

1999

The Shell Seekers and Working Women Readers' Search for Serenity

Suzanne W. Jones

University of Richmond, sjones@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications>Part of the [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Suzanne W., "The Shell Seekers and Working Women Readers' Search for Serenity" (1999). *English Faculty Publications*. 56.
<http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications/56>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Suzanne W. Jones
University of Richmond

Women: a cultural review 10.3 (winter 1999): 327-340

***The Shell Seekers* and Working Women Readers' Search for Serenity**

For the last decade feminist literary critics have convincingly argued that bestselling novels from *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and *Forever Amber* (1944) to *The Valley of the Dolls* (1966) and *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) reveal the psychic needs of twentieth-century middle-class American women, and that these needs have as much to do with desire for the emotional sustenance they once received from their mothers as with desire for heterosexual romance.¹ However, as more and more women have moved from the private to the public workplace, their psychic needs have changed somewhat.² Based on the American popularity of such bestselling contemporary novelists as Britain's Rosamunde Pilcher, Ireland's Maeve Binchy and America's Anne Rivers Siddons, I would argue that in the 1980s and 1990s the needs of middle-class American working women have as much to do with the desire for a restorative place as for a nurturing relationship with mother or lover. These readers long for a serene, comfortable and beautiful retreat from their increasingly busy and stressful lives. Readers talk of 'dwelling' in novels by these authors and of taking trips to the places depicted in them.³ Perhaps not since before the American Civil War has the domestic novel as a genre been so popular with so many American women readers.⁴ Although such American writers as Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather and Eudora Welty have periodically revived the domestic novel since then, not until such contemporary novelists as Pilcher and Siddons completely refurbished the genre has it found such a large audience of American readers.⁵

Indeed Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers* (1987) seems to have usurped *Gone with the Wind*'s place in the hearts and minds of late twentieth-century American women readers. St Martin's Press celebrated the novel's phenomenal success with a tenth anniversary hardback edition, and a picture-book of places Pilcher describes in her fiction, *The World of Rosamunde Pilcher* (1996). Pilcher's fiction, like other contemporary domestic novels, is set in rural villages and holiday spots. At the heart of each work is at least one very appealing house, the type of cosy, comfortable home that the traditional middle-class housewife once provided for her hard-working husband.⁶ Whereas nineteenth-century domestic novelists represented the home as a retreat for working men, Pilcher represents it as a refuge for working women as well. In Pilcher's variation on the form, the presence of a cheerful, dependable housekeeper sometimes takes the place of a companionable, devoted husband. Although American readers enjoy Pilcher's other novels, few think that any of them—or any other contemporary popular novel—measures up to *The Shell Seekers*.⁷ Since *The Shell Seekers* became a word-of-mouth bestseller in 1987, I have not met one woman of any race, whether a teenager or a grandmother, an academic or a full-time homemaker, a liberal or a conservative, who did not love this novel. *The Shell Seekers* provides vicarious escape from the pressures of overwork, especially for women who work both in and outside of the home.⁸ The sentiment of a *New York Times* reviewer captures their enthusiasm: 'I don't know where Rosamunde Pilcher has been all my life—but now that I've found her, I'm not going to let her go.'⁹

In July 1991 *Good Housekeeping* magazine, tapping into the popularity of *The Shell Seekers* (set in England), its sequel *September* (set in Scotland) and the steady stream of Pilcher's stories it had published for two decades,¹⁰ devised a *Good Housekeeping* / Rosamunde Pilcher

Highland Fling Contest, which asked its readers to complete this sentence: ‘To me the world of Rosamunde Pilcher means ...’ The winning entry, published in *Good Housekeeping* in May 1992, was written by Brucetta Hampton of Suffolk, Virginia:

Rolling hills, violet with heather,
Lambs wool, soft as a feather.

Mountains and coasts
Castles and ghosts.

Bagpipes, kilts and high tea;
Scotland calling to me.

While most of the 14,000 entries in this contest had been destroyed by the time I asked to see them, the promotion administrator for the contest stated that all of the entries were ‘pretty much the same’.¹¹ However, because Pilcher’s publisher, St Martin’s Press, had saved the top nineteen entries, I was able to get a good idea of what they were like. Most contest finalists mentioned Pilcher’s domesticity and scenery as significant to their enjoyment of her fiction; several used the same adjectives I have used when describing my own reactions to the novel, ‘transported’ and ‘refreshed’. The contest entries suggest that Pilcher’s fiction provides not only a vicarious experience of a restorative place but that the act of reading offers a restful respite from women’s busy daily lives, an added benefit which Janice Radway has shown is provided by romance novels among the readers she has researched.¹²

