

Proposal for “Downriver, an Unnatural History of Madness”

Comment [EM1]: Amazing title.

An article/story about a river, a childhood /family and illness

Comment [EM2]: I love this trio as the intersecting “Venn diagram” for your story, Susan.

Background: *Downriver, an Unnatural History of Madness* is a book-length memoir about the author’s experience growing up on the banks of the Sudbury River in Concord, Massachusetts that was contaminated by mercury and other heavy metals originating from a dye factory in Ashland. The family is beset with mysterious mental and physical illnesses, and the author’s brother descends into paranoid schizophrenia through his adolescence, ultimately committing a crime for which he serves a seven-year sentence in the Massachusetts correctional system. In addition, other families living in the cooperative neighborhood, “Conantum,” designed and built in the 1950’s to promote a sense of community togetherness, are also plagued by mental illness and suicide.

While “Downriver” explores the author’s search for truths to the possible links between mental illness and toxic metals, it is primarily a literary memoir, written in the style of other reflective environmental memoirs such as Terry Tempest Williams’ book, *Refuge*.

Comment [EM3]: Beautiful, beautiful precis – so clearly rendered.

Intent: For the Proseminar, a twenty-page article-length excerpt from the book for submission to the magazine *Orion* as a literary environmental memoir piece

Comment [EM4]: YES!

Special features: The article will interweave narrative memoir with the story of the river and the behavior of mercury as an environmental contaminant as an embedded narrative.

Comment [EM5]: YES! Have you ever read the book *Shimmering Images*? It’s my favorite book on memoir as it intersects with the big picture (here, environmental).

Sample: opening of Chapter 1

If we didn't live by the river, my mother used to say, none of this would have happened. The river, the neighborhood, Concord, all of it, she believed, was bad for us, especially for my brother John. Our neighborhood, "Conantum," with its affordable Bauhaus-inspired houses, common lands and conceit as the first planned post-war community in Massachusetts, was designed to promote togetherness. But my mother thought Conantum presumed an intimacy that looked more like gossip, presumed superiority, (the founders were Harvard and MIT graduates, professors, researchers, designers, the neighborhood boasting 2 Nobel prizes,) when too many of its children were troubled. And Concord then was still the colonial village, with family roots dating back hundreds of years, descendants living in the same houses, historical societies for each aspect of its history, the library with marble busts of its famous authors lurking in the shadows, Thoreau's *Journals* faithfully opened to the day. This Concord of the mid 1950s looked askance at the invasion. Conantum was what was then considered a "mixed" neighborhood; Massachusetts's communities were segregated by ethnicity then, delineated by clear boundaries, a park, a school, a bridge marking their outlines. In Conantum, along with Anglo-Irish families there were first generation German and Russian Jews, Italians, Armenians, Polish, all suspect intellectuals, physicists, artists, liberals, Unitarians, Quakers, Bohemians. We were outsiders, on the wrong side of Route 2.

Then there was the river, our stretch of it between Heath's Bridge to the north and Lee's bridge to the south, swarming with mosquitos or clouded with DDT

Comment [EM6]: !!!!!
breathtaking beginning.

Comment [EM7]: Goosebumps ... this promise that will be so soon disproven.

Comment [EM8]: Great simplicity of this phrasing.

Comment [EM9]: Such detail of place!

Comment [EM10]: ! gorgeous finish to this par.

Comment [EM11]: Susan, your writing has an incredible rhythm – a trustworthiness and beauty that feels rare and disarming.

the summers we were sprayed, its pungent, damp vapors surrounding us, especially rank in late summer at its lowest flow, sediments exposed. The Sudbury River, my mother believed, was making us all sick.

Our house was so close to the river it was like a moored boat, sitting on a clay bank above a sweeping curve, facing south. It was as if we were leaning into the river's northward current, the water running straight into the house, filling the floor-to-ceiling windows with movement, shadows and rippling, reflected light. Upriver there was a rocky promontory named Martha's Point, then Fairhaven Bay and the island, and across the river, hundreds of acres of woods leading to Walden Pond. This was the scene I woke to every morning, saturated with color, humming with life. The river: beguiling us with its mists, flocks of migrating birds, the winds that could reverse its slow pulse, the luminous silver frosts and in freezing winters, ice you could skate on for miles away from home, this river was my refuge.

