**Getting to know me in theory and practice: negotiated truth and mourning in autobiographically-based fiction (JG Ballard, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Jack Kerouac, Louisa May Alcott and me)**

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*Abstract:*

Despite recent controversies over ‘faked’ memoirs, most readers of life writing continue to trust in the autobiographical pact: they believe that memoirs are a source of personal truth, a writer’s outlet for laying bare the past. But some argue that the codes and conventions of memoir inscribe a distance between self and subject. Before writers are able to tell the truth to their readers, moreover, they have to confront and process that truth themselves over and over again. Writers of autobiographically-based fiction (or autofiction, autobiografiction) have long known that the work of truth-telling must start well before publication: the practice of writing in this form demands repeated self-revelation and intimacy with the truth of one’s own life history in a way that memoir may not. In this essay, I embrace the self-reflective methodologies of life-writing practice in order to identify and interrogate the ways in which writers of autobiographically-based fiction, including myself, process the truth of their pasts in order to reanimate and rewrite that past via a variety of imagined potentialities. I use a self-reflective analysis of the trajectory of truth-telling in my own writing over time and then turn to examine the work of JG Ballard, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Jack Kerouac, and Louisa May Alcott using the revelations in their life writings to produce alternative readings of their fictions. By doing so, I will propose a practical tool for examining that most elusive textual artefact: the writer’s imagination. While the life writing of these writers reveal a single, nominalist, reading of the facts of their lives, that is, their novels demonstrate the power of fiction to unfold hidden potentialities, and further, multiplying facets of truth around those facts. I hope to demonstrate, moreover, the usefulness of the practice-based insights that life writing practitioners can bring to textual analysis as I examine the process of writing autobiographically-based fiction from the inside out.

*Article*

*The Distance between Practice and Theory*

Writers and their critics in every discipline speak with very different discourses – literary theorists do not typically employ symbolism and synecdoche in their analysis and novelists tend not to use words like *hermeneutic* and *epistemology*. I have recently argued elsewhere, however, that this split between theory and practice in the discipline of life writing is particularly damaging to the production of knowledge in a field greatly concerned with the forces at work on the borderland between the self and the performance of that self in communicable form.1 This divide parallels the one that feminist writer/critics from Virginia Woolf to Jane Tompkins have envisioned as a political split born of the gendered associations of various forms of knowledge and discourse in which public language – the language of objectivity/ authority/ academia/ journalism is privileged over private language of subjectivity/emotions/ confession/journals.2 The battleground between public and private language is nowhere under more scrutiny than in the growing academic discipline of life writing studies, in which, in my view, the hierarchy of discourse may be read as: **THEORY/**practice.

The ambit of the battle has grown, moreover, as life writing critics have widened the net of the material they examine under the umbrella of *life narrative* or *life storying*, and because of the increasingly innovative and ever-multiplying forms of such discourses. These developments to practice in the field, therefore, demand changes to theoretical approaches. In the recent past, some critics argued that life-writing practice with its typical representations of the lives of single, static selves, had fallen behind contemporary theories of identity which saw the self as fluid, hybrid and fragmentary.3 Indeed, my own experience as the Director of the Centre for Life Narratives (CLN) at Kingston University has shown me repeated examples of academic dismissal or disinterest in the reflections of life-writers on their art. At seminars and conferences for CLN, where life writers and their critics are brought together to debate and discuss their discipline the distance between theory and practice is made manifest: the writer-practitioners may be annoyed, bemused or intimidated by questions framed in academic jargon, while the academics often note disappointment or frustration with the writers for their emphasis on the impact of marketplace pressures and failure to consider the field of life-writing more widely.

But the diversity of current life-writing practice challenges our critical assumptions about the limitations of the art and its practitioners and demands a different set of analytical tools. As the divide between theory and practice is linguistic and conceptual in nature, it is best examined with ways of listening and reading that are open to nuance and suggestion: we must not decide what we are looking for before we start. We might begin by considering how far we are still relying on Tompkins’ hierarchy as we listen to the reflections of life narrative practitioners: do we still read creativity as a partial/subjective/feminine form of knowledge that commands less value than the supposedly objective/authoritative/masculine epistemologies of academia? To avoid that formulation, we could recognise that academics may have their own partial and subjective biases, dictated by the very questions that they bring to the texts they examine. As life story practitioners, on the other hand, do not speak through any particular theoretical lens, they may well offer objective reflections useful to our study of the discipline.

