooker 3) and commodities.
- 2 The possible worlds theory, developed by literary theorists such as Umberto Eco, Thomas Pavel, Lubomir Doležel, implies that reality is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds. Every world that respects the principles of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle (where a statement can be either true or false) is a possible world. See also Brian McHale, "Possible Worlds," *Postmodernist Fiction*, in which he exposes Eco's theory of possible worlds: "Worlds which violate the law of the excluded middle, about which, in other words, certain propositions are both true and false, Eco refuses to regard as fully-fledged, self-sustained worlds" (McHale 33).
- 3 See also Lubomir Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage*.

- 4 Max Saunders uses the term “biografiction”. On definitions and different types of biografictions (pseudo-biography, mock-biography and meta-biographic fiction), see Saunders, *Self Impression* 7 and 216–218.
- 5 For a discussion on biofiction as a prolific literary phenomenon that has flourished in the last twenty years, see Anne-Marie Monluçon and Agathe Salha, “Introduction. Fictions Biographiques, xix^e–xxi^e siècles: un jeu sérieux?” *Fictions biographiques, xix^e–xxi^e siècles* 7–32; see also Max Saunders, *Self Impression*.
- 6 On the origins of the phenomenon and the renaissance of different biographoid forms, see Dominique Viart, “Naissance moderne et renaissance contemporaine des fictions biographiques,” *Fictions biographiques, xix^e–xxi^e siècles* 35–54.
- 7 See Roland Barthes’ notion of biographeme in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* as kernels of truth or biographical shortcuts that condense a whole life.
- 8 Henry James, “James Russell Lowell,” *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1882, quoted in Edel 29.
- 9 Such extrapolations are plausible when authors decide to magnify footnotes of a previous writer’s life and make them believable by filling in gaps of his/her life. For instance, a minor character who played a certain role in Mansfield’s life (Garnet Trowell) becomes the focus of *Thieves*. Keefer and her character Cassandra Baby merely explore what the biographers considered insignificant, making these details crucial and embroidering them.
- 10 “The essential trope of fiction is hypothesis, provisional suppositions, a technique that requires suspension of belief as well as of disbelief” (Sukenic 99).
- 11 “I owe a lasting debt to the late Jacqueline Bardolph; it is to a short story conference organized by Dr. Bardolph during Mansfield’s centenary that I owe the genesis of *Thieves*” (“Acknowledgements”, *Thieves* 320).
- 12 <<http://www.uoguelph.ca/atguelph/04-02-25/people.html>> (accessed September 2013).
- 13 <<http://www.writerscafe.ca/playaudio/janice-kulyk>> (accessed September 2013). <[keefer_thieves.php?pauser=on&plugsfound=real&vbr=&bookID=121&counter=0](http://www.writerscafe.ca/playaudio/janice-kulyk/keefer_thieves.php?pauser=on&plugsfound=real&vbr=&bookID=121&counter=0)> (accessed September 2013).
- 14 <<http://www.harpercollins.ca/author/authorExtra.aspx?isbn13=9780006392811&displayType=readingGuide>> (accessed September 2013).
- 15 Kulyk Keefer teaches English literature and creative writing at the University of Guelph, Ontario.
- 16 <<http://www.writerscafe.ca/playaudio/janice-kulyk>> (accessed September 2013); <http://www.writerscafe.ca/playaudio/janice-kulyk/keefer_thieves.php?pauser=on&plugsfound=real&vbr=&bookID=121&counter=0> (accessed September 2013).
- 17 “[...] I was able to undertake ‘field-research’ – one of the most rewarding elements of a writer’s life – travelling to New Zealand, across Europe, through the British Isles, and to one of the great American cities – Chicago – to flesh out my sense of the journey Katherine Mansfield, and the characters I had invented to accompany her, had taken.” <http://www.writerscafe.ca/playaudio/janice-kulyk_keefer_thieves.php?pauser=on&plugsfound=real&vbr=&bookID=121&counter=0> (accessed September 2013).
- 18 See Richard Todd, “A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*: An International Literary Success.”
- 19 On this subject, see Todd’s *Consuming Fictions*.
- 20 Since Henry James’s *The Aspern Papers* (1888), the figure of the obsessed and inquisitive biographer and his mysterious, intense search for information about an author has been used by many authors, among whom A. S. Byatt in *Possession* (1990) and more recently Alan Hollinghurst in *The Stranger’s Child* (2011).
- 21 Cassandra Baby says, “I happen to own documents that your biographers would kill for” (*Thieves* 105).
- 22 After the publication of *The Biographer’s Tale*, A. S. Byatt discussed the relationship between biography and fiction: “I see biography as rather the opposite of writing a novel.

You might think that you know a lot more about somebody in a biography than you will ever know about somebody in fiction. But, of course, the opposite is true. And I think that what fascinates me about biography is the way human beings always escape their biographers” (quoted in Burgass 46).

- 23 <http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/the_master/> (accessed September 2013).
- 24 Another author-thief in the book is Katherine Mansfield’s contemporary who expressed jealousy of Mansfield’s literary talents in her diary, namely Virginia Woolf. Monty’s academic research hinges on proving that Woolf stole from Mansfield the “technique for singling out and intensifying the small, seemingly shallow things in life – a woman combing her hair, a child playing with a bowl of porridge” (*Thieves* 40).
- 25 See Claire Tomalin’s biography on Katherine Mansfield and her article, “Katherine Mansfield: A Life” in *Lectures d’une oeuvre: Selected Stories de Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Stephanie Amar-Flood and Sara Thornton. Paris: Editions du Temps, 1997. 9–19.
- 26 Some critics consider *Thieves* “a perfect example of annoying Canadian fiction written by and for white middle-aged women” <<http://www.mcgilldaily.com/view.php?aid=2617>> (accessed September 2013).
- 27 <<http://www.mcgilldaily.com/view.php?aid=2617>> (accessed September 2013).
- 28 On this subject, see Saunders’s *Self Impression* in which the critic posits that “postmodernism has contributed to auto/biography’s return” (293): “Postmodern theories of subjectivity as constituted through narrative, combined with its scepticism about both subjectivities and about grand narratives, have renewed the sense of the indistinguishability of autobiography and fiction; and thus also the energies of autobiographical fiction” (293). In the last chapter of his book, “After-Lives: Postmodern Experiments in Meta-Auto/biographical fiction: Sartre, Navokov, Lessing, Byatt”, he further argues that the interaction between auto/biography and fiction have become “the dominant mode of postmodernism” (484).
- 29 Among the critics who question the practice of writing such books, castigating the lack of creativity of authors who engage their efforts in this genre which relies on other works and which appropriates historical figures, see Jonathan Dee. After analysing ten recent novels by Michael Cunningham, J. M. Coetzee, Norman Mailer, Don DeLillo, etc., that employ flesh-and-blood people who become characters, he concluded on the “veritable epidemic” which has spread “in the last twenty-five years or so” (Dee 77).
- 30 See, for instance, Hilary Mantel, who won the Booker Prize in 2009 and 2012 for her novel *Wolf Hall* (the fictionalised account of Thomas Cromwell’s rise to power at the court of Henry VIII) and its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*.
- 31 See David Shield’s *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, in which he argues that our culture is obsessed with “reality”. Many contemporary artistic practices offer “a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real” (5).