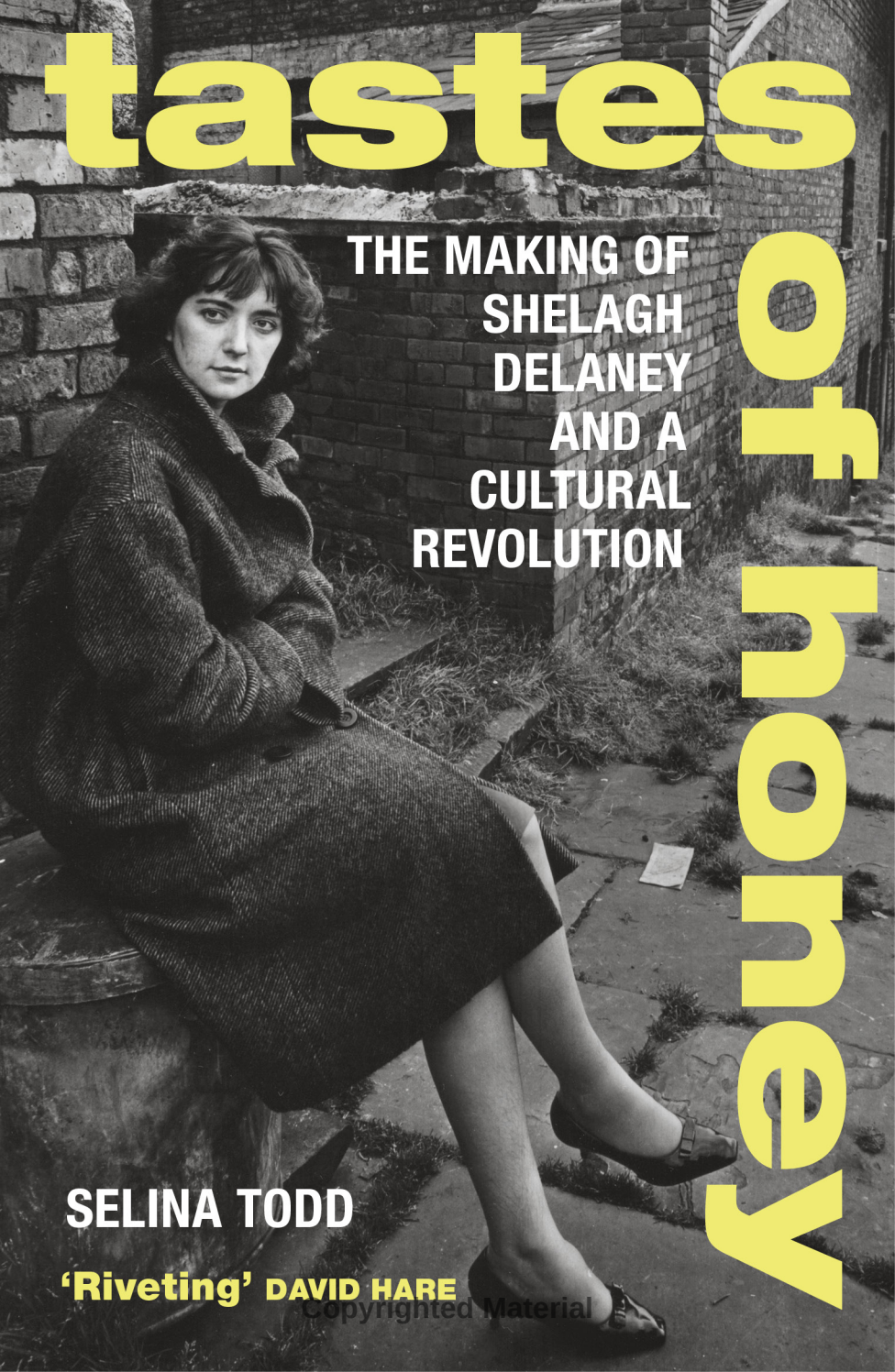

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ALSO BY SELINA TODD

The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910–2010

Young Women, Work and Family in England 1918–1950

SELINA TODD

Tastes of Honey

The Making of Shelagh Delaney and a Cultural Revolution

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For Charlotte Delaney
and Senia Paseta

