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## Review of: *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Small Histories during World War II, Letter Writing, and Family History Methodology*—Suzanne Kesler Rumsey

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Review of: **Rumsey, Suzanne Kesler. 2021 *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Small Histories during World War II, Letter Writing, and Family History Methodology*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press. Pp. 220. \$54.95.**

By G.C. Waldrep  
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Suzanne Kesler Rumsey's *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* is, on the surface, the reconstructed story of the author's paternal grandparents during World War II. The saga of Benjamin and Miriam Kesler, members of the Dunkard Brethren Church in northern Indiana, in and out of the Civilian Public Service (CPS), is one that will be familiar to most readers of twentieth-century North American Anabaptist history: a young husband called into CPS service as a conscientious objector, the young wife he left behind. What makes it richer is the trove of letters back and forth between the young couple that the author has inherited, as well as the fact that Miriam eventually joined her husband in Rhode Island for the final stage of his service. The letters provide an intimate window into life for non-resistant Christians during World War II.

Rumsey, however, is interested in more than a simple recounting of her grandparents' stories. A professor at Purdue University Fort Wayne, with a background in the modern academic discipline usually known as rhetoric and composition, Rumsey also wants to make a theoretical argument about the value of such storytelling. As she explains in her introduction, while as a loving granddaughter *she* might see the value of this story, as well as the manner of its telling, she doubted academics would. A theoretical framework was therefore required.

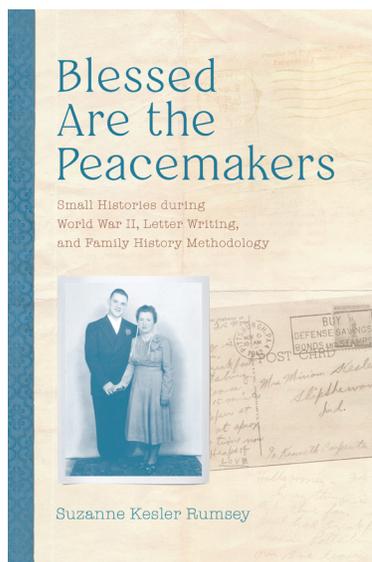
In fact she makes three theoretical arguments, not one. As she explains in her introduction, "rhetoric and writing studies have taken an 'archival turn' in the past decade," which Rumsey relocates to the site of what she calls "small histories," the lives of "no-name people from all walks of life who lived, breathed, and died during significant

political and historical moments" (p. 4). Ben and Miriam's story has a place in these larger narratives. Second, Rumsey views her grandparents' story through the lens of what she calls "family history writing" (offputtingly abbreviated "FHW"), an extension of the practice known as "life writing." "Just as small-h histories *matter*, the research practices of amateurs and everyday people *matter*" (p. 5). They not only provide a sense of one's place in the world; the practice of research and writing informs and structures that very sense of place. Third, Rumsey proposes to study her grandparents' letters as *letters*, as written traces of a correspondence, a relationship. Letter-writing is itself a genre and, she suggests, deserves a very specific form of academic attention.

One problem here is that these three theoretical frameworks constantly jostle one another, even as Ben and Miriam's story unfolds chronologically. Chunks of Ben and Miriam's correspondence alternate with references to academic jargon: as an example of the latter, "I provide these detail from our research trip in part because they are amusing and interesting and in part because they reveal some important aspects of the FHW methodology"

(p. 61), which Rumsey in her professorial role is anxious to advance. As a practitioner of "FHW methodology" Rumsey also feels ethically compelled to insert her own reactions to the letters and their contents, but this is frequently as distracting as the appeals to academic jargon. Sometimes the lives of Ben and Miriam, their letters, academic jargon, and Rumsey's least relevant reactions come together, as here, in a chapter on holiday celebrations:

Included in this letter, in addition to one of his customary platform descriptions of food, is a material element that created a sense of place from Ben's time at camp. He carefully wrapped the chicken wishbone in a paper napkin from the meal. This wishbone made it through the mail to Miriam, and it was still in the envelope when I opened it nearly seventy-five years later. I will admit I was pretty grossed out at first to find a bone in a letter, but after reading the contents of



the letter, I understood why it was there and saw the romance of it (even though it is still pretty gross). (p. 112)

The enclosed wishbone is a wonderful moment; Rumsey's professional academic verdict of it as "pretty gross" is not.

A second problem across the book is Rumsey's grounding in the relevant literatures. Her bibliography reveals she has surveyed the basic literature on Anabaptist conscientious objection, in general, and specifically during World War II. Beyond that, however, Rumsey's knowledge of historiography is scant—and this is particularly a problem when it comes to her theoretical positions. It is not news to historians (either in or out of the Anabaptist tradition) that "small histories" can tell larger stories. Since the 1960s countless historians have made their careers by choosing ordinary people, unpromising documents—a tax list here, a trial transcript there, a diary that is little more than a day-book—and crafting moving, nuanced portraits of life and society through these sources. Rumsey's epiphany that her grandparents' story could enrich our understanding of society, culture, and history is surely heartfelt, but in terms of "small histories" her book would have been better (and her grandparents' stories enriched in turn) had she read any of this historiography, from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Midwife's Tale* to Jeff Gundy's nuanced Mennonite investigation, *A Community of Memory*. The same is true for the history of correspondence, which has a rich theoretical literature. Rumsey does cite some of this literature, chiefly David Barton and Nigel Hall's *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, but her summaries of this literature are not well-integrated into the story of Ben and Miriam.

There is a fourth aspect, that of the theological position of Christian nonresistance. Rumsey doesn't make a theoretical argument *about* it; indeed, she seems uncomfortable with it, preferring the term "nonresistant pacifism" (p. 5). This may or may not be a concession to academic readers from Rumsey's field who may have little knowledge of Anabaptist doctrine or practice, but her ambivalence about the term (even as she admires and documents her grandparents' self-sacrificing commitment) adds another murky layer to the narrative, especially for a reader with affiliations

within the same conservative Anabaptist framework as Ben and Miriam.

In sum, this is a difficult book, whether one has an interest in Anabaptist history or in the various theoretical questions Rumsey attempts to address. Perhaps Rumsey would have done better to relate her grandparents' story in a more narrative fashion and then re-enter that story from each of her theoretical standpoints, with more and more quotations from this trove of letters, so that the story re-inscribed itself in richer and deeper ways as readers discovered more strategies for understanding and appreciating it. As it stands, the book begs a basic question of audience. It is too theoretical (by turns) to sustain the interest of most non-academic Anabaptist readers, and it keeps too close to its source materials (not to mention its author) to resonate academically. Rumsey has succeeded in documenting *her own* journey into and through the lives and letters of her grandparents, from the varying points of view provided by her life-roles (loving granddaughter, university professor) and her studies. But this is not necessarily what an interested *reader* would most benefit from, given the richness and resonance of the material.bio:

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