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Review of *Writing Her Own Life: Imogene Welch, Western Rural Schoolteacher* By Mary Clearman Blew

Linda Karell

Montana State University, linda.karell@msu.montana.edu

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Writing Her Own Life: Imogene Welch, Western Rural Schoolteacher. By Mary Clearman Blew. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. ix + 258 pp. Photographs, notes. \$29.95.

In the concluding pages of Mary Clearman Blew's newest contribution to western literature, she describes driving with her daughter to Tenino, Washington, where her Aunt Imogene taught school during World War II. The road they travel makes Blew feel "unsettled," perhaps because "it's not taking me where I expected to be." Readers familiar with Blew's earlier memoirs, *All But the Waltz* (1991) and *Balsamroot* (1994), are likely to find themselves similarly unsettled as they traverse territory both eerily familiar and strangely unexpected. While *All But the Waltz* and *Balsamroot* are haunting and sometimes starkly painful explorations of family resentments and resiliencies, they are also elegant masterpieces of courageous writing. *Writing Her Own Life* is a still riskier book, for while it sets out to be a memoir of Imogene's life, "the recovered artifacts of memory, voices, documents, and scribbled notations, fetched up from the dark and hammered together into a shape as exact and sturdy" as possible, it is also Blew's meditation on the risks of such an attempt, on the disconcerting process of writing in a genre that is neither wholly factual nor quite fictional. The sometimes awkward result is Blew's best commentary yet on the anguish and rewards of writing creative nonfiction—writing, in other words, about what is closest to one's heart.

With *Writing Her Own Life*, Blew, a recent winner of the Western Literature Association's Distinguished Achievement Award, focuses on Imogene's diary entries for 1940-1945, years when she transitioned between teaching in rural Montana and her eventual life in Washington. Perhaps because it is a constant backdrop, the dramatic historical events of World War II receive little attention in Imogene's diary, while we learn much about the trivia of daily life: the difficulty of getting and keeping a school, the frustrations of living with

roommates, and the slow growing pleasures of an independent life, of sugar rationing and a doomed struggle to lose weight, of illnesses and accidents. As Blew points out, the details give us a different view of time, one “that not only connects the dots of local history but transcends history.”

Where the memoir sometimes jars is in the tension Blew stages between the fiction writer and the writer of creative nonfiction, as both personas struggle to understand what to include, what to invent, what to bolster, what to explain. The memoir’s two endings remind us that to be unsettled in our reading is productive and even poignant; by refusing a single, too-pat conclusion, Blew insists that this life—and whatever lessons it holds for her, for us—be read complexly, with attention to the ways we all collaborate in its creation and meaning.

LINDA K. KARELL
Department of English
Montana State University