Mythbusting publishing: Questioning the ‘runaway popularity’ of published biography and other life writing

Biography and Other Life Writing

Susan Currie, Donna Lee Brien

Introduction: Our current obsession with the lives of others

“Biography—that is to say, our creative and non-fictional output devoted to recording and interpreting real lives—has enjoyed an extraordinary renaissance in recent years,” writes Nigel Hamilton in Biography: A Brief History (1). Ian Donaldson agrees that biography is back in fashion: “Once neglected within the academy and relegated to the dregs of public libraries, biography has made a notable reappearance on our cultural horizon, emerging, somewhat inexplicably, as a new, lucrative, and invigorating phenomenon, and a new academic adventure” (23). For over a decade now, commentators have been making similar observations about our obsession with the intimacies of individual people’s lives. In a lecture in 1994, J ustin Kaplan asserted the West was “a recent flail of its limbs” (2), and more recent research findings by John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge affirm that “the diminished human curiosity about other peoples lives is clearly reflected in the popularity of autobiographies and biographies” (218).

At least in relation to television, this assertion seems valid. In Australia, as in the US and the UK, reality and other biographically based television shows have taken over from drama in both the numbers of shows produced and the viewers these shows attract, and these forms are also popular in Canada (see, for instance, The Biography program Biography celebrated its twentieth anniversary season to become one of the longest running documentary series on American television; so successful that in 1999 it was spun off into its own eponymous channel (Rak; Dempsey). Premiered in May 1996, Australian Story, a weekly program based on real persons, has been upgraded to meet the increasing demand for these services.

Academically, journals and e-mail discussion lists have been established on the topics of biography and autobiography, and North American, British, and Australian universities offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in life writing. The commonly aired wisdom is that published life writing in its many text-based forms (biography, autobiography, memoir, diaries, and collections of personal letters) is enjoying unprecedented popularity. It is our purpose to examine this proposition.

Methodological problems

There are several problems involved in investigating genre popularity, growth, and decline in publishing. Firstly, it is not easy to gain access to detailed statistics, which are usually only available within the industry. Secondly, it is difficult to ascertain how publishing statistics are gathered and what they report (Eliot). There is the question of whether bestselling literature is a phenomenon, and a new academic adventure” (23). For over a decade now, commentators have been making similar observations about our obsession with the intimacies of individual people’s lives. In a lecture in 1994, J ustin Kaplan asserted the West was “a recent flail of its limbs” (2), and more recent research findings by John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge affirm that “the diminished human curiosity about other peoples lives is clearly reflected in the popularity of autobiographies and biographies” (218).

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In our analysis of the material studied, we will use ‘life writing’ as a genre term. When it comes to analysis of the lists, we have broken down the genre of life writing into biography and autobiography, incorporating memoir, letters, and diaries under autobiography. This is consistent with the use of the terminology in BookScan. Although we have broken down the genre in this way, it is the overall picture with regard to life writing that is our concern. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed analysis of whether, within life writing, further distinctions should be drawn.

Publishers Weekly: 1912 to 2006

1912 saw the first list of the 10 bestselling non-fiction titles in Publishers Weekly. It featured two life writing texts, being headed by an autobiography, The Promised Land by Russian Jewish immigrant Mary Antin, and concluding with Albert Bigelow Paine’s six-volume biography, Mark Twain. The Publishers Weekly lists do not categorise non-fiction titles by either form or subject, so the classifications below are our own with memoir classified as autobiography. In a decade-by-decade tally of these listings, there were 3 biographies and 20 autobiographies in the lists between 1912 and 1919; 24 biographies and 21 autobiographies in the 1920s; 13 biographies and 40 autobiographies in the 1930s; 8 biographies and 46 biographies in the 1940s; 4 biographies and 14 autobiographies in the 1950s; 11 biographies and 13 autobiographies in the 1960s; 6 biographies and 11 autobiographies in the 1970s; 3 biographies and 19 autobiographies in the 1980s; and 2 biographies and 7 autobiographies from 2000 up until the end of 2006. See Appendix 1 for the relevant titles and authors.

Breaking down the most recent figures for 1990–2006, we find a not radically different range of figures and trends across years in the contemporary environment.

