

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

# Towards a Theory of Life-Writing

Genre Blending

MARIJA KRSTEVA

ROUTLEDGE



# Towards a Theory of Life-Writing

*Towards a Theory of Life-Writing: Genre Blending* provides a look into the rules of life-writing genre blending proposing a theory to explain and illustrate the main regulations governing such genre play. It centers on fact and fiction duality in the formation of auto/biofictional genres. This book investigates the existing developments in this field and explores major criticism and lines of inquiry in order to arrive at the theory of life-writing genre play textuality. The specific interplay of the different generic characteristics develops a specific textuality at the heart of it. This is termed biofictional preservation (biopreservation) to explain the textual transformation and the shaping of the auto/biofictional genres. Written for undergraduate and graduate students, but also for the general readers, the book further exemplifies the theory in the analyses of different biofictions about the American authors F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway featuring overlapping and juxtaposed material. This volume aims to provide a theory of this specific textuality in order to better understand and approach the process in question as well as to open up new horizons for further study and exploration.

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# **Towards a Theory of Life-Writing**

## Genre Blending

**Marija Krsteva**

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# Introduction

All biographies, like all autobiographies, like all narratives tell one story in place of another.

– Helene Cixous

The field of life-writing genre play has been exponentially developing during the twentieth century, reaching the forefront of the main literary tendencies in the twenty-first century. As such, it has proven to be quite complex and in need of a bigger academic attention. The present book aims to respond to the major challenges in the field and propose a viable literary theory that would explain and establish the position of the genre of biofiction in contemporary literature. To that end, this book studies the most prominent debates in all the literary forms resulting from the life-writing genre play such as biographical fictions, autobiographical fictions and literary biographies. Following a close examination of the narrative sequences in the novelistic rewritings of the lives of two of America's most notable authors, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, the book provides a theory on the life-writing genre play textuality. It reveals the specific textual and narrative transformation resulting from the fact and fiction duality pertinent to biographical fictions. The book gives sufficient examples of life stories that have been repeatedly used as plot lines in postmodern biofictions, which, it should be noted, underline the connection between fiction, biography and autobiography by developing texts that are “both self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 2003:5). The process of creating such texts involves different appropriations of facts, fictional characters, literary works and practices, themes and subjects, which are re-ordered in a constantly changing world of doubling, mirror reflections and fluctuations constructing in this



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way narrative identities that subvert the popularly accepted images of public figures.

This creative process, known as life-writing genre play is a never-ending intriguing constructive dialogue between fact and fiction. As a result, new terms and varieties of genres keep on emerging such as: autofiction (a term Serge Dubrowski coined in 1977; Philippe Villain distinguishes it from autobiographical novel in that it requires the first-person narrator who is also a protagonist to be the same as the author) autobiografiction (a concept first coined by Stephen Reynolds in 1906, further researched and developed by Max Saunders as combining and blurring of all different life-writing forms, of fiction in autobiography and autobiography in fiction), factual metaautobiography (according to Christina Struth the term designates a relatively new development within autobiographical writing that reflects on its own conditions and conventions, the history of autobiography and contemporary autobiographical practices), metabiography (a term used to denote the relation between the biographee and the social, historical, temporal cultural and economic circumstances of the biographer), autotopography (critic Jennifer Gonzalez sees autotopography as a way to study how a person's integral objects become, overtime, so intrinsic to telling one's story), *autre*-biography (defined as a metafictional autobiography, which emphasizes the themes of subject, identity and power, as well as historiographic metafiction), heterobiography (defined by Boldrini as fictional autobiographies of historical individuals), biofiction (literature with a protagonist named after a real-life person, and the author fictionalizes that historical figure in order to show a common theme between otherwise unlike things or to convey a larger meaning, such as for social commentary), fictional biography (a genre wherein an author writes an account of a person's life where that person is actually a fictional character), literary biography (the biographical exploration of the lives of writers and artists) and the list could go on. This proliferation, while enriching, seems to pose considerable issues on all levels of literary, cultural and philosophical criticism. In the analytical part, we can see the interplay of different elements forming all the above generic varieties.