From the contest entries I read, it is clear that Pilcher’s fiction allows women readers to escape from harried daily demands not simply to a world of romance but to mountain trails with expansive vistas and cosy sitting rooms, where they can vicariously pamper themselves, either with adoring dogs and invigorating walks or friendly neighbours and tea and toast. Rita Peterson of Saratoga, Wyoming, wrote: ‘To me, the world of ROSAMUNDE PILCHER means a story that envelops me like a warm, familiar quilt.’ From the day and evening telephone numbers that accompanied their contest entries, I determined that at least 80 per cent of the contest finalists worked outside the home. Dolores Ritter from Lincoln, Nebraska, wrote: ‘To me, the world of ROSAMUNDE PILCHER means a treasured time to indulge myself. With workday completed, my favorite arm chair, refreshing drink and a Rosamunde Pilcher book. What more could anyone ask?’ Pilcher’s fiction is filled with women making just such ordinary escapes. The characters with whom Pilcher encourages readers to identify always find time for replenishment, whether it be walking the dog or cutting and arranging flowers or visiting with a friend or family member or just retreating to a room of their own. The sensuous detail, which Pilcher uses so skilfully, allows readers to take pleasure in the restorative provided by delicious meals and understanding friends and in the serenity evoked by beautiful landscapes and comfortable rooms. For example, Virginia Lochner from Dumfries, Virginia, wrote: ‘To me, the world of ROSAMUNDE PILCHER means a gentle escape from the demands of an extremely busy life. Her stories lift, refresh, and help to recharge my batteries. Reading her is joyous!’ Just a few chapters into *The Shell Seekers*, readers have taken two weekend trips to the country, vacationed on a Mediterranean island, eaten many delicious home-cooked meals and luxuriated in three bubble baths.

In 1993, in my ‘Women in Modern Literature’ course, I added *The Shell Seekers* to my syllabus and duplicated the *Good Housekeeping* contest—minus, of course, the grand prize, which

was a trip to Scotland and high tea with Rosamunde Pilcher. Half of my twenty students, mostly nineteen-year-olds, responded similarly to the working women; they wrote that the novel allowed them to escape into a world of ‘comfort’, ‘beauty’ and ‘peace’. The fact that women of both age-groups were similarly captivated by Pilcher’s inviting domestic scenes is striking, but maybe not so surprising. A UCLA Higher Education Research Institute survey indicates that nearly one in four first-year college students say they feel ‘overwhelmed’ by all they have to do.¹³ In today’s high-paced society, American women, in both age-groups, need to feel relaxed and refreshed, as well as ‘recognized and loved’,¹⁴ needs that *The Shell Seekers* provides.

The responses of my other students focused on Penelope Keeling, Pilcher’s sixty-four-year-old widowed protagonist. This woman who orchestrates the comfort, beauty and peace in the novel seems to fulfill their desires for the emotional sustenance they once received or wished they had received from their mothers. These students wrote that Penelope reminded them of their mothers or that they wanted a mother like her or that they hoped to be like her when they become mothers. One student, with her eye on a business career, was pleasantly surprised by the positive portrait of a traditional homemaker; she viewed Penelope as leading ‘an extraordinary life while doing ordinary things’. Other students admired Penelope’s generosity in fulfilling both the physical and emotional needs of not just family members, but friends as well. Their realization that they had taken for granted such comforts and pleasures provided by their own mothers parallels the thoughts Pilcher gives Penelope’s son Noel, when he reminisces about his dead mother in *September*.

During the last years he had seen little of her, closeted as she was in the depths of Gloucestershire, but still she was always *there*—at the end of a telephone, or at the end of a long drive when you felt you couldn’t stand the hot summer streets of London a moment longer. It didn’t matter if you went alone or took half a dozen friends for the weekend. There was always space, a relaxed welcome, delicious food, everything or nothing to do. Fire flickering, fragrant flowers, hot baths; warm comfortable beds, fine wines, and easy conversation.

All gone. The house and garden sold to strangers. The warm smell of her kitchen and the good feeling that somebody else was in charge and you didn’t have to make a single decision. And gone was the only person in the world with whom you never had to put on an act or pretend.¹⁵

Women readers of *The Shell Seekers* who are close to Penelope’s age admire her generosity and her warmth, but also her frankness in dealing with her adult children, especially Noel and his sister Nancy, both selfish egocentrics who see their mother’s life as continuing to revolve around their own needs. Only Penelope’s daughter Olivia has matured enough to see her mother as an individual with her own needs. Some readers who have adult children seem to take a somewhat vengeful pleasure in the way Penelope punishes Noel and Nancy by changing her will to benefit not just her own children but two other young people as well who have shown an interest in her person rather than in her pocketbook.

The Shell Seekers is a complex and intriguing story of Penelope’s relationships with her three grown children and their relationships with each other, but it is also about how people can create spaces which serve as retreats from the strains of personal and professional relationships. What Eudora Welty says of Ernest Hemingway’s use of place applies to Pilcher and other contemporary domestic novelists: when ‘people give pain, are callous and insensitive, empty and cruel’, ‘place heals the hurt, soothes the outrage, fills the terrible vacuum that the human beings make’.¹⁶ The chapter titles of *The Shell Seekers* are people’s names, indicative of the important role relationships play in this novel, but Pilcher begins the novel with a Prologue, which orients readers to her other concern. The Prologue focuses on Penelope’s return home from the hospital, a return