In every decade, from 1900 to the end of the twentieth century, people have been reliably attracted to the same kind of books […] Certain kinds of popular fiction always do well, as do diet books […] self-help books, celebrity memoirs, sensationalist scientific or religious speculation, stories about pets, medical advice (particularly on the subjects of sex, longevity, and child rearing), folky wisdom and/or humour, and the American Civil War (xvii).

Amazon.com since 2000

The USA-based Amazon.com online bookselling site provides listings of its own top 50 bestsellers since 2000, although only the top 14 bestsellers are recorded for 2001. As fiction and non-fiction are not separated out on these lists and no genre categories are specified, we have again made our own decisions about what books fall into the category of life writing. Generally, we erred on the side of inclusion. (See Appendix 2.) However, when it came to books dealing with political events, we excluded books dealing with specific aspects of political practice/policy. This meant excluding books on, for instance, George Bush’s so-called ‘war on terror,’ of which there were a number of bestsellers listed.

In summary, these listings reveal that of the top 364 books sold by Amazon from 2000 to 2007, 46 (or some 12.6%) were, according to our judgment, either biographical or autobiographical texts. This is not far from the 10% of the 1912 Publishers Weekly listing, although, as above, the proportion of bestsellers that can be classified as life writing varied dramatically from year to year, with no discernible pattern of peaks and troughs. This proportion tallied to 4% autobiographies in 2000, 14% in 2001, 10% in 2002, 18% in 2003 and 2004, 4% in 2005, 14% in 2006 and 20% in 2007. This could suggest a rising trend, although it does not offer any consistent trend data to suggest sales figures may either continue to grow, or fall again, in 2008 or afterwards.
Looking at the particular texts in these lists (see Appendix 2) also suggests that there is no general trend in the popularity of life writing in relation to other genres. For instance, in these listings in Amazon.com, life writing texts only rarely figure in the top 10 books sold in any year. So rarely indeed, that from 2001 there were only five in this category. In 2001, John Adams by David McCullough was the best selling book of the year; in 2000, Hillary Clinton’s autobiography, My Life, came in at #1; in 2004, My Life by Bill Clinton reached number 1; in 2006, Nora Ephron’s I Feel Bad About My Neck: and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman was #9; and in 2007, Ishmael Beah’s discredit[ed] A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier came in at #8. Apart from McCullough’s biography of Adams, all the above are autobiographical texts, while the focus on leading political figures is notable.

Britain: Feather and Woodbridge

With regard to the British situation, we did not have actual lists and relied on recent analysis. John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge find considerably higher levels for life writing in Britain than above with, from 1998 to 2005, 28% of British published non-fiction comprising autobiography, while 8% of hardback and 5% of paperback non-fiction was biography (2007). Furthermore, although Feather and Woodbridge agree with commentators that life writing is currently popular, they do not agree that this is a growth state, finding the popularity of life writing “essentially unchanged” since their previous study, which covered 1979 to the early 1990s (Feather and Reid).

Australia: Nielsen BookScan 2006 and 2007

In the Australian publishing industry, where producing books remains an ‘expensive, risky endeavour which is increasingly market-focused and complex activity’ (Carter and Galligan 4), the market—complexity is evidenced by the large number of sub-genres covering the broad range of life writing. The Australian Bureau of Statistics figures reveal that the total numbers of books sold in Australia has remained relatively static over the past decade (130.6 million in the financial year 1995–96 and 128.8 million in 2003–04) (ABS). During this time, however, sales volumes of non-fiction publications have grown markedly, with a trend towards non-fiction, mass-market and, in particular, the growth of general non-fiction sales in 2003–2004 outselling general fiction by factors as high as ten depending on the format—hard, or paperback, and trade or mass market paperback (ABS 2015). However, while non-fiction has increased in popularity in Australia, the same does not seem to hold true for life writing. Here, in utilising data for the top 5,000 selling non-fiction books in both 2006 and 2007, we are relying on Nielsen BookScan’s categorisation of texts as either autobiography or autobiography.

