

Critical Grief: walking the personal/public tightrope in the novels of Marion Halligan and Carol Shields.

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Marion Halligan's *The Fog Garden*¹ and Carol Shield's *Unless*² are novels that foreground literary women's experience of grief. They are the writers' responses to extreme life crises. Marion Halligan writes following the death from cancer of her husband and life partner of thirty-five years. Carol Shields has also been immersed in a battle against cancer, one that she is losing. Grief has been the central focus of these women's lives and they appear to be driven by a need to express their grief and outrage through their literature, a process they have managed in quite different ways.

Halligan and Shields are established authors with a string of prize-winning creative works to their credit. They are public women, acclaimed in their homelands of Australia and Canada, as well as internationally, for their literary contributions. Their position allows them some freedom to write as they choose, released in the twenty-first century from many of the cultural restrictions that inhibited their earlier literary counterparts. This article demonstrates some of the strategies they have employed in their writing and the effectiveness of the published works in light of past public response to women's self-disclosure.

Maybe the critics are right after all, and the act of telling can evoke confession in a woman; but where they, the critics, mean to imply that all she does is kneel in the dark and confess her sins, a list of failings she already knows, what she does in writing, in telling, is to search, sifting through the many versions and possibilities to find the shape and truth of her life, the story she doesn't yet know, the image and narrative she struggles to bring, like her self, into being.³

As Drusilla Modjeska has stated, there has in the past been much criticism of women's writing and a prevailing attitude exists that women, through their writing, have a tendency towards personal disclosure or 'confessional' writing, and that this in some way prevents them from producing 'great' literature. Writing may also be 'transformative' in the manner in which it may enable women to explore and represent a sense of their own truths.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, through an investigation of nineteenth century women novelists, explore what it means to be a 'woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are ... both overtly and covertly patriarchal'.⁴ They conclude that the act of writing has been for many women a reaction to the ways women have traditionally been represented in literature. Indeed, *The Madwoman in the Attic* reveals many examples of strongly expressed opinions of prominent men that women are culturally restricted within their communities and have no business writing at all. Gilbert and Gubar argue that such attitudes created an 'anxiety of authorship' for women which continues to require consideration in the twenty-first century.

The work of retrieval, revision and re-valuing of women's writing has been performed by many feminist intellectuals in the latter part of the twentieth century. There is a strong female literary heritage in both Australia and Canada. Women have actively participated in the settlement process of both British colonies and have frequently written of their experiences as individuals, either through life-writing or fiction. Women have created literature that reflects their acquired knowledge, perceptions and sensibilities alongside their male counterparts, but their writing endeavours have been trivialised too frequently in the past and omitted from the literary canon.

Unless and *The Fog Garden* demonstrate some of the possibilities available to contemporary authors concerning treatment of intensely personal female experience, be it confessional in tone (as in Halligan's novel) or overtly political (as in Shield's work). Both Shields and Halligan have approached sensitive material in a manner that would have been unacceptable in earlier times. Both women have produced literature that may still be considered contentious but that is worthy of further scrutiny.

The Fog Garden

Marion Halligan constructs a work of fiction in *The Fog Garden* with a central protagonist, Clare, who mirrors the author's own experience of grief. In so doing, she blurs the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. The act of writing fiction about a writer who is grieving the loss of her partner frees the author to explore, through her imagination, the possibilities of invention of character and storytelling, as well as strategies for dealing with an overwhelming emotional crisis. Furthermore, it may have had a cathartic effect by enabling Halligan to work through her own grief.

That's what fiction does. It takes the events of the writer's life - lived through, heard of, read about - and turns them into powerful stories. ... No one can truly tell how novels are written, least of all myself. Structure, plot, storyline, creation of many characters who must, absolutely must, walk, talk, and think for themselves - all that can be explained. But the primordium cannot be defined.⁵

Writers of fiction take their observations and experiences and transform them into fictions, constructed realities that, if effective, move their audience to reflect on and respond intellectually and emotionally to situations that may resonate with their own realities or move them to consider alternative ones. Marion Halligan states that her fictional writer, Clare, is like her, but not her, and that the experience of writing *The Fog Garden* allowed her imagination and memories of a loving relationship free reign.