that Penelope experiences both as ‘relief and ‘sheer delight’. Pilcher personifies the house, and she represents it, not as a place Penelope inhabits, but as a place with which she has a relationship: ‘[Penelope] discovered that she was very tired, but it was a gentle tiredness, assuaged and comforted by her surroundings, as though her house were a kindly person and she was being embraced by loving arms’; ‘in the warm and firelit room and the deep familiar armchair, she found herself surprised by, filled by, the sort of reasonless happiness she had not experienced for years’.¹⁷ Because Penelope has had a heart attack and is glad to be alive and out of the hospital, she experiences her home acutely, with all of her senses, and Pilcher describes the house in such lavish detail that readers can feel its warmth, touch the scrubbed-smooth kitchen table, see the early geraniums’ tiny buds, hear the crackle of the fire and smell the freshly cleaned rooms. Pilcher uses the Prologue, written from Penelope’s point of view, to show her readers how to savour domestic life. An especially appreciative anonymous reviewer, writing for the *West Coast Review of Books* in 1988, calls the novel ‘a gift’ for readers’ souls: ‘through the eyes and heart of this very special woman we have an opportunity to experience art and music and the joys of culinary preparations and repasts, and ... through her we become even more sensitive to the air around us’. My undergraduates, who were living in residence halls and eating institutional food, found Penelope’s house ‘warm’, ‘homey’, ‘comfy’—‘an environment you would like to read a book in’.

To emphasize the restorative value of domesticity, Pilcher juxtaposes Penelope’s cosy country cottage with her oldest daughter Nancy’s ‘old Georgian vicarage in a small and picturesque Cotswold village’ (9). Nancy’s spacious house has a ‘good address’ (9), but it is draughty, cold and inconvenient, as well as too large and expensive to maintain. Rather than provide a place to heal life’s hurts, this house inflicts them: ‘In the hall a piercing cold enveloped her, rising from the flagged floor, seeping up the stairs to the icy voids of the landing’ (9). Nancy’s house does not reflect her personality and her needs, but rather her lack of identity; she has ‘an unhappy suspicion that she and George and the children, living in some convenient little house on the outskirts of Cheltenham [nearer her husband’s work] . . . would become diminished, no longer of interest to their county friends and would be left to fade, like dying shadows, into a family of forgotten nonentities’ (12). Pilcher contrasts Nancy’s obsession with status with her mother’s interest in quality of life:

Nancy sometimes thought especially at this time of the year, that it was a pity they didn’t all live in the kitchen . . . Nancy’s mother, Penelope Keeling, had practically lived in the old kitchen in the basement of the big house in Oakley Street, cooking and serving enormous meals at the great scrubbed table; writing letters, bringing up her children, mending clothes, and even entertaining her endless guests. And Nancy, who had both resented and was slightly ashamed of her mother, had been reacting against this warm and informal way of life ever since. When I get married, she had sworn as a child, I shall have a drawing room and a dining room, just like other people do ... Consequently, lunch and dinner were served in the huge, high-ceilinged dining room, with the table correctly laid, and formality taking the place of comfort. This gloomy apartment was heated by an electric fire that stood in the grate (12).

Pilcher attributes Nancy’s tastes and values to ‘her adolescent dreams—fantasies nurtured in the novels that she devoured by Barbara Cartland and Georgette Heyer. To live in the country and be the wife of a country squire’ (10).

With such a self-conscious comment on popular British romance novelists, Pilcher presents her fiction in opposition to theirs or as an antidote. Pilcher’s aim is strikingly similar to that of nineteenth-century American domestic novelists. In these older works, Nina Baym argues, ‘domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society’.¹⁸ That this same theme would resonate among middle-class American women readers over a century later, in a decade that perhaps rivalled nineteenth-century America’s Gilded Age in conspicuous consumption, is

not surprising. Today, in partial retreat from the excesses of the 1980s, it appears that at least some Americans are searching for more leisure, simpler pleasures and more meaningful lives. Recent statistics from a survey by the Merck Family Fund reveal that 28 per cent of Americans have made voluntary changes in their jobs which decreased their earnings but simplified their lives.¹⁹ Their search for serenity has much to do with the publication of Anne Wilson Schaef's *Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much* (1990) and the bestseller status of a variety of books from *Care of the Soul* (1992) by Thomas Moore to *Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy* (1996) by Sarah Ban Breathnach to *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996) by Frances Mayes, which details the sensuous domestic life that Mayes created for herself in rural Italy as an escape from the pressures of her job as a university professor in San Francisco. Caring for the soul surely propelled, at least in part, the phenomenal growth of *Working Mother Magazine*, which now has almost a million monthly readers, eager for its articles on coping and stress rather than dieting and dating.²⁰ In the late 1980s Rosamunde Pilcher, a writer who was virtually unknown in the United States, tapped into the unarticulated feelings of many busy working women, and *The Shell Seekers* became what is known in the publishing world as a 'stealth bestseller', whose sales came not from an aggressive advertising campaign but by word-of-mouth praise.

In the novel Pilcher redefines luxury for her readers, and just in case they miss her point, she sets up a discussion about it in a flashback between the young Penelope and her American lover Major Richard Lomax. Their significant conversation occurs when they find time to escape briefly to a friend's home in a Cornish seaside village, during the Second World War. As they sit having drinks on a nearby hotel terrace, watching the sun blink in and out of the clouds and fishing boats chug out to sea, Penelope philosophizes about feelings similar to those she experiences years later on coming home from the hospital:

Luxury, I think is the total fulfilment of all five senses at once. Luxury is now. I feel warm; and, if I wish, I can reach out and touch your hand. I smell the sea and, as well, somebody inside the hotel is frying onions. Delicious. I am tasting cold beer, and I can hear gulls, and water lapping, and the fishing boat's engine going chug-chug-chug in the most satisfactory sort of way (416).

