
Reviewed by Franzi Finkenstein (Washington University in St. Louis)

Published on H-Biography (November, 2023)

Commissioned by Daniel R. Meister (University of New Brunswick)

The impulse to preserve lives in the form of written records is a global cultural phenomenon that can be traced back to ancient times. Over time, auto/biographers have not just become pivotal creators of “genealogical, religious, and didactic forms”; they have given us readers and researchers curious about cultural studies tools for reflecting on and better understanding the lives of people in different times and different places.[1]

As a practice, writing about lives, but particularly in the form of literary bio- and autobiographical texts, has generated significant cultural artifacts which have become pertinent to theoretical inquiry across disciplines today. As Margaretta Jolly notes about life writing in postmodernist times, the realm of “life writing is now being explored in literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, theology, cultural studies, and even the biological sciences in order to explain an apparent dissolution of life into story.”[2] Especially in recent years, the field of life writing has provided a crucial breeding ground for narratological questions concerning narrating voices, autobiographical performance, genre play, subjectivity, embodiment, and fictionality. The genre-transgressing potential of life writings makes for its inclusive umbrella shape that harbors not just written but also visual forms. As a concept and critical practice, as Marlene Kadar states, life writing employs “an imperfect and always evolving hermeneutic” that is inclusive of “classical, traditional, or postmodern” approaches that accommodate the complexity of narrating a life and its multiple selves.[3] But what methods do authors employ to narrate a life and ultimately preserve it for a (post)modern audience? How do the sociocultural transformations of postmodern times impact the practice of life writing? And what do contemporary life writings tell us about the relationship between genre and methodology?
The theoretical direction of Marija Krsteva’s *Towards a Theory of Life Writing* departs from the playground where genre boundaries are transgressed and the amply discussed fact/fiction relationship further explored by means of the new genre of biofiction. In Krsteva’s own words, the study wishes to give “responses to the questions about the interplay of fact and fiction and the resulting creation of a new hybrid genre” (p. 96). To understand this phenomenon of textual composition, Krsteva proposes the theory of “life-writing intertextuality called biopreservation” (p. 97). The author’s leading argument is that within the genre play that is crucial to the rewriting of the lives of historical figures” we can see a trend toward what she terms “biofictional preservation” or biopreservation—a term adopted from natural sciences that describes the method of extending the shelf life of food via influencing its bacteria. As such, biopreservation allows for the object’s survival. Krsteva’s observation is that “biopreservation as a process of textual transformation ... can be most clearly recognized within the postmodern paradigm, although not exclusively” (p. 18).

The case study is part of the Routledge Focus series that aims to publish centered discussions of emerging areas in a portable and largely digital format. As such, Krsteva examines in no more than ninety-nine pages the ways in which “biofiction is distinct in how the genre play reworks the traits of either biography or fiction” (p. 31). Her primary material consists of three biofictional texts portraying F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, namely Anne Theresa Fowler’s *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* (2014), Paula McLain’s *The Paris Wife* (2011), and Erika Robuck’s *Hemingway’s Girl* (2012).

**Genre Play**

The first part of the study provides a succinct literary review to introduce the theoretical foundations pertinent to Krsteva’s research, which revolves around genre play, life writing, biography, fact and fiction/ality. In it, Krsteva endeavors a synthesis of narratological discourses to explain how contemporary scholarship has approached the genre of literary biography and ultimately, biofiction. As the study’s primary focus is the interplay of fact and fiction, Krsteva’s proposal also responds to the international fiction/ality debate that has permeated the field of narratology over the past few decades and proven the fruitfulness of studying narrative and factuality as well as narrative and fictionality as “intersecting categories.”[4]

To address the conflation of genres and seemingly opposing concepts within biofiction, Krsteva first discusses prevalent Western—mostly European—discourses on genre. Starting with structuralism as the main pillar impacting postmodern discourses around genre questions in literary theory, Krsteva brings pioneering thinkers such as Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette, Jacques Derrida, Northrop Frye, Roland Barthes, and Mikhail Bakhtin into conversation with one another. From a pedagogical and practical point of view, this section seems especially useful to undergraduate students of literary studies, as it offers an overview of the most relevant and cited thinkers of the early years of narratological inquiry. In its educational form, the chapter “Postmodern Genre Play” can be incorporated in literature courses that deal with narratology and life writing.

In approaching the textual realities of genre play, Krsteva underscores the changes that genre theory and genres undergo in postmodernity, and that it is therefore crucial to understand its mutable nature. Looking mainly at the Western, postmodern, globalized society of the United States (Krsteva’s focal point), but not exclusively, she shows how the relationship between art and life changes alongside technological and sociocultural developments. Alongside the social and technological transitions, artists and writers create and venture into new avenues to explore the realm of genres while directly responding to modernism and its norms and literary traditions. Against this
background of changes that inform cultural and literary scenes, Krsteva stresses the need to consider both the versatility and multiplicity of genres when working with life writings.

