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THE PERSONAL AND THE HISTORIAN

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Gerda Lerner. *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002. 377 pp. Illustrations. \$34.50.

Robert R. Rosenstone. *The Man Who Swam into History*. 1stBooks Library, 2002. 280 pp. \$29.45 (cloth); \$15.95 (paper).

When I was an undergraduate in the 1980s most of my friends wanted to write novels, or at least hang out with novelists. Few of us ever wrote much fiction or met many "real" writers. We drifted off to law school, families businesses, and graduate studies. But we still admired the novel—the grand novel constructed on a wide canvass, the "great American novel." These days it seems like everyone wants to write a memoir. They want to talk about themselves, their parents, and their deepest anxieties. And now historians have joined the trend, mining the personal instead of the archives.

Last year, Gerda Lerner, a true pioneer in women's history, and Robert Rosenstone, a leading student of the American left and a keen observer of the connections between film and history, published memoirs. These are not, like C. Vann Woodward's *Looking Back* (1986), intellectual biographies or conversations with critics. Lerner and Rosenstone do not talk in their books about historiography or the debates swirling around their written work. More than anything, these are personal stories, even Lerner's, which she calls a "political autobiography." To be sure, they discuss big-P politics and personal political beliefs. But these are also intimate narratives, stories of mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. They talk about pain, longing, love, guilt, warm bodies, and wet kisses. They are explorations of self first, and history second.

Before going on and in the interests of full disclosure, a personal note of my own. I don't know Gerda Lerner. We have never met. But I have read, learned from, and debated her books—trailblazing books like *The Grimke Sisters of South Carolina* (1967), and *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986). I have heard her give public lectures and I have heard people describe her as personally fierce and stern. Lerner's combativeness did, in fact, come out in these public performances as she forcefully defended her positions and battled with critics from the audiences. But again I don't know her. I do know Robert Rosenstone.

I taught with him at the California Institute of Technology for two years. We ate together, put on a conference, and went to the movies. I bought a copy of his John Reed biography for my mother and regularly assign his essays on film to my classes. Last December, I sent Rosenstone a holiday card with a picture of my children on it. Obviously these experiences shaped how I read and thought about these memoirs.

Back to the books. Lerner and Rosenstone's stories follow remarkably similar plotlines. Both tell variations on the theme of the traditional immigrant tale. These are stories that move from the old world to flight to redemption in the new world. In a sense, each author attempts to finish the journey by writing themselves and their families into America.

Both books open in Jewish homes in Europe. Rosenstone's family came from Russian and Romanian shtetls. They scratched out meager livings against backdrops of rural poverty and anti-Semitism. Lerner grew up in the more urbane, cosmopolitan world of post-World War I Vienna. Raised in a comfortably bourgeois family, she lived in an apartment with Persian rugs and a grand piano, attended elite schools, and was attended to by a governess. But all was not what it seemed. Her parent's marriage fell apart quickly. While they stayed together in the same apartment, they lived separate lives. Her father served as a model of bourgeois respectability keeping up the appropriate appearances, dressing right, working hard in a white-collar job, and providing for the family. Lerner's mother yearned to paint and talk politics but she couldn't find a comfortable space for herself in the narrow gender confines of her day.¹

Dislocations launch the second acts in both stories. "There is a man," Rosenstone writes, "who comes swimming into history." This is the way he begins his tale of his grandfather's exodus from Romania. The only way out of that haunted land was to swim across the Pruth River. Did it really happen? We never know. But that's the story Rosenstone tells. From there his grandfather moved across Europe and eventually ended up in Montreal. His family made it there—they wore tailored suits and matching hats, ate dinners out, went to afternoon matinees, and even kept mistresses. This immigrant success story has a double twist—twists that Rosenstone relishes recounting. His family made their money running numbers. At the same time, they identified with the political left. These red racketeers marry, have children (one of them Rabin Rosenstone, a character in the story), and do all the things families do in Barry Levenson movies. They feud, argue, yell, and talk about each other behind their backs. Mostly they love each other. This deep commitment is always there, and this warm, even fuzzy, feeling gives Rosenstone's memoir a sweet, tender, nostalgic, slightly make-believe touch.

Just as the family settled into a comfortable middle-class existence in Montreal, Rabin's rather mercurial father decided to give up his underworld

life and move to California, to that sun-soaked Eden at the end of the continent. There they will remake themselves into respectable Americans. And that they do, although Rabin yearns for—maybe even invents—the family's more romantic, cinematic life left behind in Montreal.

Lerner's story covers some of the same ground without the swimming. But her story is a sadder, more dramatic, more remarkable, and anxious journey. There is little room in this tale for the mythical, the magical, or the humorous. History is too cruel and burdensome for that. Lerner learned the art of rebellion, she writes, at the dining room table defying her parents. When fascism reared its hideous head in her teen years, she went straight to resistance meetings. Not long after, the authorities hauled her and her mother in, not because of their politics, because they were Jewish. (It didn't matter that they were secular Jews.) Eventually she got out of jail and with the help of her lover and his family, she escaped to New York City. But this getaway comes at a cost. Lerner agonized about her family left behind in a Europe swallowed up by marching soldiers. She suffered in her strange new land from a form of survivor's guilt. Full of worry, she filled out endless immigration forms to get her father, mother, and younger sister out of Europe. As she did, their lives continued; they fell in love, worked, found new loves, and grew weary and old. On other fronts, she fought to hold her crumbling marriage together and make a living amidst the bleakness of the Depression.

