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Karen Weekes

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Identity in the Short Story Cycles of Lorrie Moore

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When I was a child, I tried hard for a time to split my voice. I wanted to make chords, to splinter my throat into harmonies—floreted as a field, which is how I saw it... With concentration and a muscular push of air, I felt, I might be able to people myself, unleash the crowd in my voice box, give birth, set free all the moods and nuances, all the lovely and mystical inhabitants of my mind’s speech. Lorrie Moore, Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?

As became increasingly evident in the 1960s and beyond, female identity is fraught with conflicting role choices and continuing pressure to fulfill social expectations despite increased career demands. The resultant fracturing of identity and existential angst is reflected in short story cycles written by quite a few women in the last forty years. Although this genre dates back to the Decameron and The Canterbury Tales, its use is especially appropriate for contemporary women authors as they sort through the roles available to their female protagonists and try to piece together a unified sense of self for them. Lorrie Moore is one of a group of writers, including Alice Munro, Jamaica Kincaid, Harriet Doerr, Denise Chávez, Ellen Gilchrist, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Sandra Cisneros, who have used the form in this way. Although the point of view varies, fictional narratives by these authors consistently feature one contemporary female’s perspective. Each story illuminates a specific aspect of the protagonist or a particular role that is available to her; she integrates these elements as she works to create an empowering, authentic existence. Just as the short story cycle is greater than the sum of its parts, these protagonists’ lives are richer than is reflected in any of the tales taken individually.

The short story cycle lets an author emphasize different aspects of a character’s personality or present various formative experiences that gain resonance by their
juxtaposition with each other, eventually resulting in a three-dimensional portrait. Rita Felski points out the relevance of fluid texts such as these to “the fragmented and incoherent workings of the unconscious”. In her book The Gender of Modernity (1995), she describes the characteristics of Modernism in terms that are equally applicable to many contemporary short story cycles, citing its “disruption of hierarchical syntax and of linear time and plot, its decentering of the knowing and rational subject, [and] its fascination with the aural and rhythmic qualities of language” (26). All of these traits appear in late twentieth-century texts by the previously listed authors and are exemplified in those by Lorrie Moore. Felski identifies these elements as part of a “feminine aesthetic” (26), and Moore’s use of them develops a complex, multi-faceted female identity.

As Sandra Bartky writes in Femininity and Domination (1990), “Each of us is in pursuit of an inner integration and unity, a sense that the various aspects of the self form a harmonious whole” (51). For women, this integration is especially and increasingly difficult to achieve. Many changes in the last half of the 1900s have directly affected contemporary females’ lives: a huge increase in the number and type of vocations available, a freedom from biological reproductive mandates and their dependencies, longer and healthier life-spans, and, most importantly, a new respect for their potential and contributions. All of these improvements bring with them their own responsibilities and demands, and women now must create identities that integrate a number of possibilities and roles that were unthinkable a century ago. And throughout the arduous and painful process of shaping an identity based on a personal conception of what each woman believes her life should be, she must resist persistent messages that still encourage her to live for and through others rather than developing her own autonomous self.

Although Felski champions a feminine aesthetic at work in the Modernist period, the flexibility and emphasis on experimentation that are two of the hallmarks of Postmodern art have produced an environment that encourages participation by females and representations of their own experiences. Fittingly, this has occurred within a fractured social context that is epitomized by the short story cycle. The structure of these cycles replicates the complex structure of women’s identities: it reflects attempts to connect fragments in a meaningful way, to create a fulfilling and unified self.

Lorrie Moore has written six books, five of which are intended for adults: three collections of short stories and two novels. However, two of these “collections” and one of the works usually considered novels are actually short story cycles: her first book, Self-Help, published in 1985; Anagrams, published in 1986; and Birds of America, her acclaimed text of 1998. The individual pieces in these works are united in a variety of ways, but one of their most salient commonalities is the quest for identity. Her protagonists, often women in their thirties or early forties, are haunted by a sense of being an outsider; they are exiles both in terms of place and in terms of emotional and artistic sensibility. These characters attempt to overcome this isolation by making connections with lovers or family and by reassessing the life-choices that they have made.

