

My brilliant friends

A new book turns to the lives of literary women for guidance and companionship. Can they teach us how to live?

By Anna Leszkiewicz



Radical influence: Mary Wollstonecraft painted by John Opie in 1797

When I was an English student ten years ago, I signed up to a module enigmatically described as “life writing”. Until then, the few autobiographical texts I had encountered on my degree course were ones tutors had thrown on to reading lists as a bit of a treat – like a teacher showing the film version of the GCSE set text – or ones I’d stumbled across myself. Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals, John Keats’s letters, the diaries of a serious Victorian teenager – they all held a voyeuristic, vicarious thrill, the sense of finally being in the room with buttoned-up, plum-voiced, long-dead figures and finding them both normal and strange, at times unintentionally comical. But after I’d submitted my choice, I was told the lecture series was cancelled due to a lack of interest: I was the only student to enrol.

This might suggest something about how life writing was valued academically – a decade ago, at least. Yet for many readers, the genre holds essential truths that distinguishes it from other literary forms. Virginia Woolf once declared that “of all literature (yes, I think this is more or less true) I love autobiography most. In fact I sometimes think only autobiography is literature – novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you or me.”

For Woolf, “The simple words ‘I was born’ have somehow a charm beside which all the splendours of romance and fairy-tale turn to moonshine and tinsel.” But she lamented to the writer Victoria Ocampo that “very few women yet have written truthful autobiographies... my favourite form”, and, hungry for them, she urged the composer Ethel Smyth to write one. “I should like an analysis of your sex life,” she wrote, as if asking for an update on the weather. “More introspection. More intimacy.”

This desire for intimacy, introspection and instruction seems to take on a particular intensity in women reading the lives of other women. “No sooner did I realise I was likely to grow up to be a woman than I wanted to know what the possibilities were for women’s lives,” Phyllis Rose, the author of *Parallel Lives*, wrote of her earliest reading experiences. “I wanted wild women, women who broke loose, women who lived life to the full, whatever that meant... How fully could a woman live?” In the *New Yorker* in 1989, Kennedy Fraser recalled:

There was a time when my life seemed so painful to me that reading about the lives of other women writers was one of the few things that could help... I remember an incredible intensity about all this, and also a kind of furtiveness – as if I were afraid that someone might look through the window and find me out. Even now, I feel I should pretend that I was reading only these women’s fiction or their poetry – their lives as they chose to present them, alchemised as art. But that would be a lie. It was the private messages I really liked – the journals and letters, and autobiographies and biographies whenever they seemed to be telling the truth.

When reading Fraser’s words 30 years later, her phrase “private messages” carries a double meaning

suggestive of the best experiences of encountering life-writing. Opening Woolf's journals or Sylvia Plath's letters, I am aware of my status as intruder, reading words never intended for my eyes, but which also at times feel as if they were private messages written directly to me. The reader is at once excluded from and included in an intimate conversation – voyeur and confidante.

When Woolf reread George Eliot for an essay, she began with the “autobiography” produced by Eliot's widower, and told a friend: “I can see already that no one else has ever known her as I know her.” Woolf kept a letter of Eliot's framed over her mantelpiece; Plath made pilgrimages to the Brontë parsonage and marvelled in her journal: “They touched this, wore that, wrote here.”

Joanna Biggs begins her book *A Life of One's Own: Nine Women Writers Begin Again* on her own literary pilgrimage: “Around the time I realised I didn't want to be married any more, I started visiting Mary Wollstonecraft's grave.” In 2015 Biggs – an editor at *Harper's* whose criticism has appeared in the *New Yorker* and the *London Review of Books* – was 34 and had published one book, *All Day Long: A Portrait of Britain at Work*, when she separated from her husband. Theirs was a marriage of two writers, one that she hoped would be an “intellectual” union but found to be full of “disguised envy”. Their future – “children in the suburbs” – was incompatible with her writing goals.

“I had so many questions,” Biggs writes, “could you be a feminist and be in love? Did the search for independence mean I would never be at home with anyone, anywhere? Was domesticity a trap? What was worth living for if you lost faith in the traditional goals of a woman's life?” She turned to the literary lives of her “household goddesses” for answers.

