

Celebrity Monkeys and Other Notables: Recent Life Writing Publications Reviewed

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Abstract

James Franklin observes that research has shown that thirsty rhesus macaque monkeys would rather look at pictures of celebrity monkeys than drink water; humans share this fascination with extraordinary con-specifics. The desire to get information about the minutiae of other people's lives is manifested across the publishing spectrum from the sensationalist and trivialised to the erudite. In this essay I comment on what can be learnt from the reviews of recent life writing publications I have collected. Going by what is reviewed here, between 2005 and 2008 (which is when most of these auto/biographies were published) an average of about 17 autobiographies and biographies were published per year. Given the relatively small numbers of South African book-buyers, this is an indisputably generous allocation of publishers' resources to life writing. I consider the ratio of biography to autobiography, and who is deemed a worthy subject in each genre.

The differences between the two genres are analysed. I argue that the issue of how telling one's own story might empower the storyteller is no less important in post-apartheid South Africa than it was during apartheid.

Key Concepts: autobiography, biography, post-apartheid, South Africa, reviews.

In a review of Susan Tridgell's study of biography, James Franklin observes that in the latest *Weird Science* research, rhesus macaque monkeys, who had been deprived of water and were thus thirsty, were found to prefer looking at pictures of celebrity monkeys to drinking cherry-flavoured water. I am not

sure what a celebrity monkey is, though I am sure I have never encountered one, and my inquisitiveness about such pre-eminent primates is not the reason why I mention Franklin's comment. It is rather because of what he has to say about how we humans share with our hairier cousins this fascination with what extraordinary con-specifics are doing. There is, he says, no point in resisting the allure of information about others' lives. For some of us Franklin's insistence that we should give in to the primates' (perhaps even primitive) enthrallment with luminaries might go against the grain: those above a certain age or of a certain bent might be dismissive of apparently endless celebrity gossip in the popular media. So this pop/film star is single (or involved) again, that one in (or out of) rehab, another one losing (or gaining) weight ... so? The thing is, though, that our fascination with the lives of notable individuals is not confined to sensationalist mass media. The reading public are, like television viewers and the YouTube generation, drawn to life stories. The desire to get information about the minutiae of other people's lives is manifested across the publishing spectrum from the sensationalist and trivialised to the erudite. That this is not merely an unsubstantiated opinion is borne out by the fact, reported by Franklin, that biographies outsell novels in English-speaking countries.

We cannot assess, from the reviews of life writing summarised here, the relative weightings—in publications or in sales—of fiction to non-fiction in South Africa but we can ascertain that non-fictional life stories are seen as worthwhile publishing ventures: a total of almost 80 biographies and autobiographies, the vast majority of or by South Africans¹, are featured. This is not a complete inventory of all life writing published recently by or

¹ I am interested in South Africans who are the subjects of life writing, and also in life writing texts (sometimes by non-South Africans) that focus on South African experiences. For instance, journalist Peter Hawthorne is English by birth but has spent most of his working life in South Africa (http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-in/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=52918&cat_id=557) and Zambian born Elaine Maane and Zimbabwean born Judith Garfield Todd are, as far as I can ascertain, both now living in South Africa. It is not too important, for the purposes of this survey, to be punctilious regarding the nationality of the subject of the auto/ biographical text. The intention is to get a sense of whose life stories, related in some way to South Africa, are being published.

about South Africans. Rather, it represents those books that have been reviewed, in a range of sites (mostly English, but with some Afrikaans)². Aided by the sterling efforts of the National English Literary Museum, I have gathered these reviews in the last few years³. Some biographies and autobiographies are not reflected here as the books reviewed are all in English, so there may be some (a small number, judging by previous research) which are published in other languages⁴ and which are not included. Furthermore, there are probably review sites that escaped the net⁵. The point is that the 78 biographies and autobiographies featured here represent an impressive output in any case, and the fact that the total number of life writing publications in the period covered will certainly be higher than this is remarkable. If we go by what the reviews collected, we can see that between 2005 and 2008 (which is when most of these auto/biographies were published) an average of about 17 autobiographies and biographies were published per year⁶. Given the relatively small numbers of South African book-buyers, this is an indisputably generous allocation of publishers' resources to life writing.

² Reviews come from predominantly South African and a handful of overseas sources, including newspapers such as *Beeld*, *Sowetan* and *The Guardian*, academic publications such as *The African Book Publishing Record* and *English in Africa*, and popular magazines such as *Fair Lady* and *Bona*.

³ Most of the reviews were originally published in English; a few from Afrikaans publications were translated by myself. I summarised the reviews.

⁴ Andre Brink's autobiography is rather rare in that it appeared in both English and Afrikaans. It is, however, not unique, for Krog's *A Change of Tongue* shares this distinction.

⁵ I cannot say how many life writing texts, not included in the reviews, appeared in the years covered here. It is my belief, however, that the majority of the new publications are represented.

⁶ In some instances there is a considerable time lag between the publication of the book and the date of the review. Thus the seven publications which appeared between 2001 and 2004 would have featured in previous *AlterNation* review collections had the reviews been available when those articles were prepared. For instance, the *African Book Publishing Review* of Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* appeared three years after its release.

