

Ripley Hugo, *Writing for Her Life: The Novelist Mildred Walker*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xxiv + 286 pages; 14 pages of photographs, index, illustrations, biographical note; ISBN 0-8032-2383-8; \$29.95 cloth.

Mildred Walker (1905-1998) published twelve novels and one novel for young readers between 1934 and 1970. *The Southwest Corner* (1951) was rewritten as a Broadway play and a television movie. Her writing won her acclaim. Her first novel *Fireweed* (1934) was granted first prize in the Avery Hopwood and Jule Hopwood Awards contest at the University of Michigan. Two Literary Guild Awards included *Dr. Norton's Wife* (1938) and *Winter Wheat* (1944). The latter has also been selected by University of Nebraska Press as the first One Book Montana for 2004. *The Body of a Young Man* (1960) was nominated for a National Book Award. Several of her novels have been translated into foreign languages. By the 1980s Walker's novels were out of print. According to Walker's daughter, Ripley Hugo, it was in 1991 that "Montana novelist James Welch recommended to the University of Nebraska Press they consider reprinting Mother's novel *Winter Wheat*. It had become a Montana classic over the years, available in several paperback versions up to 1984. Its publication in 1992 with an introduction by Welch was well received and encouraged Nebraska Press to reprint all of her novels" (xxii). Between 1992 and 2001 Walker's thirteen novels were reissued in the Bison Books series of paperbacks with critical introductions by contemporary authors.

Mildred Walker was born in Philadelphia to a school teacher mother and Baptist minister father, spent childhood summers in Vermont and graduated magna cum laude in literature from Wells College, New York in 1926. She married cardiologist Ferdinand Ripley Schemm in 1927 and made the first westward move to Michigan where she studied creative writing at the University of Michigan, received her MA degree in English and began writing. From 1933 and 1955 Walker wrote ten books in Montana. Mildred Walker and Ferdinand Ripley Schemm had three children: Ripley, George and Christopher. After her husband's death in 1955, Walker returned to Wells College where she took a position as professor of English until her retirement in 1968. She continued to write into her eighties; the unpublished manuscript of a novel and two unpublished collections of short stories remain in her daughter's possession. The last period of her life was spent first in her family home in Grafton, Vermont, then in Missoula, Montana and finally Portland, Oregon where she died at the age of 93.

In 1995, just after the reprinting of Walker's novels began, Ripley Schemm Hugo, the only daughter of Mildred Walker, poet and faculty affiliate in the English Department at the University of Montana, was approached by University of Nebraska Press editor, Willis G Regier, to write a biography of her mother. In her introduction to the biography Hugo explains that up until the time her research began neither she nor her two brothers knew much of their mother's publications. "We never asked about her writing because copies of her newly published novels were never out on a table to look at, not until late into our high school years. By that time, I think, we had assumed that we were somehow not eligible to ask. It was a strangeness that has taken my

brothers and me a lifetime to understand" (xvi). In 1993 Hugo discovered that her mother had sent most of her papers (journals, notes on novels, photographs, interviews, correspondence, lectures and news clippings) to the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming; several boxes of journals were found after Walker's death. The revelation must have been as unsettling as it was illuminating for Hugo. One wonders how a daughter must feel in investigating the writing life of her mother by reading her private papers. This daughter is no casual observer. Throughout the biography it becomes clear that the writing has forced Hugo to come to terms with a novelist mother who has consistently kept her writing world to herself.

In *Writing for Her Life: The Novelist Mildred Walker* Hugo details her mother's life story and provides a survey of her literary production. In addition Hugo discusses the novels, not primarily as a literary critic, but as a knowledgeable commentator and daughter who interprets her mother's journal impressions as they relate to the novels. The primary focus is to provide links between the places in Vermont, Michigan or Montana where Walker lived and wrote to the settings of the novels. Hugo has fashioned the biography as a narrative which is organized around the locations of the thirteen novels: New England, The Midwest and the Rocky Mountain West. Descriptions of the places are presented in the chronological order of Walker's living in those locales, rather than in the order of publication of the novels. Hugo explains that this structure "has been essential to my understanding of how Mother wrote" (xxiv). In this way, it seems, Hugo aspires to gain an understanding of the writing mother she has known only superficially. As Hugo writes through her mother's life and landscape, she gains personal insight into the novels and their writer.

