The Ethics of Life Writing. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2004. x, 271pp.

Reviewed by Tanya Y. Kam

When I was five, I would write "I hate momy" on the tabula rasa walls of my closet whenever I felt that I was being treated unfairly by the foresaid parent. By telling the world, inscribing my childish anger, my not-so-public declaration must have somehow soothed my furious energies. I suppose the act of telling, hidden as it was, represented a form of catharsis: words that I dared not speak aloud to my mother had strange therapeutic power when emblazoned in the dark recesses of my closet. My crude crayon indictment, however, had little consequence in the real world. My mother reprimanded me for writing on the wall and, shocked that her middle child was an inadequate speller, even more severely chastised me for misspelling "Mommy." Other than that, no one knew, and no one was tangibly affected by my attempts to tattle on my mother. Impermanent, my words were scrubbed as clean as if they had never existed. But what are the consequences of public disclosure when more mature narrators publish and distribute their life stories and, in the process, lay bare the delicate intimacies of family, friendship, hardship, and triumph to the reading public? Can the secrets they reveal, the unflattering depictions they inscribe, the privacy they inevitably invade be so easily wiped clean? To what degree should life writers be aware of and take into consideration the ethical dimension of publishing their private lives, which might, in some cases and to some real-life "characters," amount to writing on the wall, tattling to the world?

The Ethics of Life Writing, edited by Paul John Eakin, is an impressive collection of eleven essays, plus introduction and conclusion, that probe the moral dimension of mediation, meditation, transcription, and misrepresentation in a world in which self-disclosure is fraught with decision and, sometimes, deception. With its sustained interest in the relationship between the ethical and the auto/biographical, Eakin's collection breaks new ground in the study of life writing. Although other books such as Angel G. Loureiro's *The Ethics of Autobiography: Replacing the Subject in Modern Spain* (1999) and G. Thomas Couser's recent publication, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (2003), have also generated interest in how auto/biographical forms are affected by ethical considerations, Eakin's collection is more discursive in its treatment of the subject. Those familiar with auto/biography studies

will recognize prominent scholars in the field, including G. Thomas Couser, Nancy K. Miller, Craig Howes, and David Parker as well as life writers such as Richard Freadman, Nancy K. Miller, Alice Wexler, and Diane Middlebrook. However, what makes Eakin's collection particularly vibrant is its interdisciplinary edge; this set of essays is enlarged by contributions from scholars representing diverse, but often-intersecting disciplines. In addition to the scholars and memoirists already noted, contributors include Marianne Gullestad, social anthropologist; Paul Lauritzen, professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Program in Applied Ethics; Arthur Frank, professor of Sociology; Claudia Mills, professor of Philosophy; and John Barbour, professor of Religion. Each contributor writes from a background informed by his or her discipline, and it is this diversity of ideas and techniques that add personality and depth to the entire collection.

What is the good of life writing, and how, exactly, can it do harm? This question, initiated by Paul John Eakin in the introduction to *The Ethics of Life Writing,* focuses on the potentially positive and harmful effects of the genre. Eakin evokes the term "life writing" to encompass "the protean forms of contemporary personal narrative, including interviews, profiles, ethnographies, case studies, diaries, Web pages, and so on" (1). Drawing attention to a world in which private lives have increasingly become more public through various circuits of technology, the exposure of once-private lives begets questions of moral significance and consequence. As the contributors to this book remind us, the act of composing and publishing such works as a biography, an autobiography, a diary, or a blog (web log) is not a solitary experience: real people reincarnated into literary distribution are affected by the act of making the private public. Eakin's collection, then, asks us to interrogate and rethink our assumptions regarding the purpose and principles of life writing. A few of the questions inspired by the book include: how does the life writer balance the need to tell an "authentic" story with the desire to tell a morally responsible story? If letters legally belong to the person who wrote them, how can a memoirist lawfully and ethically incorporate them into one's text? To what degree are subterfuge, tact, and moral judgment necessary when writing biographically about the lives of the living, the aged, the ailing, the deceased, and the familial with whom the writer is engaged in a trust relationship? While exploring transgressions, misrepresentations, and literary flourishes complicit in life writing, individual essayists in this collection also seek to understand life writing as a powerful, contemplative outlet that has the potential to enrich the life of both writer and reader. Eakin divides the essays into four sections of inquiry: Telling the Truth in Autobiography, Biography, and History; Life Writing as