But when Franklin avers in his review of Tridgell's book on biography that *biographies* outsell fiction in the English-speaking world, he is, we can assume, speaking specifically about biography, not life writing in general⁷. Can we infer a predilection for biography amongst South Africans from these reviews? One way to consider this, while excluding fiction from the equation, is to look at the ratio of biographical to autobiographical. Whichever features more prominently is likely to be the genre that more writers choose to employ and that publishers think readers will want to buy. The findings are somewhat surprising. Compared with autobiography, biography has a relatively small showing. In fact, the ratio is slightly more than two autobiographies to every biography. I shall return to the autobiographies later, for the moment I would like to consider the biographies. As Lynn Z. Bloom observes, 'In theory, biography is democratic. Anyone can be a biographical subject, whether ancient or contemporary, historically significant or personally notorious' (2001:190). In practice, however, subjects with no notable achievements are unlikely to be chosen, unless their lives or the era in which they live or lived exemplify particular concerns of contemporary readers. Typically, successful people, in a diverse range of occupations, are more likely to be the subjects of biography than are those who do not distinguish themselves. Biographical subjects will in all probability be those 'rich and poor, known and unknown, [... whose] accomplishments are worthy of notice' (Bloom 2001:190).

Twenty-one biographies are reviewed in the collection, and of these only two (Joseph Silver and the pseudonymous 'Sizwe Magadla') are of unknown or little known people. These subjects, although not themselves prominent, nevertheless have, or represent a group who has, experience of an event or condition which enjoys public attention. For a biography to attract popular readership there are two crucial factors: sensationalist or topical interest, and the celebrity factor. These biographies of unknown or little known people fall into the former category: scandalously, Silver was, the subtitle informs us, a racketeer and psychopath; the story of 'Sizwe Magadla' focuses on his attitudes to HIV-AIDS. Since South Africa is a country with the one of the highest HIV-AIDS infections in the world, a biographical

⁷ The term biography is sometimes used to denote both biography about oneself (i.e. autobiography) and biography about another. For instance, the journal *Biography* encompasses both genres.

study such as Steinberg's of a man who falls into a high risk category is bound to command considerable notice.

The lives of famous people are obviously in greater demand than those of obscure folk, thus biographies which capitalise on the celebrity factor, predictably, make up the bulk of those published in this period. The remaining nine-tenths of the subjects of biographies covered in the reviews include authors (Herman Charles Bosman, Olive Schreiner, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer and the lesser known oral poet David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi), an artist (Gerard Sekoto), a sportsman (Papwa Sewgolum), MK activists (the story of the Delmas Four—Jabu Masina, Ting Ting Masango, Neo Potsane and Joseph Makhura—is told in a joint biography) and politicians (Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Oliver Tambo and Frank Mdlalose).

Judging by the reviews, these stories of people with varying degrees of fame seem to belong to Bloom's category of popular biographies, rather than celebrity biographies. Popular biographies, she argues, are generally well substantiated by archival research and are usually analytic; they present their subjects 'as complex, multi-dimensional characters in multiple roles, or in many facets in a single role' and 'consider complex motivations and a host of familial, social, political, economic, religious, environmental, and other factors that influenced the subject's life and were in turn influenced by him or her' (Bloom 2001:190). In contrast, 'the subjects of celebrity biographies are likely to be presented as 'flat' characters', fitting 'the stereotyped image in the public eye or [inverting this] to reveal an alternative self previously undisclosed' (Bloom 2001:190). Such texts tend to cite few sources, playing 'to the same audience for whom the celebrities perform: fans, foes, and [...] sensation seekers' (Bloom 2001:191).

The biographies reviewed here vary from popular forms like the comic to the scholarly tome. The biography as pictorial comic is represented by *Nelson Mandela: The Authorised Comic Book*. This is no superficial lightweight. At 193 pages, the book would appear to attempt serious biographical treatment of Mandela's life for young readers. One reviewer deems this a very special book which gives much personal detail; it brought tears to her eyes (Samantha Bartlett 2008:10). Even a very slim (32 pages) biography of Oliver Tambo by Luli Callinicos is, according to the reviewer, informative and fluently written. At the other extreme are scholarly

heavyweights. The expansive biographies of Thabo Mbeki by William Mervin Gumede (476 pages) and Mark Gevisser (650 pages) seem to earn the respect of reviewers, as does Luli Callinicos' biography (672 pages) of Oliver Tambo.

