

## BUT THE AUTHOR IS DEAD! LIFE WRITING IN ENGLISH STUDIES

Not all academics in English are happy that life writing is in now fashionable inside as well as outside the ivory tower. While mostly we still train students to be highly suspicious of biographical forms of textual interpretation and autobiographical self-expression, the growing flurry of courses on autobiography, biography, letters and diaries may be giving the author a sly kiss of life. Whether Boswell's or Beckham's, the writing and reading of other's lives slips easily into hero worship, slurpy gossip and pop psychology (Veeser). Are literary types who like reading autobiography or biography simply sophisticated voyeurs and navel gazers? The contradiction between the average English lecturer's textual methods and life-writers' truth-pacts may be even starker in departments that also offer practical training in memoir- or biography-writing. Though Creative Writing lecturers tend to see autobiography as a mere springboard for the proper business of making things up, classes abound in discussions of authenticity, expressive voice and factual accuracy that may seem quite at odds with the ideologically-tinted formalism that remains the standard in British literary critical training.

Certainly, the spread of life writing as subject and method poses real challenges to many shibboleths of the literary academy. In its worst guises, it signifies the influence of celebrity culture in an increasingly competitive educational market, tellingly signified by the turn of star professors themselves to confessional *bildungsroman*. (Which reminds me, I must read Terry Eagleton's memoir). But for me, the dramatic rise of life writing studies since the late 1980s is fundamentally a positive sign that universities, and indeed paradigms of knowledge, are becoming more democratic. Now that, finally, the doors are creaking open to women, working class, older or immigrant students and teachers, the lofty voice of impersonal abstraction sounds as pompous and unconvincing as Oz without his screen and speaker. Writing about one's own or others' lives is characteristic of those historically new to the academy not to confess sins but to be seen and to see (Lopate and Collaborative). It is the flowering of a thousand narrative blooms out of disillusionment with liberal humanist and Marxist generalities. In today's pluralist culture, individuals assert that knowledge is by definition conditioned by its context and standpoint, and that head, heart and body are all of its sources. It is significant that much academic interest in autobiographical life writing has come out of women's and race studies networks

(Freedman). Similarly, pedagogical interest in life writing has centred on access and continuing education, where it is a teacher's rule of thumb that engaging a student's life experiences is the best way to motivate their learning (Jolly). Even when life writing takes conservative forms, such as the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the great individual is often subordinate to a deeply collective story and moreover collective scholarship at odds with commercial exchange (Collini). For the defenders of life writing, the job of an academic is not to argue until we arrive at some final objectivity, but to find ways of understanding and living with our differences (Campbell and Harbord).

But in practice, it is not a case of either-or. Studying or writing auto/biographically can fantastically complement humanist, political and formalist strands of cultural study. It is quite possible to start with analyzing a taste for what we believe *really happened* and quickly be jawing away about epistemological and ethical philosophy. Sure, I exploit students' tendencies to revere the shocker Dave Pelzer for being *A Child Called It* (Pelzer), to cry over Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter* (Mahmoody and Hoffer) and shiver with repulsive fascination at Kathryn Harrison's incest survivor narrative *The Kiss* (Harrison). But I push them to frame the powerful emotions that true stories generate with literary questions about the relationship between author, text and history, and the value of aesthetic experiment. I remember vividly how sweet this challenge felt when Julia Swindells first posed it to me when I was an undergraduate in the mid-80s, reading her book on 19<sup>th</sup> century working class women's autobiographies through the lens of Victorian romances and politics (Swindells).

Let me demonstrate my attempt to pass on such sweetness with an account of a recent class I ran as part of my third year undergraduate course at Exeter, 'True Stories'. Students had been asked to read Brian Keenan's marvelous hostage memoir *An Evil Cradling* before the seminar, and I began by asking them simply to come up with what they thought the book 'was about' (Keenan, [An Evil Cradling](#)). Writing up keywords of their responses – 'forgiveness, love, survival' – I note that they have allowed themselves to follow Keenan's agenda of moral and psychological development, perhaps also their own idea of what defines great literature. None of them said: this is the account of an Irish lecturer in literature who was kidnapped by a group Islamic Jihad in Beirut 1986, held hostage for 4 years and released through the intervention of British and Syrian diplomats. I prompt them to consider what we might learn from this memoir if we *do* relate it to the

