

# Secrets in the Open: An Exercise in Interpretive Writing

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## Abstract

In this paper I present an exemplar of interpretive writing based on my engagement with the movie, *My Life as a Dog*. The film is a series of vignettes about Ingemar, a young boy, who is processing the events which arise from the difficulties wrought by his mother's illness. This is not the typical coming of age film where the child becomes an adult through the initiation into life's painful circumstances. The film ends with the character still in his boyhood. Nevertheless, the intermittent voice-over conveys the impression that Ingemar is narrating in retrospect, in a build up to his emergence from a state of innocence to awareness, and acceptance of pain and loss. I attended to the principles of hermeneutic practice outlined by several scholars to frame my understanding of what it means to enter the hermeneutic circle to explore the topic which addressed me: Secrecy.

## Keywords

Secrets, hermeneutic circle, childhood, interpretive writing

## Preface

This interpretive response to the film, *My Life as a Dog*, was a requirement of coursework in a hermeneutic research course I was taking in my graduate studies. I approached the task with some concern over the similarities between hermeneutic research and literary analysis. However, as I proceeded with the activity, I noticed where I was straddling two ways of thinking: the way that I would normally instruct my literature students to respond to art in order to write the literary essay and what I came to recognize as the hermeneutic sensibility. There is an

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interconnectedness between these two ways of thinking but as I often tell my students: poetry, drama, and prose, are types of literature, constructed from the same building blocks but each is distinguishable as a particular art form. Coming to hermeneutics as a novice, it is easy to be naïve and say, “it is just about interpretation” but I would argue it is about a kind of interpretation and one needs to be clear about the nature of that interpretation before calling it hermeneutics. I am grateful to Dr. Nancy Moules and Dr. Graham McCaffrey whose comprehensive course on hermeneutic research helped me understand what it means to come to hermeneutic thinking and writing, and that ultimately, hermeneutics is practice-oriented.

The film, *My Life as a Dog*, is centred around the twelve-year protagonist Ingemar who lives with his mother and older brother. He gets into trouble easily and when his mother gently admonishes him for his quirkiness, he notices that she is ill. The film is crafted through a series of scenes which capture the chronology of the events leading up to Ingemar’s understanding that his mother has passed away. That chronologically is interspersed with short clips which function like flashbacks to a period of an idyllic time shared between Ingemar and his mother. That recurring flashback with Ingemar and his mother, laughing and talking, in a scene evocative of a summer day near a lake, is a contrast to the chronology of the film, where we see the mother deteriorating physically. The flashback also contrasts the increasing distance in the relationship between Ingemar and his ailing mother.

When the mother is getting ill to the point where she needs rest and she cannot parent well enough, Ingemar and his brother are sent to live with relatives for a while and his beloved dog is reportedly sent to a kennel. Throughout the film, he and his brother are moved around a bit, though not always together, and that creates a picture of a young boy tossed around, disconnected from his closest family members. Ingemar goes to live with his uncle in a village with a mix of peculiar characters. It serves to distract him for a while, but when he returns to live with his mother and brother, the mother is obviously, chronically ill. The absence of his dog also serves to awaken his innocence. However, it is a while before Ingemar comes to understand the painful reality. When he does, his uncle and the new relationships he has formed in the village, help him to attain a measure of peace and tranquility.

### Secrets in the Open

In my caution to avoid succumbing to the inclination to respond to this film in the way that I would typically respond when conducting literary analysis, I tried to avoid the themes and motifs which were likely to evoke that kind of response. It was awkward to view the film and attempt to silence the jargon which most clearly helps me arrive at a deeper understanding. I could not shut off that prejudice. That would have been counter-hermeneutic. However, when I am with my niece and nephew (ages nine and eleven), I am not a language teacher. For the period of play with them, I inhabit a twelve-year old sensibility until my adult status is required. So for this task I did not seek to shut off my prejudices. Instead I asked, what would my childlike self see? I kept waiting for Sickan to reappear because I have a soft spot for creatures of the canine persuasion (a partiality from childhood).

