



Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall, *Witnessing Girlhood. Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019, ISBN 780823285488).

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This compact and elegantly composed volume brings together and analyses autobiographical narratives of girlhood in which adult women return to their own childhood and write about experiences of suffering, trauma, violence and abuse. These narratives range from slave narratives from the mid-nineteenth century, to comic books from the twenty-first century. While most of them are situated in the US context, several memoirs from other parts of the world are included, most notably, the *testimonio* of a Latin American indigenous woman, Rigoberta Menchú, a memoir in comic form of a young girl growing up in post-revolution Iran (*Persepolis*), and a children's picture book *My Hiroshima* about the author's relationship to the horrors of the atomic bombing on Hiroshima by the US in 1945. Other texts included are survivor memoirs on sexual violence (*Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen), on debilitating illness (*Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy), and the comedian Hannah Gadsby's stand-up performance about abuse and homophobia (*Nanette*). What these diverse narratives have in common is the desire to represent the child as witness without resorting to sentimental ideas about childhood innocence. The child is not only treated as a witness whose account needs to be taken seriously, but she also often emerges as an activist who calls on her audience to take an ethical stance against sexual violence, exploitation, or war.

The book is organized into four analytic chapters, framed by an introduction setting out the theoretical aims of the authors, Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall, and an epilogue which suggests future avenues for exploring childhood which approach different audiences (trans-of-color lives). In each analytic chapter,

the authors choose several examples which they discuss at length, drawing upon their theoretical and normative interests. What I especially liked was the wide range of narrative forms, including comics and children's picture books. For example, the graphic artist Phoebe Gloeckner who tackles the issue of sexual abuse in chapter 3 in a way that refuses to make the girl a victim. Instead she is an unrelenting observer of the institutions of patriarchy and male privilege. By making physical violation explicit and allowing the reader to imagine the 'emotional truth' of sexual violence, Gloeckner both points to and undoes the 'masculinist predatory gaze' (73). I was entranced by the chapter on *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* by Michelle Markel and Melissa Sweet. This child's picture book takes up the biography of a young Jewish immigrant girl who organized one of the largest walkout strikes of women workers in the US. Such work clearly has the potential to become a powerful educational tool for representing feminist history which has previously been hidden from view.

Despite its many merits, *Witnessing Girlhood. Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing* also has some weaknesses that makes it less powerful than it might have been. First, the authors have too many theoretical balls in the air, all of which they set out in their introduction and which appear somewhat haphazardly throughout the analytic chapters. They want to reinstate the child as credible witness to trauma. They take issue with the ubiquitous discourse on the (white) child as vulnerable victim, advocating instead for a focus on children's agency. They aspire to explore the experiences of girlhood as seen through the eyes of the adult. They want to develop a program for ethical witnessing which will move away from voyeuristic detachment toward a more active engagement with the traumas of girlhood. They aim to replace the representation of white privilege and fragile girlhood with a more gender pessimistic perspective. And, last but not least, they intend to expand the notion of trauma to include 'interlocking oppressions' by adopting an intersectional approach (7). In my view, this hopelessly broad agenda results in the authors repeatedly stating their aims in increasingly literary language rather than following through with an actual analysis of the issues involved. The term 'intersectionality' is a case in point. Despite its prominent placement in the title, it scarcely appears in the rest of the book and it is unclear to me how the different narratives are actually being analysed in terms of 'interlocking oppressions.' I often found myself longing for fewer 'buzzwords' and a more careful analysis of any of the above-mentioned issues. In this sense, this book is a good example of why less is sometimes more.

Second, the analytic chapters were hard to follow if one is not already familiar with the primary text in question. A simple description would have been helpful for the uninitiated reader. I often had to resort to Wikipedia just to discover what the book being analyzed was about and have some sense of what was going on. This is less problematic in the chapters involving graphic memoirs and picture books where there are images to which the reader can refer. This lack of description also contributes to the discussion of the examples being more top-down than bottom up. The reader is forced to accept the authors' general statements about the memoirs rather than being able to check it out for herself.

Despite these weaknesses, however, *Witnessing Girlhood* was an interesting and engaging read. I can easily imagine that it would be a good supplementary reading for courses on feminist literature and autobiographical writing as well as a valuable resource for anyone interested in the variety of forms life writing can take.