



Composing Selves: Southern Women and Autobiography (Southern Literary Studies)

Peggy Whitman Prenshaw

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In *Composing Selves*, award-winning author Peggy Whitman Prenshaw provides the most comprehensive treatment of autobiographies by women in the American South. This long-anticipated addition to Prenshaw's study of southern literature spans the twentieth century as she provides an in-depth look at the life-writing of eighteen women authors.

Composing Selves travels the wide terrain of female life in the South, analyzing various issues that range from racial consciousness to the deflection of personal achievement. All of the authors presented came of age during the era Prenshaw refers to as the "late southern Victorian period," which began in 1861 and ended in the 1930s. Belle Kearney's *A Slaveholder's Daughter* (1900) with Elizabeth Spencer's *Landscapes of the Heart* and Ellen Douglas's *Truth: Four Stories I Am Finally Old Enough to Tell* (both published in 1998) chronologically bookend Prenshaw's survey.

She includes Ellen Glasgow's *The Woman Within*, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *Cross Creek*, Bernice Kelly Harris's *Southern Savory*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*. The book also examines Katharine DuPre Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner* and Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*.

In addition to exploring multiple themes, Prenshaw considers a number of types of autobiographies, such as Helen Keller's classic *The Story of My Life* and Anne Walter Fearn's *My Days of Strength*. She treats narratives of marital identity, as in Mary Hamilton's *Trials of the Earth*, and calls attention to works by women who devoted their lives to social and political movements, like Virginia Durr's *Outside the Magic Circle*.

Drawing on many notable authors and on Prenshaw's own life of scholarship, *Composing Selves* provides an invaluable contribution to the study of southern literature, autobiography, and the work of southern women writers.

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