

Raymond Gingras n'est plus, mais on peut encore "frapper" et "entrer" dans son univers.

Luce Raymond
Cegep de Joliette

Editor's note:

Five of Mr. Gingras' engravings and drawings were published in the *McGill Journal of Education*, Spring 1987, Vol.22, No.2.

Note de l'éditeur:

Cinq des gravures et dessins de Monsieur Gingras ont été publiés dans le *McGill Journal of Education*, printemps 1987, vol. 22, no. 2.

Donald R. Gallo (Ed.).

SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES:

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES BY NOTABLE AUTHORS OF
BOOKS FOR YOUNG ADULTS.**

Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990.

231 pp. \$12.95. NCTE members \$9.95.

This book is a compilation of brief autobiographical sketches by authors who write books for children and young adults. Based on the solicited recommendations of officers of the NCTE the editor asked 100 authors to participate in a project where they wrote briefly about themselves and their reasons for writing. Eighty-seven authors agreed to contribute (most of them women), and each selection is accompanied by a photograph, and a list of publications.

When I first received this book I thought "what could be educational about it?" I was ready for another academic treatise on writers, and over-intellectualized rationalizations by writers on why they write. Just what the world needs I thought: another book about doing something, instead of doing it.

But as I started to read the introduction I became excited about how the editor organized the task. In compiling the book, he had started to observe some patterns in the material. He had noticed how a lot of the authors had close geographical links to New York City, and many of them had worked in other aspects of the publishing business, in newspapers or magazines. Some had used reading as a way to construct a fantasy life, and many of them had been lonely, solitary children who loved to read. Others had grown up in families where storytelling and gossiping were encouraged.

This interested me. Writing had been a way for them to deal with their personal problems, which were themselves rooted in social contexts. I was intrigued by the idea that there were social characteristics of the writers' experience, influences which shaped their writing. And furthermore that these social facts could say something educational about the writing experience that was relevant to readers. So I did my own observations on the material. The idea was that there might be something emancipatory that these writers were trying to communicate.

The first selection I read was by Anne McCaffrey. She spoke of the encouragement she received in using female protagonists: "No one ever mentioned to me that science fiction had a predominantly male readership. No one told me that women weren't supposed to write science fiction" (p. 128). Other women wrote about the formative influence of being female. Isabelle Holland says: "I think of myself as a storyteller and for this I am indebted to my mother" (p. 97).

I found black writers talking about the difference of growing up black in American society. Alice Childress says: "My books for young adults deal with characters who feel rejected and have to painfully learn how to deal with other people, because I believe all human beings can be magnificent once they realize their full importance" (p. 39). Rosa Guy said how she "soon learned the limitations for advancement of the black artist" (p. 85), but how she could not be happy with that. Walter Dean Myers said: "I had to figure out whether being black was a good or bad thing. This is no mean trick when all of the heroes I was presented with were white" (p. 148). In these stories I heard strength, the recognition of the experience of being black, and yet the determination to recollect and share those experiences with others.

The relationship between people and their environment is also an important one. Jean Craighead George writes about "characters learning about themselves from nature" (p. 75). Lynn Hall writes that her "love for books began as soon as I was old enough to know that ponies existed" (p. 87).

Not all writers located their motivation in their social condition, and neither could we expect them to. Yet it is interesting to have a glimpse into their personal lives, with the idea that people do struggle with social conditions not of their own choosing, and that these are formative influences in their work.

On a lighter note I noticed that most of the photographs were without a context. Only two showed a computer or typewriter in the background, thus most did not show the work of writing. Six showed a library, as if collecting books was connected with writing them. Ten authors wore glasses, which in the age of contact lenses is not necessarily a sign of intellectual activity. More than a dozen people were actually pictured outside, in gardens, or yards. Three authors had their pictures taken with dogs, and one with a horse.

Overall, in thinking about this book, I think the words of Julian F. Thompson are appropriate: "I think we human beings face a lot of problems that are deadly serious. I also think we're perfectly ridiculous, at times. My books reflect those two opinions, as well as my concerns about the way some people try to bring up kids, and teach them. I think a future generation can produce a cleaner, more humane, more democratic world than this one. I always hope that it'll be the next one" (p. 213).

I think this is an emancipatory interest, the desire to produce a better world. But it should be done now. And the message I read in many of these writer's reminiscences is that that is exactly what they are trying to do.

This book is recommended by the publishers for secondary school teachers, librarians, and all readers age 12-18. I concur. I would add to that the fact that this is an American book, oriented to American authors, but not necessarily to an American audience. We of course do read American books in Canada. But maybe as well there is a need for a similar book in Canada on Canadian authors. If it hasn't been written, maybe somebody should.

Chris McCormick
St. Mary's University