BOOK REVIEWS

Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities. By Laura Browder. Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 2000. 312 pages.

In October 1991 historian Dan Carter published an article in the *New York Times* revealing that Forrest Carter, author of the best-selling memoir *The Education of Little Tree*, had misrepresented himself as a Native American. When it became publicly known that "Forrest Carter" was the pseudonym adopted by Asa Carter, a one-time member of the Ku Klux Klan and a spokesperson for the anti-integration American States Rights Association, journalists across North America joined Dan Carter in asking "What does it tell us that we are so easily deceived?" (Browder 2). In *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, Laura Browder pursues this and other questions concerned with the performance and reception of ethnic and racial identities in the US.

After placing the development of a genre that she calls "ethnic impersonator autobiographies" within the context of a long tradition of American self-fashioning, Browder argues that the American ethnic impersonator autobiography was born in the 1830s with the appearance of slave narratives authored by white abolitionists who did not trust slaves tell their own stories. Drawing largely on Mattie Griffiths' *The Autobiography of a Female Slave*, Chapter 1 shows how "the collaborative creation by abolitionists and former slaves of a fixed autobiographical genre ... led to the development of impostor fugitive slaves—and to abolitionist anxiety about being bilked by these impersonators" (272).

Chapters 2 and 3 are less satisfying. In Chapter 2, Browder's argument that theatre functioned as an important site for negotiating shifting relations between ethnic groups in the latter half of the nineteenth century is well-founded, but her brief analysis of the spectacularization of race that was central to blackface minstrelsy and Wild West shows lacks the rigour and originality evident in other parts of the text. And, while Browder's reading of Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona* in Chapter 3 is broadly suggestive of the role which ethnic instability has played in the American national imaginary, little continuity is established in the jump from abolitionist authored "slave narratives" to racial spectacles and then to fictional representations of ethnic self-fashioning. As a result, Browder's argument is often difficult to follow.

Chapters 4 through 7 are largely concerned with a range of twentieth-century "impersonator" autobiographies written by "Indian wannabes," immigrants who misrepresented their ethnic backgrounds, and Anglo-Americans who temporarily "became" Black or Chicano. This is engaging material and it is a pleasure to read. In Chapter 4, Browder returns to Asa Carter, comparing him with earlier "Indian autobiographers" James P. Beckwourth and Sylvester Long Lance. Her discussion of their autobiographies focuses on the extent to which each of them exploited prevailing stereotypes about Indianness in their construction of Indian identities. In Chapter 5 Browder reads Elizabeth Stern's 1926 autobiography *I Am a Woman—And a Jew* alongside a 1988 memoir written by Stern's son, in which he reveals that his mother's claims to be the Prussian-born daughter of rabbi Aaron Levin were misleading. Although Elizabeth Stern was placed with the Levins as a foster child when she was seven, she was born in Pittsburgh to a Welsh Baptist mother and a German Lutheran father. Although Browder attempts to avoid inserting Stern within the "trap of binary racial definitions" by arguing that Stern simply chose one of the "identities available to her" (129, 166), one wonders if her subsequent contention that Stern's identification as Jewish did not "leave her free to be herself" is at odds with her attempt to open up a critical conversation on the de/stabilization of racial identities (170).

In Chapter 7 Browder considers key texts in the literary tradition that she calls "post-World War II blackface" (225). Unfortunately, Browder's argument that White Americans failed to hear the voices of Black Americans, but listened instead to other Whites "who had made the journey into blackness" (274) is compromised by her failure to devote sufficient attention to the reception of the texts in question. That said, Browder begins Chapter 8 by commenting on the critical reception of *Famous All Over Town*, the prize-winning 1983 novel by Daniel James, an Anglo-American screenwriter who invented a new literary identity for himself when his socialist politics caused him to be pronounced un-American by a fiat of Congress. Browder's argument that critics were eager to see the novel "as emblematic of the Chicano experience" (236) raises important questions about what it is that we, as readers, ask and fail to ask of ethnic literature. However, Browder's characterization of *Famous All Over Town* as a "triumph of disguise" and an act of "self-liberation" does not adequately address those questions (268). Thus, while it may be true that *Famous All Over Town* "defies our expectations" and "teaches us their futility" (269), it is also true that Browder's *Slippery Characters* only occasionally lives up to the author's expectation that the study of ethnic impersonator autobiography will "challenge received ideas" about the intersection of ethnic, racial, and national identities (6).

