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Changing Social Conditions—Changing Auto/Biography

The Year in Denmark

Marianne Høyen

The kind invitation to write an essay on recent life writing in Denmark gave rise to two lines of reflection: first, the question of biographies as a genre, and second, what would be significant in a specifically Danish context. Working academically with auto/biographical texts as well as teaching students the use of narrative material, I have witnessed a change in the genre over the years. Previously, both comprehensive biographies and more partial accounts of peoples' lives customarily aimed at understanding issues of a more general kind: for example, the development of a profession (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame), or the consequences of increasing state intervention in society's institutions (Goodson and Hargreaves). Today, auto/biographical material seems to aim for a perspective on the individual life, leaving the reader to make possible connections outside that life, rather than endeavoring to capture significant general trends in society.

Denmark is a small country of 5.5 million inhabitants. Despite numerous political parties ranging from very right-wing to very left-wing, the vast majority of political contenders voice a social democratic desire for a welfare society with high tax rates, free education, a comprehensive health care system, and wide-reaching social services. As in many other European countries the population is ageing. Until the 1950s Danish society was mainly agrarian, but as in most European countries, the labor market has changed under the influence of globalization. The younger generation aims for university degrees or seeks to work within media and cultural spheres, even though politicians try to persuade students that natural science and technology are much better choices. Consequently, workers from former Eastern bloc countries fill the gaps in industry, and jobs within traditional domestic fields are taken up by migrants. These changes are visible in Danish biographies published in 2018. As we shall see, migrants, people writing after retirement, and media personalities are among the active authors of biographies.

Framing Danish Auto/Biography

My perspective on life writing takes a sociological starting point, which, following Darnton, focuses on book production that encompasses several actors: authors, publishers, printers, book shops, libraries, and readers. I want to see if and how society's general development is mirrored in the production of auto/biography. To start, I searched the public library system using the keyword "biography" to find 841 book entries for 2018. This is a significant number considering the view commonly held in publishing and bookselling circles that "so few people are reading." Statistics show that books about "personal history" (autobiography and memoir are not counted separately) have increased by 81 percent from 2007 to 2018 (Danmarks Statistik). How can we interpret this growth in production within a shrinking market as the number of readers drops? Do the changes in Danish society described above play a role in understanding the publication of auto/biography in 2018?

As a foundation for addressing these questions, I repeatedly read the material enabling me to identify, apply, scrutinize, and modify how I could categorize the biographies. This was a bottom-up process that enabled successive refinement until a satisfying result for further analysis was reached; I found the categories of publisher, producers/authors, and content suitable as themes for further analysis and as a structure for my discussion of the specificities of Danish biographies appearing in 2018.

The Publishers

Publishing in Denmark has since the 1990s been characterized by concentration and contraction (Hertel). Concentration describes the way that the production of books is managed by fewer but bigger actors, and contraction describes the shrinking number of readers, libraries, and book shops. Over-concentration led to an upsurge in small and independent publishers: by 2016, 89 percent of the publishing bodies produced 10 or fewer titles per year. But we also need to consider where the biographies are being published. In the same year, 62 percent of the biographies were published either by large publishing houses (comprising four publishers and their imprints, with a yearly turnover above 30 million DKK, and including 40 percent of the market for sold books) or by small publishers (comprising a multiplicity of publishers/individuals, none of whom had published more than 10 books per year, covering 38 percent of the market). Academic, educational, or mid-range publishers accounted for the remainder.

The Authors

The scholarly biographer writing in Danish is found infrequently in 2018. More commonly, we find the communication-oriented academic popularizing a scholarly work: either an "easy reader" with simplified language for young students and

school libraries, or a more general text aimed at a broader audience, embellished with pictures and catchy headlines. Probably due to increasing “bestseller-ism” (Handesten), these (quasi)academic biographies predominantly sit in the domain of the large publishers who have the capacity to handle the marketing and distribution requirements of such books (and authors). It is the small publishers who support the ordinary first-time author, someone who in retirement now has the chance to write a book. Often that book has a personalized focus: an autobiography or memoir, an account of an older generation of the family, or a biography of someone they have long been interested in but only now are able to write about. It is not uncommon for the small publishers to be authors themselves. Additionally, another type of author seems to be evolving: one who is keen to set up a brand for him- or herself. YouTubers, young politicians, start-up entrepreneurs, and even artists write about themselves or use a ghost writer to write about their lives. These biographies are limited in scope, with the author’s youth prescribing the timescale, and the desire to ensure a polished brand foregrounding the media-friendly areas of the individual life. Like literature more generally, these biographies are seen as part of an event culture (Thykier)—something that appears rapidly, sparkles and disappears in the same moment. Some of the ghost writers behind these books are very productive, as authors of many books successively.