Erudite biographies might, because of the research ballast, be supposed to carry greater legitimacy than less explicitly referenced life stories. However, both scholarly works and scantily annotated or referenced biographies are the result of selection, interpretation and shaping of material. In an essay entitled 'Biography: Inventing the Truth', Richard Holmes expresses what is now the generally accepted view (amongst scholars, at least): 'a final, truthful, "definitive" account must always be something of a chimera. We get back only the answers to the questions we ask of a life. The picture lives only within the frame we have invented for it' (1995:19). An important part of the biographer's task lies in persuading the reader to judge the portrait as truthful, and the success of this depends not only on the inclusion of verifiable information but also on the writer's ability to make the reader *want* to trust the author/narrator. In considering the credibility of a biography, the role of the rhetorical construction of narrator should not be underestimated as opposed to the more obviously necessary research component. Readers' willingness to trust the authorial narrator is often (but not always) tied to the portrayal of the narrator as neutral, objective and balanced. The longest biography reviewed here (an impressive 733 pages), by Ronald Suresh Roberts, fails to win confidence in the narrative voice. Although reviewer Robin Visel commends Roberts' biography of Nadine Gordimer for 'relative objectivity' and its 'nuanced analysis', she also criticises it for being 'loosely structured', 'confusing and repetitive' and, significantly, for having a narrator who is 'opinionated and defensive' and whose tone is 'inappropriately informal' (2007:320). So, despite the seven years' research on which it is based, Roberts' biography still (for Visel, at any rate) lacks authority⁸.

G. Thomas Couser avers that, when it comes to biography, authority involves rhetorical and ethical dimensions: 'is the narrative balanced and fair in its portrayal of its subject?' ('Authority' 2001:73). In a review of Charles van Onselen's 646 page biography of Joseph Silver, Philippa Levine focuses

⁸ The biography has to work especially hard to establish its worth since Gordimer withdrew her authorisation of the biography.

not on the rhetorical device of narrative voice and the justness of its claims, but rather on another rhetorical feature which is similarly tied to interpretation (and which thus has ethical implications): namely, narrative structure. Levine praises van Onselen for painting 'a vivid picture' on the strength of 'research [that] is nothing short of magnificent', but dislikes the story's 'moralistic [form which is] without a hint of nuance' (2008:217-219), leading inexorably, she charges, to its inadequately substantiated conclusion.

When the conclusion about the subject and her or his life is foregone, as is generally the case with everybody's hero, Nelson Mandela, how can a biographer approach the subject with a new question or tell the life story from a new angle? Judging by the numbers of new biographies, new Mandela biographers reviewed in this collection are undaunted. These new biographers have to establish their own take on a man that people feel they know and who has already been the subject of many biographies (the authorised biography by Antony Sampson appeared in 1999 but others preceded it); he has, furthermore, featured large in other people's autobiographies. Mandela is a key person in the autobiographies of both James Gregory (1995), Mandela's Robben Island jailor, and Rory Steyn (2000), his bodyguard. Their autobiographical accounts of their relationships with Mandela secure a potentially large readership by foregrounding Mandela's name in the books' titles. Incidentally, both of these are 'as-told-to' autobiographies. This strikes me as significant: can we not infer thereby that more or less anything to do with Mandela is worth publishing, even if the autobiographers cannot tell their stories well enough to make it in print on their own? Collaborators ensure that potentially popular (read lucrative?) narratives are publishable. And publish they, along with many new writers, do.

New books about Mandela can bank on a market which is far from saturation point. Of the total of twenty biographies reviewed below, over a quarter—that is seven new biographies—published between 2006 and 2008 are on Nelson Mandela! Six of these, by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Elleke Boehmer, John Carlin, Peter Limb, Peter Magubane and Anna Trapido, were published in 2008, apparently seeking to capitalise on the publicity around Mandela's 90th birthday. How do these distinguish themselves from each other and from earlier biographies? The Nelson Mandela Foundation's *The Authorised Comic Book* targets young readers

who favour visual representation. Boehmer employs a postcolonial theoretical frame and examines the multiple representations of Mandela, his status as a site for symbolic struggles. Carlin traces South Africa's recent history, culminating—as the cover photograph indicates—in Mandela's strategic wooing of the rugby-mad sector of the electorate at the 1995 Rugby World Cup⁹. Limb's biography, tailored for high school pupils and public libraries, serves as an introductory biography. Magubane's biography is *A Photographic Tribute to Nelson Mandela*. In *Hunger for Freedom*, Trapido has composed an award-winning gastro-political history of Mandela and his times, a story told, one reviewer tells us, recipe by recipe. Doubtless, the Mandela well is not yet dry and we can expect more biographies, with foci even quirkier than Trapido's, and more autobiographies of people who have known the man (however slightly).

The contemporary South African biography market is, we see, heavily dominated by Mandela-magic. This Madiba-marketing is apparent also in new autobiographies that draw attention to the authors' relationship with Mandela in their titles: represented in the reviews are autobiographies by human rights lawyer George Bizos (*Odyssey to Freedom: a Memoir by the World-Renowned Human Rights Advocate, Friend and Lawyer to Nelson Mandela*), by priest Harry Wiggett (*A Time to Speak: Memories of Mandela's Prison Priest*) and journalists Andrew Drysdale (*My Neighbour Madiba... and others*), Peter Hawthorne (*The King's Eye and John Vorster's Elbow: Reporting the Mandela Years*) and Gerald Shaw (*Believe in Miracles: South African from Malan to Mandela—and the Mbeki Era*).

