Dan P. McAdams, *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump. A Psychological Reckoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, ISBN: 9780197507445).

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On 21 November 2022, to nobody's surprise, Donald J. Trump announced he would seek to become the Republican candidate for the 2024 US Presidential elections – and, both among those who have officially announced to be doing the same, as well as those who are likely to do so, his chances of securing the nomination are significant. The current legal investigations have done nothing to change that. Given that he is then expected to run against incumbent Democratic president Joe Biden, whose popularity has been diminished over the past few years, Trump stands a real chance to be elected president of the United States of America a second time. Thus, Dan P. McAdams's *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump*, written and published in the context of the 2020 presidential elections as an attempt to offer, as the book's subtitle phrases it, 'a psychological reckoning' with the controversial 45th US president, remains highly relevant.

McAdams comes from the field of personality psychology, and is well-known for his life-story theory, which poses that humans construct life-stories, or personal myths, in order to see their lives as meaningful wholes (McAdams 2015). According to McAdams (1995), these life-stories – our narrative identities – are foundational for our personalities, together with our personality traits and 'characteristic dispositions' (our desires, beliefs, concerns, and coping mechanisms). Over the past decades, McAdams has built an impressive body of research on these life-stories, and how people use narrative to give their lives unity, meaning and purpose, work through changes in their lives (McAdams 2021), and create a sense of belonging in and allegiance with their communities (McAdams et al. 2008). One of his main topics is

the way in which we narrate our selves aligns with the culture we live in – how, in other words, the time and place we find ourselves in influence the genre of the stories with which we express our narrative identities (McAdams 2006). This is relevant for scholars of life writing, as it offers an approach with which to study the convergence – or significant divergence – of personal narratives and society at large. This may not only lie in the explicit expression of certain norms and values, but also in the generic form of a story (McAdams 2006).

In a number of publications (most notably 2006), McAdams has discussed how the type of story that best fits contemporary American society is the redemptive story, in which 'characters endure suffering early on but they are eventually delivered from their pain to a better status or state'. The protagonist of such stories 'strives to overcome adversity' and its narrative arc is one of 'movement from negativity toward fulfilment, growth or gratification' (McAdams 2020, 239). This type of story is everywhere, not only in the stories Americans tell about themselves in private settings, but also in the public spaces, from Sunday sermons to job applications. It is also the favoured story American leaders tell, as McAdams himself has analysed with regards to two former US presidents, George W. Bush (McAdams 2011) and Barack Obama (2015).

Having discussed two of his predecessors, it seems logical that McAdams would also take on an assessment Trump's personality. This, however, is a notably different book, as Trump's is a notably different story – or rather, as McAdams exclaims repeatedly throughout his argument: 'there is no story' (4)! Neither, he concludes at the end of his psychological reckoning, is there redemption: he finds this typically American trait fully lacking in Trump. Thus, Trump is the negative example of two of the main lines in McAdams´s theory of an American narrative: that individuals need a unifying element in their lives, and an arc of redemption. It is clear that this troubles the author and the final sentences of his book are remarkably bleak as he describes how the 'empty narrative core' of Donald J. Trump is a vortex, that may end up sucking in the entire nation like a 'black hole' (251).

If this sounds uncharacteristic for a scholarly work, it needs pointing out that McAdams´s book is not merely meant for an audience of academic peers, although his readers certainly need to be able to follow an academic analysis. This analysis, however, is delivered in forceful writing that is easy to read, and as the book's cover announces, it is as much meant to be a contribution to the public debate about Trump, as it is a case study presented to fellow personality psychologists. It delivers on both fronts, but I would argue there is also much of interest here for scholars of life writing.

The term life writing is mostly used to refer to a practice, or collection of texts: any instance in which lives are turned into written narratives, most notably biographies, autobiographies and memoirs - although, increasingly, the term is also used with reference to the storification of life experiences in other genres and media. It can, however, also refer to the scholarly inquest into those texts – life writing studies – as it takes place throughout and combining a broad range of disciplines, from national and comparative literature, to history and the social sciences. It is, finally, also a method for data gathering, both used for academic (ethnographic field works; sociological interviews) and professional practices (audience research; career counselling; monitoring job performances; etc.).

The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump is an interesting example of life writing in all these three senses. First of all, McAdams collected an impressive number of life narratives of Trump, and he refers to a host of biographies, newspaper profiles and interviews in his analysis. He also – although this is not the book's main purpose – synthesises these in an engagingly told life narrative of its own: his book is, indeed, a piece of life writing, telling the life story of the man without a story that spans Trump's entire life from early childhood (and before, as McAdams includes a short history of the Trump family from Donald's grandfather onwards) to the present day. Finally, as said before, McAdams's book is also a study of life writing, as he analyses life narratives about Trump in order to show how they converge with the culture and time he lives in. 'The man', McAdams argues, 'meets the moment. Basking and raging in the chaos he creates, this strangely antagonistic human being seems perfectly made for the strangely authoritarian times in which America and the world find themselves' (209). The last three chapters of his book are devoted to the worrying consequences of this conclusion, as it points to our world becoming more authoritarian (in the chapter titled 'Us'); to a step back, evolutionary speaking, to basing authority on dominance, rather than on prestige ('Primate'); and to the aforementioned redemption narrative losing its position as 'the master cultural narrative' in US society ('Redemption'). As US culture is changing, so is the narrative genre of its stories, and Trump's popularity indicates this. McAdams clearly regrets this trend, despite being critical of the exceptionalism implied in the typical American redemption narrative.

