



**Marijke Huisman, Anneke Ribberink, Monica Soeting and Alfred Hornung (Eds.). *Life Writing Matters in Europe*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012**

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*Life Writing Matters in Europe* (2012), edited by Marijke Huisman, Anneke Ribberink, Monica Soeting and Alfred Hornung, is the product of the founding conference of the European chapter of the International Auto/Biography Association, which took place in the Netherlands, in the autumn of 2009. In line with the original conference at VU University, Amsterdam, which now functions as the base of IABA-Europe, this collection of essays by scholars from “western and eastern, old and new or future parts of Europe,” responds to the post-Cold War flourishing of “both the practice and the study of life writing ... worldwide,” as well as to the Anglo-American dominance in auto/biographical research. The volume brings together 18 essays about wide-ranging “European” subjects like eighteenth and nineteenth-century Russian life writing in French, Polish autobiography competitions, Orhan Pamuk’s writing of himself in relation to the city of Istanbul, the recent return of biography in Sweden and, last but not least, Estonian memorial culture after the dissolution of the Soviet regime.

Marijke Huisman’s introduction to *Life Writing Matters* aims to establish coherence within this remarkably varied volume by explaining the “sharp increase of auto/biographical writings” as a reaction to the end of the Cold War (the latest in a longer line of “major historical changes” on the European continent). In addition, it argues for a “European” (that is, especially a non-Anglo-American) approach to the study of auto/biographical narratives, which may encourage cooperation between scholars working in the field of literary studies and those in history and the social

sciences. However, the Cold War and its aftermath, or “post-communist” memory, is really only the subject of three essays (excellent contributions by Martins Kaprans, Leena Kurvut-Käosaar and Ioana Luca), but by placing the question of European life writing on the agenda, the book sparks a discussion that has the potential to develop beyond the scope of IABA-Europe. In that respect, it is a welcome addition to contemporary life writing research.

The editors are well aware that it will take much more than the publication of the present title to answer the European question in a satisfactory way. The introduction acknowledges that the conference in Amsterdam was concluded without reaching agreement over the meaning of concepts like “Europe” and “European”. When it states that life writing is as flexible a notion as “Europe” (14), you may worry that the book will also remain unspecific as to the definition of the field of research it tries to bring together. Indeed, how does life writing matter in Europe specifically, when contrasted with auto/biography in the Anglo-American world, for example? Judging from this volume, the Europeans especially differ from their American colleagues in studying exclusively European case studies. Some of the authors write about subjects solely from their own cultural backgrounds, which seems to go against the forward thinking, cross-cultural mission statement of Huisman’s introduction. Bringing together scholars from a large number of nations to write about “local” subjects does not immediately constitute “interaction[...] between auto/biographical cultures in different language zones” (14). And while the majority of the contributions in *Life Writing Matters* present case studies that involve at least two European cultures, they do not always explicitly thematize cultural cross-fertilization within European life writing.

Thus, an otherwise fascinating essay like Christian Moser’s, which deals with the evolution of “autobiographic memory” from pre-modern times to the more recent past, and focuses on the life writing practices of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Walter Benjamin, does not reflect on the question how French and German autobiography may have influenced each other (*as* French and German autobiography, that is), or whether the general evolution it describes may be considered typically European. In other words, Moser ignores Rousseau’s “Frenchness”, Benjamin’s “Germanness” and their shared “Europeanness”. To be fair on the author, this is not a problem for the essay itself, but it *is* a missed opportunity for the book in which it is collected.

One contribution that does situate its subject in the larger European context is an essay by Nataliya Rodigina and Tatiana Saburova about “autodocumentary” by nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals. As Rodigina and Saburova show, Russian intelligentsia of the late-Imperial period

used autobiographical writing to identify with French culture, or to do the exact opposite in case they wanted to distinguish themselves from, for instance, their fathers' generation. Their formation of identity, either as "French" or patriotically Russian, relied on their relating to other European cultures. Rodigina and Saburova suggest that Russian autobiography "must be studied in a comparative manner in order to account for influences of national and European patterns on narrative structures, genre features and representations of the author's "self"" (119–120).

As becomes clear from the above, most contributions in this book concern case studies of autobiography and memoir (not counting the essays about letter writing). This would have been more logical if more, if not all essays had dealt with subjects that fit the introduction's contextualizing of contemporary life writing in Europe as post-Cold War memory work. The emphasis on representations of the self begs the question: does *life writing* matter in Europe, or does autobiography especially? The difference being that "life writing" may be seen as the umbrella term given to *all* forms of the mediation (in print) of lives, which are then interpreted and studied without ignoring relatively recent theoretical insights with regard to the narrativity and textuality of life stories, the production and performance in language of selves and identities, as well as the idea that autobiography and biography are often, if not by definition, closely intertwined. Scholars of auto/biography do life writing research when they approach the texts they study as intertextual verbal constructs that help create identities in a particular time period or place instead of unproblematically and transparently representing "facts" or "truth" – from which, of course, it does not automatically follow that all auto/biography is literary, or fictional in the sense of invented.

A number of important questions are left unsolved by *Life Writing Matters*, but those it implicitly poses or more directly puts forward are relevant and urgent: Do European life writing scholars choose different subjects than their international colleagues? Do they ask different questions about their primary material? Do they apply different methodologies and do they have "European" theories of life writing? Hopefully, future IABA-conferences and publications will continue to address these more fundamental issues. The introduction of the book suggests that there has been something like an "academic field of life writing" for some time already (11), long enough for it to have gone through the changes described in the opening chapter of the book. Surely, life writing as a *field* of research, following the recognition (through IABA and its European department) that scholars of auto/biography should work together more closely, explore interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives and share reflections on the theoretical implications of their work, is only

slowly emerging. The very idea of “Life Writing Studies” simply does not ring a bell for most people – not with students in BA or MA programmes, nor with the institutions on which scholars of auto/biography depend for funding. Is it not rather ironic for a book about life writing, but especially one about life writing in Europe, that this volume is published as part of the “American Studies” series of Heidelberg University Press? To its credit, *Life Writing Matters in Europe* presents itself as encouraging exactly the kind of cooperation – across academic disciplines, across (European) cultures – that should characterise a proper field of research.