

Life Writing

Life Writing:
The Spirit of the Age
and the State of the Art

Edited by

Meg Jensen and Jane Jordan

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Life Writing: The Spirit of the Age and the State of the Art, Edited by Meg Jensen and Jane Jordan

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO JOHN MEPHAM AND SARAH SCEATS,
WHO FIRST BROUGHT LIFE WRITING TO KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

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© Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

BLAKE MORRISON AND HANIF KUREISHI IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNA KIERNAN

JULY 6, 2007, KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

AK *When Did You Last See Your Father* is viewed as being a seminal text in the beginning of the rise of life writing and family memoirs, confessionals and so forth. Why do you think it was so successful at the time it was published at the beginning of the 90s?

BM I have to qualify a few of those things first. I think people who say, *oh, is this the rise of the confessional memoir* have got very short memories. You know, there is St Augustine.

AK But there is a particular kind of trend in literary production at the moment.

HK St Augustine and *Jordan*.

BM Well, you see, I don't think *Jordan* is anything to me because there's always been those sort of confessional memoirs. When I was starting to write I was very aware of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, poems, but he was called confessional and that's going back to the 60s and 70s. So what was the question? Oh, why in the 90s? Well, I have different theories about this. One is there was a slight reaction against the more fantastical forms of fiction, magical realism. There was a hunger for stuff you could believe again. That you could convince yourself was true. And that had somehow been neglected in the 80s and people were ready to read that kind of book again. And then also, I suppose, if I think about my childhood in the 50s and 60s, there were an awful lot of secrets. There were a lot of taboos and many of those have gone and so as you would guess, people looking back to that period are taking the lid off things or opening cupboards that were closed, because we all get to a certain age and we write about our childhoods and secrets come out. And there's the time when we're surrounded by confessional culture in all sorts of ways on television and so on. I think there was that particular moment in the early 90s and it has continued of course.

HK It's the end of shame isn't it? By the end of the 80s there was no longer any shame.

PREFACE

THE MONSTER FROM OUTSIDE

ANNETTE KOBAK

It may be the central European in me—my father was born in Czechoslovakia—but I feel a certain wariness about the idea of a spirit of the age, of a *zeitgeist*—especially when it comes garlanded with words like ‘will’, ‘great man of the age’, and ‘actualizing an age’. (It could also be the English in me, since we too are wary of grand, sweeping ideas, for different historical reasons.) For Central Europeans know to their cost that the ‘great man of his age’ (and he’s a man, of course, in Hegel’s formulation), from Napoleon to Stalin, has sometimes got too high on the spirit of the age, distilled to his own taste. Hitler, for example, was teetotal, but—to overwork the metaphor—it was his home brew of the spirit of the age, stamped with his own labels like ‘*Lebensraum*’, or ‘*Drang nach Osten*’, or ‘thousand-year-Reich’, which went to his head and caused devastation, not progress.

So whilst lauding the energy of a *zeitgeist* when we spot a good one, we can also be alert to it being co-opted for nefarious purposes. A simple antidote to that kind of hijacking of the spirit of an age by tyrants or manipulators can be found, I suggest, in the subject of this collection: the life narrative.

*

The novelist Milan Kundera—born in Czechoslovakia like my father, and with his own past vexed by history—used the phrase the ‘monster from outside’ to describe twentieth-century history: the toxic version of a spirit of the age. Describing the effect of the *zeitgeist* on novels in that century, Kundera wrote ‘The time was past when man had only the monster of his own soul to grapple with, the peaceful time of Joyce and Proust. In the novels of Kafka, Hasek, Musil, Broch, the monster comes from outside and is called History.’¹ This monster-from-outside aspect of

history is something central Europeans understand intimately; it has taken the twenty-first century for us in the west to know how that feels. On 11th Sept 2001, for example, history graphically embodied Kundera's metaphor: something terrifying and inhuman came hurtling in from outside to destroy, indiscriminately, without warning, and in a way that changed a nation's consciousness of itself.