Moral Inquiry; Representing Others: Trust and Betrayal; and Acts of Resistance: Telling Counterstories.

In the first section, contributors explore debates implicitly related to Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact." According to this pact, the institution of autobiography is defined by the oneness of the author, narrator, and subject, and the autobiographer is presumed capable of telling and ethically bound to tell the "Truth." In "Arguing with Life Stories: The Case of Rigoberta Menchú," Paul Lauritzen revisits the controversy regarding Rigoberta Menchú's Nobel-Prize winning *testimonio.* Taking into account evidence that Menchú deliberately told an altered version of reality, Lauritzen stresses that writers of a life narrative should take care to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction. While Menchú's *testimonio* has powerful sociopolitical appeal and claims to represent a collective identity, Lauritzen's "big picture" argument holds individual life writers liable for their portrayal; ultimately, such writers have the responsibility to tell honest narratives. Echoing Lauritzen's assertion that memoirists have an ethical responsibility to tell legitimate histories, Diane Middlebrook examines the writing of Emma Tenant, a writer and Hughes's mistress, in her essay, "Misremembering Ted Hughes." Indicating that Tenant's memoir of Hughes merges inventive creations with nonfiction, Middlebrook additionally shows that Tenant's novel (mis)leads the reader into speculating that fictional aspects are actually truthful incarnations. In Middlebrook's words, "a personal ethical failure jams the signals by which a reader navigates the reality-effect of the nonfiction novel" (49). Although both Lauritzen and Middlebrook articulate compelling arguments, the concept of life writing as ethically bound to some notion of verifiable truth strikes me as being overly rigid. Indeed, some of the most captivating, provocative memoirs and biographies (e.g., Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* Audre Lorde's "biomythography," *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*) are those that test true-false dichotomies, challenging the reader to decipher what is actual, fictive, imagined, mythic, misremembered, forgotten, reconstructed, and dreamed. Debates about the reliability and ethical politics of the narrative can, in turn, lead to productive discussions about why the life writer felt compelled to stretch, manufacture, or redefine the truth.

Balancing the idea that life writing has the potential to mislead or do harm, Part Two of *The Ethics of Life Writing* examines life writing's ability to *do good,* to set models of moral behavior. Invoking Charles Taylor's question, "What good is it to be?" David Parker suggests that forms such as memoir offer the opportunity to reexamine our lives with respect to morality and mortality in his essay, "Life Writing as Narrative of the Good." In contemplating our lives, forcing us to consider

actions of the past, autobiography necessarily becomes "the narrative of the good" because it leads to a consciousness about ourselves and the lives that we lead. In doing so, life writing implicitly represents an ethical practice. John Barbour's essay, "Judging and Not Judging Parents" agrees with Parker's assessment of the value of moral nonfiction. Examining the works of Paul Auster, Kim Chernin, and John Edgar Wideman, Barbour stresses how ethical decisions guide the hands of writers when attempting to inscribe a parent's life with tact and discretion. Grappling with questions of morality, forgiveness, and religion, such texts force the writers to consider their own ethical practices as they reflect on the lives of their parents. By extension, such life writing also encourages readers to apply lessons of the text to their own lives, to consciously think about their own moral codes and operations.

