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**Review of *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of
Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* By Elizabeth Hampsten**

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Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910.
By Elizabeth Hampsten. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. Notes. xiii + 242 pp. \$22.50.

Hampsten has written a rich, provocative book on the private writings of midwestern women between 1880 and 1910. As she points out, there has been a long tradition of studying working-class male authors but little interest in working-class women writers. To recapture women's consciousness, Hampsten suggests, one must do more than approach the sources as if they were written by men. Not only the content but also the omissions, the form, and the style of women's writings are significant.

The structure and style of working-class diaries and letters bear few resemblances to what was considered "good writing" by contemporaries. Hampsten shows that nineteenth-century school children were advised to use figurative, complex language and to generalize. Good writing was to differ from conversation, serving as a mark of middle-class status or, at least, of middle-class aspirations. Indeed, as one school book bluntly told its readers, "Not to use correct and elegant English is to plod" (p. 52).

In these terms, the women whom Hampsten studies were plodders whose writing clearly revealed their working-class status. The spare, literal, immediate diaries and letters have character. The writers described the world close to them without adjectives, adverbs, or metaphors. They seldom reflected about or generalized from their experiences. They consistently ignored the topics about which men wrote and those about which contemporary readers are curious. Amy Cory, a Methodist clergyman's

wife, kept a journal in which she never referred to money nor to the conversations she had with the callers she so faithfully noted, in which she catalogued her husband's departures from home but not what he did when he was at home. Her diary was typical. Rarely did the women, even those living in North Dakota during its settlement period, describe their physical surroundings.

Although the omissions can be frustrating, the writing is not tedious, mindless, or uninformative. The women took their writing seriously. Letter writers knew they must interest family and friends if they were to elicit responses. Their style was "the spare, plain style" of conversation (p. 95). They conveyed their sense of the dramatic by piling concrete detail upon concrete detail. "This writing," Hampsten concludes, "signals intensity of experience by quantity" (p. 21). The frequent repetitions were an effort by their writers to create a literary pattern, to master both their material and their lives. The women were often remarkably revealing. They were candid and explicit about sex, illness, and death, which they saw as interconnected. They made clear who was important to them. Husbands were omitted or blurred because they were not central to the women's lives. Amy Cory's descriptions of tensions between her children and husband hinted at the marital difficulties suggested by her omissions. Women neglected to describe the outside world because their place was not the out-of-doors but the home. When they did confront their outer world, it was as if they were indoors looking out.

Hampsten's analysis of women's private writings supports her argument that we must take these works seriously. The parallels she draws between them and the work of writers like Willa Cather and Tillie Olsen reinforce her categories of analysis. Certainly one of Hampsten's major contributions is the literary framework she provides for understanding and appreciating working-class women's writings.

There are a few problems with the book. Although Hampsten explains that she wanted to study whole collections, she gives little

information about the nature of the collections. How many manuscripts did she read and how did she select her examples? One must take on faith that her sources are representative. It would be helpful to have some discussion of the differences between letters, which were written for others to read, and journals, which were not. Finally, Hampsten loses focus when she abandons the thematic structure of the first few chapters to consider individual manuscript collections in detail. But these observations are not major criticisms. This is an important book, one that should be very helpful to anyone using primary sources written by women.

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