Mandela is widely revered as a unique individual, a moral giant in a world too often led by leaders of questionable ethics. But Mandela has resolutely denied that the honours belong to him as an individual; as a steadfast African National Congress party man he insists that he learned the meaning of courage from 'comrades in the struggle' (1994:615) and could accept the Nobel Peace Prize 'as nothing more than a representative of the millions of our people who dared to rise up' (1993:n.p.) against an unjust social system. His commitment to the ANC is unquestionable. The ANC thus looms large in life stories such as Mandela's; since the ANC is the governing party, it also dominates South African biographical production. If we place the biographies of Mandela reviewed below together with those of the other

⁹ The movie, titled *Invictus*, was released in 2009.

party faithful one can see that the ruling party is also currently ruling biographical output. Eleven (that is, more than half) of the recent biographies featured in the reviews are on three ANC politicians (including the two who became President): seven on Mandela and two each on Thabo Mbeki and Oliver Tambo.

This attention to politicians, especially ANC leaders, in the genre of biography is not a new trend. There have been many biographies of prominent ANC members in the past: several on Mandela, on Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and on Walter and Albertina Sisulu, to name only those that come immediately to mind. One might argue that a strong motivation for biographies of key politicians is the publishers' recognition of citizens' and international stakeholders' need or desire to know something of how this particular mover and shaker ticks. Marginal political figures are seldom the subjects of biographies. A case in point is Jacob Zuma. A biography of the erstwhile Deputy President only appeared once he was no longer in disgrace with fortune and his boss's eyes and his star had risen in the political firmament. Jeremy Gordin's *Zuma—A Biography* was published in 2008, the year that the ANC 'recalled' Mbeki from the presidency and the Zuma camp gained the upper hand.

However, Ruth Hoberman's observation that 'biography and politics are intimately related' (1995:111) refers not to the understandable attentiveness of the electorate and other international parties to decision makers' lives, nor to the way in which key politicians' lives tend to be favoured material for biographers, nor even to the fact that biographers need to be fully apprised of the historical and political context of the subject's life¹⁰. Rather, Hoberman points to the fact that,

a culture's dominant ideology—generated and sustained by those in power—will inevitably determine whose biographical data gets preserved and how the successful life is conceptualized. By focusing on those who achieve in visible, culturally sanctioned ways, biography has tended to overlook anyone marginalized by that culture—generally women, the poor, and ethnic minorities—and to

¹⁰ James L. Clifford (1970:106) argues that for biographers knowledge of the times is as essential as involvement with character.

overlook aspects of the life, such as homosexuality, that might disturb its values (1995:112).

This is itself an area worthy of research. For the moment, it is remarkable that only two of the twenty-one biographies have women subjects (Gordimer and Schreiner) and two have subjects who could perhaps be described as poor (the Delmas Four and 'Sizwe Magadla')¹¹. The majority have subjects that are or were sympathetic to the broad terms of what is now South Africa's 'dominant ideology'.

By keeping those in positions of power in the public eye, biography reveals its essentially conservative nature. Power is, by and large, consolidated in biography. Indeed, biography runs the risk of exaggerating the importance of the individuals it selects¹². Biography reinforces political power by adding to it a human, individualistic gloss. The minutiae of the biographical subject's life are shown to be important beyond the events or positions in which actual public power is wielded. Personal relationships, family history and so on are, in the context of the biographical narrative, often accorded at least as much significance as issues related to the exercise of power; in this way, it is implied that the person has some sort of essential importance. This applies to biographies of political figures as well as those of individuals whose achievements may be less—shall we say—momentous. (I am thinking of celebrities like the Victoria Beckhams and Paris Hiltons of the world.) For Jürgen Schlaeger, biography is 'fundamentally reactionary, conservative, perpetually accommodating new models of man, new theories of the inner self, into a personality-oriented cultural mainstream, thus always helping to defuse their subversive potential' (1995:63). The 'personality-

¹¹ It is not possible to ascertain with certainty from the reviews whether these individuals are indigent or not.

¹² In their 'Introduction' to *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*, the editors cite David Brion Davis's caveat: while pointing out that biography might exaggerate an individual's historical importance, it can also provide 'a concreteness and sense of historical development that most studies of culture lack. And by showing how cultural tensions and contradictions may be internalised, struggled with, and resolved within actual individuals, it offers the most promising key to the synthesis of culture and history' (cited in Alpern et al 1992:15).

oriented cultural mainstream' is self-perpetuating: psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and postmodernist understandings of how the self is constituted and how it achieves agency are subordinated or ignored as the biographer traces the subject's life story. And the subject chosen is, as has been pointed out, usually one who sits comfortably in the 'cultural mainstream'.

Is autobiography any different? Decidedly! The human fascination with celebrities affects autobiographical output far less markedly and autobiography seems more readily able to veer away from a 'personality-oriented' conception of self. This is in part because autobiographical form is more likely to bow to pressures of content than is biography. The writing and experiencing self in autobiography conveys unique experiences and memories in ways that might require novel techniques. To give some rather extreme examples, St. Augustine blends recollection with prayer; Roland Barthes, in seeking to portray a decentred self, a self which has no 'truth', no adjectivally-limited core personality, composes an autobiography which eschews the coherence of narrative and is fragmented, a generic agglomeration. Gertrude Stein writes Alice B. Toklas's autobiography so as to recount their lives together and—sneakily avoiding contravening the taboo against self-adulation—repeatedly reminds readers of Stein's own genius. And closer to home, in *Call Me Woman* Ellen Kuzwayo incorporates key elements of the praise poem in the tripartite structure of the autobiography so as to place her life in the context of the lives of courageous and successful South African black women¹³. One could cite many other examples which show how autobiography can reject formal conservatism and move, in fundamentally different ways, beyond the ego-centric 'personality-orientated mainstream' referred to by Schlaeger.

