

If you've ever
recovered a memory of
abuse, suffered
from chronic fatigue or
Gulf War syndrome,
or, perhaps, been
abducted by aliens... you're
about to be furious.

Laurie Abraham reports

Diagnosis: Hysteria

ELAINE SHOWALTER is one of those middle-aged feminist scholars Camille Paglia loves to hate. The self-proclaimed "anti-establishment maverick" counts the renowned literary critic among the "beaming Betty Crockers, hangdog dowdies, and parochial prudes" who rode their professorial husbands' coattails into the Ivy League, then conspired to keep true feminists like herself out. "How the hell did Elaine Showalter ever get credentials for being a feminist?" Paglia rants.

From a distance, Showalter may look the part of a grown-up '50s sweetheart: Her figure is matronly, her dresses fall to mid-calf, her light-brown hair curls under at her shoulders like, well, Betty Crocker's. But in her audacious new book, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (Columbia University Press), Showalter makes her mark as the kind of provocative but formidable public intellectual Paglia might be if she spent less time taking cheap shots at easy targets; cutting down academic feminists, after all, is like shooting fish in a barrel. To stoop to the macho bad girl's rhetorical level, Elaine Showalter is Camille Paglia with balls.

Showalter dares to tell thousands upon thousands of sick, traumatized people that they don't have what they think they have; and—raising her thesis to the level of the almost sublimely offensive—that what they really have is in their heads. Chronic-fatigue and Gulf War-syndrome sufferers, people who say they've been abducted by aliens, or recovered memories of sexual abuse, or discovered multiple personalities—the whole lot of them are "hysterics," Showalter argues, who are unconsciously expressing psychological conflicts through physical pain or vivid imaginings.

"Contemporary hysterical patients blame external sources—a virus, sexual

molestation, chemical warfare, satanic conspiracy, alien infiltration—for psychic problems," Showalter writes in her introduction. "A century after Freud, many people still believe psychosomatic disorders are illegitimate and search for physical evidence that firmly places cause and cure outside the self."

SHOWALTER AND I are ensconced in her cozy office in Princeton's Gothic, gray-stone English department, midway through our first conversation, when she mentions the limp.

"I myself have experienced hysterical symptoms," she says casually.

"You have?" I ask too quickly. I didn't expect confession from someone of Showalter's intellectual stature. Her 1977 book, *A Literature of Her Own*, put feminist literary criticism on the map. With six subsequent books, several hundred scholarly articles, and scores of book and theater reviews to her name, she's one of the country's leading critics (think Harold Bloom) and president-elect of the Modern Language Association, the most powerful professional group in the humanities.

"Oh, sure," she continues, reaching for one of the candies she keeps in a dish on top of a coffee table in her living-room—>

like office. "I was very unhappy as a kid, and one of the ways I reacted is that I developed a limp. A main joy of my life was to go to the library on Saturdays with my best friend, then we'd have hot dogs and go to the movies. But I remember one afternoon it snowed, and I was limping, and I couldn't go. I can look back now and see that, of course, it was hysteria."

If Showalter admits to hysteria as nonchalantly as most of us admit to the flu, it's because she believes that the condition is a "near-universal human experience." These days, Showalter walks with the slightly rocking gait of a large woman; she's lost the limp, but, she says, not all the hysteria. "I still have certain symptoms: I pull my hair; I twist it." She catches a piece of hair between two fingers, straightening, flattening what is already well-tamed.

But Showalter surely knows that to classify fiddling with one's hair as a "hysteria" is to overdefine the category into meaninglessness. Two other episodes she describes are more to the point: first, a temporary but manageable case of stage fright—"I lost my voice"—when she left the "nurturing and support" of the all-female Douglass College at Rutgers University in 1984 for Princeton's English department; and second, months of aches and pains during a summer in Paris with her husband, a professor of eighteenth-century French literature. "I was under a huge amount of stress professionally; I didn't know how to say no, as the cliché goes. I had strep throat and I had an allergic reaction to the sulfa drugs the doctors gave me, but then I just didn't get better for a long time. I had terrible headaches; I was running a low-grade fever; I was exhausted. I had a million different tests, and at some point I realized that these pains are real, but they must have been coming out of tensions in my life."

