

Our Struggle: Reading Karl Ove Knausgård's *Min Kamp*

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04-07-2019

thread: fictions present

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A roundtable discussion hosted by Karl Knausgaard's Alma Mater in Bergen, Norway.

Scott Rettberg: We're here to talk about Karl Ove Knausgård's *Min Kamp / My Struggle*. First let me say a little bit about how this discussion came about:

The reason I started reading Knausgård was actually that when I went back to the States a few years back, Knausgård came up in conversation several times. First, I saw Mark Amerika at the University of Colorado. He's a media artist, a digital literature author, and all he wanted to talk to me about when we were there to talk about digital literature was Knausgård. He had just burned through the first five books of the *Min Kamp / My Struggle* series that summer. I said "Well I haven't touched it yet. But you've convinced me. When I get back to Norway, I'll pick up the first book," and then a couple of weeks later I ran into Søren Pold and that was I guess also at the same time as you had recently read the books. We met in Bremen, again for a digital literature event and all you wanted to talk about was Knausgård and then a few weeks later I saw Nathan Jones, again at a media arts event. He came up to me and said "So have you read Karl Ove Knausgård?" So, I began to see that there was this kind of pattern here.

I think this is interesting in two respects: one is that all these people are people who normally write about media or write about the interface between computation and culture. And yet they also read this series of novels that has nothing to do with computation or digital culture, and is in some ways removed from that, this long writing

project that in many ways represents a sort of return to a style of realism that maybe has more in common in with the early 20th century or the 19th century than it does with a lot of other contemporary literature. And our Fulbright this year, Chris Ingraham, is also here working on digital culture, but his proposed project has to do with Knausgård. Chris?

Chris Ingraham: Yeah, the plan I had when I came over here was to create some digital resources to help minimize barriers to accessibility for the book. But I also wanted to use location-specific aspects of these technologies to make available content relative to specific sites so that readers or fans of Knausgård could go in and learn more about the sites on-site relative to the scenes that are depicted in the book. So, it's sort of envisioning what fan fiction might look like for a book like this and then trying to perform that literally somehow.

Scott Rettberg: And Chris is a Communications researcher. Kjersti Aarstein, can you say a bit about your recent University of Bergen PhD dissertation in Comparative Literature? This is your actual area of research, you are a scholar, now a doctor, of Karl Ove Knausgård—

Kjersti Aarstein: Yes, quite recently. My dissertation is titled "Violence and Visions in the Sixth Volume of *Min Kamp*" (Aarsetin, 2018). It concerns Knausgård's attempt to propose an ethics for life and literature in the sixth volume.

As you know, this volume (Knausgård, 2018) is separated in three parts, two of which continue the story of Karl Ove's everyday life, while one is an essay called "The Name and the Number." I compare these three different parts, with special regard to how the essay sheds light upon the rest of the novel and its reception. For instance, I comment on Knausgård's readings of Paul Celan and Adolf Hitler, through which he implicitly reflects upon the way *Min Kamp* has acquired a remarkably loyal reception.

Scott Rettberg: Loyal, and yet divided too—

Kjersti Aarstein: Almost like a family.

Scott Rettberg: Well I think it's one of the measures of the way that Knausgård is received or has been received in Norway versus in other parts of the world that even your dissertation, a doctoral dissertation, suddenly an aspect of it becomes a kind of a media event.

It seems that controversy is sort of attracted to these books and to Karl Ove Knausgård, in Norway, in a way that it isn't in Denmark or certainly in the US. Maybe we can come back to that but why don't we go around first: Søren, would you like to say a bit about sort of what pulled you into these books to begin with, and why you kept on reading them?

Søren Pold: Yeah, well. I think this Jameson review (Jameson, 2018) that was sent around points to the fact to something towards the end that it's strange you can't stop reading. There is some kind of identification, and misidentification at stake. Which of course for me is also about being about the same age, you know having a similar history, all these kinds of things but I don't—I don't even think that it's personal. I've talked to a lot of people you know who seem to identify with him quite a lot.

So, there is this level of identification. And I think there's also an interesting turn on realism and even this way you could say that it becomes a kind of microsociology. We had a scholar visiting recently, Kristin Veel, from Copenhagen University, and she gave a talk on *Skam* (Shame), the Norwegian television series, where she argues that it's this sort of microsociological way of showing your life that's of course related in some way to social media. That's basically what you do. And it's also in the sense that the narrative doesn't really become coherent—it's not a great Modernistic narrative where everything makes sense at a certain stage. It's more like micronarratives or micro stories and you could say that accounts for the concept. You know, we just sort of end at the beginning at the end, right? But then suddenly we're here, when he's publishing the first novels, and he writes about that. And it ends with him saying he'll revel in "the thought that I am no longer a writer" (Knausgård, 2018, 1153). So, it's also some kind of anti-ending. And he also claims already in the first volume that it's anti-fiction, right? So, there is this kind of interesting turn on realism that I think is timely, you know, it has something to do with this sort of social media atmosphere we're living in—both in the sense of what it describes but also in this turn on narration and identity. But there was also just this sense that I just couldn't let go. You just keep on reading.

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, I mean I think there's definitely something to the sheer monumentality of the work and also the sort of drive to completionism that pulls you in. It was set out that he was doing this his task over this period and writing, you know, an insane amount of words every day and you feel like you need to ride along, even though parts of it, we could argue, are boring, you know, some parts of it are very much about the quotidian and maybe not even the quotidian of a protagonist who you always identify with. You know, there are many descriptions of conversations for example that Knausgård has had over the years with his best friend Geir. Sometimes these conversations were interesting but sometimes it was just like ok—let's leave the coffee shop now, shall we? Can we move on to the next plot event...?

Joseph Tabbi: Because it's like 7:30 in the morning here in Chicago and I've just finished my coffee, there's a couple of passages about coffee I want to read out a little bit later. Because they illustrate, ah, very little.

And that's partly what I want to get at with Knausgård's self. There's really very little identification necessary with the self that Knausgård presents. Jameson makes one kind of incidental point about that in the review where he writes: "Oddly enough none of this leads us to the center of this dispersed and seemingly random meditation which is the absent you itself." So, we've got all this stuff about Knausgård. But there's never any

attempt really to bring in our readerly subjectivity. I think that's the part of Jameson's review that was most interesting to me in that Knausgård's self is one that doesn't make an attempt to convince me or to engage me. So that's one thing is the self without such intersubjectivity.