Recent South African life writing shows that autobiography also differs from biography in that, as far as representing all sectors of the population goes, it is conspicuously more democratic. While the illustrious (not an absolute distinction) make up *nine tenths* of biographical subjects, they make up *fewer than half* of the autobiographers¹⁴.

¹³ I have written about this in 'The Space Between the Frames: A New Discursive Practice in Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman*' (1996).

¹⁴ The weighting in favour of autobiographical narratives is far greater if one considers that some texts—which I am counting as a single autobiographical

High-profile people—of course, such a class cannot be identified with absolute certainty: a person who is well known in some circles may be unheard of in others¹⁵—include world class sportsmen (all men in this collection), prominent lawyers, writers and journalists, politicians and religious leaders. Distinguished South Africans whose autobiographies are reviewed below include the Catholic Archbishop, Denis Hurley (*Memories: The Memoirs of Archbishop Denis E. Hurley*, OMI, 2006, published posthumously), the well-known lawyer, George Bizos, and a number of journalists and writers. From the Fourth Estate are Andrew Drysdale (editor of *Pretoria News* and *The Argus*), Peter Hawthorne (*Time Magazine*), Bridget Hilton-Barber (once editor of the SAA in-flight magazine) and Gerald Shaw (*Cape Times* and others). Successful writers whose autobiographies are reviewed include Rayda Jacobs (she has two: *The Mecca Diaries*, 2005, and *Masquerade: The Story of My Life*, 2008), Andre Brink (*A Fork in the Road*, 2009, published in Afrikaans as *'n Vurk in die Pad*), Ronnie Govender (*In the Manure: Memories and Reflections*, 2008) and Ivan Vladislavic (whose essayistic account of his life in Johannesburg, *Portrait with Keys: Jo'burg and What-What*, 2006, is more autobiographical than autobiography). Both Breyten Breytenbach (*A Veil of Footsteps: Memoirs of a Nomadic Fictional Character*, 2008) and Antjie Krog (*A Change of Tongue*, 2004) play with the thin line between fiction and non-fiction. Another famous writer is Englishman Anthony Sampson. His autobiography is included here because of his ties to South Africa and the importance these are accorded in the narrative: he was one-time editor of *Drum*, was a

text—have numerous contributing autobiographers. If one were to count these as individual autobiographers, the proportion of relatively obscure autobiographical subjects rises dramatically. Examples of grouped concise life stories include those by Indian women, a mixed race and gender group writing about experiences at boarding school, women prisoners and two books by African refugees. For ease of reference, in the reviews I have listed these multiple autobiographical texts separately under the heading 'Multiple subjects'.

¹⁵ I have included in the high-profile category people whose achievements would probably have distinguished them from their peers.

supporter of the international anti-apartheid movement and was chosen to be the writer of the authorised biography of Mandela (published in 1999)¹⁶.

Also represented in autobiographical production, predictably, are well-known politicians: Ben Turok, of the SACP and ANC, published *Nothing but the Truth: Behind the ANC's Struggle Politics* in 2003. The following year Ahmed Kathrada's *Memoirs* appeared. *A Simple Freedom: The Strong Mind of Robben Island Prisoner 468/64*, a second autobiographical account by Kathrada (with Tim Couzens) appeared in 2008. In 2006, the short autobiography of Frank Mdlalose, *My Life: The Autobiography of Dr F T Mdlalose, First Premier of KwaZulu-Natal* was released. In 2007, the memoirs of ANC defector, Andrew Feinstein (*After the Party: A Personal and Political Journey inside the ANC*) and the autobiography of past member of the Zimbabwean Senate, Judith Garfield Todd (*Through the Darkness: A Life in Zimbabwe*), were published. Tony Leon, the man ANC supporters loved to hate, published *On the Contrary: Leading the Opposition in a Democratic South Africa* in 2008.

It is, in my view, unsurprising that politicians choose to disseminate their own interpretations of their lives and beliefs since they are in the business of persuading people that they are likable, trustworthy and decent and that their political convictions are sound (while their opponents' are self-serving and/or misguided and/or dishonorable and/or incoherent and/or preposterous). So why don't more politicians publish memoirs? There must be many reasons, but probably include the fact that some might doubt their ability or willingness to record their stories; some might not want to expose themselves; some might see little benefit in such an enterprise; and some may not seek to petition the (admittedly small) book-buying sector of the electorate.

The thing is, whatever other motives there might be, one writes autobiographically because of a desire firstly to delve into one's own memory store and secondly to share one's worldview and life story with readers. In addition, a perceived need to correct skewed interpretations of one's behaviour or character could be motivating, especially to people in the public eye who believe they are, or are in danger of being, misrepresented.

¹⁶ I have not included amongst the prominent the writer and poet A.S. Mopeli-Paulus as he is not widely known.