The individual can, and does, get pulverized by these forces, but there is an almost magical way in which individual *stories* can work against tyrannies, and that is by undermining their monopoly on narrative. With this in mind, I want to outline briefly such a story, which is about how the monster-from-outside hit my father in September 1939. Uncovering his background led me to write a memoir, *Joe's War: My Father Decoded*, but the memoir grew, too, to encompass countless similar stories of lives transformed, or lost, in the second world war.²

I found out about my father's story quite late in my own life. I already had children of my own, and my parents had emigrated from London, where I was brought up, to Australia, where they still live. It was only then that I began to turn around and ask some questions: why would my father, Joe, say nothing about his past before he came to England? Why was he so taciturn? Why did his eyes oscillate continuously? Why did we never have a telephone at home? And why had he slept with a hammer under his pillow?

It took me over a decade, on and off, to find answers to these questions. In visits to my parents in Australia, I began to tape Joe's story; the grimness of the war evoked to a backdrop of blazing Australian sun and a raucous chorus of kookaburras. It took time, not only because of the intermittent nature of these visits, but also—as I eventually found—because my father could only let go of secrets so long locked away slowly, and piecemeal. But it also took time for a practical, political reason: it wasn't until the Soviet Union collapsed that he could reveal the final piece of the story (inasmuch as any memoir is ever final, which of course it isn't). By the end, I'd not only found out the reasons for my father's silence, but had also inadvertently hit on a much bigger historical silence, which politics and the cold war had dictated to the Poles who fought in the west—a silence that was still going on, and which to some extent still is.

As an ordinary researcher, I'd been surprised to find significant gaps in official records and histories of the war, including Churchill's monumental first-hand account, *The Second World War*. Of course, I shouldn't have been: the second world war, complex and fraught as it was, gave rise to different national narratives for differing purposes at different times; every country involved had things to forget, plaster over, resent, salvage or

celebrate, and every country's history, like an individual's memoir, is an ongoing draft.

My father's own story came out pristine, having been locked away untold for nearly sixty years. He told me how he'd been an eighteen-year-old engineering student in Lvov—then in Poland and now in Ukraine—when war broke out in September 1939 and the Soviets then occupied the city (taking over from the Nazis, thanks to their infamous secret protocol). Overnight Joe found himself in the eye of the unfolding war, and his future was transformed. Looking back, he didn't get out of the eye of that storm until after the Soviet Union broke up: that is, for forty-five years.

In twenty cathartic tapes, my father told me what happened next: how he'd been arrested entirely arbitrarily off the street by the Soviet army (the monster in military clothing and had escaped, only to make a perilous journey across mountains back to his home village, which now lay across a heavily-patrolled border between Soviet-occupied and Nazi-occupied Poland; how he'd found his village in charge of a young Gestapo commandant; how the vicar had asked him to smuggle refugees across the border on skis; how he got caught one night and had to turn back on skis and never saw his family again; how he ended up as raw nineteen-year-old recruit fighting on the front in France—thinking he'd fight his way back to Poland in a war which would surely be only a few months' duration; how France fell, and how he was then evacuated to the unknown country of England, where, in the middle of the war, he met my mother and I was born. I found he had unusual recall of detail: of the two suits, balaclava, overcoat, shoes and galoshes he wore as he skidded across a frozen river at night under gunfire; of affable Senegalese soldiers in France; of Morse code, which he can still decode almost intravenously, through his fingertips.

As I was writing this story, and discovering a very different, central European perspective on the war from the one we'd been given for a half century in England—Churchill, the Dam Busters, Colditz, Dad's Army—I'd assumed, in my English, island-dweller way, that my father was home and dry when he got to Britain, and so didn't question him much about his time in the army here after 1940. It wasn't until 2001 that he finally told me the last bit of the story, the one which had overshadowed his life and coloured mine from birth on. He had been not just temperamentally taciturn, I found: he'd been schooled in silence.