Jameson also makes a good point about the lists and you can see Jameson's getting frustrated with all of this listing, you know one damn thing after another. And when it comes to Knausgård's self, he's really just listing items. When he's drinking coffee, he smells the coffee and there's his breath, also. Okay. We don't learn anything about this person and that would be the same with the coffee I drank this morning. So, you know, a lot of what he's doing is neutral and a lot of the world that he's describing is neutral also.

And it's very object-oriented. So even though he doesn't have a lot of direct involvement with social media, I don't think, or with digital reflections, there's that presentation of the world as a list of neutral objects without the need for author/reader communication, that I think is very coherent with a lot of what's happening in the digital.

Kjersti Aarstein: I would have to disagree with you when you say that the text lacks intersubjectivity. Even though it's true that there's very little room for the reader in it, partly because we are hardly called to interpret in an active manner. All we have to do is to follow the train of thought. But there's an intense call to the reader to like Knausgård, and a plea to think that he's sympathetic and that he is someone we have to—not pity but sympathize with in a sense that is close to pitying. We are even called to admire him because he's so morally conscious. I think that the reader—as an other—is very present in the sense that we are being pulled hard and close up to his perspective, at least until we come to the essay in the sixth volume, where that changes.

Scott Rettberg: Once we get to Hitler—

Nathan Jones: It does seem to be like the reader is present, or the readership anyway, if you think about the books as a media event. There's almost like two readerships, really distinct ones. One would be the Norwegian readership, on whom the book lands and sort of explodes and all kind of things happen to: all kinds of moral disagreements, things that directly happen to his family as a result of his book kind of landing in Norwegian society. And then us (non-Norwegian) readers who as you pointed out, Scott, who aren't part of that world, and aren't reading it as much for the sort of voyeuristic view of Knausgård as a celebrity.

Scott Rettberg: I think in Norway, certainly, there's been this kind of perception of transgressions in Knausgård, ethical transgressions, or transgressions against Norwegian-ness in a way. When you do things like write about your family in a way that's negative—

Søren Pold: He hates Swedes more though— (smiles)

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, but I was going to say that there's also this fact, that for Norwegians there's a sense, that well there is Ibsen and now there's Knausgård. You

know, he's become the contemporary lionized cultural figure and there are not that many in Norwegian culture. You know, there's Edvard Grieg, and there's Henrik Ibsen and there's Ole Bull and you know maybe Ludvig Holberg—

Chris Ingraham: Knut Hamsun seems like a better analogue—

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, and of course Hamsun's another difficult figure. But I think part of that reaction is just like "Why is this, how did this happen? Why has he become our national author?" Does that make sense to you, Kjersti?

Kjersti Aarstein: Sure. I suppose that's a recent move, which is interesting because all of the sudden his success is not debatable. Earlier on, many people were sort of pulling their hair out, and saying "Could no one have stopped him from doing this? Could no one have stopped him from writing at this pace and in this way?" And now they are like, ok, the world has accepted this, so it's good. Some of them are perhaps a bit too eager to defend him now.

Scott Rettberg: Anyway, in Norway it does circle back to this ethical question. But I think that's also sort of ironically part of the identification. So, we see him as an ethical figure because he is wrestling with his own, what he considers to be, ethical transgressions. Right? Which again are these transgressions of authorship: to say "All right, I'm going to write my absolute truth and my absolute truth includes naming, you know, naming all the bad things that happened in my family, and you know, calling out the people who I knew whose actions led to bad circumstances in my existence, even naming myself, saying I did these bad things to people and I feel, I feel horrible about it..." at the same time as I think he is hyper-self-aware of the fact that to write is always to write fiction. This wasn't marketed as an autobiography, right?

Kjersti Aarstein: It wasn't marketed as fiction, either. It was marketed as a novel.

Søren Pold: There was this section that I reread last night where he says that what he wants to do is to fight fiction with fiction. Which is this strange sort of paradoxical realism: "I'll just keep on writing, but the writing is both the solution and the problem."

Kjersti Aarstein: I think this refers not to *Min Kamp* but to his earlier novels, where he was actually writing fiction. So, he is reflecting upon this: "I was trying to fight fiction with fiction but now I have to do something else."

Scott Rettberg: Maybe to continue a little bit on this thread though, I was remembering a conversation that I had with you some years back, Søren, about mimesis. Where would you situate *Min Kamp* within the spectrum of mimesis?

Søren Pold: Did I say something interesting a couple of years ago?

Scott Rettberg: I remember you emphasizing that mimesis was never actually about pure representation, or that realism was in your view as much a critique of the framing of reality as other types of work, postmodern fiction, that are more explicitly about that.

Søren Pold: I think that's especially true for the first volume and maybe the last volume, which is a volume about books, including his own.

In the first volume he is thinking about— there is this urge to get to the real truth even though he knows that, for example he doesn't remember his childhood. And his version of—he also knows, like—I think you're right about this sort of urge to like him. There is this urge in the writing for you to like him but at the same time he's also full of shame and self-hatred or even knowing you know that his writing is not good, that he can't succeed as a writer on this kind of stuff that is endless.

Kjersti Aarstein: But does that not make you like him? You pity him, you want to say, "Oh, please don't be so hard on yourself?"

Søren Pold: I think you're right, but even this relates to his realism with all its itemization and microsociology. It is this attempt to think about how to be a realist today. At least in part of the book, that you know, by just continuing to write, instead of editing your writing, you just continue to write. He had to simply just write and write and write rather than edit a lot or be very self-critical. And of course, it's also a book about, you know, whatever, the first-world male identity and all the problematic aspects of that which of course also makes somebody like me identify.

You know, he's trying to be a father and failing. And all these kind of things are part of the book. He's trying to be a husband, which also has some issues.

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, and it's you know, in a way, a kind of *pitiful* struggle, is one way of putting it, yet one that we all identify with to some degree: I need to be an artist and I need to be a father and I need to be this and that. Well yeah, Karl Ove, you should do those other things while you're being a writer.

But it's also this performance: to be a writer is to write every day and then you know in the end he's kind of coming to this conclusion that to be a writer is to—in the end I think there's a sort of *cri de couer* of regret that to be a writer is to have sort of ruined his family when he's thinking of his, you know, absorbing some of the blame at least for his wife's breakdown. You know, even presaging an era when his children will hate him....

Kjersti Aarstein: That's all so strange, because to be a writer does not necessarily mean to ruin your family. But when Karl Ove Knausgård says he wants to be truthful, or he wants to be honest, he identifies truth with pain. What is supposed to convince us in this sixth volume at least that we are confronted with the truth, or a true story about his life is the claim that the novel has been so painful. Pain, in this context, means actually, what it real.