In order to form a more satisfying identity, protagonists in Moore’s short story cycles are constantly exploring and pushing against the social boundaries that they and others have established. Her characters are often at odds with the roles in which they find themselves and with the expectations of families and spouse; they are uncomfortable even with their names, the most obvious marker of their identities. In Birds of America, one protagonist,
Olena, resists the efforts of her Romanian parents to Americanize her name to “Nell,” but it is only after her parents have died that she realizes that her legal name is an anagram of the word “alone,” emblematizing the role of outcast that her ethnic heritage creates for her. Olena’s tale, “Community Life,” is illustrative of most of Moore’s work: it is the narrative of a woman ill-at-ease in her world, searching for a place in a “community” from which she feels physically, emotionally, or creatively exiled.

Self-Help both leads the reader into this quagmire of the dislocated self and ostensibly, through its very structure, guides her back out again. Many of its stories are written in the form of a pop-psychology self-help manual, using the imperative voice. This narrative structure exemplifies Judith Gardiner’s emphasis on the “processual nature of female identity,” as it offers instructions on the continuing development and reformulation of the self. Its second-person narration also blurs the line between reader and protagonists and manipulates the “identifications between narrator, author, and reader and the representation of memory,” as many female-authored texts do (181). Moore advises on “How to be an Other Woman,” “How to Talk to Your Mother,” “How to Become a Writer,” and even simply “How,” a title that leaves the focus of its advice open. The similarity of protagonists’ situations in Self-Help is one of the chief linking features of this cycle, as Michiko Kakutani notes:

While the heroines or narrators of each of the stories in Self-Help have different names, they might well be the same woman—a smart, fairly hip young woman, so bland in looks that she is always being mistaken by others for their sister... At once insecure and terminally self-absorbed, she is someone who must filter everything through the lens of her own ego... (Review 21)

The stories are, for the most part, linked by narrative structure and this similar main character, but they are even more clearly united by thematic parallels. These tales explore women’s various avenues for fulfillment, including work, motherhood, daughterhood, sex, intimacy, and language.

In the first story, “How to Be an Other Woman,” the protagonist is “technically... still a secretary for Karma-Kola,” but she wonders repeatedly who she is as she becomes enmeshed in an affair with a married man: “Who is this? Who am I? ... Reclaim yourself. Pieces have fluttered away” (13), and ultimately in this deceptive role one has to “Wonder if you are getting old, desperate. Believe that you have really turned into another woman” (17). But despite the despair at her betraying lover’s ultimate betrayal of herself as well, this character uses wordplay as a means of survival, the pun in “another” (meaning a different woman) and “an other” woman (meaning an adulterer) being the most obvious. Being the “other” woman, an adulterer, has consumed her identity to the extent that she is becoming another person altogether.

“Go Like This,” one of the few first-person narrated tales in the cycle, is built around the various meanings of the title phrase: it appears eleven times in the fourteen-page story, each time with a slightly different meaning. Although the narrator seems unaware of this repetition as a manifestation of her subconscious fears about dying, she consciously uses puns to keep her feelings at bay (if she dies at 43, she can die in her “prime”), and only rarely do her emotions and her devastated sense of self become explicit: “I am something putrid...I am something incorrect... Something uncouth” (75). Solace is not to be found in her husband, who is already eyeing her friend as a potential lover; her friends, who are eyeing her husband; her daughter, who needs to be sheltered from her mother’s...
deterioration and death; or her work, which she can no longer complete. The only power
she, and most of Moore’s characters, wield is over imagination and words.

Much writing by Moore emphasizes the importance of language to help characters escape
or “resist those forces which we feel every day” (Malin 196). Especially in this first
collection, however, words are an ineffective screen against the disappointments of their
lives, as Jay McInerney points out: “The women in these stories... are witty and
intelligent, addicted to wordplay and other forms of verbal self-defense, but they know
their wit and intelligence can’t save them from love, loss of love, death” (32). Ironically,
the wordplay that serves as a defense against emotional vulnerability additionally serves
as a distancing device to ensure that the character remains not only emotionally
unscathed, but also as emotionally untouched as possible.

