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Literacy Heroines: Women and the Written Word

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Literacy Heroines: Women and the Written Word

Alice S. Horning

Peter Lang Publishing, 2021, pp. 303

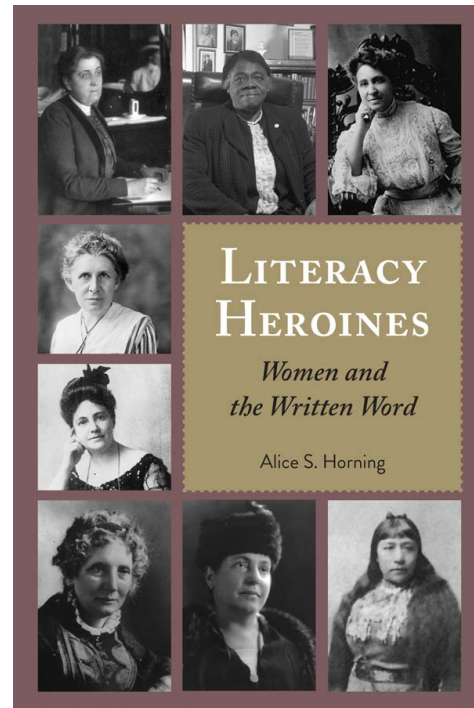
Reviewed by Andrea McCrary

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Early in my career at the small comprehensive university founded on the liberal arts where I work, I was fortunate to teach in an innovative interdisciplinary program and was regularly supported by the senior faculty members with whom I taught. One such mentor was an experienced faculty member in the History Department who reminded me that much of the value of studying stories of those who have come before us lies in the consideration of the “past that is present.” Drawing connections between the stories of the past and the struggles of the present is, in fact, what many of us do in our classrooms. In *Literacy Heroines: Women and the Written Word*, Alice S. Horning takes this approach, presenting the work of twelve notable women from the Modern period of 1880–1930, drawing significance from both their activities in their own contexts and from the models they offer those of us concerned about key issues facing our contemporary communities. As such, Horning offers readers a text that both satisfies as a work of literacy history and challenges us to see how the strategies used by these women may serve the scholars, writers, and activists seeking change today.

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The introduction of the book presents Horning’s rationale for collecting the stories of these women and arranging the chapters as she does. Before her comments on the identities and roles of the women, she begins with some key definitions, establishing shared understanding of “literacy” and “modernity” as a foundation for discussing the work of these women. Here, she highlights the similarities between the modern period and today, specifically indicating the significance of “intense change” including “demographic shifts” and “huge waves of immigration”—all of which are obviously resonant for a contemporary reader (6). Moving to a definition of “intersectionality,” Horning asserts that the “concept makes a great deal of sense when looking at the work of the heroines. . . . [given that] their approach inevitably entailed underlying intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity or other factors” (12). Indeed, each chapter aims to acknowledge and consider the various ways intersectional identities affect the work of each woman. Further, the introduction establishes definitions for three central designations that she uses for each of the women: Exemplar/



Expert, Sponsor, and Literacy Heroine. Exemplars, Horning notes, demonstrate skill and credentials, but “experts also need experience in their chosen field” to fulfill the expectations of the role (14). Sponsors demonstrate the value of literacy by “sharing their knowledge and expertise” (14). Finally, as Horning shapes the definition of the title phrase, “Literacy Heroine,” she homes in on the lens through which she sees the women whose stories are collected in the book: she states that “a literacy heroine is a woman who has worked in a variety of roles, using her literacy abilities in heroic efforts to serve as a respected exemplar/expert and sponsor of literacy for others” (17). In providing these definitions, Horning highlights the selection of these women as literacy heroines in their own historical contexts and their relevance to the issues facing contemporary communities that may draw from their examples.

In this way, Horning has set out to write a book focused on women “whose work on literacy made substantial difference in the lives of others” (52). The methodology, essentially a case study approach, finds Horning reviewing not only primary work written by each woman, but also critical work by other writers, including biographers and journalists. Notably, Horning draws from interviews with contemporary scholars who have knowledge of these women, and she reports following the feminist practice of sharing the completed work with those interview subjects as a means of ensuring accuracy in her portrayal of their ideas. The introduction to the book, then, reinforces Horning’s careful process in gathering and presenting the work of these extraordinary women writers.

Following the introduction, the book presents the stories of a dozen women, arranging their chapters around the arenas in which Horning sees their most notable work: education, activism, and writing. The women included as educators are Mary McLeod Bethune, Gertrude Buck, Cora Wilson Stewart, and Sarah Winnemucca. Horning includes Jane Addams, Mary Church Terrell, Lilian Wald, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett in the activist section. Finally, the women in the section on writers are Nella Larsen, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Ida Tarbell. Many of the women included in *Literacy Heroines* are well-known to students and scholars of the late-19th and early 20th century social movements, though some will be new. The structure of the book allows readers to take in the dozen stories in various ways—as a whole, as a group in one of the three main sections, or as individual chapters that can stand alone for readers interested in singular cases. Additionally, while Horning focuses her attention narrowly on the work of women in using literacy to confront social ills, the breadth of identities related to class, race, and ethnicity provides a broad sense of the relevant issues and effects of the work done by these women in the Modern period.

