"BLURBING" BIOGRAPHICAL: AUTHORSHIP AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Especially with the growth of new media, and amid the boom in representations of self and life in literature and popular culture, questions of authorship continue to be keenly debated. This interest in the ways artists and consumers are positioned in relation to knowledge and creativity has been spurred by the increased attention given to notions of artistic origins and narrative ownership, particularly in recent autobiographical discourse. There is significant work encompassing the effects of scholarly criticism upon the figure of the author. Despite its public visibility, however, book publicity, and its particular significance to discussions of authorship, is one issue that has remained mostly unexamined. Such an examination reveals an interesting contradiction. At a time when two, or perhaps even three generations of literary theorists have primarily been raised on the notion that the biography of the author is almost irrelevant to the text, in the contemporary world of book publication and marketing, the author has if anything become even more crucial to a book’s success.

Such disparities between academic and commercial literary reception have of course been well noted over the years. Eric Homberger and John Charmley assert that “everywhere in academic life the subtle, [and] the not-so-subtle denigration of biography grows apace,” as “influential voices tell us that the ‘author’ is dead, and that biographical study of a writer or artist is either irrelevant or not fully serious” (ix). Yet publishers and critics agree that, for better or worse, the production and popular consumption of life writing, and interest in the biographical details of contemporary authors, are experiencing a notable boom. As Hilary McPhee argues, “life-writing is now a profitable enterprise for publishers. The readership is growing all the time. First person narratives, especially those by 24-years-old footballers, sell much
better than novels" (4). There is little doubt that in the promotion of popular culture, "the personal" is profitable. Even in academic publishing, authors are increasingly being marketed by having prominent, professional photographs on their book jackets, or by making public appearances on talk shows, public panels, or conferences. As Paul John Eakin notes, it is very common for critics to be drawn into giving autobiographical accounts of their involvement in particular theoretical pursuits (xxiv). And one of the most frequently asked questions at writers festivals is to what extent fictional works are autobiographical. Thus, in an age when writers and writing are commonly categorized according to fiction or non-fiction, gender, culture, age, and so on, by transgressing other genres autobiography as a literary form is finding itself more often than not implicated within theoretical discussions and popular culture critiques of literature. The significance of autobiography has in fact been a subject of much debate among literary scholars in recent decades, and Philippe Lejeune's "Autobiographical Pact" offers one explanation of how and why readers respond to autobiographical writing. The autobiographical pact involves the textual assertion that the author, narrator, and protagonist are the same. In making this self-reference, the author enters into an agreement with readers that they will be reading about an actual person whose existence is legally verifiable (Lejeune 11).

The contemporary publishing industry is able to take this one step further by making public assertions that a text is autobiographical when publicizing it. Publicists and sellers of autobiographies agree that one of the keys to the successes of such texts is the connections they make between author and reader (see McPhee, Winters, and Gray). Autobiographies, according to popular discourse, offer insight into the lives of individuals (as community members). Their disclosures, interpretations, and records of experiences are thought to provide capital for readers to decipher their own life experiences. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson examine how life writing produces and reproduces discourses of community, arguing that "autobiographical narratives, their citation, and their recitation have historically been one means through which the imagined community . . . constitutes itself on a daily basis" (4). In the community that consumes autobiographical writing, how is the author positioned, and what are the implications of this positioning? One method for exploring the author construct and its impact upon readership is the initial point of introduction and consumption of the material autobiographical text: the book jacket. Book jackets provide the glue binding author and text together; they are the site where the author's biography meets with marketing and criticism. This is especially acute in autobiographies, where the constructed author is such an integral part of a book's reception.
BLURBS: SELLING THE AUTHOR

Book reviews are becoming ever more pervasive in terms of their occurrence, influence, and critical significance. For many contemporary literary releases, these reviews serve as the only critical material available in the early stages of release. Just as reviews are important to literary scholars, they have a significant function for the publishing industry in the marketing and selling of books. Book reviews, while still present in their literary-critical forms, are increasingly found in the popular press and on the web in shorter, more accessible formats. For example, on-line bookseller Amazon.com has a section for “customer comments”; readers are encouraged to write short reviews, which become part of the website's publicity for selling books. Richard Woodward, an essayist for the Village Voice Literary Supplement, suggests that Amazon.com's reviews reflect a move away from professional criticism towards reviews that can be more easily manipulated for the bookseller's gain (1).