While all autobiographers are likely to want to share their remembered experiences, not all court public recognition. Amongst the autobiographies reviewed are a number by relatively obscure people, people who see themselves as voiceless, who purposefully repress their true identity, yet who want to tell their stories so as to change public perceptions. *The Suitcase Stories*, the collection of life stories of child refugees living in Johannesburg, was inspired by the plea of one of the children: ‘Help me make a book about my story. People need to know why we are here. We don’t choose to come here. They need to know’ (Clacherty 2006:13)¹⁷. Researcher Glynis Clacherty found that because of their vulnerability as refugees, the children all introduced themselves as South African (not as nationals of their native countries), trying ‘to deny their own identities’ (2006:18). So as to assist them to reclaim memories and their identities in a way that did not resemble trauma counselling¹⁸, each child was invited to choose a suitcase to decorate. On the outside of the suitcase they were to depict their present lives in Johannesburg and on the inside they were to represent their past lives. Art facilitator, Diane Welvering, explains how these children had come to suppress identity:

The very nature of their tragic life circumstances compromised all sense of who they were—their own personal histories were invalid within the South African context. They had become completely disenfranchised through their placement within South African society—they were ‘foreign’ and ‘outsiders’, and as such, did not have the right to own anything. They were left with none of the social privileges required to be able to develop a concrete sense of self. The individual suitcases become significant, not only as metaphors for their identities, but also as powerful representations of ownership—ownership of identity, ownership of physical space, ownership of something special and treasured—something they could take with them wherever they went; [...] a concrete place

¹⁷ The children chose to remain anonymous (Clacherty 2006:6).

¹⁸ The children had had negative experiences of such counselling. One of the children told Clacherty that counselling had not helped. The psychologist ‘just wanted me to cry [...]. I got bored so I did, and then she felt better’ (2006:19).

where they could leave a sign or trace of themselves [...]. (Welvering in Clacherty 2006:158).

The storytelling emerged as the children explained why they had decorated the suitcases as they had. The stories were published in order to make the children 'visible in a society where they had learned to remain largely invisible', so as to build 'their sense of identity and self-worth' through the 'powerful healing tool' of narrative (Clacherty 2006:166).

Part of the empowering process in autobiographical narrative comes from the storyteller's ability to shape the story in accordance with her or his own interpretation; it also comes from being able to exercise the right to decide when to tell, what to tell and what to leave out. All of the children chose not to reveal their real names. A Rwandan boy says he had not shared his experiences with anyone before as no-one had been worthy of hearing his truth: 'That's it. It's a sad story. I get on with my life. If I think, it's too much. I haven't told no-one this story. People don't know this. They don't deserve it' (Clacherty 2006:55). Some, like Jenny who arrived from Burundi when she was eleven years old, chose to omit painful parts of their stories: 'There are some other parts to this story that aren't good [...]. I have not told everything' (Clacherty 2006:75). Being *unable* to tell your story because you run the risk of ridicule or violence is a position of extreme disempowerment; *choosing* not to tell your story (in full or in part) puts the individual in a position of relative power.

The issue of how telling one's own story might empower the storyteller is no less important in post-apartheid South Africa than it was during apartheid. In the last decades of apartheid, the disenfranchised and oppressed told their stories (often through scribes, as happened with Clacherty's refugee children) so as to exercise a right denied them, namely, to be knowing subjects (rather than objects of other people's knowledge), to claim for themselves what I have elsewhere referred to as 'the power to name the real'¹⁹. In the recent past, after the first post-apartheid decade had passed, we find that most of the autobiographies reviewed here are by 'ordinary' people, that is, people who would seldom, if ever, be described as renowned.

¹⁹ I used this phrase (taken from Felicity Nussbaum's book on eighteenth century literature, 1989:xxi) in the title of a 1997 paper on worker autobiography.

These life chroniclers range from those who have experienced extremes of poverty and political disempowerment, like the child refugees, to educated professionals²⁰.

Catherine Parke argues that minorities generally gravitate toward autobiography, wanting to share with readers the inside views of their lives and experiences. In contrast to the biographer, who offers an *outside* view of the subject and must persuade the reader that her or his interpretation of the subject is authoritative, the autobiographer explores much that is unverifiable. Minorities are drawn to the autobiographical discourses of confession or witnessing, she argues, 'until such time as their group politics and position become, either in their own or other people's eyes, better served by the rhetoric of argument' which characterises biography (1995:31). The need or desire to explain oneself, to present self and life to anonymous readers, may mask a plea to be understood. In this regard, it is worth noting, in passing, that since the demise of apartheid whites represent an even greater proportion of published autobiographers than they did during apartheid; this I attribute in part to the need of whites, now a political minority, to explore their discomfort or unease at being out of the main arenas of power²¹. Some autobiographers do not conceal their appeal for sympathy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is arguably the most famous of these. Of the relatively unknown South African autobiographers included in the reviews, the request for understanding might be less blatant or emotive than Rousseau's, but it is implied nevertheless. It is there, to give just a few examples, in the memoirs of 'a teenage mom', Tracy Engelbrecht; in the narrative of a police reservist, Andrew Brown; in the story of Hilary Maraney, a daughter whose mother suffered from depression; in Buyi Mbambo's account of how, as a *sangoma*, she is able to embrace traditional African religion, Christianity and Western psychology; and in Thembelani Ngenelwa's recollection of his life before and after finding himself the victim of violent crime.

