
Helen M. Buss. *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2002. Pp. xxv, 206. \$34.95

In *Repossessing the World*, Helen M. Buss conducts a sustained and thoughtful examination of what Nancy Miller identifies as the “avalanche of published memoirs by women in recent years” (164). Buss asks what it is that makes memoir such a compelling form for so many women at the turn of the twenty-first century, and provides some illuminating answers. This book, part of a Life Writing Series published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press and edited by Marlene Kadar, is the first full-length study of women’s use of the memoir form, a category of life writing that has been widely neglected by literary critics and theorists. The memoir form, Buss observes, has been practiced in English since the Middle Ages, but has often been “denigrated as the reserve of amateurs, from retired generals to unemployed courtesans” (186). Regarded as too personal to constitute good history, as not artful enough to be considered good literature, the memoir has occupied a kind of no-man’s-land between disciplines unwilling to accept it as a topic of legitimate study. In her book, Buss effectively challenges these assumptions, and examines the memoir from a perspective that turns some of these perceived “weaknesses” into strengths. Assembling an extraordinary range of memoirs by contemporary women, drawing upon her own experience as a writer of memoir, and gathering together a fund of trenchant scholarship on life writing in general, she celebrates the memoir as a form that is unique in giving its practitioner the opportunity to perform a subjectivity “that will give her more agency in the world” (186).

In order to show how the memoir form enables this performance of self, Buss begins, in her introductory chapter, to search out those qualities that differentiate women’s memoirs from other forms of life-writing like the confession and its secular “offspring” the autobiography (10). Looking for contrasts between the fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe* and Augustine’s *Confessions*, for example, Buss sees in Kempe’s concern with the details of daily life a “preoccupation with the physicality of a materially located place in history and culture” that is also, she argues, one of the main characteristics of memoirs by contemporary women (10). While I question the historical accuracy of referring to Kempe’s text as a memoir (especially when Buss herself has already mentioned that the earliest record of the term as we know it dates from the sixteenth century), the significance of the quotidian in contemporary women’s memoirs is something that she amply demonstrates in the chapters that follow. I found chapter three particularly rewarding in this regard.

In a reading of Elizabeth Ehrlich's *Miriam's Kitchen: A Memoir*, Buss focuses on how the memoirist's performance of that most ordinary of daily tasks, the preparation of family meals, enables an articulation of selfhood quite different from "the traditional 'I' of autobiography" that "defines its maturation through a process of increasing separation and distinctiveness" from the community (63). Buss synthesizes divergent feminist theories of identity formation articulated by Allison Weir, Judith Butler, and Sidonie Smith, and shows how Ehrlich, in her transition from single young woman and journalist to wife and mother, finds in the traditions of her grandmother's Kosher kitchen a set of repeatable domestic rituals that enables her to repossess, incrementally, the communal "ways of knowing" that her previous life required her to sacrifice (66). Far from advising a "neo-domestic retreat" (78) as a solution to the "dichotomous identity choices" women face (61), Buss celebrates Ehrlich's memoir as a "balancing act" that sustains both autonomous and communal identities.

In Chapter Five, Buss continues to examine the interplay between autonomy and relationship that is, for her, a defining characteristic of women's memoirs. Comparing the first and second versions of Eva Brewster's Auschwitz memoir *Progeny of Light/Vanished in Darkness*, Buss argues that by adding an introductory chapter that fleshes out her family's life in Berlin in the years leading up to the war, Brewster expands her text's novelistic focus on the survival of the protagonist to include "that underlying story of the traumatic rending of family and community life that Jewish people suffered under the Nazis" (126). Buss' reading of Brewster's text demonstrates her conviction that memoir is unique among life-writing forms in its ability to "bring history and individual life together," not merely by "personalizing history" but also through the more "difficult task [. . .] of historicizing the personal" (124). Buss draws upon her own experiences teaching the book to point out how the revised version of the memoir, which also includes a final chapter detailing Brewster's repeated encounters with anti-Semitism in Alberta, succeeds more than the first in making young readers aware of "the large-scale consequences of such international traumatic events" as the Holocaust (124). In its emphasis on the role of revision in the production of memoir, this chapter is particularly effective in dispelling the "illusion" that memoir is a "natural" and "artless" form of expression, and in considering memoir as a "formal solution" to the problem of writing about trauma (135).

The discussions of Ehrlich's and Brewster's texts were highlights for me, but Buss' discussion also includes memoirs like Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*, and Alix Kates Shulman's *Drinking the Rain*. Margaret Laurence's *Dance on the Earth*

and Mary Catherine Bateson's *With a Daughter's Eye* are two of the memoirs included in a chapter on the mother/daughter bond as the most significant relational connection in women's memoirs. Another chapter examines memoirs by contemporary academic women including Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons*, Jill Ker Conway's *True North*, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces*, and Elspeth Cameron's *No Previous Experience*. The subject matter of this chapter perhaps has limited appeal beyond a readership of other academic women. The positioning of the chapter as the last in the book, however, may indicate an attempt to appeal to a broader readership: at one point, Buss refers to teaching as "*my trade*" (123; emphasis added) and this raises the question of exactly what kind of audience she is addressing. Buss presents theoretical materials with clarity and in a way that illuminates the primary texts. In general, the book is very readable, and only occasionally resorts to unwieldy terminology like "reflective/reflexive consciousness," a phrase that recurs frequently to denote one of the key concepts in Buss' theorizing of women's memoir. I have indicated that Buss draws upon her own experience as a memoirist and teacher throughout, and some academic readers will no doubt be unappreciative of her commitment to an "autobiocritical" mode of scholarly writing. Buss anticipates this in Chapter Two by herself detailing some of the pitfalls of this kind of approach and justifying her own use of an autocritical method.

In its insistence on form as something enabling rather than limiting for women writers, this book should prove valuable to anyone interested in investigating intersections of genre and gender. It will certainly have an influence on the way I look at memoirs from now on, and has introduced me to many memoirs that I am now eager to read.

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