Such reflections, moreover, may shed light on the very processes at work and influences upon that borderland between the self and its formal representation which is, historically, the location of life writing theory. As these forms have multiplied, diverged and developed the practice of life storying demands that theorists return to examine the impact of art and form upon truth-telling once again.

*Nominalism, Essentialism and Autobiographical Fiction*

The divide I am concerned with here is exemplified clearly by the debates over the value and relevance to life writing studies of one of these forms: autobiographical fiction. While any novelist will tell you that writing is always, more or less, an act of self-examination and self-revelation, until recently life writing theorists have tended to shy away from the analysis of fiction as outside their ken. In the pages to follow I attempt to address the lapse in communication between theory and practice by offering autobiographical fiction as a case in which all the stakeholders in our discipline will benefit from speaking and listening to one another.

To do so, and to highlight the openness necessary to such an endeavour, I begin by offering you an intimate revelation: I am writing this paper two weeks before getting married—and there is a fundamental disagreement between my fiancé and me. Brian, my fiancé, is an historian and political biographer. I write autobiographical fiction. Brian believes in the possibility of a form of historical truth. He sides, in a rather old-fashioned way, with Arthur Marwick against his critics—that things either happened or it did not happen and we can, through an exploration of the sources, come to a good understanding of an event, and indeed of people, from past.4 Our debate does not really concern the methodological debates that take up so much of the “what is History” writing. We both agree that sources and careful research are the cornerstones of history. Our disagreement is about far we can push the claims of getting close to the essence of the past through the conventional approach of historical research and the kind of biographical writing that Brian does, as against the repeated exploration of the past through the imaginative and generative processes of autobiographical fiction. Is there a greater truth in art-based writing than in science-based writing, and if so, what is the content and character of that truth? Brian says that “the truth derived from art is different from the truth derived from the archive” and claims that from the archive he can distil a “subject’s true essence”, in so far as we can know it. He is, in certain moods, what philosopher Karl Popper would term an essentialist. I do not dispute the utility of the archive. But I do not see that what it produces is some sort of “essence”. Instead, I see it as a story of a life that one particular historian wants to tell at one particular time. I am in Popper’s words, a “nominalist”.

In *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper explains the difference between these positions and in doing so evokes perfectly the split between the discourses of theory and practice that I spoke of earlier. An essentialist, Popper writes, believes that all things have a discoverable ‘essence’, an intrinsic quality, ‘ie, that which remains unchanged during change’ (33). An essentialist is thus, for Popper, an objective, scholarly observer of phenomena while a nominalist believes that ‘the changes which the thing undergoes bring to light different aspects or possibilities of the thing, and therefore its essence’ (33). An essentialist may see a whole truth emerge from a series of facts, but a nominalist sees truth as fluid, and might hope only to discern elements of truth and partial understanding from those same facts: a nominalist observes subjectively, creatively.

Popper uses the ostensibly universal concept of ‘whiteness’ to further explain these positions.5 To a nominalist, like me, Popper argues, the notion of ‘whiteness’ has no intrinsic meaning or value—it ‘is nothing but a label attached to a set of many different things’—snowflakes, swans, table cloths (26). Brian, by contrast, as an essentialist, would in Popper’s words ‘deny that we first collect a group of single things and label them white; rather, they say we call each single white thing white on account of a certain intrinsic property that it shares with other white things, namely ‘whiteness’’ (26-7). Unlike Brian—I don’t believe in the truth—or at least I don’t believe it can be seen in full or fixed in place. For me truth is something I glimpse at the very moment it turns the corner and becomes something else. The closest I have ever been to telling the truth has been through writing fiction: the act of story-telling allows me to provoke repeated close encounters with ghostly, disappearing truths. As Popper suggests, my nominalism accounts for this, as nominalists believe in fluidity and that ‘phenomena which from some standpoints may be essentially different, may from others be essentially the same’ (26). While I understand that such a stance would make it impossible to write biography—I also believe it is the only position from which I can write fiction.

