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An Ethics of Life Writing by Paul John Eakin; Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing by G. Thomas Couser
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The Hastings Center Report, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 2006), pp. 46-47
Published by: The Hastings Center
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3528402
Accessed: 30/10/2012 22:45

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review

Confessions and Transgressions: Ethics and Life Writing

by Martha Montello

Autobiographies have become so pervasive in bookstores that critics and reviewers tell us we live in an age of memoir. We are entranced by confession, drawn to the revelations and disclosures embedded in personal narratives. However, some of this "life writing," as the critics call it, is so disturbing that it raises compelling moral questions about the telling of private stories—our own and those of others close to us. Our shared sense that the stories of others, inextricably part of our own, represent privileged communications raises the question of whether life writing is always a form of trespass.

With the opening line of reputedly his most autobiographical novel, Dickens crystallizes the problem: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by someone else, these pages must show." As *David Copperfield* unfolds, both narrator and reader come to understand the profound irony of the "or": the initially naïve protagonist becomes the man he does with and by means of the heroic others who are intimately woven through his life story. Dickens reveals the impossibility of telling only one's own story. Identity is continually formed through and within relationships, so that the freedom to tell one's own story inevitably impinges on the privacy of others. If, as Philippe Lejeune tells us, our private lives are almost always coproperty, how then should we think about an ethics of life writing, both the good it can do and the harms it can cause?

One particularly controversial recent publication in autobiography brought the ethics of life writing to the front burner of literary and social criticism. Kathryn Harrison's 1997 memoir of her four-year affair with her father met with huge sales and hostile critics. *The Kiss* continues to be a lightning rod for debate about psychological and moral motivations for such confessions. Harrison justifies her tale with a kind of dubious determinism that implies that the telling needed to follow the act, in the same way that the incest somehow needed to be committed. Her motivations came under vocal scrutiny, labeled by some as a conscious act of revenge. In his "Biography as Bloodsport," *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani included Harrison when he indicted the nastiness of many contemporary autobiographies and biographies for their potential harm to their subjects and others. In the same vein, child psychiatrist Robert Coles, author of *The Moral Lives of Children*, later recanted a laudatory blurb he had written for Harrison's memoir when he learned that she had small children who would later read and likely be harmed by her story of their grandfather.

Even when the moral purpose of writing one's life may seem exemplary to the writer, it's not always clear whether the good outweighs the damage, whether it's shrouded in fiction or not. Writers are always caught in a tension between the need to reveal and the wish to conceal. F. Scott Fitzgerald's autobiographical *Tender is the Night* was perhaps, of all his novels, the one closest to his heart. About *Tender*, Fitzgerald wrote, "*Gatsby* was a tour de force, but this is a confession of faith." A thinly veiled rendition of his marriage to Zelda, the story details her descent into madness. As readers, we appreciate the power and sad truth of the novel. But most of us wonder about his right to violate Zelda's privacy, with no realistic opportunity either for consent or for telling her story her own way. If our intimate relationships are akin to the confessional, we share our lives with each other in trust. "In confessing ourselves," says renowned autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin, "we inevitably confess those who have shared our life."

In *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, published in 2001, Hilde Lindemann contributed importantly to an understanding of the ethical obligations writers have in constructing narratives of disadvantaged people. The book examines the role that narratives play as strategies of resistance and restoration. One of the finest chapters explores the destructive elements embedded in what Lindemann calls the "master" or cultural narratives of three social groups with damaged identities: gypsies, transsexuals, and mothers. Bringing insights from feminist theory to an analysis of the power dynamics within master narratives, Lindemann examines the systematic marginalization of group members that stunts their identity and limits their opportunities to act freely within society at large. Her premise is that narratives do moral work. Since identity is "narratively constructed," the damage it sustains through oppressive stories of the self can be narratively repaired through counterstories. Powerful instruments of liberation, counterstories reimagine the person as someone worthy of moral re-

An Ethics of Life Writing. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Cornell University Press, 2004. 228 pages. $18.95. Paperback.

Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing. By G. Thomas Couser. Cornell University Press, 2004.
234 pages. $18.95. Paperback.

spect, thereby contributing to her freedom to act.

One of the best new books about moral obligations in life writing is *An Ethics of Life Writing*, by Eakin. The eleven essays in the collection bring together work by major scholars of life writing to explore many kinds of life writing, including illness and disability narratives, literary fiction, memoirs, and case histories. Eakin's introduction takes as its starting point his concept of "narrative identity," which argues, as does Lindemann's work, for narrative not merely as a literary form, but as a fundamental component of human experience. Autobiography, he avers, is a discourse of identity, one part of the self-narration we practice all our lives that continually shapes and defines our sense of self. All of the essays in the book support, in various ways, Eakin's insistence that "ethics is the deep subject of autobiographical discourse."

