From Other People’s Houses into Shakespeare’s Kitchen: The Story of Lore Segal and How She Looked for Adventures and Where She Found Them

Julia K. Baker

In examining Lore Segal’s novels Other People’s Houses (1964), Her First American (1985), the children’s book The Story of Old Mrs. Brubeck and How She Looked for Trouble and Where She Found Him (1981), and the short stories in Shakespeare’s Kitchen (Pulitzer Finalist in 2007), this paper highlights the interplay of fictional and autobiographical elements in the creative act of writing about disastrous events and emotions, such as war, fear, separation, death, loneliness, and exile. The article outlines the effects of a war-time childhood on the literary depiction of relationships.

No man, unless he puts on the mask of fiction, can show his real face or the will behind it. For this reason, the only real biographies are the novels, and every novel, if it is honest will be the autobiography of the author and the biography of the reader.¹

Children have their own tricks for handling fear: my grandson has tigers on his mind, so he turns into a tiger. I turned my own childhood disasters into adventures.²

Lore Segal’s childhood disasters – her escape from Vienna in 1938 as a ten-year-old, the separation from her parents, and living in four different English foster homes – inspired her to write her first novel, Other People’s Houses (1964). Born Lore Groszmann in Vienna in 1928, the author escaped the Nazis with five hundred other Jewish children on the first Kindertransport train that departed Vienna in December 1938. In England, Segal wrote letters to save her parents. Although they managed to get out of Vienna and came to England as ‘a married couple’, their social status (butler/gardener and maid) did not allow them to keep their daughter with them, so the family never lived under one roof again. After graduating from the University of London in 1948 with a B.A. (Hons) in English, Segal joined the surviving members of her family in the Dominican Republic until the American quota for which her family had applied back in Vienna allowed her to come to New York in 1951. She worked in a shoe factory and as a file clerk – while composing stories that soon began to be noticed and published by The New Yorker and other magazines.
Between 1968 and 1978 Segal taught writing at Columbia University's School of the Arts, Princeton, Bennington College, Sarah Lawrence, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Ohio State University from which she retired in 1996.³

Segal might have become an accomplished writer without the hardships of persecution, dislocation, and exile. Yet, without them, she might not have evolved into this kind of writer – that is, one who has continually devoted her work to addressing and fictionalizing the disasters and adventures of her childhood, and her adult life respectively.

*Other People’s Houses* is most likely the earliest, and without a doubt one of the best fictional depictions of the Kindertransport experience.⁴ In it, Segal tells the story of the Groszmann’s, a Viennese Jewish family and their fate in exile. The epigraph preceding the main text not only connects Segal’s second novel *Her First American* with her first by mentioning the main character, an African American named Carter Bayoux. It also points to Segal’s approach to writing about events and people in her life: “The ‘Carter Bayoux’ of my book once told me a story out of his childhood. When he had finished, I said, “I knew just where your autobiography stopped and fiction began.” He said, “Then you knew more than I.”” As a writing motto, this epigraph points to the interplay of autobiographical and fictional elements in remembering and narrating one’s life. It not only suggests that Carter Bayoux exists – as a fictional character and a ‘real’ person – but also indicates that Segal invites her readers to watch out for where her autobiography stops and the fiction of her life-story begins.

*Other People’s Houses* is told from the first person perspective of a female narrator called Lore, i.e. a narrator/protagonist who shares the same name with the author. As a consequence, the reader will perceive the book as Segal’s authentic life story. However, from the moment we pick up the book and look at its cover, the label ‘novel’ redirects us and commands a fictional reading mode. *Other People’s Houses* thus blurs the borders between autobiography and fiction. For Segal, autobiography stops and fiction begins in naming the ‘other people’ in her novel. Whereas the members of her immediate family are referred to by their real-life names – uncle Paul, Franzi, and Igo – the English families’ real life names were altered.⁵ The frequent use of direct speech, as well as the change of perspective in the chapter about life in the Dominican Republic (which is told from uncle Paul’s perspective) point to the fictional character of the book. An autobiographical mode is encouraged by the chronological