

Miriam Fuchs and Craig Howes, eds. *Teaching Life Writing Texts*. New York: Modern Language Association, 2008. pp. ix + 400.

As the editors observe in their introduction, life writing has now become a fixture on university teaching timetables around the world as a discrete genre, quite separate from literary or historical studies. Many postsecondary institutions currently run modules in life writing at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, whether or not those particular words appear in the course title. What is more, in the past twenty years or so, the kinds of texts routinely included in such modules have become diversified, changed beyond all recognition. Where once a stately march through the biographical canon—from Plutarch, through Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*, to Thomas Carlyle, and from there to Lytton Strachey—seemed the only option, now a reading list might include diaries, oral histories, and group biographies. Film, photography, and social networking sites could also be added to the list. And given that such courses are as likely to be taking place in Istanbul or Eritrea as in Monash or Toronto, it is probable that the material under consideration might include much that is not immediately familiar to an Anglophone western-centred audience.

The discussions that these texts inevitably generate are something new too. Where once students of life writing might have concentrated on issues of empathy, hagiography, truth-telling, and female experience, they are now likely to consider anything from sexual trauma to ethnic identity, genocide or disability. Rather than turning yet again to the stale debate about whether Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* should really be read as a gothic novel rather than a biography, today’s life writing student is just as likely to be considering the phenomenon of “second lives” in cyberspace or examining emerging forms of autobiography in post-apartheid South Africa.

In this highly energizing collection of over forty essays, teachers of life writing from universities around the world share their best

practices. The courses they teach vary widely, from Trev Lynn Broughton's Cultures of Life Writing, offered as a Master's degree elective at the University of York (UK), to Cynthia Huff's gateway Introduction to English Studies program at Illinois State University in the United States. Some of the contributors have opted to give an overview of their courses: for instance, John Mephram and Sarah Sceats describe in general terms the work done by students in their Writing the Self module, which forms part of the MA in Issues in Twentieth Century Literature at Kingston University, London. Other contributors, however, have gone into much greater detail, appending to their essays the exercises, writing assignments, and sample bibliographies that they use in their life writing courses.

So great is the range of material on offer that the editors, Miriam Fuchs and Craig Howes, who both work at the University of Hawaii's Center for Biographical Research, have sensibly chosen to divide it into two main sections with further sub-divisions for extra clarification. The first part, "Generic Approaches," is split between "Literary Studies" and "Interdisciplinary Approaches." The essays grouped under "Literary Studies" describe courses in which the instructors' choices of texts and teaching approaches reflect the histories, current definitions, and critical literature specific to the genres in which they work. In several such cases, instructors describe how they use life writing texts to further students' understanding of a particular period. For instance, Alison Booth of the University of Virginia explains how she uses auto/biographical texts to extend undergraduates' knowledge of the Victorian era, since they seem to have oversimplified ideas about it, imagining that everyone was "proper and repressed." Asking them to read and comment upon texts such as John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* or Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* not only prompts students to question whether the modernist condemnation of the Victorians as devoid of passion or humour is really valid, but also invites them to think about the status of these texts as truth-telling documents. For as Booth wryly observes, the fact that so many students routinely refer to all published texts, whether fiction or not,

as “novels” suggests how crucial it is for them to think more carefully about their working definitions of literary genres.

The courses under discussion in the second section of Part One are designed so as to lead students of life writing into adjacent and cognate subject areas, aiming for a truly interdisciplinary approach. For example, the students at Arizona State University who take Julie Codell’s class on the Victorian artistic self are invited to make use of painters’ own life writings, including *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* by James McNeill Whistler and William Holman Hunt’s *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. As Codell rightly points out, this kind of material is often overlooked or even rigorously excluded by academic art historians, who have concentrated instead on the artwork itself, perhaps with a supplementary examination of patronage networks and critical reception. By introducing the makers’ own life writings into the mix, Codell aims to add greater complexity to her students’ understanding of the production of Victorian painting. For instance, by setting Hunt’s autobiography alongside his painting *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*, and then adding a pamphlet by the Pre-Raphaelite critic F. G. Stephens and other press responses to the work, Codell is able to tease out some of the contradictory and conflicting discourses which went to make up Hunt’s cultural identity. In the process, she describes herself as bringing into play “the relation of aesthetics to personal character, economic venues, articulations in public spaces (autobiography, exhibition, critical review), and the differences between our own and Victorian aesthetic assessments.”(166) Far from reducing Hunt’s painting to disguised yet basically unproblematic autobiography, Codell’s decision to give full weight to his memoir actually opens up the painter’s experience of himself and his work to a richer range of readings.

