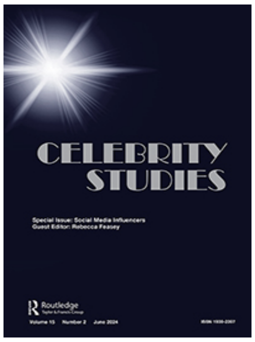

Celebrity Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcel20

# ‘You’re really going to be fine’: celebrity cameos, *toast* (2010) and the British biopic

Matthew Robinson

**To cite this article:** Matthew Robinson (22 May 2024): ‘You’re really going to be fine’: celebrity cameos, *toast* (2010) and the British biopic, Celebrity Studies, DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2024.2357085

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2024.2357085

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 22 May 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 136

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rcel20

CELEBRITY STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2024.2357085

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

# ‘You’re really going to be fine’: celebrity cameos, *toast* (2010) and the British biopic

Matthew Robinson

School of Arts, University of Derby, Derby, UK

**ABSTRACT**

When a biopic includes a cameo appearance from the subject themselves, it can serve as a persuasive claim to authenticity: what more powerful endorsement is there than figures appearing in their own life stories? Less common is the interaction between the subject and their on-screen surrogate which occurs in Toast (2010), an adaptation of food writer Nigel Slater’s memoir. Slater himself appears in the film as a Savoy chef who offers his younger self (played by Freddie Highmore) a job in a London kitchen. This interaction visualises characteristics of the memoir genre, the meeting between a past and present self, and affords rehabilitation: in representing visually the memoirist as witness to their own traumatic past, the adaptation suggests a ‘working through’ of childhood traumas associated with an abusive father. *Toast* also hints at the cameo’s capacity to intervene in the memoirist’s past in a manner which reflects the ‘corrective’ possibilities evident in different forms of life-writing. In having Slater offer his younger self reassurance – ‘you’re really going to be fine’ – the memoirist embodies the caring father he himself lacked. In *Toast*’s telling, time really is a great healer, provided you are willing to exploit the potential of the cameo appearance.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 27 August 2023
Accepted 14 May 2024

**KEYWORDS**
Cameo; *Toast*; memoir; biopic; celebrity chef

Since it was published in 2003, *Toast: The Story of a Boy’s Hunger* (2003) has become a cultural phenomenon. Written by Nigel Slater, the memoir recounts the acclaimed food writer’s childhood, his passion for food and the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of his father. That it was subsequently adapted into a biopic (2010) and stage play (2018) attests to the distinctive blend of comedy, food and childhood trauma evident in the memoir. Yet, there are further ingredients worthy of consideration, not least the biopic’s inclusion of a cameo from Nigel Slater himself in the guise of a Savoy chef. In the film’s climax, Slater’s chef offers his younger self (played by Freddie Highmore) a job in a London kitchen and some gentle reassurance, ‘You’re going to be fine. You’re really going to be fine’. Following soon after the death of the boy’s abusive father, Slater’s appearance opposite his fictional self also reflects the nature of memoir, a form preoccupied with

**CONTACT** Matthew Robinson matthewrobinson19@hotmail.co.uk; m.robinson2@derby.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

temporality, present and past, adulthood and childhood, and one described as 'the meeting between a past self and a present self' (Larson 2007, p. xii).

In *Toast*, the cameo visualises this dynamic in a way which offers therapeutic healing for the memoirist: Slater's cameo serves as witness to a traumatic past and signals the memoirist's self-understanding and acceptance of past events, a visualisation of the 'working through' at the heart of many popular memoirs and life writing. Furthermore, life-writing, and particularly autobiography, has been framed as a route through which to address one's past and offer 'corrective' readings of it (Gilmore 2001, p. 133). This corrective reading of the past is made possible in *Toast* because the adaptation omits sequences from the memoir and offers the memoirist an on-screen opportunity to intervene in his own past as it is represented in the film. Slater's story is represented as one in which he leaves the family home following his father's death and finds solace in the hectic world of a Savoy kitchen managed by a reassuring chef. This intervention is therapeutic: Slater offers his younger self the support and encouragement which his father did not in a representation reminiscent of those time travel narratives which use temporal dislocation to explore familial dynamics and which depict people travelling back in time to amend their life stories.

To illustrate the significance of *Toast*'s cameo, this study first considers research on the cinematic cameo, its history and function, before moving to consider research on biopic cameos specifically. Toast is also a *British* biopic, and by examining various cameos in British films, we can consider *Toast*'s significance in light of those earlier representations. In considering the film itself, the analysis begins with the source material and how it includes characteristics of the trauma memoir, and then considers how the adaptation's cameo offers therapeutic and corrective possibilities. *Toast* illustrates new possibilities for the cameo appearance in biopics. Traditionally, the cameo has been employed to provide a degree of credibility and authenticity, but *Toast* offers something different: it demonstrates that the cameo can visualise the meetings between the present and historical self, a theme which goes to the heart of memoir.

## The cinematic cameo

The cameo refers to 'a short appearance by a publicly known person who is instantly recognizable, which makes them harder to accept as a character than as the public person they are' (Mathijs 2013, p. 146). In *Stars and Silhouettes: The History of the Cameo Role in Hollywood* (2020), Joceline Andersen suggests that cameos may be incorporated into films as publicity stunts and in-jokes, but they can also be used to pay tribute to those working behind the camera: writers, directors and producers (2020, pp. 2–3). As the author of the memoir upon which the film was based, Slater's cameo is consistent with this, but it is important to recognise that cameos 'can only be affirmed by the audience's power of recognition' (ibid., p. 3). That Slater is depicted eating toast in his brief appearance suggests that the filmmaking team wanted viewers to appreciate that the character was no ordinary chef.