Preceding these three concluding chapters are seven short chapters in which McAdams assesses how Trump relates to himself and the world around him. In the first two of these, 'Story' and 'Deal', he discusses Trump's life so far and introduces the central thesis of the book, namely that Trump's identity is strangely devoid of story and that he is, instead, 'the episodic man' without a past or future, who has no

other purpose 'except to win, and to keep winning' (49). In the two chapters that follow, 'Reward' and 'Venom', McAdams uses his skill as a personality psychologist to assess how Trump scores on each of the so-called 'Big Five' personality traits: extraversion (extremely high), neuroticism (medium), openness (low), conscientiousness (medium) and agreeableness (extremely low). He does so, as throughout the book, in accessible language, which makes this as much a good introduction to this aspect of personality psychology, as a discussion of Trump's personality – another merit of this book.

In the next three chapters, McAdams turns from Trump's personality to his behaviour. Here, he consecutively discusses Trump's uncanny tendency to lie ('Truth'), the way he relates to others ('Love'), and, finally, how he relates to himself ('Me'). The tone here is, at times, very personal, as in the introduction to the first of these three chapters, where McAdams writes:

> I lie awake at night wondering what it is like to be Donald Trump. His overmastering strangeness challenges my imagination like no project I have ever attempted. He is so utterly different form most of the rest of humankind, so different from who I believe myself to be and who I have been. I summon up all the empathy and perspective-taking I can muster to relate to his unique experience, to find a connection between my mind and his (96).

With this tone of voice, and the inclusion of such references to the writing process, *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump* is not just life writing in the biographical sense, but also in the autobiographical: it includes a narrative of McAdams himself, on a quest to figure out why Donald Trump is the way he is. This paragraph marks a turning point in that narrative: in the previous chapters, McAdams could understand Trump's personality, and even empathise with his subject growing up and becoming the man he is today. Now, however, his 'imagination stops dead in its tracks'. Trump's utter disregard for the truth, and his tendency to 'continue to lie even when nearly the whole world knows you are lying' (97); the way that he 'objectifies nearly everybody in his world, women and men alike' (146); and his narcissism to the point that he is 'addicted to himself' (171) – these all lie beyond the author's empathy, they are perspectives that are utterly alien to him. McAdams does, however, have an explanation for all these oddities, and it is the same throughout: the fact that Trump has no narrative, that he is the episodic man.

McAdams's argument is backed up by his insight and experience as a personality psychologist, his knowledge of evolutionary psychology and the broad range of

sources he draws on. That does not mean there are no counter-arguments imaginable to McAdams's central thesis. In fact, it is very odd that he does not mention once Galen Strawson's well-known article 'Against Narrativity' (2004), in which a strong argument is presented contra the idea that we need a 'narrative identity' because without it, without turning our lives into meaningful and coherent stories, we cannot live ethical lives. Given that Strawson has discussed how 'Episodics' (who do not see their lives as coherent and continuous stories) can live a life that is just as morally upright and fulfilling as 'Diachronics' (who do), one would have expected at least a rebuttal of Strawson from McAdams, when he explains all of Trump's immoralities and vices by him being 'the episodic man'. Of course, McAdams comes from a very different field than Strawson, who is an analytic philosopher, but his evidence-based approach does not necessarily prove the latter wrong. Is it really Trump's episodic nature that leads him to be so disregardful towards the truth, others, and even himself as a person? Or is it his obsession with winning every episode, by any means necessary? After all, nowhere in his book does McAdams argue that being episodic also necessarily means wanting to win each episode – he merely assumes the one follows from the other, glossing over that this may be typical for just Trump, rather than for all Episodics. Similarly, McAdams convincingly shows that Trump's extreme narcissism can be explained by the fact that he 'loves himself the way human beings love objects, rather than the way human beings love persons' – he does not, however, show that this is the necessary outcome of him being the episodic man, again merely implying that the one comes with the other (170). An engagement with other voices, most notably Strawson's, in the debate about narrativity as a condition for leading a good life could have strengthened or nuanced his argument.

That said, this is certainly a recommended read. It does not just offer a well-wrought 'psychological reckoning' with Donald Trump and the times we live in, but, as argued above, also a model that may be followed by others when engaging with life writing. It could, furthermore, function well as an introduction to intriguing aspects of the different academic fields McAdams draws on. Finally, it also shows how enriching informed interventions in the public debate by academics can be. Drawing on his insights as a specialist with years of research, McAdams takes on the role of public intellectual, concerned with the state of his country and the world at large, and offers a valuable point of view.

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Notes

[1] The author wishes to thank Donald B. Redmond for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this review.