A SECRET HISTORY

Shirley Jackson often said that the idea for “The Lottery,” the short story that shocked much of America when it appeared in *The New Yorker* on June 26, 1948, came to her while she was out doing errands one sunny June morning. She thought of the plot on her way home, and she immediately placed her toddler daughter in the playpen, put away the groceries she had just bought, and sat down to type out the story on her signature yellow copy paper. It was off to her agent the next day, with virtually no corrections: “I didn’t want to fuss with it,” she later said.

As origin stories go, this one—first told by Jackson and repeated countless times by others—is just about perfect. Its near mythic quality suits “The Lottery,” a parable of a stoning ritual conducted annually in an otherwise ordinary village. And it sets up the reader for the surprise that follows: the angry, confused, curious letters from the *New Yorker* subscriber’s that would soon overwhelm the post office of tiny North Bennington, Vermont, where Jackson lived. Some rudely announced that they were canceling their subscriptions. Others expressed puzzlement or demanded an interpretation. And some, assuming that the story was factual, wanted to know where such lotteries could be witnessed. “I have read of some queer cults in our time,” wrote a reader from Los Angeles, “but this one bothers me.”

There is only one problem with Jackson’s origin myth: it is not entirely true. The letters are real, all right—Jackson’s archive contains a huge scrapbook filled with them. But her files show that certain details do not match up. The changes made to “The Lottery” were not as minimal as Jackson suggested they were; there is no evidence that Jackson’s agent, as she claimed, disliked the story; and the period between submission and publication was a few months, not a few weeks. These details are relatively minor; they alter neither the meaning of the story nor the significance of its impact. But for the biographer, they are the equivalent of a warning siren: Caution! Poetic license ahead!

Some writers are particularly prone to mythmaking. Shirley Jackson was one of them. During her lifetime, she fascinated critics and readers by playing up her interest in magic: the author’s note on her first novel identifies her as “perhaps the only contemporary writer who is a practicing amateur witch, specializing in small-scale black magic and fortune-telling with a tarot deck.” To interviewers, she expounded on her alleged abilities, even claiming that she had used magic to break the leg of publisher Alfred A. Knopf, with whom her husband was involved in a dispute. Reviewers found those stories irresistible, extrapolating freely from her interest in witchcraft to her writing, which often takes a turn into the uncanny. “Miss Jackson writes not with a pen but a broomstick” was an oft quoted line. Roger Straus, her first publisher, would call her “a rather haunted woman.”

Look more closely, however, and Jackson’s persona is much thornier. She was a talented, determined, ambitious writer in an era when it was still unusual for a woman to have both a family and a profession. She
was a mother of four who tried to keep up the appearance of running a conventional American household, but she and her husband, the writer Stanley Edgar Hyman, were hardly typical residents of their rural Vermont town—not least because Hyman was born and raised Jewish. And she was, indeed, a serious student of the history of witchcraft and magic: not necessarily as a practical method of influencing the world around her (it's debatable whether she actually practiced magical rituals), but as a way of embracing and channeling female power at a time when women in America often had little control over their lives.

Jackson’s brand of literary suspense is part of a vibrant and distinguished tradition that can be traced back to the American Gothic work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry James. Her unique contribution to this genre is her primary focus on the problems of women’s lives. Two decades before the women’s movement ignited, Jackson’s early stories were already exploring the unmarried woman’s desperate isolation in a society where a husband was essential for social acceptance. As her career progressed and her personal life became more troubled, her work began to investigate more deeply the psychic damage to which women are especially prone. It can be no accident that in many of these works, a house—the woman’s domain—functions as a kind of protagonist, with traditional homemaking occupations such as cooking or gardening playing a crucial role in the narrative. In Jackson’s first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), the houses on a suburban street mirror the lives of the families within. In *The Sundial* (1958), her fourth novel, an estate functions as a fortress: an island amid chaos. In *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), her late masterpieces, a house becomes both a prison and a site of disaster.