But, of course, Showalter's *Histories* isn't about the small, private tortures visited on the body of one Victorian literature professor by her unconscious. Having spent the past eighteen summers studying women and psychiatry at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in London, Showalter is among a group of critics, historians, and anthropologists informally known as the "New Hysterians." While psychiatrists and other MDs declared hysteria dead by mid-century—it was an unidentified organic illness, they said, or unique to sexually and occupationally oppressed

Victorian women—the New Hysterians insist the condition has merely mutated into new forms. Hysterics' "conversion symptoms" differ across time because people draw from the current "symptom pool," Showalter says. Hence, her limp: In the '40s, crippling diseases like polio were widely feared and relatively common. Or, in a cross-cultural comparison, "an Englishman can legitimately complain of headache or fatigue, but not that his penis is retracting into his body—a perfectly acceptable symptom in Malaysia and South China."

"I was a cuckoo in the nest," Showalter says, "a fat bookworm with an anorexic, blond mother and sister."

Modern hysterical epidemics spread widely and rapidly, Showalter asserts, because hundreds of magazines and tabloids, *Oprahs* and *Hard Copy*s, not to mention the Web, spew prototypes of disease. "Patients learn about diseases from the media, unconsciously develop the symptoms, and then attract media attention in an endless cycle. The human imagination is not infinite, and we are all bombarded by these plotlines every day."

Showalter repeatedly assures that she doesn't regard hysteria as "weakness" or "badness." Rather, it's an alternative language to communicate a message that can't be spoken, whether because of social powerlessness (a major reason she thinks female hysterics outnumber male) or oppressive cultural expectations. For instance, a traumatized Gulf War veteran runs afoul of the "mythology that psychological illness is unmanly," Showalter writes, "the mythology of the warrior hero." It's hard to imagine that these explanations will mollify chronic-fatigue or Gulf War-syndrome sufferers, however—according to Showalter, they're as deluded as people who believe

they consort with aliens.

"Joyce is worried about me," Showalter tells me during one interview. She's talking about the prolific, sometimes startlingly original novelist Joyce Carol Oates, one of her confidantes at Princeton. "She doesn't think I should go on the book tour. She thinks I'll be assassinated." Showalter and Oates are only half-joking.

ROUGHLY 300 UNDERGRADUATES are listening to Professor Showalter lecture about Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John* between sips of diet Coke. When she visits Paris, the home of the relentlessly sleek and petite, Showalter says she feels like Gulliver, the Lilliputians' "Man-Mountain," and even here, among the strapping Princeton youth, she has a monumental presence. She's wearing a crimson dress, the color of the most brilliant fall leaves visible through the auditorium's lead-glass windows, and her usual makeup: brown lipstick, eyeliner, and deep-red, nearly black, nail polish. ("Dress up! Teaching is performance," Showalter once advised a graduate student.)

This morning, she's giving a thumbnail sketch of fictional mother/daughter relationships through the centuries. You've got the Brontës and their highly sentimentalized, "homosocial" mother/daughter attachments. Modernists, from Virginia Woolf to Sylvia Plath, bring more tension to the mix, with the artist daughter chafing against the domestic mother. And postmodernists like Kincaid? "*Annie John* has a very, very intense mother/daughter plot," Showalter says. "You see a violent, almost symbolic rejection of the mother. . . . Freud said the daughter had to hate the mother to separate from her." The class titters. "You don't have to believe this; this is just what Freud said," Showalter offers. "But Freud is not a fool; Freud is a great genius."

Actually, she confides later, while it's pretty obvious that children must psychologically break from their parents to become adults, she doesn't believe *Annie John's* white-hot hatred for her mother is a necessary or inevitable rite of passage for women. Even so, Showalter's own relationship with her mother (and father) came to a sudden, horrible end.

"My parents disowned me when I was twenty-one, and I didn't see them for fifteen years, because I married someone who wasn't Jewish," she says—and it's hard to imagine anyone much Waspier, at least

Showalter quotes one young abductee whose tale bears out her analysis in almost chilling fashion: "He's making me feel things. He's making me feel things in my body that I don't feel. He's making me feel feelings, sexual feelings."

"I CAN'T BELIEVE JOYCE," Showalter tells me, laughing, again referring to Oates. "She hates to shop, so I buy her clothes from time to time. And I got her this jacket—it was really quite wonderful, hot-pink with black piping—but it didn't fit, so she had to take it back. I just got off the phone with her, and she was talking about T.J. Maxx like it was some exotic land."

When I hear this story, I recall another interpretive spin Showalter put on *Annie Jobst* during her lecture. "There's a matrophobia here, a fear of becoming one's mother." She directed the class to an Adrienne Rich essay: "Where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her."