To begin with, one of the best examples of this "mixing of genres" comes from the field of literary biography. As Michael Benton (2009) points out, it is important to always keep in mind the documentary aspect of writing about somebody's life, but since the meaning assigned to the study of facts becomes mixed with fiction,

the genre falls into the postmodern category of historiographic metafiction. Thus, such a study establishes the relation as one of a reading that is not just a collection of information about someone's life but a complex combination of factual and fictional elements. It further explores the convincing aspect of this final product, how much it adheres to the theoretical postulates about life-writing and how much it can be located in a particular theoretical frame. The juxtaposition of the main elements of the different types of the writing explains the nature of making a metafictional modification, a historiographical-metafictional modification in the development of literary biography. The subgenre's internal representational devices then become subject to exploration of historiographic metafictional elements (Benton 2009:38).

In particular, historiographic metafiction unveils the theme of life-writing acknowledging the postmodern worldview as the convention of the period. As Benton suggests, it is exactly this feature of historiographic metafiction, the concentration on intertextual and parodical building of scenes and stories that becomes one of the fundamental concerns in defining the genre of literary biography. That is why he focuses on the representation of the duality of history and fiction, craft and art, the life and the works, and on the resulting hybridity of literary biography. He believes that it is the postmodern aesthetic that "establishes significant facts" and at the same time reveals "stories", while the success of the author of a literary biography lies in their ability to select and re-arrange the material designing the life stories of their characters thus creating "biomythographies" (Benton 2009:53). This claim is in line with Cohn's urge to draw a line on what is fictional and what is factual, or to define the "signposts of fictionality" (Cohn 1990).

It is in this sense that this book analyzes the narrative techniques used by the different postmodern writers to create new genre forms in life-writing. These forms are usually closely connected to the processes of hybridization, bending of boundaries and blending of characteristics. In other words, what this book intends to reveal is how the genre play has become an inherent feature of postmodern writing, often associated with specific forms of textuality. Moreover, this textuality emerges as the theoretical foundation for study and analysis of biofictions, thus filling the existing gap of specific theory on life-writing genre play.

It should be noted that biofictions and genre play have had their variations in literature throughout the centuries. The most recent trends in biofictional writing reflect the global changes of

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the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and therefore they are most conveniently situated in the postmodern paradigm. It is worth considering that in line with such global changes come the reactions to postmodernism in the form of post-postmodern trends or metamodernism. According to Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010), the new postmodern sensibility oscillates between and beyond modern positions and postmodern strategies. The term *meta* here refers to Plato's *metaxy* to denote a movement between opposite poles as well as beyond and not to reflective stance or repetition. It is possible that the biofictional trend might be situated within such trends as a reply to different developments such as climate change, the financial crisis and (geo)political instability but also digital trends and technological advancements. Still, the core strategies could be recognized as postmodern or postmodern variations.

In order to arrive at the proposed theoretical framework within which all these different forms of textuality in the field of literary biography can be critically interpreted, the book analyzes in detail two of the postmodern biofictions about F. Scott Fitzgerald's and Ernest Hemingway's lives rather curiously concentrating not on the two male writers but on the women in their lives: *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* (2013) by Therese Ann Fowler and *The Paris Wife* (2011) by Paula McLain. As an additional source of interpretation, another biofiction, *Hemingway's Girl* (2012) by Erika Robuck is used, as a way of strengthening the argument. The study compares and contrasts these works with Zelda Fitzgerald's own semi-autobiographical novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932) and Marta Gellhorn's autobiographical travelogue, *Travels with Myself and Another* (1978). The comparison serves the purpose of illustrating the specific image-making that takes place in the biofictions as a result of the unique narrative identities developed in the texts. Thus, it also aims to prove that postmodern fiction of the early twenty-first century allows the multi-genre play to undermine the established hierarchies and patterns of behavior, especially those of a male-dominated world.