Reviews are also being exported in shorter, snappier forms such as the “book jacket blurb.” The “publisher's blurb”—a descriptive paragraph telling readers what the book is about—is increasingly giving way on book jackets to a series of review quotes, usually by famous authors, or critics from well-respected periodicals. Such reviews are often solicited from a well-known author of the same genre primarily for inclusion on the book jacket (“solicited blurbs”). Alternatively, blurbs may be extracts from longer reviews published in journals (“review extract blurbs”). Most commonly, blurbs attest to the book's being somehow special, a “must read” worthy of purchase. Although Michael Bronski suggests that “most readers and buyers understand that blurbs are not reviews” (26), I contend that in the current literary climate, this is not correct. The majority of the blurbs I will discuss in this article are sections or phrases taken from longer reviews—because such blurbs are fast becoming the new form of book review, the most read and referenced piece of criticism on a new release. As Greg Johnson asserts, “every word [reviewers] write is read avidly by publicity department staff . . . ready to pounce on the magical phrase that will serve as a 'blurb' to be used in ads for the hardcover book, and in direct quotation on the cover of the eventual paperback” (104). Richard Woodward concurs:

from a publisher's point of view, reviews are mainly sales tools—long-winded jacket copy. The good ones are faxed or e-mailed to bookstores, wholesalers, and other reviewers; the bad ones filed away or julienned to extract a sliver of praise for the paperback. (1)
Since these blurbs are part of the book itself, they are perhaps the only reviews that are guaranteed to be read by the reader. This re-formatting of reviews to a shorter, more reader-friendly form has been followed by a noticeable prioritizing of what aspects of the book’s style or subjects are given the most attention by blurb-makers, and most importantly, by how much “blurb space” is given to providing information or speculation about the author of the book.

What effects are these contemporary review blurbs having upon the figure of the “writer as author,” particularly with regard to issues of authorial agency and intention? Clearly this is not a simple question. The possible effects of blurbs are broad and complex across genres, but also between different societies and cultures. Most importantly, they differ between review media. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a marked increase in interest in the various forms of life writing. Though as Susanna Egan notes, the fascination with the personal and private life of “great men” of the “social and cultural elite” dates back to the eighteenth century (“Changing Faces” 20), interest in various forms of life writing or life viewing has taken a variety of vibrant new forms in the past decade—most notably, reality television, talk-show confessions, personal web pages, celebrity auto/biographies, fictional diaries (such as Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary), and historical fictions in film and literature. Blurring biographical seems especially likely within a contemporary social context which values celebrity, and has in fact seen a recent boom in reality-television-produced celebrities (or celebrities manufactured from so-called “everyday people”). These celebrities are marketed as accessible and “knowable,” and this has become one of the catchphrases associated with the latest generation of autobiographers. “We are habitual authenticators of our own lives,” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, “Every day we are confessing and constructing personal narratives in every possible format: on the body, on the air, in music, in print, on video, at meetings” (2). Since consumers of contemporary culture are predisposed to interpreting situations in auto/biographical terms, marketing books by using a verifiable, authentic figure who has already entered into a contract with the reader and confined in them seems profitable.

What are the implications of this renewed interest in the biography of the writer? How are these autobiographical authors employed in the promotion of their texts through book jacket blurbs? What statements do these blurbs appear to make about authorial control and creativity? I will explore and contextualize these questions using three examples of contemporary autobiographical writings by British women: Andrea Ashworth’s Once in a House on Fire (1999 Picador ed.), Jenny Diski’s Skating to Antarctica (1998
Granta ed.), and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1996 Vintage ed.). All blurb quotations I will refer to can be found on the front, back, or inside covers of these particular editions of these autobiographical texts. All three texts adhere to Philippe LeJeune's definition of autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his/her own existence, where the focus is his/her individual life, in particular the story of his/her personality," in which "the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical," and "the narrator and the principal character are identical" (4). In the contemporary publishing climate, however, it is important to add a qualification to Lejeune's definition. The text's public reception as autobiography is also very important, as is the author's public persona as an authentic autobiographer, which is commonly confirmed by the author's public appearances and constructed public image—including the book jacket photo and the biographical blurb in the book. Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, for example, is often classified as "autobiographical fiction." Most critics and reviewers refer to its being an "autobiographical novel," and Winterson herself has acknowledged this in her introduction to the 1996 Vintage edition: "Is *Oranges* an autobiographical novel? No not at all and yes of course" (xiii). Though this blurring might seem to disqualify *Oranges* from the discussion, since my paper is principally interested in representations of authors of autobiographical texts, and indeed the promotion of authentic authors, Winterson proves a fascinating inclusion.