Still barely speaking English, Joe had been posted from Scotland to a small top-secret intelligence unit in the Polish army in London which was 'listening in' to the Russians. The exiled Poles were doing this—even though the Russians were, by 1941, technically our allies—because they

distrusted the Soviets' intentions towards their country, suspecting (with good reason as it proved) that the Allies were being outmanoeuvred over the fate of Poland and other countries in the area: all of those, that is, which would end up behind Churchill's 'iron curtain'. With increasing despair, the Poles began to realize that, after all their frequently heroic fighting on behalf of others—and of their homeland in the Battle of the Atlantic, at Tobruk, Lenino, Monte Cassino, Ancona, Bologna, on D-Day and at Arnhem—they might have no homeland to go back to. And even worse, that it was their friends and allies who, for reasons of *realpolitik*, were betraying them.

My father's role was low-level espionage, and he had no choice in the matter. He was told by the officer in charge that the less he knew about what the unit was doing, the better; he was told not to trust *anyone* (what, not even you? he asked the officer, who laughed and said: you've got it); and he signed the Official Secrets Act. These instructions imprinted themselves so effectively on his mind, in his vulnerable and stateless position in a foreign country that he decided to put the lid on all his experiences before and during the war. Rather than accidentally let anything out, he let nothing out. Then, no sooner was the war over than the cold war began, and my father knew that the mere fact of the unit's existence was just as inflammatory in the climate of a cold war as it had been during the 'hot' one.

These were some of the outside events which hit Joe—Jozef, as he then was—and millions of others from 1939 to 1945. But of course they'd also stamped him on the inside. The monster had got in. I began to realize that he had been traumatized from his time in the war (hence in part the crystal—clear recall and, recent research tells us, the oscillating eyes); and that throughout my time at home he'd lived in fear of the knock on the door in the middle of the night—the poisoned umbrella (or, as it might now be, polonium 210-isotope). This was why he'd been so silent, and why we had had no telephone in the house. This explained the hammer under his pillow.

If Joe had died young—as so many of the Poles over here did, many of despair, as I've found from correspondence about the book from their sons and daughters—I wouldn't have been able to find out any of this. But he and my mother are still very much alive in Australia; and indeed I realized in writing the book why he'd been so glad to take the opportunity to go to the other end of the globe, away from all the complexity, and, for him, threat, of 'old Europe' (as Napoleon was the first to call it).

I also realized in writing the book how much I trusted the eye-witness. As a foot-soldier, Joe had witnessed a major story that official and

comprehensive history books had not told us. He had also seen details they had not mentioned: about the North African soldiers fighting for France—often far more vigorously than the French (a detail which has otherwise only come out in the recent film *Days of Glory*); or his Polish fellow soldiers' account of seeing Churchill light a cigar as the body of General Sikorski was taken out of the train at Victoria station: a too-relaxed attitude, to them, to the loss of their leader, and one which boded ill for Churchill's commitment to Poland's cause.

Trusting eye-witnesses, I wanted to bring more of them in to fill the gaps in my father's story, when he wasn't there but events were occurring that were critical to the bigger picture: gaps over Munich, over the concentration camps, over General Anders's epic trek with the Polish army across the Asian steppes. So I brought in other eyes and voices, from Martha Gellhorn and General Anders to people I met in my travels: for I also became an eye-witness myself by making a first-hand trek through the Carpathians in my father's footsteps.

It was striking to see how many of these viewpoints had been omitted in British histories of the second world war: from the still-current occlusion of the Polish generals Anders and Maczek by major historians (with the notable exceptions of Norman Davies and Adam Zamoyksi) to the Foreign Office's official *Documents on British foreign policy*, an edited version of the events of Munich in September 1938, doctored to exonerate itself.³ General Sikorski's allegedly accidental death at Gibraltar in 1943 was routinely glossed over; and why had no historians mentioned the presence of Kim Philby, in charge of security on the rock at the time? Startlingly and tellingly, there was no mention of Sikorski's death in Churchill's entries for July 1943, or at all in his supposedly comprehensive six-volume history of the war.⁴ No mention, that is, of the sudden death of the head of the government-in-exile of Britain's first and, at a crucial point, only fighting ally. Discovering the reasons for this would take me back to the Nissen hut where my father was stationed, intercepting Russian Morse code at night throughout the rest of the war. For me, the personal became literally political: Joe's silence—and flickering eyes, and hammer under the pillow—turning out to be signals of things muted and amiss on the wider scene.