Nathan Jones: Yeah. That's a really interesting point to make as well when you look at his reading of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. He's watching [the film] *Shoah*

A 1985 French documentary film about the Holocaust, directed by Claude Lanzmann.

, at this point at the end of "The

Name and the Number."

The second part of the sixth volume of Knausgård's *Min Kamp* is a long essay on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

You can tell that this final book has been produced in a very short period of time, and the writing – like, the intellectual engagement with the material – is really quite poor. He's conflating his ability to watch *Shoah*, and to read Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and implying that thinking about them somehow automatically implies that he's able to kind of self-reflectively look at the ethics of his own project, because he's putting himself through the watching of these films and suffering the angst of it.

I think at this point he really misses an opportunity. He doesn't ever seem to quite come to grips with the sort of latent — the, like, whiteness of this book that he's produced and he doesn't deal with Hitler's legacy and calling his book *Min Kamp* in a way that like deals with the truth of that or resolves the ethical question, or the questions I think are raised at the start when he says of Africa—"cut them off, leave them all to it. Close the continent." (Knausgård, 2018, 195). There's quite a lot of latent fascism in some of those things he says at the start of the final book, which isn't resolved or dealt with in the closing sections in a way that a more considered, patient enquiry might have done.

And then you sort of think: well, it makes you feel uncomfortable, and maybe that is part of the project. But does it really make you feel comfortable, sort of like: you can think these things while also not being fascist? I think when it comes to the point at which those things might be resolved in an essay in the final book, you can tell this has been written really quickly, and that he assumes he's going to be able to deal with those things in an easy way, you know in a performative way and it's kind of—

Scott Rettberg: He's going to try to create within himself this kind of sense of empathy. I do think there is this sort of—

Kjersti Aarstein: Not in the essay, no. I don't think so.

Knausgård's perspective on fascism, Hitler and the Second World War goes through Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil (Arendt, 1994).

In this perspective, the most dangerous thing is neither an evil person nor a fascist ideology, but the compliant followers, who interpret in a very trustful and loyal way. If you take this into account, Knausgård's reading of Hitler implies a critique of parts of his own reception and its loyal approach to *Min Kamp*.

Chris Ingraham: That's why it makes sense as a transition to the third part where you come back, and after having written the first four books, he's now famous. To me the key concept here is less identification than form. I think of Kenneth Burke's work on identification (Burke, 1969) where he sort of shifts the rhetorical from the model of persuasion to identification: we are influenced by those that we identify with. But Burke, also in his early stuff, when he was a literary critic, talked about form as the creation and satisfaction of an appetite.

And I think one of the things Knausgård's trying to do is collapse the self into the writing process. So, there is very little remove between what's on the page and life as it's lived. But that process is doomed to failure. That's where the mimetic comes in. I mean you inevitably fail at that. And so that's where some of the speed of it comes across in the page and to me that's where it emerges from a digital culture even though he's not writing about it. I mean I'm thinking of Facebook posts where it's like updates all the time.

Now you feel kind of like it's happening quickly almost like you can be scrolling down through this, skipping through it instead of horizontally across it somehow.

To me the book is intriguing for a number of reasons, but one is that it maps onto something like post-hermeneutic readings that you get in like German media theory instead of trying to interpret the text itself you begin to think about what it is that conditions that possibility. So, the book sets out a way of reading it that says well let's look at the book's relationship to the writing process, to its own reception. And I mean, think about it: if you read reviews of the book or the more academic takes on the book, they will often involve quoting Knausgård's own interviews as a way to do an interpretative move to understand the book. That doesn't happen often in a lot of literary criticism where you rely on what the author says. Here we assume that there is very little distinction between the Knausgård on the page and the flesh and blood person. And I think that's the form he set up for us, the appetite he set up, to make this thing as flat, the difference as little as possible between the person and the page and that's where the Hitler thing becomes so important. Didn't he choose to name it *Min Kamp* before he'd read Hitler's book?

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, he decided that he should read Hitler's book because he'd used the title.

Chris Ingraham: Yeah, like, I'd better read this. So, then I could read the Hitler stuff as kind of this post-hoc: "Well, how can I then justify my project by reading Hitler in a particular way, as," how does he talk about it, "between the I and the We?"

Kjersti Aarstein: Actually, he does not justify his project through Hitler. He *criticizes* his project through Hitler.

Scott Rettberg: Although again, what I was saying about empathy was not that, at that point, that he was crying out for you to empathize with him, but that his act there was to say all right I'm going to do this, this really difficult thing, or really two things: I'm going to try to empathize. I'm going to watch *Shoah* to have empathy with the victims of the Holocaust but I'm also going to read *Mein Kampf* and I'm going to start with a position of empathy with Hitler. Not that he's saying: "I want to be like Hitler," but he wants to understand where did Hitler come from? How did Hitler become the person that he became?

So, he starts out, you know, really not prejudging that figure. He's coming in and saying what were the factors of Hitler's existence? And in many cases, he's saying a lot of these factors of Hitler's existence map very closely to very similar factors of Knausgård's, his own existence.

Chris Ingraham: And his dad's existence, right? In a way, his dad becomes this sort of synecdoche for Hitler. Because his dad is the one with the Nazi pin and the copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. At least in the first volumes, Knausgård's dad is really the thing that drives him to write, the crisis. His dad dies, and his dad's been this haunting figure his whole life. And that's how we get the inroad into Hitler. It's from the dad.

Kjersti Aarstein: And still, when Knausgård reads Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, he's not only interested in the story, the narrative of it. He's interested in the rhetorical dimension. What repels him about *Mein Kampf* is not necessarily Hitler's fascism or anti-Semitism, but the way Hitler compels the reader to agree with him.

The lack of readerly freedom in *Mein Kampf* has a counterpart in *Min Kamp*, only Hitler couldn't manage to effectuate it. Not in *Mein Kampf*, anyway, but Knausgård claims that Hitler's speeches were all the more convincing, as they engaged the audience in an emotional way: The audience is supposed to have felt sorry for Hitler, and to have wanted to give over to him.

Scott Rettberg: Or to fill themselves, to create this idea of the folk, that they could fill themselves with, through him.

Kjersti Aarstein: Sure, but one of Knausgård's main theses is that Hitler did not manage to convince his followers because he was so confident and well-articulated, but because he appeared to be vulnerable.

