CHAPTER 1

Introduction

One of Lorrie Moore’s early short stories starts with some discouraging advice for the aspiring writer: “First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star / astronaut. A movie star / missionary. A movie star / kindergarten teacher. President of the World.”¹ The tone of droll irony has since become Moore’s trademark: the more painful the experience, the likelier she is to make it the subject of a joke. In “How to Become a Writer,” the pain revolves around failure and loneliness, the twin dangers of the would-be writer’s life. According to this story, there is about as much chance of succeeding as a writer as there is of becoming a screen idol or world president; in all these endeavors, the young aspirant is liable to “fail miserably”—“miserably” being the operative word.

Moore herself does not appear to have suffered the setbacks in pursuit of a literary calling that “How to Become a Writer” describes. Her potential was indicated in 1976, when at the age of nineteen she won Seventeen magazine’s fiction prize for a story called “Raspberries.” At that time she was an English major at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, having won a Regents Scholarship from her high school in Glens Falls, New York. While at St. Lawrence she took creative writing classes and edited the university’s literary journal. She was awarded the Paul L. Wolfe Memorial Prize for Literature in 1978 and graduated summa cum laude in English the same year.
Interviewed in 2005 about her early success, Moore attributed it to perseverance, using phrases that suggest doggedness rather than talent: “I just kept going, . . . I could plod along . . . and no one discouraged me.” In other youthful pastimes such as ballet and painting, she possessed only moderate gifts and lacked determination, but the desire to write went deeper: “I came to writing out of various sensitivities, plus a love of art and literature, and a capacity for solitude.” After graduating she moved to Manhattan and worked for two years as a paralegal, storing up experiences and observations that would later make their way into her fiction but by her own account not accomplishing much writing while she lived in the metropolis: “It was completely inspiring and stimulating and a great place to walk and brainstorm but . . . I couldn’t get much actual work done there.”

If during this period Moore considered becoming something other than a writer—perhaps, like Francie in “How to Become a Writer,” toying with the idea of applying to law school instead—her misgivings did not last long. By 1980 she had enrolled in the master of fine arts program at Cornell, where one of her tutors was Alison Lurie. It was at this point that she became single minded about her writing, giving up the piano, which she had played all her life, in order to save her hands, her mind, and her energies for the typewriter. Publication of her work began in magazines such as Ms., Fiction International, and StoryQuarterly, and in 1982 she received the A. L. Andrews Prize for three stories in her master’s thesis: “What Is Seized,” “How to Be an Other Woman,” and “The Kid’s Guide to Divorce.” These, along with “How to Become a Writer” and five others, constituted the collection Self-Help, which Alison Lurie’s agent, Melanie Jackson, sold to Victoria Wilson at Knopf in 1983, when Moore was twenty-six.
With the appearance of *Self-Help* in 1985, Moore’s foothold in American letters was secured. By then, having stayed on as a lecturer at Cornell from 1982 to 1984, she had accepted a position at the University of Wisconsin and moved to Madison. This relocation from the Northeast to the Midwest surfaces repeatedly in her fiction, which alternates between urban and provincial settings and frequently features characters who migrate between “the boonies” and New York. Moore explores the cultures associated with these landscapes, along with her characters’ often ambivalent senses of belonging and allegiance, from a perspective that reflects her own shifting identifications with the East and Midwest. As a new resident in Wisconsin she feels she was able to observe it as a “displaced author,” offering an outsider’s view that was “interesting and at least half-true.” More than twenty years on, she says she has lost that detachment and may even have become a midwesterner, “whatever that means. . . . I did root for the Rams in the Super Bowl.”

However at home Moore may have become in the Midwest, her fiction preserves an ironic distance from this as from all milieus, holding familiar social practices up to an estranging light. This satirical tendency counterbalances what she has identified as the inevitable loss, over time, of the “freshness and clarity” of a newcomer’s vision; she is never so immersed in or assimilated to a particular environment as to lose the power of illuminating what is ridiculous or disturbing in it. In a story first published in 1989, for instance, a sophisticated New York poet takes a visiting fellowship in “the sticks,” where she falls in love with a lawyer who describes himself as not at all “literaturey” and likes to go hunting. The poet parodies the predatory machismo of midwestern gun culture, quipping when she tries aiming an unloaded gun, “I can feel the urge coming on to blow away that cutting board”; but she also ridicules the unthinking,
automated, costly habits of metropolitan existence, admitting that in preference to dancing, New Yorkers “just wait in line at cash machines.”

Moore’s adroit pen portraits of places and people reflect her overarching artistic purpose, which she has described as “trying to register the way we, here in America, live.” This is an important insight because it underlines her commitment to a national literature—a literature about America and Americans. With storylines revolving largely around personal relationships, Moore’s fiction may seem preoccupied with private emotions that are universal in nature: the loves and losses, dreams and disappointments that human beings experience the world over. In subtle ways, however, the individuals in her narratives are placed in the specific context of the United States in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century. American history and politics do not dominate her works, but they are present in telling details that reflect the impact of these larger forces on her characters’ lives. For example, Francie in “How to Become a Writer” suffers acutely on behalf of a brother who is crippled in Vietnam. The story is not obviously a Vietnam War story. Only seven sentences explicitly concern this unnamed young veteran, but his injury and traumatization cause Francie a despair that infects her whole existence and is literally unutterable: “There are no words for this. Your typewriter hums. You can find no words.”