If Brian’s job as a biographer is to collect and interpret life-facts over a set period of time in order to distil from them the essence of a life, mine as a writer of autobiographical fiction is to interpret the facts of my life for a lifetime and provoke from those facts all of the possibilities and potentialities I can. When Brian’s work is finished he can turn to the next subject, but, like other autobiographical novelists, I must return with a different set of lenses to the same facts each time. By so doing, moreover, I establish intimacy with my own history even as I prepare to offer my revelations to the public. But that is not why I do it. Nor is it because I am a nominalist. I return to these facts because I must. Because even if I am unsure that there is such a thing as a whole truth, an essence, in my life—something compels me to reflect on my past in the hope of glimpsing partial truths and fragmentary understandings.

And I am not alone. Virginia Woolf once wrote that it was easier to tell the truth in fiction than in biography because ‘no one takes a character in fiction quite seriously’ (‘Sterne’ 87). That claim is read generally as a commentary on the difficulties any writer may face airing his or her dirty laundry in public. But for writers of autobiographically-based fiction, the work of truth-telling starts well before publication: the repetitive processes of story-telling demand intimacy with the truth of one’s own life history in a way that composing a single-volume memoir may not. The armour of the fictive, I argue, enables writers of autobiographical fiction to go deep—to confront their key traumas and losses over and over again and to reanimate, reassess and reinterpret their suffering through a variety of real and imagined potentialities. But—getting back to the nominalist position for a moment—can the written products generated by such endeavours really be considered *truthful*—or are they merely another narrative about the past? How might they be of interest to life writing studies?

Essentialists like Brian would probably argue that such work could not be properly considered truth, even if it portrayed certain emotional, social or psychological ‘truths’. But as Popper explains, for a nominalist the essence of a thing is ‘the sum or source of the potentialities inherent’ in it, and that therefore ‘its unchanging essence, can only be known *through its changes*.’ (32) Gold, for example, may be beaten or melted or tested chemically to ‘unfold some of its hidden potentialities’ and thereby help us better understand its essential nature. So too, the autobiographical fiction of writers such as JG Ballard, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Jack Kerouac, Louisa May Alcott demonstrates a nominalist power to ‘unfold hidden potentialities.’ In these works the writers test the parameters of the essential self by repositioning that self in a series creatively elaborated landscapes and frameworks. Those imagined potentialities when presented in fiction offer theorists a comprehensive picture of the losses these writers are compelled to mourn time and time again: the ‘essence’ of their lives. But they also enable the writers to be revealed to themselves, as Popper might have predicted, by publicly reworking their lived experiences in order to create a monument to their suffering.

*The Work of Mourning*

In their diaries and journals Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and Louisa May Alcott made use of a limited palette of tropes and repeatedly, even compulsively, framed those tropes in order to represent the distance they felt between their public and private selves.6 Symbols such as the sun, mirrors and windows appear first in their diaries and are then reimagined, or reframed, into new forms in their fiction. Their shared need to construct, over their lifetimes, a series of textual frames through which to articulate publicly their private preoccupations is striking. I would further argue that it was primarily in their fiction that Woolf, Mansfield and Alcott were able to reveal, both to the public and to themselves, what clinical psychologist Peter Shabad has called the most intimate of all human creations: mourning (197).