It was memoir—life narratives—of my father and others I co-opted along the way that had led the way for me, in their detail and specificity; and even in their partiality. As I wrote, I found too how much I appreciated the memoir as a form, for its accommodating bagginess, for the ground-level quality of its witness, and for its openness to experience

unshackled by formal expectations such as strict chronology, ‘arcs’, or happy endings.

Perhaps this is why the individual voice of memoir has often ended up almost incidentally challenging orthodoxies, from political to religious to stylistic ones—St Augustine, Rousseau, Malcolm X, Anne Frank: an individual life, if carefully attended to, isn’t susceptible to formulas or over-arching theories. Perhaps, too, it’s no coincidence that the current vogue for memoir followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. After the ideological stranglehold of the cold war, individual stories—often quirky and witty ones—burst in exuberantly, as if to make up for lost time. When the Berlin wall came down, people were let through, the past was let through, and stories were let through too. ‘Hot’ and cold war stories have percolated through to different art forms to refine or shake up some of the self-serving myths which set in after the war, and give us such new emerging narratives as *Goodbye Lenin*, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, *The Lives of Others*, or *Everything Is Illuminated*.

In his *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera proposed the European novel as a vital repository against totalitarianism. The novel since Cervantes, he says, has been the record of discovering new segments of existence, ‘grounded in the relativity and ambiguity of things human’. They stand against the totalitarian universe, ‘the world of one single Truth’, which excludes relativity, doubt, questioning. The totalitarian Truth—with a capital T—can never accommodate, he says, what he calls the *spirit of the novel*. You could say he is proposing the spirit of the novel as an antidote to the spirit of the age—when that happens to turn bad, or monstrous.

Perhaps we can add to this in a new century and say that at their best, all life narratives (autobiographical, biographical, artistic, documentary) partake of this: they begin from the observed, the felt, the concrete, the unsystematic, the direct contact with experience, the minute particulars. They lead us on to things we don’t expect. They evade control.

One of the things *I* didn’t expect—although it was staring me in the face—was the recent realization that by writing *Joe’s War* I had invited my father to breach that Official Secrets Act, and that there are *legal penalties* attached to breaching it. What if he’d come through his ordeals only to find himself imprisoned in the final furlong courtesy of daughter? Of course, the English part of me brushes it aside: it wouldn’t happen because too much time has elapsed, because my father kept his honourable and contractual silence while it was necessary, because all this is part of history now. (Is it? the Czech/Slovak side asks, remembering the old central European joke: nothing is as unpredictable as the past.)

For small nations who have been crushed by power, it's all too easy to default back to that gremlin voice, the fear of power. (Has the danger passed? Can I come out now?) Which is why, whilst it is valuable for anyone to recoup and 'invisibly repair' (as Wordsworth has it) his or her life narrative, it seems to me particularly important for individuals from small nations with conflicted pasts to do so. In this way small-scale truths can break down manipulative and monolithic 'Truths', aerating the soil for future growth.

And coming back to the particular, it has certainly been beneficial for my father to have done so. Being able to tell his story, to see it in a shape and in its context for the first time, has released him from fifty years of fear, from the prison of the past, and—as an eighty-seven-year-old—into a new lightness of being.

Joe sleeps more soundly now; as you would, too, if you no longer had a hammer under your pillow. Whether the monster is asleep, and what will provoke it again, is another story.

Notes

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.11

² I was privileged to voice these thoughts at an event sponsored by The Holocaust Education Trust; the more so because my family isn't Jewish. But solidarity among those who found themselves by chance the victims of tyranny, and decided not to internalize the role, is perhaps another way of cutting tyranny down to size—even retrospectively.

³ *Documents on British foreign policy 1919-1939*. ed. E. L. Woodward and Rohan Butler (London: HMSO, 1949), 3rd Series, vol. II.

⁴ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1948-54), 6 vols; notably Vol. V, 'Closing the Ring.'

Some parts of this essay first appeared in Tell Me True: Memoir, History, and Writing a Life, ed. by Patricia Hampl and Elaine Tyler May (Minnesota: Borealis Books, 2008)

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Manchester City Galleries, Manchester
Dorich House Museum, Kingston University
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

INTRODUCTION

DO YOU SPEAK LIFE NARRATIVE?

