

Andrea Hollander Budy

*A Bright, Discerning Light**

An engaging memoir is more than the well-told story of a life. The skilled memoirist has a story to tell, yes, but in the telling she illuminates information uncovered during the process of writing. Illumination is key—illumination plus reflection. As she examines the past, she discovers patterns and begins to understand associations—a benefit of having lived long enough to accumulate a history and to peer down its well with a bright, discerning light that distinguishes certain events and connects them. Along the way, she readjusts and reorganizes her perceptions, including self-perception. In turn, we readers partake of such accounts in order to observe memoirists close-up, to witness the process. As we read, we empathize—and find ourselves measuring our own lives accordingly.

Each of the five memoirists examined in this review pinpoints sometimes ordinary, often discomfiting, circumstances and occurrences of her past, and reveals the ways they have come to define her.

The most memorable scene in Sandra Scofield's *Occasions of Sin*, which seeks mostly to be a memoir about Scofield's mother and their relationship, takes place when the author, a twelve-year-old eighth grader at a Catholic boarding school, is invited to the principal's residence to learn the fate of an essay she wrote for the high school diocesan contest. For weeks prior, Scofield had been urged by the principal, Sister Mary John (who had seen the girl's writings many times and knew she was capable of winning), to enter the contest even though she was younger than the rest of the entrants. But Scofield had stalled, uninspired—until, during a lecture by a visiting priest three days before the deadline, she was struck by an image, then an idea.

*An essay-review of

OCCASIONS OF SIN: A MEMOIR. By Sandra Scofield. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004. 256 pp. \$13.95.

SCRAPING BY IN THE BIG EIGHTIES. By Natalia Rachel Singer. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xii, 227 pp. \$24.95.

GRACE NOTES: THE WAKING OF A WOMAN'S VOICE. By Heidi Hart. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004. 230 pp. \$21.95.

WYOMING TRUCKS, TRUE LOVE, AND THE WEATHER CHANNEL: A WOMAN'S ADVENTURE. By Jeffe Kennedy. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. ix, 165 pp. \$23.95.

JUST BENEATH MY SKIN: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND SELF-DISCOVERY. By Patricia Foster. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. 177 pp. \$39.95. \$18.95, paper.

His very words—*window, stirring leaves*—made my heart pound. It was the same feeling that came over me when I knew I had to write. A scrap of poetry (sorry rhymes), a story (fat with sentiment), such things sometimes arrived like a letter to my door. There had been times I had feigned illness in order to bundle up on my bed and scribble through the school day. This was the first time, however, that the inspiration had been for an essay. Oh, I was a good student writer, and I had hardly ever seen a red mark on my papers, but academic compositions were dutiful displays demanded by adults and evaluated by the absence of errors. This was altogether new. This was an urgent need to *argue* something, and my excitement came from the sudden awareness that what I thought I had not thought before *and maybe no one else had either*. I did not yet have the concept of the muse; I thought God, in some mysterious way, had whispered in my ear.

As soon as she could that afternoon, Scofield penned her essay—the contest’s topic was vocations—about the recently canonized Maria Goretti, who at age eleven had died fending off the aggressive sexual advances of a neighboring farm boy. Scofield wrote that Maria Goretti’s vocation was martyrdom and that the eleven-year-old’s bravery rose from “her belief that she had been blessed with her violent fate” the way the young writer believed that her own mother was “*blessed with her afflictions*.”

Weeks later, in the principal’s residence, Sister Mary John tells Scofield that the judges didn’t believe she could have written the piece alone, that it was either plagiarized or written by someone else entirely. “But I wrote it the day of the retreat!” the girl says. “Sitting in the sophomore homeroom, waiting for supper. I wrote it by myself.”

The principal believes her. She tells Scofield that she has defended her against the judges’ suspicions, but it was too late: the other winners had already been notified, and there was nothing more the judges would do, except allow Scofield a “special commendation” and a ten-dollar savings stamp, the same monetary award as the first-place winner. (She never actually received the money.)

