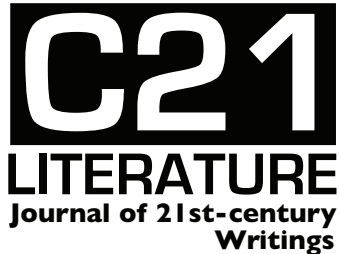




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Review

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REVIEW

Hywel Dix, ed. *Autofiction in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

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The term 'autofiction' was coined by French writer Serge Doubrovsky in his novel *Fils* (1977). It defined the term as distinct from both fiction and traditional autobiography. Since then, the term has become established in French critical discourse, prompting scholarly engagement with texts that blur the boundaries of fiction and autobiography without subscribing to conventions of the autobiographical novel. However, since this point, little attention has been paid to the idea of autofiction in Anglophone literary criticism. In his new essay collection, *Autofiction in English*, Hywel Dix offers a timely overview of a recent field of development and interest in life writing and literary scholarship.

His collection of essays suggests that a growing body of English language autofiction can now be identified and the essays unite to delineate, analyse and critically interrogate this emerging field. Dix's introduction to the volume provides a concise and comprehensive survey of 'Autofiction in English: The Story so Far', tracing its origins in Doubrovsky's work and offers an overview of the French discourse. Dix then describes autofiction's history in an English context, addressing why a study of this phenomenon emerges relatively late in an Anglophone context, due to its initial perception as a genre of low cultural capital, alongside other structural issues, such as politics of translation and gender. Dix proposes that recent developments in life writing scholarship and book publishing have enabled the effective entry of autofiction into the Anglophone context, although works concerning the issues described by autofiction have proliferated without being previously labelled as such.

Autofiction in English is split into four parts: I. Theoretical Approaches, II. Writing After Trauma, III. Rethinking Creativity, and IV. Beyond Postmodernism. Part I on 'Theoretical Approaches' opens with Karen Ferreira-Meyers' consideration of autofiction in a world literature context, exploring the French origin and proliferation of the concept in relation to its development in Anglophone literature. Ferreira-Meyers addresses the conceptual transformations autofiction underwent through the influence of French writers and critics, such as Doubrovsky himself, Gérard Genette, Vincent Colonna, Marie Darrieussecq and Philippe Gasparini. The chapter then continues to identify autofictions *avant la lettre* in works by James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway and James Baldwin, tracing an English language development of the concept into the contemporary moment as exemplified in J.M. Coetzee, Chris Kraus and Ben Lerner. Lorna Martens moves the discussion towards narratological dimensions with regard to third-person autobiographical narrative and Christine Brooke-Rose's *Remake* (1996). Martens closely analyses individual voice and its contamination, contending that third-person autofiction allows for a style that makes the identities of narrator and character difficult to distinguish from one another. *Remake* is presented as a stylistic paradox through Brooke-Rose's use of multiple characters as variants of the self, erasing and also asserting the identity of the author. In the final chapter of this section, Meg Jensen draws further attention to the aesthetics of autofiction by showcasing the multi-layered relationship between art and the human as well as its consequences for human rights and the evocation of empathy. Drawing on Sianne Ngai's aesthetic category of the *interesting* as theorising postmodern relations between process and judgment, Jensen analyses autofiction's transgression of generic boundaries as generating intimacy and humanity, leading towards 'literary empathy'. In its entirety, Part I illustrates autofiction's resistance to definitions and classifications, describing the strengths of its instability and flexibility with regard to complex relationships between national literature and world literature, narrative and identity, aesthetics and ethics.