MEG JENSEN

We live in the age of life stories. In every format of every media from travel writing to scholarly articles, from broadcasting to blogs, from political websites to art installations, and in every academic discipline, self-reflection, life writing, and offering one's life story has become a standard tool for communication and the dissemination of information. In our age, self-publishing, self-broadcasting, and telling stories about our own lives and the lives of others are all-pervasive. This is also the age of the witness, the age of testimony in which first-hand accounts, personal experience, life change and evolution are valued, for good or ill, over distanced reflection. What are we to make of all of this telling of lives?

In academia, *Life Writing* and the wider field of *Life Narratives* (encompassing non-literary forms of the life story) has emerged both alongside and in response to this spirit of our age as a distinct discipline of analysis and practice. The term life writing has been in use since the eighteenth century when its meaning was limited to what would later be called biography, but since the 1980s it has taken hold in academic circles as the preferred name for this fast-developing discipline in which any number of forms are produced and researched. As Margaretta Jolly states in the Editor's Note to her ground-breaking *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2001), she found that her collection must include not only literary works of biography, autobiography, letters and diaries, but also that it was 'appropriate to shelter under life writing's umbrella several entries on life story originating outside of the written form, including testimony, artefacts, reminiscence, personal narrative, visual arts, photography, film, oral history and so forth'.¹ Interestingly, this split between text-based and non text-based life stories is echoed by another kind of divide in the discipline: that between theory and practice.

In the past ten years or so, student demand for further professional training opportunities in higher education has led to changes in many UK

institutions. Universities have recruited increasing numbers of creative writers, filmmakers and dramatists to take full-time places in departments of humanities, while close at their heels come publishers, journalists, dancers and other professionals. Thus, while *Life Writing* has been studied widely since the 1980s, the recent rise in the presence of arts and humanities practitioners in the academy has in turn widened interest in both the analysis and production of non-text based life stories. Indeed, this development has spawned a new term to embrace all forms of life story telling: 'Life Narrative.' Moreover, this surge in the numbers of industry professionals now working in the arts and humanities in higher education itself comes alongside numerous government funding initiatives that seek to enhance links and knowledge transfer between academic institutions and industry in the hopes of increasing the employability and independence of graduates. Academics, researchers and practitioners of life narratives thus find themselves under pressure to work productively alongside each other in an unprecedented manner: but how well do practice and theory speak to one another?

In his study of discourse in academic communities, Joseph Harris has argued that no one ever steps 'cleanly and wholly from one community to another,' because they are 'caught instead in an always changing mix of dominant, residual, and emerging discourses'.² The concerns Harris articulates here have long been on my mind. In order to address them, and to face this new frontier in life writing studies, in 2006, I began working with Professor Brian Brivati, Dr Jane Jordan, Dr David Rogers, Dr Sarah Sceats and other colleagues at Kingston University to develop the Centre for Life Narratives (CLN), a research centre devoted to bringing together a variety of disciplines that produce and analyse life narratives in one physical and virtual space. CLN was positioned to work across this new interface between practice and theory within arts and humanities higher education with its 'always changing mix of dominant, residual, and emerging discourses' to cite Harris again (p. 17). As such CLN can be seen as a test case producing what I hope will continue to be a range of successful approaches to working within this hybrid environment. Our aim is to define and promote best practice in the production of and reflection upon all genres of life narrative work: a place for practice and theory to talk to each other. And so it has become.

CLN is a meeting point for those producing life narratives in various forms (such as memoirists, biographers, witnesses, documentary filmmakers, bloggers, journalists, visual artists, etc.) and for those who analyse and reflect on such narratives (arts critics, academics, trainee researchers, interested members of the local community). By fostering

debate and discussions among critics and practitioners, moreover, the Centre initiates research projects centred on the experience, methodology, formats and meanings of life narratives across written, visual, and virtual cultures. In many ways, I find CLN functioning as a translation point of sorts, offering opportunities for colleagues and visitors to move between these discourse communities sharing information, methodology and of course life stories across the linguistic divide that often separates practice and theory.