Shabad argues that early trauma, when not corroborated, validated and thus made ‘real’ by an external witness, produces in the victim the compulsion to repeat, revisit and re-tell of their lonely suffering. As psychoanalyst Paul Russell puts it the ‘repetition compulsion is an illness of loneliness’ but ‘it is also the individual’s only means of reattachment and emotional growth’ (521). Like the Ancient Mariner, the sufferer of lonely childhood trauma is sentenced to repeat the tale that is both the producer of ongoing trauma and its symptom. Shabad claims that victims of lonely and unvalidated childhood trauma ‘are continually re-creating and creatively elaborating reality […] in order to ensure that the dignity’ of their experiences ‘be taken seriously—that attention be paid’(198). Moreover, because in such circumstances the sufferer is forced into the painful position of bearing witness to his or her own experience, victims develop a coded discourse for doing so: the language of symptomology. Symptoms, Shabad states are ‘self-created communicative actions intended to build a lasting monument […] to one’s experience of suffering’ (199). Like the artistic process which this parallels, symptoms elevate ‘one’s experience through its dramatization into an objective event’ (207): the uncorroborated childhood trauma becomes the intimate work of art. The pain of that trauma, however, requires that its symptom is rendered in coded terms. Thus, as Shabad puts it ‘its artistic aim of objectification through self-disclosure remains ever-elusive’ (208).

Recognition of such self-disclosure in fiction has a long history in literary studies: it has become a truism that first novels are often or even always autobiographical. From Tolstoy’s *Childhood* in 1852, to Joyce’s *Stephen Hero* in 1905, through Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Ayn Rand, Ralph Ellison, Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou, Rita Mae Brown, Mona Simpson, Bret Easton Ellis,and James Frey (or not) any number of writers have drawn upon their early lives to produce first novels. Others, like Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Louisa May Alcott, DH Lawrence, Jack Kerouac, Hemingway, Saul Bellow, Charles Bukowski, JG Ballard and Marguerite Duras, waited until later in their careers to write autobiographically-based fiction. Whether they come to it early or late, however, the compulsion to tell of lonely childhood suffering is inscribed within their texts by a private language of mourning, the lexicon and iconography of which is peculiar to each. Moreover, because their mourning is evoked by this coded discourse, the suffering of these writers is not relieved through the telling: the tale must go on.

The practice of repeatedly reframing primal trauma enables a writer to exert a measure of (fictional) control over that past event: to examine it from the perspective of the adult, the child, the victim, the perpetrator. By doing so, to return to Popper, the writer aims to reveal the essence of that primal trauma—‘that which remains unchanged’ in every version of its telling. It is, moreover, this potential to deduce the parameters of the essential truth by subjecting the past to changes in perspectives, details, settings, genders and ages in each re-telling, that draws the compulsive, lonely sufferer to autobiographical fiction in the first place.

*Negotiation*

I was first struck by the divide between essential versus nominal truth, and indeed the function of autobiographical fiction itself, when teaching JG Ballard’s novel *Empire of the Sun* many years ago. While preparing my lecture, I came across an essay in which Ballard describes the process of writing the book.

Memories have huge staying power, but like dreams, they thrive in the dark, surviving for decades in the deep waters of our minds like shipwrecks on the sea bed. Hauling them into the daylight can be risky. Within a few hours, a precious trophy of childhood or a first romance can crumble into rust. I knew that something similar might happen when I began to write *Empire of the Sun*, a novel about my life as a boy in Shanghai during the second world war, and in the civilian camp at Lunghua, where I was interned with my parents.(1)

When I first read this revelation I was astonished: here, Ballard says that he was interned with his parents in the prison camp of which he writes in *Empire.* But Jim – the boy in the novel who clearly represents the young Ballard—is all alone—boy versus war. Why did Ballard so alter the facts in the telling of his childhood?

There was always the possibility that my memories of the war concealed a deeper stratum of unease that I preferred not to face. […] In fact, I found it difficult to begin the novel, until it occurred to me to drop my parents from the story […] just as they had moved out of my life in Lunghua even though we were sharing the same room. They had no control over their teenage son, were unable to feed or clothe him or pull those little levers of promise and affection with which parents negotiate domestic life with their children. Once I separated Jim from his parents the novel unrolled itself at my feet like a bullet-ridden carpet.

In 1984 the novel was published, a caravel of memories raised from the deep. Enough of it was based on fact to convince me that what had seemed a dream-like pageant was a negotiated truth. (1)

Here, then, Ballard exemplifies the divide between the nominal and the essential. The *truth* of Ballard’s childhood, he contends, is told in his novel: he was alone in the camp. The *fact* of his parents’ presence, he makes clear, did not alter this truth—so that what he portrays in his novel might be seen as a third position: ‘negotiated truth.’