Similarly Richard's definition of luxury depends on what David Abram has called 'the spell of the sensuous',²¹ particularly the exquisite juxtaposition of contrasting sensations,

Mountains, and the bitter cold of snow, all glittering beneath a blue sky and a savage sun. Or lying, baking, on a hot rock, and knowing that, when you can't bear the heat another moment, the cold, deep sea is only a yard away, waiting for you to dive.... Or spending a day at Silverstone, deafened by racing cars, and then, on the way home, stopping off at some vast, incredibly beautiful cathedral, and going in, and just listening to the silence (417).

Penelope and Richard agree that it would be 'awful' if they craved 'sables and Rolls-Royces and huge, vulgar emeralds' (417).

There is the philosophy for living that Penelope's materialistic son Noel finally learns in Pilcher's next novel, *September*. Used to the fast lane and the beautiful though self-centred women he finds there, Noel, exhausted from a business trip to the United States, falls in love with the domestic pleasures of 'dumpy' (15) Alexa Aird's charming London home. At first attracted to her 'material possessions' (432), he comes to love the domestic pleasures she orchestrates. By the end of the novel he realizes that he loves her, a realization that comes twinned in his mind with his mother Penelope's wise words about life.

If Juliet Schor is right, as she argues in *The Overworked American*, that consumption and material rewards have not given post-Second World War Americans the satisfaction and meaning

they expected, it is not surprising that Pilcher's concern with quality of life in *The Shell Seekers* rather than material success would appeal to so many working women, especially the over 23 million women who read *Good Housekeeping* magazine, whose median age is 46 and median household income \$39,378.²² In *The Shell Seekers* and *September*, although not in all of her fiction, Pilcher undermines the idea that well-being comes from status-seeking and conspicuous consumption, and replaces it with the notion that well-being arises from the domestic pleasures of home, the intimacies of close friendships and the stimulation of one's senses. Schor suggests that Americans' present hunger for such simple pleasures comes from their diminution in our lives over the last few years. Women who work both inside and outside of the home do not have as much time to orchestrate domestic comfort as traditional housewives did. Schor notes that to some extent employed women have been able 'to substitute commercial services for their own labor'.²³ Indeed, in *The Shell Seekers*, Olivia, Penelope's favourite child, who is a high-profile magazine editor, has mastered this technique. For example, after work, Olivia stops off on the way home and buys chicken Kiev for dinner; on her arrival she surveys her 'shiningly clean' house, which is 'immaculate' because a neighbour comes in 'each day to wash and polish' (43). Before taking a scented bath, Olivia lights the fire. Although the fire is gas with fake logs, Pilcher's narrator assures readers that it is 'as comforting and genuine as a proper fire' (43). Because Olivia's wages are high and she lives alone, she is not limited in what Schor calls 'the buying-out of domestic responsibilities'. Thus Olivia's job has not led to 'a painful cutback in household services', which Schor describes as the experience of most women,²⁴ and which is probably the experience of many women who read *The Shell Seekers*, and certainly the experience of *Good Housekeeping's* readers, 51 per cent of whom have household incomes under \$40,000. Most of Pilcher's readers do not have time to luxuriate in a bath before dinner as Olivia does because they are busy straightening the house, putting food on the table, helping the children with homework, or all three. Many cannot afford either Olivia's cleaning lady or the take-away gourmet dinners.

It is significant that Olivia, while soaking in her bath, 'squeezing her sponge so that hot water trickled like balm over her nakedness' (44), daydreams of Ibiza, which once provided balm for both her overworked body and her soul. There a vacation from her job at the magazine lengthened into a year-long sabbatical and a love affair with Cosmo, a former British army officer who retired early to live cheaply and leisurely on the Mediterranean island. Pilcher's narrative of Olivia's sojourn on Ibiza is one of two chapters (the other is Penelope's affair with Richard described above) which function as romance novellas within the novel, but without the requisite romantic ending of marriage. Penelope's Richard dies in the war, and Olivia leaves Cosmo to return to her career in London. What both idyls share are the sensory experiences of savouring everyday pleasures and relishing domestic comforts. Olivia's arrival at Cosmo's house is an experience of the type of domestic 'luxury' that Pilcher celebrates throughout the novel:

There were a table and some basket chairs set about on the flags, but Olivia did not want to sit. Instead, she went to lean against the whitewashed wall, where earthenware tubs spilled lemon-scented ivy-Leaved geraniums, and an army of ants, endlessly occupied, marched to and fro in well-regulated troops. The quiet was immeasurable. Listening, she caught the tiny muted sounds that were part of this quiet. A distant cowbell. The soft cackling murmur of contented hens, hidden away somewhere in the garden but clearly audible. The stirring of the breeze.