Clare isn't me. She's like me. ... But she isn't me. She is a character in fiction. And like all such characters she makes her way through the real world which her author invents for her. She tells the truth as she sees it, but may not always be right.⁶

The Fog Garden is a long reflection on love and loss, its narrative movement revealed through the inner world of Clare's memory of times past and consideration of her attempt to deal with her present circumstances. Halligan's novel is laden with conversations; with her self, her absent husband and others. The author begins *The Fog Garden* with a description of unbearable emotional pain: 'I do not crack. I do not crack. Though it could be thought that I might'.⁷ She likens her grief to 'a great cathedral and the hand nestling in the neck is a small bird perched on the corbel of one of its arches'. By the end of the first section, titled 'Lapping', Halligan has disclosed her discovery that 'my cathedral would be a place where I could sit and be happy, for moments, that it would be a place of comfort and solace and peace'.⁸ She sets her own journey through the various stages of grief against that of her character, Clare.

The following chapters take the reader on a journey that reveals Clare's process of grieving, the re-discovery of her sensual sexual self, and the piecing together of her identity as a widow and survivor.

She'd tried out the word *widow* in her mouth a few times; the taste was strange, not bitter or sour exactly, more mysterious. Of course not sweet; perhaps salty? And it was very very large. Needing a lot of chewing on and sucking at before she could know its flavour.⁹

Halligan draws attention to the construction of her fiction by speaking directly to her audience as author in 'Lapping', following it with an introduction that explains her position in relation to Clare, and announcing the beginning of her fictional work in a section titled 'the lineaments of gratified desire', which describes Clare's situation. Clare is a writer whose husband, Geoffrey, is dying of cancer. Clare is remembering and imaginatively re-visiting their long relationship as she attempts to come to terms with her impending loss.

The experience of dealing with Geoffrey's medical treatment by chemotherapy is juxtaposed with Clare's recounting of their sexual relationship, their joy in one another set against his physical deterioration. The description of life-affirming sexuality serves to highlight Clare and Geoffrey's loss as they work through their goodbyes, conscious always of the value of touch as a symbol of the depth of their physical, spiritual and emotional connection. When Geoffrey dies and Clare is alone, she finds that her sexual desire is rekindled and has become intertwined with her grief.

Now she finds herself thinking of sex all the time. She is still full of grief, but these thoughts of sex have become an extension of her grief, this sharp

⁹ *The Fog Garden* 25.

unfocused desire that suffuses her blood and makes her juices run; she had forgotten what puddles are possible.¹⁰

Writing sexuality as an antidote to grief is a brave move by Halligan, even in the supposedly enlightened twenty-first century western world. Idealised notions of womanhood continue to constrain women from public declarations of female sexuality. Halligan's open disclosure of Clare's sexual desires and gratification, including allusion to infidelity in light of the death of her husband, may prove confronting for her readers.

Clare is seen as an author writing, her literary construction of sexuality fusing with erotic description of illicit lovemaking with an old friend (a married man) with whom she discusses her husband.

And safe in this happy enfolding of a man's arms for a little while she talks to him of Geoffrey. She tells him how sex with him feeds into her grief for Geoffrey, nourishing it, soothing it, she has always known that sex and death are a powerful combination but hadn't thought that death could feed into sex like this. ... It is a kind of dying, this abandonment. This is adultery, which she has never practised but has imagined often enough. A lot of the characters in her books commit adultery. She has always enjoyed imagining it for them. And guilt? My grief needs this, she says to herself. It is comfort, that is all. There isn't any betrayal.¹¹

Halligan's treatment of what appears to be confessional writing, dealing with material that may jar some of her readers' sensibilities, is effective. By drawing attention to the deliberate construction of a text by a writer, then juxtaposing it with the central protagonist's behaviour in the light of her enormous personal loss, she is writing female sexuality in a more palatable manner, as clearly a literary construction, rather than a lived reality. Her playful fusion of the imagined and the constructed reality of Clare interferes with the reader's smooth immersion in the 'reality' of the text, while compelling them to read on. Sex and death are shown to closely connect as Clare considers her unexpected desire at a time when she is overwhelmed by the loss of her partner.