Gender of course is also a highly relevant issue in the commodification of autobiographical authors. In an age when celebrity authors and public appearances by authors are at an all time high, examining the marketing of female authors allows for a further contextualization of the impact of gender on marketing and blurbings. The marketing of female authors must always be considered in the light of contemporary images of women. Consider Kathryn Hughes's description of how

Andrea Ashworth . . . was quizzed on "This Morning" by an enraptured Richard Madeley about her love life . . . thirtyish, gorgeous—[she] can count on selling out any venue where [she] choose[s] to appear. Most first-time novelists, meanwhile, are lucky if their mothers turn up to hear them read at a provincial branch of Waterstone's.

Ashworth's attractiveness is identified as marketable, and it is her status as a female autobiographer who has already disclosed information about her personal life that allows questions about her love life to be considered fair territory. While Michele Roberts and Jane Tompkins have both explored how
the autobiographical form has been utilized by women to assert the value of traditionally private or personal concerns in the public domain (Roberts 8, Tompkins 1105), marketers and "blurbers" of female autobiographies have made this trend profitable by constructing women authors according to enduring myths of femininity: women as the honest and truthful gender, or women as more self-aware, emotionally attentive, generous, or saintly. Given the central concerns of this paper, however, I will only gesture towards the potential importance of such practices.

BLURBS AND THEORIES OF AUTHORSHIP

More generally, interest in authors' personal lives can also be read as indicative of popular culture's resistance to poststructuralist theories of the "death of the author." When theorists such as Roland Barthes discussed that "death," and W. K. Wimsatt argued "the intentional fallacy," this reflected the critical agenda of removing romantic notions of the human writer of a book—of the "author" as an independent or unique creative genius. Creative work is "detached from the author at birth," declares Wimsatt, and becomes part of public discourse (3–5). Also, as Thomas R. Smith notes, the widespread acceptance of "the unconscious" has challenged the notion that writers are in complete control of the work they produce (1). Yet despite the predominance of such views in the critical community, review culture remains insistent on venerating the individual writer as the author of the book. The figure, and the biography, of the single author are given priority consideration, and autobiography has compounded this practice further, for as a genre it solicits and promotes even deeper connections between an author's personal life and the written work produced. There is much evidence to suggest that it is the author-protagonist link that has made autobiographies so marketable in the blurb age. Consider the examples of Kathryn Harrison and Maria Flook. The subjects of Harrison's The Kiss (1997) and Flook's My Sister's Life (1998) had been largely covered in their earlier works of fiction, but only when these subjects appeared in non-fictional form did the writers experience media attention, highly image-conscious marketing, and controversial success.

Michel Foucault has written that "the author is . . . the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (159). The author becomes a way to confine the meaning of a text, an easy way to mark the meaning of works of literature. In relation to autobiography, Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" can be read as a guarantee that the author is the book. When this contract is supposedly violated—consider
the Wilkomirski or Menchú controversies—the author may not only be branded a liar, but perhaps more seriously, be accused of false advertising. Barthes suggests that "historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic." Significantly, Barthes goes on to explain that the critic has much to gain from elucidating a work in terms of its author: "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Once the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic" (147). Those who now resurrect authors have found similarly specific and empowering functions for them: to sell books, to manipulate the economic power of the celebrity product, and to strengthen the social importance of the arts community and its cultural capital. Authors are useful to consumer culture.

Yet further to this, the author has an important and optimistic ideological function for contemporary cultural production. In response to the threat posed by postmodernists, the author becomes symbolic of the existence of individual, autonomous creativity. Lorna Sage rightly suggests that the author appears prominently on the surface of contemporary literary culture: readings, book signings, writers festivals, and interviews, all of which position writers prominently in the public eye and in public discourse (267). Author profiles are commonly preferred over book reviews or extracts for promoting books. All of these strategies ultimately profit the industry rather than the art. Authors are constructed as the centerpiece of a widely ranging literary system over which they may exert little actual control. Just as theorists proclaimed the death of the author to ensure the life of the reader, so too are reviewers, commonly writers themselves, resurrecting the author, perhaps to ensure their own survival.