A whole new world. They had driven only a few kilometers, but she could have been a thousand miles from the hotel, her friends, the cocktails, the crowded swimming pool, the bustling streets and shops of the town, the bright lights and the blaring discos. Farther away still were London, *Venus*, her flat, her job—fading into unreality; forgotten dreams of a life that had never been real. Like a vessel that has been empty for too long, she felt herself filled with peace. I could stay here (50-1).

I think one source of working women readers' pleasure in this chapter is that Olivia's lover

Cosmo waits on her when she arrives. One could argue that Olivia and Pilcher's readers desire the world of their childhoods when mothers attended to their every need and when they themselves were free from responsibility. I am sure reading *The Shell Seekers* fulfilled this fantasy for some of my students, and *September* is a meditation on the subject, as characters converge on their rural Scottish homes for a party in September. But one could also argue that what Pilcher's working women readers desire is the world that middle- and upper-class working men inhabited (and some still inhabit) when their wives provided domestic comfort.²⁵ One contest entry captured just this point; Nancy Salinas of Cypress, Texas, wrote: 'To me the world of ROSAMUNDE PILCHER means ... during lunch, trading fluorescents . . . for candlelight. . . tuna salad . . . for roast lamb . . . balding, overweight chauvinists . . . for exciting handsome heroes . . . and computer screens ... for pastoral scenes . . . ROMANCE!!!'

Juliet Schor argues that 'domestic labor was not merely busywork as some scholars have suggested, but resulted in real benefits. Women were acting, in some sense, as domestic servants for their families. Men liked the fancy cooking, clean homes, and healthier children their wives produced. They encouraged, or even demanded, the services.'²⁶ Today, while men are taking on more domestic chores, they have not made up for the hours of domestic work that women have had to cut back on because of jobs outside of the home.²⁷ As a result, Schor, like Arlie Hochschild and Teri Apter, views married women who work outside of the home as especially overworked, living lives of 'perpetual motion, effectively holding down two full-time jobs'.²⁸

Readers, like Olivia, who have been living their lives in overdrive, find Olivia's luxurious (in Pilcher's sense of the word) stay on Ibiza a much-needed respite. Indeed readers routinely refer to this chapter as the 'Ibiza chapter', even though Pilcher titled it after its romantic hero Cosmo. Both my stepdaughter, who is a college student, and a middle-aged friend, who is a psychologist, keep well-worn copies of *The Shell Seekers* on their bedside tables, and reread the Ibiza chapter when they are exhausted. Actually my friend has never progressed beyond that chapter in the novel, not caring to find out whether Cosmo and Olivia ever get back together, only looking to be emotionally restored by vicariously experiencing Olivia's sabbatical. Olivia quits her job and prolongs her stay for a year—situations most of Pilcher's readers cannot afford. But Olivia does not permanently escape from the world of work, nor does she want to. After Olivia replenishes her energy, Pilcher depicts her as restless and ready to go back to work. When Cosmo argues that Olivia should stay on the island, she replies: 'I need the conflict of a demanding job, decisions, deadlines. I need the pressures, the flow of adrenalin. It turns me on' (81). When he asks if work makes her happy, she responds: 'There's not a Blue-bird, an End to the Rainbow. I suppose what it boils down to is that if I'm working, I'm never totally unhappy. And if I'm not working, I'm never totally happy' (81).

While Pilcher's fiction is made to order for today's working women, whose psychic needs include more leisure and someone to wait on them when they come home from work, it also provides today's women readers with models for making their homes comforting, serene and secure havens for themselves and their family and friends. No wonder women's service magazines, such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal*, which define their mission as 'running a household, defining a lifestyle, and coping with family', publish Pilcher's stories; they are fictionalized versions of the magazines themselves, providing detailed descriptions of meals, interiors, gardens and relationships. A secretary I know says she reads Pilcher to get suggestions as to what to cook for dinner. In *The Shell Seekers* meals are detailed from soup to nuts, and they vary from Olivia's trendy dinner of 'crusty brown bread, butter, and a pot of pâté de foie gras; chicken Kiev, and the makings of a salad. Olive oil, fresh peaches, cheeses' (42) to her mother Penelope's more traditional fare, 'roasting sirloin, baking onions, and crisping potatoes' with 'pastry, peeled apples, sliced beans (from the deep-freeze), scraped carrots' (117). Young women setting up their first homes with bargains or hand-me-downs or women furnishing homes on a tight budget are reassured by the worn, but comfortable interiors that Pilcher includes in her

fiction, even in those novels that contain more sumptuous rooms, like *September* and *Coming Home*. Such contrasting rooms resemble articles in women's magazines with photographs of two somewhat similar rooms, one furnished for under \$200, another for \$10,000.

While St Martin's Press first marketed *The Shell Seekers* as a novel about families and relationships, which it certainly is, the sales manager seems to have realized readers' interests in Pilcher's evocation of place and domestic comforts because it marketed *September*, the novel which followed, as 'a place you will never forget'. The addition of *The World of Rosamunde Pilcher* further capitalized on readers' interests; this is a lush picture-book with lovely photographs of Scottish and Cornish landscapes, interior shots of cosy cottages and even Pilcher's own recipes for afternoon tea (scones, treacle tart, caramel cake) and evening meals (potato and leek soup, pheasant theodora, crême brûlée).²⁹ The title of Pilcher's most recent novel, *Coming Home* (1996), foregrounds readers' desires for a welcoming environment and domestic comforts, but it also develops a theme that runs like a chorus through all of Pilcher's fiction, a belief Penelope articulates: 'To own your own house has always seemed to me the most important of priorities. It gives you security in every sense of the word' (*Shell Seekers*, 79).