Birds of America breaks new ground for Moore by showing the struggles of men as well as
of middle-aged women. However, ten of the twelve stories feature females who are, once
again, seeking connection, peace, and a sense of self, and they have often “migrated” to
other environments in their quest. Many of these women are artists, and almost all find
themselves in the Midwest at some significant point in their lives. In the initial seven
stories the cycle becomes most unified, as tale after tale features a similar protagonist: a
middle-aged female, transplanted to the Midwest, involved in a disappointing
relationship, with a life devoted to the arts and a fearful emptiness at her core. “She was
unequal to anyone’s wistfulness. She had made too little of her life. Its loneliness shamed
her like a crime” (17), realizes the main character in the initial story.

These women, past their physical prime for dancing or acting, or embarrassed by their
childlessness and solitary natures, never choose to become involved with a partner, but
somehow they drift into relationships with absolutely incompatible men. Penny Perrick
notes that

Moore has always written about people who are dangerously adrift in spite of, or
perhaps because of, being romantically attached and/or married. Her men and
women cannot stop fighting each other—mainly by means of stinging repartee—even
though there is a good chance that these sex wars will lead to ever increasing
loneliness, a state to be feared even more than an unsuitable coupling. You would
have to be looking for a long time before you found a Moore protagonist who
consciously sought out a suitable coupling. (22)

Surrendering to a startlingly deep need for connection, these women find themselves
becoming increasingly invisible, agoraphobic, and dislocated as a result of their mates’
infidelities and lack of comprehension. They seek solace in language, as Moore’s
characters usually do. They are witty, and, as usual, puns abound (“Marriage... it’s an
institution, all right.” [286]); however, language cannot save them.

Although Moore did not compose Birds of America as a short story cycle, she herself
recognizes the commonalities of this collection:

... these are stories about individuals in transition, in flux, ordinary people
confronting extraordinary circumstances in some way... these were not specifically
designed to have things in common, they were each individually generated and
imagined, although when you bring together a collection of stories that have been
written over an eight-year period, inevitably they end up with certain linking
features. (Merritt 13)

Despite the disparity in some of the stories’ settings, one reviewer notes the similar
dysfunctionalities of characters in the collection: “... they are all afflicted with ennui,
angst, and aimlessness. They can’t communicate or connect; they have no inner
resources; they can’t focus; they can’t feel love” (Rev. 207). This cycle is unified by the repetition of this character type and of several central motifs, including the importance of speech and language, an emphasis on art and artistry, questions of identity, various types of acting, and, most obviously, birds.

As Moore reminds us, Audubon shot the birds that later are so authentically represented in his Birds of America, making this title appropriate for these stories of death, loss, and displacement. Many of these protagonists are in transit:

The spiritual and physical transience of her characters helps account for the book’s Audubonish title: most of them exhibit some form of avian behavior, however discrete and illusory—looping, migrating, soaring, disappearing on the horizon. [Says Moore,] “I realized, when I was writing the last couple of stories, that this bird imagery was just running through the book. ... To some extent, unrest and searching always make for a good story.” (Blades 31)

Moore is also interested in “Audubon’s killing of the birds he painted” as “a symbol of the creative process” (Gaffney 71), which would explain the presence in this book of artists whose loss is greater than their gains, whose successes do not fully offset the creators’ emptiness and angst.

Another of the unifying features of this book, according to Moore, is the “registration of a peculiarly American sense of exile—geographic and emotional,” creating a kind of “de facto American portrait” (Merritt 13) of contemporary females, especially, who are exiled in the Midwest, the heartland of the country, and find there little solace or understanding besides that which they can muster from their own linguistic and emotional store. “Perhaps,” one of her characters thinks, “that was where affection began: in an unlikely phrase, in a moment of someone’s having unexpectedly but at last said the right thing” (88). Moore’s usual protagonists, quintessential mid-life women, rely on language to make them whole, but the “right thing” to say is difficult for them to find and even more difficult for them to communicate.

Self-Help, Birds of America, and Anagrams all feature a contemporary woman’s perspective and present a multiplicity of roles facing women, but Anagrams especially manipulates the real and imaginary roles that the protagonist and other characters assume in a search for a cohesive sense of self and deals most directly with the creation of identity. Dawn Ann Drzal comments on the “choices” that Moore’s previous protagonists have in Self-Help:

These stories seem to present their heroines with a variety of options, but they zero in to invalidate all but the chosen one. The large wheel of life is turning and within it the small cog of the heroine’s psyche. No matter how many ways she turns a phrase, no matter how many points of view she assumes, she can make only one choice, but that doesn’t mean she’ll feel it was the right one, or even the only one. No, she is doomed to be both determined and doubt-ridden. (506)

Moore’s narrative form in Anagrams confronts this problem of limited choice directly, letting the main character, Benna Carpenter, live out the consequences of various decisions about her life path. Its unique structure reflects Benna’s fractured self, which we follow through a series of metamorphoses.

