

From Ovid to Cloning: The Human Life Course in Literary Genres

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Abstract:

The essays in Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Sarah Herbe's collection *From the Cradle to the Grave* explore the interrelation between human life-course models and their representation in literary genres from the renaissance to postmodernism. The volume thus ties in with current debates around literature and science, posthumanism, and especially the emergent field of age studies. By highlighting the significance of genre in the representation of the human life course, the book makes an important contribution to this field, yet it doesn't provide a consistent theoretical framework for such discussions.

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Sabine Coelsch-Foisner; Sarah Herbe (eds.): *From the Cradle to the Grave: Life-Course Models in Literary Genres*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011. 244 +XVII pp., hardcover, €32. ISBN: 978-3-8253-5802-0

Age is all the rage in current literary and cultural studies. From a cultural studies perspective, age has become an important addition to the established concepts of race, class, and gender. For literary scholars, the central question arguably concerns the 'poetics of growing old': how do authors give shape to the experience of aging, and how have the narrative patterns and plots by which we structure our lives changed diachronically? Moreover, literature not only mirrors our societies' views on aging, but it also can serve as a testing ground for alternative concepts, models, and meanings of age.

Published as volume 15 in the series "Wissenschaft und Kunst" (Science and Art) and based on the 18th Salzburg Conference on "Literature and Culture: Life-Course Models in Literary Genres" (2008), the collection at hand ties in with this current interest in literary representations of aging. More specifically, it imbricates the notion of life-course models with the question of genre, asking "how particular genres, especially non-(auto-)biographical genres, narrate life and, in so doing, emulate or generate particular life-course models" (p. X). Thereby, as Coelsch-Foisner states in her introduction, the book "adds an aesthetic dimension – 'aesthetic time' – to current life-course studies" (p. XI). The collection is thus based on the theoretical premise of a reciprocal relation between genre and life-course models: On the one hand, an author's choice of a certain genre structures or even constructs a particular life course, while on the other hand particular notions of life courses predetermine certain genres and serve as a catalyst for generic innovation and change.

The volume comprises 20 essays on literary representations of life-course models from the Renaissance to the 21st century, with a strong focus on contemporary literature. The texts discussed in the individual essays cover rather a broad generic spectrum, ranging from several subgenres of the novel (e.g. Bildungsroman) and short stories to poetry, biography and autobiography, comics and graphic novels, science fiction and fantastic literature.

While the individual essays are extremely heterogeneous in terms of their subjects, approaches, and historical contexts – from Glyn Pursglove's revisionist reading of the Italian Renaissance biographer Giorgio Vasari to Markus Oppolzer's analysis of Al Davison's comic-book autobiography *The Spinal Cage* – there are nevertheless certain ideas and approaches which

connect many of the contributions. As a recurring methodological pattern, several essays inquire into how discourses and theories from the social and natural sciences have influenced literary representations of the human life course, and how, in turn, these representations reflect on, and critically engage with, scientific models. Exemplary in this regard are Stephan Karschay's essay on the influence of contemporary theories of atavistic reversion and genetic determinism on the Victorian Bildungsroman, Sabine Coelsch-Foisner's impressive survey of the anthropological implications of "metamorphic counter-narratives" (p. 194), i.e. fantastic literary texts that imagine metamorphoses or transformations of the human body and thereby disconnect 'life' from the temporal framework of the life course, as well as Sarah Herbe's discussion of Charles Stross's fictional worlds of multiple childhoods, uploaded minds, and serial lives brought about by nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and neuroscience (also see the essays by Stratmann, Rosenberg, Piatek, and Herzog).

Though these essays' discussions of generic life-course models are all interesting in themselves, one cannot help detecting a certain lack of theoretical and conceptual cohesion. Not all of the essays explicitly tackle the questions raised in the introduction, and the collection's central concern – the ways in which life-course models and generic representations thereof interact – seems somewhat undertheorized. So, while many of the essays provide illuminating studies of their respective subjects, the volume as a whole cannot provide significant theoretical advancement to its central question.

To sum up: The volume at hand constitutes a valuable and original contribution to life-course research and age studies by foregrounding the role of genre in representing the human life cycle. Given that age/aging is still an ill-conceived category in literary and cultural theory, this is no mean accomplishment. At the same time, however, the collection unwittingly exposes this lack of theoretical foundations: where a survey of current debates and positions in interdisciplinary life-course studies and/or genre theory could have provided at least some theoretical essentials, the very brief excursion to the life sciences (the essay by Richter) is merely a drop in the ocean and seems slightly disconnected from the other essays. Nonetheless, especially because of the many intriguing discussions on a remarkably broad range of literary representations of life-course models – by doctoral students and distinguished professors alike – the volume is recommendable for all scholars and students with an interest in age studies and life writing as well as literature and science.