Central to Janet Carey Eldred’s book, in both subtle and overt ways, is the persistent and still relevant issue of personal and academic writing as it relates to compositions and Composition. In ways invoking a tenet reminiscent of the National Writing Project, Eldred foregrounds the assumption that being an active writer impacts our teaching. But *Sentimental Attachments* specifically focuses on how the nebulous genre of the essay embodies “the central premise [of the book] . . . that some hybrid form of composition can fuse the personal and the academic” (vii). At the same time, she argues that we should problematize the essay genre and its history as we teach and write it. Though the pages that follow her introduction would likely be called literary nonfiction (or creative nonfiction, personal essay, etc.), her complication of the essay form guides how the following pieces are read. Most useful is her discussion of how “the luxury” of being in composition studies at this time invites composition as a form to have rich and varied possibilities (9).

*Sentimental Attachments* is a short book, and deliberately so; the author likens it to a novella, and this is one of the caveats with which she begins her book. For readers who write and study the essay and its relationship to composition studies or have grappled in their teaching and writing with enacting the hybridity of personal and academic writing, the justifications she makes about the form and length of the project have a recognizable though useful refrain. The introduction and conclusion directly engage in such issues; the body of the text consists of interrelated essays—some first published in acclaimed literary and composition journals, demonstrating her efforts in broadening genre boundaries—about Eldred’s lived experiences. These “exercises in composition” grapple with “how we—postmodern academics—create and re-create family as we find ourselves far flung and unraveling from traditional fabrics” (2).

Part 1, “Children at all Costs,” deals primarily with Eldred’s adoption of two boys from Russia in 1995 and 1996. Invoking Peter Pan, a favorite book of her elder son, the author imagines herself (and is cast by her son) as Wendy. Exhibiting the hybridity called for in the introduction, Eldred deftly describes the tension between how critics have read Peter Pan and the ways she craves for the story to at its heart be about “a troubling, fragmented, beautiful act: adoption” (21). The adoption of her boys, Alyosha and Sanya, could be described with the same adjectives, and against a newly-capitalist Russian backdrop, she relays the rich and complex journeys (both literally and figuratively) that bring them all together as a family. Readers imagine along with the author the lives of the boys’ mothers and learn the sometimes awkward and sometimes graceful learning curve of suddenly
having a new toddler at home. The process of and adjustment to adoption is made all the more poignant by the short essay ending part 1, “Life without Children, or Spring Cleaning 1994,” in which Eldred renders the longing and frustration that returned for her every spring in trying to make a home without children.

In the second part of the book, Eldred deals overtly with the messiness of the sentimental in writing, and in life. Not surprisingly, given her previous work on early U.S. women’s writers, her raising and treatment of the issue is handled skillfully. She asks: “is there room for women writing sentiment, doing it well, after the turn of the twenty-first century?” (50). Her question resonates all the more when considering the larger themes of the book: how we as writing teachers compose, what we ask our students to compose, and how genre and gender in the essay complicate such endeavors. In the piece “Modern Fidelity,” she enacts such issues by weaving a love story to and about her mother with a discussion of modernism and the essay. Essay writers and readers especially will enjoy reading The New Yorker history, specifically the work and love relationship of E.B. White and Katharine Sergeant Angell, and the ways they influenced the modern essay.

Still exploring with the place of the sentimental in composing, Eldred returns to ideas of making a home in “Houses II,” this time with a fuller and more cluttered house. After a move to a Depression-era home with her husband, children, and father-in-law, the family finds itself in an established neighborhood with all its burdens and rewards. Neighbors still identify the house with its prior owners and layers of wallpaper, and won’t let them forget the house’s former incarnations. The pretension Eldred feared with the move existed, to be sure, but some assumptions were challenged by the kindness displayed to her family and the friendship that was struck among an elderly woman, Alyosha, and Sanya. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits to moving into their older home was the discovery for the entire family of their individual and collective talent for what she terms “dreaming houses” (88). Invoking the motto she learns when adopting her sons that “in Russia, anything is possible,” her Russian sons appear to have transferred this optimism to America, as they are particularly adept at uninhibited possibilities for future homes they could inhabit. It is a far cry from the troubled new capitalism they were born into, and Eldred contemplates the fragility and luxury of such happiness.

Still perhaps anticipating an audience that may not be convinced of the message her book is meant to convey, the conclusion to Sentimental Attachments is entitled, “Why Essays?” She revisits her fascination with The New Yorker but confesses that she doesn’t assign the magazine in class. What she would like to assign instead is O, The Oprah Magazine because she’d “like to propose that people who teach composition might do well to engage the O-like activities of authorship, editing, and sponsorship” (98). She argues that compositionists can employ the essay as sponsors, and this is one way she (as a teacher, writer, and author of the pieces collected in this book) can answer the familiar question of how personal essays connect to the teaching of writing. Again, for those who have been asked, or asked of themselves, the same question, Eldred’s book will be particularly
enriching and useful. Other readers who don’t feel quite as situated in conversations about the essay and composition may find themselves less grounded; this book is suggestive rather than exhaustive, not giving much context, for example, of the historical significance of the essay within the field of composition. It could be that Eldred assumes audiences will likely bring prior knowledge of this background, or that to relay such an overview would greatly change the tenor of a book that is purposefully working to wed form and content, to be fully essayistic. Given that many in the field of composition discuss hybrid forms but much more infrequently practice them, I think her choice to be contextually spare makes good sense. That said, some may still find that this collection, too, does not truly blend genres as much as it sets out to. Regardless, this book has much to offer: her personal essays within are wonderfully rich, the discussions of the essay and Composition are astute and thought-provoking, and the invitation to compose as we help students compose is motivating.

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Reviewed by Holly Middleton

Norbert Elliot’s On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment in America, spans 1874-2005, but begins in earnest where Mary Trachsel’s Institutionalizing Literacy leaves off: with the 1900 founding of the College Entrance Examination Board. Formerly the professional responsibility of faculty in English, writing assessment came under the purview of an external organization staffed by researchers in psychology and psychometrics. The challenge was to create a national standard for writing and the methods and criteria for measuring it. On a Scale is a chronology of case studies where Elliott reconstructs the shifting contexts of writing assessment in the twentieth century. In 1904, experiments testing for native intelligence established a link between children’s language facility and their sensory ability to distinguish between degrees of intensity in light, weight, and sound; this correlation underlies the conflation of literacy and intelligence that followed.

Believing that nice distinctions in written composition would index degrees of human potential, Edward L. Thorndike and his graduate student, Milo Hillegas, utilized one hundred readers and seven thousand specimens of student writing to build a reliable scale of merit. They constructed the “Hillegas Scale” as a poster for convenience, and it was reprinted four times in 1917 alone to meet the demand for an evaluative standard. The ranked specimens on the scale were thought to demonstrate degrees of intelligence as surely as the capacity to distinguish sensory intensity. What became an institutionalized reliance on scale, statistics,