

# Serial Life Narratives

## More of the Same?

Erschienen in: Mehr oder Weniger | More or Less

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Particularly in the last two decades, the book world has experienced a “boom” (to evoke Julie Rak’s famous study<sup>1</sup>) in life narratives. The broad field of life writing includes autobiographies, memoirs, self-help memoirs, and celebrity memoirs, as well as texts that consciously experiment with formal and aesthetic strategies of and for self-presentation such as autofiction, autotheory, and auto/socio-biography. In recent decades, a particular subtrend has emerged: the multi-volume, serial publication of life narratives. A cursory sketch reveals serial life writing to be a phenomenon neither exclusive to the contemporary period nor to the Anglophone book market: Marcel Proust’s canonic *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1906–1922) comes to mind, but also Dorothy Richardson’s less-studied thirteen-volume *Pilgrimage* (1915–1938, posthumously completed in 1946). Examples from a contemporary period can be found in Norway (Karl Ove Knausgaard), France (Annie Ernaux, Edouard Louis), Germany (Andreas Maier, Joachim Meyerhoff), the US (one can think of the numerous works of autobiographical and self-referential texts of authors like Philipp Roth or Paul Auster), and also the UK (Doris Lessing, Rachel Cusk). This by no means exhaustive list of examples raises several questions about the forms, scopes, and aesthetic possibilities of multi-volume self-narratives.

The act of writing several autobiographical texts is motivated by a desire to overcome the formal limitations often associated with a single autobiographical endeavour, and the recognition that serial forms resist narrative unity and closure; this argument is central to Nicole Stamat’s 2014 monograph.<sup>2</sup> They also promise to give ever more insight into an author’s life-story by extending the textual space available for self-presentation. In this text, I want to contrast two examples – by Karl Ove Knausgaard and Maggie Nelson – to show the different ways in which authors may employ several autobiographically inflected texts. I want to show that the “more” implied by continued autobiographical narrative not only entails a qualitative increase in textual, stylistic, or formal experimentation, but can also result in a more repetitive, accumulative style.

Karl Ove Knausgaard rose to critical acclaim or at least attention with the publication of his six-part *My Struggle* serial (2009–2011). Less than a decade later, a second serial appeared: the *Seasons Quartet* (2015–2016). The *My Struggle* serial is labelled as “fiction,” although the texts are narrated by an unambiguous narrator named Karl Ove

Knausgaard; this tension between paratextual ascription and obvious autobiographical reference has led many reviewers to employ the term “autofiction.” Knausgaard’s second serial interweaves a series of smaller narrative forms, such as essays or letters, accompanied by illustrations and paintings. At the same time, certain motifs – such as the description of fatherhood, the description of creative struggles – reoccur in both serials and are also brought about in similar ways.

In *A Death in the Family*, author-narrator Knausgaard reflects on the tensions between his everyday life and his authorship:

And when what has kept me going for the whole of my adult life, the ambition to write something exceptional one day, is threatened in this one thought, which gnaws at me like a rat, is that I have to escape. Time is slipping away from me, running through my fingers like sand while I... do what? Clean floors, wash clothes, make dinner, wash up, go shopping, play with the children in the play areas, bring them home, undress them, bath them, look after them until it is bedtime, tuck them in, hang some clothes to dry, fold others and put them away, tidy up, wipe tables, chairs and cupboards. It is a struggle, and even though it is not heroic, I am up against a superior force, for no matter how much housework I do the rooms are littered with mess and junk [...].<sup>3</sup>

By writing about his difficulties in finding time to write amidst his household duties, Knausgaard makes everyday life the topic of his writing. Knausgaard condenses his household duties and the activities of several hours into one long sentence. As an effect of this condensation, the textual scope is much more reduced than the real-time duration of these activities. Verbs (“clean floors, wash clothes”) are used in the same grammatical form (present indicative) and lack any personal pronoun. Even though different activities are listed, this syntactic alignment implements an effect of repetition due to the lack of variation in the sentence structure. By listing his domestic preoccupations, author-narrator Knausgaard narrativizes the routine and repetition of his daily life.

