

# Book Reviews

*The Story of Our Lives: Review of The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*

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## **REVIEW:**

*The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*

Edited by Maria DiBattista and Emily O Wittman

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Cambridge University Press has built up an enviable record over the years for the quality of its work. Such is its reputation that even a local telephone directory bearing its imprint would probably be treated with some reverence. Its companion series, which typically focuses on a single theme or author, is a welcome addition to an authoritative catalogue. *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, edited by Maria DiBattista and Emily O Wittman, continues in this proud tradition. The two US academics – DiBattista is from Princeton University and Wittman from the University of Alabama – bring together scholars from various fields to provide an overview of writing which can be construed as in some way providing an autobiographical perspective.

The first chapter in this volume, by New York University classics professor Adam H Becker, examines Augustine's *Confessions*. This influential set of texts – a collection of 13 books published around 400AD – comes up for discussion in more than one chapter. Augustine's reflection on the central place of religion in his life is often singled out as the first autobiography. Princeton literature scholar John V Fleming, more modestly, regards it as a key text specifically in medieval autobiography. Either way, it still appears odd at first glance to include a work such as *Confessions* – which is primarily an engagement with issues related to Augustine's Christian faith – in a collection whose main preoccupation is first-person writing on the self.

However, Fleming contends that what he calls “the autobiographical impulse” is present in all historical periods of Western literature (presumably, in his view, in *Confessions* as well). The crucial difference, he suggests, is that early autobiography is not as individualistic as its modern variation.

Even so, Montaigne’s *Essays* also initially appears to be a curious inclusion in a collection which deals with self-writing. Dartmouth College academic Lawrence D Kritzman tacitly acknowledges this in his chapter on the French philosopher’s writing. While he notes that Montaigne’s essays bear “a multitude of autobiographical elements”, Kritzman admits that they differ in one important respect from traditional life writing: *Essays* is not a look back towards the end of a life.

“In terms of representation, the *Essays* do not transcribe a self that has completed its journey,” Kritzman states, “but instead one that is in the process of self-composition ...” In other words, he regards the essays as part of Montaigne’s construction of a sense of self.

Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, too, did not produce conventional autobiographies. However, Alastair Hannay persuasively argues that their notebooks, correspondence and published work provide sufficient material for full-length portraits of their lives. In fact, the University of Oslo-based philosophy professor goes even further and asks whether their published work “betray aspects of themselves and their lives not present in any volunteered account”.

Adopting this notion calls for a bold departure from the conventional study of autobiography – which usually focuses almost exclusively on self-written life narratives – and flags a potentially rich new field of research. Hannay skilfully illustrates the rewards of using such an approach in his work on the two nineteenth-century philosophers, both of whom incorporate episodes from their lives in their writing. (Kierkegaard’s notebooks, for instance, refer to many people who played key roles in his life).

Jean-Michel Rabate, a humanities professor at the University of Pennsylvania, presents a similar argument in his examination of the work of the French writers Andre Gide and Jean Genet. While Gide did publish a memoir, Rabate asserts that his journals and correspondence add to an understanding of his notion of autobiography. These letters and journals, he suggests, “are the place where his private and public selves meet without fear of censure”. Genet, too, wrote a conventional autobiography in *Prisoner of Love*. According to Rabate, the writer “play[s] it straight with the facts, [and] provides an honest account of his life with the Palestinians and the Black Panthers, while being very much a book about Genet himself”.

Even so, he argues, some of Genet's novels can still shed new light on his time in prison and on his life as a thief and prostitute (in fact, Rabate regards *Our Lady of the Flowers*, *Miracle of the Rose* and *The Thief's Journal* as no more than "autobiographical novels"). Some chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography* nevertheless do confine themselves to a discussion of texts which generally provide a factual account of the life of a particular individual.

However, as Leland de la Durantaye demonstrates in relation to the Russian-born writer Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, even what appears to be a straightforward autobiography is often anything but. Nabokov himself declares in his first chapter that the search for "thematic designs" is the true purpose of autobiography. (According to DiBattista, the English writer Virginia Woolf similarly held that it is the task of autobiography to discover patterns in seemingly disparate memories.) Because of Nabokov's emphasis on the importance of themes in autobiography, De la Durantaye – a literature scholar at Claremont McKenna College in California – suggests that he pays little attention to chronology and world history.

As *Speak, Memory* declares unapologetically in the foreword: "The present work is a systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections ranging geographically from St Petersburg to St Nazaire, and covering thirty-seven years, from August 1903 to May 1940 ...". De la Durantaye notes wryly, though, that the nature of this process "is bound to be a mystery to Nabokov's reader at this point, there being, of course, no way of knowing, nor even any easy way of imagining, what system might be employed to correlate which events to what end".

Early African-American autobiographies, discussed by University of Alabama English professor Trudier Harris, appear to fit more comfortably into the usual notions of autobiography. However, they, too, differ in at least one fundamental aspect from the norm. "Arguably, witnessing is the guiding motivation and creative force behind African American autobiographical writings," claims Harris. "Few early African American writers wrote simply for the sake of doing so ...". She cites the work of Phyllis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs as examples.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she argues, was a notable departure from this tradition and was written in an individualistic rather than communal voice. James Baldwin returned to the earlier tradition of African-American life stories in his autobiographical writing. However, Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and various prison memoirs once again reverted to the individual narrative. Nevertheless, Harris maintains – with justification – that such writing, as well as more recent African-American autobiographies, continues to bear witness about the lives of a broader community. As she puts it, “individuality can still be viewed in terms of the collective”.

*The Cambridge Companion* examines many other approaches to the writing of autobiography. Few of these conform to autobiography scholar Philippe Lejeune's seemingly all-encompassing description of autobiography as “a retrospective narrative in prose which a real person creates of his or her own life, placing the emphasis on his or her individual life, and particularly on the history of his or her personality”. At one level, this is the single most important contribution of this collection of articles: it provides compelling evidence that the genre of autobiography can accommodate a vast range of writing that is not usually associated with life writing.

And, despite ongoing disagreements about the character and conventions of such writing, DiBattista and Wittman point out that substantial progress has been made in developing appropriate conceptual tools to understand “the nature of the autobiographical mode”. Still, some inclusions in this collection are bound to raise eyebrows. How, for instance, does University of Rhode Island academic Mary Cappello's chapter on “creative non-fiction” fit into this genre? Nonetheless, *The Cambridge Companion* is a vital reminder of the importance of autobiographies. While they ultimately remain personal accounts of individual lives, they often reveal much deeper truths about humanity more generally. And while this collection is not really a basic introduction to the subject– it assumes a reasonable familiarity with the terrain it covers – it is, on the whole, quite accessible to the casual reader who seeks an overview of the most recent work in this field.

For students and teachers of literature in search of further information, the reading lists at the end of each chapter provide more than enough material to follow up. These recommendations help to turn a relatively slender volume into a valuable resource. The only quibble – and it is no more than that – is the fact that almost all the contributors are based in the US. While this may have been dictated largely by pragmatic considerations, it results in a skewed look at life writing and scholarly work on autobiography. Another limitation is its exclusive focus on Western autobiography. The editors acknowledge this shortcoming, but submit that including a few chapters on life writing elsewhere would not have been adequate to give it the attention it deserves.

On the whole, though, *The Cambridge Companion* is a comprehensive and thought-provoking outline of the latest thinking and research on autobiography. It offers much to interest those starting out in the field as well as established scholars with vast experience.

This is a tribute to the careful planning and editing that went into producing this collection.

- Tyrone August