Gadamer pointed to the paradox of the hermeneutic impulse that gets the inquiry rolling along, that “individual explorations necessarily start from the very limited experiences and fields of

experiences” (1976, p. 18). My understanding is that hermeneutics, as interpretive inquiry, begins in the address of the familiar. Jardine stated that interpretive inquiry is concerned with “the generativity of meaning that comes with the eruption of the new in the midst of the already familiar” (1992, pp. 51-52). When Sickan failed to appear and I felt the familiar heartbreak of the loss of a beloved animal, in addition to all the other challenges facing Ingemar, I started to notice the other instances where information was withheld from him. I began to wonder about the secrets in the film and I began to ponder even further, when does secrecy cease to be deception and when does it take on a poignant or dangerous overtone? As I mentally pulled out the instances of secrecy, I had to pause. I was on the verge of looking for a pattern in the examples and I would likely proceed to a conclusion as I am wont to do for literature. At that rate, I would never enter the hermeneutic circle. However, if hermeneutic inquiry begins in data saturation (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015, p. 83), then I needed to look more closely at the examples of secrecy in the film and I found several.

### **Address of the Topic**

I almost abandoned secrets because I thought I would have preferred an easier topic. I wanted to pursue something more familiar, more evocative, such as the rustic environment and the eccentricities of the characters. I was trying not to conduct literary analysis and uncertain that I had the hermeneutic tools at hand, I doubted whether I should follow the trail. However, Gadamer cautioned that “avoiding misunderstanding cannot be regarded as the specific task of hermeneutics” (Palmer, 2007, p. 87). I am beginning to see what Caputo implied about the discomfort that initiates hermeneutic work, the paralysis that compels one to proceed with the topic (Moules et al., 2015, p. xii). The topic was not allowing itself to unfold unless I did the work but it was preventing me from seeing anything else. The secrets did not have patterns and I had indecisions about what I construed as secrets in the film.

There it was, the topic, in all its discomfoting nakedness: what understandings about secrets are evoked from viewing this film? What meanings are confirmed and challenged by my understanding of secrecy? Secrets have a peculiar association with childhood and I had deliberately entered a childlike sensibility when viewing the film. I wondered about when do we stop saying “let me tell you a secret” and begin saying, “can I take you into confidence about something” and how we go about distinguishing between lies and secrets. When does the word evoke something pleasurable and when does it veer into taboo terrain?

Up until this inquiry, secrets had been relegated to the sentiment Moules et al. captured with the recognition that “when a term becomes widely assumed and taken for granted, it starts to slip away from us, unnoticed in plain sight like a comfortable pair of shoes” (2015, p. 152). I felt that I did not know enough about secrets to conduct an interpretive analysis of the topic. There was the literary analyst rearing its head. The term is familiar so I was not sure why I had trepidations. Who among us has not used the phrase “it’s a secret” with awareness of the associations the phrase evokes? It is sometimes accompanied by the exclamatory “shh” or the imperative to be hushed. Secrets are about the unknown, but they are distinguishable from mysteries because somewhere, someone “knows” the secret. Some definitions give the term associations with concepts of exclusion, concealment, privacy, and division.

I looked at book titles and the contexts where the term tends to be used. There were self-help books which offered to reveal the secrets to staying healthy or beautiful or young; there were other kinds of self-help books about the secrets to human behaviors or success; the whistleblowers who put out secrets that institutions, companies, and governments do not want you to know; the secret “truth” about ancient societies or ways of living different from what we know; secrets of the animal kingdoms; advice books for children about secrets that they should share; notions of secrets in romantic relationships and domestic contexts; secrets in health, employment, or academic situations. (I discovered that I really wanted to know the ancient secrets of the horse’s mind in a way that I had never known that I wanted to.) Then there were books on secrets to writing papers and dissertations, but none on the secrets to hermeneutic interpretations of film. Even Caputo declared that he has not been given access to some big capitalized know-it-all “Secret” in hermeneutic practice (2000, p. 1).

The term secret is seductive and suggestive of something profound, special, and classified. Attach the word “secret” to anything and it takes on proportions of grandeur. Secrets are everywhere. At that point in the inquiry I could not tell if secrets were really in our everyday parlance or the topic was digging into my psyche to the exclusion of everything else. Gadamer described what resembles my understanding of the address, “we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true” (Palmer, 2007, p. 82).

### **Entering the Hermeneutic Circle**

In Moules et al., the hermeneutic circle is characterized as having two important stances: entering the circle, which is accomplished by responding to the call of the topic, and staying within the circle which entails discipline and rigor (2015, p. 122). To enter the circle, I had to phrase the question appropriately, with the hermeneutic nuance, and I had to look at the data, or the events in the film which offered insight about secrecy. What understandings about secrets did the events in this film reveal?

