

Book Review: Lives Made, not Found

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hand, the 'bottom-up' research strategy highlighted that national lobbying for legislative changes is perhaps as, if not more effective for improving workers' immediate conditions than consumer boycotts or corporate codes of conduct. This is especially noteworthy at a time when conventional wisdom equates globalization with the internationalization of labour campaigns. All in all, *Threads* is a highly accessible, informative book that is likely to generate useful debates in the field of women's studies.

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LIVES MADE, NOT FOUND

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Elusive Subjects: Biography as Metafiction

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What is the value for history, for feminism and for women, of biographies of women that cross the boundary between history and fiction and within which contexts can the recent emergence of such texts best be examined and explored? These are the questions to which Scarparo's *Elusive Subjects* offers a compelling response. This cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study takes as its subject matter four works that combine the biographical and the historical with fictionalized sources such as diaries and letters and that combine elements of genres including the historical novel, the biography and the autobiography. Starting out from the premise that the first works of women's history were biographies, *Elusive Subjects* places biography, or, more properly, biographical fictions, at the centre of a discussion of the relations between life-writing, feminist theory and contemporary debates about the relations between the past, history and representation. The book's chapters analyse, respectively, Anna Banti's *Artemisia* (1947), which takes as its subject the Italian 17th-century woman artist Artemisia Gentileschi; Maria Bellonci's *Rinascimento privato*, (1985), a fictional biography of the Italian Renaissance aristocrat Isabella d'Este; Susan Daitch's *L.C.* (1986), a fictional biography of Lucienne Crozier, a French woman who lived through the 1848 revolution; and finally *Poppy* (1990), Drusilla Modjeska's boundary-crossing 'biography' of her own mother. This chapter arrangement reveals a fascinating trajectory as the residual and already problematized emphasis on rescuing and giving voice to forgotten women's histories found in the earlier two works is increasingly marginalized by an increasing stress, in *L.C.* and *Poppy*, on the impossibility of any unmediated retrieval of those historical voices and the acknowledgement, in its place, of biography as the dialogic making both of the biographer and of her subject.

Scarpato's stated aim is to 'investigate how select women writers play out in literary practice both the current feminist theorising of women's life writing and the debates among feminist historians about the rescue of the forgotten and excluded, and the re-interpretation of the misunderstood and maligned women of the past' (p. xiii). Her intention, as she puts it, is 'to reflect on the relationship between history and fiction and to question the notion of historical truth by looking at specific examples in which history turns into fiction, and fiction becomes history' (p. xiii).

A central debate, here, is whether, or better put, *how* women's absence from history can be made good, once feminist history's aims of giving voice to the excluded, and inserting the absent into history have been complicated by those theories that emphasize the mediated nature of all historical representations of the past. Scarpato cites as a fascinating case in point, here, the different accounts of the Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi found in Banti's *Artemisia* and Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race*. For Greer, Artemisia is a lost heroine whose achievements she celebrates. Informed by a particular moment in the history of feminist history, *The Obstacle Race* seeks to make good such absences from the historical record through the insertion into history of women such as Artemisia Gentileschi. For Scarpato, Anna Banti's *Artemisia* is a very different work, however, since it exposes to view the identificatory mediations that must surely drive all biographical writing including Greer's, but which remain unacknowledged in *The Obstacle Race*. In *Artemisia* mediation is troped through the loss, in 1944, of the fictional narrator's manuscript of Artemisia's life – a manuscript that stands for the loss to history of this and other women's lives. *Artemisia* reveals a complex process of mirroring between the 'biography's' subject, Artemisia, its fictional narrator, and its author, Banti. Here, there can be no straightforward insertion of woman into history, rather, 'Banti often exposes herself in the act of creating her character' (p. 33), explains Scarpato, as 'Banti or her narrator chase each other through the labyrinths of history and across the layers of time that separate their centuries' (p. 33).

A central theme of *Elusive Subjects* is that of the 'voice' constructed by the four works discussed. If voice cannot simply be retrieved from history, as Scarpato argues, and these four 'biographies' demonstrate, then what is the 'voice' that the biographer finds through writing these lives in new 'biographies' and how is it related to the life written? Scarpato's response to this question is complex and involves focusing on the relation between the biographer and the subject of the biography. In *making* that subjectivity, Scarpato argues, the biographer also finds their own voice. Scarpato insists that the biographies she discusses confirm that women cannot be retrieved from oblivion and voices from the past cannot simply be listened to and heard. *Elusive Voices* itself constitutes a further act in this process, since it is constituted through the dialogue between its author and its chosen texts. It brings to notice its chosen authors and their fictionalized biographical subjects. At points, particularly in the chapter that discusses Bellonci's account of Isabella d'Este, the boundary between lives made and lives found begins to seem permeable, as Scarpato writes of d'Este from a sociological perspective informed by Italian feminist theory. This theory's emphasis on questions of women's power and its limitations produces an uneasy blurring between an approach to d'Este as 'real woman' and an approach that foregrounds biography's dialogic production of its subjects.

The entirety of *Elusive Subjects* might be seen as Scarpato's response to Ann Curthoys and John Docker's essay 'Is History Fiction' (Curthoys and Docker, 1996), in which the authors describe Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppo* as belonging to the

hybrid genre of life-writing that lacks 'a system or set of conventions for indicating how the stories they tell may relate to any historical sources' (quoted in Scarparo, p. 127) and therefore cannot enliven history, but must stand outside it (p. 127). Scarparo's response to this is that history's dialogical relation with fiction is enlivening to both. For Scarparo, the disruption between Lalage (the fictionalized narrator of *Poppy*) and her sources is a 'compelling device to entice the reader into entering an open-ended dialogue about the quest for self-definition and about the implications of speaking in somebody else's name' (p. 151). For Scarparo, then, the subjects of all biography are fictional, inasmuch as they are all formed through mediating dialogue, though there are different degrees to which this fictitiousness is disavowed, acknowledged or even made the subject of biography. The four biographies of women by women analysed in *Elusive Subjects* demonstrate the extent to which while in the past, this mediation may have remained unknown or unacknowledged, it has recently risen to the surface and been made explicit, particularly in texts such as *Poppy*, a work that is as much autobiography as it is biography, and which meditates on its own dialogic process as it tells the story of Modjeska's mother, and of her daughter.

Scarparo concludes that her chosen texts move 'in and out, to and from biography, autobiography, history and fiction' (p. 154). Central to these movements are processes of identification between authors, narrators, biographical subjects and, of course, readers. Scarparo's own life-story, which she tells briefly – and which included migration from Sardinia to Australia – determined to some extent, the texts she chooses as well as her treatment of them. *Elusive Subjects* confirms that the dialogical making of subjects is not without constraints but is formed through the coming together of discrete and specific histories. But what Scarparo's book adds to this insight is the analysis of the textual strategies of fictional biography that have both foregrounded this process and acknowledged the profound 'otherness' of the past and of the lives of women known and unknown.

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