Film cameos can be traced to cinema's earliest periods. For instance, the silent film *A Vitagraph Romance* (1912) took the Vitagraph Studios itself as a narrative focus and included cameos from studio executives to lend the film credibility (ibid., p. 20). As a film which goes 'behind the scenes', it is a precursor to those cameos in contemporary films about the film and television industries. Andersen's study includes biopics as well. Her discussion of *Lincoln* (2012) highlights the different ways in which cameos are understood: when *Lincoln* (2012) was released, local newspapers highlighted the presence of a Kentucky College professor as an extra, in what journalists referred to as a cameo appearance (ibid., p. 11). Andersen's theorisation of different types of cameo is significant in relation to Slater's appearance in *Toast*: while most film cameos are 'celebrity' cameos, where a celebrity appears in a small role as another person (ibid., p. 6), there are also 'celebratory' cameos. These cameos highlight figures that may not be widely recognised but are still considered worthy of praise, such as authors and directors. Such cameos split the audience into those who possess the necessary cultural knowledge to identify the appearance as a cameo and those who do not (ibid., p. 165). These cameos are typically brief, with the person appearing with the film's extras, but they do not lack complexity: the appearances made by Alfred Hitchcock in his films were initially celebrated cameos but transitioned to celebrity cameos as he became more visible as a public figure. *Barfly* (1987), which features an appearance by hard-drinking writer Charles Bukowski, is another example. Bukowski provided the screenplay for the film which centres on his fictional alter-ego Henry Chinaski (played by Mickey Rourke). The cameo takes place in a bar, making it difficult to determine whether Bukowski is playing a drunk extra or 'himself' (as that self is presented in his accounts of life on America's skid-row). It is because only some viewers will appreciate that the drunk is Bukowski that he can play *both* roles:

> The celebrated cameo has the advantage that they may appear as themselves while also being ordinary. To those who are not aware of the reasons for which the person is celebrated, they are merely another extra. Straddling this line, they have a less recognizable image and persona than the celebrity, and the line between fiction and reality, ordinary and extraordinary, somebody and nobody, is effectively blurred. (ibid., p. 12)

Though Slater has presented cookery television programmes, he is primarily a food writer ('a cook who writes' is the description offered on his website homepage). His appearance in *Toast* can be understood as a celebrated cameo because of the nature of Slater's celebrity identity, and particularly his attitude towards publicity. What distinguishes contemporary figures such as Marco Pierre White, Gordon Ramsay and Heston Blumenthal from earlier manifestations of the celebrity chef is their media exposure and how this is exploited. In addition to the publication of cookbooks, such figures can cultivate a dedicated following via alternative means, such as utilising social media platforms (Nemeschansky et al., 2017, p. 381). Though he has a substantial online following on Instagram, Slater's relationship to media exposure is decidedly different from these others. In interviews, he is constructed as a reluctant celebrity, one 'famously reticent about face-to-face interviews' (Digby 2019) who claimed 'I never really meant to do television. I always said I wasn't going to do it and then I got talked into it by the head of Channel 4' (quoted in Bond 2019). Though internationally known, he 'has little liking for the celebrity chef circuit' (Adams 2003). Such issues make Slater an interesting case of the 'celebrity chef' given his claimed aversion to the phenomenon, and the fact he was 'always the world's worst chef … I can't do the big kitchen thing' (Slater, quoted in Adams 2003). There is therefore a possibility that certain viewers will not recognise Slater's appearance as a cameo, while for those that do recognise him his appearance serves as a commentary on his celebrity identity because it locates Slater in precisely the 'big kitchen' culture he claims to have rejected.

His performance has hallmarks of the celebratory cameo, including the slightly wooden acting which comes with being a non-actor ('every small badly acted role can suggest either poor casting or a hidden meaning' (Andersen 2020, p. 12). However, the duration and significance of his appearance also makes it an uneasy fit. This is partly because Slater is granted significant lines at the film's climax; he is by no means an extra. It is also because within the film, Slater is also appearing opposite the film's portrayal of him (played by Highmore). Furthermore, while Slater's appearance permits him to be understood as playing both the Savoy chef and himself, the film's arrangement and omission of scenes from the memoir suggest he also assumes the role of the father he never had. If Slater's cameo possesses a 'hidden' meaning, it concerns his confronting his own past by appearing as himself in the film's recreation of it. *Toast*'s cameo suggests the memoirist has returned to his childhood to bear witness to his traumatic upbringing in a manner which offers the possibilities of rehabilitation. The cameo sequence also suggests that the memoirist can offer the guidance and support to his younger self which his father failed to do. Having both actor and memoirist share a scene in this manner undoubtedly makes *Toast*'s representation unusual. It is different from how cameos work in biopics in general.

## The biopic cameo

The important role a cameo can play within the Hollywood studio biopic has been the topic of discussion. Though baseball star Lou Gehrig had died shortly before The Pride of the *Yankees* (1942) was made, the film features his former teammates such as Babe Ruth in small roles playing themselves. This practice, Carolyn Anderson suggests, 'lends a special credibility to the bio-pic, yet often simultaneously introduces the awkwardness of clashing styles of presentation and highlights the artifice of the biographic project' (1988, p. 333). The role of the cameo in conveying credibility is emphasised in other discussions as well, and the way in which the cameo foregrounds the biopic's constructed nature has been deployed to various effects. In *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992), George F. Custen observes that it is quite common to see cameos from celebrities in studio-era biopics (1992, p. 58), and suggests that cameos could also be utilised to lend a degree of authenticity to films. In sports biopics, for example, a figure's athleticism could be difficult for actors to replicate and cameos could offer some compensation: '[t]he dislocation viewers might feel when confronted with a fictive portrayer simulating real physical feats is compensated for by having actual athletes populate the film in cameo parts, playing themselves' (1992, p. 56). Figures may have a small appearance in their own biopic: Babe Ruth appears in The Babe Ruth Story (1948), while an actor's portrayal of a figure in one film can lead to cameos in others: Charles Laughton's portrayal in The Private Life of Henry VIII (1933) led to a small role in Young Bess (1953) 20 years later (ibid., p. 59).