I’ve been fascinated by Jackson’s work since my first reading of *Hill House*, which captivated me with the literary sophistication and emotional depth she brought to what might have been a hoary ghost story. But it was only more recently that I began to appreciate the greater range of her work and its resonance with her life story, which embodies the dilemmas faced by so many women in the mid-twentieth century, on the cusp of the feminist movement. Jackson belonged to the generation of women whose angst Betty Friedan unforgettably chronicled in *The Feminine Mystique*: women born during or just after World War I, who were raising their families in the 1940s and 1950s. Like the housewives who felt a “strange stirring” of dissatisfaction as they went about their chores, Jackson, too, fought to carve out a creative life amid a bustling family. But—as was also the case for so many women of her time—her identity was ineradicably bound to her husband’s, and their sometimes tortured intimacy reverberates seismically through her work.

Jackson began to write in earnest in college, shortly before she met Hyman, who went on to become a faculty member at Bennington College and a respected literary critic. He would always regard her as his greatest discovery, while she relied on his taste and judgment as a measure of her literary worth. The couple moved quickly into the ranks of the literary elite: at the age of twenty-three Hyman joined the staff of *The New Yorker*, which also published a dozen of Jackson’s short stories, starting in the early 1940s. Her critical and commercial success mounted with each of her books, culminating in the triumph of *Castle*, her last completed novel, which was a favorite of reviewers and a best seller. At the same time, her nonfiction articles for women’s magazines, which she
turned into two successful memoirs about her life as a mother, won her a large popular audience and impressive fees.

Sadly, the trajectory of Jackson’s creative ascent was mirrored by an arc of personal descent. Though she and Hyman shared an intellectually rich marriage and a warm family life, he could be a domineering and sometimes unfaithful partner, and he grew to resent the fact that his writing never enjoyed the public acclaim of his much celebrated wife’s. As the pressures on Jackson swelled, she turned to tranquilizers to soothe her nerves and to amphetamines to help her lose weight and manage a demanding writing schedule on top of a boisterous household that included four children and a menagerie of pets. In the last years of her life, she was so tormented by anxiety and agoraphobia that she rarely left the house. Health problems related to the couple’s heavy drinking and love of indulgence—both Jackson and Hyman were significantly overweight—contributed to their tragically early deaths from cardiac arrest: she in 1965 at age forty-eight, he five years later at fifty-one. Her death cut short an impressive rebound during which, recovering her emotional and mental strength, she had begun to write two new novels.

Critics have often been puzzled by the question of how one writer could work simultaneously in two very different genres: literary suspense and domestic comedy. “One would sooner expect [Charles] Addams to illustrate Little Women than Miss Jackson to write a cheerful book about family life,” commented a reviewer of her first memoir. But these two aspects of Jackson’s writing are profoundly interconnected. Her horror stories, which always take place primarily on a psychological level, are grounded in the domestic: in Castle, an entire family is poisoned at the dinner table; in Hill House, the nursery, referred to as “the heart of the house,” is one of the sites of greatest terror. (The word poignantly repeated, mantralike, by whatever is haunting Hill House is “home.”) Meanwhile, the domestic tales often need only the slightest tap to take on a darker shade, as in “Charles,” in which the boy making trouble in the narrator’s son’s kindergarten could be either an invisible imp or (more likely) the son himself. Jackson’s two authorial personas, though often in tension, were equally authentic.

In “The Third Baby’s the Easiest,” a magazine piece that was incorporated into her memoir Life Among the Savages, a clerk asks Jackson, as she arrives at the hospital to give birth to her third child, to state her occupation. “Writer,” she says. “I’ll just put down housewife,” the clerk replies. Jackson set down these lines without rancor in a laugh-out-loud account of labor and delivery. But they vividly illustrate how great was the pressure on women of that era to assume without protest the “happy homemaker” role society urged upon them. Jackson was an important writer who happened also to be—and to embrace being—a housewife, as women of her generation were all but required to do. The tension between the two roles was both internal and external, based simultaneously in her expectations for herself and in the expectations of her husband, family, publishers, and readers.

