



Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative

Valerie Smith

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It is by telling the stories of their lives that black writers--from the authors of nineteenth-century slave narratives to contemporary novelists--affirm and legitimize their psychological autonomy. So Valerie Smith argues in this perceptive exploration of the relationship between autobiography and fiction in Afro-American writing. Smith sees the processes of plot construction and characterization as providing these narrators with a measure of authority unknown in their lives. Focusing on autobiographies by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs and the fiction of James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison, she demonstrates the ways in which the act of narrating constitutes an act of self-fashioning that must be understood in the context of the Afro-American experience.

Hers is a fertile investigation, attuned to the differences in male and female sensibilities, and attentive to the importance of oral traditions.

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