Exemplary of the rest of the memoir, this scene is well written—highly dramatic but balanced by retrospective insight. Scofield, an established novelist, knows her craft. The unfairness dealt her in the essay contest, as powerful as it is, she accepts as almost matter of fact, as the way of the world for someone who grew up mostly separated from her invalid mother and her broken family, someone who wanted only to be a salve that might heal.

Throughout 256 pages Scofield attempts to expose the story of her mother, Edith, who aspired to a religiously spiritual life that was simultaneously sexual and whose early death no one, especially her daughter, expected. In part the book explores a mystery: did Edith die of natural causes (renal failure) or by her own hand (two bottles of pills were missing from her bedside)? But the book is more than an investigation. As Scofield writes about her own emotional development and her sometimes complicated

and confusing relationship with her mother and family, she reveals, seemingly almost accidentally, the roots of her own writing and the power with which it sustained her. “Suddenly I realized how much my writing meant to me,” Scofield says after she leaves the principal’s residence. “It was from some place inside me, where I was not pretending to be smart or good or holy, where I simply *was*.”

This memoir is not without flaws, but they are relatively minor. The title is misleading, *Occasions of Sin* implying a subject matter that is only sporadically treated. Perhaps Scofield intended when she began the memoir that it would center on what others, and perhaps she herself, believed was her mother’s morally questionable behavior—and subsequently her own. But the book quickly becomes more an examination of the stresses Scofield herself endured because of her isolation.

Also, Scofield’s moves to and from various locales, including her mother’s home and the parochial boarding schools where she resided, are not always made clear. I kept wishing for a timeline. Neither does the writer satisfyingly explain why her loving grandmother, who lives in proximity of one of the boarding schools, is ordered not to visit, nor why the woman more or less obeys.

The strengths of the book far outweigh these few disturbances. Especially commendable is Scofield’s willingness to look with an unwavering eye into her mother’s controversial life—among other transgressions, Edith has an affair with her married doctor—and equally into her own behaviors, which Scofield might label *mis*behaviors. She captures the vulnerability of her childhood and her youthful inability to judge the mother she loved, the woman others too easily condemned.

Scofield’s memoir is a vehicle through which she allows herself to despair at the loss of her mother and to protest that loss through her efforts to remember. Further, she wonders about the life she and her mother might have lived, had their proximity to one another not been prevented. *Occasions of Sin* demonstrates well that memoir is not only a way to revisit the past, but a means to revise one’s perceptions of it. As Scofield writes,

It has taken me a long time to understand that my memories largely shape the meaning of my life, and that sometimes memories are a trick you play on yourself. When you lose your mother at a young age, you lose a part of who you are; you spend years navigating what amounts to chaos without any sort of reliable compass. The more bewildered and ashamed you are, the more you avoid reflection, the more you lash out; it’s always someone else’s fault. The past is a site of great injustice, the place where your parents failed you; the place where you see, nonetheless, the only possibility for connection.

And connect she does—both with her reconsidered memories of her mother and with the self she lost in the process of navigating, as best she could, her difficult childhood.

Natalia Rachel Singer's *Scraping By in the Big Eighties* chronicles her struggle to earn a living, become a writer, and alleviate burdens brought upon her by her paranoid schizophrenic mother, who is always unpredictable and often dangerous. The strategy Singer employs in this series of linked essays is to view the decade of her twenties through the lens of politics, arguing that personal lives are affected by, and cannot be separated from, governmental policies and practices. She describes, for example, an occasion during the mid-eighties when she watched a television news story about a vigil held in Cleveland by Russian Americans whose relatives had been killed or injured in the Chernobyl explosion. Thinking about her maternal grandmother, whose forebears emigrated from the now heavily radiated area, Singer weeps. She considers the local geography, the more than two million Belorussians subjected to radiation, and the land itself. She condemns the Russian leaders who worked to conceal the danger from the population:

In this way the Russian leadership was mirroring a move made by Ronald Reagan, who set out early on to reclassify documents about nuclear testing and nuclear plant safety that had been opened in the Carter years, thus reconcealing information on public risks to human health and enabling the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to abandon some of its most important safety regulations without the knowledge of the people who lived near the plants.