**BLURBS AND BIOGRAPHICAL READINGS**

Author resurrection is perhaps best achieved through renewing the connection between biographical details and authorial control over the text. And yet, even in autobiographical writing, using a biographical reading can create interesting dilemmas for literary interpretation. Arguably the texts I discuss in this paper invite such a reading simply because they are each autobiographies: *Once in a House on Fire, Skating to Antarctica*, and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* are each written in first person past tense, and their narrators have the same names as their authors. Blurbs of contemporary autobiographies make especially good use of this "autobiographical pact," constructing the author's biographical details as essential to the reading, and effectively marginalizing other readings—a practice also common to reading
fictional texts where the biography of the author is well known. As Alan Collett observes, the “non-fictionality” of a text can often cloud the features of a text that would confer “literary status” upon it (351). Such clouding is even more pronounced in autobiography, where the biographical details dominate the form, style, plot, and characterizations of each text. In short, the more attention that is given to the text’s non-fictional characteristics, the less attention that is presumably given to its “art.” This complex issue cannot be fully explored within this paper. What needs to be noted is that since autobiographical texts often contain photographs on the cover, biographical details on the inside cover, and personal references throughout the text itself, an author’s biography is easily recognizable and accessible literary evidence. Biographical details are used in blurbs to provide information about the autobiography for sale. These details are taken to offer a measurable and plausible interpretation of a literary work, often presented as a corrective to popular perceptions of the extravagant and imprudent liberties often taken by scholarly critics. Offering the neat illusion of containment, biographical readings become interpretative “weapons” that popular culture wields against “high” culture, as quick-fix blurbs, which so often presume to inform the reader more about the writer than the work, conveniently affirm the notion that the significance of a work best (and most easily for marketing purposes) emerges through such a briefly constructed human writer.

So what are some examples of biographical readings in the blurbs of the three books in this study? As presented through book covers, interviews, and reviews, the autobiographies are commonly packaged, in the contexts of the writers’ present and acknowledged lives, as particularly prodigious work. Similar to blurbs on Andrea Ashworth’s book, the jacket blurbs of Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit seem preoccupied with her status as a “young” writer; I use the signifier “young” to describe blurbs which refer either to Winterson’s age or to her lack of prior publications. John Bayley refers to Winterson’s “promise,” a term commonly used to endorse and encourage writers early in their careers. Gore Vidal’s blurb, the only review quotation appearing on the front cover of this edition of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, also refers to Winterson’s talents rather than the book itself. “The most interesting young writer I have read in twenty years,” writes Vidal. But the Evening Standard review on the inside cover unexpectedly extols this “young” writer by noting that “Many consider her to be the best living writer in this language.” In fact, all four jacket blurbs confine their praise to the writer, with none referring specifically to the work itself, suggesting that these quotations do not come from reviews of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit at all, nor that they are designed to be used exclusively for promoting that
novel. This is confirmed by John Bayley’s blurb on the inside cover. “Even at a time when so many good and interesting novels are coming out, hers stand out,” writes Bayley, with the final phrase revealing both that he is basing his judgment on having read more than one of Winterson’s novels, and that his blurb could not have been written at the time of the book’s initial release, since *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* was Winterson’s first novel. Clearly, here the writer is being marketed, rather than the book: an established writer’s name is now being used to sell a new edition of her earliest work.¹⁶

In a similar vein, the *Observer Review*’s book jacket blurb for Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica* suggests that “there are not many novelists like Jenny Diski.” As with Winterson, the known author is used in blurbs to promote product identification and loyalty, both very important for book selling. Interestingly though, “new” authors such as Andrea Ashworth can also prove useful for marketers. As in advertising for other products, book reviews tend to announce simultaneously that there is something new from an old source, something new that will remind you of something you already like, or something new from a totally new and interesting source.¹⁷ Thus when blurbs appear to be praising the writer as author, it is worth considering the marketing agendas at work, and what the function of the author is in these strategies. To put this in marketing terms, the publisher is attempting to shape your answer to the question, “What do you, as the reader, want the author to be?”

**AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: OBJECTIVE, OBSERVANT VOICE OR CREATIVE ARTICULATION?**

Blurbs commonly emphasize and praise the realism of autobiographical texts. But if autobiographical writing is mere observation and recollection, then perhaps the author is dead? As Michele Roberts notes, autobiography has traditionally been considered an inferior writing craft to fiction (5). And yet, as previously discussed, marketers have found it profitable to assert contradictions—that a product is both new and familiar, for instance. So review blurbs alternate between representing autobiographers as creative geniuses or observant recorders, commonly allowing these assessments to merge, contradict, and even somehow sustain each other. Paul John Eakin argues that thanks to “the poststructuralist critique of the concept of the self,” this is one way in which literary autobiography has separated itself from other forms such as biography and history: “in this last twenty years, the pervasive initiative has been to establish autobiography as an imaginative art, with special
emphasis on fiction” (qtd. in Herman, “Autobiography” 353). In other words, autobiography may not only be closer in form to fiction than to biography, but there may also be less expectation of truth and greater valuing of artistry, at least in some critical circles. In the case of Winterson’s and Diski’s writing, for example, in the current climate there seems ample opportunity for an autobiography to be more than just an autobiography and yet not be expelled from the autobiography genre by marketers and critics. Lejeune’s claim that “autobiography does not include degrees: it is all or nothing” (13) apparently does not apply within the world of contemporary publishing.

