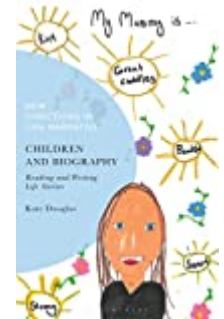


Kate Douglas. *Children and Biography: Reading and Writing Life Stories.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. viii + 217 pp. \$108.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-23636-3.



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First things first: this book is the first in Bloomsbury Academic's New Directions in Life Narrative series, and the author, Kate Douglas, has set a high standard for subsequent books. It is also the first book-length study on auto/biography produced for and by children, and includes two chapters that investigate children's reading and reception of biographies. This compact yet exhaustive monograph adds to the still limited research on the representation, voices, and agency of children in contemporary forms of life narrative, from authors such as Mary Kylie Cardell, Celeste Kearney, Gilmore Leigh, Elizabeth Marshall, Emma Maguire, Ana Belén Martínez García, and Anna Poletti.[1]

Emerging scholarship in this field focuses on addressing marginality, but numerous apparent paradoxes characterize these studies of life narrative. In this book, for example, Douglas dedicates a chapter to the ways in which two biographical books "aim to make the lives of child refugees visible to child readers" (p. 15). On the one hand, such life stories allow the voices of refugees and

asylum-seekers to be heard in the Global North. On the other hand, the "recorded" voices are always edited with elements of amplification or toning down for Western audiences, in problematic ways. Given that Douglas's monograph examines literature through the eyes of children and adults in Australia, and is produced by a British worldwide publishing house, it is perhaps more accurate to proclaim this as the first book-length study on twenty-first-century auto/biography produced for and by children in the Global North.

Regarding the question of in/visibility and other paradoxes in the field of children's auto/biography, it is crucial to remember that books for and about children are "multiply mediated texts" that are ultimately accessed by children via adult "authors, editors, publishers, marketers and various other gatekeepers of good or appropriate literary taste" (p. 103). Douglas clearly illustrates this in the introduction and in most chapters of the book. Similarly, many chapters discuss the complex distinction between biography and autobiography, the use of the slash after "auto," and the

question of blurred generic borderlines—especially the ongoing debate about the tangled relationship between fiction and auto/biography.

Situating her book within the literary analyses of life narratives for and by children, and drawing on scholarship in the fields of children's literature and childhood and life-narrative studies, Douglas shows her expertise in navigating and trawling murky waters; she is professor of English at Flinders University and has published extensively in the field of life narrative. Although she repeatedly draws attention to her research's many caveats, it should be stressed that the author does not aim to solve the paradoxes. Her main scope is to study an important subgenre of life narratives that, as she argues, has received little attention from scholars in the past. Hence the study's wide-ranging corpus fills a gap in both life narrative and childhood studies. Specifically, it is crucial to examine the personal stories of children, especially the ones produced in childhood. For this reason, I believe that the strongest chapters are those discussing children's views and textual analyses of biographies aimed at their age group. When Douglas describes a children's reading club, and thus highlights their reading practices and voices, these are innovative child-centered investigations that truly rejuvenate studies in the field of life narrative.

In the introduction, Douglas explains that she approaches the study from an interdisciplinary perspective; she addresses the major terms and concerns related to childhood, children's literature, and life-narrative studies. Regarding her methodology, it is important to point out that she focuses her studies on life narratives for and by children ages five to twelve, because these are, as she illustrates, "the target ages for children's literature" (p. 12); after this span, the target audience is young adults. Douglas begins the introduction by recollecting a biographical set of books that she enjoyed as a child, called *Value Tales*.^[2] Although these books may be unfamiliar to readers, her in-

formative personal anecdote makes it clear that her study focuses on texts published in English in the Western world. Here Douglas acknowledges that a more "global study" would "yield more fascinating results," but that due to "linguistic limits and the time-consuming practicalities," she had to impose some boundaries to ultimately focus on deep analysis (p. 10). In her literary-historical overview in the first chapter, Douglas argues that children's life narratives cannot be studied separately from the history of childhood. Life narratives about and by children reveal the "cultural positioning" and the cultural constructs of childhood in their era (p. 25). Showing the shifts in the foci of this subgenre of auto/biography, she explains that whereas initially, children's books were morality tales and highly didactic, they became more entertaining in the nineteenth-century; and now they are also sites for "consciousness raising" (p. 34). Douglas ends this overview by elucidating that twenty-first century children's biographies "present opportunities for the consideration of previously marginalized subjects" and histories (p. 36).

Starting the visual and textual analysis of the representations of these subjects in life narratives for and by children, chapter 2 provides a deep study of contemporary texts for children about women "who transgressed cultural expectations of their time" (p. 41), such as *Women in Science*.^[3] Douglas ends the chapter by highlighting the importance of the interactive qualities of some of these books, because they also help to develop children's biographical skills, such as observing and writing. Although her examinations of the life narratives' contents here and subsequently are mainly very positive, Douglas also acknowledges that the adult writers and publishers of these books choose stories that will sell; she therefore rightly asks, "What narratives are we missing?" (p. 62).

