Marcia collared me at a meeting. She was waving Renee Norman's book around like some kind of spirited fish. Marcia had been kind enough to offer to read my research proposal — what is, for all intents and purposes, for the moment, for the next three years, my life's work. "You've got to read this book!" Marcia said. "It's exactly the kind of thing you want to do." I've been observing Marcia. She's an enabler. I took the book and read it.

When my brother and I were small, we were fascinated with mirrors. There were two mirrors (both belonged to our mother) that we played with. One was a round hand mirror set in a tapestry frame. Our mother’s father had given it to her when she was a teenager. He’d given her this beautiful gift and said, “I hope it doesn’t make you any more vain than you already are.” The other was a square mirror, framed like a photograph, which sat on our mother’s dressing table.

Using the central metaphor of a house of mirrors, Renee Norman leads readers into a labyrinthine performance of pedagogical erudition, philosophical speculation, and autobiographical insight.

She tells us: “I am re-searching autobiograph(ical)ly through the mirror of my selves, in the context of the great body of work that already exists, and in relationship to the living and textual Others that I meet and live with and love and encounter every day”(56).

Norman’s re-search is a submersion into self where conventional boundaries of public and private, past and present, fact and fictional, motherhood and scholarship are destabilized in the...
This is the way my brother and I played with my mother’s mirrors:

1) We held them out, flat before us, and gazed into them as we walked through the house. It was a wonderful experience to walk on the ceiling, to step over light fixtures and chandeliers; and it was terrifying to ascend the steep slope above the stairs. We’d bump into chairs and beds, obstacles we did not know existed in our mirrored world. We’d meet cobwebs and spiders, so conspicuous in the prairies of white stucco that extended clean and capacious before and behind us.

2) We played Snow White, the Snow Queen, or Rumpelstiltskin, deconstructing and reconstructing fairy tales, holding the mirrors before our faces, and reciting variations on the theme of revelation.

3) We sat on the bathroom counter facing the big bathroom mirror, then held the small mirrors at angles to allow ourselves to see an infinity of selves and mirrors.

Eventually, both mirrors would break. I don’t remember how the square one got broken, but I remember the way the hand mirror went. I remember because it is so uncertain. My oldest brother and I (not the brother who liked me…not the brother I walked on the ceilings with) were in my parents’ bedroom. It was dark and the television was on. Why were we in this room together? I don’t remember. I can’t be clear, but something pulling at the back of my mind says my brother “lured” me in. He invited me to jump up and down on my parents’ bed (a favorite forbidden pleasure of mine). My parents were away. They’d gone out for the night. No babysitter? I was five. My oldest brother was eight. I was jumping up and down on my parents’ bed in the dark, only the light of the television emanating. I didn’t hear anything fall or shatter. I

illumination of reflection. This deconstruction opens gaps, which provide readers with “wisps of sight and sound” of the places that exist in between, where creativity and household chores overlap, where the experience of being “I” is amplified in the historic past, the genetic present, and the artistically imagined.

The volubility of voicelessness and the silence of the spoken are just two themes that I find particularly interesting, spiraling, as they do, from the textual lacunae Norman engineers. In a section of her work entitled “Deconstructing Our Own Words and Telling Silences,” Norman discusses the issues of gender and culture and the way they influence storytelling. She takes up the “telling silences, silences that are stories in themselves,” as well as those for which no text can exist (39).
heard nothing but the creak and bounce of the bed. Where did my brother find the broken mirror? “Look what you did, Madeline! Look what you’ve done! Mum’s going to kill you!”

In her section, “Re-searching Lives,” Norman autobiographically evokes the author Doris Lessing and her fictional character, Martha Quest, and later presents a poetry manuscript, “Martha in the Mirror,” in which she “offer[s] details and impressions and emotions of [her] own life for Martha to use.” She describes this as “a curiously freeing and uncensored experience where I know I am contemplating and writing about events in my life which I would never have written about so openly under the guise of my own name” (84).

Besides veiling her own experience in Martha’s identity, Norman also self-consciously addresses Lessing in a poem, “Dear Doris Lessing”:

Doris—/i am borrowing Martha/am writing autobiographical episodes/under her name/an alias for my own indiscretions/Doris—/i am signing her out/like a library book/opening her chapters/bending the corners of pages/and reading them backwards/Doris—/i am borrowing Martha/will not return her in the same condition/although she’s long overdue

Evoking the author, as Norman does, as well as breathing voice into a fictional character, dissolves subject/object borders. As reader/writer/character, Norman gains points of access beyond conventional critical inquiry—points of access, which allow for deeper interpretations and a fuller engagement with the text.

We see, for example, in her poem “Martha Answers,” not only Norman’s own reflected experience, but also the experience of the character Martha evolving as she expresses her rage at being “borrowed”:

I am currently working on a story with Madeline Usher (from Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”) as the subject. Madeline, after the house shatters and crumbles, emerges baffled by circumstances over which she has had no control. In Poe’s text, Madeline Usher appears only twice and never speaks, yet she bears the responsibility for the destruction of the physical house, as well as the termination of the Usher genealogical line.
Segment from my story in progress:

“The story was written by Edgar Allen Poe,” the student said.

“Poe? Who? You mean it is already told?”

The student laughed lightly, then.

“You're an actress, right? We're being filmed, right?”

“Tell me of this story,” I demanded.

The student tidied her hair with her hands and squinted into a rose bush.

“Well, there’s this guy named Roderick Usher,” she began.

The name of my brother stung me.

“Proceed,” I ordered.

“And there’s this other guy, this old school friend of Roderick. He’s the one who’s telling the story.”

“And what of the Lady Madeline…does she figure nowhere in this account?”

“Oh, her,” the student replied. “You don’t really hear too much about her. She’s the crazy lady who gets accidentally vaulted into a crypt.”

When my mother returned home that evening, my eldest brother ran to her extending the shattered mirror. “Look what Madeline did! Look what Madeline did!” I don’t recall the feel of my mother’s hand across my cheek or bottom. I don’t know if I was slapped at all. I just remember seeing my mother’s face in the reflection of the kitchen window as she held the broken mirror.

“This was a gift from my father,” she said. “It’s the only thing I had left.”

This technique of allowing the imagination the freedom to move beyond the personal while embracing the personal enlarges the orbit of the textual encounter, and presents a myriad of opportunity for expanding on and into the text.

you think you know me so well/as you sit in your house/with your middle-class life/that wasn’t me/why are you tainting me/with your own pathetic stories/waiting in the churchyard/and hauling out my parents, my friends/for re-inspection/changing Doris’s history/what do you know of war/or injustice/i grew up with spilled blood in my veins/& crushed skulls for breakfast/rug fluff in an ovary/you were not even born/how dare you invade my soul (116).

About the Responding Author
Madeline Sonik is a writer, anthologist, and Ph.D candidate at the Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction. Her works include a novel, Arms (Nightwood Editions, 2002) and a short story collection, Drying the Bones (Nightwood, 2000). She has co-edited two anthologies, Fresh Blood: New Canadian Gothic Fiction (Turnstone, 1998) and Entering the Landscape (Oberon, 2001); a third anthology, Canadian Gothic: Tales of Unease from Pre-Confederation to the Present, is forthcoming with Wilfrid Laurier UP.

Correspondence: Madeline Sonik, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada.
E-mail: educational.insights@ubc.ca