The book is divided into five sections: four short stories (ranging in length from 4 to 30 pages) and a novella (164 pages). Each section features three continuing characters: Benna Carpenter, Gerard Maines, and Eleanor. But the essence of their continuity transcends the flux of their varying situations and relationships to each other: In the first story, “Escape from the Invasion of the Love-Killers,” Benna is a widowed nightclub singer, Gerard is her neighbor, smitten with unrequited love for her, and Eleanor is a
friend of Benna’s who has a child. In the fourth story, “Water,” Benna is a single art history professor, a respected scholar on Mary Cassatt; Gerard is her teaching assistant, juggling the responsibilities of a wife, daughter, and graduate school; and Eleanor is an absent friend to whom Benna writes long letters. In the novella, “The Nun of That,” Benna is a widowed mother of an imaginary six-year old and is an ABD poetry teacher at a community college; Gerard is her friend, a musician and aspiring opera singer; and Eleanor is another figment of Benna’s imagination: an acerbic, overweight, childless woman who teaches physical education between cigarette breaks. Moore says that in choosing this structure, she was “inspired by the idea of an anagram... which is the rearrangement of characters to make a new word. What I did was rearrange characters to make new worlds” (Iannone 61). She has also likened the form to “a Calder mobile, with the main narrative sprouting these little reworkings” (Gaffney 63). Both the characters and themes are rearranged in various patterns, but certain consistencies begin to be apparent throughout the collection.

Appropriately, one of the epigraphs for the novella is taken from Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland: “‘Things flow about so here!’ she said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a workbox, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at” (61). This “large bright thing,” shifting from a childhood doll to the workbox of adulthood, is a perfect image for the cyclical and fluid nature of female identity posited by Nancy Chodorow and by Gardiner, who “picture[s] female identity as typically less fixed, less unitary, and more flexible than male individuality” (183). Rather than a linear progress toward autonomy and independence, they argue that females’ identities are continually formed and reformed, allowing women to fluctuate between stages of development in response to the sociological demands of relationships and maternal nurturing.

The consistency in both Alice in Wonderland and Anagrams is this quest: the ongoing struggle on the part of the protagonist to try to make sense of experience, her longing for meaningful and permanent connections with others, and her continuing pursuit of an understanding of herself. In each story, Benna’s personality remains basically unchanged: she is frightened of intimacy; self-doubting; uncertain of what her future will be, can be, or even should be; searching for fulfillment in her work and her relationships; and fighting off existential despair and excruciating loneliness. As she says at the beginning of the novella, “You might one day wake up and find yourself teaching at a community college; there will have been nothing to warn you. You might say things to your students like, There is only one valid theme in literature: Life will disappoint you” (63).

A significant characteristic of Benna’s that remains constant throughout the stories is her use of puns and other types of wordplay, a trait redolent of Felski’s “fascination with the aural... qualities of language” in the feminine aesthetic (26). As in Self-Help and Birds of America, this linguistic tic is a coping mechanism that actually subverts any real connection with other characters. Kakutani comments on Benna’s lack of participation in “anything approaching a real conversation,” terming her reliance on wit and joking a “defense strategy that precludes the very intimacy she thinks she wants” (“Jokers” 13). “Strings Too Short to Use” is the story in which Benna is most painfully isolated, as her lover drifts away in the midst of her pregnancy and breast lump traumas. Yet when Eleanor painfully reveals her affair with Benna’s boyfriend, the stricken Benna’s only spoken reaction is to make a pun on “sociobiology.” Throughout each incarnation, Benna
remains locked in her pattern of avoidance, even concerning her feelings for her dearest friend, as she realizes that "I want here to be able to tell Gerard how it is that I care for him. But I remain still, like someone being mugged" (203).

