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*Lifewriting Annual: Biographical and Autobiographical
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Lifewriting Annual: Biographical and Autobiographical Studies, Volume 2. Ed. Thomas R. Smith. New York: AMS, 2008. 316 pp.

Reviewed by Tanya Y. Kam

I MUST confess that it was with a certain amount of gloom that I approached my August “task” of writing a review of *Lifewriting Annual: Biographical and Autobiographical Studies* (2008), edited by Thomas R. Smith. Despite its comforting hardcover heft and elegant eggplant-and-silver cover design, my mind was preoccupied with less cerebral thoughts concerning perennial gardening, light summer reading, and uncomplicated home repairs. Once I cracked the spine of *Lifewriting Annual*, however, I was absorbed by the quality of the scholarship within, and I was reminded why auto/biographical studies has remained a constant research interest through the years. The essays and reviews inside are layered with insight and intellectually rigorous but many are also entertaining, acutely personal and engrossing. *Lifewriting Annual* demonstrates that scholarship can assume a variety of guises, that it can be both intricately theoretical and creatively expressive—a stimulating read even during the dog days of summer.

Lifewriting Annual is divided into three sections: Essays, Crossings, and Reviews. The first six essays are more conventionally academic in nature, and they address a variety of concerns ranging from the use of primary documents in research to an examination of the symbiotic relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. The opening three essays concentrate on manuscripts and letters as essential components in understanding a particular writer’s life and work. In the opening essay, Maggie Grover demonstrates that access to Austen’s handwritten letters can yield a more intimate understanding of a much-revered author, yet “in her novels, Austen allows us to enter the same kind of confidential relationship which we would have as addressees of her letters” (21). Continuing the focus on manuscripts, Sarah Russo rereads an unedited manuscript of “Hannah’s Places,” Hannah Cullwick’s autobiography. Russo deftly shows how this domestic servant’s life represents a telling portrait of Victorian England while also indicating how Cullwick’s handwriting and well-intentioned editorial interventions may have significantly contributed to misreadings of her work. While distorted representations of a writer’s work are sometimes unintentional, Sharon Bickle’s examination of Katharine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper,

"aunt and niece, lifelong lovers, and the collaborative writers known as 'Michael Field'" (71) reveal the extent to which the archival process reflects societal vetting. Autobiographically documenting her own journey into the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, Bickle concludes that "archives are not neutral spaces" and the loss of the love letters between Bradley and Cooper "is directly attributable to the gendered archival processes which positioned the letters outside the body of lifewriting accessed by Michael Field scholars, whilst at the same time deflecting any outrage that such a process might have been expected to generate" (85–86). Victoria Carchidi's examination of T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in light of postwar trauma studies illuminates how Lawrence "moves towards fictive modernist techniques of representation" (93) as a means of building an identity that highlights "community and affirmation of life rather than dominance, bloodshed, and power politics" (107). Continuing the focus on trauma and life writing, Robert Ward reminds the reader of distinctions between "autobiography" and "memoir," stressing memoir's association with crisis as he examines Joan Didion's memoir, *Where I Was From*. Ward further observes that cultural crisis and personal anxiety is reflected in the montage-like structure of Didion's book, which "allows primary source historical fragments written and spoken by marginalized individuals and groups to share platform with more canonical documents of the past" (122). The final essay in this section, by Bruce Kellner, explores the loving, symbiotic relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas. While charting sharp differences in each woman's personality and writing style, Kellner's eloquently expressive essay shows the extent to which "the two had in effect absorbed each other. Gertrude Stein may have written the words, but Alice B. Toklas had made that writing possible" (138).

The Crossings section of *Lifewriting Annual* highlights the efficacy and legitimacy of scholarly personal writing and is, admittedly, my favorite section. G. Thomas Couser's gem of an essay represents a poignant journey to understanding his father, a teacher and a missionary who traveled to Syria in the 1930s. Mediating time and culture, Couser inscribes a rich biography generated by his desire to understand his father: "[w]hen children write a parent's life, it seems, they're driven to write memoirs of the distant or absent father" (170). Couser's work recovers aspects of the father who seemed mysterious, sometimes remote to him while also painting a larger portrait of a missionary whose life orbit seemed uncharacteristic for a man of his father's temperament and unconventional religious practices. While Couser's essay attempts to unearth a fuller understanding of his father, Anne Ryden's essay is a personal mediation on the passing of her child, Ever. Ryden's essay represents an attempt to come to terms with her loss as

