Introduction: Life Writing and Critical Practice

Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly

Contemporary critical practice is becoming increasingly self-reflective, with first person commentary and subjective musings appearing in academic texts produced across disciplines. On the other hand, as the number of writing practitioners in the academy mounts, their works reflect a growing awareness of, and engagement with, the critical and theoretical debates that surround creative practice. Nowhere is this interchange between theory and practice more prevalent, however, than in the discipline of life writing, a field concerned with the forces at work on the borderland between the self or subject and the performance of that self in communicable form. Yet the two groups, life writing critics and life writing creatives, often remain mutually suspicious and their relationship under-theorised. This Special Cluster of *Literature Compass* brings together scholarly readings, both critical and creative in form, which interrogate the place of life writing in critical practice. These essays were developed through discussions and debates at the 7th Biennial International Auto/Biographical Association Conference at University of Sussex in June 2010. IABA has led the professionalization of life writing as a field of literary critical debate and is increasingly being used as a forum for life writers as well. In this Special Cluster, leading figures in the field, both critics and practitioners, begin a dialogue on the developing phenomenon of creative/critical interface in life writing, and make suggestions for new pathways for the future.

The Special Cluster begins with a preface by multi-award winning novelist, controversial life writer and teacher of creative writing, Rachel Cusk, who reflects on the tensions she encounters daily both as a writer in the academy, and as a memoirist whose work has attracted widespread critical attention and interpretation both benign and otherwise.

In Part 1 of the Cluster, entitled “Creativity and the Critic” you will find key critics and theorists of life writing exploring the impact of creativity and self-reflection on their critical practice. We begin with an introduction and historical overview of key debates between critics and practitioners in the discipline, written by one of the co-editors Margaretta Jolly, editor of *The Encylopedia of Life Writing* and Joint Director of the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research at University of Sussex. Jolly’s essay sets out the terms of conflict and cooperation in contemporary Life Writing criticism and practice which will be explored throughout the essays that follow, by grounding these in their social, historical and practical contexts. In the second essay, Tom Couser, whose works on vulnerable subjects and the ethics of life writing are standard reading for all students of the field, offers his moving reflections on his struggles with the practice he has so long theorised, as he attempts to write a memoir of his late father. Tom Smith, another long-standing critic of life writing (editor of *Life Writing Annual* andfounding member of IABA) experiments with a more personal mode in the third essay in this section. Smith’s work here, interestingly, is not so much life writing as autocriticism proper—a confessional way of talking about texts that allows us an interesting glimpse of literary masculinity. By contrast, the essay that follows, by women’s studies scholar Eva Karpinski, offers a more straightforward critical appreciation of the work of Nicole Brossard, but in doing so reveals a feminist writer who long ago blended and broke the creative/critical divide in coolly intellectual fashion. Any clichés that women tend to write more personally are further upset in the next piece by Kathleen Boardman. Boardman’s essay powerfully rehabilitates the science writer Loren Eiseley to show how his struggles against impersonal scientific discourse of the 1950s anticipate our own. Here, Boardman argues that Eiseley’s empathetic representations of non-human animals offer glimpses of an inter-species ethics that seems to be fascinatingly related to his mixing of scientific report with creative life writing techniques. A final piece from the critics’ side of the fence comes from Micha Erdlich on eco-critical narratives. Erdlich finds further evidence that creative critical life writing is associated with ethical principles of care and connection, and, we hope, demonstrates what creative life writing can offer to science as well as the humanities.

We contend, then, that critics of all shades can learn much from creative writers. But the gift goes both ways. Part II of the Special Cluster, entitled “Criticism and the Creative Writer,” therefore, offers a series of essays by life writing practitioners—memoirists , biographers and writers of autobiographically based fiction—who reflect upon their encounters with, and negotiations of, life writing theory. First up is Meg Jensen, co-editor of the Special Cluster, literary critic, novelist and Director of the Centre for Life Narratives at Kingston University. In this essay, Jensen considers the divide between creative and critical discourses, and her attempts to find useful critical methods for reading autobiographically-based fiction. Derek Neale, award winning fiction writer and dramatist, brings critical theories of memory to bear on creative life writers in the second essay in Part II, using writers’ testimony about their practice to demonstrate the complex ways in which memory and imagination are configured within the writing process—“prompting the writer with unplanned leaps, unheralded avenues and unbargained-for associations.” Many of these exchanges between critical and creative are taking place in biographical as well as autobiographical practice, though literary critical circles tend to underplay this. We are especially pleased therefore, to present the ninth essay in this cluster, by biographer Rachel Morley, who describes her emotional investment in her biographical subjects as inspired directly by Roland Barthes, a critical theorist who like Brossard, reinvented poststructuralism through lyrical life writing. Morley’s essay is followed by that of another biographer/critic, Philip Holden. While traditional in his critical approach, Holden uses his admirable analytical skills to tease out the creative performances and self-deconstructions of the creative writer and autobiographer Somerset Maugham. This section concludes, fittingly, with a beautifully written and tender reflection by Pauline Liu-Devereaux, who weaves together seamlessly the creative and critical to explore her responses to art, death and to academic life writing conferences. We hope that this, with all the essays gathered here, will inspire more such intellectual autobiography—a form which we suggest provides a location for practice and theory, long divided, to meet again as friends and colleagues.