

Independent Studies: Autofiction

Introduction: Autofiction

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“As soon as I write myself, I invent myself.”
– Serge Doubrovsky

Autofiction is a literary genre that combines the traditional genres of fiction and autobiography. The term autofiction was coined in the 1970s by the French author Serge Doubrovsky. According to Claudia Gronemann, the term autofiction appeared for the first time on the cover of Doubrovsky’s published novel, where it was defined as “Fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement reels; si l’on veut *autofiction*’ [‘Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; *autofiction* if you like]” (241).

In Doubrovsky’s perception, the blending of fictional elements with autobiographical ones is no dichotomy in life writing. However, Karen Ferreira-Meyers argues that such a blend poses a paradox in the conventional perception of genre (203-4). Moreover, autofiction is not as simple a term as its name would suggest since it is used in various fields and has been defined differently by critics (204-5). As Ferreira-Meyers states, Doubrovsky argues that “autofiction fictionalises a character which really lived” (205) whereas James zu Hüningen describes it as a first-person narrative that is told as if it were an autobiography. The author, hence, plays a significant role because the narrator is seen as a substitute for the author (zu Hüningen). While zu Hüningen also depicts autofictional texts as authorial enactments of autobiographical expression, in which the author reveals and disguises himself, Claire Lynch argues that “an autobiographer writes with the objective of publication” (211). Therefore, life-story writing can be a form of “proclaiming a public identity” and serving, as Linda Anderson states, as a “representative of a particular marginalized group” (qtd. in Lynch 211). Thus, the author’s experiences “become a source of empowerment and public recognition” (Lynch 211). In other words, besides their expected uniqueness as self-experiences, autobiographical texts can be read and treated as sounding boards for the reader. On the other hand, the fictional aspect of the genre is not to be equated with sheer invention but rather “the avoidance of intentional subjectivity” (Gronemann 241). In line with that, Toni Morrison offers a compelling comparison with memory, describing memory as “a form of willed creation” that aims “to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (385). Autofiction as a genre thus moves between fact and fiction and blurs the boundaries between them. The different approaches to various genres, narrative forms, and forms of text demonstrate the large range of autofiction as a genre.

The three autofictional texts in this section stem from a class on “Autofiction,” taught by Lujain Youssef in the summer term 2022, which engaged with the genre and encouraged students to produce their own creative writing. The three pieces collected here vary in style and form as well as in content. In “Lady Bird and Firebird,” Jia Shen Lim takes the reader through a night of dancing

to the poetic beats of techno music, unexpected acquaintances, and the taste of vodka-infused energy drinks. “In Theory” by Tina Pahnke tells the story of Lisa and her family, challenging the reader’s perception of memory and reality through interjections from the first-person narrator. In “The Story Untold” by Sahar Al Kharsa, the reader is encouraged to feel the process of self-invention – literally, as being a real character, and metaphorically, as if the text depicts a self emerging from its cocoon. Taken together, the three texts utilize the genre of autofiction in their own unique ways and create an astounding harmony between reality and fiction. Their different approaches to narrative and textual forms demonstrate the large range of autofiction as a genre.

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