Part Three focuses on strategies that different life writers use to portray the lives of those close to them. In "Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir: Trust and Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life," Claudia Mills argues that it is valuable and often necessary in a cathartic sense to tell "real" stories despite the cost to friends and family. Stressing that writers can choose to tell a nonfiction or fictional story, Mills contemplates tactics that they can use to tell truthful stories while minimizing adverse effects on family and friends. Mills relates how she writes fictional children's stories to capture moments in her life as the mother of two sons. Although she sometimes uses true events as a source of inspiration, she takes care to shield her sons' privacy through the creation of a fictive alter ego. Thus, she concludes that the tensions between telling a true story and a moral one can sometimes be resolved through a creative rendering of factual events, since fictional works are not encumbered with such strong expectations of accountability as nonfiction. In "Decent and Indecent: Writing My Father's Life," Richard Freadman continues the discussion sparked by John Barbour's essay on textually reconstructing fragile parent-child relationships. Writing autobiographically, Freadman candidly illustrates the process and problems associated with writing a biography about his father, emphasizing his attempts to balance his father's preoccupation with decency with Freadman's desire as biographer to furnish a realistic portrait of his father's life. By incorporating an imagined interview with his deceased father, Barbour gives voice to the biographical subject and vividly illustrates how conscientious biographers are obligated to respect the moral concerns and perspectives of the people whose stories they attempt to capture. Nancy K. Miller's striking diary-style essay entitled "The Ethics of Betrayal: Diary of a Memoirist" colorfully exposes the fine line between telling a legal story and telling one

that is ethically accountable. In writing her memoir, Miller mulls over whether or not to incorporate her ex-husband's letters in order to capture the emotions and facts of a particular period. Aware that letters legally belong to the letter writer, she also knows that she can elude legal accountability by paraphrasing the letters. However, such a strategy still seems ethically questionable and is compounded by the fact that Miller herself was violated by the unauthorized use of her letters in someone else's personal narrative. With sincerity and insight, this set of essays emphasizes the polemics of publishing versus privacy when incorporating the biographical portraits of those whose lives are close to, intertwined with, that of the writer.

The final four essays in the Eakin's book examine resistant narratives that probe the ethics of life writing with respect to medical conditions, disabilities, and racial difference. Alice Wexler claims the right to compose a personal narrative of disease in opposition to "scientific" studies authored by scientists outside the patient's circle in her essay, "Mapping Lives: 'Truth,' Life Writing, and DNA." Wexler's discovery that she is predisposed to Huntington's disease leads to, or coincides with, a number of other revelations. The problems associated with the publication of her memoir are manifold: not only might insurance plans and employers reject her once her predisposition for the disease is revealed, but her familial life becomes uncomfortably public. In addition, Wexler is forced to weigh how the exposure of her father's indiscretions may affect her father (who is already in fragile health), and she must consider whether her coming-out story has any place in a narrative of disease. In "Moral Non-Fiction: Life Writing and Children's Disability," Arthur Frank, writer of his own illness narrative, proposes the concept of "remoralization," asserting that illness and disability "call upon people to become morally engaged because they have everything to lose, but also to gain" (177). Accompanying David Parker's idea from Part Two that life writing is morally beneficial in that it broaches contemplation of how one has lived or will live his/her life, Frank asserts that illness is "inherently moral" because it forces reexamination of one's life. Both Wexler and Frank view the act of recounting their own lives and narrating their medical stories as acts of activism and empowerment that allow them to, as Wexler says, "disrupt an old eugenic narrative by telling a story of genetics from the inside, up close and personal rather than at a distance, revealing the humanity of those of us who happen to be unlucky in our genes" (172).