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Curtain Up

In April 1958, nineteen-year-old Sheila Delaney, the daughter of a Salford bus driver, sent a manuscript to Joan Littlewood, the director of London's avant-garde Theatre Workshop. Her covering note explained to 'Miss Littlewood' that this bundle of thin, closely typed sheets of paper was her first play – *A Taste of Honey*. 'A fortnight ago I didn't know the theatre existed,' she claimed. But then, 'a young man, anxious to improve my mind, took me to the Opera House in Manchester and I came away after the performance having suddenly realized that at last, after nineteen years of life, I had discovered something that meant more to me than myself'. The next day she 'borrowed an unbelievable typewriter' and 'set to and produced this little epic – don't ask me why – I'm quite unqualified for anything like this'.[1]

The story Sheila Delaney told to Joan Littlewood was only partly true – her letter was a typically shrewd attempt to appeal to her audience, in this case by presenting herself as a naive, northern ingénue. Even her signature was embellished. She called herself 'Shelagh Delaney' – the name she will be known by for the rest of this book – in a deliberate rejection of the identity of plain Sheila from Salford and the future laid out for

her. 'Shelagh' Delaney was a young woman ambitious to escape the life she'd been born into. But she was also determined to tell the stories of the women she left behind. *A Taste of Honey* was her first attempt, and arguably her best. Shelagh's play focuses on Jo, a working-class teenager who lives in Salford with her single mother, Helen, and who becomes a single mother herself as the result of a brief affair with a black sailor. Jo rages against her fate, but finds solace in her friendship with Geof, a gay art student, who is keen to make a home for her and the baby. The play ends when Helen returns from a brief, failed marriage to find Jo's labour pains beginning.

A Taste of Honey grabbed Joan Littlewood's attention. Working-class people, if they appeared at all in books, films or plays in the fifties, were – as the *Listener* magazine said – 'comic or loyal, or more frequently both'.[2] For most audiences, these appearances provided the only glimpses of working-class life they got. 'They weren't people one knew … they were people you saw from the tops of buses,' said Stephen Frears, a seventeen-year-old public schoolboy in 1958, destined for Cambridge and a film career.[3]

This situation was slowly changing. John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, staged at the Royal Court in London in 1956, was the ripple that quickly turned into a 'new wave' of novels, plays and films about a restless generation of young working-class upstarts. But the protagonists who wanted adventure – Joe Lampton in John Braine's novel *Room at the Top* (1957), or Arthur Seaton in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) – were men. Women often held them back. One kiss and they were envisaging marriage; pregnancy turned

them into dutiful replicas of their mothers. Their biology determined they could do nothing else.

Shelagh Delaney was the first post-war playwright to suggest that these women had minds and desires of their own, a radical proposal in the fifties. 'Motherhood is supposed to come natural to women,' says Geof, voicing the standard medical opinion of the time – pregnancy was meant to render women docile, maternity to fulfil them.[4] Advertisers, educators, policymakers and psychologists told women that they were luckier than their mothers – the post-war welfare state, and affluence brought about by full employment, rendered their lives both easier and more fulfilling. Clad in New Look dresses they could spend their lives making happy homes for their hard-working husbands and their healthy children – the citizens of Britain's brave new future. But this was a life that Shelagh showed was beyond thousands of women who, like Jo and Helen, continued to live in overcrowded slums. Even more radically, she suggested it was a life that they did not want. More than a decade before the Women's Liberation Movement emerged in Britain, Shelagh Delaney created characters who challenged the assumption that women found fulfilment in marriage and motherhood. Neither Jo nor Helen is satisfied by being a wife or mother. For Helen, motherhood and marriage present at least as many burdens as joys. Jo, meanwhile, rages against her body and her fate. In a world that told working-class women they should be grateful for anything they got, Jo and Helen openly longed for a taste of honey, craving love, creativity, adventure and escape.