We die alone, and in our most secret beings we live alone. Desire presses bodies together, plaits together minds, but what keeps sex going is the knowledge that each time you haven't finally made it work, you haven't merged with the other, you still have to part, and there is melancholy in that, but the rekindling of desire as well.¹²

The Fog Garden deals with elements of strong human emotion, sexuality, intellect, spirituality and physicality in a forthright and frequently graphic manner. Halligan subverts the traditional treatment of birth, sex, death, reproduction and medical issues which have conventionally been treated with more delicacy, particularly by women writers who are actively discouraged from representing 'indelicacy' on the page.

Carol Shields also flouts convention in her novel *Unless*, though her 'indelicacy' differs in focus and effect.

Unless

Unless is the most recent, and possibly the final, novel by Carol Shields. Having battled breast cancer since 1998, Shields feels she may not have the time or energy for further large works. Her illness has had a significant effect on the content of this

novel, affecting the way she initially wrote it with more autobiographical focus and the changes that occurred in the creation of the final published fictional work.

I would never deny that this book wasn't a moving sideways of that shock, a shock that the glass can be broken. ... Cancer makes one serious, and awake. I have had time to pay attention to certain questions that have been hovering for years. And since it is probably my last novel, I feel I can be braver.¹³

Shields states that, in this novel, she is expressing 'feminist rage' at a time when she perceives that women continue to be substantially unrecognised in the public sphere and that far too many injustices and inequities for western women still exist, in spite of the 'progress' that has been made over the last century.

Unless foregrounds the experience of ordinary women, with the central character, Reta Winters, narrating a first-person account of a tragic incident in her family. Strongly resonating with Shield's recent personal experience, the opening sentence of the novel is:

It happens that I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now. All my life I've heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I've never understood what they meant. To lose. To have lost.¹⁴

Reta Winters is a translator, who is writing a sequel to her own first successful novel, and *Unless* contains much critical insight into the act of writing as the action progresses. It transpires that Reta's peaceful, ordinary, family life has been seriously challenged when her eldest daughter, Norah, who has been attending university and living with her boyfriend, has taken to camping on a Toronto street corner, wearing a sign around her neck that reads, 'GOODNESS'.

Norah had been a good, docile baby and then she became a good, obedient little girl. Now, at nineteen, she's so brimming with goodness that she sits on a Toronto street corner, which has its own textual archaeology, though Norah probably doesn't know about that. ... Norah sits cross-legged with a begging bowl in her lap and asks nothing of the world.¹⁵

The family is unable to ascertain what has happened to the previously happy and well-adjusted Norah, who now appears to be lost to them as she visibly deteriorates, both mentally and physically. Reta, at the age of forty-four years, is obliged to question everything she has previously taken for granted as she attempts to come to terms with Norah's condition and her own inability to 'make things better'. As Reta explores the possible reasons for Norah's condition, she considers what it is to be a woman, the types of feminine characteristics applauded by society, and systematically rejects them. 'A woman's charm is with her for life ... but you must pay attention',¹⁶ suggested her beauty therapist.

Anyone can be charming. It's really a cheap trick, mere charm, so astonishingly easy to perform, screwing up your face into sunbeams and spewing them forth ... the metaphoric projection of self hatred. Of all the social virtues, charm is, in the end, the most unrewarding. And compared to goodness, real goodness, or the unmovable self-abnegation my daughter

¹³ Ann Dowsett Johnston, 'Her Time to Roar', *Maclean's* (April 15, 2002) 49-50.

¹⁴ Carol Shields, *Unless* 1.

Norah practises, charm is nothing but crumpled tissue paper, soiled from previous use. ... Sincerity's over. Sincerity's lost whatever edge it had.¹⁷

Politeness meets the same fate, as does a sunny disposition. Women are shown to be indoctrinated with qualities and attributes that make for ease of interaction with others, but these qualities don't allow for women to confront the realities of their lives and develop a sense of self-worth that will enable them to demand more than their current position in society allows. Through Reta's self-questioning, Shields presents her thoughts on women's place.