The term interests me greatly, both in relation to Ballard’s writing and to my own. When I read his essay, I was in the midst of *not* writing a memoir of my childhood: a project I had begun and given up on several times over the years. The naked truth was too daunting, too overwhelming, too painful. Ballard’s proposition of ‘negotiated truth’ freed me. I would reveal the truths of my childhood (to the public and to myself) through the negotiations available in fiction. Rather than a memoir I wrote a book with this premise: what would become of a person who had my childhood? What fears would she have? What choices would she make? What kind of mother, lover and friend would she be? Writing the autobiographical novel allowed me to interact repeatedly with my history, to expose the brightest and darkest moments of my life with a degree of candour that I simply could not have achieved in memoir. I could tell the truth about Bernadette, my character, and her family in a way that I could not about Meg and hers. And not simply for fear of reprisal: the task of providing plausible motivations for my characters silenced the censorious editor in my head.

*Tropes as Symptoms of Lonely Suffering*

Virginia Woolf spent much of her career negotiating truths in her fiction including those of her painful relationship with her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, and employed a very particular form of private language to do so. In works such as ‘A Sketch of the Past’ and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf uses tropes related to libraries, academia and mountaineering, her father’s characteristic preoccupations, in moments of intimate revelation. In ‘Sketch,’ Woolf combines these figures as she writes of her relationship to Stephen’s writing:

When I read his books I get a critical grasp on him; I always read *Hours in a Library* by way of filling out my ideas […] and always find something to fill out; to correct; to stiffen my fluid vision. I find not a subtle mind […] [b]ut a strong mind; a healthy out of door, moor striding mind; […] and there often steals in, not a filial, but a reader’s affection for him (115-16).

In this passage Woolf describes her relation to her father’s words first in the *academic* terms of critical grasp and correction, and then in the *mountaineering* language of the outdoors, the moors, striding. Woolf used this discourse inherited from her father often in her work to portray constrained yet intimate relations. In *To the Lighthouse*, for example, the character of Mrs. Ramsay overhears her husband talking and ‘did not catch the meaning, only the words, here and there… dissertation… fellowship… readership… lectureship…’ (24). This passage has been read as signalling a divide between male and female language but Mrs. Ramsay’s reaction seems to belie that reading: the words arouse her sympathy and lead her to think of the view ‘that her husband loved’ (25). 5 Here, Woolf uses her father’s ‘ugly academic jargon’ to portray the familiarity and even intimacy of the Ramsay marriage: Mrs. Ramsay need not understand her husband’s words to respond to them.

These tropes appear in different guises in all of Woolf’s fiction, and such repetition can be read as a symptom of Woolf’s need to continually reframe her relation to her father. By doing so, Shabad’s work suggests, Woolf may have hoped to forge intimacy with Stephen’s memory and mourned the pain of their shared history. By marking moments of strained intimacy in her fiction with her father’s voice, Woolf reveals her lonely suffering publicly via a coded language: a negotiated truth.

In Louisa May Alcott’s fiction, intimacy with father figures is depicted as intrusive mind control which can only be avoided via deception. Alcott once wrote that she’d rather be a ‘good daughter’ than a ‘great writer’ and the *Little Women* series compounds this image of Louisa as conforming like her fictional counterpart, Jo March, to the desires of her father, Bronson Alcott.8 In her thrillers, however, this dutiful daughter avoided Bronson’s policing gaze by writing of dangerous and powerful bodies, uncontrolled passions and fantasies of revenge under a pseudonym. For Louisa, life was a struggle between duty and desire, between her profound compulsion to write and her father’s constant moral surveillance. Time and again these traumatic feelings were privately reframed and publicly confronted in fictions that seem otherwise irreconcilable: the passion, decadence and addictions of the characters in Alcott’s thrillers, are merely the dark reverse of the controlled and dutiful characters of her morality tales.

