

Structures of Auto/biographical Narrative: Dan Jacobson, Blake Morrison, Tim Lott, Margaret Forster, Richard Wollheim

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This paper will explore the structures of a group of recent British auto/biographies, focussing on the ways in which they attempt to recreate childhood experience through memory and on the functioning of hindsight. Paul John Eakin has coined the term 'relational autobiography' to refer to texts in which the life of the subject-narrator is told in relation to the life (or lives) of a 'proximate other', usually, but not always, a parent: such texts challenge the boundaries and definitions of autobiography/biography/memoir/social history. I will be discussing the ways in which writers research and reconstruct the lives of others, and the ways in which they bring these lives into relationship with their own: I will thus be engaging with Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'post-memory', and interrogating how it functions in specific instances. This kind of life-writing raises ethical questions: the revelation of family secrets, the use of letters and other documents not originally intended for publication, and, of most interest here, the perspective of hindsight which is inevitably available to those who 'come after'. Michael Andre Bernstein has identified three perspectives available to the novelist, auto/biographer or historian: fore-, back- and sideshadowing. Foreshadowing is a narrative perspective 'whose logic must always value the present, not for itself, but as the harbinger of an already determined future', whilst sideshadowing is 'a gesturing to the side, to a present dense with multiple, and mutually exclusive, possibilities of what is to come'. Dan Jacobson, who reconstructs the life of his rabbi grandfather in his memoir *Heshel's Kingdom*, is all too aware of his tendency to 'backshadow', to judge his grandfather for not leaving Lithuania when he had the opportunity in 1912, as if he should have known what was to happen some 25 years later, as we do now. For Bernstein, these narrative perspectives have political implications: sideshadowing is 'fundamentally democratic and pluralistic', in contrast to 'totalitarian ideologies [which are] most deeply resistant to admitting the validity of sideshadowing'.

Such considerations operate in the private realm, also: I discuss the use Blake Morrison, Vikram Seth and Tim Lott make of letters written by their parents and (in Seth's case) his great-aunt, letters which, whilst invading privacy, also restore and record the voices of the dead and a sense of the sideshadows, the still remaining possibilities, of their lives as they were living them. I also discuss the ways in which the writers concerned narrate their own lives, the narrative and linguistic strategies they employ in order to reconstruct their childhood experience 'as it was', and the extent to which they acknowledge the inevitable functioning of hindsight, of interpretation and re-construction of memory.

I will provide photocopies of extracts from the texts, and will probably focus most closely on Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom*, Blake Morrison's *Things My Mother Never Told Me*, and Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*, with some reference to other auto/biographies.