The three biofictions, analyzed in light of genre blending, or what may also be called "genre play", hybridization (Hutcheon 2003), "creolization" (Anderson 1991) and blending (Benton 2009), provide the basis of formulating a new perspective through which postmodern life-writing can be understood. I call this a process of biofictional preservation, or "biopreservation". I use the term "biopreservation" to refer to the "literary" preservation of one's

life, and “bio” to refer to the facts of one’s life. Biopreservation can be viewed as an experiment with different postmodern modes and techniques of writing, as a play with generic characteristics. Similar to the process of biopreservation in biochemical laboratories, in the process of literary creation, the authors decide which facts from the biography of their subjects and which traits of their characters they want to preserve and then choose what “literary” “preservatives” to use to create the fictional stories. The end product is a biofiction that illustrates a new vision of the past times. Thus, the term metaphorically refers to the scientific process of biopreservation denoting the unique genre play in postmodern rewriting of the lives of historical figures. I see the work of this process in the dynamics of the text and by finding, describing and explaining the main elements of biopreservation, I try to establish a theoretical foundation for explaining the genre play in biofictions. Interestingly, the terms “genre” and “hybridization” also take root in natural sciences and find their way in humanities.

The need for such a study has arisen from the lack of a specific theory dealing with the formation and implications of this new genre in terms of its specific characteristics and textuality. The biggest online network of books and readers, Goodreads harbors numerous works of blended life-writing genres, however, most of these works are either wrongly labeled or little investigated which might obstruct the attempt to review or understand the work in the best possible light. The situation is not less complicated in academic research and study. While many excellent attempts to uncover the main characteristics of the genre have been made in this field, no specific theory has been proposed that would reveal the governing structures of the life-writing genre play on a textual level. Therefore, this particular textuality could be considered an initial point in all further studies and analyses of a work of biofiction.

Adding to the need to critically address such genre blending is Gérard Genette’s exploration of the factual and fictional in his essay “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative” from *Fiction&Diction* where he examines the notions of order, pace, frequency, mood and voice in light of factual and fictional narratives. He concludes that “if we consider actual practices, we have to admit that there is no such thing as pure fiction and no such thing as history so rigorous that it abjures any ‘emplotting’ and any use of novelistic techniques” (Genette 1993:82). He further urges the need to explore the rules behind this mixture saying

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Indeed, the question ought to be all the less discouraging to empirical inquiry, for even -or especially- if narrative forms readily cross the borderline between fiction and non-fiction, it is no less urgent, or rather it is all the more urgent, for narratology to follow this example.

(Genette 1993:84)

Therefore, the aim of this book is to determine the specific type of textuality as a key aspect and a starting point in the analysis of such narratives since the generic interconnectedness and the inevitable contact between the factual and the fictional calls for such an approach.

In this respect, I isolate and describe the main characteristics of the biopreservation process in the above biofictions. The analytical approach establishes the theory and draws general conclusions about the role of biopreservation in genre blending. Furthermore, I use biopreservation to show how the (auto)biofictional narrative identities of the women around the two modernist writers are constructed and how that shapes the images of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Similarly, other analyses could be made to other biofictions, inspired from different socio-cultural and historical aspects they want to convey.

I first discuss the blending of the traditional critical theory and creative practices and outline new insights into the theory and the craft of contemporary postmodern fiction. This stages a practical and theoretical inquiry into the double, hybrid functions of the texts as historical and literary. In this respect, the study offers a novel interpretation of how life-writing influences the genre conventions of fiction, biography and autobiography, the creative process and the negotiating of the self and the relation between the reader and the author in a wider social and historical context. These works of fiction exhibit the capacity of the postmodern novel to project the characteristics of historiographic metafiction. They are composite texts that dramatize key events in the apparently disparate lives of the writers turned subjects. The accent here is on the process of how different themes surrounding the writers' lives are reworked in the fictional space.

One of the specific traits of this study that serves the theory of biopreservation, derives from the formation of Zelda and Hadley's fictional narrative identities, as well as from the depiction of Fitzgerald and Hemingway as characters in postmodern fiction seen as the result of genre transgression and the use of postmodern techniques