26 Another consistent theme is that of motherhood and Benna’s evolving response to that role. She initially is “a woman who said she had no desire to have children... 'Once you’ve seen a child born you realize a baby’s not much more than a reconstituted ham and cheese sandwich. Just a little anagram of you and what you’ve been eating for nine months’” (6-7). In the second story, Benna is advised by a nurse-practitioner that if she “had a child, it might straighten out [her] internal machinery a bit... A woman’s body is so busy preparing to make babies that every year that goes by without one is another year of rejection that is harder and harder for it to recover from. Soon it could go completely crazy” (21). Benna pragmatically suspects that “it was talk like this that had gotten women out of the factories and started immediately on the baby boom” (21). Later, she accidentally gets pregnant by her insensitive and philandering boyfriend (Gerard) and has an abortion. But in the novella, Benna is devoted to her daughter, Georgianne, who is funny, loving, interesting, perfect—and imaginary.

27 The role of imagination is central to an understanding of both Benna and the book. Near the end of the novella, Benna reveals that much of significance in her life has been make-believe, and hints that the stories that have come before are alternative lives that Benna has imagined: “I think, This is why a woman makes things up: Because when she dies, those lives she never got to are all going down with her. All those possibilities will just sit there like a bunch of schoolkids with their hands raised and uncalled on–each knowing, really knowing, the answer” (225).

28 Of all of Benna’s possibilities, her most satisfying role is her imaginary motherhood, where she is able to love and be loved unstintingly, be intimate, creative, and active. Benna’s motherhood is ideal and idealized in several ways: first, it contributes to her sense of her own normalcy and sanity. Throughout the book, she anguishes over whether or not she is crazy or will go crazy; at one point, she admits that “only once, and very late at night, did I run downstairs and out into the street with my pajamas on, gasping and watering, waiting for something–a car? an angel?–to come rescue or kill me, but there was nothing, only streetlights and a cat” (23). Moore begins the novella, “In the dictionary, lumpy jaw comes just before lunacy, but in life there are no such clues” (63). As the nurse has cautioned, a childless female “could go completely crazy” (21). In one sense, then, Benna’s creation of Georgianne allows her to adopt women’s most traditionally acceptable role. The next peculiarity of Benna’s imaginary motherhood is that, of course, Georgianne is always GOOD, and the ramifications of child-rearing mistakes are nonexistent. Thus Benna can be a parent without suffering any consequences or inconveniences; she does not have to stop her career, make divisive choices–she does not even have to give birth. She escapes the pain and difficulties of motherhood, but savors the intimacy with and dependence of her child.

29 In contrast, her two relationships with actual people in the novella, her love for and friendship with Gerard and her affair with her student, Darrel, are fraught with fear and posturing on all sides. In her teaching, as well, Benna avoids discussing intimacy and emotions; she presents Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” solely in terms of its commas, and her comments on student poems pertain chiefly to spelling and the correct use of “lie” and “lay.” Her imagination allows her to escape, at least temporarily, from dissatisfying and disappointing relationships and experience their alternatives.
The novella’s point of view underscores Benna’s fractured identity, but a shift in point of view also dramatizes the depth of her loss and isolation. Throughout the novella, first person is used for segments that tell of Benna’s links with Gerard and Darrell as well as for those with the imaginary Georgianne and Eleanor. The conflation of these real and surreal relationships and the immediacy of all four of them for Benna’s existence is shown by how quickly and smoothly she glides from one aspect of her personal life to another, all narrated in first person. On just one page, for example, appear “I open the door [to Darrell],” “I ask Gerard on the phone,” and “I sit on the edge of the bathtub, drying off Georgianne” (146).

However, third person is used for segments that detail her life as a teacher; in fact, the perspective is so removed that Benna is referred to as “the teacher” rather than by name: “The teacher took a walk before her afternoon class” (155). Benna appears to be observing her actions in this role as if they were performed by a completely different entity. When she learns of Gerard’s death, the point of view shifts abruptly from first to third person, and Benna is referred to as “the teacher” even though she is not performing a teaching role at all at that moment; in fact, she has lost her teaching position altogether. Benna moves from the vulnerable, revelatory first person to the extremely objective (and relatively controlling) role of teacher, an escape marked by the retreat into third-person narration. The next thirteen pages continue the third-person narration, although they refer to Benna by name. She is described as “feeling that she’d been made, forever and for now,... stupid with loneliness, bereft of any truth or wisdom or flicker of poetry, possessed only of the wild glaze of a person who spends entire days making things up” (213).