Hugo's biography opens with the chapter entitled "Childhood in Vermont" and a vivid description of a photo of Mildred Walker as a child with pencil and paper sitting in a loft in her Vermont home. At the outset Hugo confirms the strong impression that the image has made on her by gently interweaving the source material into the narrative. The experience is reinforced by the memory of her mother's announcement that she would write all her life; Hugo goes on to explain "the loft is a place to be separate from the bustlings in the house, a separation she made clear she had coveted as a child" (1). Hugo discusses the dichotomy of her mother's private nature and her public writing: "I have been keenly aware of the two lives that she had always led: the one, essential to her sense of well-being; the other, essential to the strength and excitement of her writing. She kept the dimensions of her life as a wife and mother separate from the more daring dimensions of her life as a writer" (xix). In drawing clear boundaries between the social self and the writing self, it is likely that Walker may have felt the need to distinguish her personal aspirations from her own mother's focus on running a household. Walker had determined to pursue a literary career and to preserve her social position in middle-class America; these decisions likely influenced Walker to maintain a peripheral relationship primarily to her children and also to her grandchildren.

In spite of the obstacles in creating a biography of her mother, Hugo intends “to give an interpretation of her writing life” (xxiii). The task of integrating the personal knowledge of the social mother with new insights of the writing mother is a long and complicated process. On the one hand, Hugo discovers that Walker was plagued with self-doubt and dissatisfaction with her life. Walker only occasionally admitted her fear of relationships, such as in a journal entry from 1968: “It is my timidity that cheats me” (246). The writer-daughter struggles with her writing mother’s need for distance from the family. As the biography progresses, Hugo’s revelations convey a daughter’s longing for maternal recognition juxtaposed with the realization that her mother required privacy. Hugo repeatedly expresses personal disappointment particularly as she acknowledges the fact that her mother had never been emotionally engaged in her grandchildren (240). On the other hand, it becomes evident that the close relationship Walker had to her husband was very stimulating. “No man was ever more alive in the hearts of his children and wife ... for Fred led me into a world of joy – loving and living with him was joy that I couldn’t have known without him” (40). After his death her literary production dwindled dramatically.

Still, according to Hugo, Walker was condescending. It is a puzzle to Hugo that her mother exhibited in her daily life a surprising distaste of and a critical attitude toward low class behavior which is absent in her fiction. “What I did resent my first thirty-five years was not my writing mother but my social mother. Shopping trips with her were the worst, especially to Great Fall’s only department store, the Paris. Her verbal scorn for the clerk who didn’t carry the right brand of stockings made me burn with eleven-year-old hangdog shame” (xvii). The underlying text, the mother-daughter plot, serves as a developing drama into which the reader is drawn. Conflicted situations span the relationship and are regularly exemplified in the biography. Hugo places herself in the text as she aspires to resolve the contradictory emotions and behaviors that exist in the family. A “family memoir” she calls it.

A typical conflict occurred, Hugo recalls, when her mother expressed disappointment in her decision to teach in a one-roomed rural school in Montana. By comparison, the novelist shows compassion for the main character of *Winter Wheat* (1944), young Ellen Webb, who struggles with loneliness and defeat while teaching in a small country school in Montana. In the end Hugo realizes that “Ellen Webb was a heroine of fiction and a character who portrayed strength and individuality; I was my mother’s daughter and had a role to play that fit Mother’s idea of what a daughter of hers should be or engage in” (153). In Walker’s writing and also her non-writing life, it seems, the participants: her children, as well as her characters, were delegated appropriate roles over which Mildred Walker sought to exercise vigorous authority.

The presentation and discussion of the novels are preceded by extensive descriptions of the lived history, for example of the neighborhood place of the family home in Grafton, Vermont. Hugo relies on numerous entries from Walker’s notebooks which provide the historical details of people, many of whom Hugo is familiar with, places and historical events, farming and implements, local and national politics. Walker

told stories of her own childhood to her children, perhaps, Hugo suggests, as a writing technique to challenge memory and develop creativity as she attempted to entertain the children. The novelist's research notes include information about a local 150-year-old soapstone quarry in Grafton, for example, which forms the setting and lives of her characters in the novel *The Quarry* from 1947. Hugo superimposes her own memories and those of her two brothers together with a wealth of novelist's notes onto the construct: Walker, the novelist.