Katherine Mansfield’s lonely suffering surfaces in the images of windows and mirrors used almost obsessively in her fiction. In her earliest writing, rain beating against the windows and reflections in mirrors are frequent metaphors for the interior struggles of her protagonists, while later in her career her characters avoid the looking glass, and the world outside is portrayed as safer than the life being lived indoors. For Mansfield, whose career was blighted by illness, exile and the sudden death of her beloved younger brother, these tropes appear to have functioned as catalysts to provoke her into writing. Convalescing in cheap hotel rooms and yet forcing herself to work, Mansfield would set a character in front of a mirror or a window and from there create tale after tale of exile and self-deception. The images appear in her journals, notebooks and letters throughout her life as well. Soon after her brother’s death, Mansfield wrote to his memory:

The almond tree, the birds[…] flowers you do not see, the open window out of which I lean and dream that you are against my shoulder [...] I want to write a kind of long elegy to you […] perhaps in Prose. (KM Notebooks 2:33)

That prose elegy became *Prelude,* Mansfield’s most well-known work and here too her central figures frame the story: it begins with a Mansfield-like child Kezia pressing her hands against a window and ends with Kezia refusing to look at herself in the mirror. In these works, and in the work of other writers of autographically based fiction, such compulsive reliance on key tropes signals a private desire unfulfilled, an public episode of mourning that never ends.

In his study of Jack Kerouac, critic Mitchell Breitweiser suggests that these attempts to mourn through autobiographical fiction are necessarily unfulfilling, for they work to avoid, rather than confront, feelings of loss. Such fiction, he writes, rather than providing a ‘complex and adequate image of the lost’ which would in turn produce ‘an understanding and acceptance of the boundary that death has drawn up between the dead and the survivor’ instead enshrines mourning as ‘a ready-made and abstract statuette [...] freezing life at the instant of loss’ (Breitweiser 53). Kerouac’s novels offer an excellent example of this claim. Indeed, the sheer number of his autobiographical fictions (fourteen in all) provides ample opportunity for examining how a writer uses such work to enshrine mourning and negotiate truth. For Kerouac, there was essentially one loss that formed the central figure of all of his writing: the death, when Jack was four years old, of his nine year old brother Gerard.

As Kerouac noted, the task of writing the fourteen novels that comprise the Duluoz Legend, his fictional autobiography, was the task of coming to know himself.7 But it was also the means of obsessively, repetitively telling of the pain of his brother’s death. As John Tytell has noted, from a early age, Kerouac, now an only child, wrote stories as a ‘systematic pursuit’ recording daily the number of words he wrote ‘consumed by guilt [...] unable to stop writing’(Tytell 64). In the novel which recounts his brother’s life and death, *Visions of Gerard*, Kerouac writes of the cause of this compulsion:

I’ve since dreamed it a million times [...] the house on Beaulieu Street the night Gerard died [...] I don’t see him in the coffin but he’s there, his ghost, brown ghost, and I’m grown sick in my papers (my writing papers, my bloody ‘literary career’ ladies and gentlemen) and the whole reason why I ever wrote at all [...] because of Gerard, the idealism, Gerard the religious hero. (10)

In Kerouac’s autobiographical fiction he returns again and again to images of lost brothers and haunted, haunting angels. In *Visions of Gerard*, we see the source for these tropes, as Kerouac’s brother is portrayed as a saintly, angelic figure, his painful and terminal rheumatic heart condition making him highly aware of suffering. He was, Kerouac writes ‘a soft tenderhearted angel the like of which you’ll never find again[...]’ (p. 10)

The vain attempt to ‘find again’ his brother/angel is the key trope in Kerouac’s fiction. In his novels that angel (usually male) is seen by Kerouac’s alter-ego, the narrator, as a kindred spirit, a brother or lover, whom the narrator follows on a journey of some kind. The quests undertaken, however, are aimless, aborted, or otherwise unfulfilling: narrator and the angel become separated, either through death, disillusion or distance, and the narrator stumbles, painfully, home. As Sal Paradise, Kerouac’s narrator, tells us in *On The Road* :

Yes, and it wasn’t only because I was a writer and needed new experiences that I wanted to know Dean more […] but because, somehow, in spite of our difference in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother (10).