Scott Rettberg: Yeah vulnerable, not the sort of male figure that would be a hero, or even an attractive figure in the conventional sense, but someone who was—to be taken under the wing.

Nathan Jones: And there's also this thing that Knausgård says—one of the things that set the conditions for Hitler's ability to be so inhumane, was that he puts something outside of humanity that could be more important than humanity, and by doing that—I think he gives the example of Germany, like nation being more important than any individual within it—by putting something outside of humanity you set up the possibility for extreme behavior because all of a sudden any single life can be sacrificed to that. And so that it was it seems to me that he was pointing to, that move of Hitler's that preceded his anti-Semitism, and in fact he points to those places in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* where he's not an anti-Semite and he decides to become an anti-Semite in order to meet these nationalist aims that he has...

Scott Rettberg: That's also about the creation of an other, a move that is very familiar today.

I mean I'd just make a quick note. I don't know if it's true, but it has been said that one of the few books that that Donald Trump has actually read is a book of Hitler's speeches (Kentish, 2017), right? His ex-wife said he kept this book in his nightstand. I don't know how true that is, but that was certainly something that was said.

And you can certainly see that this sort of othering is a common practice now and that's where I thought that the rhetorical analysis here is extremely relevant today. And the rhetorical appeal of the sort of pitiful aspect of his character is also familiar. I mean this figure who is you know almost comic in his failures and maybe you sort of identify, you know maybe he creates a sense of identification through those failures—

Kjersti Aarstein: However, Nathan's observation sheds light on *Min Kamp*, as Hitler's willingness to sacrifice everything for the idea of the Third Reich echoes in Knausgård's willingness to sacrifice a lot for his idea of the novel that is close to real life.

Nathan Jones: Exactly. So, Knausgård puts something above, something that is more important than the people in his life—the book—which is this striking part of the project. And that, you know, I think that becomes quite stark in the end. He doesn't square that circle at all, he just leaves that. He critiques it through Hitler and then just does it, and it does seem maybe to set up a dangerous precedent in a way.

Søren Pold: But maybe— I think it kind of relates to this, you know, what does it mean to be a privileged male in Northern Europe? (and we could count in Northern America). And as you said it's pretty much a book about the I versus the We, or the identity versus the social. And you know, you don't have to be a sociologist to conclude that there is this issue of the mass, or the social or whatever you want to call this this entity that is problematic again in a way that reminds us of the 1930s. That you had these issues of populism politically, but also, I think that we have the same problems with figuring out what is the social, and how can the social be a political factor in a good way? As it was, well, maybe after the Wall came down, for example.

And of course, with social media and in general computation, we've become what Deleuze would call *dividuals*, right? We are measured, we are quantified. But where does the We go? Where is the We on Facebook? There is no we, there's only *dividuals*, right? Like the We on social media, Facebook, Twitter or whatever. And in that sense, I think it is also a way to try to understand, you know, what is my relation to Hitler, as a Northern male? You know, in the context of what we see recurring. And this is problematic in all sorts of ways. But there might be no way around re-reading Hitler, or re-reading fascism. It seems to be here again. We have to understand it again. The post-war period has ended. So suddenly these monsters are back. They're back in every country. Of course, Trump, but you know, the Danish People's Party, or Sweden Democrats, or—

Joseph Tabbi: They're back in every country, I agree, Søren. But the construction of the We is different from the 1930s. I just happen to have in front of me a description of Facebook that John Lanchester gave in the *London Review of Books* (Lanchester, 2017). "Facebook in particular displays an inherent tendency to fragment and atomize its users

into like-minded groups." And that seems to me more what the We looks like, what the imagined We is like also in Knausgård. That feels more coherent to me than any demagoguery of the Hitler mode or other modes. It's more as Chris was saying, a scrolling, it's more like we're reading a continuing scrolling that is coherent within the Facebook mode where your identity is, you know, just giving a few quick coherent—or incoherent, it doesn't really matter—opinions or situations, or what-I-ate-last-night, who I visited. This is the way it works. And here again I think is another deep coherence of Knausgård's imagination or non-imagination of a We, a limited imagination of a We or you. And when it comes to the I, what we have in Knausgård is an I that is written, that's what the I is reduced to in the five books, it's a project of writing, and that's what we identify with, just like when we identify with people in social media. It's a continual writing of lives that everybody on Facebook and Twitter is doing

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Note from Scott Rettberg: Knausgård describes himself avoiding the Internet, but he comments on this phenomena of self-writing in social media in the sixth volume: "The notion that to be seen is to be seen by many, in the media, as a name with a particular aura, has become so prevalent that almost everyone I know has begun to treat their name as something that not only denotes who they are, replete with meaning beyond their control, but also an advertisement of their own idea of who they are, setting up profiles on Facebook and furnishing their name with a certain air by inserting it in certain contexts, not unlike the way in which a brand is built up or a pop star constructed" (Knausgård, 2018, 402).

. Again, I'd say that that's where the coherence is. That's where the social imaginary is.

Scott Rettberg: I want to pause, and come back to that, but I know that Kjersti needs to leave shortly—to do a radio interview about Knausgård. There is also this sort of elephant in the room, which is male identity, that I think we haven't really addressed thoroughly enough here. Part of what I thought was interesting about Knausgård is this return in a way to the concerns of these male identity novels of the 1970s or 80s, these sort of monumental books. And I was wondering too, when we say there's this identification, and there's this sort of white, middle-class, male identification, I was wondering, did you have any sense of a gendered sensibility within the novel and is there something othering about Knausgård's perspective on gender, in your view?

Kjersti Aarstein: It's a good question. And actually, I think that any female literary scholar who has read the western canon will be very used to being othered in that sense, but still, also very used to identifying with the typical male protagonist, the typical white heterosexual male protagonist of western fiction. Actually, I think in *Min Kamp*, this is very much up front. In the sixth volume, Knausgård mentions that all the charismatic people we can think of are androgynous. In his opinion, this is the most compelling quality of Hitler's appearance, and also his father's appearance. It's not this harrowing male with an intractable and strong expression, but the openness, the vulnerability and other female characteristics. Knausgård finds the androgynous expression highly seductive. And I think this is very apparent—

Scott Rettberg: Certainly, in his reading of Hitler.

Kjersti Aarstein: Yeah, and it's also very apparent in his self-representation.

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, and the fact that he spends a lot of time writing about picking out shirts—

Chris Ingraham: Having photos taken of himself...

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, there's an interest in his own vanity.