What is missing in this context are more instances of children taking the lead; thus, the for-

midable strength of Douglas's book lies in chapters 3 and 4. By allowing the children to speak about the biographies they read, Douglas provides genuine insights into how children read and make sense of biographical books for their targeted age groups. Both chapters follow the same structure: they begin with a brief overview and discussion of a biographical book series (*Kids Who Did* and *Rebel Dogs*).^[4] Douglas then examines how children perceive meaning from these texts by discussing the results of her small pilot study of a children's book club. Eight nine-year-old children from a school in the Adelaide area took part, and their discussions of the representations of under-examined biographical figures are thought-provoking. The children understand and at times relate to the lives of the represented subjects due to socio-cultural and generational imbalances. In studies that are usually dominated by adult perspectives and interpretations, readers can see here that these nine-year-olds are mature enough to provide fully developed interpretations. In presenting their astute feedback on life narratives and demonstrating that they have awareness and agency, Douglas has treated these children and their insights with due respect, and this should pave the way for more child-centered examinations in this field.

At the end of these interconnected chapters, and considering biographies of dogs as well as all biographies for children in general, Douglas asks, "Who gets a biography and why?" (p. 98). Within this context of in/visible auto/biographical subjects and systems of inequality that lies at the heart of Douglas's examinations, she could have also asked, Who are biographies written for in the first place? This question would have addressed the point of the somewhat privileged children within the reading group who were allowed to take part in the study, as opposed to children in many other locations who do not have access to biographical books at home, schools, and libraries, for multiple problematic reasons.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 respectively focus on biographies about child refugees; drawings produced by child and youth asylum-seekers in a detention center; texts and drawings about their mothers, by primary school children in the Adelaide area; and diaries produced by children in the Adelaide area during the COVID-19 lockdown. In chapter 5, Douglas draws attention again to the contentious gatekeeping, decision-making, and editing by adults, which lead to inevitable omissions in children's literature (p. 103). Regarding omissions, by leaving out the insightful comments of the book club children that appear in the other four analytical chapters, Douglas misses the opportunity to further broaden the focus on how children read biographies. At the beginning of chapter 5, for example, she provides a *Goodreads* reader-review in order to illustrate the point that there are adult readers who find some books too upsetting to give to children (p. 103). She concludes this chapter by returning to this commentary, and it is not clear why the children of the pilot study were not asked for their opinions on this seemingly important issue. Unfortunately, we are given only a very brief comment by the author's daughter. For the activity in chapter 7, Douglas asked children (via their parents) to supply her with pictures they drew of their mothers and to comment on them, but it is not mentioned why only the adults attended interviews with the researcher to discuss the biographical texts. Finally, regarding pictures, Douglas provides many useful illustrations of the texts she analyzes, but some pictures were unaccountably not included. For example, in chapter 5, two picture books are analyzed, but only one illustration is shown. One can only speculate that this is due to the complex issue of image copyright permission; Douglas refers to this in chapter 6 when explaining why she could not supply pictures produced by children in a detention center for asylum-seekers.

Biographies for and by children is a fascinating and evolving subgenre of life-narrative studies. Accordingly, Douglas concludes her book with

a brief discussion of a recently published book about Indigenous histories, to prove her point that “subjects for children’s biography are ever expanding” (p. 191). The conclusion also provides suggestions for future research, including the timely need to expand studies to other geographical locations. I, too, hope that this book will encourage researchers to ask what we can learn from adopting a broader cultural and geographical perspective, and that it will promote a more diverse understanding of children’s life narratives.

To conclude, the chapters that reveal children’s interpretations of biographies break new ground. In respecting the views, actions, opinions, and auto/biographical practices of her own child and of other children in her local area, and in sharing these incisive insights with us, Douglas demonstrates that children have the power to deliver their own judgments in academic investigations of children’s literature. The monograph as a whole is of great value to scholars and students of children’s literature, childhood studies, and auto/biographical writing. Given the many biographical books about marginalized subjects and histories that Douglas mentions, I am confident that this will become an important resource for teachers and librarians, as well as for anyone interested in the variety of forms that life writing for and by children can take. The last word should go to Douglas’s daughter, who is mentioned throughout the book and who has produced the striking cover illustration. In what is presumably her first biographical text to be published academically, Darcy Spencer-Douglas informs us that her mother is “kind, great [at] cuddles, beautiful, smart, strong.” Her mother’s firstborn (of the new Bloomsbury Academic series) is just as strong, and it looks like this young set of books is growing into a thriving family of life-narrative studies.

Notes

[1]. Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas, eds., *Telling Tales: Autobiographies of Childhood and Youth* (London: Routledge, 2015); Kate Douglas

and Anna Poletti, *Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall, *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019); Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (London: Routledge, 2013); Emma Maguire, *Girls, Autobiography, Media: Gender and Self-Mediation in Digital Economies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and Ana Belén Martínez García, ed., *New Forms of Self-Narration: Young Women, Life Writing and Human Rights* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020).

[2]. Ann Donegan Johnson and Spencer Johnson, *ValueTales Series* (La Jolla, CA: Value Communications, Inc., 1976-98).

[3]. Isobel Lundie et al., *Women in Science Series* (New York: Franklin Watts, 2019).

[4]. Kirsty Murray, *Kids Who Did: Real Kids Who Ruled, Rebelled, Survived and Thrived* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2019); and Kimberlie Hamilton, *Rebel Dogs! Heroic Tales of Trusty Hounds* (New York: Scholastic Nonfiction, 2019).

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