How could the river be bad for us? It offered hope, momentum, and a promise of all I ever yearned to see, the world downriver beyond the large windows. Even when I was sick, as I often was in childhood, the view of the river from my room under the eaves offered solace. The river was my companion, and a constant one.

Comment [EM12]: YES!

Comment [EM13]: Yes...!

Comment [EM14]: Oh how compelling this is. Such an innocent question used here. I cannot wait to read the full story.

“Bluebeard’s Egg” in the Nested Narrative

At the opening of Margaret Atwood’s story “Bluebeard’s Egg,” Sally is already in a quagmire. Like the unfortunate wives of the fairytale character Bluebeard, she is moving closer and closer to the truth about her husband Ed, and the consequences both during her search and its outcome will be dire. Ed is at the dead center of Sally’s life: occupying her thoughts, her dreams, her planning, and her fears. Sally’s actions, even what appear to be forays into independence are calculated to draw him closer and hold him there. But like a fairytale, the more Sally chases the object of her desire, the more it eludes her; the more she wishes to penetrate the enigma of Ed, the more closed he appears, the more she pursues her one and only obsession, the more she loses herself. And yet, while her final discovery shatters Sally’s fragile world of belief constructed around the unknowns of her husband, we readers can collect the clues, like breadcrumbs through the forest, along the way.

We find the first clue to Sally’s strife cleverly embedded in Atwood’s opening scene. A gloss of normal domesticity shimmers over her preparations for a dinner party while Sally looks out her kitchen window toward the ravine at the bottom of the couple’s yard. This ravine is a wilderness of vines, a broken fence, a playhouse that predates Ed’s kids, and hints at other marriages taking place here, “before Sally’s time; it’s more ancient than that, and falling apart” (pp156). Sally wanted to clean it up with “a kind of terrace, built of old railroad ties, with wildflowers growing between them, but Edward says he likes it the way it is” (pp156). We may wonder why these details matter here. Is the setting just a visual backdrop for characters to move across? No, with Atwood, every

Comment [EM15]: Include date published

Comment [EM16]: Gorgeous introduction + opening – in clear language that reflects the fairy tale nature of “BBE,” you show both the truth and the surprise of this story. You set us up with a promise to show us how truth, obsession, and enigma work here. A solid claim.

Comment [EM17]: Sound set-up sentence.

Comment [EM18]: Lovely analysis of this disconnect, her wish to “clean it up.”

detail is a revelation of its own, and this scene is like a scrim behind which shadows lurk.

The ravine, below Sally's "well-kept back lawn" (pp156) is as weedy and unknown as

Comment [EM19]: YES!

Ed's past and his resistance to civilizing the space is our first indication of him as the story's fixed character, around whom others move, react, change and implode.

At first, we see Sally's husband Ed as she does, innocent, bumbling, perhaps a bit absentminded while he putters below her in his old jacket, another remnant from his past.

Comment [EM20]: Another beautiful guiding sentence/claim.

Sally affectionately calls him "stupid," and "*Edward Bear, of little Brain*" (pp157).

Comment [EM21]: Can omit pp.

Much later in the story, when we learn that Ed is actually a heart specialist, "one of the best" (pp160), we may wonder how reliable Sally is as his only witness in this story.

What does she mean by "stupid?" Apparently Ed is stupid about women. Sally believes that there are women hovering in the background, ready to pounce on him at every turn and that he gives into them too easily, as if he doesn't know what they are up to. A quick look back and we discover again that she starts to think "Ed's stupidity is not passive"

(pp157). She believes here that there must be willfulness to "the vast mosaic of his stupidity," and that "his obtuseness is a wall," that shuts out Sally so completely that she

feels she has to "hack her way through the brambles" (pp157), like the prince in "Snow

White." Is Ed cunning or innocent? This is the question that gnaws away at Sally's heart.