Carrie Dawson Dalhousie University

Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold. By Carolyn G. Heilbrun. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999. viii, 112 pages.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun's *Women's Lives* is composed of the four Alexander lectures she delivered at the University of Toronto in 1997. The University of Toronto Press summary and introduction to Heilbrun's lectures (i–ii) lists her as part of "a line of distinguished scholarly work with such previous lecturers as Walter Ong, Robertson Davies, and Northrop Frye," but then goes on to suggest that "Heilbrun, within this distinguished genealogy, reworks the very notion of the line, creating a new pattern of writing and approaching literary culture."

Heilbrun does challenge the notion of linearity as a model of successful literature, invoking in her second chapter, "The Evolution of the Female Memoir," Susan Winnett's argument in an article on "Women, Men, Narrative, and the Principles of Pleasure," which asks "Is there ... always the same 'master plot' imitating linear male sexuality, or do some narratives reflect female sexual experience?" (Heilbrun 33). Heilbrun says that "Women may be said to have neither a path nor a linear rise and fall; rather, their sexual experience may be defined as a series of circles, a rhythm that may appear to men, and to those of us taught to think like men, unfamiliar, repetitive, and declining to proceed to a single, ordained finale" (34). In her rhetoric in these lectures, Heilbrun says, she herself resists the male, linear pattern, and returns to some points in a seemingly repetitive but in fact intentionally circular way.

After explaining her own lecturing style, she draws attention to a number of moments when she creates circular patterns, such as when she reminds readers in Chapter Three, "Embracing the Paradox," that she has already discussed Cathy Davidson's memoir *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* in the first lecture (71). But while asserting the validity of the circular narrative, Heilbrun simultaneously undermines her own argument by placing these intentional repetitions in parentheses, thus marginalizing the very method she seeks to defend. For example, she says in another parenthetical argument on the next page, "(Let me pause here to make a quite irrelevant and yet to me significant point about the liminality of current professional female nomenclature ...)," and she then discusses the fact that many women academics are known by a married name that often belongs to a former husband. She argues that women should instead claim a name that will be their own for their entire professional and personal lives. This discussion of names is surely not incidental or unnecessarily repetitive in a chapter on the formation of women's identities. The parentheses may be intentional, but to claim that an issue she feels strongly about is "quite irrelevant" detracts from Heilbrun's defence of digression, repetition, and circularity as valid forms of female narrative.

Women's Lives circles through, among other things, questions of women's beauty or relative lack of it in relation to their intellectual and artistic success, women's lived experience of dissent from convention and the challenge of writing about that experience, the tensions between mothers and daughters over what constitutes a useful and fulfilled life, and the necessity of continuing the struggle to recognize and value women's lives and potential. Heilbrun writes clearly and passionately of the challenges women confront daily through their lives, and she urges readers to celebrate the idea that women are on the threshold of possibilities. The condition of liminality, she writes, is a "threshold experience" that offers choices and challenges: "to be in a state of liminality is to be poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another. But the most salient sign of liminality is its unsteadiness, its lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing" (3). *Women's Lives* celebrates that state of liminality as possessing a transformative power for the direction of women's lives. What the book doesn't do, however, is talk much about the consequences of the choices women eventually must and do make.