well as to explore, and perhaps forgive, rigid medical institutions that do not always privilege or respond to the emotional and individual needs of the patient. Eugene Stelzig's tragic-comic-philosophic essay regarding his travels abroad manages to plumb the folly of moral righteousness, stereotypes, humiliation, and comeuppance in a manner that somehow combines humor with somber ethical contemplation. While traveling in Spain, Stelzig tries to play hero in a story concerning a suitcase situation gone wrong, but the recognition that he misread the scenario troubles Stelzig more than thirty years later. Realizing that he was out of place in more ways than one, the more mature, less impetuous Stelzig uses the past to shape his present and future selves. Cristina Houen's essay sustains Stelzig's focus on ethics, and she employs autobiographic mythology and the figure of the Crone in her examination of the desiring female self. Rather than submitting to rigid societal definitions of mother and wife, Houen reclaims her subjecthood as she rewrites her life, acknowledging her multiple desires and interrogating one-dimensional stereotypes regarding the "deserting wife and abandoning mother" (195). Shifting the spotlight to methodologies of research, Howard R. Wolf's essay, which narrates the history of his book and manuscript collections, brings alive the process of forming a collection and serves as a resource for those who wish to research a number of notable authors, including Wolf himself. Wolf's process of compiling and documenting his collections, creating what he calls an "autobibliography," testifies to the fact that collection formation is an art in itself insofar as it represents a meditative process requiring time, thought, and talent. As does Wolf, Jeffrey Meyers offers a behind-the-scene glimpse of his careful process of researching, writing, and structuring his 2005 book, *Impressionist Quartet: The Intimate Genius of Manet and Morisot, Degas and Cassatt*. Writing autobiographically, Meyers reveals the genesis and growth of his book as he charted the interrelated careers, friendships, love lives, and disagreements between the four Impressionist artists mentioned in his book's title. Rather than interpreting a singular auto/biographical text, both Wolf's and Meyers's essays promote a larger understanding of life writing by highlighting the research and decision-making processes essential to shaping, preserving, and expanding the field.

The eight reviews that compose the final section of *Lifewriting Annual* range in subject matter to appraisals of literary figures, legal philosophers and translators, as well as one review that focuses more broadly on the subject of adoption. They represent reviews of the following memoirs and texts: Gregory Rabassa's *If This Be Treason: Translations and Its Discontents*, Ron Powers' *Mark Twain: A Life*, Neith Boyce's *The Modern World of Neith Boyce: Autobiography and Diaries* (edited by Carol DeBoer-Langworthy), Donez Xiques's

Margaret Laurence: *The Making of a Writer*, James M. Hutchisson's Poe, John Haffenden's *William Empson: Among the Mandarins*, Nicola Lacey's *A Life of H. L. A. Hart: The Nightmare and the Noble Dream*, Marianne's Novy's *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama*. Rather than reviewing these reviews, I hope that it will suffice to comment that the quality of these assessments demonstrates that the process of examining and reviewing life writing constitutes an important form of scholarship in itself, albeit one that is too often ignored.

Thomas R. Smith's meticulous selection and arrangement of academic essays, crossover essays, and reviews have crafted an annual that is rewarding to read and ambitious in its scope. This second volume is, as Smith himself notes, "heftier than the first" (vii); most conspicuously, the growth of the "Crossings" section from one essay to six suggests the potential and increased interest in scholarship that blends autobiography and biography, research and the personal voice. Among the contributors are scholars representing women's studies, postcolonial studies, disability studies, legal studies, literary translation, and literature, as well as a review written by an established poet. The interdisciplinary design of the *Lifewriting Annual* underscores the fact that the essays and reviews compiled in the *Annual* are likely to appeal to a much wider audience than simply those who define themselves as experts in the field. My only critique is a petty one: I would have liked the visual transition between the three sections to be more distinct, but this is a matter of simple formatting more than anything else. In all, Thomas R. Smith deserves warm recognition for his vision and dedication to advancing scholarship in so many engaging directions. Without doubt, *Lifewriting Annual* is a stimulating contribution to the study of auto/biographical studies, and it is likely to appeal to curious minds who may choose to peruse it on the porch on a fine summer day or, alternatively, consume it, huddled in blankets on a somber December night. Whatever the season, this montage of ideas and voices, theories and anecdotes, will not disappoint the inquisitive reader.

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