Enumerations<sup>4</sup> also feature prominently in the *Seasons Quartet*, not only in the ongoing and repeated listing of household activities. The texts consist of a range of essays, an enumerative form that underscores the self-inventorizing impetus of Knausgaard chronicling his life. Except for *Spring*, which narrates one day in the life of his new-born daughter – albeit one day that is interceded with analepses into the author-narrator’s pasts – all parts of the quartet combine a series of essays on seemingly random and sometimes unrelated topics. Each of these texts is split into three parts, which are thematically headed with the season’s months: in *Autumn*, these are September, October, and November. These subparts, in turn, contain a series of essayistic vignettes: for example, the first digressions in *Autumn* are about topics as diverse as “Apples,” “Wasps,” “Plastic Bags,” “The Sun,” and “Teeth,” to name just to the first five entries, which appear in this very order. Some of these essays are directly related or implicitly refer to the thematic season of the respective narrative. In others, Knausgaard explains

his life to his daughter. The structure of assembling discrete thematical essays carries an enumerative impetus and underscores the *Seasons Quartet's* encyclopedic angle, as the following quotation taken from *Autumn* reveals:

I want to show you our world as it is now: the door, the floor, the water tap and the sink, the garden chair close to the wall beneath the kitchen window, the sun, the water, the trees. You will come to see it in your own way, you will experience things for yourself and live a life of your own, so of course it is primarily for my own sake that I am doing this: showing you the world, little one, makes my life worth living.<sup>5</sup>

Knausgaard's essayistic treatments of diverse elements and natural phenomena form an inventory of objects that make up the author-narrator's surroundings at the point of narration. Knausgaard uses an associative style to recount his surroundings: he lists elements in a non-specified way ("the door," "the floor," "the trees") so that he describes their existence but does not elaborate on their exact appearance. The short syntactic listings of elements alongside the assembly of diverse essays resembles the narrativized listings in *My Struggle*, in which he enumerates his everyday activities ("clean," "wash").

Even though this comparison is not exhaustive in tracing the idiosyncracies of Knausgaard's style, the recurrence of motifs and narrative strategies shows that at least in Knausgaard's case, increased textual space does not necessarily come with an increase in stylistic or textual innovation. Following Umberto Eco's framing of seriality as being an interplay of "repetition with variation,"<sup>6</sup> one could describe this as "more of the same" with only slight variations.

However, the act of writing and publishing several life narratives can have different effects when it comes to variation or difference. A form of supplementation describes the relation between two of Maggie Nelson's works: *Jane: A Murder* (2005) and *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* (2007). Written in close temporal succession,<sup>7</sup> they are both occupied with the 1969 murder of Nelson's aunt Jane. *Jane: A Murder* is a collage of autobiographical poems, poeticized entries from Jane's diaries and journals, and further textual fragments that chart the events surrounding Jane's murder and her family's reaction to it.

*The Red Parts* is an immediate response to the "reopening of [...] Jane's murder case in 2005",<sup>8</sup> written almost directly after the publication of *Jane*. In the preface to the 2015 Vintage edition, the author-narrator states:

After attending the suspect's trial in July 2005, I felt an intense rush to record all the details before being swallowed up, be it by anxiety, grief, amnesia, or horror; to transform myself or my material into an aesthetic object, one which might stand next to, or in for, or as the last impediment to, the dull speechlessness that makes remembering and formulating impossible.<sup>9</sup>

In light of the trial, the author describes the need to “record all the details” and new evidence that had come to the fore. *The Red Parts* thus supplements the story of *Jane* by including this new evidence. It chronologically covers the trial of her murderer, which took place in 2005, more than 30 years after Jane’s death and right after *Jane*’s publication. On a formal level, *The Red Parts* also differs from *Jane* in that the former is mostly written in prose style, whereas *Jane* incorporates diary entries by Jane and other intertextual sources such as newspapers, letters, and Nelson’s own account. Taken together, these two texts supplement one another to form a multi-faceted account of Jane’s murder, and a range in Nelson’s ways of coming to terms with this death.

As this brief foray has shown, serial forms of life writing seem outwardly characterized by a sense of writing “more and more” by highlighting different elements of a life story and postponing textual closure. A closer look at some of the narrative techniques employed, however, shows different implications of this “more”: sometimes, it can be seen as quantitative, for instance when authors write with only little stylistic or thematic variation between their multiple accounts. In other cases, the “more” does take on a qualitative increase, when texts fill gaps of preceding accounts or appear in different genres, thereby including distinct voices but also distinct stylistic and narrative strategies. Serial life narratives thus share an impetus towards postponing closure and deferring autobiographical unity, but the ways in which the texts achieve this may differ greatly, varying between “more of the same” and textual and formal experimentation.

## References

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4. For an investigation of lists and enumerations, see: von Contzen, Eva (2018): *Experience, Affect, and Literary Lists*, in: *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 315-327. For a specific focus, see Mainberger, Sabine (2003): *Die Kunst des Aufzählens. Elemente zu einer Poetik des Enumerativen*, Berlin: de Gruyter.
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7. Interestingly enough, Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* serial too was written in a short time span, and this opens up further questions on the temporal dimensions and constellations involved in different series.
8. Nelson, Maggie (2007): *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial*, London: Vintage, p. xvii.
9. Ibid.

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