From description of the lived-in setting, Hugo then turns to discuss the novels. The transition is smooth: the people on the streets of the town become the characters in the novel. In the literary discussions Hugo reveals her own response to her mother's work, such as in *The Body of a Young Man*, a love story about a woman and her husband who struggle with unfounded guilt of the suicide of a young student. It was published five years after Ferdinand Ripley Schemm's death. The biographer recognizes her mother's silent reserve in the female protagonist. Hugo claims the novel is "eerily autobiographical" (35). She goes on to admit her dilemma as the daughter of the novelist in her reading of the novel. "And although the incidents, especially those that involve the three fictional children, are conceivable in any summer's events and essential to the plot, they startle me. I cannot see them as I should from the perspective of a reader. They are described exactly as they occurred, chiefly in my youngest brother's family years" (38). Hugo resolves herself to the understanding that in her writing Walker draws heavily, sometimes too unimaginatively, on family experience and observation.

It is not only challenging to read a mother's writing, the biographer is also implicated in the life writing process. Hugo is the biological daughter of her subject; there are unavoidable psychological and personal connections between the two. With a straightforward and honest commentary Hugo resolves the pitfalls of the biographer's position. When reflecting her own perspective in this writing task she admits knowledge of the mother-daughter relationship. A similar autobiographical style of family memoir can be seen in the biography by Brenda Ueland of her mother Clara, in *Clouds, Unfold! Clara Ueland and her Family* (2004).<sup>15</sup> The narrative is an inter-mix of memory and details from Clara Ueland's journals and Brenda Ueland's journals interfaced with family correspondence and standard historical resources. Ueland allows herself to figure as the persona in the narrative biography with a reflective voice that speaks for the whole family. In this text, however, the daughter aims to honor her mother and thereby creating an unwaveringly positive memoir. Hugo's task is considerably more demanding due to the need to resolve conflicting family emotions in order to construct an image of which her mother would approve.

Hugo takes a critical view of her mother's work as she gradually reconnects the novelist with the mother figure; "when I finally read *The Quarry* in my late thirties, I realized that this novelist's interest and insight into the feelings and thoughts of her char-

15. Brenda Ueland, *Clouds, Unfold! Clara Ueland and her Family* (Unpublished manuscript by Brenda Ueland, 1967), (Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 2004).

acters had a depth I had never suspected possible of the woman who was my mother” (20). Hugo has clearly arrived at a fuller picture of Walker as mother and writer. One might protest that the fragmentary nature of biographical evidence and dependence on subjective sources and techniques may be misleading even incorrect, generating a distrust of the result. Hugo admits: “But it is my mother the novelist whom I have been asked to write about. The attempt to see her first as a writer and second as a mother has brought back many glimpses of her that I didn’t know I had – glimpses that do not form any steady narrative” (xiv). She goes on to explain that her personal memories are rich in emotional and physical sensations; the strength of those images have left indelible traces of recognition of the individual which have re-surfaced during the life writing process. It seems likely that in writing biography, one is often writing autobiography. The intersection between knowing her mother and knowing herself is consolidated: “What I know now as an adult is that my stories remembered about my mother and father are not as much about them as they are about me – my reactions to them” (9). In this work self-knowledge reinforces the biographical purpose.

Hugo does what she sets out to do. She provides the reader with an interpretation of her mother’s “writing life on the basis of Walker’s journals, quotations of writers who seem to speak to her own writing, and her sense of where her life is going” (xxiii). Hugo succeeds in transforming the numerous biographical resources she relies on into a coherent image of a novelist mother. Those diverse materials contribute to the creation of a valid life history which emerges in clear depictions of a historical past through the narrative. Further, the goal of finding her mother the novelist becomes an exercise in finding one self. The approach is effective in that the narrator mediates between subject and reader in a way which draws the reader close to the story, the people and their place and becomes a voice which enlightens the complex hidden motives of the human personality. The book is well constructed, rich in landscape detail and clear accounts of the real people who became characters in the novels. As a study of a daughter’s exploration of her relationship to her mother, what made her mother write and what she wrote, the biography is insightful. Moreover, the scholarship is useful and valuable to the student of American fiction and non-fiction of the West, and it records the account of a noteworthy woman previously hidden from history.

Judith McGuinness Torvik

Telemark University College

Lasse Kekki, *From Gay to Queer: Gale Male Identity in Selected Fiction by David Leavitt and in Tony Kushner’s Play Angels in America I-II* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003); 427 pp.; ISBN: 3-03910-034-3 hardcover; € 63.80.

What, precisely, is the nature of “gay male identity”; or, can “identity” be said to have any “nature” at all, being produced through and by specific historical, cultural, and/or discursive practices? These questions have, since the early 1990s in the United States,