In Part Two of the book, “Cultural Approaches,” Fuchs and Howes have grouped those essays that describe life writing pedagogies in relation to cultural and historical developments. Included in the first subsection, “Times and Places,” is an illuminating essay by Gillian Whitlock and Kate Douglas who describe two undergraduate

courses, Post-Colonialism and Australian Lives, which they taught at the University of Queensland in 2002-03. In the first of these courses, the undergraduate cohort, which contained several visiting students from North America and Europe, were asked to look at journals and letters produced by settlers during the British colonization of Australia, Canada and South Africa in the early nineteenth centuries. By gently introducing different theories of subjectivity, including Foucauldian and psychoanalytical ideas, they could encourage students to begin to think about how applying a particular interpretive model to a text generates a corresponding set of insights. In the second course, Australian Lives, Whitlock and Douglas shifted their focus to teaching contemporary genres of autobiography. In the process, they stressed the importance of being open to the moment. In addition to reading already planned work on indigenous lives and blogs, the students were also required to be alert to happenstance. The death of the country and western singer Slim Dusty midway through the semester allowed the class to critique his obituaries. Narratives drawn from contemporary sporting events were likewise woven into seminar discussions. The media coverage of Jana Pittman's World Championship-winning run, for instance, was illuminatingly compared with the kinds of popular biographical narratives routinely constructed around Australia's male cricketers. What is more, the bafflement with which some of the visiting overseas students greeted these iconic Australian names provided a useful illustration of the centrality of place in the production and inflection of life writing narratives.

The remaining essays in the second part of this collection deal with widely varied subjects: Margaretta Jolly's essay discusses using Jo Spence's autobiographical photographic work to interrogate narratives of gender in Roland Barthe's *Camera Lucida*, and Hilary Clark addresses running seminars using women's depression memoirs. Each of the two main sections of the book concludes with an extremely useful "Additional Resources" document that supplements rather than repeating reading material already cited in the essays.

As this brief summary suggests, the essays in this book are overwhelmingly concerned with teaching autobiographical rather

than biographical writing. This perhaps may be attributed to two things. First, and most pragmatically, autobiographical texts speak powerfully to audiences made up of young people who are likely to be engaged in constructing and revising their own early versions of their adult selves. Second, in the past thirty years autobiography has been far more effectively theorized than has biography. The teacher who is considering developing a course in first-person, non-fiction narrative will find a rich and varied bibliography of secondary reading to help frame this material. Teaching biographical texts, by contrast, can often feel like stepping on to a high wire without a safety net.

This book, then, is less likely to be of interest to those whose life writing teaching practice is centred on the history and practice of biography. But for those many academics who have taught or are thinking of teaching courses organized around autobiographical work, including photography and performance as well as the more obvious published and manuscript memoirs, letters, and journals, this is an essential book. Particularly valuable are those essays that include sample exercises, many of which could be adapted to suit a whole range of different contexts. Several of the writers also provided gratifyingly reassuring admissions that there were moments when planned exercises or other classroom initiatives failed to quite catch fire. And so, ironically, by reading this collection of pedagogic essays as a kind of life writing, one is reminded again of one the genre's most valuable functions: to provide the reassurance that, no matter how vulnerable one might sometimes feel in the lecture hall, someone, somewhere, has already gone through exactly the same thing.

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