Not one of us was going to get what we wanted. I had suspected this for years, and now I believe that Norah half knows the big female secret of wanting and not getting. ... We are too kind, too willing – too unwilling too – reaching out blindly with a grasping hand but not knowing how to ask for what we don't even know we want.¹⁸

Reta is translating the memoirs of an elderly French intellectual feminist woman who takes Norah's strange behaviour seriously and does not dismiss it as a 'stage' she is going through or counsel Reta to 'count her blessings' that she still has two beautiful daughters to rear and a supportive partner to share her life, opinions that are among those offered as some form of comfort to Reta by friends and acquaintances. Rather, this woman suggests that 'Norah has simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power: she has accepted in its stead complete powerlessness, total passivity, a kind of impotent piety. In doing nothing, she has claimed everything'.¹⁹ At this point, Reta is reluctant to think of her daughter's aberrant behaviour in terms of power, but as the narrative unfolds she comes to believe that there may be an element of truth in the concept.

Norah seems lodged in childhood's last irresponsible days, stung by the tang of injustice, nineteen years old, with something violent and needful beating in her brain. It's like a soft tumour, but exceptionally aggressive. Its tentacles have entered all the quadrants of her consciousness. This invasion happened fast, when no one was looking.²⁰

Reta and her family visit Norah regularly on her street corner, but she remains uncommunicative. They visit the hostel where she sleeps at night, donating money to the institution and providing Norah with food and warm clothes each week, much of which Norah gives away to other homeless people. Devastated by Norah's condition and unable to do more to alleviate such an unbearable situation, Reta continues to seek possible reasons for Norah's apparent decision to opt out of her own life:

It sometimes occurs to me that there is for Norah not too much but too little; a gaping absence, a near-starvation. There is a bounteous feast going on, with music and richness and arabesques of language, but she has not been invited. She is seeing it for the first time, but now she will never be able to shake it from view. A deterioration has occurred to the fabric of the world, the world that does not belong to her as she has been told. Again and again and again. She is prohibited from entering. From now on life will seem less and less like life.²¹

The tone of the novel is conversational and it is constructed with a light touch, infused with humour which is set against the extreme pathos of the inexplicable loss

of a daughter. In *Unless*, Shields has implanted, through her central character, Reta, her own outrage and grief, resulting from her personal confrontation with cancer. It is from Reta's observations of the impact of Norah's withdrawal from family and community on her as a mother, and on all those who are connected to Norah, that the reader is given some insight into a woman's place in twentieth century Canada.

Shields, like Reta, has found solace and strength in her domestic life and her writing. *Unless* has a strongly autobiographical flavour because of the similarity of experience between the author and her central protagonist. But this is fiction, not autobiography, even though there appears to be some blurring of the boundaries. Reta reveals that she avoids her own misery by various strategies, mostly involving immersion in her writing or by intensive household management:

What about the ripping sound behind my eyes, the starchy tearing of fabric, end to end; what about the need I have to curl up my knees when I sleep? Whimpering.

Ordering my own house calms me down, my careful dusting, my polishing. Speculating about other people's lives helps, too. These lives hold a kind of tenancy in my mind, tricking the neural synapses into a grand avoidance of my own sorrow.²²

Throughout *Unless* Reta is writing a novel and through her experience of writing, Shields is able to talk about the act of writing and many of the circumstances that commonly affect writers, such as dealing with publishers and editors, the posturing of other writers, the construction of a public persona that is required of the writer in order to fulfil the demands of the publishing and marketing industry, and the impact of the solitude required during writing on family. As a large part of *Unless* is concerned with Reta's grief and outrage over the inexplicable loss of her daughter, writing is shown to be therapeutic. Writing is utilised by Reta as a way of managing to continue to function for the benefit of herself and her family, a way of escaping from her emotional load. By exercising her imagination systematically to order the lives of her characters on the page, Reta feels that she retains some sense of control over her own life:

But more than anything else it is the rhythm of typing – and – thinking that soothes me, what is almost an athlete's delight in the piling of clause on clause. Who would have thought this old habit of mine would become a strategy for maintaining a semblance of ongoing life. ... On days when I don't know which foot to put in front of the other, I can type my way toward becoming a conscious being.²³

The notion that writing may be therapeutic is frequently theorised by scholars of women's writing and is borne out by the letters and journals of immigrant Australian and Canadian women produced from situations of isolation, loneliness, hardship and displacement during periods of settlement in their new homes, or the journals of women who recounted their home duties and lists of things to do or purchase, or the diaries of women who created a narrative for themselves in which they were the central protagonist of an endlessly interesting story.