Such is the way Singer spends a bulk of the memoir, first scooping details of her personal life from her 1980s journals, at the next turn reporting on the politics of the time, and finally offering educated retrospective opinions on the latter. As a result, the book becomes mostly the story of how she perceives errors in U.S. public policy that affect her life and that of the populace. At times she seems more interested in demonstrating parallels between the Reagan years and the present-day era of George W. Bush than she does in exploring the circumstances of her own life and the consequences of her decisions and actions, although she relates the latter in precise detail and in articulate, at times elegant, prose.

Indeed, throughout the volume Singer reveals her longtime desire to pursue a writing career. Her father, whom she never met, was an artist who lived the stereotypical bohemian lifestyle, one she sets out to emulate. But daughter is more responsible than father. For one thing, she must support herself. To this end she pursues a number of jobs—office work, food service—always arranged to provide ample time to write. But she is continually burdened: “How do you find your voice when you’ve always believed there is something wrong with you, when self-invention and transformation have become your mission?” she asks.

Write what you know, people say. I wasn't ready to tackle my mother, that woman in the stained red stretch pants with red lipstick smeared across her teeth; I could not reconcile my idealized vision of my future self—a pub-

lished writer, looking calm and confident on the book jacket photo—with the despair and self-hatred I felt when I recalled the sound of my mother, a cigarette at her lips, hissing my name during one of her breakdowns.

In her earnest pursuits of writing and living a life distinctly her own, one as far away as possible from her mother and her influence, Singer tries meditation, spends time at an ashram, and makes her way to such disparate places as Seattle, Port Townsend, Mexico, Paris, and New York. Throughout her travels and her settling-downs she strives to accept one spiritual or artistic philosophy or another, all the time hoping that “all you needed to be happy was enough self-esteem and a daily bath of white light. It helped if you lived somewhere pretty.” But happiness for Singer is tied to her relationship with her mother. Whereas Scofield clings to and is needy for her mother, Singer tries hard—for good reason—to escape hers. And her escape is not only geographic. She also immerses herself in a series of romantic relationships—even marrying a man to whom she knows she is not suited (the marriage lasts only thirty-five days), manifestly filling her emotional life to an extent that there might be no room left for the mother who continually besieges her.

During Singer’s teenage years her mother stalked her wherever she went, whether to junior high school dances, the skating rink, or her friends’ homes, believing and fearing that Singer was about to become pregnant, even though she had not yet begun to menstruate. Even after Singer left home for college or moved to the West Coast after graduation, her mother continued to plague her in awkward, menacing, and sometimes terrifying ways. Considering the severity of her mother’s condition and the overwhelming persistence of her interference, Singer provides relatively few glimpses of the woman whose burdensome behavior ignited her daughter’s desire to leave home in the first place. Obviously Singer was terribly weighed down by her mother, but as the book progresses Singer minimizes her presence. In the early essays, she recalls her mother’s often frightening behaviors; in later ones, with only a few exceptions, parental burdens have been replaced by those encumbered by President Reagan.

Psychologically speaking, of course, this makes sense: it is healthy to survey oneself within a context larger than one’s own problems. But within the confines of the memoir, this reader hoped to witness the writer become aware of her habit of transference, more or less condemning Reagan for calamities caused by her mother. Instead, too often the essays seem to pull away from the underlying cause of Singer’s restlessness. She admits as much in “When the Monks Wept,” where she recalls packing for a trip back to Seattle from a temporary stay at a Buddhist enclave in New York:

My grandmother had funded my train trip as a birthday present with the proviso that I stop to see her and my mother on the way back to Seattle. I was more afraid of seeing my family, I admit, than of what would happen to the nation in the immediate future.

