Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Small Histories during World War II, Letter Writing, and Family History Methodology by Suzanne Kesler Rumsey (review)

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Book Reviews

Suzanne Kesler Rumsey, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Small Histories during World War II, Letter Writing, and Family History Methodology*, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2021. 220 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8173-2090-4.

Blessed Are the Peacemakers began with literacy scholar Suzanne Kesler Rumsey's inheritance of her grandmother Miriam's papers, which included a surprising number of letters exchanged with her first husband, Benjamin Kesler, between 1941 and 1946. Rumsey "was shocked to discover what their lives were like . . . in the midst of World War II" (2). As "one might expect of war-era letters," they were "filled with love and longing, anguish at being apart, uncertainty and anxiety about the war and the country's future." But, in Miriam and Ben's case, the newlyweds were separated because Ben was a member of a historic peace church and conscientious objector. As an alternative to serving in the United States military, he was conscripted into unpaid labor in Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps, leaving Miriam to support the family while she too avoided better-paying jobs that contributed to the War. Working with their letters, Rumsey reconstructs the story, or small-h history, of her grandparents, weaving their narrative into the large-H History of conscientious objectors during WWII. Rumsey demonstrates the importance of small-h histories to the history of rhetoric, models how to develop them through family history methodology (FHM), and illuminates the role of love letters in both this historiographic work and the relationships they record.

Rumsey's introduction sets out "three salient themes" that are woven throughout the book: "the value of small histories, the methodology of FHM, and the study of conduit and platform within letter writing" (7). Situating it within the tradition of *ars dictaminis*, Chapter 1 theorizes these two concepts—conduit and platform—as characterizing the nature of Miriam and Ben's letters. The letters were a conduit, "a vehicle or a means by which they could transmit the intangible," such as love (15). Through "the physical, tangible *materiality* of the letters," they also "functioned as a platform upon which they built their relationship" (15).

The remaining chapters are organized chronologically and can be understood in two parts. The first part tells the story of the couple's early courtship and letter writing leading up to marriage (Chapter 2) and then during their separation only months later as Ben's first CPS placement

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began at Sideling Hill in Pennsylvania (Chapters 3–8). Illustrating the FHM she developed, Rumsey moves from "extensive archival digging and secondary source reading" (33) on the broader context of historic peace churches and faith-based nonresistance (Chapter 3), to the specific story recorded in Miriam and Ben's letters. These letters document their "epistolary nesting" when first separated (Chapter 4), the details of Ben's labor at the CPS camp (Chapter 5), and Miriam's work as a young wife left responsible for supporting them (Chapter 6). Here Rumsey demonstrates the power of small-h histories, not only to show what the life of an individual conscientious objector was like, but also to uncover the lesser-known story of CPS women. Subsequent chapters nuance Miriam and Ben's story by identifying moments when the conduit and platform of their letter writing fell short: when dealing with family conflicts about time-sensitive financial matters (Chapter 7) and when coping with separation during their first Thanksgiving and Christmas as newlyweds (Chapter 8). Throughout this part of the book, Rumsey's analysis might be developed further in conversation with scholars who investigate the rhetoric of the specifically romantic subgenre.[1] They offer approaches to exploring how norms of gender and sexuality get embedded in and challenged through epistolary rhetoric. Regardless, Rumsey's theory and analysis of conduit and platform will prove useful for any rhetoricians and/or historians working with love letters.

The second part of *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* turns to Ben's next CPS placement at the Rhode Island State Hospital for Mental Diseases, where Miriam was able to join him as an employee. Letter writing proved crucial but challenging as the couple struggled to deliberate about this potential move (Chapter 9). Again, demonstrating her FHM, Rumsey moves from reflections on a research trip to State Hospital, to archival research on conditions there prior to Ben and Miriam's arrival (Chapter 10); from records of the "deplorable" conditions in 1943 (Chapter 11), to the couple's non-work life (Chapter 12) and financial challenges while anticipating a baby (Chapter 13). Rumsey deftly manages the relatively limited number of letters from this period when Ben and Miriam were together in Rhode Island. Rumsey also handles her grandparents' epistolary discussions of sex with a representative sensitivity, thus countering the assumptions of outsiders about "conservative Christian communities" (175). Finally, this latter portion of the book confronts the challenges for conscientious objectors who tried to remain nonviolent when working in a hospital that was often violent toward the people institutionalized there. Engagement with a disability studies perspective might be helpful for cultivating additional critical distance from the archived descriptions of institutionalized, disabled people as "violent and deranged patients" (165).[2] Yet Rumsey exhibits humility and self-reflexivity about her positionality as a researcher and family member when considering these questions.

Blessed Are the Peacemakers is a must-read for anyone interested in the nuanced view of WWII rhetoric available through small-h histories, the rhetoric of letter writing, and/or family history methodology. Rumsey

writes as a first-rate storyteller, historian, and archival researcher. Her book stands as a model for those learning how to do archival research as well as more experienced researchers who desire to learn FHM and become more self-reflexive about researcher positionality in personal collections and histories of rhetoric.

[1] Consider, for example, Suzanne Bordelon, "'Courtship-by-Correspondence': Seduction through Mentoring," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 36, no. 3 (2018): 296–319, https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.2018.36.3.296; Ames Hawkins, *These Are Love(d) Letters* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2019); Pamela VanHaitsma, *Queering Romantic Engagement in the Postal Age: A Rhetorical Education* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019).

[2] See especially Zosha Stuckey, *A Rhetoric of Remnants: Idiots, Half-Wits, and Other State-Sponsored Inventions* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014).

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Dana Farah Fields, *Frankness, Greek Culture, and the Roman Empire*, Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies, Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2021. 236 pp. ISBN: 978-0-429-29217-0.

In an ancient context, the term *parrhēsia* is most often associated with the Athenian democracy of the fifth century BCE, where free or frank speech became a key egalitarian and therefore democratic value. But it also featured prominently in Greek literature of the Roman period (1st-3rd centuries CE), a time when a single man ruled over the Mediterranean world and social hierarchies dominated life on a local level. Although *parrhēsia* has been a topic of recurrent interest over the past three decades (thanks in large part to the influence of Michel Foucault), later Greek literature has been largely sidelined in discussions of this virtue.[1] Dana Fields's *Frankness, Greek Culture, and the Roman Empire* begins to fill this gap by providing a thought-provoking exploration of how Greek sophists, philosophers, and satirists of the second century CE deployed free and frank speech. Most importantly, Fields's study challenges the prevailing assumption that, after Alexander the Great, the connotations of the term shifted radically from a political right to a personal, ethical virtue. Instead, Fields argues, *parrhēsia* retained political significance in the second century CE, both in terms of local institutions and, more importantly, in the interpersonal relationships that so often defined politics at this time.

Fields's discussion proceeds in six chapters, the first of which lays out the book's approach and establishes Aristophanes, Socrates, Diogenes, and Demosthenes as "icons of frankness" for later practitioners of *parrhēsia*. Chapter 2 further sets the stage by considering *parrhēsia* in the classical