Although all of the autobiographies referred to above are well received, one may still wonder why publishers would commit themselves to the publication of autobiographies by unknown individuals. Is there not a

²⁰ The educated professionals who are not household names include an occupational therapist, a doctor, a game ranger and a teacher.

²¹ See my 'Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Life-writing' (2001).

danger that readers will ignore memoirs by people whose names are unfamiliar to them? Perhaps. Yet a life story about an 'ordinary' life (though I would argue that there is no such a thing), one which raises issues of current concern and is well written (though this seems to matter less), seems to have a fairly good chance of making it into print and, once published, seems likely to be reviewed and thus to receive some publicity. These 'unknown' memoirists come from all walks of life: there is a teacher, an occupational therapist, a mountain climber, a soldier, a doctor, a minister, refugees, and some whose occupations are irrelevant, such as HIV-positive people as well as many individuals who merely recount their childhood experiences.... The allure of such life stories for publishers lies, beyond the generally positive sales generated by non-fiction, in the stories' topicality and/or narrative effectiveness. The autobiographies reviewed here include a fair proportion by people whose lives, though lived in relative obscurity, highlight issues which are topical or record experiences which readers, or specific sectors of the reading public, deem interesting. There are life stories which reveal experiences in contemporary China (Robert Berold); experiences of refugees (there is Glynis Clacherty's book and another by Joanne Bloch and Sue Heese); of crime (Bridget Hilton-Barber and Thembelani Ngenelwa); of addiction (Donald Paarman and Harry Wiggett) and HIV-AIDS (Derrick Fine and Elaine Maane); of growing up during apartheid (Richard Poplak, Mokone Molete, Tim Ecott and others); of teenage pregnancy and motherhood (Tracy Engelbrecht), and so on.

Of course, what fascinates one generation or sector of the population may not tempt another. Shifts in taste and preoccupation over time and between communities can reveal important information about socio-political trends—desires and anxieties—and life writing is a particularly sensitive marker of these. Life stories, as we saw during apartheid in the collected stories of the poor and uneducated, alert readers to the harsh realities of lives that might otherwise have remained hidden. They often seek to humanise people who are oppressed or whose voices are not heard. And when someone tells their own story, even if it is through an interlocutor, they assume agency and authority as knowing subjects, not objects of researchers' knowledge. In the recent autobiographies reviewed here, there is, for example, a new concern for the lives of refugees which arises out of—and attempts to prevent in future—the xenophobic violence which has, on several occasions

recently, put South Africa in international news headlines. Another new progression in life writing concerns a group of people whose sexual orientation makes them vulnerable to ostracism or worse. My own research into apartheid autobiography indicates that books by South Africans focusing on their gay or lesbian identities were seldom, if ever, published. In this batch of reviews, we find Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (2008) and Derrick Fine's story about his coming out as a gay man and his infection with the HI-virus in *Clouds Move: My Journey of Living Openly with HIV* (2007). Even amongst the biographies, there is a biographer's declaration that he is gay (Jonny Steinberg in *Three-Letter Plague: A Young Man's Journey through a Great Epidemic*, 2008). The last two books remind us that life stories by members of this frequently stigmatised group of people, namely, those who are HIV-positive, have been appearing regularly in the past few years. Another new development, one which seldom surfaced during the police-controlled apartheid years, is the revelation of addictions: we find autobiographies by a drug trafficker (William Bosch), a Springbok surfer (Donald Paarman) who chronicles his descent into drugs, alcoholism and lunacy, and a recovered alcoholic Christian minister (Harry Wiggett).

Not all of the novel themes in life writing, however, arise out of new social concerns or the aim to sensitise readers to specific life challenges. Sales of books may also indicate interests, unrelated to identity politics or social ills, which have a long history. Sports fall into this category. There are three such autobiographies reviewed in this collection: one on surfing (Paarman), one on tennis (Abe Segal) and one on rugby (Jake White). The latter is the collaboratively-written life story of the man previously known as Jacob Westerduin (he changed his name to Jake White), past Springbok rugby coach. This outsold all other local publications when it was released in South Africa. In fact, one reviewer (Simon Borchadt) remarks that in less than a year 'this book sold more than 25 000 copies in South Africa—the highest sales of any book in any genre in South African publishing history' (2008:19). The highest sales of *any book in any genre* in South African publishing history! Yet the 25 000 copies on which Borchadt's claim is based were only a fraction of subsequent sales: the publisher's website newsletter of 2 September 2008 states that over 200,000 copies of White's autobiography were sold in 2007 (<http://www.randomstruik.co.za/>). Sales of

books by our world famous Nobel prize-winning *literati* like J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer do not even come close. The astronomical sales of *In Black and White: The Jake White Story* (book buyers being undeterred by its corny title) are perhaps more remarkable when one considers that the book is criticised in the review summarised here for revealing very few 'juicy bits' apart, that is, from the revelation of interference by political heavyweights who replaced White as Bok coach because he refused to include the politically well-connected Luke Watson in the team.