No one could argue that Showalter has become her mother (an eighty-three-year-old with whom she has reconciled), but if fleeing her family initially meant quiet contemplation in the ivory tower, getting pulled back might mean mucking around in the traditional feminine world—something Showalter does with almost self-conscious glee. Apart from being a die-hard shopper—"I think it's meditative for women, like channel-surfing for men"—she is obsessively, though somehow endearingly, attentive to her toilette. At least a half-dozen times a day, she pulls out her compact to reapply her brown lipstick. During my first visit with her in Princeton, she schedules a joint manicure for us (dark red for her fingers, purple for her toes—which she would show off outside the campus store during a pit stop to replace her sagging knee-highs with a newly purchased pair). And to one of her graduate students, whom we bump into on the street: "Your eyeliner is gorgeous; what kind is it?"

During our first conversation, Showalter told me that as young academics, she and her husband lived a "double life"—sneaking to New York to see popular movies or hear Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane. "I've always really loved popular culture, but it wasn't something serious intellectuals were supposed to be concerned about. As far as movies go, about the only thing you could see was

Bergman—you know, about suicide and the immortal soul and death—and I was very fond of a Walt Disney movie called *The Incredible Journey*, about a cat and two dogs that went over the Rockies. I remember being at a faculty party and saying that we had been to see this movie, and it made people so annoyed that I think I kind of enjoyed it."

Ruminating about pop culture has become more academically respectable, but, perhaps predictably, Showalter has another showstopper to pull out at faculty parties: Until January, when she decided

"Alien-abduction scenarios closely resemble women's pornography," she says.

she couldn't handle the weekly deadlines, she was a critic for *People* magazine—a TV critic. "A lot of people are simply appalled; they don't understand why she would do such a thing," says Michael Cadden, the director of Princeton's theater and dance department and one of Showalter's few soul mates on campus. "It's the equivalent of being told back in the '30s that the professor likes boys. People just refuse to believe that it's the same Elaine Showalter."

Showalter herself told me that her colleagues go mute when the nasty subject of *People* arises, but I hadn't taken her literally. She's an engaging, dramatic storyteller, and I'd assumed she was exaggerating for the sake of gripping narrative. Which is why I am amazed to be present when one of those silences falls. It's during a private dinner for Arthur Miller, hosted by a family of rich alumni who'd invited the playwright to campus. Old New York-dockworker handsome, his mind still wide open and penetrating at eighty-one, Miller had earlier discussed *The Crucible's* witchcraft hysteria with Showalter's graduate seminar. Now, at a table adjoining Miller's, Showalter

and I are dining with Oates, her husband, the provost, and a couple of other Princeton faculty.

Several times that day, Miller had lamented the lack of a national theater in the United States, and now the provost takes up the topic. "When I was at Princeton, you used to go by dorm rooms and hear Mozart," he says. "These days, you hear rap."

Hear, Hear! is the immediate reaction around the table. "It's TV," someone offers. "TV is everywhere."

"It used to be *we* at the prestigious universities preserved a different culture," the provost continues. At this, Showalter sets down her fork. The cuckoo in the nest can't resist the bait of the new parent: stodgy, elitist academia. "But pop culture is better today. It's not based on the syrupy models like we had in the '50s. It's so widely varied; it comes in so many interesting forms."

"That's right," Oates murmurs, her eyes faintly mischievous. "I mean, who would have thought that the president of the Modern Language Association could also be a TV reviewer for *People*?"

The provost looks briefly, balefully, at Showalter. Someone changes the subject.

SHOWALTER'S STUDENTS SEEM TO LOVE her—"She's not purposefully enigmatic like the other professors here; she feels everyone should be able to understand her lectures," one English major gushes—but sometimes it seems like they're the only ones. For freshly minted feminist scholars, she is an Oedipal figure, as is just about any academic who's a leader in her field. "You can make your career by bashing Showalter," Cadden explains. Then, too, by Showalter's own and others' accounts, she's not exactly beloved by her feminist contemporaries at Princeton. They're disdainful of her stardom, offended by her flip rhetorical style or annoyed by her sanguine view of women's progress in the bid for equality.