Liminality may be liberating, but it is not eternal. It can indeed be exciting and energizing to imagine the power to make new choices, to create new patterns, and to live in a different way, but ultimately those choices, patterns, and lives are made, and then women have to live with them. Heilbrun says that "the place of feminism, and women within it ... is a place that is amidst, among, atwixt, rooted nowhere but in the realm of questioning, experiment, and adventure, and as it questions everything, it uses what it finds befitting" (98). But how do women determine what is befitting? Heilbrun doesn't address this question, and at this point she avoids circling back to her first and most prominent example of a woman who created her own unconventional life and thus flourished as an artist—George Eliot, who with her well-known belief in the peremptory and absolute nature of moral duty would be unlikely to sympathize with a way of life that involves experiment without context or standards. Heilbrun argues that "in the higher reaches of academic feminist theory, the state of necessary in-betweenness is understood and valued" (98), which may be true, but academic feminism as Heilbrun outlines it nevertheless has a specific, decided, even linear goal: "Feminism, in literature as in life, has either moved women, or tried to move them, from the margins closer to the centre of human experience and possibility or has made evident their absence from that centre" (3).

Liminality and circularity are useful and exciting, sites of tensions, debate, and the opening up of possibility, but they are not ends in themselves. Heilbrun's argument for the value of women's liminal condition is important and interesting, but just as she undermines the value of circularity in her lectures by deriding some of her own points as irrelevant or as mere digressions, her case for the central importance of liminality in women's lives eclipses the consequences of the choices women make as a result of the very freedom that liminality gives them. These consequences are hinted at in the last paragraph of the book, where, after suggesting that the conventional place of women "will always be attractive to those who would rather be safe than sorry," Heilbrun concludes that "the threshold, on the contrary, is the place where as women and as creators of literature, we write our own lines and, eventually, our own plays" (102). Following the conventional path of women's lives means rehearsing a drama others have acted before us; living on the threshold of experience means improvising and revising action, practising lines and writing new ones. The view from the threshold, however, is of the plays women will write, no longer hovering at the margin or the threshold in a condition of uncertainty and obscurity, but central to fully lived human life. The threshold is a valuable intermediate step, a place where women can practise, but it is not the place where they will write their own plays. Although Heilbrun doesn't say this explicitly, she implies that women won't live liminal lives at the threshold forever, because after rehearsing and improvising, they will need to move to writing from the centre, if possible. This book needs a sequel.

Sarah Emsley Dalhousie University

Development as Freedom. By Amartya Sen. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. xvi, 366 pages. $41.50, $22.50 paper.

Development as Freedom is the first book published by Amartya Sen since he won the Nobel Prize for economics in 1998. It contains the fullest statement of his theory regarding which basic moral principles will, if instantiated in a developing society, serve to lead it to become a developed and just society. It is, then, a theory of justice for those working to transform Third World societies into fully developed, just, democratic ones. Sen's *capabilities approach*, which he developed with Martha Nussbaum, holds that a just society is one that, insofar as is possible given its circumstances, provides each of its members with those things needed for him or her to be capable of leading a fully functioning life, with an equal capability to lead a life where that individual can perform all the tasks typical of a healthy adult human.

Unfortunately, Sen never faces the main challenge faced by all theories of justice that hold that the grounds for justice reside in some feature of humans or their circumstances which they themselves may not value. Any such theory faces the inevitable puzzle: how does justice get to be a virtue, something worth having, in those circumstances where people don't actually value it? This is not to say that questions of this sort cannot be answered; it is just to complain that (in this work) Sen does not even hint at how he might answer it. But this worry will seem unimportant to most of Sen's readers who, perfectly reasonably, think that having the opportunities and abilities to exercise one's potential to the fullest is one of the conditions which makes life worth living. And so, since the just society, as understood by Sen, seeks to accomplish this, most will be interested in knowing what such a society looks like and how we might go about the task of constructing such societies.