In 2006, no works of life writing made the top 10 books sold in Australia. In looking at the top 100 books sold in 2006, in some cases the subjects of these works vary markedly from those extracted from the Amazon.com listings. In Australia in 2006, life writing makes its first appearance at #39 with convicted drug smuggler Schapelle Corby’s 14-story Life on the Inside. This is followed by another My Story at #25, this time by retired Australian army chief, Peter Cosgrove. Jonestown: The Power and Myth of Alan Jones comes in at #34 for the Australian broadcaster’s biographer Chris Masters; the biography, The Innocent Man by John Grisham at #18 and Li Cunxin’s autobiography Mao’s Last Dancer at #45. Australian autographicaL Mars’ Last Dancer of coping with personal loss, Salvation Creek: An Unexpected Life makes 50; bestselling USA travel writer Bill Bryson’s autobiographical memoir of his childhood The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid 69; Mandela: The Authorised Portrait by Rosalind Coward, 79; and Joanne Lee’s memoir of dealing with her kidnapping, the murder of her partner and the justice system in Australia’s Northern Territory, No Turning Back, 89. These books reveal a market preference for autobiographical writing, and an almost even split between Australian and overseas subjects in 2006.

2007 similarly saw no life writing in the top 10. The books in the top 100 sales reveal a downward trend, with fewer titles making this band overall. In 2007, Terri Irwin’s memoir of life with her famous husband, wildlife warrior Steve Irwin, My Steve, came in at #26; musician Andrew John’s memoir of mental illness, The Two of Me, at #37; Ayhan Hrst Ali’s autobiography Infatul at #38; John Grogan’s biography/memoir, Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World’s Worst Dog, at #42; Sally Collings’s biography of the inspirational young survivor Sophie Delezio, Sophie’s Journey, at #51; and Elizabeth Gilbert’s hybrid food, self-help and travel memoir, Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything at #62. Mars’ Last Dancer, published the year before, remained in the top 100 in 2007 at #87.

When moving to a consideration of the top 5,000 books sold in Australia in 2006, BookScan reveals only 62 books categorised as life writing in the top 1,000, and only 222 in the top 5,000 (with 34 titles between 1,000 and 1,999, 45 between 2,000 and 2,999, 48 between 3,000 and 3,999, and 33 between 4,000 and 5,000); 2007 shows a similar total of 235 life writing texts in both 1998 and 1990s, the popularity of what she categories as memoir had direct repercussions on the numbers of birth-to-death biographies that were commissioned, contracted, and published as “sales and marketing staffs concluded[ed] that readers don’t want a full-scale life any more.” (17).
Appendix 1


1990 included two autobiographies, **Bo Knows Bo** by professional athlete Bo Jackson (with Dick Schaap) and Ronald Reagan’s **An American Life: An Autobiography**. In 1991, there were further examples of life writing with unimaginative titles, **Me Stories of My Life** by Katherine Hepburn, Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography by Kitty Kelley, and Under Fire: An American Story by Oliver North with William Novak; as indeed there were again in 1992 with It Doesn’t Take a Hero: The Autobiography of a Former POW by Jim Zwit, a story of life as a POW; and Andrew Morton’s **Diana: Her True Story by Andrew Morton, Every Living Thing**, yet another veterinary outpouring from James Herriot, and Truman by David McCullough. In 1993, radio shock-jock Howard Stern was successful with the autobiographical Private Parts, as was Bette Midler with her detailed recounting of her alleged near-death experience. Embraced by the Light: 32 powerful stories on the list in 1994 next to Don’t Stand too Close to a Naked Man, comedian Tim Allen’s autobiography. Flag-throwing titles continue in 1995 with Colin Powell’s My American Journey, and Miss America, Howard Stern’s follow-up to Private Parts. 1996 saw two autobiographical works, basketball superstar Dennis Rodman’s Bad to Win I Be and figure-skater, Ekaterina Gordeeva’s (with EM Swift) My Sergei: A Love Story. In 1997, Diana: Her True Story returns to the top 10, joining Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes and prolific biographer Kitty Kelly’s The Royals, while in 1998, there is only the part-autobiography, part travel-writing A Private Looks at Fifty, by musician Jimmy Buffet.

There is no biography or autobiography included in either the 1999 or 2000 top 10 lists in Publishers Weekly, nor in that for 2001. In 2001, David McCullough’s biography John Adams and Jack Welch’s business memoir Jack: Straight from the Gut featured. In 2002, Let’s Roll! Lisa Beamer’s tribute to her husband, one of the heroes of 9/11, written with Ken Abraham, joined Rudolph Giuliani’s autobiography. Leadership. 2003 saw Hillary Clinton’s autobiography Living History and Paul Burrell’s memoir of his time as Princess Diana’s butler, A Royal Duty, on the list. In 2004, it was Bill Clinton’s turn with My Life. In 2008, we find John Grisham’s true crime (arguably a biography), The Innocent Man, at the top, Grogan’s Marley and Me at number three, and the autobiographical The Audacity of Hope by Barack Obama in fourth place.