Comment [EM22]: Yes – you bring us through the story organically, a very trustworthy guide.

Unearthing the truth about Ed is tricky. If we read "Bluebeard's Egg" from start to finish in a conventional straight line, we see the story unfolding strictly from Sally's perspective through a close third person point of view. If, however, we reread previous sections before progressing, we start to see the hysteria in Sally's quest for the answers to the man she has built her life around. We start to see, too, Ed's inclinations as his own personality, not just the observations of his wife. We start to see his patronizing

indifference, his bloodless disregard for Sally's feelings, his inability to connect emotionally with her or his children. If we follow the reliable third-person narrative, we see the play between both characters as equal partners in the drama. To see the story unfold this way almost requires that it be read in this back and forth progression.

While "Bluebeard's Egg" takes place over the course of just a portion of a single day, there are tendrils reaching into the past and wrapping around the present moment.

We read about the ways in which Sally creates a life for herself that, in spite of outward appearances, exacerbates her isolation and emptiness. At first, it seems that Sally goes to work and takes night classes simply so that she can be more interesting to her husband.

Later she realizes that she is trying desperately to fill her mind with something other than Ed. Most of the classes she takes, we hear, hold her attention in a superficial way: she is

adept at the exercises, which can be "completed and discarded," but gains no pleasure or relief from her obsessive thinking about Ed, even though we are told that she is smart and adept, and "full of good ideas, brimming with helpful suggestions" (pp170).

The classes do not solve her central problem, which is that she can't have much of a self because she only has this puzzle of Ed at the center of her life. This vacancy at her center and the vacancy in the marriage are highlighted when Sally begs Ed to show her the illumination of her own beating heart on the hospital's new imaging machine. Sally is struck by how it looks so "insubstantial, like a bag of gelatin, something that would melt, fade,

disintegrate, if you squeezed it even a little" (pp165). In a moment where there could be tender reassurance, instead, Ed "seemed so distant, absorbed in his machine, taking the measure of her heart, which was beating over there all by itself, detached from her, exposed and under his control" (pp165).

Comment [EM23]: Not a "have to," but some of these shorter paragraphs might be combined for a more standard academic length (I'd say on average half to 2/3 page, or ~10 sentences). Play with them and see.

Comment [EM24]: Beautiful!

Comment [EM25]: Powerfully observed.

Comment [EM26]: Extra quotes

Comment [EM27]: !!!!! Goosebumps point in your analysis. Surprising and true.

Sally's obsession with her husband, her insubstantial inner life and the looming external crisis bring the plot to a head and set the stage for the story within a story. Introduced in one of Sally's night classes, "*Forms of Narrative Fiction*" (pp170), the fairytale "Bluebeard" adds a third layer of complexity onto the story's external and internal circumstances. This embedded narrative upends Sally's view of her world and pushes the story to what feels like an inevitable climax and its uncertain conclusion. Atwood prepares us for "Bluebeard's Egg" with many allusions to fairytales earlier in the story. We see a house separated from the world by a tangle of vines as in Briar Rose, we see Sally imagining herself as Ed's one true bride among so many other untrue, and we see her vainly hacking away to breach Ed's impenetrable wall.

Comment [EM28]: Either italics or quotes, I think – usually no need for both.

In this version of "Bluebeard," which Atwood has her teacher character Bertha claim is earlier and less sentimental than Perrault's, the third sister and wife of an evil wizard rescues her murdered sisters (previously abducted and forced into marriage) and returns an unblemished egg to the wizard, whereupon he loses his power over them all. Sally's assignment involves choosing a point of view from one of the characters or elements in the story and for the first time she is not able to quickly, superficially breeze through the task. She dwells over the significance of each element. She finds herself looking for, of course, the character or element that most closely resembles her Ed, passing over the wizard, "he's nowhere near sinister enough" (173), and settling on the egg. She mulls this over as she prepares for the party. She imagines Ed as the egg, "blank and pristine and lovely. Stupid, too. Boiled probably. Sally smiles fondly" (174). But then, in a reprisal of a theme central to the story: the dual nature of her enigmatic

Comment [EM29]: Another lovely finish to a par.