Shields utilises life-writing, that is, letters from Reta to masculine literary critics, to expound her views on the effect of their writing practices on the way women view themselves and their place in the world. For example, in a letter Reta writes to magazine editors regarding one of their advertisements for a product titled 'Great

Minds of the Western Intellectual World' in which no women are mentioned, Reta admonishes them for their 'callous lack of curiosity about great women's minds' and states that, 'My only hope is that my daughter, her name is Norah, will not pick up a copy of this magazine, read this page, and understand, as I have for the first time, how casually and completely she is shut out of the universe'.²⁴ Another letter is to Alexander Valkner, who has written an excellent journal article on 'The History of Dictionaries', in which his list of great writers included no women. Reta points out that her daughters are being adversely affected by the exclusion of their gender in almost all representations of human greatness, indicating that Norah, who was 'once a lover of books ... has resigned from the act of reading, and believes she is doing this in the name of goodness ... What Norah wants is to belong to the whole world or at least to have, just for a moment, the taste of the whole world in her mouth. But she can't. So she won't'.²⁵

Yet another letter Reta writes is to the author of a book on problem solving in which all examples utilised are men. Reta gently admonishes him: 'I don't think you intend to be discouraging in your book. I think you have merely overlooked those who are routinely overlooked, that is to say half the world's population'.²⁶ One of Reta's letters is to a female book reviewer who has suggested that women writers are the miniaturists of the literary world. Reta's response to this proposition is to indicate that her daughter, Norah, 'has been driven from the world by the suggestion that she is doomed to miniaturism. Her strategy is self-sacrifice. I know what that feels like. She can have "goodness but not greatness"'.²⁷

Reta also responds to an obituary in which the novels by great writers on the deceased man's bedside are listed, as well as the great composers whose music filled his final days, but no female authors or composers are included. The final letter written by Reta is to the author of a short story concerning a European philosophy professor's disgust at seeing a mastectomy bra displayed in an American medical supply shop window. The professor was both nauseated and disgusted at this apparition, the practical and essential nature of which is described by Reta in her letter of offended response. Reta comments on the professor's obvious misogyny demonstrated in his attitude to the bra display and draws a parallel between his hatred of women that 'extends to anything that might touch the body of a woman' and the view commonly held by men that women's writing is 'self-pitying, humourless, demanding, claustrophobic, breathless'.²⁸ She goes on to argue that such hatred of women impacts on all women and the way that they perceive themselves, relating such attitudes towards women back to her theory on the plight of her daughter:

Norah had become aware of an accretion of discouragement, that she had awakened in her twentieth year to her solitary state of non-belonging, understanding at last how little she would be allowed to say. ... Norah took up the banner of goodness – goodness not greatness. Perhaps because there was no other way she could register her existence.²⁹

None of the letters Reta writes are ever signed or posted. They are her way of expressing her outrage and distress at the constant public reductive treatment of women, their history, writing, art, work and contribution. When Nora is admitted to

hospital having contracted pneumonia, she responds to the care and treatment provided. Through research and reasoning, the family uncovers the event that precipitated her breakdown and withdrawal so they finally have some concrete knowledge to act on. 'Day by day Norah is recovering at home, awakening atom by atom, and shyly planning her way on a conjectural map'.³⁰

The titles of the chapters of *Unless* are: 'Here's', 'Nearly', 'Once', 'Wherein', 'Nevertheless', 'So', 'Otherwise', 'Instead', 'Thus', 'Yet', 'Insofar As', 'Every', 'Regarding', 'Hence', 'Next', 'Notwithstanding', 'Thereupon', 'Despite', 'Throughout', 'Following', 'Unless', 'Toward', 'Whatever', 'Any', 'Whether', 'Ever', 'Forthwith', 'As', 'Beginning With', 'Already', 'Hitherto', and 'Not Yet'. Shields suggests that 'she used these titles because these little words are often forgotten, but they connect the big nouns and verbs and give them a sense of time and place'.³¹ Further, the interim implications, a kind of balance between things, may also indicate a potential without closure. The use of forgotten connective words (that appear meaningless if they stand alone) as section titles for the narrative also gives a sense of fragmentation and disorientation that parallels Norah and her family's experience, and may be seen as a metaphor for the ways in which women so often are required to operate in their communities as connectors and stabilisers, rather than as more active participants in the public sphere.