This, her second book, contains eight essays about eight writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot, Zora Neale Hurston, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison and Elena Ferrante, making Biggs herself the ninth women writer of her title. (This decision to stand herself alongside the greats is a bold one, teetering on the knife-edge between admirable ambition and self-aggrandisement.)

Biggs's bid for intimacy with the writers is clear from the contents page, a list of first names: “Mary, George, Zora, Virginia, Simone, Sylvia, Toni, Elena” (a construction used in many recent group biographies of women – why is it so hard to imagine a book about male artists that does the same?). She sets out to explore these women's lives at moments of change – Wollstonecraft's suicide attempt, Eliot's unconventional, creative union with George Henry Lewes, the collapse of the Plath-Hughes marriage – alongside her own life at moments of overlap.

Biggs's project is defiantly unscholarly. She recalls that the “biggest taboo during my degree was to wonder about the sort of person a writer was from the novels they wrote”, but this, she writes, is exactly how many of us read fiction: “It is strange to me that anyone ever talks of books apart from a writer's life... Even if a book is about everything else, it is never

not about the life the writer lived.” Hers, then, embraces a biographical, emotional and associative form of criticism.

It is also an explicitly feminist project. Biggs believes that “instead of reading books in order to learn about history... women might draw benefit from thinking of themselves as being involved in a long conversation, in which they both listen and talk, and even manage in this way, over time, to establish a tradition”. So she draws parallels between herself and her forebears. Describing Wollstonecraft's impassioned letters to Gilbert Imlay, she reflects on her own post-divorce love affair: “I had found that untameable thing, a mysterious recognition, everything the poets mean by love. I wrote him email after email, sending thoughts and feelings and provocations, trying out ideas for my new life... I must have sounded like Wollstonecraft.”

When George Eliot writes a heartbroken letter to a man who has rejected her, Biggs notes: “I feel close to Eliot... When I am broken up with, I discovered while dating after my divorce, I agree entirely with my breaker-upper, that I am unworthy of love.” When Plath's marriage breaks down, Biggs observes: “By leaving my husband, I discovered, like Plath, that I hadn't grown up yet.”

This is not a woman's autobiography of the kind Woolf was so hungry for. Instead it is what she described as “side-glances in the shape of essays” – which, she argued, inevitably fall short of total sincerity. The glimpses Biggs offers of her life post-divorce – crying in the bath, writing at night, eating sorbet for dinner, discussing Elena Ferrante, making “divorce pasta”, letting herself “kiss on manicured lawns, drink prosecco in bed, read poetry at dawn, dance naked in heels, paint my lips red” – feel romanticised, not necessarily the full story.

Biggs's habit of searching for similarities between herself and her writers across such chasms of time, context and opportunity flattens differences and risks over-identification. Woolf's commitment to novelty in her prose is compared to Biggs's move to New York City: “Was I maybe experiencing modernism? We tie that make-it-new impulse to the early 20th century, but it could be that modernism also comes in waves over our little lives.”

Her search for connection results in some observations that may be significant to Biggs, but less so to the reader (“I used to live 15 minutes' walk from Newington Green, where Mary [Wollstonecraft] went to church”). Her chapter on Plath began life as an essay for the *LRB* – she replaces that essay's terrific first sentence, “Sylvia Plath was afraid of letters,” with the rather weaker: “Four Augusts after I was divorced, I went on holiday to Newcomb Hollow Beach on Cape Cod, where Sylvia Plath had spent her ‘Platinum Summer’ of 1954.”

As a result of her prizing of relatability, the “lessons” Biggs teases out can edge towards the trite. Wollstonecraft “reminded me to listen to my feelings, even if they scared me”; Woolf that “I had to let myself grow and change”. I suspect there are more literal teachings Biggs seeks from these women: she asks ▶



A Life of One's Own: Nine Women Writers Begin Again
Joanna Biggs
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 272pp,
£18.99

For Woolf, “The simple words ‘I was born’ have somehow a charm” that outshines any fairy-tale

◀ herself, “Could I write that novel?” and in her final pages she admits, “I don’t know if I can write the novel I want to write one day.” One senses this hoped-for future career as a novelist is what really draws her to these figures. But she finally concludes,

The best lesson these women writers, my friends and teachers, have for me isn’t that I should copy them, but rather that I might... let go of them and become the author of my own life... That’s one thing that Mary, George, Zora, Virginia, Simone, Sylvia, Toni and Elena all offered themselves, and it is something I can offer myself. You can too.

