Bibliography


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**TLS**

**THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT**

**Life-Writing**

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US $25 ($35, rest of the world).

In 1985, a two-page newsletter, produced in bold courier font to resemble a typewritten script, was sent to individuals and university departments, seeking to consolidate networks in autobiography and life-writing studies by promoting relevant publications and asking readers to write in with their research interests. Breaking from the influence of New Criticism, which had labelled biography an inferior form, the result was a biannual journal that argued for the constructed, literary nature of life narratives. *a/b: Auto/biography Studies* took letters, diaries and scrapbooks as distinct genres worthy of scholarly attention, placing them alongside more traditional forms; the subjects of its articles were often those overlooked by society and literature—ethnic minorities, queer identity, women’s lives. The journal’s remit remains broad and, though its contributors and subject matter generally come from the world of academe, it also draws on popular culture (as with Louis A. Renza’s reading of confession and celebrity personas in “Bob Dylan’s 116th Dream: Reflections on the Lyrics”, Winter 2008).

But behind the bright pink-and-blue covers, *a/b* favours a traditional structure of full-length articles (an average of seven per issue), followed by book reviews. Issues are frequently themed—reflecting general trends and emergent paths of inquiry—and have included “Epistolarity in the Twenty-First Century”, “Adoption Life Writing”, “Autobiography and Neuroscience” and, in Summer 2008, a Festschrift on Paul John Eakin and James Olney, scholars central to the recognition of life writing as a literary form. This retrospection is, however, balanced by the Summer 2009 issue on “‘New Biography’ for a New Millennium”, introduced by Elizabeth Podnieks, a life-writing scholar with a Modernist bent, in which contributors scrutinize innovations in contemporary biographical practice, from theatre and film to the internet. Paul Longley Arthur’s “Digital Biography: Capturing Lives Online” and
Podnieks’s “Celebrity Bio Blogs: Hagiography, Pathography, and Perez Hilton” consider how the non-linear and endlessly editable nature of online writing has altered our methods and motives for recording a life.

The journal is currently a year behind on its publishing schedule—the issues dated 2008 are, confusingly, from 2009, and those marked 2009 were produced in 2010. But the quality of the material is consistently high. The most recent issue, Winter 2009, is representative.

Articles by Sara Kippur and Meg Jensen explore the role of language in life-writing with all its attendant disruptions. In “From yo to je: Héctor Bianciotti and the Language of Memory”, Kippur examines the shifting linguistic register of the author’s “autofiction”, in which bilingualism increases the distance between self and narrating subject. Jensen, meanwhile, focuses on the miscommunications that occur between practitioners and theorists, that is, between the writers of Lives and their critics. Disappointment is mutual, with researchers considering their subjects “uncritical” in their reflections, while the authors are, in their turn, “bemused or even intimidated” by “academic jargon”.

Life-writing taken as a performance is a prominent and overlapping theme. Rachel E. Hile traces Edmund Spenser’s crafting of fictional relations with peers and families of elevated social standing, reading these “fantasies” as an attempt by him to direct his biographical legacy, while, in “Cultural Contact and the Contemporary Culinary Memoir”, Jopi Nyman describes food as a means to construct identity through interactions of taste and memory in cooking. His choice of subjects, the Indian actress and food writer Madhur Jaffrey and the Iraqi-American novelist Diana Abu-Jaber, makes for a lively portrayal of the culinary memoir as a sub-genre of postcolonial life-writing. Here, unusual food combinations, such as masoor dal (a curry of split orange lentils) and English sausage, create a “hybridized identity”, one that remains tied to “roots and traditions” yet “constantly in flux”. Memories of food, taste and communal preparation are thus paradoxical, seeming to bridge, at the same time as they promote, difference. Indeed, the diversity that Jaffrey and Abu-Jaber would, in Nyman’s view, produce and preserve in their cooking seems a fitting analogy for a/b as a whole: inclusive, adaptable and fresh.