_Beyond a Fact/Fiction Dichotomy_

Krsteva’s theoretical effort differs from biography theory that is primarily devoted to ideas about “accurate representation” and retelling, and that considers the genre blending of life writing as a contradistinction to biographical inquiry. But even those who commit sincerely to what has become a heated debate about the status of fact and fiction in literary theory where one side repulses life-writing theory, Krsteva’s theoretical consolidation invites everyone to venture a thinking beyond the divide. It is, however, certainly up to the reader to decide whether this consolidation is a sacrifice for the sake of narrative style and the pact that guides the reading experience. What is more, in formulating a methodology against the backdrop of genre blending, the study contributes to the investigation of biographical practices—more precisely biofictional writings. Drawing from theories of life writing conducted by Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and others, Krsteva’s attempt at a “theory towards life-writing” examines the textual realities of genre play. In this theory proposal, Michael Lackey’s approach to biofiction as a genre of life writing sets the note (p. 29). In Lackey’s study, the word order matters, as the author states, “in determining the subgenres’ distinct characteristics and make[s] a difference between a biography, fictional biography and biographical fiction” (p. 31). Thinking with Lackey’s intervention in the genre-blending nature of life writing, Krsteva points out that the distinction between biographical novelists from biographers is marked by an authentic and accurate representation of the life “of an actual historical figure” on the side of the latter, and the wish to portray “the biographical subject’s life ‘right’ and rather use the biographical subject in order to protect their own vision of life and the world” (p. 32).

With theory-pregnant words such as “accuracy” and “authenticity,” Krsteva evokes a horizon of debates about the relationship between fact and fiction in literary criticism. But the author does not give this horizon much attention. In the same vein, Krsteva points out that many authors who write in the intersection of biography and fiction “call their work fiction rather than biography” (p. 31). One might miss a gesture toward thinking beyond this seemingly authorial choice and set this observation in relation to the demands of the postmodern literary market and imagined readership: Can the creation of biofiction and the trend to label it as fiction be considered as a product of consumer culture as well?

In the second part of the study Krsteva further establishes her theory through literary analysis that focuses on the practice of postmodern genre play in three novelistic rewritings of two of the most famous and well-known US writers. To approach the biofictional character of the texts, Krsteva explores how the respective authors form biofictional texts and thus contribute to the writers’ literary afterlives. While this choice to focus on two widely celebrated literary figures seems a bit stale, as the titles suggest, all three biofictional texts use the perspective of the wives Zelda and Hadley as points of departure to portray the famous men’s lives. In focusing on women’s perspectives, the biofictional authors’ methodology shows an emphasis both on the narrator as an observer and on her subjectivity. The inquiry into the authors’ methodology allows Krsteva to illustrate the different utilization of intertextuality that creates scenes of “biopreservation sequences,” that is, the narrative strategies that meander between “biographical fact” and fiction. For example, with regard to _The Paris Wife_ Krsteva argues that “McLain intertextually weaves events from the characters’ past as well as material from Hemingway’s own novels in numerous biopreservation sequences thus constructing a tale of their lives that builds up different narrative identities from earlier biographers have done” (p. 72).
consulting biographical facts, fictional and fictional experiences, and literary and historical texts, McLain’s biofictional text contours a portrait of Hemingway through the eyes of others “in another ever-expanding intertextuality network” (p. 74). Ultimately, this method of intertextually interweaving sources and perspectives enables the image building of Hemingway and indicates a strategy of world-making biopreservation (p. 79).

**Biopreservation as Method**

Towards a Theory of Life-Writing: Genre Blending delivers a compact theory and analysis to conceive of Krsteva’s idea of biopreservation. However, the namedropping or rather concatenation of theorists at times interferes with Krsteva’s own critical voice. While the study emphasizes on textuality, the ‘Postmodern Genre Play’ part might prompt some readers to think beyond textuality and toward the demands within postmodernity/late capitalism (consumer desire) that drastically impact genres and writing practices, especially the realms of fiction and auto/biography.

Krsteva’s study succeeds in demonstrating that the biofiction authors of her project deploy compositional devices in the form of biopreservation and how they create their biofictional narratives by diving into the historical figures’ “inner worlds” and interpreting them, and so outlining the narrative identity. Thus, the authors of the biofictional writings create a narrative DNA that is both factual and fictional and demystifies “the narrative practice in life-writing genre play” (p. 97). In tracing the methods of giving the literary figures a second life, the study not only offers a vocabulary to describe the methodology at play in the biofictional texts (such as “fictionally inserts the fact,” “biopreservation,” and “biopreservation sequence”), it also inspires students to think about other practices of literary biopreservation. Conclusively, the study offers a thought-provoking response to contemporary discourses in literary theory that inquire into the methods of genre play, and more specifically, into the narrative practices employed by authors to preserve (famous) literary figures, and to do this form a playful interaction of biographical facts and creative fiction.

Yet, the question that the book leaves some of us with is whether life writing, as practice and concept, requires a “specific theory,” as when Krsteva states: “the field of life-writing lacks its own specific theory … on a textual level” (p. 97). Is there truly a theoretical lack? Is it not because of the genre play and hybridity of textual and visual creations we find in modern and, increasingly, postmodern texts that refuses any kind of “specificity” of life writing? In parts, Krsteva’s research direction toward a theory of life writing responds to these questions as it presents a glimpse into the various practices and technicalities of life-writing authors who playfully intertwist “facts” and fiction to preserve, or rather create, a second life of historical figures.

**Notes**


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-biography


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59053

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.