In a telegram to her new protégée, Joan Littlewood announced that her company would stage *A Taste of Honey* as

their next production at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. Shelagh was present for the premiere on 27 May 1958. Theatre Workshop had a reputation for courting controversy, but neither Joan nor Gerry Raffles, her theatre manager, had any idea how Shelagh's play would be received. Raffles warned Frances Cuka and Murray Melvin – the actors playing Jo and Geof – to 'be ready to run' from the stage if the audience turned abusive when they took their curtain call.[5]

When the curtain fell on that Tuesday evening, there was a moment's stunned silence – and then the audience roared their approval. Within days *Honey* was a hit and Shelagh the most famous teenager in Britain. Over the next three weeks, hundreds of people flocked to Stratford East to watch an extraordinary episode in British theatre history. A story of slums, sexual politics and race relations, *A Taste of Honey* caught Britain on the cusp of change. At a time when Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was claiming people 'had never had it so good', reactions to the play exposed a deep social chasm. Almost all the press condemned *Honey* as tasteless muck. Even those reviewers who enjoyed it betrayed their amazement 'that such apparently moronic people can be so moving', as Denis Constanduros, sent from the BBC drama department to see what all the fuss was about, put it.[6] But theatregoers from working-class Stratford did not agree. Norman Rimmell, who worked at the local Co-op, thought 'it groundbreaking … but it wasn't particularly controversial';[7] Shelagh depicted a life with which he and his wife were familiar. Builders, labourers and office workers told a BBC news crew that *Honey* was 'about people like us, isn't it? Real life.'[8]

Honey turned Shelagh into a celebrity. The burning question posed by journalists, fans and most of the arts establishment was how a working-class teenage girl from Salford could write such a shattering play. For Shelagh came from the place she wrote about, much to the horror – and prurient fascination – of her critics. The *Spectator* declared that *Honey*'s only redeeming feature was that 'it is not scholarly anthropology observed from the outside through pince-nez, but the inside story of a savage culture observed by a genuine cannibal'.[9] By the late 1950s there were quite a lot of outsiders peering at the working class, but Shelagh was different. She wasn't, as some critics would imply, a single mother or a prostitute, but she'd grown up in an area where women were independent; many worked for a living; some were widowed or had been deserted by their husbands; some sold their bodies and some babies were black. In fact, the north as she presented it looked a lot more eclectic than supposedly bohemian Bloomsbury.

Her working-class background set her apart from the few other women playwrights emerging in the late fifties. Ann Jellicoe had seen her play, *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, premiere at the Royal Court just weeks before *Honey*'s debut. The story of a juvenile gang, the play explored relations between young men and women growing up with little hope for the future. But Jellicoe's work was grounded in improvisation – she saw herself as a director as well as a writer – and hers was an outsider's view of working-class life. She had had a boarding school education before training at the Central School of Speech and Drama, and *The Sport of My Mad Mother* has a narrator who is detached from the juvenile gang he observes. By the

time *Honey* became a film in 1961, a group of women writers were beginning to explore the frustrations and desires of highly educated girls of Shelagh's generation. But most of these writers, like their protagonists, were middle class. In asserting that working-class women deserved their own voice in the theatre, as playwrights and as the subjects of plays, *A Taste of Honey* was unique.

This book is about how and why Shelagh Delaney became a writer, and about what happened next. It is also about how this might change the way we regard the recent past – particularly the 1950s, and the history of feminism. Shelagh's work as a playwright and a screenwriter for television and film repeatedly returned to the fifties, and to the stories of women and children. We can only understand why she did so by scrutinising her own early life. Her story begins at a time when a moribund conservative elite, shaken by a war that had handed a landslide election victory to a Labour Party that established a welfare state, used the new threat of nuclear war to try to revive an imperial past, in which 'British values' meant those of the white privileged men who held the reins of power. Yet this was also a period when some women and working-class people grasped new opportunities to claim broader horizons for themselves. Shelagh's work shows that the demands made by the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s were alive in the 1950s. Her childhood and youth reveal that her ideas sprang from her experience of growing up as a working-class girl in Salford. A desire to lead a different sort of life from your mother's wasn't new to Shelagh's generation, but their opportunities to do so were unique, thanks to a welfare state, council housing,

education and full employment. Shelagh and her contemporaries grew up able to imagine taking unprecedented risks, knowing that failure would not mean hunger and poverty.