The barbs of her fellow intellectuals may only prick skin thickened by twenty-five-plus years in the academic ring, but if *Hystories* gets as much attention as her publisher hopes, its critics are almost sure to draw blood. As the Dartmouth reaction suggests, advocates of recovered memory will be in there jabbing, though their own credibility has been under serious attack for some years now. It's the chronic-fatigue and Gulf War-syndrome patients who will probably feel most

superficially, than her husband of thirty-four years, English Showalter, a descendant of Virginia plantation owners. But her betrothed's religion was only the public reason her parents cut her off, she says. "I had a very, very contentious relationship with my parents practically my whole life, and in addition, my mother was bitterly unhappy. She was an intelligent woman who did not have an education, who had no outlets for her energies. And I was the cuckoo in the nest. I was an intellectual: a fat, respectable, bespectacled bookworm with a gorgeous, anorexic, blond mother and a gorgeous, anorexic, blond sister."

Showalter was so desperate to escape her parents that she talks as if she disowned them. They would have condemned everything from her "hippie dress" to her choice to become a working mother (she had her two children by age thirty) and a feminist activist. "I have to say it was very enabling for me to be free of my family. It was right to leave when I left. I had the guts to do it, and I had to do it," Showalter says. "So I feel good about myself for that. I saved myself."



Dartmouth students accused Showalter of "trashing women."

DURING A SIX-WEEK stint as a visiting scholar at Dartmouth in 1994, Showalter gave a talk on recovered memories of sexual abuse, based on her research for *Hystories*. It was not well received.

"The women in the community got together to denounce me," Showalter says in *Crucible-ese* (Arthur Miller's play about the Salem witch trials animates her work and speech). Never mind that she is a mother of feminist literary criticism, the founder of one of the nation's first women's-studies programs, the former president of the New Jersey chapter of NOW—Showalter was a traitor to the cause. "A little delegation of students came to me and said that they had all been having midnight meetings about me, and they wanted me to meet with them to apologize and recant."

Showalter had questioned the reliability of recovered memories in her typical style: direct and, occasionally, wickedly funny. While she maintains that hysterics deserve empathy, not scorn, she doesn't hesitate to use sarcasm to make her points. For instance, in a chapter on mul-

tipl-personality syndrome, she dissects Canadian writer Sylvia Fraser's autobiography, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing*.

Fraser tells readers her first memory of being sexually abused came in her forties, at which point she discovered her "other self" with the encouragement of a hypnotherapist (an example of the kind of therapeutic suggestion that Showalter believes has transformed a real but rare disorder into a hysterical epidemic). Fraser blames this alter-ego for cheating on her husband, a good man whom she

ity as a feminist intellectual."

Showalter is hardly insensible to the ways in which hysteria has been used to impugn women. Her 1985 book, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980*, exposes how stereotypes of femininity have distorted the diagnosis and treatment of insanity. And she devotes several chapters of *Hystories* to the medical and literary low points in the history of hysteria, beginning with the Greeks' attribution of women's random pains to their wandering uteruses ("Monday in the foot, Tuesday in the throat, Wednesday in the breast, and so on," Showalter jokes) and leading up to Freud's dismissal of what was probably real trauma as the fantasies of hysterical women.

Still, Showalter buys Freud's fundamental notion that hysteria is the physical expression of mental pain—with a caveat: Sexual conflict isn't the only cause of hysteria. "Women have traditionally used hysterical disorders to compensate for the lack of adventure or challenge in their lives," she says. And today, hysteria may be a "coping mechanism" for women

who can't do it all. "In a study carried out by Harvard Medical School," Showalter says, "women with chronic-fatigue syndrome reported frantic lives with multiple responsibilities: jobs, child rearing, volunteer work, exercise, and social activity."

Interestingly, though, passages where Showalter pulls back the curtain on the sexual dimensions of hysteria are among the book's most eye-opening. Tales of alien abduction are the mental creations of women who need to believe that "desires for touch, gazing, penetration, have to come from very far away, even outer space," she writes. Although we usually think of men as the rabid sci-fi fans, the majority of alien abductees are women. A typical encounter starts with a gynecological exam and culminates with a "Tall Gray," usually analogized to a doctor or other male authority figure, harvesting the woman's eggs and "gazing deep into her eyes like an extraterrestrial Heathcliff or Flaret."

Noting that "abduction scenarios closely resemble women's pornography," >

loved and respected. "It wasn't so much passion that tempted me," Fraser writes, "but compulsion that drove her. Like a sleepwalker I watched askance while someone who looked like me cast aside everything I valued to re-create an infantile world in which no will or desire existed outside of the illicit affair."