In a more specific examination of illness and disability narratives, G. Thomas Couser proposes the term "euthanography" to refer to narratives in which one considers euthanasia (although it is not necessarily committed). In his essay, "When Life Writing Becomes Death Writing: Disability and the Ethics of Parental Euthanography," Couser suggests that such trauma narratives can stunt relationships among members of the family of the disabled, but they also can rebuild them and be valuable mode of closing introspection. Couser writes, "The subtext of a robust disability narrative is life without cure, but not without care" (214). The disability narrative, then, might be interpreted as a recuperative act that allows an individual to assert autonomy, rebuilding support systems and even expanding into a more public, communal kinship circle. In "Tales of Consent and Descent: Life Writing as a Fight Against Imposed Self-Image," Marianne Gullestad moves from the topic of illness narratives that reclaim individuality to examine how people of color living in Norway attempt to resist racist stereotypes and assert agency over their perception by recreating themselves in print. In adopting models set forth by the dominant culture, however, these writers of color internalize a vision that is often exclusive and, in fact, replicates stereotypes of white superiority and non-white inferiority. Once again, the essays in this section stress life writing as a mode of resistance: in constructing their own narratives of illness and identity, life writers assert agency over their own self-representation (even if this representation internalizes mainstream values).

The Ethics of Life Writing is a critical anthology that guides the reader without providing easy answers. In the afterword, Craig Howes traces how a somewhat-rambunctious colloquium led to the inception of Eakin's book. Asking, then showing how the ethics of life writing sometimes intersect with psychology, biography, literature, theology, and politics, Howes affirms the pervasive and influential nature of life writing. Deftly tying together threads apparent in different essays, he makes the connections necessary to unify the disparate but overlapping essays and add sticky cohesion to the entire book. Howes is careful not to oversimplify the debates that enlarge the study of moral thinking and life writing. Rather, he thoughtfully draws attention to how the diversity of opinions regarding life writing has enriched his understanding of the genre, leaving readers to ponder how they, too, might benefit from a multifaceted discussion of the purpose, process, effects, and ethics of life writing. Howes concludes that one intention and accomplishment of the book was to "tease us repeatedly into ethical thought, without presenting us at the same moment with a recipe for what this thought should be" (263).

A prolific writer, Eakin is one of the founding fathers of modern auto/biography studies. His list of accomplishments includes earlier works such as *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985) and *American Autobiography* (1991), as well as newer titles like *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), and *Touching the World: Reference in*

Autobiography (2001). *The Ethics of Life Writing* is an impressive addition to Eakin's oeuvre. This collection is not complete in itself, but it represents a trail blazing work that widens the path for additional discourse regarding the ethics of personal disclosure. Other essays that might have also been well placed in this collection include a more persistent discussion of how the ethics of life writing applies to blogs or online journals. Because the first paragraph of the book acknowledged that "the revolution in Internet and Web-based communication has generated an unprecedented amount of personal exposure that challenges the very idea of privacy in the United States" (1), I was surprised that a focused discussion on the subject did not appear in this text. It would have also been intriguing to read an essay that more ambitiously pursued how cultural taboos or gender figure into the ethics of composing a life narrative. Certainly Gullestad's essay on cultural assimilation in Norway addresses relevant issues of ethnicity while essays such as those by Miller, Mills, and Couser allude to gendered roles such as (ex-)wife, mother, and caretaker, respectively. Still, I would have been eager to read an essay that magnified how ethnicity and/or gender might influence ethical considerations in life writing. It is not, however, the purpose of Eakin's collection to be an exhaustive volume on the ethics of life writing, so perhaps such questions are best left to the essays and collections that are sure to follow. In all, *The Ethics of Life Writing* is a seminal contribution that broaches consideration of how life writing is a genre with unique ethical, even recuperative, dimensions that encourage writers and reading audiences to contemplate the role and value of truthful representation, moral inquiry, and resistance through counterstory. Rather than ironing smooth diverging opinions, this text rumples preconceived notions regarding the ethics, purpose, and methodology implicit in life writing. The varied opinions expressed in *The Ethics of Life Writing* as well as its interdisciplinary breadth make the text memorable to readers interested in ethics, sociology, disability studies, anthropology, and theology, but this book will especially tantalize the intellects of those who read, write, teach, and/or study the various manifestations of life writing.

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