

Biography Vol. 16, No. 3

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Remarks on the Occasion of the Publication of *Called From Within: Early Women Lawyers of Hawaii* March 12, 1993

I am delighted to be here at the celebration of your great biographical project, and delighted, too, that Mari Matsuda invited me to have some small part in it by writing the Foreword. What you have done here--collecting and preserving the stories of pioneer women lawyers--needs doing in all the states. Women in this most masculine of the professions long for models and it seems quite clear now that we must not only make the history but must write it as well.

The job of the biographer--the nature of the work--has been on my mind a lot in the last few months because of my 15 minutes of Warhol-like fame at the end of January this year. Late one Thursday night, Zoe Baird withdrew her name as the nominee for attorney general. Shortly thereafter, a short list was leaked of potential nominees for the job. My name was on that list, and over the slow news weekend, I had dozens of media calls.

I developed two themes in my responses--one was the effort to push other women and the other was to get my biographical subject, Clara Shortridge Foltz, mentioned in the stories.

Foltz, as I hope everyone here knows (since she appears in your book's introduction), was the first woman lawyer on the Pacific Coast. My main problem in writing about her is that her papers are lost or destroyed. Thus, I'm always eager to get her name out, linked with mine in case someone might come forward with some information.

I also intended when I was talking to the media to use the fact that I

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was writing a biography as a sort of metaphor for the place I am in life and how being the first woman attorney general doesn't exactly fit into it. But, as you might imagine, the story in many newspapers became greatly simplified: Stanford professor says: "I can't be first woman AG because I have to write a book."

When this story appeared on the first page of one local paper that Sunday, a friend in the English Department called to say: "Listen, I'll write your biography for you if you will be attorney general for me."

Even though I felt a little foolish at how it all got translated, I had to laugh at the column in the San Francisco Chronicle where Jon Carroll wrote:

I think it's a swell idea for a woman to be the next attorney general: I am puzzled by the number of women who, sharing my opinion, nevertheless turn down the job.

Perhaps the most bewildering is Stanford Professor Barbara Allen Babcock, who said she would reject any offer because she was "committed to finishing a biography of Clara Shortridge Foltz."

What? Is this the New Commitment we hear so much about? Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for Clara Shortridge Foltz?

At any rate, one result of this brush with great fame was that I began to think more and more about how I own the story of Clara Foltz. How her story is in my hands, and the truth that will be known about her is what I say it is.

This is an experience that all the collaborators on this book have shared, I know. Perhaps you have also felt as I do how much the story of your subject is in some profound sense your own story. This happens partly because in writing biography you immerse yourself in the times, learn as much about the people your subject knew and what was happening as possible. As you live with her, come to use her to interpret events, make decisions, she becomes a reference point and a sort of vegetable love grows between you.

And in this relationship of biographer and subject is also the blurring of biography and autobiography. There comes a time, around 50 seems to hit a surprising number of people I know, when one develops a terrible sense of mortality that could be disabling. One arguably sane approach to this feeling that life is slipping through one's fingers is to try to capture it in print: to write an autobiography.

But the trouble with this is that most of us have neither the lives nor the ability to translate our own experience into universals (or even

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make it intelligible to ourselves, for that matter). So the answer is: choose a subject and offer your experience through that writing. All biographers are, in some sense, "doing" autobiography in the very choice of the subject, in the arrangement of material and in what one finds important in the interpretations offered.

A few years ago, NY Times Book Review editor James Atlas wrote about how biographers choose their subjects, on the affinity that is the basis of choice. Thus, white men and African Americans choose subjects like themselves, women write about women, gays write about gays, geography sometimes enters in. And then, Atlas concludes:

The intimacy that develops between subject and biographer is like no other; it's a collaboration between two sensibilities bent on defying the sentence of oblivion imposed on us all. As an act of remembrance, biography accomplishes what other, more transient forms of memorial never can: the preservation of a vanished life. It endures as a monument to the tenacity of the biographer--burrowing, gathering, digging, retrieving--and to the infinite complexity of the subject. By dwelling on a single existence, biography illustrates our human variety.

But the development of this partnership depends on finding the right subject, the one that induces biographical obsession. I join with all of you in celebrating your joinder of subjects and writers, and in celebrating the lives written here, which in this collected form only multiply the lessons in human variety that we learn from biography.