Much has been written about linguistic divisions of this kind in academia. In Jim Corder's wonderfully titled essay 'Academic Jargon and Soul-Searching Drivel,' for example, he discusses a sense of split within the academic writing community by examining the relationships between 'academic papers and personal forms of writing' and the 'apparent distance between them.'³ In his essay 'Abstracting the bodies of/in Academic Discourse,' Don Kraemer suggests that such a dilemma is common to writer/practitioners working in academia. Kraemer states that in order 'to participate in an academic discourse community, writers must creakily, strenuously struggle for coherence [...] necessarily suppressing their splits and what splits them.'⁴ The notion of a split between academic and creative or personal writing is discussed in much feminist criticism, too, in the works of writers from Virginia Woolf to Jane Tompkins to Helene Cixous, in each of which this difference is conceived of as not only socially inscribed and hierarchical but also gendered. In 'Me and My Shadow', Tompkins's most well-known work, for example, she asserts that writer/practitioners who are also academics must continually negotiate a split-voiced self. As she points out 'these beings [the writer and the academic] exist separately but not apart. One writes for professional journals; the other in diaries, late at night.'⁵ Tompkins envisions this split as a 'public-private hierarchy' and contends that in our culture public language—the language of objectivity/authority/academia is privileged over private language of journals/emotions/arts(p. 169). Such privileging of public over private forms of discourse may certainly have been true when Tompkins wrote her essay (1987) but despite the fact that arts practitioners are now part of the academy in growing numbers, the sense of a divide between the languages of art and academia remains to trouble the waters.

This divide, moreover, makes it difficult to answer fully the kinds of questions life narrative researchers and practitioners are asking. Academics in the field reflect on the nature of the self and how it can be told in any form if subjectivity is fluid, open ended and incomplete. They probe the ethics of telling life stories. They grow increasingly interested in

the effects of translation of life stories from language to language and from media to media. They question how such stories negotiate the subject/object boundary.⁶ Nearly thirty years ago, James Olney asked 'What do we mean by the self, or himself (autos)? What do we mean by life (bios)? What is the significance and the effect of transforming life or a life into a text?' and researchers have been struggling to respond to these questions ever since.⁷ How might they be answered more fully by talking to or working with practicing life writers, documentary filmmakers, visual artists, bloggers and other life narrative professionals?

Practitioners in the field, on the other hand, are keen to find out more about pedagogical codes and conventions, about current debates and new directions in life narrative theory and research, and to train in the language needed to apply for grants and scholarships for their practice-based research. Shouldn't working alongside academics in their field of interest give them the opportunity to gain such training? It is not always so easy. As Don Kraemer's study suggests, the presence of practitioners in the academy is a 'process of ongoing error, betrayal, and partial understandings. Because of these acts, our selves, are imperfect, always becoming, precisely because of this we can join others without becoming those others. And yet we are changed by what we join.'⁸ The act of practice and theory listening to one another can be and needs to be more than just transliteration. Indeed, as David Constantine has argued, all translations are a 're-articulation of a complex human experience' that change both speakers forever.⁹ These translations, moreover, like those between any two discourses, are never fully finished, or at least not as long as we keep inviting these discussions. Just such cross-fertilisation of information, or 'knowledge transfer' as the current terminology calls it, is at the heart of what the Centre for Life Narratives hopes to achieve through its seminars, workshops, research projects and conferences.

The first such CLN conference took place at Kingston University in London in July 2007 and its aim was to encourage debate not only across disciplines but across the practice/theory divide. The conference focused on issues surrounding the writing of lives in the past, and on the challenges and opportunities facing such endeavours today and tomorrow. This three day event took its title from Hegel's formulation that 'the great man of the age is the one who can put into words the will of his age, tell his age what its will is and accomplish it. What he does is the heart and the essence of his age, he actualises his age.'¹⁰ *The Spirit of the Age* conference brought about interdisciplinary debates around Hegel's model of the making of an age by offering papers from academics working in areas from history to literature, from social science to women's studies,