With the writing of *Unless*, Carol Shields has demonstrated one way to skirt literary convention (that is strongly geared towards masculine writing of men's stories) in order to express the reality of women's lives and experience more effectively. In so doing, she has been able to implant in her writing strong social criticism regarding the politics of the exclusion of women from equitable participation in public life and the continuing negative impact of culturally prescribed gender-specific behaviours on both men and women.

It can be seen that both novels *Unless* and *The Fog Garden* differ in style and tone. The authors, Carol Shields and Marion Halligan, have written texts that treat grief in an accessible and powerful manner and break new ground in their challenges to conventional writing strategies. As prominent authors in their respective communities, these women have more freedom to test contentious writing strategies than writers from earlier times, emerging contemporary writers or those from non-western cultures.

Women have been writing for centuries, for as long as they have been literate and have had the time and resources available to them to practice their craft. Their writing practices have ranged across different genres at different times according to their social position, geographical location, material resources, desires and ability to negotiate cultural expectations of female endeavours with the reality of their lives. It is necessary to read women's writing in relation to the means of expression available to them and the cultural frameworks of their particular times. Social, religious and class conventions have contributed to prescribed standards of feminine behaviours which often prevented women from articulating their experience directly.

Representations of women in the past, by both male and female authors (conditioned by their gender roles) in both works of fiction and non-fiction, have often fitted social expectations of acceptable female behaviour: that is, as idealised versions of dutiful daughters, wives, mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers. Representations of women who slipped from such conventional stereotypical roles

were pilloried as bitches, witches and whores and punished within narrative, as in real life, for their sins:

... Women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to *mere* properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because generated solely ... by male expectations and designs.³²

These narrative treatments of female subjects served to reinforce societal prescriptions of 'feminine' behaviour. While the same might be said of masculine stereotypes, the dominant hegemony in settler societies was masculine and 'alternative' voices of women were not always comparably authorised.

In the twenty-first century in western nations such as Australia and Canada, women participate more fully in the public sphere and participate actively in the literary industry. This is reflected in the range of literature available. The scope for representations of women in literature are broader and this allows for authors such as Shields and Halligan to present more forthright depictions of women's experience, attitudes and behaviours, adding to our understanding of the huge range of difference that exists across human experience and perception.

Notes

¹Marion Halligan, *The Fog Garden*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001).

²Carol Shields, *Unless* (Canada: Random House, 2002).

³Drusilla Modjeska, *The Orchard* (MacMillan, Sydney: Picador, 1995) 32.

⁴Susan M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1979) 45-46.

⁵Marion Halligan, 'Some Sorcery in the Subconscious', *Ruth Park: A Celebration* (National Library of Australia) 10 Dec. 2002, <http://www.nla.gov.au/friends/ruth/halligan.html>.

⁶Halligan *Fog Garden* 9.

⁷Halligan *Fog Garden* 1.

⁸Halligan *Fog Garden* 8.

⁹Halligan *Fog Garden* 25.

¹⁰Halligan *Fog Garden* 27.

¹¹Halligan *Fog Garden* 29.

¹²Halligan *Fog Garden* 35.

¹³Ann Dowsett Johnston, 'Her Time to Roar', *Maclean's* (April 15, 2002) 49-50.

¹⁴Shields 1.

¹⁵Shields 11.

¹⁶Shields 28.

¹⁷Shields 28-9.

¹⁸Shields 98.

¹⁹Shields 104.

²⁰Shields 162.

²¹Shields 134.

²²Shields 107.

²³Shields 109.

²⁴Shields 137.

²⁵Shields 165-6.

²⁶Shields 220.

²⁷Shields 249.

²⁸Shields 308.

²⁹Shields 309-310.

³⁰Shields 320.

³¹Carol Shields, 'Interview with Kathy Weissman' (May 10, 2002).

³²Gilbert and Gubar 12.

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