Her admission here seems key. To avoid focusing on her unstable family, she writes about the country. Every bad thing that happened to individuals in the United States during the decade of the eighties, Singer implies, was a direct result of Reagan's policies.

I admire this book's ambitious efforts to entwine the personal with the political—as in this typical declaration: “Stephanie befriended me when our mother, newly divorced, moved us from Indiana to Cleveland the same summer Barry Goldwater tried to yank the presidency from Lyndon Johnson”—but Singer too often avoids pursuing either avenue of exploration thoroughly enough to be convincingly insightful. Whatever its imbalances, however, *Scraping By* is a continually engaging enterprise. Singer is a conscientious researcher whose perceptions are sharp and whose story is compelling. Near the close of the book she writes, “Maybe I’m still too idealistic, but I believe government is meant to be a force that encourages a culture to flourish and its populace to work together toward a greater good.” This idealism stems from Singer's projections of her own unsatisfied necessities; what she says here of government and culture is equally true of parents and family. But Singer demonstrates that she has learned much, and she is determined to live a healthier existence than the one she was dealt: “Here are my family values now: If you are lucky, and have a good one that nurtures you and cares for you, treasure it with all your heart for all your days. But if you don't, be sure to get out while you can.”

Heidi Hart's *Grace Notes* is subtitled *The Waking of a Woman's Voice*, and she intends multiple definitions of *voice*. Most immediately she means her singing voice, for she is a trained and accomplished vocalist. But she also means *to utter, to speak, to give one's opinion*. Hart was born into a family whose Mormon identity stretches back generations. During years of musical difficulty and concurrent spiritual discomfort, the latter caused in part by religious dogma about the way women should conduct their lives, Hart began to question the path set by her Mormon upbringing, first secretly and then more and more openly. *Grace Notes* is an illuminating examination of the pains and joys she experiences as she examines her self within the confines of her community, and as she breaks gracefully from it to give honest voice to each important component of her existence: her artistic talent, her spiritual integrity, and her domestic well-being.

To cover her abundant material, Hart arranges her book in six chapters, each divided into six sections of varying lengths but consistently ordered and titled as follows: *diary, nine openings, chant, passaggio, conversation, silence*. These sections focus on particular moments in Hart's life, each of which bears upon the reasons for her restlessness and on the development of her musical voice—and, less pointedly, her literary one.

The journey is never easy, but Hart treads lightly. Usually. Like the rest of us, she sometimes lashes out against those she loves, most notably her mother—who, like Scofield's and Singer's, is often at the core of the memoir. Her mother is a creative woman, but one who, like generations of Mormon women before her, buried her voice and followed her religion's prescribed lifestyle requirements, suppressing her individuality behind a series of masks. Seemingly generous and open, she never exposes her true feelings to others. When ill or hurt, she says she's fine when people notice her distress.

As Hart grows up, she begins to resent her mother's behavior. She holds her responsible for being the wrong role model, one who lacks the kind of courage many girls and young women find wanting in themselves and wish their mothers had achieved before them, so they wouldn't have to initiate it. Although Mormon women were not shunned for choosing certain careers—her mother, for example, was a professional singer and voice teacher—such were acceptable only because through them the women could become showpieces for their husbands. “When she wasn't onstage,” Hart says of her mother, “she might as well have been mute.”

Most upsetting to Hart is her mirroring of her mother's fate. Where her mother took often to a sickbed, Hart found refuge at first in her own bedroom and later, after her marriage, in the bathroom, where she “lived suspended between [her] need for creative solitude and the passive silence” exemplified by her mother:

Outside the bathroom, I played the part my mother had in the first decades of her marriage, and tried to disappear. I tiptoed. I packed Kent's lunches. Sometimes I wrote him a note of apology and left it on his pillow. Sometimes we spent hours talking on the couch, the same conversation over and over for years: I pried out of him what I'd done to offend; he listed five or six things that had “built up” in the past few days; I promised to do better; he told me he didn't want me to have to promise, he wanted me to do these things because I loved him. Afterward, enraged and mute, I'd lock myself in the bathroom and weep . . .