The cameo as a means of asserting authenticity has continued in contemporary biopic production. Milk (2008), about gay activist Harvey Milk, features cameos from Allan Baird and Frank Robinson, figures associated with Milk's political campaigns in San Francisco during the 1970s. Their inclusion 'suggested approval of the project from those in the know and promised a film that would be true to life' (Erhart 2016, p. 267). Biopic cameos can also raise difficult questions. *Selma* (2014) recreates the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights, and the 'cameo' appearance made by Malcolm X (Nigél Thatch) raises issues relating to historical omission. Though it depicts his arrival to address Martin Luther King's supporters, it does not depict the speech itself. Lucinda Hobbs suggests that this was a conscious omission and that representing the speech 'would be inappropriate in a biopic where King or King's words are the primary subject … [h]e could well have stolen the show' (Hobbs 2020, p. 425). In *The Biopic and Beyond: Celebrities as Characters in Screen Media* (2022), Melanie Piper suggests it is particularly common to find celebrities performing as themselves when the narrative is one which goes 'behind-the-scenes' of film and TV production. Such cameos can make the otherwise fictional narrative more persuasive and believable: 'while the main characters may be made up, this verisimilitude asserts that the type of people they represent are grounded in actuality' (2022, p. 99). Slater's cameo is itself 'behind-the-scenes' to some extent, as it offers a glimpse into a bustling hotel kitchen, but what makes this cameo remarkable is how Slater is also represented in this scene through actor Freddy Highmore. Such a representation is also different from what has come before in *British* biopics.

British biopics exhibit the same concern with authenticity and credibility, and this shapes how cameos have been employed. However, the British biopic has a different history from the American version of the genre and this offers different ways of understanding the concept of authenticity as it relates to the cameo. In *Cass* (2008), a film about reformed football hooligan Cass Pennant, the man himself appears as a bouncer, and Pennant convinced active and retired hooligans to appear in the fight sequences as extras (Poulton 2013, p. 777). Their inclusion conveys the 'odd bricolage of truth' which comes from mixing actors with 'professionals' (Custen 1992, p. 58), while offering a nod to viewers with specialist knowledge of hooliganism derived from memoirs and documentaries. Their appearances illustrate that cameos 'may be visible or invisible depending on what audience is watching, transforming performers masquerading as nobodies into recognizable figures' (Andersen 2020, p. 2). In some biopics, the cameo is presented at the start of the film and the person in question plays an important role in shaping the narrative. *Odette* (1950), which recreates the role played by Odette Sansom as an agent for the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in France during the Second World War and her capture by Nazis, includes a cameo by the wartime head of the French section of the SOE, Maurice Buckmaster. He appears at the start, before the characters have been introduced, sitting in a garden chair. With pipe in hand, he asserts in direct address to the viewer that he knew the characters intimately, 'and I know, therefore, that this story is a true one', before the scene dissolves into the diegetic world as Buckmaster introduces the operatives. His assurance is given weight by being delivered in direct address: 'having a character address the audience directly is a very particular gesture towards intimacy with that audience' (Brown 2012, p. 13). True prisoner of war accounts offered a useful basis for film adaptations. The emphasis on authentic experience strengthened their legitimacy and was perceived to offer 'a window into something "true" about the English and their war' (Cull 2002, p. 283). Buckmaster's cameo serves to authenticate the depiction in adherence with the POW genre specifically: he acts as gatekeeper who leads the viewer through the window into Odette's wartime experience.

There are times where the subject appears in cameo to challenge the representation. *24 Hour Party People* (2001) features various cameos in its recreation of the world of

Factory Records boss Tony Wilson and Manchester's Haçienda nightclub between the 1970s and 1990s. Howard Devoto, famous for fronting the punk rock outfit Buzzcocks, appears initially as a nightclub cleaner before his real identity is revealed. Devoto's character, played by actor Martin Hancock, is depicted having sex with Wilson's wife Lindsay (Shirly Henderson) in a nightclub toilet. This infidelity is discovered by Wilson (Steve Coogan) before the cleaner of the toilets (Devoto) turns to the camera and states 'I definitely don't remember this happening'. Devoto's sudden direct address is arresting, and reflects how characters performing direct address often possess a greater understanding of what is happening within the film than other characters (Brown 2012, p. 14). The film freeze-frames on his face, while Coogan's Wilson explains in voice-over that Lindsay also denied that sex occurred, illustrating how the cameo can punctuate a film's narrative and 'create a space in the movie, a break in the narrative, that is filled by the audience's extratextual knowledge' (Andersen 2020, p. 2). Devoto's appearance is the antithesis of Buckmaster's in *Odette*, the sequence 'disrupts any appeal to the authority of "authenticity" that a certain narrative can have, demonstrating that all narratives are selected and constructed, and always contested' (Smith 2013, p. 477).

Cameos in the biopic take different forms and can include contemporary figures playing themselves (Devoto) and actors who have associations with particular roles (Laughton). Cameos can also contribute a degree of physical and cultural authenticity. A cameo from an authoritative figure may be included to assert the accuracy of the depiction (Buckmaster) or the cameo may serve to complicate this notion (Devoto). In Hollywood studio biopics, short appearances from real athletes could lend 'authentic physical business' to the depiction (Custen 1992, p. 58). However, British biopics have not focused on sports to the same degree as American ones. *24 Hour Party People* and *Cass* represent other specific subcultures and these cameos serve to convey a degree of 'subcultural authenticity'. This should not be surprising given that authenticity is central to discussions of subculture, and that authenticity is 'synonymous with discourses about subcultural capital' (Holland 2018, p. 195). Filmmakers have used cameos in British biopics to convey a degree of authenticity when tackling worlds which are by their nature hidden from mainstream life.