Rather than provide details from each chapter, as each woman’s story provides myriad significant moments (more than this review can hold), I want to highlight Horning’s arrangement and approach, as they offer important revelations for readers. By grouping these women according to activity—Educators, Activists, and Writers—Horning highlights the limits on women’s lives in the Modern period while also demonstrating the possibilities for confronting societal problems from within those limits. Within these sections, the arrangement of each chapter provides a consistent

lens through which to view the women's contributions to literacy in their communities. Horning has crafted a tight structure, creating clarity, accessibility, and a clear through line for the discussion.

Each chapter begins with a brief introduction before moving into a context-setting "Issue of the Times" section in which Horning situates the women according to the prevalent events and issues in their communities. These issues are far ranging, but all significant; they include specific legal moments like the *Plessy v Ferguson* decision or the Dawes Act, as well as broader movements on issues of racism, suffrage, immigration, labor, and indigenous rights. In each chapter, this section highlights the issue most relevant to the woman being discussed. Next, each chapter moves to a biographical sketch of the woman, emphasizing elements of each woman's life that seem most relevant to their work in the communities. Specifically, Horning here turns to relational details like family background and connections to other people doing similar work, along with educational background and achievements. Here, Horning often points out the important sponsors in these women's lives, further underscoring the importance of literacy sponsors in the development of literacy heroines.

Following the background sections in each chapter, Horning discusses each woman as they fulfill the significant roles of exemplar, sponsor, and heroine defined in the introduction. In enumerating the achievements of these women, Horning highlights the breadth of their accomplishments offering readers a glimpse into the remarkable achievements of these women. The book includes women who founded or led educational institutions (i.e., Bethune, Stewart, and Buck) as well as women who founded or led social organizations (i.e., Addams, Terrell, and Ruffin). Despite the notable diversity of experience and focus represented by these women, the noteworthy commonality as Horning presents them is their achievement in writing; writing dissertations and novels or essays, speeches, and columns, these women uniformly represent the power of literacy to speak to and against the social concerns of the writer and her allies. In pointing out the written work as well as the organizational and leadership work that these women represent, Horning reinforces her thesis that these women achieved the accomplishments they did largely through their successful deployment of literacy work.

Just before a list of references related to the heroine in each chapter, readers will find a section headed "Lessons for Contemporary Times" in which Horning calls attention to the attribute that best served each woman in her work. Having pointed to research on grit as a foundational idea, she regularly highlights the persistence that propelled the women through the challenges they faced, often as a result of their intersectional identities. While these women certainly demonstrated resilience in a world that resisted them and their work, I struggled a bit with the repeated reliance on grit as a defining characteristic. However, I found the inclusion of qualities like Terrell's networking and encouragement of coordination among women more useful, as this kind of collective approach serves as an important model for how women may face contemporary challenges in their communities. Indeed, bookending each chapter with "Issues of the Times" and "Lessons for Contemporary Times" provides readers a way of seeing how the past is present with us. In this way, Horning highlights

both the challenges and the mechanisms of change available to these literacy heroines. While such a tight structure could be seen as repetitive or rigid, some students, particularly undergraduates, will likely find the pattern helpful in realizing the ways these diverse women resisted the challenges of their times in various ways, all with a sense of progress and vision.

Horning's final chapter, "Lessons and Conclusions," brings the significance of the work of these women into sharper relief with "an imagined opportunity for the heroines to make clear the lessons we might learn from the work that they did" (271). While each of the chapters focuses on one woman's work, this final chapter draws the work of the women together in a sense to reflect how their work responded to challenges of health and wellness, education, intellectual development, governmental regulation, citizenship, and racism. Recognizing the ways that these issues shaped the work of the heroines, Horning reminds readers that the lessons of the past really do have a place in our work today in that these issues represent ongoing struggles in the contemporary world. Strikingly, she includes in the final chapter comments from scholars whose work informs the view of the heroines that she constructs and a brief acknowledgement that to choose a dozen remarkable women requires the omission of others. She concedes that "while there might be another book to be written about both women and men overlooked here, they are kindly set aside to allow the Heroines to come to the fore" (285). I appreciate the recognition and the challenge that other stories remain to be written.

While Horning's discussion of how issues are met in complex contexts could have also included more acknowledgement of systemic change, the individual activities and collaborative approaches Horning's heroines undertake offer important examples to students of history, social change, literacy education, and writing to consider. I appreciate Horning's work in highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of these women, as well as her inclusion of multiple voices on their work. While each chapter provides only a brief overview of the tremendous labor undertaken by the woman of focus, the chapters can stand alone as useful introductions to women whose work may be new to students, with useful lists of references to guide further study. Importantly, though, reading the book as a whole provides further evidence that women have been doing the heroic work of "addressing the many forms of inequality in American society; their lives and work show that literacy is thus a key tool in the struggle for social justice, then and now" (291). In providing us with such an overview of these women, after other significant writing in the field, Horning takes her place among them, as this work of feminist history situates her as both exemplar and sponsor herself. I hope that we all continue to learn from the stories of these women whose work precedes us and continue to uncover the long trails of influence in the work of the contemporary literacy heroines among us.