In *Coming Home* Judith Dunbar's young life has been divided between Ceylon, where her father is in foreign service, and England, where her mother rented a house so that Judith could go to British schools. Pilcher plots this novel very much like a romance novel, but changes the object of desire from a man to a house. From a young age, Judith desires: 'Her own home. Roots. The one thing that she had never known and always longed for.'³⁰ When her mother rejoins her husband in Asia, Judith is displaced to a boarding school where she meets Loveday Carey-Lewis, who introduces Judith to her family's country estate. Pilcher represents Judith's encounter with Nancherrow and its gardens and view of the sea as other novelists would a lover; Judith remembers the feeling as 'being instantly captivated, falling in love' (364). The family's attachment to their home and its domestic pleasures becomes a model for Judith, and by novel's end Pilcher rewards her, not just with a home of her own, but a miniature Nancherrow, thanks to the unexpected generosity of a dying aunt. When the Second World War sweeps her off to south-east Asia, the time apart from Dower House increases her ardour much like the absence of a lover would. Far away she dreams of 'indulging herself in a veritable orgy of repair and refurbishment' (570). When Judith is reunited with her home, the man who falls in love with her must fashion his career around her house and her life in Cornwall. By the end of the novel Dower House has provided 'sanctuary' (710) for several lost souls and 'dispossessed' (316) people. One of these people is Judith's Aunt Biddy, whose son dies in the war. She says to Judith:

'Mrs Boscawen must have been a very tranquil lady.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because I don't remember ever having been in such a tranquil place.'

Not a sound. Just birds and gulls and a sunlit garden. And that little sight of the sea' (437).

There is a serenity about Pilcher's fiction that draws readers in. As one contest entrant wrote, in Pilcher's world 'people are intelligent and calm even in the time of trouble'. Pilcher's editor Sally Richardson thinks readers 'love the mix of reality (which includes all the problems of modern life) with elegance or positive attitude that allows her characters to surmount their problems. At least live with them productively and not go under.'³¹ I think that Pilcher's evocation of place is as soothing as her resolution of conflict, and both in combination provide women readers with a welcome antidote to the hectic, noisy, sometimes violent late twentieth-century world in which we live. Pilcher doubles the serenity of her domestic novels by setting them in the country. In *Coming Home* Lavinia Boscawen reads Trollope's *Barchester Towers* and thinks 'reading him is like having someone take you by the hand and gently lead you back into an easier past' (120). With their rural settings and small communities where family and neighbours are 'involved and

interdependent' (*September*, 431), Pilcher's novels provide a similar experience for late twentieth-century readers. Pilcher represents village life as simpler and more humane than the hectic life of the city. In *Coming Home* Gus calls London an 'anonymous, crowded, stressful place' (683) and gravitates to Cornwall with its 'ordered tranquility'. There the 'timeless, healing quality' of Judith's country home produces in him a 'blissful state' (710). In *September* those with money leave London's 'rat race' (4) and retire early, or like Edmund Aird put up with long commutes to Edinburgh so they can bask in the 'pleasure and solace' (162) of their country homes. Even the hard work of running your country estate as a B&B for 'tedious Americans' (*September*, 184), the way Isobel Balmerino does, is better than moving away from a world that city-dwellers like Noel assume is 'gone forever' (335).

Biographical information on the back cover of *September* gives readers the impression that Rosamunde Pilcher has found a way both to write bestsellers and to create domestic bliss—to be both Olivia and Penelope: 'She has been writing fiction for nearly forty years. When not writing, she is a passionate gardener and keeps an eye on a variety of guests, children, and animals.' The implication is that Rosamunde Pilcher is really not so different from her working woman readers, who also work two jobs, and that they too can have a satisfying domestic life if they only realize its value.³² While *The Shell Seekers* is emotionally restorative for readers because Pilcher allows them to experience vicariously the domestic bliss that Penelope Keeling values and orchestrates, the aesthetic of domestic simplicity that Pilcher's most admirable characters espouse co-exists with a weekend trip to a well-appointed country estate, a holiday on a Mediterranean island and an unexpected stay in a first-class hotel due to a small windfall from the sale of several paintings by Penelope's father, whom the art world has rediscovered. Not only are these material luxuries out of the reach of most of Pilcher's readers, but they provide indulgences in just the type of luxury that elsewhere in the novel Pilcher appears to reject. Testimony to the conservative strain in her fiction is the fact that Pilcher followed *The Shell Seekers* with two novels, *September* and *Coming Home*, that vicariously supply readers with more lavish lifestyles, more sumptuous homes (usually inherited) and more traditional female characters, most of whom do not work outside the home because they have married men of means. The portrait Pilcher paints of Alexa, the caterer whom Noel falls for, is more that of the hovering helpmeet than the modern career woman:

If he awoke thirsty in London, he only had to reach out a hand to find the tumbler of spring water which Alexa set out for him each night, spiked with a slice on lemon. If, in the small dark hours of the morning, he found himself desiring her, he only had to turn to the downy bed, reach out and draw her towards him. Awakened, she was never resentful nor too sleepy for his ardour, but responded with the gentle passion that he had taught her, glorying in her own new-found knowledge, confident in her own desirability (*September*, 362).