The Content

Initially, I classified the books according to biographical genre finding three distinct groups of Danish biography in 2018: *historical*, the author writes about a person from the past, or a person who witnessed past events; *contemporary*, the author writes about another but more modern person; and *personal*, the author writes about aspects of his/her own life. We can now usefully consider the content of these auto/biographical texts in relation to the two main types of publisher and the diversity of producers and authors.

Across all three groups the most popular theme in 2018 was “overcoming”: the protagonist’s story about dealing with obstacles or disadvantages, told by him- or herself, a relative, or another author. In different ways, all these stories depict the protagonist’s escape from an unfortunate situation to achieve a much better life. Some of these situations are self-imposed, such as a criminal career or being a workaholic. Others are imposed by illness, the loss of a loved one, or by social forces such as the women’s liberation movement. A very popular theme is the country boy’s journey from a remote hamlet to a successful career as the boss of a huge company or in a prestigious professional or academic post. Both large and small publishers send large numbers of biographies with this theme into the market.

A closer look, however, reveals certain types of auto/biography that emanate from the small publishers: individual life stories about belonging to a particular place or making a life-changing journey. Often these accounts of an entire life evoke a sense of a place that today is vanishing even though it still exists: a place where

once a family lived and thrived is now a place to spend leisure time and the summer holidays. The tone of these biographies suggests that “this story should be told before I die.” Another recurring theme is “the difficult life” of an addict, of a victim of violence, or of someone who lived through some other challenging situation. These texts offer very personal stories written from a highly subjective perspective and are often marketed as self-help books, for personal or professional use. Among these publications from small presses we also find memoirs of particular professions in which authors recount their careers, as, for example, a travelling actor (Kjørulff-Schmidt), a schoolteacher (Jespersen), or a community police officer (Haurvig and Simoni). In some cases, these memoirs of work chart transformations in Danish social institutions such as the school system and law enforcement.

In contrast, the large publishers issue biographies of significant public figures such as prominent artists or politicians. Although not academic in the traditional sense, these biographies are well-researched and crafted by professional writers who use emplotment and dramaturgy to achieve a well-told story. Another variation is one in which the protagonist, typically a politician or an athlete, describes recent events to an author who also follows that event—for example, a general election or a sport season. This kind of auto/ biography offers close-up perspectives on a situation that is generally known by the public but not in detail. Such stories are often retrospective, adding privileged information or challenging the official narrative.

Three Examples from 2018

Three examples of contemporary Danish life writing illustrate the categories I have set out. In the first, *Rødde: en gangsters udvej*, reformed gang leader Nedim Yasar tells his story to a journalist, Marie Toksvig, in an “overcoming” tale with a twist. Yasar describes an unhappy childhood in the care of a lovely mother and criminal father. His story is one of a law-breaking teenager who challenged the educational and social reform systems to the full, justifying the title “Rødde,” which translates as both “roots” and “tough guys,” to achieve his life goal of becoming a king in his own kingdom. His story provides insights into gang warfare, drug-dealing, and the operations of the criminal world from both inside and outside prison. But it also describes a double life as he chooses girlfriends from ordinary Danish families, with one of whom he has a child. Perhaps because of his son, Yasar chooses to leave his life of crime. He enters a seven-year exit program that enables him to gain the qualifications to become a social educator, working to turn others away from the path he had trodden, and “fame” as a host on an elite Copenhagen-based radio station. However, on the day the book was launched, he was fatally shot, presumably by former rivals. Thus, his story challenges the simple “overcoming” biography showing that a personal commitment may not be enough. This may be categorized as a contemporary account of a “newsworthy” person on a popular theme written in association with a professional writer for a large publisher.