Kjersti Aarstein: I think it's easy, for me at least, to identify, but I'm not sure whether I identify or just release myself into his perspective, in a sense.

Scott Rettberg: Yeah and maybe fill in those gaps with your own biography.

Chris Ingraham: Well that's where the quotidian becomes so useful, because we can all relate to, I don't know, looking, or people watching, or having to choose something to buy at the supermarket and looking at what the best price is, and this and that, these details that just fill our everyday life. That's a big part of the story here. And maybe that's what Joe was getting at with some of the object-oriented stuff here. We're displacing some of the identification onto these things or processes of the everyday, and it doesn't usually work that way. In other stories, those objects are what get displaced onto the narrative or plot.

Scott Rettberg: Thanks, Kjersti. She needs to go talk on the radio now

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Aarstein, Kjersti. "Tolker inn drapsanklage i Min Kamp." NRK *Dagsnytt* 18, 26 Nov., 2018 <https://www.nrk.no/kultur/tolker-inn-drapsanklage-i-min-kamp-1.14312336>

. Good luck with the media stage of your dissertation.

Søren Pold: There is this dimension, as you say, the object-orientation. There is this dimension which I think is in some way the most interesting part of the novel, where this sort of micro-sociology, just of making coffee, you know, looking at stuff, suddenly becomes an essay, which is in my opinion often more interesting. Some of the most boring parts are where he tries to discuss being a writer. You know, been there, done that. I think it's more interesting when he discusses making coffee.

Scott Rettberg: Well, or being a reader, too. That's another aspect of the essayism of the book that is sometimes a dud, but sometimes really interesting. For instance, when you said, Nathan, that it wasn't a very good essay in some senses—

Nathan Jones: I think there's a danger of treating the whole project homogenously. And it is a very uneven one.

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, it definitely is. And part of what's compelling about it, is that it casts us back in a way—and Joe will probably have more to say about essayism—but I think that part of essayism is about reading. And it's very much the case that when Knausgård runs out of something to write at the moment, and he knows that everyday he's going to write X number of pages anyway, that what he does is he looks at his bookshelves and he pulls off a book from the shelf and he says, "I remember reading this," and he starts writing about that book. So, *Min Kamp* is very much about his subjectivity as a reader, not just as a writer, and I think a lot of those parts are the most interesting or the most productive in the book.

Nathan Jones: Yeah, the Celan essay is worth mentioning on that basis. That reading of Celan's poem is just incredible, especially seeing that he prefaces it by saying "I got nothing out of the poetry I read," that for him "It was as if poems were written in code," (Knausgård, 2018, 422), and then he goes straight into this very rigorous and fascinating, in fact virtuoso reading...

Joseph Tabbi: But that massive lack is real. And the way that he accesses Celan is more like what Scott described. He reaches up and takes a book off the shelf. I think the essays are some of the best parts in the corpus actually. But one reason they're some of the best is that we've got the writer reflecting on other writers, which is what writing is. And that's enacted very... I wouldn't say powerfully. If it was too powerful it would be something like "This is the literary canon that I am entering." And that's exactly what Knausgård is *not* doing. He's not regarding these works, the Celan, the others he's writing about, as being in any way canonical. They're simply available, another item on the list. So, I guess Nathan, my sense of the narrative is a little more homogeneous than you want it to be. And the homogeneity is that he never allows the day-to-day and the narrative of the self to enlarge. He doesn't enlarge the narrative into canonicity, he doesn't enlarge the narrative into subjectivity, and definitely not into where a group gets together and forms a political party or large political change. And he never allows things to generalize into religion. You know, that's one thing I wanted to talk about, is where Jesus Christ does appear, in this one passage when he's drinking coffee. But I'll hold on to that for a minute. I've made my general point. The fact that he's writing about his everyday writing life, that really gives it a homogeneity, I think.

Scott Rettberg: Although, to push a little bit against that, one of the ways that I find him interesting as a writer is that, within this fairly limited register of realism, if you do go through the books, if you work through all of them, you will see these fairly significant stylistic changes within that limited register. So, the book about boyhood (Knausgård, 2014) is written in a quite different type of style, and he's trying to adopt this naïveté in the voice that carries you back to the sensations of childhood. If we come back to his realism, there's this kind of rediscovery of the potential for stylistic variation within that limited range. And that's where I see a real accomplishment as a writer.

Nathan Jones: And to compare that as well to the last book, especially the last two, to the first one, which he consciously talks about rewriting, in the last book he's talking about rewriting the first one, not just to change the names and the things like that that he needs to do, but he really reworks that book. And there's a stylistic choice there to this explicitly performative thing of the six weeks per novel. I think it's the last two. So, they're different projects to me, you know they read differently, and they sort of have something of, as Kjersti says, this truth and pain exercise that he's going through, which the first one definitely doesn't. That just seems to be the image that we have of these books as this triumph of the quotidian sort of thing. He manages to really deal with the small things in life. And that's how he got me addicted to him, in a way. The last one was spoiled for me by the (lack of) politics, in a way. But stylistically, there's also a big gap. The last two were written at speed, and the first one not. They're different in that way.

Scott Rettberg: Again, and maybe to come back now to Joe, to your point or in a way to your earlier theory, I'd say, in *Cognitive Fictions* (Tabbi, 2002) where you're thinking about self-reflexive autopoiesis, which is this sort of creation of the self through writing. Your theory there actually resonated a lot with me as I was reading Knausgård, because there is this sense that the reason why he felt driven to write these books was that he didn't know himself. And he couldn't really know himself until he *wrote* himself. This sort of goes along with, if we think about Harry Mathews' *The Journalist* (Mathews, 1994), or other books like this, where in order to structure reality or structure consciousness this person needs to take notes on every aspect of his day, and these systems become more and more complex until they take over his life.

Joseph Tabbi: Yeah, Mathews is the reference point for Knausgård, not Proust. Just for the reasons you gave. That really is, I hadn't thought of it, but that's really the mode here. *Twenty Lines a Day* (Mathews, 1989), *The Journalist*, it's that kind of journalistic, essayistic practice, you know, twenty lines a day, Mathews is practicing. Out of the twenty lines, some of them will be good, some of them will be not good, and occasionally some of them will take off. Maybe. So that's very much the mode. And you can put that mode under constraints also. Although Mathews' peers said that Mathews' constraints were the craziest of all in the Oulipo group. And nobody really knew what they were. But still, you know, the freedom of the form, you know, write what's in your head and write every day, and let things emerge as they will, you know, that's consistent not with some notion of freedom but the opposite: with the constraining, the idea that there are all kinds of material constraints, and those material constraints are the object world, the world that is machinic, and it's in the machinery of the world, and it's kind of reflecting that in how you write. You know, it's a self-making, but it's a self-making that doesn't deny that the self is another object moving around in this world.