Several of the essays focus on the ethical failings of well-known contemporary memoirs. In "Arguing with Life Stories: The Case of Rigoberta Menchu," Paul Lauritzen contends that when Menchu violates the ethical responsibility to be honest about biographical facts, she "generates corrosive skepticism" that destroys readers' trust in the author's credibility and undermines her own intended moral work. Her admirable effort to describe the suffering she and her people endured under a repressive government military regime in Guatemala cannot justify distortion or fabrication of biographical and historical facts. In "Misremembering Ted Hughes," Diane Middlebrook describes how Emma Tennant, Hughes's lover for a time, obscures readers' view of the historical record by making it impossible to tell fact from fiction in both her memoir and novel about Hughes's life. Middlebrook contends that a writer's ethical obligation to tell the truth applies evenly to both the "nonfiction novel" and the autobiographical memoir.

But it's when life writing tells perhaps too much truth that things get more difficult. Strong essays by Nancy K. Miller and Richard Freadman examine the points at which autobiographers' best interests collide with those of their family members, who may or may not consent to the story's publication. Alice Wexler's case study of the moral complexities of publishing her family's history of Huntington's disease proves to be one of the best in the book. She recognizes the potentially severe consequences for people she cares about. In essays that explore the perils and rewards of parents' writings about their seriously ill or disabled children, G. Thomas Couser and Arthur Frank acknowledge the dangers of trespass but also champion the potential of life writing to resist the damaging identity narratives and reshape cultural conceptions of disability and illness.

In a full-length study of his own, G. Thomas Couser focuses on perhaps the most intractable problem in biographical and autobiographical writing: the ethics of representing others with whom the writer has an intimate, trust-based relationship, but who are unable to give meaningful consent. *Vulnerable Subjects* is especially concerned with the disabled, institutionalized, unborn, dead, mentally impaired, very young, and very old—those who cannot speak for themselves to protect their privacy. Arguing that the relationship between life writers and their vulnerable subjects is analogous to the doctor-patient relationship, he adopts a pared-down version of Beauchamp and Childress's "middle-level" principles of bioethics as a guide through the ethical dilemmas, emphasizing the principle of autonomy and its dictums around informed consent and, to a lesser extent, the principle of beneficence.

In one especially fine chapter, "Life Writing as Death Writing: Disability and Euthanography," Couser renders two narratives written by parents of young men left paralyzed in diving accidents. As the parents face the possibility of terrible end of life decisions, the key to going on with their lives becomes their ability to imagine their sons' lives with disability. Couser describes a "meaningful respect for autonomy . . . allowing and enabling individuals to develop new centers and new equilibria." Telling these counterstories creates "scripts" for such damaged lives, "accounts that inscribe futures where no future seemed plausible."

The strength of the book lies in its well-articulated concerns with the multiple and complex obligations that writers incur to resist objectifying and exploiting their subjects, as well as their responsibility to their readers to clarify the negotiations and moral thinking that led to publication. Its limitation lies in its overdependence on informed consent as a moral value. Couser seems to be giving life writing a rule-based manual, based on regulations and codes of professional conduct: "Although it is not necessarily exploitative to treat a subject as a literary commodity, doing so lacks the built-in ethical justification of the clinical case history and of biomedical research." Ultimately, the approach is inadequate. The intimacy of family relationships and friendships calls for a less constrained and rigid approach.

Taken together, *Vulnerable Subjects* and *An Ethics of Life Writing* succeed in delineating the critical tensions between allegiances to truth and privacy at the center of autobiographical writing, but these tensions find no final resolution. Writers always need to reflect on the ethics of their work in the ways that Eakin's and Couser's books so ably describe.

For readers, so-called "life writing" must ultimately be judged by the same criteria by which we judge fiction. We look for two strong moral values: 1) a profound respect for the characters and 2) a deep sense of purpose from which the telling arises. We're drawn to stories that develop the characters with respect for the integrity—or wholeness—of the person, whether that person is good or bad, real or fictional. And we're drawn to stories that come from a deep desire to really know something about another person, about the world, or about our own sense of life. These are the stories that live on in the imagination, that give us valuable ways of understanding each other, and that have the power to transform our sense of who we are.