This apparent flexibility of styles and forms makes autobiography and autobiographers ideal “products.” In this spirit, the blurbs for Skating to Antarctica, Once in a House on Fire, and Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit can contain fiction descriptors signifying authorial intention, agency, creativity, and writer ownership, yet also present the autobiographer as an authentic observer, like the author of a biography or some other form of non-fictional writing.

In any case, unlike critical works that disavow authorial responsibility, reviews and blurbs are commonly concerned with proclaiming agency and offering commendation wherever it appears to be due. Given our democratic, meritocratic, work-ethic-ridden social norms, attributing a work to an author would seem to be desirable, and within the blurb such identifications make for rather quick ideological or value fixes.

Many reviewers share this impulse. In his article on the idea of voice in book reviewing, Peter La Salle cites the ideas of author and reviewer John Updike, who suggests that reviewers should “try to understand what the author wished to do” (169). Containing many examples of crediting the authors with creativity, the blurbs for our three books seem to conform to this writer-intention interpretation. Muriel Spark’s Vanity Fair review pronounces Jeanette Winterson to be “a fresh voice with a mind behind it”—the “fresh voice” suggesting originality, and the reference to Winterson’s “mind behind it” signifying individual, creative agency. This “is just what we need now in the literature of the English language and certainly Jeanette Winterson provides it.” Spark continues, going on to describe her as “a master of her material; a writer in whom great talent abides.” The phrase “master of her material” strongly suggests an artist in control of her work, while the reference to “talent” establishes Winterson as a unique creator within the context of “literature of the English language.” Just when it seemed that the notion of “originality” was out of style, John Bayley similarly writes that Winterson has “real originality and extraordinary promise.” Where Spark’s review implies originality, Bayley’s uses the word explicitly. As for the Evening Standard, it declares that “In her hands, words are fluid, radiant,
humming.“ The word “hands” overtly connotes skilful control, and the descriptors “fluid, radiant, humming” have entirely positive connotations, suggesting that it is not contexts, languages, intertexts, and stylistic traditions, but Winterson, the specific writer-author, who gives the words their power.

These blurbs grant significant weight to the author’s ability to manipulate the narrative to create such literary effects as topical references, disclosure, and reader engagement. The book jacket blurbs for Andrea Ashworth’s *Once in a House on Fire* credit her with utilizing creative new literary forms. “Ashworth has a rare capacity to describe,” Susanna Rustin writes, while Melissa Behn suggests that “Ashworth has the poet’s power to make language, and therefore experience seem new,” and the *Kirkus Review* describes the book as “stylistically fresh.” Similarly, Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica* is “brilliantly written” according to Harry Ritchie of the *Mail on Sunday*, while the *Times Literary Supplement* describes the book as “confession with its wit about it,” and the *Independent on Sunday* describes the memoir as “original.” Giving little reference to other formative factors, against notions of the autonomous literary object, these blurbs suggest that the writer is the author, the producer of the work, the autonomous literary subject.

And yet, alongside these review blurbs that praise the author’s creative originality, other blurbs suggest the opposite. For autobiographers are also held responsible for recording authentic experience, rather than for creating it, for being in effect social biographers as well as autobiographers. Such representations parallel in certain ways Leon Edel’s description of a biographer’s task: “a writer of lives is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact” (13). When Margaret Driscoll describes *Once in a House on Fire* as rich in “vivid detail of everyday life,” or Julia Thorogood praises Ashworth’s work as “observant and precise,” or Marina Benjamin writes that “the past comes across as recollected rather than reprocessed, assimilated not analysed,” then they are downplaying notions of originality to praise the author for merely responding accurately to the stimulants, prompts, and traditions of the social and literary worlds she inhabits. They imply that the author is (and should be) recalling events objectively, again suggesting the biographer’s tasks as outlined by Leon Edel: “lives are composed in most instances as if they were mosaics. Mosaics, before they are composed, are not fiction; they are an accumulation of little pieces of reality, shaped into an image” (16). Sometimes these pieces are elements of the author’s community. Thus when the *Lancashire Evening Post* blurb describes *Once in a House on Fire* as distinguished by “never-say-die Northern humour,” it suggests that Ashworth’s representation of reality is unconsciously endowed with archetypal or communal meanings and attitudes.
Comparing the review blurbs of the three autobiographical texts suggests that while Winterson is credited with creative, imaginative work, Ashworth is promoted almost equally as a creator and observer. Two possible explanations are that as a first time author Ashworth does not have the product identification value of a Winterson or Diski, or that Ashworth’s book is more overtly realist-autobiographical—the impression of her book “taking from life” is overpowering—than Winterson’s interspersed fictional fantasy elements in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. That Winterson’s autobiography is categorized as autobiographical fiction gives her book (and its promoters) a “best of both worlds” marketing opportunity. While gaining the critical kudos of fiction (and eligibility for literary fiction prizes), it also can enjoy the popular successes of autobiography. Such postmodern, transgeneric texts are very much in vogue.