I came to understand the rigor required of me as the care which one gives to the topic looking at data as a whole, the topic, and data in part, which is a particular instance (Moules et al., 2015, p. 122). I collated the instances of secrecy which were most revelatory about the topic. Several occasions in the film had secretive tones: the opening scene; the mother’s medical condition; the bed-wetting scene; the secret spot under the train track where he spends time with his best friend; the story he relates of his father has nuances of secrets concerning his father’s fate; the lingerie magazine which Mr. Arvidsson hides and pulls Ingemar into his secret by asking him to read from it; the footballer-girl’s hidden puberty, and Sickan, who got this all started for me. The repetition in the voice-over “I should have told her everything while she still had the strength” is framed as a boy mourning the loss of a relationship and wishing that he had shared exotic stories with his mother. However, the ambiguity of “I should have told” is a phrase often associated with or evocative of secrecy. That voice-over phrase which is replayed several times in the film, reinforces the tones of secrecy surrounding the events in Ingemar’s life.

The opening scene comes across as a revelation of a secret. Ingemar’s uncle has difficulty being blunt and escapes from having to tell what needs to be stated directly by declaring that Ingemar

knows already. He apologizes for having been unable to tell Ingemar something which he seems forced to acknowledge at that moment. The film then unravels as a series of flashbacks which culminate in that point of the opening revelation. Ingemar's voice-over has the distant tone of the character played throughout the story, avoiding being blunt about the challenges he is facing and displaying coping mechanisms that seem a little odd. By the end of the film, positioning the opening scene becomes clearer. The revelation is about Ingemar's mother who has quite likely succumbed to her illness and it occurs right about the time that Ingemar accepts that Sickan will not be returning either.

In my literary analyst mode, I would normally linger on the dramatic irony that the audience knows the mother is terminally ill from the first indication of disease, in the classic trope of juxtaposing childhood innocence and the coming to awareness of the unpleasantness of life which are archetypal initiation points. Dramatic irony is a kind of secrecy from the character, shared between the audience and the narrative structures. A hermeneutic inquiry asks something different of me. What does the secrecy around the mother's illness suggest about secrecy? People are often secretive about their medical issues, even when these issues are not threatening to others. There is a social consensus that children are shielded from the bare facts of medical knowledge especially if that knowledge can disrupt their innocence. We believe in the importance of keeping children insulated from harsh realities and keeping secrets about medical difficulties in family members is a societal norm. That secrecy is usually also seen in financial matters and family disputes. The assumptions underlying these secrets is the societal consensus that children are not emotionally mature enough to handle tough experiences.

Perhaps certain events inevitably lean toward secrecy where children are concerned. There are at least two other instances of secrecy where it appears that children are protected from suffering. Ingemar's father is a mysterious feature of the film. We do not know exactly where he is and Ingemar's story sounds like a carefully crafted narrative given to him to protect him from the truth. This element of the film led me to consider how secrets are distinguishable from mysteries. Can I say definitively that the father's status is a secret? Not quite. It resembles what I associate with secrecy: the unknown, a bizarre story, a failure to appear, but this element seems to linger in mystery. There is no concrete revelation which confirms my suspicion about the secrecy surrounding the father's status. Yet the frequent references to him suggest that his absence is a revelation of some kind.

The other event which seems to protect Ingemar from suffering is the absence of information about Sickan. Like Ingemar, we are given a story about what will happen to Sickan: he will be cared for in a kennel. However, the adults have not been forthcoming about what seems obvious to the audience, the mother is dying. Is it possible that Sickan's fate is being kept a secret from Ingemar to avoid hurting him further? That led me to consider that our understandings of secrets are often on the cusp of deception. There is no overt revelation about the dog's fate, much like the status of his father but that does not diminish the element of secrecy. The uncle's reluctance to respond to Ingemar's request to follow up on the dog is a kind of revelation.

The other instances of secrecy had distinctive qualities which made it difficult to see a pattern in secrecy in the film. There, the flux of hermeneutic inquiry was giving me a dose of what it means to suspend my expectation and go where the data led me. The bed-wetting scene and the manner

in which the boys tried to keep it a secret from the mother shed understanding on the element of secrecy that sometimes it is done to protect the self. Others would consider it lying especially when one admits that the outcome of the revelation would mean some distress or discomfort for the keepers of the secret. The secret spot under the train track where Ingemar spends time with his best friend is the poignant kind of secret, which is used to build intimacy, strengthen relationships, and there are no obvious risks. The lingerie magazine which Mr. Arvidsson hides and then he pulls Ingemar into his secret asking him to read from it; the footballer-girl's hidden puberty which pulls Ingemar into complicity with her secrecy, also contain those nuances of the nature of secrecy, fostering closeness with others.