This muteness is not just an inability to speak, but an inability to truly and openly live—and it is *this* muteness to which the subtitle of Hart's book keenly refers.

Hart contends with her multifaceted problem of muteness in a number of ways. As a singer, she longs to access what she believes to be her *true* singing voice. Tapped early as a soprano—and thus trapped by the label—she yearns to be an alto. She experiences numerous frightening periods in which her voice alters unbecomingly or disappears altogether. Eventually Hart meets Thomas Young, a music teacher at Sarah Lawrence College, where she is a graduate student. Although initially she is uncomfortable and embarrassed, he helps her to sing from her depths.

As her voice becomes truer, so does her life. As she scrutinizes herself, she begins to share her doubts and discoveries with her husband, a traditional Mormon male, who also grows. Kent, whom Hart met and married before she finished college in Utah, suffers from bouts of depression, but he becomes a better partner by not holding her back from her various un-Mormon-like desires and also by being a willing if sometimes hesitant supporter. Early in their marriage, Kent responded with what Hart calls “the silent treatment” to any disappointment she caused, but as the years progress and Hart becomes more and more open to herself, he too begins to break from the stiff ritualistic roles set forth by his religion, though he doesn’t abandon them or it.

Hart meets her closest friend Kate, also a musician, during the several years she and Kent and their two sons spend in the Northeast while Hart attends Sarah Lawrence. The two explore music together—Kate on the piano, Hart vocally—and Kate becomes a musical and emotional confidante. “Until we met,” Hart says, “I was full of closed doors.” Kate provides female companionship, which in turn gives Hart the confidence to continue opening herself. (Parenthetically and unsurprisingly, once she finds herself able to confide in Kate, she spends much less time recording her thoughts in her diary.) “If I am to understand my own history of silence, I have to become a *passaggio*, that word that means both corridor and journey. I have to move backward and try all the doors.”

Grace Notes is a carefully examined journey down many such corridors. Hart travels backward and forward, deep and wide, continually questioning both her past and present selves. In another writer’s hands, her story might have become overwrought with too much earnestness or ego, but Hart avoids self-aggrandizement. In fact, her honest exposé never shies away from difficult self-portrayals. “As a very young child . . . I screamed,” she writes. “I scared away any little cousin who happened to touch the meticulously arranged glass dogs on my dresser.” Elsewhere she acknowledges that even though her family didn’t own a Mercedes or other expensive automobile, “we were snobs in our own way.”

When she discovers a new spiritual life in Quakerism, she writes about it calmly and without proselytizing, and her humility is attractively unusual. For example, when she relates her political involvements, she does so without considering herself heroic. She even questions her motives for taking part: “Was I more interested in making a point than in actually working for peace? Was I hoping someone I knew would drive by? Yes, I confessed to myself. I longed to flash my very orthodox Mormon uncle, sleepy at the wheel after a long day at the office, my sign and my most exuberant smile.”

Though *Grace Notes* is probably the most self-reflective of the five memoirs reviewed here, it seems one of the least self-absorbed. Hart’s writing is beautiful without calling undue attention away from her story; the words have the quality of good

conversation—that of a close friend who wants us to understand something important, but will not smother us with unnecessary details or melodrama.

Jeffe Kennedy, who works as an environmental consultant, possesses a biologist's ability to examine objects close up and to relate them contextually to the larger world. Her memoir, *Wyoming Trucks, True Love, and the Weather Channel: A Woman's Adventure*, consists of fifteen distinct essays on such diverse subjects as her father's death, her grandmother's dementia, her environmental work, and her experiences learning to drive a truck and shoot a rifle. Together the essays provide a portrait of a young, intelligent, articulate woman whose ultimate decision to live in a remote and sparsely populated place has given her strengths and perspective she had not counted on.