By these unobtrusive means and on a small scale, Moore anatomizes American society as revealingly in her way as do writers such as John Updike or Tom Wolfe, who place American mores and politics more prominently in the foreground of their work. Born in 1957 Moore belongs to a post–World War II generation that came to political consciousness during the cold war, Vietnam, and Watergate. She was a young adult in the Reagan
years and has lived most of her voting, taxpaying life under Republican presidents. Her critical, dissenting stance comes through in the fiction, as does the cultural atmosphere of these decades, with their evolving rock and pop scenes, visual media, slogans, and idioms. Moore has defined the “historical” property of fictional narrative as consisting in the record it provides “of inner and outer”: its ability to chronicle both the inner, private lives of characters and the outer, public life of the times in which they take place. Her characters’ personal dramas are enacted against a recognizably American backdrop composed of myriad details, allusions, and conversations. Through the accumulation of these individual histories, Moore’s fiction captures something of the inexhaustible variety of American lifestyles and experiences—a national diversity that she considers it the writer’s duty to record: “In this country there is a great range in the way people live, and this has to be acknowledged and felt by all of us.”

In a work published a year after Self-Help, a novel called Anagrams, Moore explores the variety of American life in an experimental way. The three main characters in the novel reappear in its five sections in shifting guises, their occupations, places of residence, and relationships undergoing transpositions that resemble the reshuffling of letters in the word game alluded to in the title. Moore has attributed these reimaginings to her interest in the unrealized possibilities in every life course—what Robert Frost termed “the roads not taken.” By dispensing with certain novelistic conventions, Moore allowed her heroine to sample several lifestyles—as a nightclub singer, literature teacher, or aerobics instructor in Fitchville, USA; a lecturer in art history in California; a femme fatale; or a broken-hearted, unrequited lover. The form, as she puts it, was a response to “the choices
people make, the limited choices people have in life, the variations that people can’t explore but in fiction perhaps you can explore them.” At the time she was writing the novel, Moore was still traveling uncertainly between Madison and Manhattan, and her heroine’s unstable identity may also reflect her own somewhat rootless existence in the mid-1980s.

The form of *Anagrams* was not popular with readers and critics at the time—it “got a lot of bad reviews and did terribly” — and has since earned Moore an inaccurate reputation in some quarters as a postmodern writer. Moore includes postmodernists such as Donald Barthelme, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Thomas Pynchon in the long and wide-ranging list of writers she admires, and a degree of postmodern influence is evident in the verbal play throughout her work as well as in the experimental and metafictional qualities of *Anagrams*, but Moore’s steadfast commitment to capturing the texture of human life always predominates over any deconstructionist inclinations. “Literature occurs,” she says, “when one feels life on the page.” In a radio interview in 1999 she elaborated on this commitment to constructing “an accurate record of life and the world”: “When I’m in the world of a particular story I’m just recording what would be true about that world and what would be true about the emotional life of that world and what would be true to the physical texture and details and psychological reality of that world.”

The emotional and psychological reality of Benna Carpenter’s world in *Anagrams* is powerfully constructed and very bleak. Looking back Moore feels that although the novel has redeeming features, it is “chock-full of mistakes of judgment and taste and sensibility.” Twenty-six when she began it and twenty-nine when it was published, she was still at an early stage in what she calls “Learning to Write.” Her intended theme was “creative
remedies” for loss and sorrow, but she ended up producing a
meditation on loneliness that bears the imprint of her own “crazy
solitude” in her late twenties.19

Moore’s next book was a novel for nine- to twelve-year-old
about the friendship between one of Santa’s elves and a badly
behaved little girl, it is a relatively slight work that was itself vir-
tually forgotten until Yearling Books reissued it in 2002. No
other books for children have followed, although Moore dis-
closed in 2005 that she has written the text for a picture book.21
If writing for children did not have a lasting appeal, however, she
has been consistently successful in writing about children and
childhood. Whether through youthful characters or adult narra-
tors’ memories of younger days, Moore has exploited the tension
between naïveté and shrewdness in the child’s consciousness to
 estrange and puncture adult conduct. Learning to decode or
mimic adults’ language, and to measure the gap between their
ostensible and their actual motivations, children in Moore’s
work evolve from innocence to irony. Sometimes in their preco-
cious or cynical understandings, sometimes in their ingenuous
misunderstandings, they point up dissemblings, deceptions, and
disappointments. They are translators, interpreters whose con-
structions and misconstructions have moral value. As Moore put
it in her introduction to The Faber Book of Contemporary Sto-
ries about Childhood, acknowledging the influence of What
Maisie Knew by Henry James, in the best literature about the
adolescent consciousness “knowledge is the story; its rough and
specific acquisition is the plot.”22 Most of the stories she selected
for the Faber anthology—including pieces by Margaret Atwood,
Sandra Cisneros, Louise Erdrich, Ellen Gilchrist, and Alice
Munro—revolve, in her words, around “moral occasions—
moments in childhood when something becomes known, some-thing else is tested, some fact steps fiercely forward, some circum-
stance is discerned or milestone encountered.”

