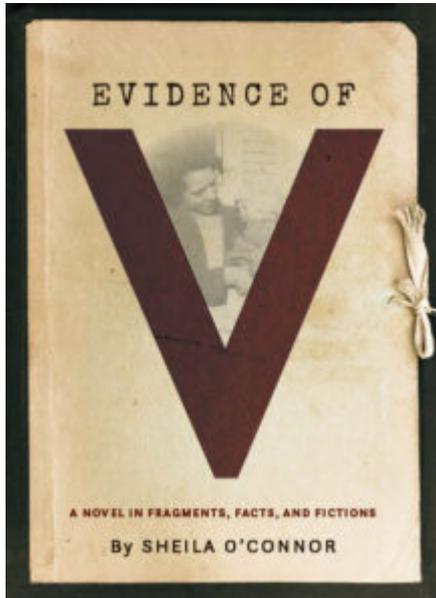


History & Hybridity: A Conversation with Sheila O'Connor

written by Guest Contributor | July 15, 2020



I recently had the opportunity to interview Sheila O'Connor about her most recent hybrid novel, *Evidence of V: A Novel in Fragments, Facts, and Fictions*, which excavates the buried history of her family story as well as anonymous American girls incarcerated for years for the nebulous offense of “immorality.” Inspired by her maternal grandmother’s incarceration, and her mother’s birth within a juvenile detention facility, *Evidence of V* collages multiple forms, including archival documents and original research, to reconstruct a missing narrative. The book has recently won the Minnesota Book Award, Foreword Indies Editor’s Choice Award, and was named a Marshall Project Best Criminal Justice Book of 2019.

MV: In the world of memoir, “negative space” is one of the things that often motivates writers. The lost ancestor, the lost voice, the lost influence, the lost history. Can you speak to the way you manipulate negative space in your book, both through structure and language?

SO: Thank you for that question. Negative space was incredibly important to me because it was the space within my life and imagination occupied by V’s erasure. I had nothing, so the question was: How to make something out of nothing? In part, the book becomes a collection of whatever fragments I’m able to construct within a void. I wanted that absence to be present on every page and in the language. In the syntax, and the sound, and in the literal space that refuses to be filled.

Beyond the negative space I occupied, there was the larger negative space left by this silenced history. The story of these unjustly incarcerated girls. Their files are sealed. So many of them were victims of sexual and

physical abuse, and like so many victims, they were made to carry shame that belonged to someone else. And why wouldn't they? They were already serving sentences for crimes they didn't commit.

MV: And, regarding the structure, how did this book form in your mind? Did it come to you in fragments?

SO: Absolutely. I did not begin with the idea of a book, I began by simply constructing fragments. I had wanted to write a book about this absent history for years, an epic novel that covered generations, a book nothing like this book, and I'm sure I still had that aspiration when I began working in these fragments. Flash pieces that may have existed as stand-alone prose poems, but not a viable book. And many of them I actually dictated originally, and later put to paper. It wasn't until I had transcribed them, that I began to see there was something happening in language that could be formed into a whole.

MV: The layers of imagination in the book are stunning. On page 120, you simply state, (The inheritance of fiction. Fiction as survival.) Do you think that imagination is an inherited trait or that you found imagination, as V did, in order to cope with difficulty?

SO: My family, like most families, relied on so many fictions to survive. We tell ourselves stories to make sense of chaos or sorrow, to allow for dreams and aspirations. How else are we to make it through this world? But strangely, I'm also a hard-core realist, in both my life and my writing. I want to separate fact from fiction, to name it, because that process is also essential to my personal survival. In terms of inheritance, I believe that we're all born with imagination, our nocturnal dreams are proof of that, but the world does its best to keep us too busy to honor our great and vast imaginings. I don't think I was more imaginative than anyone else, I just liked to give my imagination language.

MV: When you first asked about the true identity of your grandmother, your mother hushed you. Later, as you were going through the previously sealed records, she began to open up. Then, on p 236, she referred to the book you were going to write, making it clear that you were the one who would tell the story. How did it feel to be granted this permission? How does it sit to be the one in the family revealing secrets and missing stories?

SO: My mother's loyalty was to her parents, my beloved grandparents, and her desire to keep the story buried was for them. I think this was common for many adoptees of her time, a deep sense of loyalty to the adoptive parents, a belief that searching out information would be a kind of betrayal. Remember, those adoption records all remain sealed for 100 years for a reason. But my mother was a very forthright person, and once my grandparents had left the earth, she wasn't conflicted in the same way about seeking out the truth. She was interested. I don't think she envisioned this exact book; I think she probably saw a more traditional novel, but I have no doubt she would have been proud of it.

In terms of our family, it's very small now, my mother was an only child.