In *September* both Alexa and Isobel, principal characters who must earn their own incomes, use domestic work to make their money, and they run their businesses out of their homes, much as Rosamunde Pilcher herself does.

In *The Shell Seekers*, as in her other fiction, Pilcher ultimately sidesteps the difficult balancing act between public and private lives that her working women readers must negotiate. Olivia's workplace is a hazy backdrop, which Pilcher does not attempt to make family friendly. Although Pilcher acknowledges the dangers to women's psychic health from overwork and shows great interest in representing Olivia's life during her sabbatical when she has opted out of her hectic career, she does not explore Olivia's working life, except to suggest in a final chapter that she has learned a lesson from her mother's life: that 'to receive love, she must remain a woman prepared to give it' (546). In the novel's final scene, Cosmo's daughter Antonia calls unexpectedly, and Olivia reluctantly interrupts her busy schedule to have lunch with her. Rosamunde Pilcher also sidesteps working women's ability to create the peaceful havens she describes by endowing Olivia, her career woman, with no desire for a family and setting up Penelope, her mother figure, as past that

stage. Thus Pilcher never really represents the tensions the majority of her readers feel between work and home nor the imbalance working women like Olivia experience daily in their lives. Furthermore, Pilcher's focus is solidly on the upper middle class, although hovering in the background of her novel are the cleaning women, gourmet shopkeepers and gardeners, who make such lovely, serene domestic lives possible. We never see Olivia's maid nor do we see Penelope's housekeeper performing the domestic chores that free Olivia to curl up by the living-room fire or that allow Penelope to entertain luncheon guests in her new conservatory. Although housework is presented as work to be respected, the plot depends on freeing the lady of the house from work that is monotonous and arduous, as it did a century earlier in Caroline Howard Gilman's classic American domestic novel, *Recollections of a Housekeeper* (1834). However, there is a late twentieth-century twist to *The Shell Seekers*. Such freedom is desired not so much so that Pilcher's characters can perform the duties of wife and mother, as was the case with the nineteenth-century protagonists of domestic novels, but so that they can luxuriate alone in their domestic space or be a delightful companion and charming hostess to their invited guests.

The female characters' and the readers' romance in Rosamunde Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers* is not with a tall, dark and handsome man, but with a warm, cosy English country cottage or a tastefully decorated London flat to which they can escape, and where the arduous, monotonous housework that makes for serene repose and domestic comfort is done behind the scenes by someone else and the most difficult choice the working woman has to make is whether to luxuriate in a scented bubble bath or take a walk after work. The nineteenth-century theory of domestic influence, which 'promised women the power to set the course of society without leaving home',³³ has been replaced by a late-twentieth-century theory, which reaffirms the power of domesticity to rehabilitate the individual, but, for the most part, ignores the world beyond one's gate, or gated community, as the case may be. In *The Shell Seekers* Penelope's mother Sophie reads and rereads *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1900) because, she says, 'It comforts me. Soothes me. It reminds me of a world that once existed and will exist again when the war is finished' (262). Similarly, *The Shell Seekers*, like Rosamunde Pilcher's other novels, provides a short holiday, a welcome retreat for working women juggling two or more shifts. The delicious peace and sensuous pleasures of homes and lives like Penelope Keeling's parallel the serenity Pilcher's fiction provides readers after a hard day at work.

¹ See Madonna Miner 'Guaranteed to Please': Twentieth-Century American Women's Bestsellers', in Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocino P. Schweickart (eds), *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, and Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984. See also Suzanne Juhasz, *Reading from the Heart: Women, Literature and the Search for Love*, New York: Viking, 1994.

² In *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1975, psychoanalytic theorist Norman Holland argues that, while readers consciously engage a text for 'social, biographical, political, philosophical, moral, [or] religious meaning' or for 'escape, titillation, amusement', they unconsciously engage the same text in order to transform 'primitive wishes and fears into significance and coherence' (30). Juhasz employs D. W. Winnicott's ideas about maternal nurturing and infant self-development to explain how romance novels replicate the mother-infant bond (see her appendix, 'Women's Development, Object Relations Theory, and Reading').

³ See the comments about these authors and their novels on the amazon.com web-site.

⁴ In the revised edition of *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993, Nina Baym argues that before the Civil War women writers and readers believed in

'the redemptive possibilities of enlightened domesticity' to produce public benevolence as well as a balm for husbands (50). However, the Civil War and the Gilded Age led to the demise of the domestic novel by demonstrating 'the feebleness of the affectional model of human relationships' and by affirming 'profit as the motive around which all of American life was to be organized'. Liberal white women writing after the Civil War began to represent domestic life as constraining. Since then, anti-domestic fiction, from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) to Sue Kaufman's *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967), has displaced the domestic novel for many American female readers.