Clearly, we South Africans share with rhesus macaque monkeys and the English-speaking world a fascination with what celebrities like the Springbok rugby coach have experienced. We have paid a great deal of money to get our own copies or to give such life stories as gifts²². These and other autobiographical accounts lure readers because, for many, the self is the ultimate authority on the self and experience. So while we may applaud biography for its objectivity, for depth and breadth of research, for offering a multi-faceted portrait of the biographical subject, and for situating the subject in her or his life and times (as a person immersed in the business of living a life is seldom able to do), we are nevertheless drawn to the idea that someone can tell us about aspects of her or his own life and experience that must remain inaccessible to a biographer. A biographer, as an outsider, cannot *know* with certainty the thoughts and feelings that the subject may have had but not expressed or acted on; the biographer can, for the most part, only guess at dreams, desires, fears, likes and dislikes (records are not always left of such things and other people's perceptions of these are notoriously unreliable), and is obliged to assume (perhaps mistakenly) that what the subject says and does signifies much about the inner self. This is not to say that biography fails to attract readers. I have spoken about the success (worldwide) of the Mandela-biography machine. Moreover, South Africa has produced some fine biographers whose books are likely to sell well. The following biographers feature, and are praised, in reviews: Gillian Stead Eilersen (of Bessie Head), Stephen Gray (of Herman Charles Bosman)²³, and

²² As I recall, Jake White's autobiography was released just in time for the Christmas rush.

²³ Gray's biography of Beatrice Hastings was also well received.

Charles van Onselen (of Joseph Silver)²⁴. Nevertheless, my point, based on the fact that biographies make up less than half the number of life stories that are reviewed, is that the story most readers want is the one the person tells about her or himself.

I wonder if this imbalance in favour of autobiography over biography is evident elsewhere in the world. Franklin, you will recall, referred to the popularity of biographies when he remarked on the English-speaking world's preoccupation with the stories of particular lives. Collaborative autobiography, such as that by Jake White and co-writer Craig Ray, straddles the two genres of autobiography and biography. It is often impossible to tell, in such collaboratively written narratives, whether autobiography (the telling of the subject's own story by her/ himself) or biography (the telling of the subject's story by the writer) predominates. This can be true even of the avowedly 'as-told-to' autobiography when the influence of the co-writer in eliciting and shaping content is usually impossible to measure: was the story 'told to' the writer spontaneously, or did the writer request that certain issues be attended to or others omitted? And how does one measure the precise contribution of the writer in creating the textual characters of first-person narrator and protagonist for the 'autobiography'? Indeed, the exact nature of the collaborative relationship, the precise demarcation of who was responsible for what parts of the life writing venture, might be, and usually is, deliberately concealed²⁵. The occult presence of the writer is obscured behind the foregrounded autobiographical subject, the one readers want to read about. Many famous, and some not so famous, South Africans have published their life stories with the help of a ghost writer. Our joint Nobel Prize winners, Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk, both published autobiographies (which have remarkably similar titles)²⁶ penned by or with the help of co-writers. Neither mention these co-writers on the covers or copyright pages, and it is rare for reviewers, or even academics, for that matter, to take cognizance of the role of these ghost writers. In the

²⁴ Van Onselen is also acclaimed for biographies of Kas Maine and 'Nongoloza' Mathebula. Other famous South African biographers, not featured in these reviews, are Lyndall Gordon (she has several: on her Capetonian school friends, on Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, T.S. Eliot and Emily Dickinson) and Jeff Guy (on John William Colenso and Harriet Colenso).

Acknowledgements, Mandela credits the otherwise invisible Richard Stengel with a collaborative role, 'providing invaluable assistance in editing and revising the first parts and in the writing of the latter parts' (1995:n.p.) and in the Preface to his autobiography de Klerk refers to 'Dave Steward's key role. [...] His research and contributions were indispensable and it would not be out of place to give him recognition as co-author' (1998:xiv).

Questions of who had the greater influence in the composition of the life narrative seem to be of little interest to readers who seek knowledge about how other people live and how they make sense of their lives. Alexander Pope's assertion that 'The proper study of Mankind is Man' is one that is often reiterated. As Franklin remarks, though, for all the promises of general knowledge of humankind in disciplines like psychology and, I might add, anthropology, history and sociology, generality has to be founded in and checked against the stories of particular lives, and for that, Franklin argues, we turn to biography and, as we see in these reviews—even more enthusiastically—to autobiography. Autobiography 'dramatizes and perpetuates the universal human struggle to live an examined and meaningful life' (Bonnie Gunzenhauser 2001:75-78). For many readers, the attraction of such life writing texts, diverse as their auto/biographical subjects are, lies partly in the readers' quest to find vicarious coherence and significance in their own superficially unexceptional, yet in reality uniquely particularised, lives.

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²⁵ This is not the case in *The Suitcase Stories*. The editor, Clacherty, carefully explains how stories were gathered and exactly what her role was.

²⁶ Where Mandela remembers a *Long Walk to Freedom*, de Klerk, three years later, recalls *The Last Trek*.

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