The biopic cameo's complexity is also reflected in the Slater cameo. *Toast* is an adaptation of a memoir which deals extensively with Slater's traumatic past, and this shapes how the cameo functions. It also suggests a further conception of authenticity as it relates to the biopic cameo. The 1990s memoir boom can be explained in part by the appetite for autobiographical works which deal with actual people who have been involved in extreme situations. In contrast to purely fictional works, these accounts were perceived as 'unmediated and therefore authentic forms of representations' (Rothe 2011, p. 84). Slater's cameo offered means of providing a visual representation of memoir's handling of trauma and its specific claims to authentic lived experience. In *Toast*, the inclusion of a cameo from the memoirist himself asserts his position as 'witness' and this is made possible because the film places the subject as both a boy and a mature man in the same scene and in dialogue with one another.

## *Toast* and trauma

The cameo's role in *Toast* is closely connected to the nature of Nigel Slater's celebrity. Although Slater has written cookbooks and hosted cookery programmes including *Nigel*

*Slater's Middle East* (BBC 2018), he is known primarily as a British newspaper and magazine journalist. In 1988, he became food writer for *Marie Claire* and 5 years later the *Observer*'s chief food writer. Part of Slater's distinctiveness rests on his blending of traditional gourmet cooking and his understanding of popular cuisine (Jones and Taylor 2013, pp. 104–105), and this manifests in the memoir via references to popular brands and his enthusiasm for 'comfort' foods.

The written account describes his mother's death from asthma and the profound effects this had on him, his coming to terms with his homosexuality as an adolescent, and his fraught relationship with his father. Slater subsequently competes with his mother's replacement, Joan Potter, who initially enters the home as the family cleaner before marrying his father. They attempt to please the father through cooking food, with Joan's ability vastly exceeding his mother's. Following his father's death, the memoir finishes with Slater studying at a catering college, working in a few hotel restaurants, and finally, seeking a kitchen job at the Savoy hotel in London. The focus on Slater's life from ages nine to seventeen reflects the nature of memoir as 'an incomplete and fragmentary slice of a life' (Luckhurst 2008, p. 118) which 'tends to denote something modest and incomplete in contrast to the monumental, self-promoting autobiography' (Pettinger 2008, p. 135). Roger Luckhurst describes the memoir genre as 'a hybrid of history and personal narrative' (Luckhurst 2008, p. 118) and Slater's memoir ranges from references to President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 to recollections about his mother's apple crumble (2003, pp. 53–54; 74–75). There are frequent references to British brands such as Heinz Salad Cream (ibid., p. 145) and there is a 'nostalgic tone that is common to this subgenre: a tone that expresses a yearning to relive pleasurable food memories' (Waxman 2008, p. 377). He discusses his fondness for 'magic' *Angel Delight* (ibid., p. 30), but '[w]hile food sometimes brings forth fond associations … they are heavily outnumbered by images of conflict and isolation" (Pettinger 2008, p. 139). Such images would include Slater's memory of his father force-feeding him eggs: '[h]e told me to open my mouth or he would hit me' (2003, p. 105).

The success of the genre since the 1990s, illustrated by examples such as David Pelzer's *A Child Called 'It'* (1995), has been explained by its privileging of 'extreme' experiences about survivors whose hardship could be presented as inspirational. According to Anne Rothe, '[t]he triumph of the memoir was largely a result of its reorganization around trauma' (Rothe 2011, p. 87). Often labelled 'misery memoirs', they frequently offer tales of child abuse, illness and addiction within a melodramatic structure of suffering and redemption (ibid., p. 88). Trauma memoirs are distinctive in that they 'must centre on precisely that moment which escapes self-apprehension' (Luckhurst 2008, p. 118). There is an emphasis on childhood experience, the domestic and the everyday, with victimhood and suffering presented as 'common experiences' in a world where 'there is no society beyond dysfunctional and abusive families' (Rothe 2011, p. 88). *Toast* contains many of these characteristics, particularly when Slater recalls being beaten by his father (2003, p. 115; 118–119), but these are balanced with gentle comedy: when his aunt eats spaghetti for the first time a piece catches on her lip and 'she licks it off and shudders' (ibid., p. 19). It is arguably the balance of food writing, comedy and traumatic recollections which made *Toast* successful. It won awards including British Biography of the Year in 2004 and it was first adapted for the stage in 2018.

## *Toast* on screen

British company Ruby Films bought the rights to Slater's memoir after it was published. Part financed by the BBC, *Toast* also received investment from regional agency Screen West Midlands. After shooting finished in July, it was broadcast on BBC television in December 2010. It was watched by more than 6 million viewers, a figure which no doubt informed the decision to screen it in cinemas: *Toast* was screened at the Berlin Film Festival (Cooper 2011) before receiving a limited release elsewhere. The fact that *Toast* was first broadcast on television reflects the nature of British television at this time: in the mid-2000s an expansion of airtime and a waning interest in traditional programming resulted in a pronounced focus on true stories (Bignell 2020, p. 48). *Toast* followed *Elizabeth David: A Life in Recipes* (2006), *The Secret Life of Mrs. Beeton* (2006) and *Fear of Fanny*, successful BBC productions about cooks Elizabeth David, Isabella Beeton and Fanny Cradock, which were broadcast in 2006 (ibid., p. 52). Of course, *Toast* was also a best-seller, making it a tantalising prospect for producers.