Showalter's critique? "Actually, [Fraser] never quite remembers the incest," she writes, "but she knows it happened. It must have, for otherwise why wouldn't she be happy? Why wouldn't she be faithful? . . . By her own account, Fraser feels terrible guilt for a sexual indiscretion that does not fit her standards of respectable behavior. Seeing herself as a victim allows Fraser to forgive herself for the infidelity."

The Dartmouth students charged Showalter with "not believing women, trashing what women said," as well as "washing [women's] dirty linen" in public—in front of notoriously piggish Dartmouth men, no less. "I said, 'I'm not whispering these things in secret. I'm willing to come forth and take the heat for saying these things. That's my responsibil-

ambushed by Showalter and thus try hardest to strike back.

"Most people know what they think of alien abduction: It's crazy," Showalter says. "And they're offended I equate it with chronic fatigue. That's why I did it. What's similar about them is that you get a group of people who, for one psychological reason or another, aren't feeling well. And then you get experts who become very concerned with these patients, and who come up with a hypothesis of what's wrong, and who persuade them that what's wrong is something very specific—that there's a mysterious disease. And diseases have some sort of cause. And the government isn't allowing us to research it in the proper way [a charge made by CFS patients]. Or: This was done by aliens who are coming to this country, and the government knows about it, but it's concealing the evidence."

CFS fits neatly into one of the most resonant narratives of our time—that paternalistic doctors don't take women's complaints seriously—a story that attracts reporters as readily as a plane crash. As an example of blinkered media coverage, Showalter cites a *Publishers Weekly* review of a patient's autobiography. While the reviewer criticized the book's "messy chronology, poor writing, and muddled science," including a claim that 15 percent of patients thought their fingerprints were fading, he then let the author off the hook by adding that "CFS tends to undermine one's ability to communicate clearly."

The same kind of muddled reportage is transforming Gulf War syndrome into a virulent epidemic, "shifting the debate from the symptoms to the cover-up," Showalter says. At the time this story went to press, media fingers, led by the big, fat one of *The New York Times*, were pointing to toxic chemicals as the cause of the veterans' distress, specifically the nerve gas sarin, which might have been released when army engineers blew up an Iraqi ammunition depot. And, indeed, the "news" foisting this story onto front pages day after day is: What did Pentagon officials know, and when did they know it?

A Gulf War-syndrome story published one of the days I'm visiting Showalter announces that two new government studies show that troops who served in Iraq are suffering more "serious health problems" than those who didn't, seeming to "vindicate ailing veterans who have

said that their service in the Gulf has cost them their health." The maladies disproportionately striking the vets? Chronic diarrhea, rashes, joint pain, memory loss, fatigue, and depression.

"Those symptoms, they're classic," Showalter erupts, meaning they're typical of post-traumatic-stress disorder, or war neurosis, the history of which she documents in the book. "Nobody is denying that they're sicker—yes, they're sicker. But that group [profiled in the *Times* story], those were reservists from Pennsylvania. These are just ordinary guys who joined

"The pain of hysteria is just as real as if you had a tumor, just as little in your control."

the reserves because it's what men in their neighborhoods do: It's butch, macho, and they get paid for it. And all of a sudden, they get picked up and put down in the Iraqi desert, and they are told that a monster in human form, with his elite Republican Guard, is going to kill them in terrible ways. And they sit there for four months, putting on these awful [chemical repellent] suits, taking all kinds of [anti-nerve-gas] injections. I mean it's *horrible*, horrible. The war itself, the combat, is nothing compared to the anticipation, the existential helplessness."

But what about the wives of veterans who say they've been burned by their husbands' sperm? I ask, throwing out the kind of incendiary question Showalter is sure to get if she goes on the talk-show circuit. "That's such a metaphor! The husbands come back and then start getting these symptoms. Some of them can't work, and they seem different, and the women are scared, and they're also, at some level, angry." What better metaphor for marital alienation than burning sperm? "These people need counseling so badly." Showalter's voice drops and fills with genuine concern. "I mean my heart

goes out to them. My God, I feel so bad for them, what it must be like."

"WHEN YOU TAKE YOUR SHIRT OFF," a Gulf War-syndrome sufferer is telling *60 Minutes'* Ed Bradley, "and show 'em rashes and bubbles that's all over your skin, and part of your skin's peeling, and they look at you and say, 'That's post-traumatic-stress disorder'—that's just damn nuts. That's all there is to it."

