

Review: *To Know Her Own History: Writing at the Woman's College, 1943-1963.*

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Ritter, Kelly. *To Know Her Own History: Writing at the Woman's College, 1943-1963.* Pittsburgh, U Pittsburgh P, 2012. Print.

This engaging, readable, and highly informative volume, in which Kelly Ritter excavates the postwar history of writing in the Department of English at The Woman's College of North Carolina (in Greensboro, sister to the all-male campus in Chapel Hill) is a welcome addition to our knowledge of women's education and of women's writing. Ritter's interest in normal schools and women's education had been sparked during her tenure at Southern Connecticut State College, but not until she joined the faculty at what is now known as UNC-Greensboro, where they take their normal school history as "one of the premier public colleges for women in the South" (3) seriously, was she drawn into this work. Delving into the rich historical archives there, Ritter began to discern the outlines of several narratives and counter-narratives regarding writing's role within this institution, and moreover, of women's role in weaving those narratives and counter-narratives. Drawing on Charlotte Linde's *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory*, Ritter set out to attend as carefully as her materials would let her to women as viable agents, whose "noisy silences" have been too long ignored. In the pages of this book, these silences speak clearly and loudly, giving readers' a view of women and women's education that runs aslant received historical accounts by Connors, Berlin, and others.

The opening chapters trace the origins of normal schools and their relationship to the State Normal and Industrial School that was founded in 1891 and became the Woman's College in 1931. Noting that such

normal schools served as the training ground for women teachers and that many important state universities today grow out of the normal school tradition, Ritter argues that if we want to understand the roots of women's education, we must look outside the Ivy League and specifically to these much less elite institutions. The second chapter takes us into the inner workings of the English department, where literary studies, composition studies, and creative writing jostled up against one another, each trying to define itself. This chapter provides a fascinating case study of the first-year writing magazine, *The Yearling*, which was published from 1948 to 1951. *The Yearling* featured expository or argumentative as well as creative writing that provided a "model archival story of literacy education in public women's colleges during this era." Ritter reads the story of this student magazine against and within the mission of the Woman's College to graduate women who would be the teachers of their families and "knowledgeable workers, even leaders, within this community postgraduation (55). Their rigorous course of study—aimed at competing successfully with the men's college at Chapel Hill—and high aspirations led the College to distinguish itself by giving freshmen [sic] an opportunity to publish, as students were doing at prestigious colleges such as Bryn Mawr. In this chapter, Ritter shares tantalizing excerpts from student writing (about southern culture, about the choice of colleges, about segregation, in poems, essays, stories, and genre-bending pieces that made me want to head for those archives myself. I savored the emerging picture of highly literate, ambitious young women, many of whom went on to "value and practice writing throughout their adult lives" (90).

Chapter 3 presents the more familiar story of general educational reform, most often focused on Harvard. Yet Ritter enriches this story by grounding it at the Woman's College and presenting the college's response to the question of "What is an educated woman?" This chapter reveals the fault lines surrounding the terms "writing" and "literacy" within the English Department, whose definitions grow in decidedly different ways in the Department's three areas. Chapter 4—my personal favorite, entitled "The Double-Helix of Creative/Composition"—gives readers an up close and personal look at the Department by juxtaposing the careers of two of its members, Randall Jarrell (the noted poet and strong advocate of creative writing) and May Bush, the director of the first-year

writing program. This chapter alone should be required reading for all students in rhetoric and composition, for it illuminates the history of composition in remarkably insightful ways. While many scholars have figured literary studies as the privileged group with English studies (those Maxine Hairston identified as "mandarins" in her enduring CCCC chair's address), Ritter's study adds a third element—creative writing—that complicates this narrative and raises many additional questions about the relationship of these two "wings" of English. Here her use of "multiple layerings" of archival materials as well as her interviews with alumnae, materials that allow her to produce a history of people rather than merely of documents, allow her to show

how the Woman's College, as an institution already heavily committed to writing and the arts prior to the postwar era and at the forefront of the surge in MFA offerings nationwide, responded to this visibly dynamic decade in writing—specifically, how it came to redefine its priorities where writing instruction was concerned, and how it came to define itself as a primary department of *creative* writing both internally and externally. This redefinition would be one last way in which the college distinguished itself from stereotypical traditions expected of normal schools, and became a case study in cross-pollination of writing pedagogies, as well as administrative priorities, in the postwar era. (153)

But this summary doesn't capture the drama of this chapter, in which we see Randall Jarrell become more and more powerful and take the lion's share of departmental resources even as May Bush fails to gain advancement, or even a decent salary. Over and over again, Ritter's research reveals, and in spite of the Department's supposed support of her, Bush is given tiny increments (\$140) while Jarrell makes (at least) twice her salary and carries half her teaching load. I'm sketching in what is a much more complicated story, and Ritter's conclusion—that the Department's focus on creative writing as a means of bringing the Department to national attention and of turning young women into creative writers (as opposed to making them into "*rhetorically savvy* writers of prose and criticism") failed in the long run to be a sustainable

narrative for the Woman's College, which became the coeducational University of North Carolina, Greensboro, in 1964 (190).

The final chapter of this book explores the debate over whether the Woman's College should continue as a single-sex institution, in the context of the growing UNC system and its relationship to state politics. Ritter urges other WPAs to dig into the history of their own institutions, to scour the archives, conduct oral histories on the institutions, and begin to document the history of writing instruction and of literacy at a host of colleges and universities—and particularly at smaller public schools, through which we might “augment, advance, or otherwise rearticulate the trajectory of our collective and disparate composing histories in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (193). Such work, Ritter argues early on in this volume, could “lead to a new understanding of local archival research as not only cataloguing the past, but also troubling and resituating the present for writing programs within all institutional types” (18).

These are ambitious and worthy goals. Fortunately for the field of composition studies, Kelly Ritter has provided a blueprint for others to follow and produced a gripping narrative in all its twists and turns and counter-turns, along the way.

About the Author

Andrea Abernethy Lunsford is the Louise Hewlett Nixon Professor of English, Emerita and Bass Fellow in Undergraduate Education at Stanford University. The Director of Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric from 2000 through 2011, she has designed and taught undergraduate and graduate courses in writing history and theory, rhetoric, literacy studies, and women's writing and is the editor, author or co-author of twenty books and numerous essays. A member of the Bread Loaf School of English faculty since 1990, she is currently at work on *The Norton Anthology of Rhetoric and Writing* and *Writing Lives*, a longitudinal study of student writing and writers.