Biggs is more than capable of rigorous criticism, and the book includes close readings of several novels – but her decision to write in a different mode is deliberately provocative. “I used to want desperately to be a ‘proper’ critic, to be taken seriously, to have a full command of history and theory,” she writes, “but I don’t want that any more. I don’t want to ‘admire’ writing for its erudition, I want to be changed by it. I want to know what it’s like to be someone else.”

The best parts of her book are when she succeeds in letting us try on the life of someone else: we feel Wollstonecraft’s despair; sense the excitement of the Harlem “rent parties” attended by Zora Neale Hurston; glimpse Plath’s mania in her first student days as “a Smith Girl!”. Why should we not admit that we read to feel something, to find connection, consolation and guidance, as much as to be intellectually stimulated?

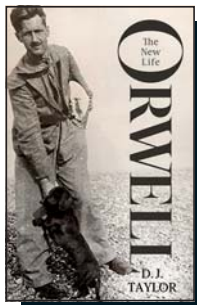
Why read life-writing? The obvious answer is because it’s true. Biographies and memoirs are about real lives, even when twisted into narrative; honest life-writing by women might hold some specific, recognisable truths for those of us who happen to be women. But the life-writing that seems most directly written out of life – diaries, letters, journals, notes – possesses a concentrated truth, a special power: the power of the present tense. They speak to us through time because the moment of their making is handed to us, as if frozen in the glass ball of a snow globe.

“The present is forever and forever is always shifting, flowing, melting,” Plath wrote in her journal at 17, despairing at her inability to capture it. “This second is life. And when it is gone it is dead.” But reading her words, this second seems to live again with us. We can temporarily suspend our deeply held disbelief at what logic and history tells us must be true: one, two, three or more centuries ago, among the corsets and deadcarts and horse shit in the streets, someone lived, as you or I do now. It’s a feeling I only otherwise get occasionally and suddenly walking through London, with its streets of commingling buildings of all different eras and the centuries-constant arc of the Thames. They lived, they died, they are not here to meet us. But we can meet them on the page for a second – and then go back to the stuff of our own lives. ●

The sanctification of George Orwell

The writer has become a national treasure, moral arbiter and begetter of biographies: do we need another one?

By Robert Colls



Orwell:
The New Life
DJ Taylor
Constable,
608pp, £30

David Taylor has already written one biography of Orwell, from 2003, and now he’s written another. Why? Although the two books are different, there’s not that much you can change in the life itself. We know how it runs. Born Eric Blair, India, 1903. Public Schoolboy 1911-21. Burma Sergeant 1922-27. Down-at-Heel Writer 1927-34. Great Road North 1936. Spanish Civil War 1937. TB 1937-38. Marrakech 1938-39. Great Patriotic War 1939-45. *Animal Farm* 1945. Hebrides 1946-48. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 1949. Last Days. Dies.

The New Life has the advantage of being able to draw on about a dozen previously unpublished letters, but to no real consequence. Not much bothered by other biographers, Taylor raises nobody up, casts nobody down, shows little interest in grand theories and doesn’t come up with any of his own. By and large he sticks to his brief – the life and those who hovered close to the flame.

The publishers’ proud claim that this is the first full-length study for 20 years is not true. The best reason for a second try is that Orwell is worth it. Born as he was into a world at war, a biography of Orwell is almost a running history of that world in 46 years – years in which he hammered himself into a writer of monstrous talent, enormous breadth, and enduring significance. In spite of old colonial money on both sides of the family – sugar and opium on the English side, Burmese teak on the French – it was as a man of the left that Orwell took a sharp and personal interest in struggle wherever he found it. At the same time, for someone who swept so wide (his Eastern Service BBC wartime scripts were outstanding) he also ground exceeding small. One moment we find him discussing nationalism and imperialism as great historical tides, the next moment he is an imperial policeman lying flat on his belly, shooting an elephant he didn’t want to shoot in a village he didn’t want to police. A jeering crowd and a man at bay – it was in small things such as these that Orwell lifted his sights and found his range.

In recent times, the appeal has gone beyond the