political history it discusses obliquely, asking them how they relate to current news stories of terrorist kidnappings in the Middle East. The class is filled with confessions of uncertainty, pity, fear: a certain excitement. We all feel that Keenan's interior, philosophical and poetic emphasis counteracts the voyeurist, Manichean world of 'the war on terror'. Keenan, conveniently, has himself commented recently on his disgust at the demonisation of Islam in the Bush era (Keenan, Viewpoint: A Hostage's Story). We link this to the continuing political relevance of his earlier autobiography as a conversion narrative that is structured as spiritual trial rather than revenge narrative. At the same time, we note the evasions this may involve: Irishness becomes his talisman for resisting oppression, but is this to repress his own ambiguities as a Republican Protestant from the North (Whitley)? Does the forcibly inner world of the prison ironically facilitate the grounds for canonically transcendental autobiography? Is the text really as 'universal' as we want it to be? We have begun to appreciate just what is at stake in the literary manipulation of hostage experience.

At this point I show how we can get more technical about that manipulation. Introducing students briefly to the structuralist Gerard Genette's theory of narrative discourse, I draw a horizontal line on the board, beginning at Keenan's birth and ending with 'Keenan now' (Genette). Together we fill in a rough chronology that I name as the 'fabula': the story before its writing. We then visually map the protean line of Keenan's *actual* narrative order. Keenan of course is much too sophisticated to begin *An Evil Cradling* with his birth, plunging us rather into his life's turning point, his attempt to escape depression by leaving Ireland only to land in the hands of murderous kidnappers in Lebanon. Referring to Genette's other criteria for narrative (or *sjuzhet*) design: frequency and duration, mood and voice, we appreciate further Keenan's tantalisingly abject Preface; his stretching out of particular moments of his imprisonment mimicking his hallucinations and eventual moral growth; his repetition of motifs like refusing to shave, his shrinking of other elements of his story, such as what happened after his rescue.

Finally, I invite students to work quietly and privately on mapping a small part of their own life story as first 'fabula', then 'sjuzhet'. Of course I frame this as a potentially sensitive exercise, offering them the choice of choosing someone else's life. I am not surprised that noone politely deigns to pass up the chance of writing about *moi*. The exercise is simple. They too must draw a horizontal line along two sheets, marking their

birth date and then every five years until their present age. They then fill in a few conventional markers: the date and place of their entrance into school for example. Now comes the kick. What would they choose as a turning point of their own, and what would happen if they began telling their life from that point? If they were to write out a narrative, where would they loop in flashback or flashforward; where would they exaggerate or concertina time, move into poetry or satire? We do not discuss any actual experiences in class, merely the idea in general, although I suggest that they continue their 'sjuzhet' at home in a diary or other private writing. This kind of exercise must obviously be ethically squared with an academic setting: I point out we cannot be a therapy group. So I take the discussion back to the intellectual question of whether turning points are primarily a function of story-telling as opposed to psychological experiences (Sheringham). Essay questions provoke further meditations on the interaction between writing and living much more generally.

Academic courses can benefit from such excursions into the personal, partly because we begin to see much more clearly the psychological landscape of the activities of writing and reading themselves. But I do believe it works the other way round too, that is, where practical writing courses dip their toes into the academic. In my masters course 'Writing from Life', I challenge any assumption that life writing is an easier option than fiction through psychoanalytic theories of memory and the unconscious, and the ethical puzzle of representing necessarily relational life stories. We look at hagiography, quest biography, confession or trauma testimony as genres they may wish to write but that also may wish to *write them*. Life writing's wealth of forms are modes of written relationship as historically specific and ideologically driven as any novel, poem or play.

Should we be teaching students to write from the head or heart? Life writing can help us avoid such a false dichotomy, whether it is the object of analysis or a practice. Going through, rather than around, the individual's experience, life writing can open up a dialectic between the particular and the general, experience and theory. Surely this is the key to the study of all literature, whether we call it true, fictional, or simply imaginative.

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