How is Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica* “blurbed” with regard to issues of creativity and authenticity? Though she too is praised for creative merit, she is also credited with the skills of “assembly.” Like Winterson’s, Diski’s work belongs to more than one genre. The *Observer* reviewer describes *Skating to Antarctica* as “part traveller’s tale, part autobiography”; the text “tells the story of a trip to Antarctica, interwoven with reminiscences of her dysfunctional family and her daughter’s quest.” Writing for the *Independent on Sunday*, Elspeth Barker explains that “this strange and brilliant book recounts Jenny Diski’s journey to Antarctica last year, intercut with another journey.” Barker also calls *Skating* “a book of dazzling variety,” and Michele Roberts, writing for *The Times*, agrees: “Diski puts all her novelistic skills at the service of discovering and arranging autobiographical truth.” Here again, blurbs attest to the usefulness for popular criticism of the multidimensional author and text. Diski and Winterson can be marketed as autobiographers or fiction writers, travel writers or fantasy authors, as the situation demands.

Another part of celebrity author-building is the common portrayal in reviews of the autobiographical author—and the author of childhood autobiography especially—as an almost saintly figure. This is perhaps the least complex view of authorship: the great, wise, and almost infallible writer, which is likely an effect of autobiographical and biographical traditions in which “few ‘ordinary’ lives are written” (Edel 14). Although the autobiographical form has opened significantly to allow a diversity of subjects and lives to be represented, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have shown the ways in which the time-honored revering of authors as saints is (re)occurring as part of the consumption of contemporary autobiography: “personal histories—in all their varieties—serve as individualized testimonies to getting a ‘successful’ life together (however success is defined) and/or to the failure of
self-remaking in terms of the dream” (6). Such representations serve consumer strategists well, since such autobiographies can be marketed as “must read” texts—gifts from generous, self-actualized authors. Inside the cover of Once in a House on Fire, Peter Stanford writes of Andrea Ashworth “I am in full admiration of her courage and endurance,” while Hilary Mantel describes the book as “strong and admirable.” By describing Ashworth as a “role-model without parallel,” Margaret Forster suggests how the worth of the human author becomes an important tool for selling the book—and hardship and suffering often endow this worth. “Andrea Ashworth escaped the fire to write a remarkable book,” Blake Morrison writes, and the review from The Scotsman regrets that “the only pity is that she had to live it to make it.” Similarly, in the blurbs for Skating to Antarctica, Jenny Diski is referred to by Helen Dunmore as having a “strong interest in survival.” As is common, Diski is also praised for her advanced capacity for self-awareness—her work is filled with “insight” (Independent on Sunday)—as she embarks on a “journey into her own heart and soul” (Elspeth Barker, Independent on Sunday), on “an inner journey from darkness to light” (Daily Telegraph), on “a voyage of self-discovery” (Good Housekeeping). The most interesting point to make here again relates to the marketability of a veritable, accomplished, autobiographical author, who in such blurbs becomes a proven and authentic social commentator with a morally correct message for the reader. As Smith and Watson note, this is one way in which consumerist discourses are circulated:

in telling their stories, [autobiographical] narrators take models of identity that are culturally available. And by adopting ready-made narrative templates to structure experiential history, they take up culturally designated subjectivities. Their recitations of personal narrative thereby attest to and verify their participation in corporate culture. (9)

Just as there are limited narrative templates for autobiography in mainstream publishing, we can conclude that there are limited narratives for blurbing.

In their blurbs, as well as in their autobiographies, however, authors are particularly valued and held accountable for the authenticity of their work. In short, autobiographers are commonly praised by reviewers for telling the truth. Writing for the Literary Review, Maggie Gee credits Jenny Diski with creating a wonderful fairy story, but follows this comment with the remark that “even better, it’s a true story. . . . I savoured her clarity, the clipped, astringent truthfulness of her prose.” Of Once in a House on Fire, Margaret Forster writes that
the material Andrea Ashworth had to work with is so explosively awful and sad she had only one option—to tell it as it was, as quietly as possible. This she does, chronologically, recalling her upbringing in short bursts, and ... [with] admirable restraint.