I did want to cite just one paragraph, to see how Knausgård gets from the most ordinary to the largest, but he keeps the large within the same realm as the ordinary. That to me is when he's having his coffee. This is on page 191 of Book One, so part two of Book One: "I unscrewed the lid of the coffee tin, put two spoonfuls in my cup, and poured in the water, which rose up the sides, black and steaming, then I got dressed" (Knausgård, 2012). I can verify that it's true, as this morning before this conversation, at 6:30, I did the same. That is real, I can verify. Then the next line, I'm not sure. "Before going out I stood in such a way that I could see the face on the wooden flooring." This is a studio apartment that he has, and he'd noticed a page before that the wooden floor looked like Jesus. It looked like, you know, the crown of thorns. "And it really was Christ. The face half-averted, as though in pain, eyes downcast, the crown of thorns on his head." So that's how he gets religion in. It's, you know, a pattern on the floor. That's how he gets politics in. It's material structures there that you see in passing. And that's where I think you get some of the spirit. But part of the spirit is he never generalizes, you know, he never enlarges that to religion, canon, political party.

Scott Rettberg: Well in that case, when he's seeing Jesus, he's seeing himself.

Chris Ingraham: The long hair...

Scott Rettberg: Well yeah, he is, he's seeing himself, he's seeing his crown of thorns, and he's seeing his pain.

Chris Ingraham: It's not only entering by way of the object world. It's specifically not entering by way of the symbolic. This is one of those instances that we have in life when we think we see something, or you see a face in a cloud or something like that. And in the context of the novel, in the reality of the novel, this is not a symbol for the religious. Like you say, this doesn't evolve to something larger. It's just a return to the everyday, to something that we've lost track of again in the following page. So, it's not a recurring motif, it's just one of those things that sort of punctuates our day in a particular way.

Scott Rettberg: Shall we come back to say something more of the relationship to the media? I mean, I think that it's exactly right that part of the appeal of these books is that they offer another take on the same process that's involved in self-construction through social media, although it's this more hermetic type. You know, we know exactly who the actors are within Knausgård's social network, we know all of his friends. They don't need to be enumerated for us by a corporation because they're all described very closely in the text. Other thoughts on that maybe?

Chris Ingraham: Yeah, I have something I thought I'd say about that. So, after reading the Jameson essay I began thinking about lists and itemization relative to the Knausgård books, and I thought of an argument that Umberto Eco makes in his book on lists (Eco, 2009), which is that, in Homer, you get two versions of representation at the very outset of the western canon or something. You have Achilles's shield, which depicts the entire cosmos on it in a finite set. I mean it shows the heavens, it shows the seasons, so you get time represented. And you have these ever-outward circles, the rings of a shield that depict agriculture and war cities and so forth, and the idea is that the whole universe is contained, represented on the shield. So, the idea is that representation can be successful and conclusive. And then you get a different version of representation, in Eco's argument, in the Trojan battle order, which lists the weapons that are used, the people that fought, the names of the ships, and it's always inconclusive, it's always sort of a dot, dot, dot ends it. So, it suggests that, no, you can't possibly contain all the things that are there. And I was trying to think about which, if we buy this hypothesis that these are two different variations, which version do we get with Knausgård? And I think you get kind of a collapsing of the two if that's somehow possible. So, I'd put it in terms of the arguments about database versus narrative that you get in, like, Lev Manovich makes that argument in one of his books (Manovich, 2001). And there's a logic of the database here with this list, this quantification, this sort of daily "here's what I did" or "here's the aspects of my life" that can just go on and on and on. You know, think about big data. It's potentially infinite, and there are patterns in it that we rely on neural networks to figure out because they're too big for humans to understand. In some ways, then, Knausgård is just presenting this big data and you can interpret it how you want, or you can interpret it a different way or not.

Joseph Tabbi: Yep.

Chris Ingraham: On the other hand, his self-reflective moves are showing that making sense of a whole, or the parts of a whole that we have access to, that's how we live. That's what life is about, is reflecting, trying to be a better person, trying to take moments of joy in your coffee or in the cross on the floor. So that was a tension for me that was in the book that's related to digital culture.

Joseph Tabbi: Footnote on that. When we have data versus narrative, that really is an opposition. And the thing about data in Knausgård and in contemporary culture is that it does not require belief. Object-oriented ontology is not about belief. It's not about "I believe in you and you need to believe in me." It's not about, you know, I believe in a larger spirit. It's about the data speaks for itself, or so we imagine. So that too is consistent with this kind of hesitation to move into any kind of intersubjective belief realm. Narrative, on the other hand, that's where beliefs tend to emerge. If you read Galen Strawson, *Against Narrativity* (Strawson, 2008), he says narrative is really about believing in yourself or having others want to believe in you. That's a reductive move, but the focus on the self usually does require telling stories and these stories have a meaning. I think that Knausgård's self is *not* that self, it's not a narrative self, it doesn't have a larger meaning. You know, the things Karl Ove lists irritate a lot of the people that know him. And the books have a lot of stuff about Karl Ove Knausgård that we know. But it's never about enlarging that understanding into a narrative. And I think that's a helpful distinction. And that was much longer than a footnote.

Scott Rettberg: It's also about, you know, the struggle that's described—what drives his narrative, or the desire to create a narrative—is the desire to create a self. So, I think part of the exercise of listing all these facts and his description of his essentially alienated relationship to other people, to the world, to Bergen, to Stockholm, to all the places he lives, is that desire to create a self where he can't sense one. There's always this sense of alienation. And I think that ultimately, when you get to the end of this series, the real crux of it is "I have tried to create a self, or a self that I can tolerate, and to a large extent I've ultimately failed." I mean, this is the end of the book, right, this sort of, I've gone to all this effort and—

Chris Ingraham: I'm no longer a writer.

Scott Rettberg: I'm no longer a writer, and everything around me is ruined. And at the end of it I'm not actually sure that I have a self. I don't have the father, but maybe I also don't have a self.

Chris Ingraham: I like the idea of trying because that's the root of the essay, right? "I try."

Scott Rettberg: "I assay."

Søren Pold: Maybe it's an autofictional essay, that doesn't really give an understanding of his life as also Schmitt and Kjerkegaard has discussed (Schmitt & Kjerkegaard, 2016).