Love brings Lerner a measure of redemption. Just as her first marriage collapsed, she met writer-director Carl Lerner and was soothed by his kindness and invigorated by his intensity. Together they immersed themselves in left-wing politics and art and into that grand project to, paraphrasing Langston Hughes, make America be America. They, too, headed west to California. This is where Carl found work in the movies, their daughter was born (a son comes later), and Lerner discovered her voice as a writer. Still rebellious, she became a grassroots activist organizing women across the color line. But it was also the 1950s and the Hollywood Red Scare hovered over Carl and Gerda, reminding her of her dreadful teenage encounters with fascism in Vienna. By this time, both belonged to the Communist Party, although, as Lerner shows, they were not dupes of Moscow, rather they were dedicated to the most democratic principles of equality and justice. Between changing diapers and attending union meetings, Lerner wrote. It became her salvation. ("I am a creative writer," she announces in the prologue [p. 3].) She published a few short stories and completed a novel that she never sold. Worn down by suspicious minds, the Lerner family returned to New York. More political work, more making America accountable, followed in Gotham. Through their creative talents, they supported the emerging civil rights movement. And then the story ends with Gerda going to graduate school in history. This represents another act of redemption.

History is heavy in Lerner's narrative. Several times, she admits that she is a serious person, and she has written, not surprisingly, a weighty book—literally it weighs a lot. Big events, major historic events, drive the story. Parts of the memoir, in fact, read like a history lesson. Some passages even footnote secondary sources; a few others sound like sections from a textbook with the third-person narrator taking over from the first person. Lerner's *Fireweed* is, then, a didactic book. There is much to learn here about Austria during the 1930s, United States immigration policy, the Depression, war, the Cold War, Hollywood unions, the Communist Party, and the psychic costs of repression and exile. To say this in a different way, there is more history, more facts, and more stuff for teachers to fit into survey classes in Lerner's book than Rosenstone's. Through her own stirring life stories, she provides a fresh and personal perspective on familiar events. Some might call this microhistory, but it isn't. Lerner's memoir is macro-history wrapped up in the personal—both on the surface and between the lines.²

Rosenstone, on the other hand, has written microhistory, but it is more and less than that. This is a book from another place. There is nothing like it. It has no single, stable narrator. Different characters pick up fragments of the story at different moments, fitting them together with new details that build on and contradict other accounts. And the stories he so artfully tells—and a lot of them are almost lyrical—are really myths. They are the bits of family lore blown up and pieced together and glued into tales that combine Catskills shtick with Phillip Roth pathos. History intervenes in funny, moving, beautiful, nearly cinematic ways. (Not only does Rosenstone write about film, he savors the movies, and finds in them a model, it seems, for his own prose.) Rosenstone's female characters are perhaps his most vividly drawn. They cook, clean, endure, dream, and complain. Along the way, they show the constraints and possibilities of gender roles in the middle of the last century. The Second World War, that cataclysmic event, that textbook turning point, is experienced in the smallest ways, or perhaps in the most typically idiosyncratic ways. Helped by his father's underworld connections, Rabin ate thick steaks, went to the movies, and rode around town in a car with a full tank of gas and new tires despite wartime shortages and rationing. A relative's Victory Garden yields puny tomato plants and cucumbers that never bloom and little else to help the allied cause. Like Lerner, Rosenstone participates in the civil rights struggle. "Rabin," Rosenstone writes, "likes Jackie Robinson." "Of course," he continues, "he was supposed to like him. . . . Robinson was the first Negro—Rabin knew how to say the word properly, emphasizing the vowels in the first syllable as if the word contained three or four e's—to play professional baseball. It was not so long ago that Jews were kept from doing things too, not so much baseball, but other things, so we had to cheer for Jackie Robinson because it was almost the same as cheering for ourselves" (p. 143).

Rosenstone might be a master of the small, wonderfully detailed scene, but he is, at the same time, after something bigger in *The Man Who Swam into History*—and that is history itself. What interests him, he says in the introduction, is how he fits into history. This is a mid-life attempt (maybe a moment of mid-career frustration with the history business—do I know this from talking to him?) to find his place in the past and present. But this book, like Lerner's, has its didactic side. Rosenstone insists on the centrality of stories, real and invented. Personal stories of sorrow and love, pain and relief, dreams and disappointments, he argues and then demonstrates, are who we are. They are how we create meaning and make the past a part—an intimate, soul-deep part—of us. On page after page of this elegant memoir, Rosenstone suggests that there is nothing so real as stories, the ones we come to believe and the ones we doubt, and the interplay—dance really—between stories—personal ones and public ones, official accounts and family legends—is history.

One last, possibly troubling, note of comparison. Both Lerner and Rosenstone end their books in the same place. They stop their narratives at the door to graduate school. Both of these noted scholars close their memoirs before they become historians. What are they saying? Are they saying that there is no relationship between the personal and the historical? Probably not. (I know that Rosenstone doesn't think so.) But, then, are they saying, at least implicitly, that being a historian means killing the writer? Does the writer exist only in another frame, another life even? Let's hope not.

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1. Her mother Ilona Gronstein's paintings—done during her wartime exile in the South of France—have recently been shown in several important European galleries and have earned critical acclaim.

2. For a nice riff on microhistory, see Jill Lapore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88 (June 2001): 129–44.