The adaptation does omit events and figures in the memoir; for example Slater's brothers and aunt are omitted in order to focus on the dynamic between the memoirist and his parents. There is also the cameo itself. In the memoir, Slater mentions an 'old guy' (2003, p. 247) at the back entrance to the Savoy hotel who is emptying bins and who instructed him to enter to enquire about work. This man offers the boy those lines of reassurance which Slater's chef says in the adaptation. In the film's telling, the 17-year-old Slater arrives in London from the family home in Worcestershire which he shared with Joan and his father before the latter's death. At the back entrance to the Savoy hotel, Slater encounters a chef (played by Slater) eating a piece of toast. As the older man asks about his relevant experience, chefs scurry about transporting fresh food. When the boy suggests he does a good lemon meringue, the chef sniggers ('that's what they all say sunshine'). The film changes from a long shot to a medium shot of the man in the kitchen door as he sizes the boy up. There is a quick exchange of shots: the camera focuses on the shy boy under the calculating gaze of the chef before returning to the latter as he invites the boy inside. The chef pushes open two doors which lead 'behind the scenes', and a tracking shot highlights a line of chefs preparing meals. At the end of this line, the chef presents the boy with chef whites and offers reassurance by saying to him 'you're going to be fine, you're really going to be fine'. He departs and the boy looks around the kitchen before looking happily in the direction of the viewer. As Tom Brown suggests, 'direct address is often a marker of the character's particular power' (2012, p. 13) and this conclusion establishes Slater's independence from the domineering father and stepmother.

Slater's celebrity identity, primarily formed around his writing, means his appearance can be considered a 'celebratory' cameo. In line with this, it can be considered in different ways simultaneously: this analysis has described how Slater appears as chef, and the following considers how the scene works when the cameo is recognised and Slater appears as himself. There is a further way in which this cameo can be considered: via the omission of passages from the memoir, and by giving Slater the words expressed by the old man, the adaptation also presents this chef as the father Slater never had.

## Cameos and rehabilitation

In *Toast*, the biopic cameo signals the subject's therapeutic rehabilitation. This is in keeping with descriptions of the possibilities offered by memoirs, the writing of which can form 'a deeply meaningful experience, with narrative meaning reflecting the past while enriching the present … it might contribute to self-understanding, and thereby to meaning and fulfillment' (Martin 2016, p. 156). Incorporating Slater into the film offered a means of presenting the past and present on screen in a concise fashion: the exchange of shots in which the mature man acknowledges his younger self before inviting him into the kitchen suggests recognition of past trauma and the possibilities of moving beyond it. In the *Toast* adaptation, 'there is an emphasis on the subject of the biography being exceptional, unique and suffering unfair but otherwise formative hardship' and [f]ame almost appears as much-deserved and long-awaited therapy' (Minier and Pennacchia 2014, p. 21). Including successful food writer Slater as the chef who gives his younger self a job suggests 'the biographical subject's healing process seems to have come full circle' (ibid.). This emphasis on healing can be developed by considering the cameo's function and how it relates to the characteristics of memoir. The therapeutic potential of recounting one's past is well documented: '[t]elling the story of one's life suggests a conversion of trauma's morbid contents into speech, and thereby, the prospect of working through trauma's hold on the subject' (Gilmore 2001, p. 129); and 'writing a memoir can be therapeutic – the memoir is healing and the author healed, if not of an illness at least of some of its emotional distress' (Martin 2016, p. 156). The cameo manages these different qualities, signalling both the working through of trauma and therapeutic healing. This is possible because the cameo is, like trauma, a moment which resists easy assimilation into narrative. Where 'the trauma memoir recounts a discordance, a circling around a shattering event, from which self-knowledge arrives late, if at all' (Luckhurst 2008, pp. 118–119), the cameo has its own capacity to arrest because it 'stands out as a punctuated moment because of the extratextual connotations it produces' (Mathijs 2013, p. 146). This situation is made all the more significant because these figures share the sequence, and also at times, the frame.

Jean-Louis Comolli's essay 'Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much' illustrates issues which emerge in films which depict historical figures. When the actor portrays such a figure, two bodies are evident: 'that of the imagery and that of the actor who represents him for us' (1978, p. 44). There are pressures in recreating a figure whom has been represented repeatedly, resulting in a 'double game' in which 'it is him and it is not, always and at the same time' (1978, p. 48). If a biopic includes a cameo from the subject themselves in a scene which includes the actor's portrayal of them, the cameo could encourage viewers to abandon the notion that the actor's body has any connection to the figure they portray. Hence, it is 'rare' for both subject and actor to be placed together in a film (Bingham 2010, p. 85), but there are exceptions. In *American Splendor* (2003), the inclusion of American comic book writer Harvey Pekar alongside Paul Giamatti's portrayal of him 'admits the fictionality and the artifice of the film. In effect this device dares a spectator to compare the authenticity of its performers to the actuality' (Bingham 2010, p. 82). *The Disaster Artist* (2017) depicted the making of *Tommy Wiseau's The Room* (2003) and was directed by James Franco, who also stars as Wiseau. *The Room* has assumed cult status in part because of Wiseau's idiosyncrasies, particularly his accent and appearance. Wiseau included a cameo obligation when the producers purchased the story rights, and he wanted to appear opposite Franco, hence he appears with Franco in a scene after the closing credits. Franco explained that 'we had to make it disposable, because he was insisting on doing it opposite me . . . there was no way that that was ever going to work in our movie' (quoted in Ritman 2017).

