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Beyond Boundaries. Authorship and Readership in Life Writing: Introduction

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On 24 and 25 October 2019, a conference on life writing for young readers took place at Tilburg University, the Netherlands. This conference was organised by Helma van Lierop, Jane McVeigh and Monica Soeting. The main issue of the conference was that of boundaries with respect to authorship and readership in life writing. In 'The Limits of Life Writing' David McCooey (2017) argues that in life-writing studies, the concept of limits or boundaries plays a central role. Since the rise of auto/biography studies in the 1970s and 1980s critical attention has been paid to generic limits and the limits concerning the auto/biographical subject. With respect to the former, discussions have evolved in particular around the boundaries between literary and factual writing, and between verbal, graphic, audio-visual, and digital forms of life writing. With regard to the latter, academics since the 1990s have given attention to the expansion of auto/biographical subjects previously marginalized, which has deepened, among other things, the cross-cultural understanding of experience and identity. This expansion of auto/biographical subjects, but also the rise of social media as a medium for life writing have contested the limits of selfhood.

However, the limits having to do with readership and authorship have gone largely unnoticed in life-writing research so far. As stated, until now little attention has been

paid to the boundaries between life writing for adults on the one hand and life writing for young readers on the other. Crossing these boundaries can provide fruitful debates about how the reader matters and how studying the reception and addressed audiences of life writing is important. This is all the more important since crossover literature or dual-audience literature, has become an important segment on the book market. Although books with a dual audience of young and adult readers is not a completely new phenomenon, since the 1990s, the number of reading materials that address both adult and young readers, has increased as never before. Critics, publishers, booksellers, writers, and readers now recognize crossover texts as a distinct literary genre and a marketing category. The Canadian scholar Sandra Beckett was the first to call attention to the implications of crossover texts for the boundaries between adult literature and children's literature. In 1999, she edited *Transcending Boundaries*, in which she discussed the multifaceted nature of these texts, and the variety of ways in which these texts address a dual readership of children and adults. She continued her research on the characteristics of crossover texts in *Crossover Fiction* (2008) and *Crossover Picturebooks* (2012). In these studies, she reflects, among other things, on the causes and consequences of the crossover trend. In her opinion, developments in contemporary children's literature are mainly responsible for the shifting borders between children's and adult literature: 'Children's literature has become a field of innovation and experimentation, challenging the conventions, codes, and norms that traditionally governed the genre. [...] A wide range of previously taboo subjects and complex narrative strategies – including polyfocalisation, composite genres, deviations from chronological, linear narrative, fragmentation and gaps, absence of closure, intertextuality, irony, parody, metafiction – transgress the traditional demarcations separating children's from adult literature' (xvii). Sandra Beckett does not pay specific attention to life writing genres, but today there are also many life writing texts that address a dual audience of adult and young readers, thus crossing the border between adult and children's literature.

Related to crossover fiction is the phenomenon of cross writing, that is authors writing for both adults and young readers. In general, three types of crosswriting can be distinguished: first, the phenomenon that authors write both for children and adults in separate works; second, authors addressing young and adult readers in the same text, and third, the rewriting of a book for adults to turn it into a children's book and the reverse. Again, this also happens when authors choose to write about their own life, but so far, this has not been subject to much scholarly attention. Another issue to do with authorship and life writing that has not received much attention in

life writing research is the boundary between life writing by adult authors and life narratives by young people.

The articles in this cluster address all these different issues, and more. Marjolein Breem, in her contribution 'Tattoos tell Stories', argues that children's literature tattoos are a new form of life narrative, and states that these tattoos function as personal memoirs of childhood as well as a reflection of the tattooees' hopes for the future and who they want to become. Hannah Fleming, in her article on virtual reality life writing and young adult media practice, investigates the impact of digital technologies on the production of life writing texts and media for and by young adults. Lena Hoffmann, in 'Life Writing through Texts and Images; Texts by Celebrities for Young People', focuses on the international phenomenon of celebrities publishing novels and or picture books for children and adolescents, and contextualises this international phenomenon within a theoretical framework of celebrity studies and research on life writing and intermediality. Vanessa Joossen, in 'Writing when Young: Bart Moeyaert as a Young Adult Author', studies the genesis and early reception of *Duet met valse noten* (Duet with false notes) an autobiographical novel by Belgian author Bert Moeyaert to reflect on young authors who fictionalize real-life experiences and desires. In her article, Anne Klomberg takes *The Fortune Finder* (2008) by Dutch author Edward van de Vendel and Anoush Elman, a then 17-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, as a case in point to demonstrate how interactions between material bodies, space and power constitute some characters as strangers or, in other words, as bodies deemed out-of-place. Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer, in 'Voice and Silence in Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*', focuses on how *Brown Girl Dreaming* has been fleshed out as both a political memoir and an autobiographical narrative of identity formation. On the basis of her analysis of the two plot lines, Van Lierop-Debrauwer argues that the categorization of *Brown Girl Dreaming* as young adult literature disguises that the novel addresses a dual audience of adult and young readers. Anna Poletti, in *Life Writing, Networked Media, Climate Change: The Challenge of Testimony to the Future*, examines some of Greta Thunberg's life writing as an example of the creativity and ingenuity with which some young people engage with the identity category of 'youth' in their life writing, and argues that Thunberg's activism uses personal testimony in order to amplify expertise testimony as an epistemic source that demands action on climate change. In her contribution to this cluster, 'New Female Role Models from Around the World', Marleen Rensen discusses the international bestseller *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women* (2016) from a feminist, transnational perspective. Focusing on the authors' narrative strategies, she investigates how tropes of agency are used to make us aware of

women's struggles and successes across time and space, and examines how girls are actively encouraged to continue these legacies. Finally, in 'A Victorious Roman Holiday: Life Writing and Loving Beyond Boundaries', her creative contribution to this cluster, Jessica Sanfilippo muses on her and her parents' lives BC (Before COVID-19), writes about her life as a researcher DC (During COVID-19), and longs for a life AC (After COVID-19), as we all do, undoubtedly.

About the Authors

Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer is Professor of Children's Literature at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. She is coordinator of the Children's and Adolescent Literature Master's program at this university. She also teaches in the Erasmus Mundus International Master Children's Literature, Media and Culture. Until January 2021, Van Lierop-Debrauwer was president of the Dutch section of the International Board on Books for Young People. Her research interests are life writing for young readers, adolescent literature, and the relationship between children's literature and age studies.

Dr Jane McVeigh is Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Roehampton. Her publications include 'The Spanish Translations of Richmal Crompton's *Just William* Stories' in *Transnational Perspectives on Artists' Lives* (2020), edited by Marleen Rensen and Christopher Wiley. Her new biography is *Richmal Crompton, Author of Just William: A Literary Life* (Palgrave forthcoming 2022).

Dr Monica Soeting studied philosophy at the University of Tübingen and at the University of Amsterdam. She is co-founder of the European chapter of IABA and of the *European Journal of Life Writing* of which she was journal manager from 2012 to 2021. She published a biography of Dutch popular writer Cissy van Marxveldt (1889-1948) in 2017 and is currently researching a biography of Queen Emma of the Netherlands (1858-1934).