It is on these issues that Sen—whose breadth of knowledge of economic theory, applied economics, the workings of democracy, education systems, corruption, human rights and their abuses, health and nutrition, and gender issues is truly astounding—is at his best. He argues convincingly that a just society, one which provides its members with the sorts of positive freedoms he advocates, must have the following attributes: be democratic; have mechanisms to ensure widespread respect for human rights; provide basic education, health care, and welfare for its members; include a free and open market economy; and encourage and protect our natural capacities to treat others with respect and compassion. Along the way he effectively argues that the progress (or apparent progress) of those societies that lack some of these elements is either highly over rated or somewhat illusory. (He is particularly good in attacking the so-called "Asian values" justification for allowing developing societies to go through a period of authoritarianism prior to becoming human rights-respecting democracies, pointing out how harmful anti-democratic communitarian projects can be, showing that freedom matters quite a lot even to the very poor, and arguing that democracy is the best form of government for dealing with emergencies such as natural disasters or famine.) His moral defence of a robust and fairly free economic market is both powerful and plausible and will be (for those who know Sen's earlier work) the most striking feature of the book.

In sum, this is an excellent interdisciplinary book. It paints an attractive picture of what the impoverished and unjust societies of this world could become and has many insightful things to say about how actually to go about creating the sorts of societies most of us would like to see cover all parts of this planet. If you can read but one book on international development, this would be a very good choice. (And if you do read it, don't skip the endnotes, many of which are full of interesting facts about a wide variety of matters.)

Sheldon Wein — Saint Mary's University

A.J. Ayer: A Life. By Ben Rogers. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1999. 402 pages. $49.95.

You would not want to read biographies of most famous philosophers. Their ideas are usually too complicated for the short-form treatment necessary in a life story. And they are rarely interesting people. A critical reviewer of Quine's autobiography complained that one should not write an autobiography unless one had had a *life*. But A.J. Ayer's main ideas are simple enough for summary, and he had a spectacularly wild and interesting life. Unfortunately, Ayer's autobiography is reticent about his ideas and the juicier bits of his life, and is just as dull as Quine's. But Ben Rogers' new biography of Ayer is not dull at all. Rogers combines a good philosophy education with a journalist's skill in graceful concise explanation, and he provides excellent synopses of Ayer's ideas. And he has gone far beyond the little Ayer revealed about his own life, interviewing Ayer's friends and relations, exhaustively researching all sorts of connections. The result is a really good story.

Ayer's hugely famous book, the bible of Logical Positivism, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), contained nothing original; all of Ayer's ideas came either from Bertrand Russell or from the Vienna Circle. Almost nobody accepted all the positions in the book. Immediately after its publication Ayer himself began a long process of gradual amendment and retraction, and said during the 1970s that the book's "most important defect was that nearly all of it was false" (Rogers, 337). Nevertheless, it was the best-selling and most influential English-language philosophy book of the century. Published when Ayer was only twenty-six, it was a work of youth: enthusiastic, brash, revolutionary. It condemned most existing philosophy (including, notoriously, all of ethics) as literal nonsense, and claimed to have solved all remaining philosophical problems. The old philosophical guard in England was scandalized and offended, and there was almost universal disdain on the Continent ("Ayer est un con," said J.-P. Sartre). But decades of young anglophone philosophers have been enthralled. You can't find any Logical Positivists any more, but Ayer's book has permanently and profoundly altered philosophy as practised in the English-speaking world.

Ayer was as radical and exuberant in his personal life as he was philosophically. He was married four times (twice to the same woman), but his "open" marriages almost never interfered with his constant womanizing. He loved to dance and to drink, and had an enormous international circle of friends—academics, artists, writers and celebrities. A left-liberal, in the tradition of his friend Bertrand Russell, he ran for office (unsuccessfully) for the Labour Party, and was a leading social/political qvetch in Britain for decades. He achieved celebrity as a TV chatterer, and was certainly the only academic philosopher/sports commentator in history.

