



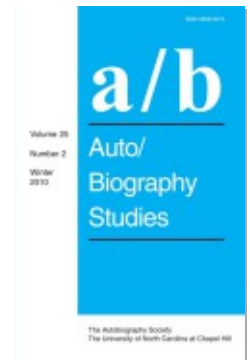
PROJECT MUSE®

New Essays on Life Writing and the Body (review)

Claire Lynch

a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, Volume 25, Number 1, Summer 2010,
pp. 138-141 (Article)

Published by The Autobiography Society
DOI: [10.1353/abs.2010.0014](https://doi.org/10.1353/abs.2010.0014)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/abs/summary/v025/25.1.lynch.html>

New Essays on Life Writing and the Body. Ed. Christopher Stuart and Stephanie Todd. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. 270pp.

Reviewed by Claire Lynch

CHRISTY BROWN'S LANDMARK AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *My Left Foot* (1954), a narrative both by and about the body, reaches out from the experience of one body to all others. As the author recounts a life dominated by both the limitations and advanced capabilities of his body, he writes a text which is not "just something about myself, but about all who had a life similar to my own" (139). In doing this, Brown provides a narrative born out of intellectual and physical knowledge; his writing is to pass from one mind to another and between bodies. Such a project is at the core of *New Essays on Life Writing and the Body* and as Timothy Dow Adams rightly points out in the foreword, the collection is both timely and significant since our sense of self "is so often connected to both body image and body function" (ix).

Despite this claim of universal relevance, the editors point to the absence of the body in a large section of life writing and an often-limited acknowledgement of its importance by critics. In this way the collection brings the body into sharp focus and in doing so opens up a wealth of new readings. The readjustment of perspective this encourages in readers is admirable and impacts upon not only the texts and contexts covered within the book but on readings of life writing more broadly. Indeed, both general and specialist readers will be rewarded by the way the theme is taken up by the contributors. While some of the themes evoked might be considered required elements in such a collection—such as illness and dis/ability—the inclusion of more atypical bodily concerns—for example, the athletic or adopted body—adds a freshness to the book's approach.

The introduction by Christopher Stuart grapples with the enormous-but-vital trinity of gender, race, and disability, traditionally central to any discussion on the body, and then expands into analyses of the absence of the body in western philosophy and history. Stuart moves from Cartesian readings of the bodiless self into the age of Anglo-Romanticism, in which the promotion of the idealized imagination began to erase the materiality of bodily experience, through to de Man's "sweeping pronouncement" of de-facement in which bodies "recede entirely into irretrievability, and thus invisibility" (7). Stuart's introduction will prove particularly useful for scholars of life

writing, providing as it does a useful overview of the field but also a thought-provoking breakdown, compartmentalizing texts which are considered as “body-centered” into sub-sections on the Head, Torso, Feet/Legs, Skin, Whole Body, and Sexual Orientation. This useful dismemberment of the topic points to numerous potential avenues for future research while also sketching possible sub-fields for this burgeoning subgenre of life writing.

The claims made here for body-centric life writing can at times seem tied to a previous generation of life writing research, focused on widening the scope beyond the privileged, white, male, literary canon—as Stuart has it “to liberate the bodies that had previously been oppressed or obscured in autobiography” (7). While this is in some danger of seeming a little behind the times, several examples can be found within these pages which present nuanced contemporary readings of clearly post-millennial topics such as eating disorders and intra-racial adoption. The arrangement of the essays into sections focusing on literary life, women, adopted selves, and disability/disease/disfigurement points to the array of approaches taken here. Although all of the essays in this collection contribute in their variety and scope to the overall project, a selection of highlights is presented here to provide an overview.

Modernist women writers Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein are the subject of the first section of *New Essays on Life Writing and the Body*, and the focused intersections highlighted by Mary V. Marchand, Nóra Séllei, and Jill Pruett hint at a worthy separate collection which could be developed on this subtopic. Timothy Dow Adams, in his chapter “They Weren’t What They Ate,” taps into the contemporary focus on food and body-consciousness that will surely be a useful source for others working in this field across several disciplines. Judith Moore’s memoirs, *Never Eat Your Heart Out* and *Fat Girl*, and Betsy Lerner’s *Food and Loathing* are part of the interdisciplinary emergence of food studies of which body-centered life writing must surely be considered a part. The chapter outlines the current state of the art and demonstrates generous scholarship in providing several potential routes of enquiry for those engaged in the subgenre of life writing in which “food, hunger (physical and intellectual), eating, craving and cooking are central” (73).

Tracy J. R. Collins’ interesting take on the body at peak performance which looks at the “fit and athletic body” at the end of the nineteenth century presents the “New Woman,” “young, middle-class, and single (on principle)” (87) who expressed her independence through athletics and sports. Collins’ work here on reclaiming “the woman as athlete, the woman as intellectual, and the woman as politically assertive” (104) will surely have resonance to life writing

studies in our own time, not least in charting the modern trend for professional athletes' memoirs.

Emily Hipchen's "Images of the Family Body in the Adoptee Search Narrative" breaks new ground in considering the place of the body in adoption, including the contested areas of recognizable features and genetic similarities. Sharing her own reunion with her biological family, and rooting the experience in her analysis of related life writing such as Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*, Hipchen draws on scenarios where the body is not what the self had once imagined. The chapter expands the book's core premise to something "bigger and more complex than the edges of a single body" (171), providing searching questions about the nature of genetically linked bodies and the narratives which allow for the self to "share a body" through biology (172).

Elizabeth Grubgeld's contribution, exploring the conjunction of the masculine body and disability, presents a juxtaposition of bodily experience and normative expectations. Examining texts such as Robert Murphy's *The Body Silent* (1986), Grubgeld considers authors who suffered mobility impairments during young adulthood forcing the subject to "find new ways of negotiating conventional American concepts of a masculine self" (192–93). The chapter presents something of a template for the book as a whole by linking the key themes of gender and bodily distinction, and will be of interest to scholars of dis/ability studies.

The central project of the book, to promote the body to a centralized position in life writing scholarship, is made to seem strangely timid by a reluctance to historicize further. The examples used inevitably present this as a modern concern and while there are admirable attempts towards variety, the book is arguably limited by the predominantly Anglo-American focus. Perhaps inevitably with such a broad and yet under-discussed field, the work can appear cursory in places. The editors do acknowledge that such a book must unavoidably be limited to an opening-up of the topic rather than an exhaustive study, yet attempts to sketch a cohesive history of western thought and literature around the body and life writing make this apology unconvincing.

Overall, the work presented here is thorough, providing a vast network of references and recommendations for others to follow up, marking out a space in the field not only for studies on the body but also pointing to the ways it overlaps with other pertinent concerns including neurobiology and genetic criticism. The book is supported by a central nervous system of key theorists, often drawing on the work of Eakin and Butler, for instance, but also introduces newer voices, the nerve endings of new scholarship who introduce their pre-

cisely focused readings of the life writing texts under consideration. Both the range of topics and texts and the varied experience of the contributors promise for a solid future for the continued integration of bodily approaches to life writing of which this book will surely be noted as a milestone.

Brunel University

Works Cited

Brown, Christy. *My Left Foot*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1954. Print.