The second example, *Heinz i Hitlers Luftwaffe*, was penned by Susanne Kragh, a former civil servant in the Danish national registration office, writing after retirement. This is a biography based on the personal accounts of Heinz Wiesenhöfer, a German soldier during World War II who had fallen in love with a young Danish woman but was unable to marry her. Heinz was a prolific diarist, keeping accounts of his childhood, his schooldays, and his time as a soldier in Hitler's Luftwaffe. Kragh met Heinz in 2008, when he turned up at her workplace asking for help to find the woman he had been in love with sixty-four years earlier. She managed to trace this woman, and the couple met again when both were in their late eighties, but the story that Kragh tells is far more than a romance. Heinz's accounts record the lived experience of being a German soldier in WWII, of being a war prisoner in the Netherlands, and of being a native of a defeated nation trying to earn a living in postwar Germany. The biography was first offered for publication in the 1990s in Germany but was turned down (Jensen). Kragh worked with the material for a decade and it was eventually accepted for publication in Denmark in 2018, deemed suitable for dissemination in a different country and culture. Yet it remains an authentic biography, as it is based on the accounts of the person who lived the life described. By category, this is a historical account on a niche theme written by a retired person who felt the story should be told and published by a small press.

My third example is a memoir by a young YouTuber, Boris Laursen. Laursen has celebrity status, having participated in a number of reality shows such as *Paradise Hotel* and *Robinson*, and possibly for that reason his book, *Gentleman*, was published by a large firm. Laursen describes his transformation "from fuckboy to gentleman." (The words "fuckboy" and "gentleman" suggest the degree to which Danish has absorbed English vocabulary). Laursen's memoir offers the reader his "deepest" thoughts, constructed as twenty things we did not know about him and presented as responses to followers' questions on Instagram and Facebook. It covers topics like how to be a gentleman (in his self-made understanding of the term) and how to deal with appearance and "look," but also it includes short accounts from his normal but mildly troubled childhood, his struggle with asthma, friendships in school, what he remembers as his parents' wise words, trips to Hollywood, why he returned to Denmark, and his relationships with girls. *Gentleman* may at first appear superficial, but its themes and informal, conversational language appear to appeal to young people who hold similar ambitions. Some Danes view YouTube, reality shows, and celebrity culture as decidedly lowbrow, but engaging with these media may also offer a contemporary means of achieving *bildung* through self-reflection and considerations of humanity and the meaning of life. As Laursen's postings were initially made synchronically as events actually happened, the process of composing *Gentleman* resembles Heinz's, of writing by hand many years before. Laursen's memoir falls into the category of a personal account sculpted for an established audience by a newsworthy author and published by a large press.

Conclusion

Considered together, the three examples raise some interesting questions about the relationship between the “writer” and the “narrator” of auto/biographical texts. In Yasar’s *Rodder* we clearly see the role of the professional co-author, Marie Toksvig, and it may be that Kragh’s crafting of Heinz’s narrative accounts for some of the “added value” that made it publishable. It is hard to say, as the passage of time and the different national context will also have played roles in making his story “tellable.” Laursen is credited as the author of *Gentleman*, but in practice his thoughts were prompted by direct questions from—and possibly the imagined responses of—his audience. He, too, presents a narrative partly shaped by external voices. It may be that in addition to writing skills, the second voice of a biographer offers a degree of credibility to an otherwise autobiographical account.

Collectively, life narratives mirror the societies in which the authors live. Everybody can write, and many do. Authors are claiming the space to tell their own stories. The products may not all be qualitatively good, but they are accounts of lived lives. However, in general, there is still a lack of life writing from new groups entering the hitherto homogeneous Danish society. These voices do exist—Yasar was a member of Copenhagen’s Kurdish community—but are few in number. This lack of heterogeneity should be a concern for both scholars and publishers.

Thanks to technological possibilities, Danish authors of lifewriting texts are no longer dependent on the good will of publishers to disseminate their stories; due to DIY-publishing, they really can do it themselves. However, of the three examples in this text, only one, the biography of the German soldier, is from a small publisher. The other two subscribed to an event culture and—identified as potential best-sellers—were published by large publishers.

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