The recurring voice-over, the image of Ingemar in the summer house which looks like a kennel, the framing metaphor of the title, that Ingemar is bumped around without being told much by the adult world, all evoke his similarity to being a family pet, a dog, loved and cared for but somewhat distant from the goings-on of the human world. Secrecy fosters that distance. Some of that distance is Ingemar's doing, because he declares that one ought to have perspective, but much of it is the adult world holding the child at bay. Secrets are the adults' ways of ensuring things do not get too out of control. Considering Ingemar's odd little habits (such as his inability to drink from a glass when stressed) and the possibility that his childhood could be traumatized by the truth of what was transpiring, secrets seem like an expedient way of managing the situation. This raises even more questions: how do we use secrets to manage difficult situations and when do secrets become inflammatory in those situations? Ingemar felt unloved, unwanted by his mother but it was obvious to the audience that she was just too ill to parent lovingly. The secrecy surrounding the gravity of her condition could have had the effect of isolating Ingemar. Secrets can create distance even when intended to mollify difficult situations. Yet even though we "know" that, in some situations, it might even be an instinct to keep secrets to avoid hurting others.

In trying to find the right voice or the appropriate language to clearly describe the understanding of the topic generated in the process as is recommended in Moules et al. (2015, p. 122), I turned to the personal. Last month when my mother "revealed" that she had undergone a medical procedure and the results came back fine, my first reaction was "why didn't you tell me you were going to do it" and her response was simply that she did not want me to worry. That silenced me because she was right; I would worry because I do not handle medical issues very well. I was grateful for her secrecy and there I saw the instinct to shield others from discomfort as the adults tried to shield Ingemar. Secrets are by nature multilayered with meaning, never one thing or the other. Considering Ingemar's stories and meanings of "secrets" which emphasize separation, one can see how secrets in lived experience are capable of divisiveness and effect hurt. Conversely, in some of Ingemar's stories they engender comfort and intimacy.

### **Within the Interpretive Process**

Secrets are fodder for the hermeneutic practice. They are about something. There is a phenomenon in the middle of it. They emerge from relationships. People have secrets from others. Even though it is one individual holding the secret away from another individual, there is an element of declaration to the self about the secrecy. The language we use to talk about secrets imbues them with inherent preciousness. We "guard" and "keep safe" the secrets, but that

language can just as easily turn dark with “don’t say a word” and “be quiet” although each instance has its own flavor. Secrets have a dialogical element: there is something which is kept, yearning to be shared in conversation with another. Secrets can even have a diabolical element when they are used to sever connections instead of building intimacy. When they are perceived as willful deceptions they lose any magic they could have had. When they are used to con and exploit, they become toxic.

Secrecy can veer into meanings of deception and lying. To be on the side of the unknown can sometimes be a case of protection from an unpleasantness but it can also be seen a dark phenomenon when the unknown and subsequent “reveal” is dangerous or done carelessly. Fortunately for the character, Ingemar, the relevant revelations which induced deep hurt were buffered by a new life surrounded by gentle caring characters.

This inquiry led me to consider the psychology of secrecy. I conducted a search for literature on the topic, perhaps in an impulse to conduct the dialogue that is necessary when one is within the hermeneutic circle and I was on the verge of proceeding to what looked like a literature review when I encountered Bellman’s *The Paradox of Secrecy*. Then I recognized I was in a potentially dangerous zone of over immersion and I felt the tug of what Jardine referred to as “knowing when to stop in the spinning out of implications of meaning” (1992, p. 59).

I was finding it difficult to wrap up the understandings. How do I conclude in a way that does not have a strong whiff of literary interpretation? I could go on and on, or I could just stop here and acknowledge the ongoing nature of hermeneutic work. However, I could not leave the understandings lying around like puppies abandoned at a dog pound. Moules et al. advised that they should not be “left there to dangle in an exotic display but must be brought back into the world where the topic is located” because deconstruction moves toward reconstruction (2015, p. 132).

### **Beyond the Circle**

I cannot look at the concept of secrecy the same way ever again. Considering the instances in the film, those I addressed here and those I briefly mentioned, I have come to several understandings of the topic. Normally when one declares that one has a secret in possession the instinctive response is to persuade the secret-holder to reveal it. We usually want to know something once it has been imbued with the veneer of secrecy. Secrecy has the quality of something which ought to be revealed eventually, whether that is done willfully or by happenstance. The unknown tends to be considered as mystery when the revelation has not happened.