Forster suggests here that the revelations and disclosures in Once in a House on Fire are subtly and artfully structured by the author to protect somehow both author and reader from the horrors of the material—an idea common to reviews. And yet there is more at work than simple authorial benevolence. Subtle revelation, and in particular the use of a naïve child narrator, positions the reader in some ways “above” the narrator, and therefore alongside the author. In this way, the author is able to connect with the reader, perhaps even gaining the fruits of critical readership and interpretation, while maintaining the position as named author. Instead of interpreting the first person narrator “I” as the reader, readers of autobiographical writings attribute this “I” to the author, whose artistic presence is so strong. This form of comprehension again relates to certain established literary traditions involving the ways in which readers are conditioned to read. As an author “makes us read” a text, Georges Poulet remarks, the author “awakens in us the analogue of what . . . [he or she] thought or felt. To understand a literary work, then, is to let the individual who wrote it reveal himself to us in us” (61). Contemporary authors of autobiography therefore owe a significant part of their authorial authority to the readers of their work, and to the particular reciprocity a written work elicits between writer and reader. In autobiography, this connection is largely due to the constructed accessibility of the autobiographical author. Unlike the “great figures” of biography, lofty academics, or mysterious writers of fiction, the present breed of literary autobiographers are commonly constructed as “everyday people” with notable achievements.

CONCLUSION

Though no great theoretical movement has challenged the rise of the autonomous postmodern text, as an engaging human figure who is socially observant and uniquely creative, the author is apparently still crucial to the success of contemporary literary production. At a time when “reality” in all of its forms and illusions is very marketable, the author figure has been resurrected by publishing industries able to exploit it. Publicists use biographical details of the author—as revealed within the autobiography and drawn from the author’s public persona—to create blurbs and publicity which in turn create a biographical frame through which the literary text will primarily be
read. The revival of the author in this case has been facilitated by the autobiographical form itself, which like biography, documentary, or fly-on-the-wall television, professes to allow a unique glimpse into the life of someone notable that will tell readers/viewers something valuable about their own lives. In this way, autobiography, which encourages the consumption of “authorized and authenticated lives” (Smith and Watson 3), seems to play directly into the consumerist agendas of the literary industry.

By suggesting that the author is at once a unique creator and an observant social commentator, blurbs embrace and exploit this apparent contradiction. Indeed, consumerist values assert that authors can and should be whomever the reader wants them to be, and whomever the market demands. Such strategies encourage an author/reader relationship which connects strongly with popular culture’s gestures towards interactive entertainment. Blurbs illuminate the importance of readership to the appearance of authorship; or more specifically, blurbs show us how the author is constructed through the reader. In blurring, the notion of “author” is not only manipulated to suit certain critical, ideological, and economic agendas, but perhaps most notably, the survival of this notion profits the web of stakeholders involved in the production and promotion of autobiography—critics and readers, both professional and recreational, as well as the writers themselves. If “the personal” continues to be profitable, biography will continue to permeate through cultural production, influencing reception in ways not anticipated by those who pronounced “the death of the author.”

NOTES

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1. Eakin is referring here particularly to autobiographical critics, but such personal explanations are also common to theorists of gender, sexuality, race, and culture.

2. This phenomenon further indicates the importance of biography in book promotion. In this instance, the reader’s personal revelations become important tools for marketing. Such disclosures are especially valuable when connected with the author’s biographical details, whether disclosed within the text or speculated upon in the reader’s comments.

3. The term “blurb” was coined in 1907 by the humorist Gellet Burgess, who defined it as a “flamboyant advertisement; an inspired testimonial; fulsome praise” (Jackson 57).

4. As I have previously mentioned, in the absence of a “publisher’s blurb,” the “review blurb” functions as the only available information “about” a book, and is likely to be read by bookstore patrons as well as those who will eventually read the book itself.
5. See articles in the review press by Michelle Adelman et al, Jonathan Bing, Paul Gray, David Herman, and Malcolm Jones, as well as the scholarly work of Susanna Egan, Robert Folkenflik, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and Julia Swindells.

6. Ashworth's text is an autobiography by a new writer. Diski's *Skating to Antarctica* is a new autobiographical work by an established writer, and Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, originally published in 1985 by Pantheon Books, is the reissued first work by a now established author. In the hope of uncovering the effects of context and intertextuality on the practice of blurbing, I have thus chosen three texts that, while vastly different in content and style, have been widely accepted as autobiographical texts written by British women. I will take up the issue of Winterson's autobiography as a "novel" in the essay.

7. For example Pamela Petro, Rebecca O'Rourke, Helena Grice and Tim Woods, Tess Cosselett, Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, Hilary Hinds, Laura Doan, and Ann Hornaday.

8. See Gray for the rise of celebrity autobiographical authors such as Frank McCourt and Kathryn Harrison (106). Sherman describes the current publishing period as the "golden-age of author tours," and bookseller Margaret Maupin suggests that the presence of an author at a book signing can mean thousands more books sold (qtd. in Symons 30).