Ultimately, though, Benna is returned to the telling of her own story: in the last two pages, she returns to a life amalgamated of make-believe and reality, resurrecting Georgianne: “She is a gift I have given myself, a lozenge of pretend” (225). The return of her imaginary child fills Benna’s life with intimacy and fragments of poetry as well as marks a new self-realization about the depth of her need for fantasy. The “wild glaze” and self-excoriation that followed her confession to Gerard has been tempered into a self-forgiveness, an acceptance of the peace that only her “daughter” can give her.

Anagrams was marketed as a novel, which emphasizes the connections between chapters, themes, characters, motifs, and plots. But the novelistic genre also implies a linear progression through the narrative that does not take place from chapter to chapter; rather, the novella provides the missing piece that clarifies the links throughout the book (once again evoking Felski’s aesthetic in the “disruption of... linear time and plot” [26]). The novella provides an explanation for the discrepancies among the preceding stories, a culmination of Benna’s experiences. Through considering all the stories, we come to a cumulative understanding of Benna in all her many lived and imaginary roles.

Moore comments on the “cubist” style of Anagrams, a metaphor that evokes the various roles presented with postponed resolution and Benna’s divergent attempts to negotiate her life-choices and relationships. According to Moore, the multiplicity of possibilities “ironically... ends up revealing what few possibilities and arrangements a single life may ever have, even allowing for the reckless ride of the imagination...” (Gaffney 64). This reflection may be Moore’s most sobering comment on female identity of all, partly explaining the similarity in age and temperament of many of Moore’s characters in Self-Help, Birds of America, and Anagrams. Perhaps the angst of introspective early-middle-age
is inescapable, no matter what routes one has taken to fulfill one’s life or what linguistic or structural tricks one creates to escape it.

These three texts are similar in their cyclical structure, their focus on multiple identities and roles for women, and their emphasis on language and wordplay. Moore’s interest in the creation of women’s lives and selves is evident in these books, but it appears in her other work as well. The protagonist of *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?*, Moore’s 1994 novel, meditates on the idea of her own identity formation and fragmentation:

> I often think that at the center of me is... a house in my heart so invaded with other people and their speech, friends I believed I was devoted to, people whose lives I can only guess at now, that it gives me the impression I am simply a collection of them, that they all existed for themselves, but had inadvertently formed me, then vanished. But, what: Should I have been expected to create my own self, out of nothing, out of thin, thin air and alone? (17)

This populated “house in the heart” is exactly where Moore’s characters, quintessential mid-life women, do create themselves: bumping against others in various configurations, they become an anagram of all they have known. Their voices split, and the search for identity becomes a matter of finding harmony in the chorus that speaks from their own throats, a unifying melody that gives shape to the self.

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ABSTRACTS

L'article intitulé "Construction identitaire dans les cycles de nouvelles de Lorrie Moore" développe l'hypothèse selon laquelle nombre de femmes auteurs se servent du genre "cycle de nouvelles" pour représenter les périls que, à notre époque, traverse la quête identitaire féminine avant d'atteindre son unité faite de fragments. Le cycle de nouvelles dont l'unité est faite d'histoires individuelles, convient bien à la représentation de cette quête parce que dans le cadre de la littérature post-moderne, l'identité féminine apparaît souvent comme une mosaïque. C'est précisément cette quête d'unité identitaire qu'illustrent les personnages des trois cycles de nouvelles de Lorrie Moore Anagrams, Self Help et Birds of America. Les personnages féminins qui habitent ces nouvelles tentent de réconcilier leur désir d'indépendance avec l'image "traditionnelle" et persistante de la femme victime à l'autel du devoir quotidien. Elles y parviennent ou pas, selon les cas, à des degrés différents.

AUTHORS

KAREN WEEKES

Karen Weekes has written a chapter on Lorrie Moore’s Anagrams in the forthcoming The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues (Greenwood Press). Her criticism has appeared in The Southern Literary Journal, Notes on Contemporary Literature, and The Cambridge Companion to Poe. She is an Assistant Professor at Penn State University, Abington College, where she is completing a manuscript on the life-writing of female academics.