Rogers' biography is full of good anecdotes. Sample: Ayer, in his seventies, is at a fashionable party in a Manhattan apartment. An agitated woman says that her friend is being assaulted in the bedroom. Ayer investigates, and finds Mike Tyson forcing himself on the model Naomi Campbell. Ayer tells him to stop. Tyson: "Do you know who the fuck I am? I'm the heavyweight champion of the world." Ayer: "And I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic. We are both pre-eminent in our field; I suggest that we talk about this like rational men." They talk, and Naomi Campbell slips out.

Ayer's story is well worth telling, and Rogers has done a splendid job of it.

Robert M. Martin Dalhousie University

The Hungarians and Early Medieval Europe: An Introduction to Early Medieval Hungarian History. By András Róna-Tas, translated by N. Bodoczky. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999. xxii, 566 pages.

This is a major new work which synthesizes a vast range of scholarship, including the author's own research over four decades into the ethnography of central Asian peoples and historical linguistics. It is an extended translation of a work in Hungarian first published in 1996, and is offered to a European and North American readership not "as a scholarly monograph," but "to inform rather than argue." The standard of English is excellent. Grammatical mistakes are few, although a rare slip features in the sentence thanking the translator (xx)! English idiom is employed frequently, and occasionally unfortunately, for example in discussing archaeology: "New material is constantly emerging from the bowels of the earth ..." (116). Róna-Tas handles this new material expertly, as he does more traditional source material. His extensive introduction to "The Written Sources" ranges from Byzantine Greek to Hebrew, through Latin, Slavonic, Middle Iranian, Arabic, Persian, Syrian, Armenian, Georgian, Turkic, Tibetan and Chinese. It would be impossible to cover the latest research in every area Róna-Tas draws into the purview of "Early Hungarian History," and this is the book's principal weakness.

The author states in his introduction that he intends to establish the broader context of Magyar history, and suggests that this context is "contemporary global history." "Contemporary," however, is liberally interpreted, and the chronological introduction begins with a brief mention of the Pleistocene (2–2.5 million years ago), before plunging into the Holocene period (Lower to Upper, 10000–500 BC). "Global" is interpreted more conservatively, but still the reader is offered "A brief history of China." In total, the introduction runs to 168 pages. Much here is of interest, but most is buried beneath the dead weight of extraneous detail; for example, we are offered two pages on the glottochronological method in historical linguistics, only to be told in conclusion "no linguist today would use [it]." This tendency to record obsolete information undoubtedly stems from the author's professed desire that his "knowledge will find its way to textbooks and encyclopaedias" (xviii) and replace such obsolescence. In lieu of that event Róna-Tas has produced a work which stands awkwardly between textbook and mini-encyclopaedia.

Still, the book has great merits. Róna-Tas is at his best when dealing with ethnographical and linguistic data: he has spent years in the field in both Mongolia and among the Chuvash people of the Volga region.The insights of his early research on the Mongols allow Róna-Tas to make original and convincing suggestions on early Magyar modes of production. Previously no explanation could be found to correlate the Magyars' nomadism with the observation of a ninth-century Arabic author that the *Majgars* wintered in river valleys where arable land were plentiful. Róna-Tas suggests, by analogy with the twentieth-century Mongols, the Magyars sowed in the spring, moved on to the summer pastures to herd, and returned to reap in late autumn. They always plowed virgin soil, moving to a new river valley each year. As the Mongols put it: "the land also migrates." Furthermore, as befits a man who has written a book subtitled *Adventures in Historical Linguistics*, Róna-Tas offers a thorough, if fragmented, analysis of the role of language as source material. Countless observations persuade and inform, for example one finds on a single page the linguistic roots of the East European titles *zhupan*, *boyar*, and *ban*. Later, one learns that the Hungarian title, *királу*, "king," derives through Slavonic mediation (*kral*) from the name of Charlemagne; and more fancifully, that every American owes his designation to a brief fashion in northern Italy for a variant of the Hungarian name Emericus (from the German Henrik), hence Amerigo Vespucci.

Paul Stephenson University of Cork, Ireland