But Shelagh was provoked to write by the unimaginative manner in which politicians planned these gains, and the grudging delivery of them by those in authority. The rationing of education; the bleak out-of-town estates without libraries or cinemas; the assumption that working-class women only needed a part-time factory job, a fridge and an indoor toilet to be content; the neglect of ordinary people's lives by the theatre and the BBC – these were the post-war facts of life that Shelagh hoped both to escape and to expose through her writing.

She had a crucial and unusual vantage point. A series of events meant that she directly experienced both the positive and the negative effects of the major transitions brought about by war and the welfare state. She spent the Second World War living in an inner-city area called a 'slum' by outsiders, her mother, like many women in the area, struggling single-handedly to keep her family while her husband fought overseas. Afterwards, they moved to a new council estate, where housing was better but friends and entertainment were in short supply. When Shelagh fell seriously ill in the late 1940s she was treated by the new National Health Service; but her care was in the hands of authoritarian nuns whose power to tyrannise their working-class charges hadn't yet been stripped away. After failing the eleven-plus exam she attended a secondary modern school meant to produce the next generation of factory workers – but, exceptionally, she was transferred to a grammar school in her mid-teens. After leaving school she worked as an usherette and

a shop assistant before becoming a playwright at the age of nineteen. She often found that she preferred the option meant to be second-best: the slum, the secondary modern, the factory; but she was no romantic about working-class life – her experiences made her determined to flee the fate that the post-war state had in store for her.

Her story belongs in the history of feminism, though not to the history as it's usually told, which assumes middle-class women were the sole agents of change. In that story, the women's movement of the 1970s was precipitated by those who, warned by the example of educated mothers forced to be full-time housewives in the servantless fifties, demanded more from life.[10] Many of them attribute their sense of entitlement to the 1944 Education Act. This Act introduced free and compulsory secondary education for eleven- to fifteen-year-olds; but the kind of academic education that gave you opportunities beyond the factory gates was strictly limited to the top 15 or 20 per cent of performers in the eleven-plus examination. These grammar school pupils were 'picked out *on account* of how they were extra-bright', said one of them, the writer Angela Carter. 'And were they grateful? Were they, hell … We'd the full force of the [1945 Labour] Attlee administration behind us, too, and all that it stood for, that lingered on after the Tories got back in. All that free milk and orange juice and cod-liver oil made us big and strong and glossy-eyed and cocky and we simply took what was due to us whilst reserving the right to ask questions.'[11] When, in the late 1960s and 70s, these women entered employment, or marriage, or motherhood, and found their opportunities were not as rich as they expected, it was this sense

of entitlement that gave them the impetus to challenge the barriers they confronted.

But most of these women, like Carter, came from middle-class homes. They had grown up learning of their difference not only from their brothers – men – but also from the uncivilised rabble of their working-class peers, relegated by the eleven-plus (which social scientists had recognised by the late 1950s tested social class and little else)[12] to secondary moderns and a future of factory work. 'We seemed to stand, isolated and alone, in a hostile environment, in which the natives might at any time engulf us in a tide of split infinitives and generally dissolute behaviour,' recalled Mary Evans of her middle-class upbringing in the Home Counties. Misbehave, she was warned, and she'd end up 'working in Woolworths'.[13] In the early 1960s, Sheila Rowbotham, educated in the even more socially elite world of a girls' boarding school, agonised at Oxford University over whether 'I could be a socialist because I didn't love the working class'.[14] In the turbulence of the late 1960s, many, including Rowbotham and Evans, would reject the contempt of working-class people with which they had been brought up. But these middle-class women take centre stage in histories of feminism, while working-class women are shunted into the wings, their stories unheard. 'It was tough, in the fifties,' wrote Carter. 'Girls wore white gloves.'[15] Not in Salford they didn't.