Comment [EM30]: You have a great eye for quotes and a lovely way of weaving them into your writing.

husband, she wonders how there can be a story from the point of view of an egg, if it is “so closed and unaware” (174).

Is Ed truly unaware? Or is it Sally who is unaware, naïve, willfully blind in counter-point to her husband’s utter withdrawal from her. In the end, a slight gesture Sally witnesses reveals Ed’s true nature, his hand grazing her friend’s Marilyn’s buttocks, and the instant, bland cover-up of both which expresses more contempt than any verbal reproach could. If Sally chooses to see this gesture for what it is, the obvious intimate caress of lovers long familiar with each other’s bodies, her world, her perfect, egg-like world, will be shattered. But if she ignores it, if she allows it to pass and recreates the fiction of her life around the imaginary husband, the exterior of the egg can be repaired, but the interior will fester and die. Here is where the true stakes for this character are revealed: her inner life, in order to become her own and no longer occupied by the illusion she holds of her husband, needs to hold the truth. While lying in bed the night after the dinner party Sally sees the egg:

which is not small and cold and white and inert but larger than a real egg and golden pink, resting in a nest of brambles, glowing softly as though there’s something red and hot inside it. It’s almost pulsing; Sally is afraid of it. As she looks it darkens: rose-red, crimson. This is something the story left out, Sally thinks: the egg is alive, and one day it will hatch. But what will come out of it (pp178)?

What is the egg? If the egg is Ed, we finally see who he really is, an emotionally remote man who, like Bluebeard, uses women and casually casts them aside, the brutality of his indifference revealed for what it is. The egg, in this case is dangerous and the

Comment [EM31]: One more n.

Comment [EM32]: Another goosebumps point –true and heartbreaking.

Comment [EM33]: No need to indent – this sentence is best used, usually, for unpacking the block quote we’ve just been offered.

hatching spells the end of the marriage and that ensuing wreckage. Or, the egg could be

Comment [EM34]: Yes! Powerful point.

Sally, pulsing with unrealized potential, the potential she has smothered under her obsessions. If the egg hatches, she will find her authentic self, one who will determine her own life, is no longer beholden to a man. This version of the egg is perhaps the most threatening to Sally, as it will contain years of unfulfilled dreams, longings and rage. Finally, the egg could be simply the truth, waiting to hatch, the truth of a marriage that has lain dormant for so many years, that once revealed will never survive.

If we apply our one step forward and two steps back approach to reading Atwood's tale, when we arrive at the end of "Bluebeard's Egg" we may return to the beginning and, now that we know about Ed's infidelity, search for Bluebeard in his character and in the story. But another question arises here, which is not so much about the Bluebeard character as it is about fairytales and what they reveal about the individual and collective psyche. The key here is whether the fairy tale is cautionary, or instructional. In the original fairy tale, one moral could be a warning to young women: stay away from men who have obvious flaws, (blue beards!) especially murky pasts with unexplained divorces. If it is instructional, a left over from an age where the doom of arranged or forced marriages was inevitable for many if not most women, the moral may be: curiosity kills. In this case, with her new knowledge Sally risks not only losing her husband, but everything she is. If she is to survive, she will have to reconstruct herself, like the sisters in the story who are stitched back to life.

Comment [EM35]: Perhaps specify the main difference ... both teach safety.

Comment [EM36]: Such a beautiful ending. Susan.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. "Bluebeard's Egg." *Bluebeard's Egg*. Knopf Doubleday, 1998. pp 156-178.

Comment [EM37]: Reverse indent --- see OWL or samples on Canvas.

Susan, what a delight to read your work, both creative and analytical. The story is exquisite, as are your sentences + points in this analysis. I would not change much. Re: analysis, please make sure all the comments make sense. There are a few small MLA items, but I think the analysis feels complete in the way it follows this thread through the paragraphs, deep-reading evidence in a complete and satisfying way.