Here, as Sal describes Dean Moriarty, we witness the ur-brother/angel, the first of many that Kerouac’s narrators encounter. Of course, the character of Moriarty (and in later novels, Cody) also has its origin in the real life figure of Kerouac’s companion Neal Cassady. For Sal the fictional Moriarty is ‘a burning, frightful Angel, palpitating toward me’ (112). Unlike Gerard, the benign angel of Kerouac’s childhood, Moriarty is the stuff of nightmare. By linking Moriarty to the trope of the angel, however, Kerouac is able to restore the loss of his brother by creating a both a fictional angel (Moriarty) and a real life ‘brother,’ Cassady.

In fiction after fiction, Kerouac negotiated the truth of loss by creating brother/angel characters. For Breitwieser, such ‘enshrinement,’ speaks of longing rather than mourning. He argues that Kerouac’s fiction enacts both his avoidance of loss (as the dead are still here in words) but also, his hopeful, romantic state of longing. Thus, Breitweiser argues, Kerouac’s novels substitute the acceptance of loss with the ‘romance of rediscovery... the chance that the observer might come across [...] something, streaked with fatality and therefore lonely, but also interesting and mysteriously companionable’ (58-9). By enshrining and reframing such mysterious companions, angels, mirrors, little boys with airplanes and old men in libraries, writers of autobiographical fiction privately negotiate the truths of their lives and mourn their losses. And that, as I told Brian, is truth-telling, even if it is also fiction. As such it is of value to theorists and practitioners of life writing—whatever language they speak. Ballard, I think, would have agreed with me, for as he suggested all tales of the ‘dream-like pageant’ of the past are negotiations between discourses of experience and of analysis, of truth and of fiction.

*Short Biography*

Dr Meg Jensen is Director of the Centre for Life Narratives (*CLN*) at Kingston University, where she is Principal Lecturer in English Literature and Creative Writing and Deputy Head of the School of Humanities. She publishes both creative writing and literary criticism, and in both forums, her focus is upon writers and writing: what writers read, what writers think—tracing the impact of writers’ lives upon their writing. She developed the undergraduate and post graduate programmes in Creative Writing at Kingston in 2003 and ran both for several years before establishing *CLN*. Recent publications include: ‘The State of the Art and The Story So Far: An Introduction to Life Writing, Life Narratives and The Spirit of the Age Collection,’ in *Life Writing: The State of the Art and The Spirit of the Age*, Jensen and Jane Jordan,eds. (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009); ‘Separated by a common language: the (differing) discourses of Life Writing in theory and practice,’ *A/B Autobiography Studies* 2011; ‘The Anxiety of Daughterhood, or Using Bloom to Read Women Writers: The Cases of Louisa May Alcott and Virginia Woolf’ *Literature Compass* 4 (4) , 2007; ‘Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf's Major Novels’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* (CUP, 2007); *The Open Book: Creative Misreading in the Works of Selected Modern Writers*, (Palgrave Macmillan,2002). She has also completed two novels, *Saints on Staten Island* and *Geraldine Mulrooney’s Last Chance.*

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*Endnotes*

1. I argue the points made in this opening section at length in the forthcoming Jensen, ’Separated by a common language’.

2. Woolf *A Room of One’s Own*, and Jane Tompkins, ‘Me and My Shadow.’ This citation Tompkins (169-70).

3. See for example Zuss 15.

4 A good flavour of the debate can be found here: <http://www.history.ac.uk/resources/discourse-postmodernism/munslowonmarwick-paper> and Arthur Marwick’s response, here <http://www.history.ac.uk/resources/discourse-postmodernism/marwick-paper>

5. It is worth noting that Popper, writing in 1957, uses the term white here to stand for any abstract notion—he is not referring to the racial connotations of the word and the legacy of those in the imagination—although later theorists might suggest that all such references are racially inflected, consciously or otherwise. See for example Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992).

6 See forthcoming M Jensen ‘The Writer’s Diary as Borderland’

7 See Jane Marcus. ‘Niece of a Nun’

8 Cited in Showalter, vii.

9 Cited in Tytell 67.

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