Appendix 2

Amazon.com listings since 2000

In 2000, there were only two autobiographies in the top 50 bestsellers with Lance Armstrong’s It’s Not about the Bike: My Journey Back to Life about his battle with cancer at 20, and Dave Eggers’s self-consciously fictionalised memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* at 32. In 2001, only the top 14 bestsellers were recorded. At number 1 is John Adams by David McCullough and, at 11, Jack: Straight from the Gut by USA golfer Jack Welch. In 2002, Leadership by Rudolph Giuliani was at 12; Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson by Robert Caro at 29; Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper by Patricia Cornwell at 42; Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative by David Brock at 49; and Louis Gerstner’s autobiography Who Says Elephants Can’t Dance: Inside IBM’s Historic Turnaround at 50. In 2003, Living History by Hillary Clinton was 7th; Benjamin Franklin: An American Life by Walter Isaacson 14th; Dereeking of Duty: The Eyewitness Account of How President Bill Clinton Endangered America’s Long-Term National Security by Robert Patterson 20th; Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith by Jon Krakauer 32nd; Leap of Faith: Memoirs of an Unexpected Life by Queen Noor of Jordan 33rd; Kate Remembered, Scott Berg’s biography of Katherine Hepburn, 37th; Who’s your Daddy?: Looping for the Great, Near Great and Reprobates of Golf by Rick Reilly 39th; The Teammates: A Portrait of a Friendship about a winning baseball team by David Halberstam 42nd; and Every Second Counts by Lance Armstrong 49th. In 2004, My Life by Bill Clinton was the best selling book of the year; American Soldier by General Tommy Franks was 16th; Kevin Phillips’ American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush 18th; Timothy Russert’s Big Russ and Me: Father and Son Lessons of Life 20th; Tony Hendra’s Father Joe: The Man Who Saved my Soul 23rd; Ron Chernow’s Alexander Hamilton 27th; Cokie Roberts’ Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised our Nation 31st; Kitty Kelly’s The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty 42nd; and Chronicles, Volume 1 by Bob Dylan was 43rd.

In 2005, it was a year when we had the down list with the whole top of the list. The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion at 45 and The Glass Castle: A Memoir by Jeannette Walls at 49. In 2006, there was a resurgence of life writing with Nora Ephron’s I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman at 9; Grisham’s The Innocent Man at 12; Bill Buford’s food memoir Heat: An amateur’s Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany at 23; more food writing with Julia Child’s My Life in France at 29; Immaculée Ilbargiza’s Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust at 30; CNN anchor Anderson Cooper’s Dispatches from the Edge: A Memoir of War, Disaster and Survival at 43; and Isabella Hofstot’s Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship (between a baby hippo and a giant tortoise) at 44. In 2007, Ishmael Beah’s relatively long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier came in at 8; Walter Isaacson’s Einstein: His Life and Universe 13; Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s autobiography of her life in Muslim society, Infidel, 15; The Reagan Diaries 25; Jesus of Nazareth by Pope Benedict XVI 29; Mother Teresa: Come be my Light 36; Clapping: The Autobiography 40; Tina Brown’s The Diane Chronicles 45; Tony Dungy’s Quiet Strength: The Principles, Practices & Priorities of a Winning Life 47; and Dan Tapper’s Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant at 49.

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References


eliot, simon. “very necessary but not sufficient: A Personal View of Quantitative Analysis in Book History.” Book History 5
Some of his writings were published by his teacher Whit Burnett, in the magazine 'Story'. However, the aspiring writer's aim was to get them printed in 'The New Yorker' magazine. After 'The Catcher in the Rye' was published, this author shot to fame, and produced other extremely popular books like 'Franny and Zooey', 'Nine Stories', and 'Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction'. His most famous creation is that of the 'Glass' family which appears in almost all his stories. 'Salinger' is biography by American writers Shane Salerno and David Shields, which was published in 2013. Salerno also made a documentary film that went by the same name, which was telecast in the 'American Masters' television show. Top.