To make either of enduring interest to others requires a level of examination and reflection, along with the telling of stories. Through their stories, we can all weave our own predilections, surprises, nods of agreement and consternations. Renee Norman takes us on her journey, evoking through the performatives of poetry, personal essay, journal entries, memoirs and “theoropoetic ruminations,” her readers’ full analytic and emotional presence. In the same way that Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner have done in Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject, Norman demonstrates the practice by writing in the genre she is illuminating. We journey with her, as she works towards self-knowledge and reflects upon the potential for distortion.

She describes her multiply-themed, intertextually woven strands of theory and reflection as bricolage. I am struck again by that word, the product of a Jack or Jill-of-all-trades, the bricoleur, the handyone! It evokes memories from my own past as a journeylevel carpenter, visiting Quebec, and discovering a program sponsored by the Montreal YWCA. They trained and kept a registry of tradeswomen to be sent out to assist elderly, more housebound, people with their home repairs. How we all struggled with that word! The French language is so gendered, could bricoleur mean more than a handy man? What would the feminine be? What exactly is she tinkering with?!

Already I am drawn into her story, peopled as it is with the stories of great writers and theorists, knowing that I am entering the world as seen by a feminist, a teacher, a m(other), a Jew and a scholar.

Threaded through the prose and poetry, theory and reflection are Journal Entries, performed in a script typeface; suggesting that we step aside and deeper for a moment, taking us into her confidence. In these, Renee Norman begins and ends her book with the notions of childhood secrets (pp. 32-33; 241-263), and the ethics and practices of secrets; the concepts of whose story it is and what impact the character of the lens may have on the threads that we see and hear. “Truth in autobiography seems to be relative, or at least, relative to what your relatives might add. What strikes me most is how the same episode can seem somehow dissimilar when the narrator changes. The kaleidoscope has been turned” (p.47).
Using the device of the mirror, she explores the potential of both the story and the silence to teach us about the lives of those who use the craft of autobiography. As she analyzes the contributions of such luminaries as bell hooks, Hélène Cixous, Erica de Jong, Hannah Arendt and Doris Lessing, we become immersed in her own poems of autobiographic reflection. “…And I know I will never quite capture all there is” (p. 56).

There is a section in which the concepts of autobiography and the mirror are both explored and challenged through the literature, leading to a poetic intertextual engagement with Martha Quest, Doris Lessing’s autobiographically fictional character in the “Children of Violence” series, discovering and producing within herself “an eternal subject-in-process of a text-in-progress” (p. 94). As the poetic conversation continues, it is sometimes difficult to draw the lines between what is a reflection on Martha, and the deeper queries into what Norman sees of her own life.

“Is all autobiography educational research?” (p. 134)

As the text moves back and forth between poetic autobiographical representations, and reflections with the literature on the truth and value of such representations, I felt I was reading a justification for alternative forms of writing research representations. Renee Norman reinforces this sense of justification when she suggests that “Gunn offers us legitimacy as well as urgency when she theorizes autobiography as worldly…” (p. 147). Many of us on this experimental edge hope for such legitimacy, and each note of the truths of lives lived demonstrates the value of such a symphony as a tool for education.

I found a richness in the juxtaposition and discussion with Neumann and Peterson, considering research as relational; with Janice Jipson, regarding writing as a way of knowing and an emotional letting go, with Carl Leggo on the notion of leaving a “final testimony,” and Janice Varner Gunn’s notion that meanings we create for ourselves are still/actually arising out of culturally constructed knowledge which we are interpreting: “As the reader of his or her life, the autobiographer inhabits the hermeneutic universe where all understanding takes place” (p.22).

This book pursues on so many levels the “educational” value of autobiography. Using both poetry and prose, imagining and reflecting, Norman takes us on the journey of immersing herself in the life of Hannah Arendt as it was lived and written about by Hannah herself and through collected letters between heartfelt correspondents, analyzed and critiqued. Renee writes over the grave to Hannah as one Jewish woman to another, writing as a writer, a mother, a daughter and a feminist. I feel her call to know and understand the forces that move their lives. Was I, too, a conscious pariah (p.173)?

Her feminist analysis and reflection embody how, through the forces in her life as a metonymic woman in birth and death, sex and nurturance, she was able to “break out of the law of the father, the Lacanian and Freudian drama which had scripted [her] as dutiful, silent, not-writing wife and one-dimensional, unambiguous, devoted mother” and become the woman who “re-turns to herself through the autobiographical writing…in the poetic [prize-winning] texts that are her life, her breath, her labour.” This was a stunning synthesis of the discoveries of her journey through the lives and work of the many autobiographies she studied. That she was able to do this while living in her family and growing through relationship with her husband is a tribute to both of them.

Norman could take those lessons and use them, in her maternal narrative and poetic space, to share the incredible processes of helping schoolchildren write their ways to healing their own lives; at the same time teaching about the ethics of whose stories we are telling, and asking questions about what is truth, and from whose perspective can the stories be told. In the process, we, both adults and children, can all learn a great deal more about how to write autobiography with integrity, passion, reflection, and, as research.

Madeline Sonik’s insightful reflections, evoked by Norman’s book, exemplify these themes with grit and elegance: evocative stories, subjectivity lessons which lead to further conversation based on intimate detail rather than abstracted facts. It illustrates! This creates a ‘space between’ the author, the text and the reader where new knowledge can be created and/or integrated. Sonik’s prose and stories are woven with Norman’s in a conucopia of ‘theme, story, response’ which is at the heart of Norman’s ideas of autobiography as re/search, a tool for teaching: about ourselves and our relation to our worlds.
Endnote

1 Larousse’s (1971) French-English dictionary defines bricolage as tinkering, or puttering about, and a bricoleur as a handyman. The term was also coined by Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) to describe the ability to make use of whatever tools you have available. Denzin & Lincoln (2000) used the term to describe their work exploring the multiplicity of qualitative research methods over the past decade. Joe Kincheloe (2001) suggests that the word “signifies interdisciplinarity,” and “serves as a magnet for controversy in the contemporary academy” (680); where bricoleurs (described as handymen and handymen)

“...recognize the limitations of a single method, the discursive strictures of one disciplinary approach, what is missed by traditional practices of validation, the historicity of certified modes of knowledge production, the inseparability of knower and known, and the complexity and heterogeneity of all human experience, they understand the necessity of new forms of rigor in the research process…that alerts them to new ontological insights” (p. 681).

References:


About the Responding Author

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