In the opening piece, "Inheritances," Kennedy describes the day an airplane accident killed her father when she was a toddler, as well as the journey she and her mother took twenty-five years later to the spot where his plane went down. Relatively brief and masterfully structured, the narrative shifts back and forth between the fateful day when the base commander pulls his car into the driveway in 1969 and the subsequent "excellent adventure," as Kennedy's mother dubs their trip from Colorado back to North Carolina, where the accident occurred and where her paternal grandmother resides.

Lest the reader wonder why mother and daughter moved immediately to Colorado after the accident, Kennedy explains that the military "put us on a plane for Denver less than twenty-four hours later" to "prevent other wives from realizing their husbands' mortality." And because her father's remains were not actually found (the midair explosion vaporized bodies), only one of his uniforms was buried at the cemetery in Colorado. Kennedy relates this story with equal measures of compassion and remove, with palpable love for her mother and with empathy for the general plight of her mother's life.

"Inheritances" is poignant and engaging, but even more so is "Appliances," Kennedy's essay about her grandmother, whose annotated wall calendars became not only a kind of family diary but also a sad chronicle of her dementia. Begun in 1965 with the marking of dental appointments, birthdays, and the like, these calendars soon begin to note more significant occasions. On the date of her sister's death, the grandmother writes, "Buried Georgia." Kennedy's day of birth reads, "Kathy's Baby." Still later, the calendar becomes a laconic diary:

January 27, 1970	Sick with flu
January 28, 1970	Still sick
January 29, 1970	Still sick
January 30, 1970	Still sick
January 31, 1970	Still sick

February 1, 1970 Sick
 February 2, 1970 Better Today

Examining entries that span years, Kennedy notices and interprets changes both subtle and exuberant—her grandmother’s inclusion of daily high and low temperatures, for example, which eventually diminishes to a noting of only the highs. Later her grandmother begins to circle significant dates without fully explaining them, though Kennedy has done consequential research and provides explanations. On one circled date, 16 July 1979, the note “Pat—Calif. 12:30 to be with Lee First Day back to work” seems innocuous, Kennedy explains, “unless you know that Lee was the woman [Kennedy’s grandfather, Pat] had been having an affair with, [and] that Grandmother added in different pen the circle and the ‘to be with Lee’ later, after she discovered the affair.”

Tracking these obsessions and preoccupations via calendar entries, Kennedy can see her grandmother’s approaching and then overwhelming diminishment revealed in the woman’s notes regarding various household appliances. Her refrigerator’s ice maker first exhibits minor problems, then it makes sounds no one else can hear, and yet she continues to call upon repairmen, then family members, to fix it: “April 8, 1980 Kathy & Leo came to work on Ice Maker.” This fixation continues for years, and eventually she purchases a replacement refrigerator, only to imagine other problems: “August 31, 1992, 73° Bad day re: Refrig.”

Kennedy demonstrates much skill in choosing which entries to include in the essay, which ones to clarify, and which to investigate at length. The ensuing rhythm of the interchange between entry and commentary is powerful—nearly theatrical, though not distractingly so—and her assessments are thoughtful and keenly sensitive:

We are a family of passionate women. Women who like men, especially the dashing variety. Women who like to drink, who like to make big dinners, who spend their money on art and travel. We are also the women who check the mailbox twenty times in one day, waiting for something to arrive.

November 19, 1992 34° Went to Wards to try to find Refrig.
 Thermo—So tired worrying over Refrig
 Eye hurts badly also & lonely

Our minds return again and again to the same point. What is a foible in youth, becomes an annoyance in maturity and finally condenses into dementia.

April 2, 1993 Dark dreary day—did *NOT* go out Trying
 to work a plan for Me—I *MUST*

She was so lonely, but she refused any companions and refused to move. Finally it became clear that her weight loss stemmed from forgetting to eat, thinking she already had.