If this suggests an association of children with inevitable disillusionment, children in Moore’s fiction also have a more affirmative function, as reminders of the powerful human capacity for love. The ardor of youthful friendship and romance, the trust that small children place in their parents, and, above all, the passion that adults feel for their offspring all represent the highest emotions she portrays: conditions of loving and being loved that are tantamount to secular states of grace. The loss or lack of such bonds is a cause of desolation throughout Moore’s work and accounts for much of the darkness of her second collection of stories, *Like Life*, which appeared in 1990. In “Places to Look for Your Mind,” for example, a mother’s emotional and geographical distance from her daughter and her literal loss of a son who left home suddenly as a teenager produce a profound sense of absence and fruitlessness for which nothing can compensate. In another variation on the theme of maternal love, one of the best-known and most frequently anthologized stories in the volume, “You’re Ugly, Too,” partly concerns a young woman’s unfulfilled desire for children. The sense that something is missing, which permeates *Like Life*, here revolves around the protagonist’s empty womb—“furnishing and unfurnishing, preparing and shedding,” but never conceiving (70). Her desire to become pregnant is cruelly mocked by her body’s production of a mysterious and possibly cancerous growth: an organism that in some ways resembles, but is in fact the antithesis of, new life; it is *like* life but abhorrently *not* life. Disease and mortality infect several of these stories as metaphors for the fears and unsatisfied longings that make all the lives portrayed here deficient or defective in some significant, and often devastating, way.
In spite of this overall darkness of tone, *Like Life* was more popular than *Anagrams* and earned a far better critical reception. Six of the eight stories in it had appeared previously in periodicals, and Moore had received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation to assist with its completion. Among the distinguishing features of these pieces is the assured and inventive deployment of simile and metaphor, some of them too unconventional for the *New Yorker*, which carried early versions of two stories. Moore recalls that even under the relatively liberal editorship of Robert Gottlieb, who took over from the more conservative William Shawn in 1987, the magazine insisted on excising certain “dangerously odd” figures of speech. In “You’re Ugly, Too,” for example, it cut the simile “alarm buzzed through her like a low-level tea,” which Moore reinstated in revised form for subsequent book publication.

Moore’s unexpected images make incongruous connections that open startling, and often humorous, new perspectives. They go hand in hand with the sardonic quips, witty one-liners, and linguistic tricks that have “come to constitute an unmistakable prose style all her own.” Commendation of her humor and verbal calisthenics is not universal—for instance, her pervasive puns have been decried as gratuitous and shallow—but her admirers note the alliance in her work between flippancy and deep feeling, humor and pathos. The narrator’s observation about the punch line of a joke in “You’re Ugly, Too” is applicable to Moore’s comedy, which is often “terribly, terribly funny.”

In the case of *Like Life*, the tragedy revolves around people’s loneliness and susceptibility to harm. Many of the characters in this collection are spiritually destitute: abandoned, cheated, aching for kindness. As a study of the state of American society toward the end of the twentieth century, the volume as a whole
presents a dispiriting picture. Like Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) or Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), several of the stories focus on New York City as a symbolic locale—a landscape with metonymical significance for the condition of America. The predominant impression Moore’s New York fictions create—like those by Tama Janowitz in *Slaves of New York* (1986)—is of a dehumanizing culture: alienating, brutal, corrupt, and contagious. A young English visitor to Manhattan sees it as populated by “Crazy People”; a struggling playwright is driven from his squalid apartment by traffic fumes, sewage, and vermin into a city so violent that a man suffers a brutal beating for shoplifting. The title story takes the trope of diseased city to its limit in a futuristic scenario in which tap water is toxic and the streets are infested with the homeless terminally ill. Precancerous growths on the protagonist’s throat and back suggest that in this dystopia the condition of being alive is itself incipiently malignant.

In a post-9/11 context, *Like Life* reads as a chronicle of American malaise centered on a city both dangerous and doomed. The volume contains moments of affirmation and glimpses of beauty that construct New York less as rotten apple and more as “wonderful town,” but with hindsight these passages seem elegiac, as if anticipating the cataclysm that would later so profoundly affect both the symbolic Manhattan skyline and the national psyche. If at the time of *Like Life*’s publication the city had iconic value as the embodiment of national myth, Moore’s engagement with that myth is ambivalent: disconcerted, skeptical, sometimes disgusted, but nevertheless susceptible to enchantment. Life in the America she depicts here is usually nightmarish but sometimes dreamlike, invoking the idea of America as a nation founded for the fulfillment of a dream but