ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Nola
Robin Hemley
Graywolf Press
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Nola was so exciting and confirming for me as a nonfiction writer that I wanted to set this review in the context of some of the current issues evolving around creative nonfiction. It is an important text because it unites story and essay, as well as letters, self-declared fictions and reflection, almost effortlessly at the crossroads where nonfiction as the fourth genre is most controversial: the junction between truth and lie. For readers unfamiliar with these issues, look at Root and Steinberg's groundbreaking anthology, Creative Nonfiction: The Fourth Genre (MSU Press) in which they write: "The great challenge of memoir writing is knowing how much we remember is reliable and accepting the likelihood that we're 'inventing the truth.'"

Hemley seems acutely aware of this issue, but persuades us to trust him through his honest examination of his own strategy:

> *Even a liar wants to convince you to shake off your skepticism, and I have to say that perhaps I'm lying here … And I say that not to manipulate you, but so that we may question together how truly or falsely words can ever relate an experience, and to say that it is not only the truth of an experience that matters, but the telling, the transformation that happens in the telling, the power of words to create new experience, a new truth that the distortions are not what matters, or at least not for the ordinary reasons.*

In this context, Hemley's book sits square in the center of the new and most successful nonfiction, exemplifying the trend of stretching the form. Nola is not just a life-and-death narrative of the author's brilliant and disturbed sister, but it's also a complex narrative of Hemley himself, of his mother as writer and editor, and finally it is the story of how he makes meaning out of his own connections with his difficult, eccentric, and excruciatingly literary family. Hemley weaves his memoir from letters, excerpts from Nola's journals (with his

mother's editing included!), court documents, his own powerful memories, and, finally, pieces of fiction from his mother's and his own writing. The resulting structure, though not entirely new (see Moraga's Loving in the War Years or Cofer's Silent Dancing) is one of the richest and most literary of recent publications in this genre.

Couple the inventive format with a writing style that is deeply reflective, utterly honest, and sensitive of the issues of writing nonfiction in this way, and you have a colossal memoir. Hemley involves himself not just in telling a life story, but creating meaning by revealing how he thinks — exploring not one, but several voices that relate this narrative. In this, Hemley is a master. He introduces his sister's story as though he were solving a mystery, accepting clues from both imagined scenes in her life and actual conversation. He adeptly borrows fiction techniques, but builds complexity by introducing excerpts from his sister's memoirs and setting these against his own and his mother's memories. He adds veracity by including passages from Nola's memoir, quoting the text as his sister wrote it, but with light strikeovers revealing the cuts his mothers made in her first and failed attempt to manage the material. In this he explores the formative relationship between his mother and himself, and as he ruminates about her reasons for the cuts, he cautiously unfolds his own thinking about his brilliant sister and his connection to her.

This unconventional pattern of revelation will fascinate avid nonfiction readers, unless you're looking for mainstream confessional memoir, in which case, head for something lighter and less sophisticated than Nola. There is confession here, but it is so well written and so populated with questions of meaning, intent, consciousness and spirituality, that this is a challenging, but truly rewarding read.

Anne-Marie Oomen