You know the quote Joe just read is also funny because it reminds him of his childhood, when he saw this figure on the water on the television, which he had actually forgotten. You know, everything is a void. He's sort of an anti-Proust, right? You know, it's not that this cake reminds me of something which is suddenly alive. It's just the hole of having forgotten everything, and it sort of becomes paratextual until the end when we start off hearing of the novel appearing and all of the problems that creates. Yeah, in that sense it's trying to get to an experience, but it stays in the paratextual to some degree. And it's trying to look into the horror of particular stories like Hitler, of course, and even trying to use them as a mirror into the social, or for trying to understand the quarrel with the social. And you know it does get further because there are more texts, but there's no sort of big narrational understanding of anything. He just tries to touch all the problems that are in being who he is, who we are, but without finishing the story really.

Scott Rettberg: Well maybe this is a place to get back to where do we situate this work? Somewhere back in 19th century, or back to Romanticism, or through realism and modernism and postmodernism, where? Because one of my reflections, or one of the things that compelled me about this, was the difficulty of pinning it down. There are certainly a lot of aspects of modernism, but a kind of flat modernism in terms of referentiality. There's a lot of obvious reflexivity when we have the last book as the story of the first book and the story of its reception. So, I'm curious, because it's like taking a 19th century approach or writer and then sticking them into postmodernism. The society itself is the postmodern that's evoked. So, I thought I'd throw that out there and ask how you would situate the novel in relation to modernism and postmodernism, etc.?

Nathan Jones: I think that's a really interesting question is where these books are situated, not just historically, with him as a male, right, but just among his contemporaries and other big books of this time, big literary events of his time, and how exactly they may give us a glimpse at the particularities of this book and how it could have been done in other ways. Because there's a temptation sort of thing to say it's quite an original gesture what he's done stylistically and sort of conceptually. But it does sit alongside the conceptual writing project. I think you can read elements of it alongside like Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget* (Goldsmith, 2002). I thought that would be interesting to Chris because that was digitized also, as a way of making it accessible.

Chris Ingraham: I haven't seen *Fidget*. What's the project?

Nathan Jones: Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget*, which was a project where he just sat for 24 hours I think and wrote everything, every movement his body made actually. But that got into a digital project online on Ubuweb. So, for me parts of it are a bit like that, but then it's part of an autofiction tradition that we're in the middle of now with Elena Ferrante and Roberto Bolaño, and these big literary projects. I think Elena Ferrante is very informative. You could read *My Struggle* project alongside the Neapolitan novels because she almost makes the opposite gesture where she seeks to protect herself and the people around her by becoming anonymous through the book, but then I think it turns

out actually that she's totally invented it all and that none of it is autobiographical even while seeming to be so. And I just think the ethics of this project can be seen in a better light through that. But it doesn't really answer your question about historicity.

Scott Rettberg: Well this particular kind of postmodernism, a postmodernism in realism's clothes, is something I keep thinking about.

Chris Ingraham: It's kind of an inverted *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne, 2003), which was pre-postmodern but could be described as a Postmodern novel in some ways. There are digressions, he does lists, there's the black page that he has, and here's a squiggly line or whatever. It's not that kind of hi-jinx in the Knausgård, but there's a willingness to separate the project from a story. I think I read in an interview that he wanted to see how far away he could go from the story and come back to it before it was lost, and he found that about thirty, forty pages was as far as he could go. I actually think he goes further than that at some point. But in a strictly realist project, in the Zola or Flaubert vein, I think you don't deviate from that narrative very long. You stay close to it.

Søren Pold: Well, you know, this idea about itemization is also a Realist idea. You sort of get lost in items, one item after another, which is of course in Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pecuchet* (Flaubert, 2005) which is about two copy-clerks trying to write an alternative encyclopedia where they sort of got lost in all the details. Speaking about what might have been some kind of scandal in at least early postmodern literature, about this layered reality and speaking about different layers as textuality and changing, for him has become a reality. It becomes a reality, for instance, in the sixth volume, where it is just the fact that his novel is coming out and it interferes with his life. And in that sense, it also has to do with how the relationship between life and writing has become more intermingled. Now what used to be: I write and I'm this author, and we're not supposed to think that the author was the same as the biographical person, is just not valid anymore. It's much more intermingled in the sense that whether it's an autobiography or not is, in a way, not that—you know, well of course it is and it isn't, in a way, at the same time—maybe that's not the big question. It sort of, at the same time, becomes a way of finding a new sense of realism of the objects, or of the child's experience of the world, and at the same time also about all the writing that's just there, you know, next to the coffee.

And of course, it's also part of our life, where because of this sort of short-circuit of media and writing and life, it's there immediately, right? You know, he doesn't write much about social media but that's the reality we all live in, that things just move so fast and who's the real author and where does he stop, and all this kind of stuff, just doesn't quite make sense anymore.

Joseph Tabbi: What I like is that we've gone back to Flaubert and ahead to Kenneth Goldsmith. I do think that what we have here is something that really does get us past the postmodern circle, you know the constant self-reflexivity, and that's a welcome change if you consider how hard it's been, these past several years to supplant the postmodern. What Knausgård and all of these other writers are doing is really just

enacting their lives and enacting the moment-to-moment process of thinking. And that can be fictional, but we're in a time when fictions are everywhere and there's not a need for more stories, for more fictions. Maybe there's a need for better, that's arguable, but really everything that's outside has already been narrativized. So, you get more of a tendency to write in an essayistic mode. This is where I think that essayism—you know, the postfictional novel, the essayistic novel—these are ways of describing something that is larger than the modern and the postmodern and is potentially a way through.

Chris Ingraham: Joe, are you suggesting that the essayistic novel is a new trend?

Joseph Tabbi: That's a point. It was pretty much finished with Montaigne, right? Who's going to write the essayistic literature of that level? It's been done. Still, we repeat this in many different circumstances because that kind of life-writing and self-reflexivity will take new forms in different social and medial situations. So, at the same time I do think there really is a felt continuity that goes back to much earlier experiments, you know, pre-modern literary experiments. If you go from this time of emerging interesting essays, you see it everywhere. I'll send everyone today a call for papers that EBR, *electronic book review*, is doing on essayism. We've got about fifty contemporary writers on the list that are interesting from this perspective. So, it's happening. *Countertext*

5 <https://www.eupublishing.com/loi/count>, a journal in Malta, is doing a similar special on the essay. So, I do think it's got legs as a way out of the modern and postmodern paradigm.

