

Lucy Forsyth Townsend and Gaby Weiner
*Deconstructing and Reconstructing Lives:
Auto/Biography in Educational Settings*

London, Ontario: Althouse Press, 2011. 384 pp.

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Deconstructing and Reconstructing Lives considers the application of various forms of life writing to the field of education. The authors “aim to show that personal accounts can provide illuminating insights into what goes on in education” (1). They have set two main goals: “first, to provide a comprehensive investigation into the uses of auto/biography, its benefits and dangers; and, second, to explore how we can judge the value of using biography and autobiography as historical and cultural sources *for education*” (3). The book is divided into two parts with Weiner authoring five of the six chapters in the “Deconstructing Auto/Biography” section and Townsend writing one chapter in the deconstructing section and all four chapters in the “Reconstructing Auto/Biography” section. The authors, who have both held several academic posts in their careers to date, have collaborated for twenty years, although they seem to have quite distinct roles within this monograph. This book will be of interest to those embarking on the study of biography more so than to those who have already worked in the field. Its most obvious market is graduate students engaged in capstone courses or theses describing their own, or others’ educational journeys. It would also make a good textbook for an undergraduate or graduate course in educational life writing.

The first half of “Reconstructing Auto/Biography” examines the researching and production of a variety of biographies and biographical material, including photos and obituaries. Weiner argues that any kind of biography includes a great deal of interpretation; there are very few if any facts from which to construct a biography but many possible truths. Every step in writing a biography requires the author to make decisions that affect how the story is told, whether by focusing on particular events at the expense of others, or by plotting chronologically rather than thematically. Weiner applies the same analysis to autobiography. She aptly quotes Estelle Jelinek

in the introduction, “The autobiographical fallacy of self-revelation is demonstrated not only by the similar subjects usually avoided in life studies by both sexes but also by the different means of detachment with which they treat material they do include” (39).

The greatest strength of this book is its practicality. It covers a breadth of essential issues in writing and critiquing life writing. Most chapters include excerpts drawn from published biographies or examples the authors have created from their own lives or the lives of their main research subjects. The chapter on deconstructing obituaries, biographical dictionary essays and chronologies, for example, includes an obituary of Sojourner Truth and a *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* entry on Élodie Paradis (founder of the Little Sisters of the Holy Family). The chapter on deconstructing biography and life writing includes biographical information on Lance Armstrong drawn from his official website, as well as a biographical excerpt on Donald Dickie, written by Rebecca Coulter. The chapters in the “Reconstructing” section of the book are also grounded in examples. Chapter Seven, “Biographer as Sleuth,” considers Anna Peck Sill, the founder of a nineteenth century women’s college. Townsend describes her “concentric circles” research method, arguing that a mystery cannot be solved simply by following a set of predetermined steps” (228). In chapter Eight, Townsend offers the example of writing her own life, which she titles, “Ordinary Lessons from an American Girlhood.” She begins by admitting, “I began by trying to decide what self I wanted to portray and whether it was possible to describe the person I believed myself to be. I had no outline and no clear purpose....” (247).

Townsend and Weiner achieve their goal in teaching readers “to develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of people’s stories” (3). *Deconstructing and Reconstructing Lives* is a very strong introduction to the complexities, nuances, and ethics of life writing.