Another compelling essay is “Thanksgiving,” which discloses Kennedy’s awkward relationship with her boyfriend’s children and especially with their mother—the awkwardness due in part to Kennedy’s legally undefined liaison with the boyfriend. In an earlier essay, she protests (perhaps too vehemently) that she has no need to marry David, who is divorced and with whom she has lived in a committed relationship for more than ten years. Yet the unofficial nature of their union poses problems, not only for Kennedy but for others as well. During a Thanksgiving visit with the couple, David’s son grows ill enough to require a stay in the hospital, where she and David remain with him. An attending nurse assumes that Kennedy is the boy’s mother since she not only tends him as closely as a mother would, but does so all through the night. The next day, when the boy’s actual mother arrives, the same nurse assumes she is merely Kennedy’s sister and more or less dismisses her. The mother’s resultant animosity toward Kennedy is palpable.

Kennedy acknowledges her own difficulties with her nameless identity in relation both to David’s children and to David himself: “I don’t have any names for what [David’s children] are to me. There are words for David: boyfriend, lover, partner, significant other, mate. But none carries weight, describes the way our lives intertwine, vines growing on and supporting each other.”

The writing throughout the book is generally very good. At times Kennedy employs weak or unnecessary adverbs (someone asks *earnestly*, answers *softly*, or explains *slowly*), but her use of figurative language is powerful and imaginative: “An oxygen tank now crouched in her bedroom like a squat silver spaceman, the long cord—her ‘leash’—snaking along behind her, trailing back down the hall” (“Appliances”); “I took the gun carefully, like a bird with folded wings that might suddenly flap out of my grasp” (“Bullets”); “Twenty years later, the city sags under its own weight like the disintegrating muscles in my stepfather’s face, the people full of hysteria gathering in my mother’s eyes” (“Report from Driver #3”).

Furthermore, though her subjects are serious, Kennedy displays an effective sense of humor. In the title essay she notes, “When I drove from college in St. Louis to New York for a wedding, my friend said not to worry about the city traffic because I would fit right in. This may not have been a compliment.” *Wyoming Trucks, True Love, and the Weather Channel* is Kennedy’s first book. Her ability to reflect insightfully and memorably upon a variety of potent, complex subjects marks her as a writer to watch.

When I opened Patricia Foster’s *Just beneath My Skin: Autobiography and Self-Discovery*, I expected, perhaps because of the volume’s subtitle, a how-to book. What I got instead were eleven self-contained personal essays, some giving Foster’s notions and advice about autobiographical writing, but most depicting her struggles to come

to terms with (and alternately to dismiss the too easy labeling of) herself as a white, southern, middle-class female.

Throughout, Foster emerges as a woman continually trying to locate and define herself. Brought up in a genteel and typical white Alabama household whose gender-defined expectations she continually tries to accept and escape, twenty-something Foster moves to Los Angeles, where she studies visual art, and then to Iowa to pursue a degree in writing. She also makes numerous, significant visits to her childhood home, where she grapples with her changing perceptions of what had formed her essential values and ambitions.

Ultimately, the book recounts Foster's journey toward self-knowledge. As Heidi Hart has concerns regarding expectation and desire, and Jeffe Kennedy comes to terms with her seemingly disparate roles as woman and scientist, city girl and gun wielder, so Patricia Foster examines the conflicts she has experienced between the social mores of her upbringing and the ambitious and therefore "unfeminine" person she has sought to become. Aware that it is too easy to resist the expectations of one's race and socio-economic class, and even the good intentions of one's parents, by simply rebelling against them, Foster tries to accommodate others' expectations and her own aspirations. Looking back on her life and her process of becoming, she credits the act of writing about her life for affording her perspective: Autobiography, she says, "must show how relationship becomes conflicted, how the patterns of desire can be thwarted by our very human failings. In my own case, it was by writing a memoir that I came to understand my mother's need for middle-class ambition and to respect that desire." By approaching her life retrospectively and intensely, Foster learns to accept differences not only between herself and others but also within herself.