Shelagh wrote not in spite of her working-class upbringing but because of it. In 1957, Richard Hoggart's bestselling, semi-autobiographical account of working-class life, *The Uses of Literacy*, declared that the 'cardinal sin' in working class communities was conceiving a child out of wedlock. He claimed many

girls 'retain … an ignorance about the facts of sex'; marriage was their dream and most wished to walk up the aisle 'quite untouched'.[16] Shelagh, twenty years Hoggart's junior, and a woman, disagreed. The builders, cleaners and clerks who watched *Honey* had a better idea about its wider appeal than those established authorities who declared it a disaster. Like Shelagh, many of them lived in neighbourhoods where some women found work as prostitutes; where many struggled to make ends meet as single mothers; and where 'flitting' between decrepit lodgings was common in an era when slum landlords reigned supreme.

A Taste of Honey proved to have enduring appeal. In 1959 the play transferred to London's West End; in 1960 the cast enjoyed a Broadway run; in 1961 Shelagh helped to adapt it into a film. Through the 1960s it was staged and screened across the world, finding fans on both sides of the Iron Curtain. By the 1970s it had become a set text in Britain's new comprehensive schools, and would remain so for the next forty years. In the 1980s Shelagh's words were immortalised by singer-songwriter Morrissey when his band the Smiths swept to international fame with hits that cherry-picked her lines. Performed by repertory and community theatre groups in the UK and abroad, in 2014 *Honey* returned to London with a sell-out run at the National Theatre. In the same year, her home town, Salford, launched an annual Shelagh Delaney Day to celebrate her achievements. The survival of *A Taste of Honey* testifies to a fascination with the post-war world that it evokes – one of conservative morality and ideals, certainly, but also a world where these were never quite as monolithic as they could appear. It speaks, too, to the contemporaneity

of her subjects: her work showed that mixed-race relationships, teenage pregnancy, lone motherhood and homosexuality were not marginal or abnormal aspects of life, but experiences that many shared or were touched by, a truth that became more evident in later decades. But the timelessness of *A Taste of Honey* is also due to Shelagh's affirmation that the search for love is both innately human and a hopeful quest. By showing that everyone, no matter their circumstances, is capable of loving and being loved, Shelagh offered an optimistic vision for the future, one that survived all the political and economic turbulence she was to live through.

She went on writing about women who challenged the conventions in which they found themselves through her long career. From as early as 1963, journalists asked: 'whatever happened to Shelagh Delaney?'[17] When she died in 2011 most obituaries concurred that she'd 'quietly petered out', as Jeanette Winterson put it, unable to live up to her first play.[18] In fact she enjoyed a career as a screenwriter in television and film, working on pioneering realist dramas like *Z Cars*, bringing surrealism into British film with productions like *Charlie Bubbles*, and finding a new audience with her 1985 screenplay for *Dance with a Stranger*, the story of Ruth Ellis, the last woman in Britain to be hanged (in 1955). Shelagh wrote television plays which made marriage the focus of family drama rather than the backdrop to the action, and scripted radio plays that placed older women at the centre of the storyline.

Why was her subsequent work ignored, or greeted with lukewarm praise? In part, as we shall see, this was due to her reliance on instinct and insight to refute the political 'common sense' of

her times. Against post-war representations of women and working-class people as stereotypes: the immoral single mother or the juvenile delinquent – or as ideals: the angel of the house, the cheeky chappie or the socialist hero, Shelagh explored ambivalence and uncertainty. She never sought to present a coherent alternative to capitalism or male dominance, as some socialist and feminist theatres of the 1970s and 80s did. While her work often focused on women chafing against marriage and motherhood, or who had escaped these institutions altogether, her explorations of women's desires – for children but also freedom; for lust but also love; for independence but also dependence on a man – could be contradictory. She created characters who, like their author, were influenced more by emotion than by formal education or political ideology. The results could be sensitive and compelling, but also frustrating: fragmentary characters, incoherent or circular plots, and ambiguous endings.

