

Reflecting on 21st Century Literature and Autofiction as Novel Forms of Narration

Zahra Vojgani

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Zahra.Vojgani@romanistik.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

Fiona J. Doloughan interrogates the conflation of fiction and non-fiction by analyzing the literary and philosophical works of four contemporary authors, arguing that memoir and autofiction blur the line between the real and the imagined, resulting in a shift in the current trend of the novel. The study insightfully examines how literature reflects, influences, and interacts with real-life experiences, emotions, and societal issues, and considers how genres are shaped by societal construction of gender roles, expectations, and stereotypes.

Eine Reflexion über die Literatur des 21. Jahrhunderts und die Autofiktion als neue Form des Erzählens

German Abstract:

Fiona J. Doloughan hinterfragt die Vermischung von Roman und Fiktion, indem sie die literarischen und philosophischen Werke von vier zeitgenössischen Autor_innen analysiert und argumentiert, dass Memoiren und Autofiktion die Grenze zwischen dem Realen und dem Imaginierten verwischen, was zu einer Verschiebung des aktuellen Trends des Romans führt. Die Relevanz des Buches für die Konstruktion des „Selbst“, die Erforschung der Verbindungen zwischen Literatur und Leben, Kunst und Realität sowie die Frage nach Genre und Geschlecht bieten wertvolle Einsichten.

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Zahra Vojgani

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Doloughan, Fiona J.: *Radical Realism, Autofictional Narratives and the Reinvention of the Novel*. London: Anthem Press, 2023. 180 pages, 80 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-83-998337-5.

In *Radical Realism, Autofictional Narratives and the Reinvention of the Novel*, Fiona Doloughan provides a thorough examination of life story narratives by four contemporary authors – Karl Ove Knausgaard, Jeanette Winterson, Xiaolu Guo, and Rachel Cusk – to discuss the realm of personal narrative and introspection. Doloughan’s analysis begins with “the radical realism of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* series with its thick description and detailed representation of everyday life alongside thoughts, feelings, and reflections of narrator-protagonist Karl Ove [...] to the reinvention of the novel form actualized by Rachel Cusk in her ‘Outline’ Trilogy” (p. 146). Rather than offering a historical study of the novel as a genre, Doloughan examines “genres (novel, autobiography, memoir, auto-fiction), their modes of existence (fictional, factual, referential, self-referential), purpose/s (aesthetic, ethical, critical, creative), and perceived status as truthful, fabular and realistic” (p. 6). Doloughan’s main research questions revolve around the role that fantasy, imagination, and invention play in the narrative, given the contemporary trend of writers expressing dissatisfaction with the traditional novel format and turning to alternative modes of expression that give rise to new hybrid forms (cf. p. 16).

Her study consists of seven chapters including an introduction, a theory chapter, a conclusion, and four main chapters that provide in-depth studies of the selected authors’ works. The second chapter, following the reflective introduction, elaborates on the theoretical and critical concerns of the monograph, the value of the novel, and “the role and extent of fiction and fabrication in writing” (p. 20). She also defines key terms such as realism, fictionality, autofiction, etc., in order to construct a sophisticated argument that delves into the intricacies of the analyzed works, thereby offering readers a deeper understanding of their thematic complexities and artistic merits.

In chapter three, Doloughan examines each of the six volumes of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* series (2012–2018), highlighting its cross-cultural reception. She generally maintains a structural and macro-level analysis of “critical responses to the work’s potentially controversial substance” but specifically negotiates “its auto-fictional tendencies” in order to “treat issues of genre in the light of authorial aims and ambitions” (p. 41).

In chapter four, Doloughan compares Jeanette Winterson's memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2012) with her semi-autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). She argues that there exists a companionship between Winterson's two works not only because they both tell about Winterson's experiences while growing up but more importantly because her later memoir stands in a revisionist relationship to her earlier novel in that it resets “residual Wintersonian myths” in order to make peace with the past and find possibilities for “self-love as well as love of and for others” (p. 99).

In chapter five, Doloughan begins her analysis of Xiaolu Guo's *Once Upon a Time in the East* (2017) by summarizing the reception of the work in international reviews and studies. For instance, Guo's work is categorized as “a tale of survival” or “a kind of ‘Cinderella in China’” in a review in *The Spectator* as it uses the fairy-tale standard opening phrase of ‘Once Upon a Time’ in its title which leads Doloughan to argue that Guo's memoir has been read and received “not so much as an account of an eventful life but as a fabular tale” (p. 101). Further, as a translingual author, Guo faces the challenge of translating her feelings or insights into a second language, something that Doloughan sees reflected in the differing titles of the US and UK versions as well as in their different endings. Doloughan qualifies Guo's work as the result of her “cultural nomadism” as she draws inspiration from Roland Barthes, Marguerite Duras, Eva Hoffman, Boris Vian, and Jean Genet and uses her experience in documentary filmmaking to create a prose that is of “visual quality” (p. 111–112).

In chapter six, Doloughan examines Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy (2014), in which Faye, the narrator, takes on a passive role by “relaying stories that other people have told her without revealing much about herself” (p. 130) and symbolically represents Cusk's alter ego. Doloughan compares the themes of her memoir *Aftermath* (2012) – divorce and custody battle – with Cusk's concerns in the ‘Outline’ Trilogy, consisting of *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016), and *Kudos* (2018), three volumes that constitute a journey toward “the construction of a self who is

refracted through a narrative recount of the lives of others” (p. 129). Doloughan argues that the ‘Outline’ trilogy, similarly to her memoir, explores family life and gender, was both an independent effort and a reaction to the harsh criticism *Aftermath* received (cf. p. 146). Citing an interview with Cusk in which she says that her intention with the trilogy was “to correct the link between narrative and reality; language and truth,” Doloughan suggests that her novels “disentangle societal scripts from personal experience” (p. 146).

Fiona J. Doloughan’s clear formulation of the research questions and her thorough assessments of extratextual literature, including interviews with authors or their non-fiction writing, are remarkable in terms of the caliber, scope, and applicability of the individual chapters, as well as how effectively they are combined to form a well-rounded study. With an intertextual analysis, Doloughan also takes into account the larger context of literary influence and reception of these works to better understand how these texts relate to and contribute to the larger literary conversation. For example, through an intertextual analysis of Guo’s *Once Upon a Time in the East* (2019) and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2020), Doloughan emphasizes Guo’s focus on the interrogation of different intellectual positions and cultural perceptions in her work, which is why she favors the term “documentary novel” (p.149).

With *Radical Realism, Autofictional Narratives and the Reinvention of the Novel*, Fiona Doloughan offers an insightful study that combines literary, historical, and cultural contexts in its analysis of the discussed works. It reflects on realism, fictionality, and autofiction and explores “issues and ideas of writerly (and readerly) import such as the extent to which it is possible to unfold or reveal a ‘true’ self over time; the role of culture, including narrative culture, in producing a sense of self; and the extent to which literature is able to compete with other media today by virtue of its immersive and world-building powers” (p. 151). Thus, it will be of interest to scholars interested in unconventional narrative forms and their literary as well as extratextual impact.