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Writing a Woman's Life

By Carolyn G. Heilbrun



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"A provocative study that should be in every writer's library."? *Washington Post*

In this modern classic, Carolyn G. Heilbrun builds an eloquent argument demonstrating that writers conform all too often to society's expectations of what women should be like at the expense of the truth of the female experience. Drawing on the careers of celebrated authors including Virginia Woolf, George Sand, and Dorothy Sayers, Heilbrun illustrates the struggle these writers undertook in both work and life to break away from traditional "male" scripts for women's roles.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

With subtlety and great eloquence, Carolyn Heilbrun shows how, throughout the centuries, those who write about women's lives--biographers *and* autobiographers--have suppressed the truth of the female experience, in order to make the "written life" conform to the expectations of what that life should be. Heilbrun also examines literature's silence on such vital topics as friendship between women, the female physical experience, and the richness that often imbues a women's later years. Recommended reading for everyone, especially women and writers.

From Library Journal

According to Heilbrun (*Reinventing Womanhood* , LJ 4/1/79), women's lives and the stories of those lives have been steeped in the language and power of men, making some stories unthinkable and others contrived. Not until the 1970s have there been stories freely and openly expressing the achievements, ambitions, and experiences of women from all walks of life. By examining the traditional written accounts of women's lives and the facts omitted or underplayed, Heilbrun suggests new ways for women to write biography and autobiography. Though a clearer development and connection of some of the issues and topics would have made for an even more interesting presentation, this book is provocative. Jeris Cassel, Rutgers Univ. Libs., New Brunswick, N.J.

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Review

If it moves readers to write the full truth about female lives or live lives that are not scripted by others (male or female), its effects will be indisputably emendatory. -- *San Francisco Chronicle*

In this concise and eloquently written feminist classic, Carolyn Heilbrun examines English-language fiction, biography, and autobiography written by and about women, confirming her suspicion that the truths of female experience have been altered to assure that literature conforms with a predetermined and narrow definition of woman. Prior to 1970, "biographies of women made certain facts unthinkable," facts like the existence of anger, rage, an open desire for power, or deeply felt sexual passion of any kind. According to Carolyn Heilbrun, when people with drive and ambition have no models, no exemplars, no stories to guide, they must make choices outside "safety and closure, which have always been held out to women as the ideals of female destiny, [but] are not places of adventure, or experience, or life." Some women have dressed like men, others have taken men's pen-names like George Sand/Aurore Dudevant and George Eliot/Marian Evans. Countless others have made choices which deny both personal and social truths about what it means to be a woman and condemn themselves to the "ultimate anonymity, to be storyless." This book is about more than just literature however; it's about the pain caused when human desire and drive are denied, and about the choices all women have to make to find the courage to be fully alive people with stories. -- *For great reviews of books for girls, check out Let's Hear It for the Girls: 375 Great Books for Readers 2-14.* -- *From 500 Great Books by Women; review by Jesse Larsen*

Users Review

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Katie Doll:

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