I was indecisive about whether to declare this understanding about secrecy and the reveal as a “finding” for this inquiry. I considered the research described in Moules et al. (2015, p. 127) that grief is usually accompanied by the appearance of guilt, and tentatively latched on to this as support for my process. Other inquiries will indicate other dimensions to secrecy that I have not considered here, but that is a recurring caveat when conducting hermeneutic research, that when we see one side, there is yet an unconcealed side.

Now, when I hear the word secret used in common parlance, I will wonder about the understanding attached by the user. Is it a genuine secret, or is the word used for effect? What would make it genuine? Is there something perverse in wanting to know a secret? Or is there something anti-social when people are unmoved by the idea of the thrill of secrecy? This film led me to consider that the concept of secrecy when attached to childhood, carries connotations of protection from harsh realities, or the pleasures of having a world without the intrusion of meddling others (adults or other children). Indeed, these understandings are also applicable to secrecy and adulthood but secrets take on darker tones in the adult world. This inquiry made me reflect on the concept of gossip and how it hinges on the concept of secrecy.

As I found myself going out of the parameters of the film, I came to see why the hermeneutic inquiry is an immersion into the flux of being. Understanding is not bound. There is still more to uncover. I thought about secrets in a way I have never had to do before. Through the experience of interpreting the film, I am ineluctably altered in my relationship with the concept.

### **In Trying to Cultivate the Hermeneutic Sensibility**

This section of the paper is a bit like a post-script. What has this exercise revealed to me? How is this kind of inquiry different from literary analysis? These were some of the questions which accompanied me throughout my exercise as I tried to be true to hermeneutic praxis. I have been acutely attentive to the similarities between hermeneutic approaches and literary analysis but I wanted to guard against naiveté and the assumption that my eventual research with people, reading the texts of interviews, can be done like analysis of fictional text. Initially I wondered, how I would divorce my literary inclinations from the hermeneutic circle. I found as I read more about the principles of hermeneutic practice that there were pointed differences.

This film is not about secrets. Secrets inhabit a small part of the narrative arc. They are not an overriding theme or motif. Literary analysis would involve coming to a conclusion about the use of secrets as a motif, a statement about what secrets add to the narrative as a whole, and proceed to look at how the major elements of the film use the concept of secrets to strengthen the narrative. I cannot simply convert an expert discussion about dramatic irony into a hermeneutic exemplar. The hermeneutic sensibility requires something different of me. Grondin described hermeneutic practice as “a matter of knowing limitations and humility” (2003, p. 25). The practice demands that I ask different kinds of questions. It expects me to attend to the meanings attached to the phenomenon of secrets. Indeed, the hermeneutic sensibility requires humility. I had not thought much about the concept of secrets, in this way, until now, even though I have some understanding of the topic.

I was reading several texts about hermeneutics as I sought to develop the hermeneutic sensibility for this paper. I wanted to get it “right” immediately. I was irritated with the similarities and differences to what I was used to in literary analysis. I was impatient to get past the plurality and write a coherent paper on secrets. I suspended my concern about the paper and turned to the topic. I had to relinquish some control. Understandings could not be conjured and concluded neatly in the same way that I would write a film review. Understanding is partial, incomplete, still evolving. I ought not to forget that this is a principle of analysis – every time you look at a text, further understandings will emerge. The hermeneutic sensibility requires patience. Grondin’s

almost confessional tone that he was taken aback by Gadamer's declaration that the universal claim of hermeneutics was to be found in the "inner word" (1994, p. xiv), is a reminder that there is much to be discovered for practice and there will always still be more.

I am a few months into reading the works of the prominent scholars of hermeneutics. I have been listening to YouTube lectures, reading original works, reading critiques of these works, reading simple introductions to the major concepts, all in a view to saying, I know how to defend my choices. It has not felt sufficient yet. Nevertheless, I do feel that it is not enough to read condensed versions of the main scholars or reinterpretations of their work. Gadamer pointed out that "the claim of hermeneutics seems capable of being met only in the infinity of knowledge, in the thoughtful fusion of the whole of tradition with the present" (1960/2004, p. 337). In light of that I see the importance of attending to tradition and the need for more familiarity with the key thinkers. I cannot justifiably develop the hermeneutic practice without the hermeneutic sensibility which requires a historical consciousness of the scholarship.

I know that there are other elements of the hermeneutic sensibility that need some tending but for now I am trusting the learning process, accompanied by Caputo's observation in Moules et al. (p. xiii) that "hermeneutics does not shy away from the difficulty of life but summons the courage to deal with life in all its ambiguity" and Jardine's counsel that "we don't fully know what it is because we don't yet know what will become of it. And we don't know this because it is still coming" (1992, p. 57).

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