This guy almost certainly would sooner spit in Showalter's eye than accept her sympathy or her facts: From World War I onward, veterans have reported conversion symptoms much more dramatic than rashes—limps, paralysis, loss of voice—but until recently their condition was euphemistically called "shell shock." No man who fought for his country should be "castrated" with the feminine diagnosis of hysteria, the thinking went. Now, the term is post-traumatic-stress disorder, and 15 percent of Vietnam veterans have suffered from it, according to the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, and another 11 percent have had partial symptoms.

Showalter doesn't expect to make converts among Gulf War-syndrome patients, or any other camp of hysterics, for that matter. Destigmatizing psychogenic illness must begin at a broad, cultural level, which is one of Showalter's motivations for writing *Histories*. "We have to say these are legitimate symptoms. This pain is just as real as if you had a tumor. It is just as real, and just as little in your control. But there are ways to heal."

That's not to say that Showalter thinks doctors should lie to patients whom they believe are crippled by their minds. Physicians who collude with hysterics out of kindness prevent them from getting needed psychological help and strip them of dignity, she says. What's worse, when individual hysterics become widespread, enemies are targeted, whether the government, satanic cults, or fathers. "I was so struck by the fact that one of the women whose kids were killed in the Oklahoma bombing now believes it was a government conspiracy," Showalter tells me. And meanwhile, the accused bomber, Timothy McVeigh, reportedly believes the army planted a chip in his buttocks, a plot straight out of alien-abduction narratives. Hysterical epidemics undermine our respect for evidence and truth, Showalter says, and "support an atmosphere of conspiracy and suspicion." >

Showalter seems so confident, articulate, sure of her ideas, I think as I listen to her. But I'd seen her heatedly disagree with *New Yorker* film critic Terrence Rafferty during a lecture he gave at Princeton, then immediately collapse into self-doubt. "Was I too vehement?" she blurted, pink-faced, to another professor when Rafferty finished.

That kind of second-guessing is inevitable when you're pushing ideas to an extreme, says Showalter's friend Cadden. "If you've just yelled fire in a crowded theater, it can be uncomfortable dealing with the fallout." But Showalter knows what she's doing, Cadden contends. "Oscar Wilde once said, 'The only thing that's worse than being talked about is not being talked about,' and I think there's sort of an aspect of Wilde's personality in Elaine. The book is a very self-conscious attempt on her part to be a public intellectual. She's making an attempt to play the role that professors used to play within the culture: Here's some informed thinking that is a little different from what you've been hearing. Let me put this into the mix."

Even readers who don't quickly dismiss Showalter as a dangerous crank will find weaknesses and inconsistencies in her

work, to be sure. For one small example, Showalter puts part of the blame for the profusion of hysterical epidemics on the outlandish-illness peddling of TV talk shows, yet praises them for reaching women who can't "afford or manage other forms of counseling." So does TV talk spread hysteria or cure it? Showalter can't resolve the contradiction. Similarly, therapists are stoking the recovered-memory and multiple-personality hysterics, she says, but they're supposed to be the ones who help patients recognize the psychological sources of their illnesses. Showalter's answer—that we need better regulation and licensing standards for mental-health professionals—is undeniably true, but ultimately unsatisfying: Can reforms really reach inside offices of therapists and stop them from interpreting common troubles as signs of repressed sexual abuse?

Finally, the polemicist, or provocateur, in Showalter can overwhelm the scholar. What prompted Sylvia Fraser's false memories of incest, Showalter says, is her intense guilt over cheating on her husband, and his death "soon after the divorce." While there is ample evidence in *My Father's House* to credit Showalter's

conclusion that Fraser was keenly remorseful over all of the above, her husband didn't actually die until *ten* years after the divorce, and about three years after she began recalling the sexual abuse. In other words, in her eagerness to make her point, Showalter got sloppy. More fundamentally, her argument that Gulf War syndrome is a hysteria would be stronger if she acknowledged that pockets of veterans may, in fact, be suffering unexpected consequences of chemical exposure. She worries that such concessions feed hysterical epidemics—every veteran with an ache will think he's a chemical casualty. But you wouldn't have to be hysterical to think, Hey, wait a minute, these days, we're all guinea pigs in a brave new chemical world, so how can Showalter be so sure some of these guys *were* exposed to harmful toxins?

That said, as is often true, Showalter's worst quality also may be her best: We need more academics to take bold stands, to bring carefully considered, albeit controversial, ideas from the university to the rest of us. It's a job for which perhaps only a cuckoo in the nest has the will, or the nerve. □

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