

Life/writing: Narratives of Ageing, Illness and Renewal
Lingnan-La Trobe conference, Melbourne, October 16, 2009

Welcome: Prof. Richard Freadman

A very warm welcome to you all to this conference on Life/writing, Ageing, Illness and Renewal.

I'm Richard Freadman, currently Chair Professor of English and Director of the Life Writing Research Program at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. In January of next year I will return to my position as Professor of English and Director of the Unit for Studies in Biography and Autobiography at La Trobe.

I won't speak for too long because a full and fascinating day of presentations and discussion awaits us. But I want to start where conferences too often end – by thanking a small number of people while you're all still here and fully awake.

Particular thanks to the following members of the La Trobe Unit for Studies in Biography and Autobiography (hereafter USBA) for their contributions to planning the conference: Dr John Jenkin, Professor John Gatt-Rutter, Professor Sue Thomas and Professor David Tacey. From the Health Sciences Faculty, including the Institute for Social Participation, special thanks to Professor Rhonda Nay, Professor Annette Street, Dr Fiona Gardiner, Dr Bruce Rumbold and Dr Colleen Doyle.

The President of Lingnan University, Professor Yuk-Shee Chan, has given marvellous support to the Life Writing Research Program. I want to thank him warmly, *in absentia*, as it were, for his encouragement and for the financial support which has helped us to stage today's event. I would also like to thank Dr Judy Ho of the Lingnan English Department for her support in establishing and running the Life Writing Research Program, Dr Mike Ingham, also of the Lingnan English Department, for his support and for agreeing to be the Program's next Director; thanks also to the two other members (along with Judy Ho and myself) of the Program's Executive Committee, Professor Peter Baehr and Professor Mette Hjort. Sincere thanks also to Mrs Joyce Hui, the Program Secretary, for her excellent work. For crucial financial support special thanks go also to the La Trobe Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the La Trobe Institute for Social Participation.

I want to say a very special thank you to Dr John Stuyfbergen, not only for the immense amount of work he has put into planning and staging this conference, but for his energy and initiative in fostering links between the Humanities and the Health Sciences at La Trobe, and, in particular, in his role as Deputy Director of USBA for keeping the Unit ticking over in my absence.

[Professor Freadman now called Dr Stuyfbergen to the podium and presented him with a thank you gift.]

It's marvellous to see so many colleagues, students and members of the general public in the audience today. But I want to pause for a moment to remember a colleague and friend who alas can't be with us. Terry Collits, formerly of the La Trobe, University of Sydney and University of Melbourne English departments, was a great friend and

colleague for many of us. Alas Terry lost his battle with cancer a few months ago. He was a great educator at La Trobe, Melbourne and Sydney – ‘great’ in that he was a superb teacher, but ‘great’ also in the more general sense that he cared so deeply about and was so able to inspire students, and that he was an educational innovator who found ways to reconcile innovation with core educational values. Terry was also a marvellous story teller and tremendous company. We take this opportunity to honour Terry’s contribution to La Trobe and to Australian higher education and to send our best wishes to his wife, Tessa, herself a distinguished health care professional.

Today’s conference is an interdisciplinary and collaborative occasion. It is my pleasure to announce that this is the first collaborative event between Lingnan and La Trobe universities since these two institutions signed a partnership agreement. This agreement will promote contact and exchange at various levels. For those of you who do not know of it, Lingnan is a fine, progressive and delightful small liberal arts university in the New Territories of Hong Kong. It provides a rich on-campus education for about 2500 undergraduate students; it is one of the best research universities in Hong Kong, and it has a distinguished and diverse teaching faculty. I’m delighted to say that three other folk from Lingnan are here to participate in the conference. Please join me in welcoming Dr Sophia Law from the Visual Studies Department, Dr Carol Hart, formerly of La Trobe and now a member of the Lingnan English Department, and Mrs Emma Zhang, an MPhil student in the Lingnan English Department and recipient of the Lingnan President’s Award for the top undergraduate student in her Lingnan cohort. Later in the day we will hear a video taped presentation from Professor Alfred Chan, Chair Professor of Social Gerontology and Director of Lingnan’s Asia Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies.

It is anticipated that the main axes of research collaboration between Lingnan and La Trobe will be between the Lingnan Life Writing Research Program, the La Trobe Unit for Studies in Biography and Autobiography, Lingnan’s Asia Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies, and La Trobe’s recently-established Institute for Social Participation (IPS). I have been particularly grateful for the collaborative support, expertise and energy of Professor Rhonda Nay, Director of ISP. I believe that today’s event will be the first of quite a number of collaborative initiatives between these two universities. The prospects are exciting.

Before we launch into panels and papers, it might be helpful to reflect briefly on one of our organizing notions for today’s conference, namely, life writing. Among other things, the conference aims to explore the roles that life writing might play in narrating experiences of illness, ageing and renewal (that is, the reinvigoration of life, for however long, in terms of activity, meaning and other facets). We might note at the outset that life writing is more than mere chronicle: whilst it has great value as a means of putting a life, or aspects of a life, ‘on record’, it is also a powerful way of reviewing the meanings and significance of lives and life-episodes. Often such meanings and significance are revealed through the *process of writing* and not merely recounted as already-established facts by the life writer. I suggest that, for the moment at least, we might define life writing roughly as follows:

Life writing includes any form of narrative which takes as its fundamental unit of analysis and/or self-expression the individual life. Life writing includes many genres

– biography, autobiography, memoir, oral history, interviews, blogs, journalistic profiles, eulogies, some forms of lyric poetry, and more – and can also include non-verbal forms such as visual art (as in the paintings and drawings of trauma survivors, the subject of one of our panels today), cinema and drama. Life writing can also operate by narrating the history of a collective entity – say a city, or several generations of a family – on the model of an individual life. Importantly, life writing is often most effective when it sees the individual life in and as to a significant degree shaped by its surrounding social and ideological world. In terms of medical narrative, this means that we are concerned not just with a person’s illness but with the notions of illness, wellness, ageing, and ideological issues pertaining to health care, that circulate in the ill person’s culture. We’re also concerned with the interaction between individual and cultural factors.

As we proceed it should be possible to elaborate and refine this definition. So let’s now do that – proceed!

I wish you all a happy conference.