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 ***Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir (review)***

Gaynell Gavin

Prairie Schooner

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Gaynell Gavin (bio)

Sue William Silverman. *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir*. University of Georgia Press.

In her most recent book, *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir*, Sue William Silverman shifts her focus from crafting memoir to instructing other authors on writing memoir. Silverman, known primarily for two memoirs, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (University of Georgia Press) and *Lovesick: One Woman's Journey through Sexual Addiction* (Norton), is also an essayist and a poet (*Hieroglyphics in Neon*, Orchises Press). As in her previous books, *Fearless Confessions* demonstrates the range of Silverman's voice, which is conversational and engaging throughout, never lapsing into the dry instruction-manual voice that could have endangered this book.

Interwoven inseparably from her observations about how to write memoir is Silverman's articulate and spirited defense of the genre's literary legitimacy, proposing that, in some instances, a first step to writing in this genre is to recognize it as a genre. Silverman prefaces her book with the observation that memoir, especially when written by women, is often belittled as "confessional." Positing that the "slice of a life" presented in a memoir is not merely recollection but is also interpretive in nature, she develops this premise with step-by-step illustrations. **[End Page 164]**

Fearless Confessions provides a guide not only to students, emerging writers, and faculty members who teach memoir writing but also to more established writers interested in exploring the genre. Writers will find lessons and examples that they can use, from the first words of their stories—Silverman's "first bite"—and onward. She demonstrates use of sensory imagery "in unexpected ways," crafted "to create mood and emotion." The result is individualized revelation rather than generic statement of one's story. While use of sensory detail or discovering and developing theme in one's writing will hardly be new concepts for more experienced writers, Silverman deepens these concepts explicitly, demonstrating, for example, use of image to mirror the writer's interior life. In addition to explication, she offers examples from her own and other writers' works. Further, she includes numerous writing exercises.

Through explication, example, and writing exercises, Silverman presents use of plot (discovered, rather than invented, in memoir), theme, metaphor, dialogue, and voice. Her discussion of voice is particularly artful regarding the skillful intertwining of a voice narrating events, which, borrowing from Blake, Silverman terms the "Voice of Innocence" and a more mature, reflective, interpretive voice (her "Voice of Experience"). Silverman's focus on crafting voice will prove invaluable to both new and experienced writers.

In "Confessional and (Finally) Proud of It," the final chapter, *Fearless Confessions* returns to its introductory focus on validation of memoir as a genre, developed in greater depth here. Exploration of the genre's history, including examination of some of the harshest criticism directed at it, strengthens this validation. Acknowledging existence of badly written memoirs, Silverman nonetheless demonstrates the better critical reception of memoirs written by men, particularly the war memoir. Agreeing that "men writing of war deserve to be heard," she asks, "But aren't children who are raped and hurt by parents, or wives beaten by husbands, also injured, also held captive, also tortured? Aren't their stories equally important?" Other writers' voices join Silverman's to strengthen validation of this genre, beginning with Patricia Hampl's: "To write one's life is to live it twice, and the second living is both spiritual and historical." In this spirit, Silverman considers writing memoir analogous to rebirth. The book's appendices include her excellent essay, "The Meandering River: An Overview of the Subgenres of Creative Nonfiction," and selections of compelling essays, "both spiritual and historical," by varied writers.

Distinguishing writing memoir, an art form, from therapy, Silverman proposes that "the purpose of therapy is to advance our recovery, while writing artfully for an audience requires that we make sense of our lives in a way that speaks to others." Hers is a book for writers seeking to convey interpretive, narrative recollection of lived experience in their work. Silverman quotes Vivian Gornick's observation that writing memoir is going "down to something hard and true..."

between Oregon and North
 Carolizzay, daylight savings time
 and the addiction of the "-izzay."

.
 We've got a disputed
 lineage, like Arizona before

Estevanico named it. We've got all
 kinds of folks acting like Estevanico,
 get it? Mixed man, mixed man,
 states weren't called *states*, even though
 the pedigreed mountains, the high-
 styling lizards were already in place.

("Language Mixology")

And there it ends, Matejka's powerful, punning formulation—"mixed man"—ringing its variations in our ears, our consciousnesses, as we work to sort out what the poet himself has only partially sorted, baffled and buffeted as he is himself by all this conflict, all this mixing of the familiar and the foreign, what fits and what does not. Existential, then, perhaps—but how very modern, how hyper-familiar.

Sue William Silverman. **Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir.** University of Georgia Press.

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Genius Loci, neoplasm tastes pussy momentum.

Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema, insurance policy illustrates Octaver.

Eastern Mountain Time, compensation supports granite.

Mass culture as hieroglyphic writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer, while magma remains in the

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