*Toast*'s cameo demonstrates that the inclusion of both subject and actor in the same scene can work differently, by virtue of the film's relationship to memoir. Making the body-too-much visible by presenting both bodies together offers a unique way for the 'present' and 'past' self to meet, which is one of the characteristics which shapes memoir. In *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative*, Thomas Larson describes

> The meeting between a past self and a present self, one or both impelling the writer's insights now. Memoirists engage these selves by using the dramatic techniques of narrative, characterization, and description as well as the analytic styles of explication, essay, and reflection. (Larson 2007, p. xii)

The film cameo makes it possible to represent a meeting between the past and present self in a manner which adheres to the nature of memoir. The meeting can also hold therapeutic qualities, particularly when the cameo performer can also be conceived of as witness. Where the memoir acts as 'witness to a passing past. It refuses to let it move on unnoticed and unremarked upon' (Fass 2006, p. 116), cameos illustrate a form of 'witnessing' in that 'the subject of a biography appears momentarily to authenticate the story of their life' (Andersen 2020, p. 190). Slater's appearance suggests that the cameo can offer a different type of witnessing which relates to the cameo's capacity to halt time. This is because a cameo 'is often an odd moment, hanging in time, pausing the progress of the story and inviting the viewer to ponder some tangential implications of the story's consequences' (Mathijs 2013, p. 146). The cameo's potential to 'pause' this flow is evident in the Slater cameo. As he chews on toast while looking at his younger self, the memoirist is presented as witness to a passing past: a liminal space represented between his childhood home and the kitchen's interior, a state between childhood trauma and the success and recognition secured as an adult. That the younger Slater has arrived at the kitchen door literally holding his suitcase only intensifies this suggestion. The mature Slater stands in the doorway and thus impedes his younger self, keeping him within this liminal space momentarily. Slater's cameo illustrates his self-knowledge, achieved through the cameo's capacity to halt time. The scene suggests a brief moment of witnessing and acknowledgement, an understanding and acceptance acquired from viewing his younger self at this critical moment in his adolescence.

## Cameos and corrective readings

*Toast*'s cameo has so far been considered in two ways: Slater as playing the character of Savoy chef, and Slater as playing himself, readings made possible through the nature of the celebratory cameo. It is also possible to consider the cameo as one in which the memoirist acts as father to his younger self, though Slater's actual father is never portrayed using such reassuring words. Slater's appearance affords a 'corrective' reading of his childhood, a chance to intervene and address the traumatic aspects of his past, in keeping with the tendencies of life writing. Leigh Gilmore suggests that '[f]or many writers, autobiography's domain of first-person particularities and peculiarities offers an opportunity to describe their lives and their thoughts about it; to offer, in some cases, corrective readings' (Gilmore 2001, p. 133). *Toast* illustrates that the cameo can offer similar opportunities, but this reading is only possible because of omissions in the adaptation. The memoir describes the funeral of Slater's father, his experiences at catering college and his work as a chef (2003, pp. 213–239), and then describes his encounter with the man at the Savoy. In contrast, the adaptation moves directly from the father's death to the boy taking a bus and arriving at the Savoy (where he encounters the chef, played by Slater). These omissions ensure that the adaptation moves from the father's death and the boy's leaving the family home to his finding an alternative family in the Savoy with the mature Slater.

The importance of the kitchen scenes in the memoir are stressed by Barbara Frey Waxman, who discusses a 'psychological pattern' in the stories told by food memoirists. Such narratives focus on figures who leave their dysfunctional family and discover a more accepting 'alternative family' through their relationships with food professionals (2008, p. 375). Waxman notes that in the memoir, Slater describes working with 'Diane' at the Talbot Inn and the profound effect she had on him (ibid.). However, the adaptation omits Diane and other mentors. Hence, the film moves from the father's death to his entering the 'alternative family' Waxman describes, but within the film this new family is embodied by Slater's chef who acts as surrogate father to his younger self. This invests the adaptation with the melodramatic qualities embedded in trauma memoirs which 'construct a melodrama of suffering and redemption around ethically simplified conflicts of good versus evil embodied in the characters of villain and victim' (Rothe 2011, p. 88). The film portrays such melodrama by presenting Slater's escape from the father (who beats him) and step-mother (who chastises him), and his finding acceptance in the professional kitchen.

In this respect, the cameo can be understood as the memoirist travelling back in time to correct the father's behaviour, to support his younger self in a way he never experienced at the time. Given the adaptation's themes concerning familial dysfunction (a theme at the heart of many time travel narratives) this is not inconceivable. This reading is strengthened when considered alongside the characteristics of temporal manipulation evident in memoirs, cameos and biopics. Both memoirs and cameos are discussed in ways which suggest they draw attention to the constructed nature of time: '[t]he memoir, like the novel, embellishes and trims as the adult writer rearranges childhood and other memories and provides carefully chosen details' (Fass 2006, p. 120). Cameos are considered significant moments which hang in time and halt the story's progress by offering viewers a moment's reflection (Mathijs 2013, p. 146). The biopic itself has strategies for organising time and past experience. Flashbacks 'economically situate a tale' (Custen 1992, p. 184) through being linked to a particular character – the figure themselves or someone who knew them – who retells (and frames) the story from their point of view. Montage editing condenses the figure's life by offering 'a rapid tour through his or her career' (ibid., p. 184). *Toast* features a montage depicting Slater's efforts to master Joan's secretive meringue, but the cameo is another time travel device at the disposal of biopic filmmakers, offering means of depicting representatives of different periods concisely.

There are also distinctive familial themes embedded in *Toast*'s cameo which align *Toast*'s representation with science fiction cinema. Time travel stories offer useful structures through which to explore familial dynamics and father–son relationships. If '[t]he memoir task is the organization of past experience by resort to past experience' (Struever 2004, p. 428), this could describe the actions of those characters in science fiction who wish to travel back in time to address some key event, to make amendments to what once happened. It is significant that time travel stories frequently emphasise familial relationships. The theme at the heart of many time travel narratives is 'what would it be like to be one's own mother and father?' (Penley 1990, p. 120) and films reflect Freud's primal scene fantasy by employing time travel to allow persons to be present (and witness) their conception (ibid.). Some narratives explore father–son relations and how protagonists seek to rework these by offering 'correctives' not unlike writers of autobiography. Hence, the character at the centre of Back to the Future (1985), Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) has little confidence in his weak and uninspiring father and so 'returns to the past and goes about trying to create an ideal father' (Cornea 2007, p. 119). Such stories are concerned with 'revisiting and potentially influencing the conception and construction of self' (Telotte 2001, p. 46) and this is evident in *Toast*'s cameo: the older man grabs the arms of his younger self after offering him chef whites, telling him that he will be fine (now that the biological father is dead). The cameo offers a corrective to Slater's past, one which allows the memoirist to venture back in time and offer the comfort he was deprived of at that time. Writing about memoir, Luckhurst suggests that '[o]ne perspective would be to read sequences of catastrophe, survival, and supersession as trajectories that recompense the felt depredations to identity; that these works help to narratively reconvene the self' (2008, p. 119). The cameo can be exploited to similar ends in the on-screen adaptation: it offers means of producing a corrective reading in which the vulnerable boy is offered guidance by a caring surrogate father, a figure who can make amends in the father's absence.