9. Consider Adam Begley and Stephen Moss's comment: "beware a woman scorned—especially if she is clutching a publishing contract."

10. In Wimsatt's words, the "design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable" to critics or readers of written works (3–5).

11. Barthes warned against extreme critical prioritization of authorial intention, arguing that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146). Though the current status of authorship is not suffering from the extreme authorial status that concerned Barthes, allowances for authorial intention and biography alongside a variety of other influences may be a reason for the (perhaps subtle) re-emergence of the author.

12. It is worth noting that this issue almost never surfaces with biographies, which are rarely marketed as the work of a particular author. Only when some question about truth or method arises does the biographer tend to become a media issue.

13. The fact that in these cases it was female authors who found success in the autobiographical form after they failed in fiction adds further weight to the argument that contemporary autobiography is considered a more likely form for expressing women's experience.

14. As Steve Sherman notes, "The number of available celebrity authors, well-known literary writers and up-and-coming names continues to grow along with bookseller interest in sponsoring store readings. 'The chains are now demanding equal access to what had been the territory of the independents,' said Maureen Donnelly, director of publicity at Penguin. Random House publicity director Mary Beth Roache added, 'Definitely, stores are requesting more and more authors, and occasionally we've added cities to tours for stores that have good track records.' Little, Brown publicity director Beth
Davey also finds that the number of author tours “is growing, so we have to be more organized in approaching bookstores far enough in advance.” Lead time often stretches to seven months or more. At Barnes & Noble . . . several hundred events a month are booked across the country” (26).

15. Two blurbs for Ashworth’s autobiography praise it for being “like a novel,” which at least in some literary quarters is higher praise than referring to it as a quality autobiography.

16. One possible analogy here would be film publicity, which frequently markets products as the new Julia Roberts or Tom Cruise film. Individual films, books, CDs, and paintings are commonly subordinated to the sense of a celebrity career curve.

17. Consider the book jacket blurbs for The Long Way Home: The Story of a Homes Kid (2001), the well-received Australian autobiography of childhood by first time author Kate Shayler. Her work is described simultaneously as offering something new—insights into the “great silence” surrounding institutionalized children—but also something familiar—she is referred to as “Australia’s own Frank McCourt.” Similarly Ashworth’s Once in a House on Fire is described as “new” and “extraordinary,” while being likened to Andrew O’Hagan’s controversial autobiography The Missing (1995), and even to D. H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers.

18. “Your memoir is marketable,” suggests Tristin Rainer, founder of the Center for Autobiographic Studies in Pasadena, California, “if it provides a glimpse into a unique world, reflects the social issues of a larger group or is just great writing” (qtd. in Winters 100D). This suggests formulaic marketing at work, rather than formulaic autobiographical writing, as some critics have suggested.

19. Homberger and Charmley suggest that there is indeed pressure on other life-writing genres such as biography to move in this direction: “It may be a matter of time before biography, loosened from its roots in fact and document and ‘truth,’ and bolstered by techniques of fiction, makes its appearance. Will such books be biographies in the traditional sense?” (xv).

20. This obviously suggests that the agendas of reviews and scholarly criticism differ. Blurbs are linked more closely to consumerism, and specifically to notions of production and consumption. While criticism is driven by a theoretical agenda, and reviews, to a lesser extent, are also driven by literary ideologies, blurbs are predominantly powered by economic strategies, though perhaps hidden within signifiers that appear to be ideological. Blurbs of autobiographies, for example, seem to promote in an almost literal sense the idea of purchasing a pre-packaged “life” to consume. Readers are encouraged to “connect” or empathize with the life of an individual, and thus find some kind of interest, intrigue, or inspiration. “Modern consumerism,” Robert Bocock suggests, “depends upon its specific set of values becoming acceptable and comprehensible among sufficient groups of people so that sales of consumer products can be made. These consumption-oriented values have to include those which either allow, or actively encourage, the purchase of the goods and experiences on offer” (54). Blurbs perpetuate such practices.

21. Such a tendency can be traced back to earlier critical periods. With reference to nineteenth-century literature, Tomasevskij writes that “we suffered through a period when the writer was necessarily considered a ‘good person’” (53), and Foucault argues that
“modern criticism uses methods similar to those that Christian exegesis employed when trying to prove the value of a text by its author’s saintliness” (150). The tendency to use an author’s apparent “goodness” for publicity or critical ends is therefore not a new phenomenon. I am suggesting that this tendency has a distinct relevance to understanding the success of autobiographies in terms of their authorship.

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