There aren't many boats to rock. Also, the deeper I got into the book, the less it was a book about my particular family, and more the story of the tens of thousands of girls incarcerated for immorality. I hadn't expected to encounter this story, this story of a girl sentenced to six years for giving birth to my mother, but once I had, I knew that was the story I needed to tell.

MV: As I read the book, I thought a lot about genetic coding and the ways in which you have observed V's DNA in both yourself and your son. Can you talk a little more about that?

SO: I have a deep belief in ancestral knowledge, as well as inherited trauma. We inherit eye color, or the shape of our hands, or height, or talents, and we also inherit what our ancestors' bodies and psyches have survived. I have my mother's curly hair, but our curly hair can't be accounted for within the family that we knew. My brother was born with an exceptional gift as a musician, a performer, born with it, and yet it seemed inexplicable. Then my son arrives with his devotion to music and every form of theatre and performance, literally from his first word, and we are mystified. But in the end, it turns out the lines runs straight to V, that fifteen-year-old singer and dancer.

MV: You did an incredible job of blending fact and fiction to cover the themes of immorality, temptation, victimization, inhumane treatment, and classism. Can you speak to the choices you made regarding fiction vs nonfiction as the book evolved?

SO: I've always written across genres. My MFA is in poetry, my six books are novels, I write essays. I'm interested in all that forms and genres offer. But as a writer, I've always been clear on what is fiction and what is fact, at least in my own life. Because I didn't know V, didn't know any of the characters in the book besides my mother, and only my mother within the confines of my relationship with her, I was forced to imagine this story. I had a file, I had some facts, but I didn't have a cohesive narrative, and I knew I never would. So there is V, and the people who share her story, and they are all imagined. At the same time, I had the archival documents—reports, statistics, articles—I was able to uncover in my years of research, and I wanted those to speak for themselves. And then, there are the first-person nonfiction sections, which function as a meta-narrative, in which I am talking directly to the reader, my partner, as we attempt to construct this story. And in part, it's the job of that narrator to remind the reader an imaginary work is actively being created to fill a void.

MV: Female friendship is a strong theme in the book. Did this type of bond exist among your aunts, V's sisters?

SO: Yes, very much. Thank you for asking. V's sisters, my grandmother and my great aunts, were exceptionally close, and devoted to one another. This is a model I grew up with in my family, and I had my own three sisters. I understand the secrets, and the pacts made between girls, and the many ways that girls and women are often dependent upon each other for survival. The women in my family were feminists before their time, incredibly self-

determined.

MV: Just before C-19 hit, I saw Dani Shapiro speak about her most recent book, *Inheritance*, in which she shockingly discovers that the man she believed was her father was not her biological father. Your books both address the long-term impact of guarding family secrets. Numerous people have reached out to Dani with similar life stories. Can you talk about the people who have been reaching out to you since the publication of your book?

SO: One of the things that compelled me to stay with this book was the belief that it would reach the girls who were incarcerated at the Minnesota Home School for Girls Sauk Centre whose stories have been buried. And not just there, but across the United States. As soon as the first newspaper article came out, I heard from people. I heard from girls who were incarcerated there and elsewhere, and I heard from their descendants. I've also heard from witnesses. People who worked there or lived near the reformatory and saw the treatment of the girls. The stories have been gut-wrenching, but I think there has been something powerful in the telling. So many emails I received said something like, "I have never told anyone this story." Or, "my mother has never told anyone this story." Or, "my grandmother never told anyone this story." All of the records are sealed, just as ours was sealed, but people are asking me how to open them, and I'm giving what advice I'm able. We are all carrying the trauma of this silenced family history in our bodies, and up until now, we haven't had a chance to name it. My hope is that the voices of survivors can be brought forward so they can tell their own stories. So we can hear them. That's my great hope.



Megan Vered is an essayist whose first-person writing focuses on family, friendship, faith, and the fantasia of her youth. Her work has been published in *Silk Road Review*, *Brevity*, the *Coachella Review*, and *fresh.ink* among others. Megan holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her memoir, *Dancing Light*, is currently being shopped for publication. She lives with her husband and West Highland White Terrier, Hamish, in Marin County, California, where she serves on the board of the UC Berkeley Library and Heyday Books. She leads local and international writing workshops as well as online reading forums. www.meganvered.com



Sheila O'Connor is the author of six novels including her most recent hybrid book, *Evidence of V: A Novel in Fragments, Facts, and Fictions*, winner of the Minnesota Book Award, Foreword Editor's Choice Award, and named one of the Best Criminal Justice Books of 2019 by the Marshall Project. Awards for her work include the Michigan Prize for Literary Fiction, Minnesota Book Award, International Reading Award, Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers, and Midwest Booksellers Award among others. She is a professor in the Creative Writing Program at Hamline University where she serves as fiction editor for *Water~Stone Review*, and she also teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Converse College.
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