This tension animates all of Jackson’s writing. And it makes her perfectly representative of her time. Writing to a boyfriend in 1956, college student Sylvia Plath imagined a life with “babies and bed and brilliant
friends and a magnificent stimulating dinner home where geniuses drink gin in the kitchen after a delectable dinner and read their own novels.” Anne Sexton opened her poem “Housewife” (1962) with the line “Some women marry houses.” The themes of Jackson’s work were so central to the preoccupations of American women during the postwar period that Plath biographer Linda Wagner-Martin has called the 1950s “the decade of Jackson.” Her body of work constitutes nothing less than the secret history of American women of her era. And the stories she tells form a counternarrative to the “feminine mystique,” revealing the unhappiness and instability beneath the housewife’s sleek veneer of competence.

The American midcentury was a time of both unprecedented prosperity and profound uncertainty, with the shadow of the war that had just ended—a war unlike any other—lingering uneasily in the background. The women who had entered the workforce to replace their enlisted husbands and brothers were balking at being urged back into the home—even a home stocked with gleaming new appliances, in a safe suburban neighborhood. The House Committee on Un-American Activities sought Communists lurking in the halls of U.S. government institutions and at home in those cozy suburbs; both America and the Soviet Union tested nuclear bombs of unprecedented power and danger; a massive social transformation, kick-started by the desegregation of public schools, was under way. All these tensions are palpable in Jackson’s work, which channels a far-reaching anxiety about the tumultuous world outside the home even as it investigates the dark secrets of domestic American life. In the years that led up to the civil rights movement, she grappled with issues of racial prejudice. During a time when Jews, including her husband, were struggling to win acceptance among the WASP elite, she charted the anti-Semitic strain in American society. And the psychological suspense she generated in her novels and stories, often manifested in the fear of the self disintegrating from the inside, is inseparable from the real paranoia of a postwar America obsessed with nuclear annihilation and with the Communists who might push the fatal button.

Critics have tended to underestimate Jackson’s work: both because of its central interest in women’s lives and because some of it is written in genres regarded as either “faintly disreputable” (in the words of one scholar) or simply uncategorizable. *Hill House* is often dismissed as an especially well-written ghost story, *Castle* as a whodunit. The headline of Jackson’s *New York Times* obituary identified her as “Author of Horror Classic”—that is, “The Lottery.” But such lazy pigeonholing does an injustice to the masterly way in which Jackson used the classic tropes of suspense to plumb the depths of the human condition. No writer since Henry James has been so successful in exploring the psychological reach of terror, locating in what we fear the key to unlock the darkest corners of the psyche. “I have always loved . . . to use fear, to take it and comprehend it and make it work,” Jackson once wrote in a line that could be her manifesto. In our fears and in our crimes, she believed, we find ourselves. And the outrage that greeted “The Lottery” shows that she was right.

In 1960, Jackson wrote to her parents with an unusual request. She and Hyman had been making their wills and thinking about posterity, and she wanted her parents to promise eventually to return all the letters
she had written to them. “since i hope i have a couple of years still to go the problem is not very pressing,” she wrote. “but the vital thing is that you not throw them out. . . . they must be a long detailed record of many years. i am almost embarrassed when i think of the mountains of pages they must make.” (jackson tended to abandon typographical conventions in her letters and manuscript drafts, and i have chosen to preserve her style.)