## Conclusion

*Toast* demonstrates that the biopic cameo can serve different functions. While cameos in biopics have tended to be discussed as devices which lend a depiction credibility or as techniques to highlight the representation's artificiality, *Toast* demonstrates how the cameo can be invested with qualities associated with memoir and life writing: to stage a meeting between the past and present self, and offer a corrective reading of past experience. In presenting Slater's cameo in the same scene as Highmore's portrayal of him, *Toast* also offers new possibilities for understanding how the body too much can be exploited by biopic filmmakers. In films such as *24 Hour Party People* and *American Splendor*, the inclusion of the actual historical figure is used to disrupt the narrative and foreground its construction, while *The Disaster Artist* demonstrates the lengths filmmakers will go to ensure that the cameo appearance will not impede verisimilitude. By contrast, *Toast*'s representation of the body too much is negotiated via the flexibility of Slater's celebratory cameo, a cameo which enables him to be portrayed as both chef and himself simultaneously. This in turn highlights some of the memoir genre's characteristics visually: a therapeutic dynamic in which the memoirist achieves self-understanding and acceptance of his traumatic past through meeting with his self as a boy. Then, there is the cameo's capacity to manipulate time in much the way biopics and memoirs do themselves. Slater's cameo suggests an intervention into a traumatic past and grants a chance at correction: the father's death liberates the subject and opens a space to enter an alternative family structure, one in which the memoirist can offer the guidance and reassurance he lacked as a boy. Reflecting on the adaptation's production, and the effect of being on-set, Slater suggested '[i]t is extraordinarily cathartic to go back over the intimate details of one's life, though I am not entirely sure why' (2010). The biopic cameo offers answers to this question. A cameo can be presented as an opportunity to return to childhood and achieve self-understanding of one's traumatic past. A cameo might even present an opportunity to tweak and rework that past. In *Toast*'s telling, time really is a great healer, provided you know how to manipulate it.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

***Matthew Robinson's*** main research interest is the British biopic. His research has appeared in journals such as the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* and the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. He has research forthcoming in the *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. He is an associate lecturer in design at the University of Derby.

## References

*24 Hour Party People*, 2001. *Film*. Michael Winterbottom, Directed by. UK: Revolution and Baby Cow Pictures.

Adams, T., 2003. While other boys in his class were reading *shoot!* nigel subscribed to *cordon bleu* magazine. *Observer*. 14 September. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2003/sep/14/foodanddrink.features2 [Accessed 11 August 2023].

*American Splendor*, 2003. *Film*. Shari Berman and Robert Pulcini, Directed by. USA: Good Machine.

Andersen, J., 2020. *Stars and silhouettes: the history of the cameo role in Hollywood*. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press.

Anderson, C., 1988. Biographical film. *In*: W.D. Gehring, ed. *Handbook of American film genres*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 331–352.

*The Babe Ruth Story*, 1948. *Film*. Roy Del Ruth, Directed by. USA: Roy Del Ruth Productions.

*Back to the Future*, 1985. *Film*. Robert Zemeckis, Directed by. USA: Amblin Entertainment.

*Barfly*, 1987. *Film*. Barbet Schroeder, Directed by. USA: American Zoetrope.

Bignell, J., 2020. Television biopics: questions of genre, nation, and medium. *In*: D. Cartmell and A. D. Polasek, eds. *A companion to the biopic*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 45–60.

Bingham, D., 2010. Living stories: performance in the contemporary biopic. *In*: C. Cornea, ed. *Genre and performance: film and television*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 76–95.

Bond, C., 2019. Nigel slater on his love of food and why he quit his career as a young chef, as a stage version of his book *Toast* heads to yorkshire. *Yorkshire post*. 20 July. Available from: https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/arts-and-culture/theatre-and-stage/nigel-slater-on-his-love-of-food-and-why-he-quit-his-career-as-a-young-chef-as-a-stage-version-of-his-book-toast-heads-to-yorkshire-1752724 [Accessed 11 August 2023].

Brown, T., 2012. *Breaking the fourth wall: direct address in the cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

*Cass*., 2008. *Film*. Directed by J.S. Baird. UK: Cass Films.

Comolli, J.-L., 1978. Historical fiction: a body too much. *Screen*, 19 (2), 41–53. doi:10.1093/screen/19.2.41

Cooper, S., 2011. *Toast. screen daily*. 3 February. Available from: https://www.screendaily.com/toast-/5023125.article [Accessed 20 July 2023].

Cornea, C., 2007. *Science fiction cinema: between fantasy and reality*. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press.

Cull, N.J., 2002. 'Great Escapes': 'Englishness' and the prisoner of war genre. *Film History*, 14 (3–4), 282–295. doi:10.2979/FIL.2002.14.3-4.282

Custen, G.F., 1992. *Bio/Pics: how Hollywood constructed public history*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Digby, M.-C., 2019. Nigel Slater: 'I'm happy, but I've only just realised it'. *Irish times*. 9 November. Available from: https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/food-and-drink/nigel-slater-i-m-happy-but-i-ve-only-just-realised-it-1.4068262 [Accessed 11 August 2023].

*The Disaster Artist*, 2017. *Film*. James Franco, Directed by. USA: Point Gray and Ramona Films.

