

Paper proposal for the Inaugural International Women's Writing Association Conference

From Dr Helen Pleasance

Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at York St John University

[h.pleasance@yorks.j.ac.uk](mailto:h.pleasance@yorks.j.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

### **'Like ectoplasm from a medium's mouth': on being haunted by women writers**

*Fabricating: a family repair job* is a memoir/family history project in which I unknot the fraught matrilineal threads between my grandma, mum and me. At the centre of our tangled relationship sits my mum's statement that, 'My mother never wanted me'. I trace family history back to the late nineteenth century to understand the complex roots of this relationship and stitch it into a larger history of women's lives, motherhood and what it might mean to not 'want' a child.

Writing the lives of the ordinary women in my family became difficult. Beyond official documents, a jumbled archive of family photos and snippets of family folklore, the threads of their lives frayed and disappeared.

Domestic needlework was a material activity that connected us, and it became my metaphor for repairing the family fabric. I turned to representations of needlework in women's fiction from across this period in search of women's interiority and sensibilities – the stuff that was missing from my family documents. I found rich material.

Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Taylor, Elizabeth Jane Howard, Dorothy Whipple and Edna O'Brien, amongst others, draw on needlework in fascinating ways to illuminate the lives of their women characters. My title simile – 'Like ectoplasm from a medium's mouth' comes from Elizabeth Taylor's 1945 novel, *At Mrs Lippincote's*. It is a description of material billowing from a sewing machine.

This paper will explore how fictional representations of women stitching helped me to narrate the lives of women who have left little historical trace. These women writers and their characters haunt my own writing and allow me to conjure my female forebears as ghostly presences in experimental creative nonfiction.

## **Bio**

**Helen Pleasance** is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and English Literature at York St. John University, UK. She has published on the memoir form and narrative constructions of the Moors murders, *Music, Memory and Memoir* (2019), *Venue Stories* (2023) *Turntable Stories* (2026) and *Haunted Writing* (2026). She is currently researching how domestic needlecraft shaped women's lives in the twentieth century.