But her work, at its worst as well as at its best, illuminates a current of thought, and a way of being, that deserves to be taken seriously. Her insights may not have amounted to a coherent vision of society, but they were interrelated. They sprang from her conviction that experience – including one's inheritance from one's family and community, and encompassing emotional as well as material life – required more serious consideration than abstract ideas and theories. This way of thinking and of writing enabled her to give a voice to working-class women who lacked the political platform or the education or professions of many middle-class feminists. But it also distinguished women from the notion – so prevalent in medical and political thought in the 1950s – that they were governed

by their biology. Shelagh showed that people acted and felt within contexts they had not chosen. In doing so she suggested that love, desire, motherhood, marriage – the experiences of womanhood, in fact – were shaped by historical circumstances, and that they could change.

Despite the flaws in her work Shelagh had a very successful career as a writer; she was a pioneer in getting women's lives onto stage and screen. That her achievements have been overlooked is due to the condescending belief that a working-class woman has only a limited amount to say. During the 1960s and 70s it became more acceptable for working-class men, and, to a lesser extent, women, to create art from their experiences. But many of the artistic establishment remained incredulous that they might be able to write about subjects that strayed beyond the autobiographical. And working-class writers were, and are, granted a national platform only when they produce absolutely exceptional work. Shelagh's second play, *The Lion in Love* (1960), is regarded as a failure that forced her ignominious retreat into obscurity. In fact it enjoyed a reasonably successful run at the Royal Court before being staged in New York. When middle-class writers or playwrights achieve a small audience, they are talked of as having a niche following, or a distinctive appeal. Shelagh, however, was dismissed as uneducated, *A Taste of Honey* as a fluke or the work of Joan Littlewood. Yet in the expanding world of 1960s television, both her plays were successful enough to provoke the BBC to plead with Shelagh to join its drama department.

She refused that invitation; and her desire to go her own way is another reason why she has been ignored. Disillusioned by

the critics' hostility towards her and impatient with journalists who only wanted to ask about her sex life, she chose to retreat from the limelight. When, in 1964, she became a single mother, the prurient press attention made her eschew further media attention. She gave only a handful of interviews during the rest of her life.

This book is called *Tastes of Honey* because Shelagh constantly pursued the fun, excitement, love, sexual adventure, artistic fulfilment, fame and fortune that working-class women had been denied. Still in her teens, she asserted that women had every right to express desire, but showed that they paid a heavy price for doing so. Shelagh herself took advantage of every door of opportunity that lay ajar and forced others open, often provoking loud cries of disapproval from the press and the artistic establishment. She rejected every category into which they tried to pigeonhole her. She wasn't a starving artist in a garret, but nor did she retreat into a celebrity marriage as journalists anticipated she would. She wrote for a living, and liked spending much of her time on that living which, she said, was essential for a writer. She relished the benefits that fame and wealth conferred, delighting in telling friends that 'I earned a lot of money, I spent it all. I loved the parties, I loved the cocktails.'[19] Being brought up in a family where everyone had to work hard and watch the pennies made her appreciate not having to do so. She established herself as an independent woman at a time when single women found it hard to get a mortgage or even open a bank account. She created her own family as a single mother, in a household that included close female friends as well as relatives. And she kept on writing.

This is a hopeful story. Not just because Shelagh Delaney's work and life helped to change the way working-class women are treated and represented in Britain, but because she is a reminder that dissent is more widespread than we might think. While in their everyday lives people may act primarily in the bread-and-butter interests of themselves and their loved ones – after all, everyone needs a roof over their heads and food to eat – it doesn't stop them imagining a more hopeful and expansive future. Clothes, cosmetics, music, storytelling, romance, comics, novels, films and plays are the tools by which working-class women can fashion those different futures. Rarely do they find a national stage and an audience. This is the story of one who did.

2
Becoming Shelagh

'Shelagh' Delaney came alive in April 1958, the product of her own pen. Born Sheila Mary Delaney on 25 November 1938, she thought 'Shelagh' exotic, a hint that she wanted to stand out rather than fit in.

