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Reviews

Is That You, Ruthie?

Ruth Hegarty

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Ruth Hegarty explains the title of her newly released memoir, *Is That You, Ruthie?*, by revealing that this seemingly harmless question was actually connected to institutional control and a child's fear of authority so that 'even having my name called held no endearment, just the threat of punishment' (113). Such is Hegarty's experience as a Queensland Cherbourg Aboriginal Mission 'dormitory girl' between the ages of four and fourteen as it is recorded in her 1998 David Unaipon award-winning text. This text is much more than Hegarty's own personal story, however, for its real task is to memorialise what the author terms as a potentially 'forgotten generation' (43). To this end, Hegarty explicitly sets herself up as a spokesperson for other 'dormitory girls': 'I would tell my story and it would become theirs . . . My story is their story; whatever I write would reflect the experiences and feelings of all' (3-4).

From a literary perspective, this focus on the construction and authorising of a community historical narrative through personal experience remains a particularly intriguing part of *Is That You, Ruthie?* In relation to this issue of narrative authority in autobiographical writing, one of the most intriguing moments in the memoir happens after Hegarty has left the dormitory and is placed in a less-than-satisfactory position as a domestic servant. In an incredible act of resistance (considering she was only aged fifteen at the time), she writes a letter to the Superintendent of the Cherbourg Aboriginal Mission asking for a release from her contract on the basis that, "I had been here already nine months and my mistress has given me a bad time. She is very insulting . . . she has been telling the whole of the neighbourhood some awful lot of lies about me" (110). In response to her handwritten note, the Superintendent writes: 'I cannot consent to your terminating your agreement . . . I might mention that I do not believe the statements made in your letter, as [the employer's] record at this office indicates that she has been a very good employer' (111). This incident raises the issues of the constructed nature of truth within historical narrative: which stories are 'true' and which should be 'believed'? The Superintendent's refusal to believe Hegarty's testimony is symptomatic of the ways in which Aboriginal voices were systematically and effectively silenced by government policies and administrators until only very recently. It is testimony to Hegarty's own resilience that her attempt to get her story heard in 1944 at the age of fifteen finally comes to fruition over fifty-five years later.

These letters, along with many other 'official' records and documents, were only recently discovered by the author during her research for *Is That You, Ruthie?* when she gained access to her 'file' kept by the Department of Native Affairs.[1] These files become an important focus of the memoir (as they did in Rita and Jackie Huggins' collaborative auto/biography, *Aumtie Rita*) for the letters and documents contained in them offer alternate versions (specifically government versions) to Hegarty's own recollection of events. Indeed, the blatant discrepancies between the state narratives of Hegarty's life as documented in the Department of Native Affairs files and her own personal memories provide fascinating insights into the systematic construction of 'official' government histories in relation to the lives of Aboriginal people. Hegarty's memoir joins other newly released Aboriginal autobiographical narratives, such as Rosalie Fraser's *Shadow Child* and Herb Wharton's *Yumba Days*, to actively and effectively resist these 'official' historical narratives within the frame of an enjoyable, frank, and often surprisingly humourous tale of childhood woes and wonders as a 'dormitory girl' in the Queensland Cherbourg Aboriginal Mission in the 1930s and 1940s.

[1] Now the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs