



Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold (Alexander Lectures)

Carolyn G. Heilbrun

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Eve has been supposed to have remarked to Adam as they left the garden, my dear, we are in a state of transition, and of course they were. It is no coincidence that Eve delivers this line. While humanity in every era and stage in history has been marked by a strong sense of itself as being in a state of transition, women have always had a particularly close relationship to changeable terrain. In their quest for self knowledge, boundaries, and names, women have found themselves between varying cultural demands. In one view, perhaps the dominant one, the only way to gain positive status is to fit appropriately into approved categories: appropriately beautiful, appropriately young, appropriately thin, appropriately successful. In another view, the view compellingly expressed by Carolyn Heilbrun, women must abandon the appropriate and seek out the liminel. The word limen means threshold. To be in a state of liminality is to be poised upon uncertain ground, on the brink of leaving one condition or country or self to enter upon another. When recognized, liminality offers women freedom to be or become themselves.

In Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold Carolyn Heilbrun looks at the biographies and memoirs of women who have wrestled with their own betwixt and betweenness (in the process altering the face of literature, and the world): George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Gloria Steinem. She reveals the ways in which feminism has changed our perceptions of these lives. Surprising explorations of the positions which launch women into uncertain ground extend these lectures outside the academic purview.

Each year the Alexander lectureship invites a distinguished scholar to the University of Toronto to give a course of public lectures on the subject of English Literature. These four lectures from the 1997 series put Carolyn Heilbrun in a line of distinguished scholarly work with such previous lecturers as Walter Ong, Robertson Davies, and Northrop Frye. But Heilbrun, within this distinguished genealogy, reworks the very notion of the line, creating a new pattern of writing and approaching literary culture, just as the women whose lives she examines have done. The reader will come out of this experience moved, refreshed, and inspired to create rather than take a position.

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