She chose it thinking, erroneously, that Shelagh was the Irish spelling of her Christian name. That was important – a link with her father's Irish heritage of which she was proud, and a sign of her adoration for him. Joseph Delaney was twenty-four when Shelagh, his first child, was born. His own father was an illegitimate coal-carter whose mother hailed from southern Ireland; his mother was a Dubliner who came to Manchester in search of work in the 1900s. Shelagh admired her paternal grandfather, 'a Socialist . . . of the Kier Hardie tradition'.[1] Politics in the 1950s seemed to her, as to her contemporary Sheila Rowbotham, a game of 'power and ambition' played by a few men in Parliament.[2] But Shelagh's imagination was caught by the rebellious ideals her grandfather had espoused.

Shelagh knew her father as 'a great storyteller and reader',[3] but most of his reading was done after he'd left school at the age of fourteen. There was no thought of staying on for Joseph Delaney; his family were too poor to consider it. For the same reason he

couldn't try for one of the engineering apprenticeships that many Salford lads hankered after; these were a passport to a skilled job, but apprentices earned a pittance until the age of twenty-one.

Joseph, quietly spoken and well mannered, managed to get a job as a bus conductor, which proved to be a better post than an apprenticeship. When the economic slump came in the early 1930s, engineering was decimated, but Joseph's job was safe. By 1936, he'd become a bus driver, with enough money in his pocket to frequent Salford's cinemas and dance halls. Tall, olive-skinned and with thick, unruly black hair – physical traits he'd pass on to his daughter – Joe caught the admiring glance of many young women. Gregarious and witty under his quiet demeanour, he wanted a girl who was pert as well as pretty. He found her in Elsie Twemlow.

Joseph Delaney was a good catch for Elsie. She was one of seven children; her father, John Twemlow, was a cotton worker from Manchester; her mother, Mary Ann Doyle, from Liverpool, had also worked in the mills. Elsie didn't tell stories like Joseph did, but she had a turn of phrase that Shelagh found compelling, and in the 1970s she asked her mother to write down her childhood memories. Born in 1915, Elsie could just recollect the Armistice, particularly 'my uncle coming home from the war – he had a leg amputated but there was [*sic*] so many people in our house to welcome him that I believe someone sat on me'. This uncle moved into the Twemlows' already crowded home until he married in the early 1920s. Nearby lived her grandmother and 'two old-fashioned old maid aunts' who she visited each week – 'we used to love going because we used to get half a crown each'.

Growing up in a crowd meant Elsie had to shout to be heard. She had plenty to say for herself and she was also a joker. At school her swift repartee won her plenty of friends, but she wasn't sorry to leave in 1929 because she found lessons dull. She 'loved' her first job at a small woodwork firm where she quickly knew everyone. If she was late in the mornings she could 'sneak in a side door', confident that no one would give her away, and when she and her workmates were bored, 'we used to run out and buy things' from local shops.[4] She was part of a generation of young working-class women intent on fashioning the future. They spent their days manufacturing the new consumer goods – wirelesses, fashionable clothes, ready-made furniture and cosmetics – that they aspired to own themselves. Elsie spent her evenings practising the latest dances with her sisters, before launching herself on Salford's dance halls every weekend with a carefully waved bob and a touch of lipstick to show off her confident smile.

But when she met Joe, Elsie was ready to settle down. In 1936 her father died suddenly of a heart attack. Life was precarious, particularly for a widow with a family to keep, like Mary Ann Twemlow. Her youngest boy was only fourteen, so Joe's wage was welcome. In 1937 Elsie and Joe were married and settled into Elsie's childhood home, helping Mrs Twemlow to pay the rent.