jackson’s letters to her parents—most of which they did preserve and return to hyman after her death—must be read with a certain degree of skepticism, since they often represent the efforts of a rebellious yet dutiful daughter to wrest the narrative of her own life away from her parents. still, they are indeed the best surviving account of her life, although any letters she sent before 1948 are presumed lost. she was an inconsistent keeper of diaries, but a few from her high school and college years still exist, and other scattered pages turn up at various points later on. in researching this book, i made use of numerous other letters, including some to such well-known friends as ralph and fanny ellison and kenneth and libbie burke. hyman’s letters to mutual acquaintances, too, proved an important source of information about both of their lives, especially as he often devoted a few words to whatever his wife was currently working on. during the summers they spent apart while in college, jackson and hyman wrote to each other constantly, sometimes as often as twice a day; i have drawn heavily upon them for my story of their early life together. laurence hyman, jackson’s eldest child, made available to me many years’ worth of jackson’s never-before-seen correspondence with her literary agents: thanks to their careful records, i have been able to date nearly all of her work, both published and unpublished. (a select bibliography of her published writings can be found in the back of this book.) the greatest surprise and delight of this project was the discovery of nearly sixty pages of jackson’s correspondence with a housewife named jeanne beatty, who began their intense exchange of letters with a simple fan note. these letters, hidden in a pennsylvania barn and never before published, offer an intimate look at jackson’s family life and the state of her mind as she embarked upon the writing of castle.

these and other sources have given me an unprecedented understanding of jackson’s creative process as well as her personal life—which were closely related. by all accounts, she was a powerful personality as well as a brilliant writer. “her character was so tremendous it was always hard to believe she was just one person,” her friend libbie burke once said. she lived the life plath hoped for, with her brilliant husband, her brood of children, and their legendary vermont house, the headquarters of a social circle that included ellison, howard nemerov, and bernard malamud, among others. on a family visit to new york when laurence was thirteen, jackson and hyman decided that he ought to learn something about jazz—and took him to four nightclubs in a single evening. a devoted baseball fan, jackson had a running joke with her editor at farrar, strauss about using witchcraft to secure victories for the brooklyn dodgers.

a biography of jackson would be incomplete without a full consideration of the life and work of stanley edgar hyman—not only through the lens of their marriage and his influence on her work, but also as
an important intellectual and fascinating character in his own right. Hyman was the author of several major works of literary criticism, including *The Armed Vision* (1948), a study of critical methods, and *The Tangled Bank* (1962), which explores the work of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, James Frazer, and Sigmund Freud from a literary perspective. He is well remembered by friends, colleagues, and former students for his generosity of character, his personal charisma, and his booming voice.

The long-running poker game that he participated in weekly—along with several other Bennington professors, various college presidents, and the local garageman—was memorialized by Nemerov in a poem published shortly after Hyman’s death: “hard / As it is to imagine / A fat and rowdy ghost / Pee in his empty glass / So as not to miss a hand, / That’s how it happens.” (The poem is called “Myth & Ritual,” after a celebrated course Hyman created at Bennington, for years the most popular course in the college.) Taken together, his and Jackson’s lives offer a fascinating snapshot of American intellectual life from the 1940s to the 1960s.

As a writer and mother myself, I am struck by how contemporary Jackson’s dilemmas feel: her devotion to her children coexists uneasily with her fear of drowning in domesticity. Several generations later, the intersection of life and work continues to be one of the points of most profound anxiety in our society—an anxiety that affects not only women but also their husbands and children.

Whatever his flaws as a husband, Hyman was a consistently insightful interpreter of his wife’s work. He bitterly regretted the critical neglect and misreading she suffered during her lifetime. “For all her popularity, Shirley Jackson won surprisingly little recognition,” he wrote in an essay published after her death. “She received no awards or prizes, grants or fellowships; her name was often omitted from lists on which it clearly belonged.” He ended his lament with a prediction: “I think that the future will find her powerful visions of suffering and inhumanity increasingly significant and meaningful, and that Shirley Jackson’s work is among that small body of literature produced in our time that seems apt to survive.” Considering the revival that has taken place in recent years—nearly all of Jackson’s books are currently in print, with a new edition of previously uncollected and unpublished materials appearing in 2015—it seems safe to say that he was correct.