

Toni Schlesinger

Five Flights Up and Other New York Apartment Stories

318 pages. Princeton Architectural Press
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Review by Paul Martin Lester

Elizabeth Bishop once lived five flights up, subsequently the name of her poem and the title of this book. I hope she does not mind my using it, as she wrote a lot about space and home. (Toni Schlesinger, p. xvi)

By all accounts, Toni Schlesinger is a quirky seeker of the offbeat and, like all good journalists, seems equally comfortable with tenement denizens and penthouse elites. Since 1997 she's written a much-loved column in the *Village Voice*, "Shelter," in which she combines her piercing questions and observations with an environmental portrait of her featured host, almost always by a freelance photographer. The result is a pleasing, if at times redundant, collection of 139 personality profiles with 136 portraits taken by 27 photographers (Sylvia Plachy has four portraits).

If nothing else, this book supports the proposition that quirky attracts quirky. The press release from the publisher cites site sights such as "men living in pods, twin sisters and their hog intestines, a 129 pound rubber band ball, and 500 volumes (sic) of *Moby Dick*" (Myers, 2006, p. 1). Greg Miller, a New York freelancer, who took the cover image and 30 photographs inside, recounted that, when he

started taking pictures for Schlesinger's column, the assignments made him curious. But after meeting so many odd people with their near obsessive-compulsive collections (many involving Barbie dolls), "my eyebrows got burned so that when I got home I wanted to throw things away" (personal communication, February 27, 2006).

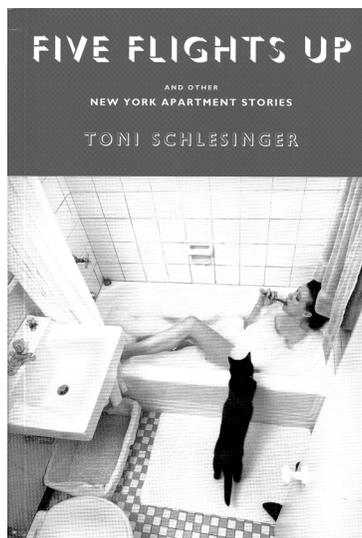
Despite all the smiles, casual poses, and boldface questions and comments, Schlesinger's world is skewed a bit to the White. Of the 234 persons photographed, 75% are White, 2% are Asian, 14% are persons of color, 7% are Latino, and 2% are of an unknown race. The New York City government Web site lists the city's demographic breakdown for

2000 as 35% White, 10% Asian, 25% African American, 27% Latino, and 4% other ("Demographic Characteristics," ¶ 1). Greater care should have been given to matching the book's choices with the city's actual demographics. Men are probably overrepresented at 53% and dogs beat out cats, a potbellied pig, and a reindeer 11 to 4. Perhaps not surprising, 49% of the portraits are of people who live alone. Someone else can do counts on the economic, lifestyle, and location differences among the photographs; this reviewer is no longer particularly interested in pursuing such additional insights.

That's because of a wonderfully unexpected turn while researching Schlesinger's book.

Google "five flights up" and you will see for yourself—suddenly you are propelled into the life and work of one of America's most gifted poets, Elizabeth Bishop.

Tragedy struck early and often for Bishop. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1911, she was the only child of wealthy parents. However, when she was only 8 months old, her father died of Bright's disease, a debilitating disease of the kidneys. Her mother, overcome with grief, was committed to a sanitarium 5 years later. Her mother's parents, her father's parents, and then her mother's sister in south Boston cared for Bishop. Because of the transitional lifestyles with family members, she developed severe asthma, eczema, and bronchitis. Life with her aunt seemed to agree with her, however, and her health improved. She majored in English at Vassar



College and graduated in 1934, but it was the year her mother died (Schoerke, n.d., ¶ 2–4).

With her inherited family's wealth she was able to live in Europe, Mexico, New York, and Massachusetts. She bought a house in Key West, Florida, where she lived with her lover, Marjorie Stevens. She was briefly hospitalized for depression and alcoholism in 1949. That same year, however, she served as poetry consultant for the Library of Congress and in 1951 won a traveling fellowship from Bryn Mawr College that she wanted to use to sail around the world. She made it as far as Rio de Janeiro, where she lived for 16 years with a nurturing and supportive Brazilian friend, Lota de Macedo Soares. This was a productive and generally happy time for Bishop and de Macedo Soares, as the two could live more openly as a lesbian couple outside of the cultural repression of America (Schoerke, n.d., ¶ 5–9).

In 1956, Bishop won a Pulitzer Prize for a collection of her work, *Poems: North and South*. She won the National Book Award in 1970 for another collection, *The Complete Poems*, which was published in 1969 and which contained many verses concerned with Brazilian culture. However, tragedy struck again that year; depressed over the pressures of her governmental position, de Macedo Soares killed herself. Bishop's alcoholism worsened and she returned to America. Fortunately, a new lover, Alice Methfessel, helped her through the last years of her life. Bishop taught classes at Harvard, New York University, and the University of Washington. She and Methfessel

also managed to travel to the Galápagos Islands, Machu Picchu, Scandinavia, and Greece (Schoerke, n.d., ¶ 10, 12, 14).

On its surface, the poem "Five Flights Up" is a simple lesson in close observation. Before dawn, Bishop gazes out the window of a New York apartment and eventually becomes aware of a bird on a branch and a man with his small dog. [Note: Unfortunately, it was not possible to get permission to reproduce Bishop's poem before press time. Please refer to the work at the PoemHunter.com Web site, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/five-flights-up/>]

Like all things that matter, careful reflection reveals deeper meanings. Bishop's poem is filled with visual messages in adjectives, nouns, and verbs—gray light, bare branch, glassy veins, sits, runs, bounces, fallen leaves, lift—creating a tone of longing and sadness. We are all half-asleep until a bit of violence snaps us awake, but perhaps that is not the way it has to be. For Bishop, however, the description seems apt. Written in 1974, the poem describes a view from Methfessel's apartment at a time when she was relatively content but probably regretted her past (Fountain, 1997, p. 254).

Schlesinger's book should be used to help inspire your students (and yourself) to never forget the power of the ordinary to describe larger social phenomena, to experience the humbling privilege of being invited without reservation into someone's life, to make telling descriptions of persons in words and pictures that enable you to discover how the combina-

tion of the two is far greater than the sum of its parts, and to remember the enormous passions at work when poetry and photography become one.

Bishop died more than 25 years ago, but if she were alive today, I can imagine her and Schlesinger sitting on straight, wooden kitchen chairs near a windowsill, silently waiting for the sun, and then smiling at the innocent and spirited antics of a bird and a dog five flights down.

References

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