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*Life Writing and Schizophrenia: Encounters at the Edge of
Meaning* by Mary Elene Wood (review)

Barbara Schneider

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Mary Elene Wood. *Life Writing and Schizophrenia: Encounters at the Edge of Meaning*. Clio Medico 90. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. 364 pp. ISBN 978-9042036840, 75 euro, \$105.00.

Schizophrenia is widely regarded as the worst of the serious mental illnesses, associated with experiences such as hearing voices, having delusions, and speaking in disorganized and apparently meaningless ways. Popular and medical representations of schizophrenia typically focus on how people with this diagnosis appear to others, but only rarely do they try to represent how individuals themselves experience and make meaning in their lives. In this important book, Mary Elene Wood offers a counter to the widespread notion that people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia are unable to tell a coherent story and therefore cannot be taken seriously as speakers about their own condition. Typically, the stories that such people tell are used by clinicians as a diagnostic tool, as evidence that the person has schizophrenia. While for the rest of us, narratives are a key means through which we assert our identity, for those who receive a diagnosis of schizophrenia, the stories they tell are regarded as symptoms that justify the diagnosis. These people become “the objects of narrative” (16) rather than the speakers. According to Wood, this assigns to those individuals an ontological status different from and somehow less human than the rest of us. They are without personhood. She instead insists that the stories of people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia be attended to with respect and the understanding that in their stories they convey their experiences and narrate their identity, just as the rest of us do.

Wood is a literary scholar and has chosen for analysis a variety of writings by and about people with schizophrenia. These include four memoirs written by women institutionalized for varying periods of time in mental hospitals; the first-person narratives that appear in every issue of the journal *Schizophrenia Bulletin*; the writings of Freud and Gregory Bateson, who took seriously the stories of writers diagnosed with schizophrenia; the fictional and autobiographical writing of Janet Frame, a New Zealand author and person living with schizophrenia; the diagnostic narratives found in the case book that accompanies the *DSM-IV*; and her own mother’s story of schizophrenia and institutionalization. Wood brings her considerable analytic abilities to bear in showing that even in the most apparently incoherent of stories, people struggle to tell their own stories, to construct meaningful identities, and to retain some sense of control in their lives.

Every narrative is of course a construction rather than a representation of reality. Narrators tell some part of a much larger story while narrating some version of a smaller story. They entwine larger cultural discourses with personal experience, societal expectations with individual goals and desires. In

each of her chapters, Wood shows that this is as true of people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia as it is of anyone else. She demonstrates the complex ways in which people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia respond to and incorporate larger cultural discourses in their own stories, even when they seem at their most incoherent. Particularly the medical story of schizophrenia provides a larger discourse that the writers she analyzes work to counter in their descriptions of their experiences. She also addresses the ethical minefield of attempting to speak for others through the interpretation of their words. This is an essential issue in the analysis of any speaker's words, but particularly so when the analyst wants to avoid turning the lives of the writers into objects for analysis; that is, to avoid doing what Wood claims medical professionals do when they use stories as a basis for diagnosis. Instead, she asserts her intention to regard the writers she analyzes as active knowing subjects, with the ability to interpret their own experiences and to take the position of expert in that experience.

Readers will be attracted to different chapters in this book, depending on their specific interests. Two chapters stood out for me: the one on how patients' stories have been incorporated into the *DSM-IV* casebook, and the final chapter in which Wood discusses her mother's story. I found the casebook analysis particularly interesting as it is designed to help users of the DSM to understand the manual's diagnostic categories. Schizophrenia has no physical manifestations that can be used for diagnosis. Despite the optimistic hopes of researchers that they will soon know more about the causes of schizophrenia, in fact, as Wood articulates, schizophrenia is as much a mystery as it was fifty years ago. Practitioners must rely on interpretation of behavior and speech to arrive at an appropriate diagnosis, and the casebook instructs readers in how to do this. That is, stories of people with schizophrenia are presented in such a way as to lead readers to a diagnosis that will be treatable with antipsychotic medications. However, Wood also sees that aspects of the patient narratives presented in the case book "strain against the container of a particular diagnosis" (219), opening the possibility of attending to alternative interpretations that acknowledge the essential humanity of the people who receive this diagnosis.

The last chapter of the book is Wood's analysis of the story of her mother, Eunice Wood. Wood's analysis of the content of her mother's experiences shows that delusions are not just "symptoms" to be cured through medication, but carry multilayered meanings with unspoken connections that inhere in the stories without being articulated. Eunice Wood, despite the presumption that she was incapable of coherence, was in fact constituting her own narrative identity and attempting to take control of the direction of her life. She worked hard to articulate her experiences and in doing so to establish herself as a person, not just a case.

Wood gives us the view of schizophrenia as “written from the inside” (5), both by those who have received this diagnosis and those who are in close contact with them. It is a must read for those wanting to approach the mystery of schizophrenia from a non-medical angle. It allows us to appreciate the coherence in apparently incoherent narratives and behavior as people struggle to deal with the suffering and distress they experience, and to take an active role in the construction of their identities in a context in which they are assumed to be without a coherent identity.

Barbara Schneider

Celia Hunt. *Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing: Exploring the Self in the Learning Process*. London: Routledge, 2013. 197 pp. ISBN 9798-0415578424, £24.99, \$44.95.

People change, often in profound ways, when they engage in creative practices, but understanding the nature of these changes and the reasons why they take place continues to challenge adult educators. This book takes a close look at the effects of participating in postgraduate programs in what the author terms “creative life writing,” and makes the case for considering the students’ experiences as a form of transformative learning. The author seeks to extend our understanding of the nature of transformative learning as a result of these analyses. In the introduction and in the opening chapter Hunt details the Creative Writing and Personal Development Programmes that took place at Sussex University between 1996 and 2010. The remainder of the book is divided into four sections.

The first part begins by exploring some concepts of the psyche, and goes on to use case studies to illustrate the kinds of changes students experienced during their time in these programs. The programs used a range of creative writing exercises and activities to help people deepen their understanding of themselves, enhance their creativity, and engage with the therapeutic potential of creative writing. Hunt outlines the unusual and hybrid nature of the programs. They help develop the craft of writing, but do not claim to produce professional writers; they encourage people to explore themselves and involve the study of therapeutic theories, but are not accredited either as therapy or as courses for therapists. There is hybridity, too, in the theoretical work, which she begins to delineate in the opening chapter. She draws on an array of theoretical frameworks to explain the kinds of learning and development taking place through creative life writing. She seeks to contribute to the expanding debate about the nature of transformative learning, positioning herself alongside those who have argued that to move forward, transformative learning