Autofiction's potential to challenge boundaries is further explored in Part II, 'Writing After Trauma'. Lisa Sheppard examines two examples of postcolonial 'Autoethnography in Post-British Literatures': Charlotte Williams's *Sugar and*

Slate (2002) and Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road* (2010). Sheppard argues that Williams's and Kay's experimental approach to life writing exceeds established definitions of autoethnography as situating the individual in specific social environments. Instead, these texts enact a more flexible understanding of the identities of people and places, thus rethinking the relationship between the self and the social. Olga Michael then considers 'Graphic Autofiction and the Visualization of Trauma in Lynda Barry and Phoebe Gloeckner's *Graphic Memoirs*', arguing that graphic autofiction explores the representation of emotional truths, fragmented memory and retrospectively reconfigured experiences in creative ways. Michael shows how contemporary women's graphic autofiction can render the often silenced narrative of private childhood trauma and the survival of abuse. This is followed by Graham J. Matthews' chapter on 'Illness Narratives and the Consolations of Autofiction' which charts the generic transformation of 'pathography' from clinical descriptions of disease to representations of the patient's lived experience. Drawing on pathographies in writing and performance, Matthews theorises autofiction's scope to embed the hermeneutics of suspicion into its form without discounting the real suffering of individuals. Sarah Foust Vinson then analyses Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) about his experiences in the Vietnam War as an example of autofiction that constructs memory, truth and retelling as processes of blending fact and fiction, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of war trauma.

Part III, 'Rethinking Creativity', approaches autofiction's experimental potential through literary analysis as well as creative and pedagogical practice. Ricarda Menn's chapter 'Unpicked and Remade: Creative Imperatives in John Burnside's Autofiction' sheds light on a contemporary Scottish writer, whose series of autofictional texts has hitherto attracted little scholarly attention. Burnside's *A Lie About My Father* (2006), *Waking Up in Toytown* (2009) and *I Put a Spell on You* (2014) are shown to engender a serialization of identity that challenges conceptions of the narrated self as fixed, factual and stable. Instead, seriality emerges as a distinct mode of autofiction that demonstrates processes of self-fashioning as continuous and ongoing. Turning from close reading to writing practice, Celia Hunt considers empirical research into the impact of using autofictive writing for the education of creative writing students.

Hunt identifies benefits for the personal development of writers in the therapeutic nature of autofiction, analysing its strengths as a 'cognitive emotional tool'. Amelia Walker continues this focus on practice, by exploring the ethical implications and potential of 'Autofictionalizing Reflective Writing Pedagogies'. Walker interrogates the assumption that autofiction may 'strengthen the ethicality of reflective personal writing' by critically analysing Amélie Nothomb's *Fear and Trembling* (2001) and Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle: Book One* (2013). According to Walker, autofiction can reveal the pitfalls of a simplifying narrative paradigm by rejecting certain writing conventions in favour of complex themes and experimental style, thereby enabling a Foucauldian critique of existing power structures in the classroom context.

Part IV of the collection showcases autofiction's potential to rethink or even go 'Beyond Postmodernism'. In this context, Todd Womble discusses Wayne Booth's concept of the 'implied author' and its implications for autofiction with regard to contemporary American texts: Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985), Philip Roth's *Deception* (1990) and Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* (2005). These texts are shown to complicate the distinction between author and implied author, narrator and character to an extent that classical narratological approaches encounter their limits in describing autofictional narrative situations. Alex Belsey reads Will Self's *Walking to Hollywood* (2010) as an autofictional exploration of emotional truths and ethical responses to the use of fictionalization, challenging existing approaches to the text as an exemplary self-reflexive postmodern novel. In the final chapter of the volume, Bran Nicol draws previous arguments about autofiction together by addressing American autofiction more generally, arguing that contemporary autofictions create a counterpoint of self-consciousness to the self-narration of 'reality' TV and social media. In positioning John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut and David Foster Wallace as metafictional precursors to contemporary autofiction, Nicol identifies autofiction's emergence from postmodern metafiction, and in turn metafiction as a possible variation on autofiction. Echoing Ferreira-Meyers's idea from Chapter 2 that Anglophone writers utilise autofiction's techniques and themes in a way that is distinct from approaches by which French writers search for an unattainable truth, Nicol traces a lasting commitment to sincerity in American autofiction's explorations of authorship.

Autofiction in English offers an expansive overview of Anglophone works of autofiction – including a select bibliography of Autofiction in English – in an ambitiously varied and multi-layered cross-section of literary historical, genre-theoretical, narratological, aesthetic, creative and practice-based approaches to analysing and critiquing autofiction. It constitutes an overdue survey of an expanding and popular field in contemporary literature, making it a fruitful resource for both students and scholars of literature and life writing as well as a starting point for further research.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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