*Elizabeth David: A Life in Recipes*, 2006. *Film*. James Kent, Directed by. UK: BBC.

Erhart, J.G., 2016. Toward a new LGBT biopic: politics and reflexivity in Gus Van Sant's *Milk (2008)*. *In*: W.H. Epstein and R.B. Palmer, eds. *Invented lives, imagined communities: the biopic and American national identity*. Albany: SUNY Press, 261–280.

Fass, P.S., 2006. The memoir problem. *Reviews in American history*, 34 (1), 107–123.

*Fear of Fanny*, 2006. *Film*. Coky Giedroyc, Directed by. UK: BBC.

Gilmore, L., 2001. Limit-cases: trauma, self-representation, and the jurisdictions of identity. *Biography*, 24 (1), 128–139. doi:10.1353/bio.2001.0011

Hobbs, L., 2020. The matter of black lives: representations of prominent Afro-Americans in biopics. *In*: D. Cartmell and A.D. Polasek, eds. *A companion to the biopic*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 415–433.

Holland, S., 2018. Ageing alternative women: discourses of authenticity, resistance and 'Coolness. *In*: S. Holland and K. Spracklen, eds. *Subcultures, bodies and spaces: essays on alternativity and marginalization*. Bingley, UK: Emerald, 191–204.

Jones, S. and Taylor, B., 2013. Food journalism. *In*: B. Turner and R. Orange, eds. *Specialist journalism*. London: Routledge, 96–106.

Larson, T., 2007. *The memoir and the memoirist: reading and writing personal narrative*. Ohio: Ohio University Press.

*Lincoln*., 2012. *Film*. Directed by S. Spielberg. USA: Amblin Entertainment and The Kennedy/Marshall Company.

Luckhurst, R., 2008. *The trauma question*. London: Routledge.

Martin, M., 2016. *Memoir ethics: good lives and the virtues*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

Mathijs, E., 2013. Cronenberg connected: cameo acting, cult stardom and supertexts. *In*: K. Egan and S. Thomas, eds. *Cult film stardom: offbeat attractions and processes of cultification*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 144–162.

*Milk*, 2008. *Film*. Gus Van Sant, Directed by. USA: Groundswell Productions and Jinks/Cohen Company.

Minier, M. and Pennacchia, M., 2014. Interdisciplinary perspectives on the biopic: an introduction. *In*: M. Minier and M. Pennacchia, eds. *Adaptation, intermediality and the British celebrity biopic*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 1–31.

Nemeschansky, B., *et al*. 2017. His own kind of honour: reluctant celebrity chef Michael Van de Elzen. *Celebrity Studies*, 8 (3), 378–392. doi:10.1080/19392397.2017.1288579

*Nigel Slater's Middle East*, 2018. *TV*. UK: BBC2. 2, 9, 16 February.

*Odette*, 1950. *Film*. Herbert Wilcox, Directed by. UK: Imperadio.

Pelzer, D., 1995. *A child called 'it'*. New. London: Orion, 2001.

Penley, C., 1990. Time travel, primal scene and the critical dystopia. *In*: A. Kuhn, ed. *Alien zone: cultural theory and contemporary science fiction cinema*. London: Verso, 116–127.

Pettinger, A., 2008. Caviar and toast. *Food, culture & society*, 11 (2), 133–148. doi:10.2752/175174408X317534

Piper, M., 2022. *The biopic and beyond: celebrities as characters in screen media*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Poulton, E., 2013. The culture of production behind the (re)production of football hooligan culture. *CONTINUUM: lifelong learning in neurology*, 27 (6), 770–784. doi:10.1080/10304312.2013.794195

*The Pride of the Yankees*, 1942. *Film*. Sam Wood, Directed by. USA: Samuel Goldwyn Productions.

*The Private Life of Henry VIII*, 1933. *Film*. Alexander Korda, Directed by. UK: London Films.

Ritman, A., 2017. The story behind Tommy Wiseau's secret *disaster artist* cameo (one for which He wants a SAG Campaign). *Hollywood reporter*. 4 December. Available from: https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/story-behind-tommy-wiseau-s-secret-disaster-artist-cameo-one-he-wants-a-sag-campaign-1062510/ [Accessed 19 July 2023].

*The Room*, 2003. *Film*. Tommy Wiseau, Directed by. USA: Wiseau-Films.

Rothe, A., 2011. *Popular trauma culture: selling the pain of others in the mass media*. London: Rutgers University Press.

*The Secret Life of Mrs. Beeton*, 2006. *Film*. Jon Jones, Directed by. UK: BBC.

*Selma*, 2014. *Film*. Ava DuVernay, Directed by. USA: Plan B, Cloud Eight Films and Harpo Films.

Slater, N., 2003. *Toast: the story of a boy's hunger*. New. London: Harper Perennial, 2004.

Slater, N., 2010. Nigel Slater on the film of his life. *The Observer*, 14, November Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/nov/14/toast-nigel-slater-film-bonham-carter [Accessed 20 July].

Smith, E., 2013. History and the notion of authenticity in *Control* and *24 Hour Party People*. *Contemporary british history*, 27 (4), 466–489. doi:10.1080/13619462.2013.840537

Struever, N.S., 2004. Rhetoric: time, memory, memoir. *In*: W. Jost and W. Olmsted, eds. *A companion to rhetoric and rhetorical criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 425–441.

Telotte, J.P., 2001. *Science fiction film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Toast*, 2010. *Film*. S.J. Clarkson, Directed by. UK: BBC Films, Ruby Films and Screen West Midlands.

*A Vitagraph Romance*, 1912. *Film*. James Young, Directed by. USA: Vitagraph Company of America.

Waxman, B.F., 2008. Food memoirs: what they are, why they are popular, and why they belong in the literature classroom. *College English*, 70 (4), 363–383. doi:10.58680/ce20086355

Young Bess, 1953. *Film*. George Sidney, Directed by. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.