Scott Rettberg: All right.

Joseph Tabbi: But I do have to go so I can get to a thesis defense in time.

Scott Rettberg: Enjoy your drive in the snow. Nathan do you want the last word?

Nathan Jones: I'll say goodbye to Joe. Should we wrap up together?

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, I think wrapping up is good. But if you have a last observation to make?

Nathan Jones: I think that's just a good point to make. I think that it's better to think of this as part of a trend or a convergence of a series of trends like the essay-novel, the conceptual writing work, the kind of return of the autobiography, more than it is to think of it as a singular achievement of literature itself which in itself is sort of important. You know, I think it seems to me that's why I read it, as an example of something that's happening in literature, rather than something that stands alone. But what I did find stands alone about it, which we didn't get time to talk about, is this thing that Jameson says, that it has no style. But then I thought that the style was really sort of what kept it going, you know, some of what Søren called the micro-tensions, or the microscopic level of the prose, sometimes I thought that was amazing. It kept a real tension into the quotidian and I thought it was brilliantly written. So, I'd like to get the point out there that why it manages to work is that it is brilliantly written in spite of being so dull as well.

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, and I think that saying it doesn't have a style is incorrect as much as saying that it has as many different styles, depending on the day.

(Laughter)

Chris Ingraham: What book he pulls off the shelf, what music he decides to play while he's writing...

Scott Rettberg: Yeah, it has that kind of sponge-effect.

Søren Pold: But also, before we end it, I'd like to talk a little more about the political thing. Nathan, you talked about the whiteness, the male whiteness that is there. I'm curious, is there a bit more?

Nathan Jones: I suppose what I don't want to do is conflate the fact that this is a really good book, a really good series of books, a brilliant series of books, with the fact that we identify with the character. I do identify with the character in terms of the kinds of arguments that happen with my wife, for example. But I do not identify with the character when he talks about Africa, and I just don't want to conflate the forms of identification that can happen with that author. And I think that the basic danger being, "Well I really identify with this guy, so therefore I kind of identify with all aspects of what he's saying." Some of it I find, as I've sort of let into that, I find quite repugnant.

Søren Pold: But what I'm after is also that maybe even this sort of identification is part of his realism in the sense that this is also how politics happens. We also identify—well, we don't, but some do—with being Danish or German. You know, all of these kinds of identifications are suddenly part of the political again in ways that aren't nice. There were these moments reading when you sort of think "Oh my God." And I had the same when reading Houellebecq, for instance, which I really like a lot, and I think he's a very important writer, but I'm not sure I like him in that sense, right? But there is no way, for me at least, I cannot get around the fact that this is part of our reality, it's part of my reality that I live in a society where issues around nationality, even race, gender, is both on the agenda and of course this agenda is problematic. But there's no way of ignoring it. I think it's interesting. You know, that's why Houellebecq is worse in a way. I tend to like these, I find these kinds of writers interesting. You could also mention Céline, of course, or Hamsun for that matter. They're very interesting precisely because of their problems—you know, and I don't think Knausgård is quite there, but he touches upon this, well, mainly the question of white maleness and being privileged, you know we can't get around that we are this kind of "What should we do with this?" I can't get out of my body and my history and my perspective.

Nathan Jones: You don't have to. You know you can't be anything other than a white male. But you don't have to be a Knausgård style white male. And there's a danger, because he's so honest that with that comes this sort of latent, you know, the latent conditions that are behind the rise of the politics of populism. But it's our responsibility, surely, as intellectuals, to be able to engage with the literature, look at it, and be like,

"Wow, this is really well written, but there are some assumptions being made." If we start to be like, if we associate with him, we automatically might also have these politics. And you know, as a white male I don't share these things with him.

Scott Rettberg: Probably not though. I mean, I think it's not the same as a political speech. When we read something as a novel, we are able to definitely say, "Okay, I can become fascinated by becoming embedded in this author's consciousness," but I never felt this sense that I wanted to hang out with Karl Ove Knausgård, or that I wanted to be like him. There's not that sense of identification. And I think a lot of troubled people are like that, troubled and talented, where you have an identification, but you don't want to stand in their shoes, and you don't really lose your sense of criticality when you look at their perspective. You just sort of—because they create this sensation of evoking a world, or their worldliness, their world-ness—you're able to step in and appreciate their perspective.

Nathan Jones: Yeah. Exactly. I completely agree. I think that that's the way to read this book. The granular treatment he gives life gives us the ability to read things in this way and pick apart the threads in that way, and that I think is really useful. So, him as a product of this era of political populism, and you can see the strains of some of those kind of unhealthy ways of thinking about the other, and see them in that mixture and try to not be—

Søren Pold: But on to the problem, it is of course also a question of identity politics, and then we can discuss what that is. You know, Trump has an identity politics, and that's in a way our kind of identity politics. If we were, you know, the white male, heterosexual, blah blah blah, then you get right there and it's also something that you have to struggle with. It's banal. You know, how, as a white male, what's your identity if it's not macho strong or if it's not Danish in a romantic or even identarian way—you know, in Denmark we have this discussion of "What does it mean to be Danish if you don't want to follow the Danish People's Party, the Swedish Democrats or the Norwegian Progress Party?" If you don't want to think, okay, forget about Denmark, Sweden or Norway. Forget about being Scandinavian. Is there another way of being Scandinavian and feeling a relation to Scandinavian history than following right wing politics and also considering the fact that the morality of cultural society is different today and that some populist politics are based in existing problems that they misrepresent? We can't just ignore them. You know, it's easy to ignore the problems of the underprivileged from a privileged academic position. But they are here, they are part of our world, so I think it's also interesting to read about as a way to reflect on, even negotiate, your own identity, but also your own identification. You know, this kind of strong identification is useful, because otherwise you couldn't stand to keep on reading if you didn't identify with him somehow. Even though you don't have to be like him, you know, or think he's this best buddy, you start to feel at home in the novel, or you start to really feel at home. In that sense, every time you read a novel that's, let's say, whatever 3,600 pages long, it ends up being your home;

but it was also really strong in this one. It became your home for a while, you know, your second home, which is also part of its realism. It's not trying to deny the presentation of reality. You can feel at home in it, including identifying with Karl Ove.

Scott Rettberg: Great. I think we should stop there.

Nathan Jones: To be continued.

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Cite this Essay:

. "Our Struggle: Reading Karl Ove Knausgård's *Min Kamp*", *Electronic Book Review*, April 7, 2019, .

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