

**Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades, ed. *Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice.***

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Life writing is one of the most popular forms of literature at present. Works of autobiography, memoir and biography, particularly of and by well-known figures, are huge sellers and attract significant scholarly interest. Yet the analysis of these forms in the academy is weighted towards autobiography and memoir. This book continues that trend away from an interest in biography, although it does include several essays on the form.

The editors present a range of scholarly essays on life writing and a large selection of experimental writing along with ficto-criticism. They state at the outset that the idea for the volume arose at a conference. It is ambitious to try to transform a set of presented papers and practice as research pieces of such diverse range into a coherent book. The result is uneven but many of the practice pieces provide satisfying reading.

Patrick Mullins (recipient of the National Biography Award in 2020) presents a lively, highly journalistic essay about current Australian political biography that is at odds with every other inclusion in this volume because it focuses on conventional biography of living political figures in Australia—and therefore a specific sub-genre of biography. Moreover, a fluent first-hand account by Janine McVeagh about her project of writing about a little-known English children's writer and philanthropist, Priscilla Wakefield (1751–1832), is interesting in revealing the life of this figure and her hold on the author but seems unconnected to the other essays. Perhaps works on historical figures as opposed to the living may have warranted a separate section because of the different methodological questions that pertain to the two categories? The inclusion of an essay about eco-biography in this section again ventures into completely different territory and is puzzling in its placement here. As a result, the section ostensibly on biography comes across as a little ad hoc and disconnected from key problems of methodology and practice in the genre.

Approximately half the volume is given over to work categorised as 'Life Writing and Self Making' and 'Embodiment, Experiment and Fictocritical Modes.' Several of the pieces offer fragments of delight such as Kevin Brophy's 'Mind as Hive' in which the narrator begins: 'I dream of tearing pages from a dictionary and using them to soak up a spill of milk on a desk. In the dream this shows resourcefulness though the words on the pages prove to be distracting as I perform the task' (207). 'Memory Gardens,' a short, jointly written 'conversation' piece by Jen Webb and Paul Hetherington, is quietly disturbing. Alternating 'He said' and 'She said' the 'dialogue' offers simplicity, and a melancholy theme of loss: 'We remember ourselves in those old pages—vast tracts of words; wildernesses of expressions . . . It's not that we've forgotten too much but that we carry a great weight of unknowing and the pages are releasing us. On those mornings people arrived at our places of work and neither remembered us' (194–95).

I found the piece by Anna Gibbs entitled 'Vivarium' witty and whimsical as the narrator contemplates whether 'life writing' could be turned into 'live writing,' 'a writing in vivo, a writing in the here and now? A writing that carries a little charge, something inarticulable or unidentifiable happening in it. It might go off. Or then again, it might not' (248). The narrator recalls loitering in the university bookshop as an undergraduate 'where you could run into the

campus feminists, lesbians and gays, and Marxists. These were unfamiliar beings that interested me very much' (249). Discovering a book on bacteriology excited her to thinking about how the human body is simply a house or 'housing' for 'trillions of microbes.' 'The question arose for me . . . of whether we belonged to bacteria or they belonged to us' (249).

Quinn Eades delivers poignant reflections on 'losing my family,' as one by one they express grief for someone who has died, upon learning of his changed status, his trans newness, and his sense that he must prove himself, contemplating the urge to 'string together a cohesive trans narrative with which to explain my lowered voice, the stubble on my chin, my changing smell. "It has been difficult letting go of the niece of whom I was so proud," writes his aunt. 'How do I need to be let go of? How does the changing of a name and a hormone profile require a death? . . . Has the person with my old name died? Have I died?' (254). This piece raises all-important questions about personhood and the idea that relationality is integral to identity. The idea that a person has died when in fact they are changing their sexual identity is clearly confronted in this piece with a strong, nuanced empathy for the views of others to whom they are related.

For all the delights of some of the creative and ficto-critical offerings in this volume, the book as a whole suffers from the inherent difficulty of combining practitioner works with scholarly essays in a coherent manner. I anticipated from the sub-title of the volume 'Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice,' a discussion of approaches, debates, experiments and methodologies that inform the practice of contemporary life writing, yet only a few of the essays attempt such discussion. The rationale for the collection of essays is stated but the inclusions don't fully deliver on the re-evaluation dimension.

Perhaps a working definition of life writing, for the uninitiated and for scholars, would have anchored the introduction, situated the field for the reader, and provided direction for the selection of essays and creative pieces that follow? Although the volume opens with a section ostensibly dealing with 'truth and history' in life writing, the first essay deals with 'speculative biography,' a sub-genre of biography that explicitly 'speculates' because of a lack of evidence available about the subject, surely a tenuous place to begin. The essay itself does little to make a convincing case for speculative biography, although it seeks to make a case for this controversial sub-genre, canvassing examples of the form. The author stretches Geoff Dyer's concept of a 'contract' with the reader too far and I think wilfully misreads his contract with the reader. The lack of biographical evidence available to the writer presents a problem that cannot actually be solved in conventional biography. Perhaps the term 'speculative biography' is the issue, and we need a new one for works that explicitly shun the contract with the reader and the traditional understanding of biography as non-fiction? Or perhaps they need to be called fiction?

Only two of the essays in this volume wrestle with the many problems of the genre of biography. This is unfortunate as biography is one of the most potent and significant genres of life writing—it is certainly the most popular—and one in which readers and writers of the genre look for guidance and discussion of approaches and philosophical understanding. Biography is also a genre in which the questions of method and principles of writing non-fiction are highly contested. A comment in the introduction specifically points out that the essays in the first section offer 'a range of ways of creatively and productively utilising imaginatively inflected approaches to generate life writing texts that move beyond limiting binaries of fact and fiction' (5–6). But for so many readers and scholars, certainly this reviewer, therein lies a problem that does not receive adequate attention here. The result is that such biographical texts become

problematic, and the biographer quickly becomes untrustworthy for the reader. The binaries of fact and fiction matter. 'Facts matter; nothing can be done without them,' Brenda Niall pointed out some years ago (*Life Class: The Education of a Biographer*, Melbourne UP 2007, xii). To ignore the ethical, legal and historiographical problems of substituting fiction and speculation for facts and evidence is naïve and intellectually dishonest.

This collection offers some provocations and some pleasures. While some of the highly personal essays on the process of life writing, the short prose pieces and the poems are joyful, playful and illuminating, the purported attempt to 're-evaluate' life writing falls a little short.

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