**Joanne Sayner.** *Women without a Past?: German Autobiographical Writings and Fascism.* Genus: Gender in Modern Culture Series. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 381 pp. $105.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-420-2228-7.

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## Women (Are) Remember(ed) Differently

Several areas of inquiry converge in Joanne Sayner's insightful book. For one, it is an addition to the large and still growing field of autobiography studies. It also contributes to the study of the National Socialist period. Most importantly, it offers reflections on the ways in which memory is constructed and passed on. Such processes, Sayner argues, are political as much as personal, and a reflection of the culture in which such texts circulate. Sayner takes her cues from the critic and autobiographer Ruth KlÃ¼ger, whose own autobiographies of persecution and survival have shaped the field in recent years and have drawn renewed attention to contributions to the autobiographical genre as private texts with significant public impact. KlÃ¼ger's contention that war and fascism are male domains and their memory often claimed as a male privilege is the point of departure for Sayner's feminist readings of autobiographical texts by seven women. Sayner is fundamentally concerned with how memory is presented in these documents and, equally important, how these texts have been read and received over the course of the past sixty years. The resulting book is a detailed study of individual texts with particular focus on the changing meanings of gender.

While the autobiography boom of the 1990s may have lost some of its intensity, the genre continues to elicit interest on the part of scholars as well as the general public. Over the past two decades, autobiography studies have moved beyond the analysis of the genre as a neutral category to investigations that take into consideration the writers' social identity. Gender is a typical choice, sometimes combined with race, but also specific historical experiences, such as having lived through oppressive regimes or belonging to a particular social class. Sayner takes up this model and applies it to autobiographical narratives by women who lived through fascism. Importantly, the selection of writers includes both victims and perpetrators. The study thus intervenes in the reconfiguration of the victim-perpetrator divide that has been subject to public debate in the past several years and seeks to suggest ways of looking at both groups without disregarding the distinctions. One chapter each is dedicated to the writings of seven women, some fairly well known,

others less so. Some are published authors, like Elisabeth LanggÃ¤sser, Grete Weil, and Elfriede BrÃ¼ning; Hilde Huppert, a Czech Jew and concentration camp survivor, only wrote her autobiography. Melita Maschmann's *Fazit* presents the memoirs of a Nazi; Greta Kuckhoff and Elfriede BrÃ¼ning were involved with anti-Nazi resistance and lived in East Germany after 1945. Some accounts are autobiographies in the conventional sense, other memories, like LanggÃ¤sser's, survive in the form of letters, or, as is the case with Inge Scholl's well-known text *Die WeiÃe Rose* (1955), blur the line between autobiography and documentary. Sayner's broad definition of autobiography allows her to historicize the genre, shifting attention to its use and function over a period of time.

Despite their significant differences, these works have certain things in common. For one, gender plays a role in all of them both in the self-understanding of the writer but also for the reception. More often than not, gender is explored through family connections and linked to notions of agency and victimhood. The communist resistance fighter Grete Kluckhorn, for instance, had to negotiate between her role as mother and her participation in the resistance movement. Inge Scholl, in the different editions of her memoirs, reduces the centrality of her brother Hans within the WeiÃe Rose and, over the course of time, places growing importance on the Jewish genocide. Scholl's text is therefore a striking example of the changing focus in the reception of the Nazi period. In the case of the East German writer Elfriede BrÃ¼ning, gender tends to be subordinated to class, resulting in an uncritical stance toward the GDR. Gender also plays a significant role in the history of publication. All texts discussed here went through multiple editions, often with new prefaces or significant editorial interventions. Of particular interest is the history of Hilde Huppert's work, an autobiographical narrative written in German in the fall of 1945 about the murder of Huppert's family and her own deportation to Bergen-Belsen. The text, for which Huppert could not find a publisher, was reworked by Arnold Zweig and first circulated among German prisoners in a British camp in Egypt. It was subsequently translated into Hebrew by Huppert's son and only much later retranslated into German and published in Germany. Different prefaces and afterwords together with changes in the narrative itself transformed the autobiography from an emotionally charged eyewitness account to a report that reviewers saw fit to praise for its neutrality. Similarly, the changes made to the editions of Elisabeth LanggÃ¤sser's letters not only reflect the preferences of the individual editors, but, to an important degree, the changing expectations of the readership over time. While the first edition, compiled by LanggÃ¤sser's husband in the 1950s, attributes the spontaneity expressed in the letters to their author's gender, the 1990 edition, put together by the LanggÃ¤ssers's granddaughter, emphasizes the complex interplay of gender and Jewishness in these documents. Changing assumptions about women's writing and a shifting interest in the Nazi period come to the fore also in the editions of these letters. Based to a large degree on notions of collectivism, Melita Maschmann's justification of her involvement with Nazism is interesting in particular in the context of the more recent debates about Germans as victims. Maschmann's allusion to rape as an experience of gendered victimization, Sayner points out, challenge us to hone our reading skills with reference to such texts.

Sayner's book is a very welcome addition to the study of autobiography, research into the Nazi period, and the continuing importance of gender as an analytical category. She is to be commended for her painstaking reconstruction of the complex publication histories of the works she discusses. An index would have been useful to allow the reader to access and process this wealth of information more easily. Most fascinating is Sayner's careful analysis of the interplay between editorial decisions and the shifting interpretations of the Nazi period in postwar Germany. Texts are never timeless documents, as is sometimes claimed, but this book confirms just how profound the changes can be. As Sayner traces the history of publication, she hints at future tasks for literary scholars as much as for historians and perhaps sociologists. The importance of who remembers and how also extends to who reads these texts and how. The volume ends with the assertion that only detailed readings of the autobiographies assembled here will allow us to understand what these women are telling us. As Sayner makes clear, the shifting contexts within which they speak are just as important.

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