⁵ See Ann Romines's discussion of Jewett, Wilkins Freeman, Cather and Welty in *The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, which picks up the discussion of the domestic novel where Nina Baym left off. The most recent novel Romines discusses, although only in passing, is Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1981), which she views as representing a division in American women with its tale of two sisters—one rejecting and one embracing domesticity—brought up by a very undomestic aunt (295).

⁶ See Mary P. Ryan *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity, 1830-1860*, New York: The Haworth Press, 1982, especially chapter 1, 'From Patriarchal Household to Feminine Domesticity', pp. 38-40.

⁷ At the amazon.com web-site, fans of *The Shell Seekers* testify to reading the novel countless times; one reader writes: 'It sits on my book shelf of most-beloved books next to *Gone with the Wind* and *The Colony* [by Siddons].'

⁸ In *Working Women Don't Have Wives: Professional Success in the 1990s*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1994, Terri Apter, who studied English middle-class working mothers, but whose analysis also resonates for American women, argues that 'the greatest threat to women's well-being is no longer the isolation and tedium of being a housewife' but rather the tension between wanting to do a good job at work and wanting to provide well for family members at home. Apter maintains that the stress in their lives comes not only from overwork at two full-time jobs, but from feelings of failure at not being able to do either to the best of their ability. She believes that 'career dedication' is still 'measured against a gauge of people whose domestic and family lives are serviced by wives', and that women who work both in and outside of the home and experience depression do so because they are trapped in circumstances that they can neither manage nor change (198, 203). Apter's findings parallel those of Arlie Hochschild's research on American working women, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1989.

⁹ Pilcher's publisher, St Martin's, reprinted this quotation in the paperback copy of *September* (1990). It is from Martin Levin's review of Pilcher's *Another View* in the *New York Times* (6 October 1974).

¹⁰ Lee Quarfoot, the fiction editor of *Good Housekeeping* magazine, wrote prefaces for two collections of Pilcher's stories, *The Blue Bedroom and Other Stories* (1985) and *Flowers in the Rain* (1991). A number of the stories in each collection first appeared in *Good Housekeeping*, while others had appeared in *Redbook* and *Ladies Home Journal*, all of which are referred to as 'women's service magazines', as opposed to women's fashion or decorating magazines.

¹¹ Conversation with Elaine Vilbig, promotion administrator of Marden-Kane, Inc., 13 August 1992. The quotations that follow are from the remaining nineteen contest entries held by St Martin's Press. See also responses to Pilcher's fiction at the amazon.com web-site.

¹² See Radway and also Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992, 36-8, for a critique of Radway's optimistic analysis of the positive effects of women's consumption of mass culture's representations of women.

¹³ These statistics were reported by Mary Jordan in her *Washington Post* article, 'College Women's Aspirations Top Men's' (24 January 1994), which notes a significant increase over 1985 statistics when 16 per cent of first-year college students said they were overwhelmed. Jordan revealed that the number of first-year women who plan to earn advanced degrees is 66 per cent, compared to 63 per cent for the men—a statistic that will likely continue to cause women to feel pressures of overwork unless gender roles in the home are changed and the workplace becomes more family friendly.

¹⁴ Juhasz, p. 6.

¹⁵ Rosamunde Pilcher, *September*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1990, 12. All subsequent references to this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text.

¹⁶ Eudora Welty, 'Place in Fiction', in *Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*, New York: Random House, 1977.

¹⁷ Rosamunde Pilcher, *The Shell Seekers*, New York: St Martin's, 1987, 3, 3, 6. All subsequent references to the novel will be noted parenthetically in the text.

¹⁸ Baym, p. 27.

¹⁹ Of the 28 per cent who have made changes, 68 per cent said they did so to create more balance in their lives. The statistics were reported in Don Oldenburg's, 'The Simple Life: Making Do with Less . . . and Loving It' (*Washington Post*, 9 January 1996).

²⁰ The associate editor of *Working Woman* states that the magazine, first published in 1979, publishes 950,000 copies a month (e-mail message, 4 September 1996).

²¹ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.

²² These statistics come from the 'Demographic Profile of *Good Housekeeping*' (autumn 1997).

²³ Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, New York: Basic Books, 1992, 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.37.

²⁵ See Apter.

²⁶ Schor, p. 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁸ Schor, p. 20. Arlie Hochschild has also described this phenomenon. Two studies just published suggest that men's participation in household chores has recently risen dramatically in working-class as well as professional households: Rosaline C. Barnett and Caryl Rivers, *She Works/He Works: How Two-Income Families Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996, and Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

²⁹ Siv Bublitz (ed.), *The World of Rosamunde Pilcher*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1996.

³⁰ Rosamunde Pilcher, *Coming Home*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1996, 422-3. All subsequent references to this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text.

³¹ Letter dated 1 July 1992.

³² In 'Family Romances: The Contemporary Popular Family Saga', Christine Bridgwood noted that publishers of family sagas in England have employed a marketing strategy that attempts to reduce the distance between writers and readers (in Jean Radford (ed.), *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, 169).

³³ 33 Ryan, p. 40