By the time Shelagh was born, Elsie and Joseph were renting their own house. Her first home was a two-up two-down in New Thomas Street in Pendleton, the working-class district of Salford made famous by Walter Greenwood's 1934 novel *Love on the Dole*. The house backed onto Pendleton Railway Station;

horse-drawn carts clattered past the front door day and night to collect coal from Harry Ainscough's coal yard next door. Their neighbourhood was badly polluted, a place where poverty robbed children of their health. In the 1930s Salfordians were more likely to die of tuberculosis than the residents of any other British town or city.[5] Between 1931 and 1935, of every thousand babies born in England and Wales, 62 died before their first birthday. But in the working-class districts of Manchester and Salford, this was true of more than 140 babies in every thousand.[6]

Shelagh had no memories of New Thomas Street. By her second birthday she and Elsie and Elsie's mother had moved to Hartington Street in Ordsall, Salford's dockland neighbourhood. Shelagh's father had effectively disappeared from her life. As a bus driver, Joseph was under no obligation to join up when war was declared in September 1939, but he immediately enlisted in the army. In a semi-autobiographical short story written in her early twenties, Shelagh described a man who 'ought never to have been a soldier, according to his wife, but he insisted'.[7] On his daughter's first birthday in November 1939, he was training with the Lancashire Fusiliers at 'an unknown location'.[8]

Ordsall was 'a little community that was all on its own', a triangle of closely packed terraced streets bordered by Trafford Road and the docks, busy Regent Road heading into Manchester, and the River Irwell.[9] It was not an idyllic place to live. In 1930, a group of young volunteers from middle-class Manchester homes decided to 'discover for ourselves what life is like in the slums', and chose Ordsall as their destination. They discovered

that 'factory buildings pollute the air with smoke and block out sunshine and light, so that many householders have to burn gas all day'. Residents lived in overcrowded homes that were 'grimy with soot', pervaded with damp, and 'infested with vermin'. The investigators were at first shaken and disconcerted by what they saw; then they became angry that people were forced to live in this manner, just a few miles from their own prosperous suburbs. 'We have,' they concluded in this report, 'discovered conditions the existence of which did not seem possible in a Christian community.'[10] Nothing had changed by the 1940s.

Despite these problems, Ordsall was Shelagh's home, a place where her family and their neighbours worked hard to create a life for themselves. In 1957, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* described his upbringing in Hunslet, a working-class district of Leeds that was similar to Ordsall. Hoggart's vivid account of his childhood, and his assertion that his community had values and a culture worth celebrating, appealed to thousands of readers. *The Uses of Literacy* helped to create a popular image of northern England as a vista of endless terraced streets, populated by parochial communities sustained by working-class mothers scrubbing the steps of their two-up two-down houses.[11] It was a picture of life that Shelagh would recognise. 'There's a terrific life force,' she said of Salford. 'You can go all over these parts and you put your hand down on the ground and you can feel its heart beating.'[12]

Ordsall's sense of community sprang from the men's work at the docks, but also from the mutual support of the women who lived there. Dorothy Green grew up a few streets away

from Shelagh. 'If your mum wasn't in it wasn't a problem,' she said. 'You'd just go in someone else's house and get a jam butty and a drink.'[13] Hoggart spoke of working-class mothers as 'devoted to the family and beyond proud self-regard'.[14] Certainly Elsie proved determined to keep her family together, refusing to allow Shelagh to be evacuated in 1939.

Yet in other ways Shelagh Delaney's Ordsall differed markedly from Richard Hoggart's Hunslet. For Shelagh, Salford 'means one thing – restlessness'. The city, as viewed from Ordsall, was in constant flux. 'Running right through the city is a great roadway, like a sort of main artery,' she said. 'All the blood rushes along here. And great carts and cars and everything.' It was a community defined by work. 'The docks were alive!' recalled one of Shelagh's contemporaries. 'There was always something going on, something loud and noisy and a bit on the dirty side to look at.'[15] Trafford Road, the dock road, was lined with pubs catering for sailors from ports across the world, factory workers employed at the vast Trafford Park industrial estate, dockers and, on match days, the crowds of football fans who surged down to Manchester United's ground at Old Trafford. 'We called it the Barbary Coast,' recalled one man, 'all these different nationalities you could pass, and the prostitutes – they was all sort of painted up to glory.'[16] It was a side of life that Richard Hoggart preferred to gloss over.[17] But to Shelagh it was home.

Hoggart described the world from a male vantage point. Shelagh knew life for women was harder than he suggested. In Ordsall, girls learned about sex early. Eight-year-old Shelagh, playing alone in a back alley, was approached by a sailor who