Because Foster continually steps outside her personal narrative to address the process of contemplation through writing, in essence to address us directly, we too may begin our own parallel contemplations. Foster also promotes a kind of bravery in facing one's family when there is disagreement. For example, in "A Place at the Table," which focuses on a Christmas in Alabama when she brings home the man she's been living with for six months, she includes comments made by her father as well as her own responses:

All around us, my family is busy with the business of Christmas—decorating and baking and shopping—and it's not until that festive day is over that my father leans toward me one night as he takes off his shoes.

"I don't know what to tell these grandkids about you two living together," he says, looking directly into my eyes. He stretches his feet. "You know only white trash do that here, and we think it's immoral."

I'm not surprised by this comment. I've already had this conversation with my parents over the phone, have felt the force of their disapproval in both

words and a restrained silence. I've told them what I know to be the truth of my life: Having gone through a bad divorce, I'm frightened.

And that's what I say to my father now. "Well, Daddy, tell them the truth. Tell them that some people get burned in marriage and don't know if they can make that commitment again. Tell them you don't approve, but there's nothing you can do."

The conversation continues, neither father nor daughter giving in. "It's just an old set of standards you're living by," Foster tells him. And then to both the reader and herself she says, "But of course, this is the very issue. Who makes the standards one lives by?" She acknowledges that the argument is "abstract," but it is still important in bringing father and daughter "closer to each other because it's at the center of our lives." "You're a hard case," her father says later that evening, then nevertheless sweetly kisses her good night.

During the same Christmas visit, Foster's sister, concerned about her children's exposure to Foster's living situation, also confronts her. Neither the differences between Foster and her family nor the difficulties that such differences bring with them will disappear. But, says Foster, a kind of healing can take place—at least for her—through writing, the way she can return to these difficulties again and again. "The act of writing is an act of recovery," Foster writes. "A reenactment and revision of all that went before. At least, I believe, that is the goal, the one good meal."

The most powerful of Foster's essays appears near the end of the collection. "Skin" recounts her experience teaching a memoir writing class to a group of twenty local citizens in a library in Tuskegee, Alabama. Anxious and uncomfortable, Foster nevertheless is determined to try, through the democracy of writing, to bridge differences between her middle-class, white, female self and the mostly older black citizens who show up. The first meeting doesn't go well, and only a few participants return to the second, at which Foster is left to change the subject, as it were, from writing about memory to first talking, then writing, about race.

Certain redundancies emerge in the volume, perhaps because the essays draw upon some of the same experiences and landscapes. Occasionally this becomes tedious, but I accept the fact that the book is a collection of discrete pieces not necessarily expected or intended to be read at once. A more important shortcoming is an overabundance of (sometimes clichéd) metaphor and, far too often, a kind of listing that almost always comes in sets of three. For example, Foster says that writing autobiography forces her to "stare at the rough edge of sadness in [her] life, the thin blades of rage, the tough, stubborn pride that often evokes a stony silence." A few paragraphs later she claims that autobiography "allows the narrator a kind of striptease, a virtual disrobing, the titillation that certain minds find thrilling." Not long after this she characterizes her initial efforts to write about her adolescence as eliciting "the beginnings

of panic, the freezing of ambition, a subterranean anger that finds no openings into air.” None of these threesomes is a problem on its own, but the frequency with which Foster uses such tripling can be distracting.

Just beneath My Skin is nonetheless a valuable and honest look at one woman’s confrontation with herself in the context of culture, place, and history. It is likewise a treatise—one powerfully demonstrated within the pages of all five memoirs—on the ways that writing about one’s own life can lead to recovery of the past through memory and imagination, as well as to an enlightened understanding of one’s present and the ways it was shaped by that past.

