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The contest for authority in as-told-to life writing

Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that the contest for authority in as-told-to life writing is experienced differently by subjects and writers.

For subjects, authority is about rights over textual content. A continuum may be drawn between texts transcribed by an amanuensis directly from a subject's dictation and those over which the writer has complete creative control. In both cases and in all cases in between, it is the writer who does the writing. For subjects, the contest for authority therefore concerns the extent to which they can influence what is written. Social status and strength of personality may both come into play.

However, for the writer, authority is more about responsibilities than rights, and the contest for authority is not so much about which of the two parties is the strongest, as it is about the strength of the relationship that develops between them. Biographers are responsible for the way their subject is portrayed in the text and the dual nature of their responsibility for writing the subject's story and having regard for the subject's reputation may give rise to ethical dilemmas. These take on an additional dimension in as-told-to life writing where the writer-subject relationship is a personal one. As they are trusted with intimate disclosures and confidences, as they find themselves facilitating a subject's self-examination and identity construction, writers may begin to assume responsibility, not only for the textual life of the subject, but also for the subject in real life. The deeper the level of emotional involvement, the more difficult it is for writers to balance their responsibility for the text with their responsibility for the subject. In cases where writers feel compelled to choose between the two, those who opt for the text are criticised for betrayal, while those opting for the subject are criticised for complicity or collusion.

For the subject of as-told-to life writing, authority is about rights and the contest for authority is a struggle with the writer over the right to make decisions concerning textual content. For the writer, authority is about responsibilities and the contest is an internal struggle between competing responsibilities, where the best ethical outcome can only ever be one of maintaining a balance.

Biographical note:

Sandra Lindemann is a part-time PhD candidate at Flinders University. Her research examines practitioners' experiences of the ethical challenges of as-told-to writing.

Sandra has been a practitioner of as-told-to life writing for the past ten years and has published the following books:

A Mosaic of Memories, with Gisela Behrend, Seaview Press, 2008

To the Beat of his own Drum: the Ben Yengi Story, Gramarye Press, 2009

Realising the Dream: Journey of a lost boy, with Akoi Manyiel Guong, Gramarye Press, 2011

She is currently working on her fourth book.

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Just over ten years ago, as the major assignment in a professional writing course, I started work on my first biography. It was the story of a Sudanese refugee. His name was Ben Yengi. I already knew a little about Ben's life. He had come to Australia in 1970 after fleeing the first civil war in Sudan and had since become well known for his work with traditional and urban Aboriginal musicians and with migrants and refugees.

I was delighted when Ben agreed to let me write his story. He told me that he had long considered writing it himself but could never find the time. The fact that English was his third language, after Bari and Arabic, was also a consideration. As I drove my car across town to the university campus where his office was located, I was looking forward to our first interview. I was confident that Ben would serve as an extremely interesting biographical subject.

It didn't take me long to recognise my own *naiveté*. From the moment he began to speak, I was faced with the fact that Ben was far more than mere subject-matter. He was a living, breathing subject, fired by his own desires, opinions, anxieties and passions. Ben had strong views about what was important and interesting about his life—and they didn't necessarily match mine.

For the three years that we were involved in the project, Ben and I were engaged in an ongoing contest for authority. It was not a hostile contest; we got on very well and our interactions were always genial, cooperative, often generous. But it was a contest. I was the writer, responsible for producing a text suitable for publication but, because I was working with a living subject, my authority was not automatically assured. The question asked by Malcolm X of his biographer Alex Haley so many years earlier, 'Whose book is this?' (Haley 1966: 38) hung constantly over the project. So, too, did the different but closely related question raised by literary scholar, Philippe Lejeune: 'Who is the author?' (Lejeune 1989: 185). Other questions arise: What kind of writing is this? What is it called? How is it defined?

I originally embarked on my story of Ben Yengi with the understanding that I was writing the biography of a living subject. Lejeune (1989), however, approaches this kind of writing from the opposite direction, referring to it as 'the autobiography of those who do not write' (185), while at the same time observing that autobiography may be written in the first, second or third grammatical person (7). G Thomas Couser (2004: 34-55) includes it under his umbrella term, 'collaborative life writing' but this term is rather too broad for my purposes. Building on the foundation provided by these literary critics and continuing to draw upon their insights, I am using the term 'as-told-to' life writing which I define here as: *the written account of a subject's life produced by a writer on the basis of an oral account produced by the subject during the course of a series of interviews.*

In this paper, I examine the contest for authority in as-told-to life writing. While this may be understood to refer to authority over the whole project, including financial arrangements, publication decisions and so on, my concern here is primarily with control over textual content.

A continuum may be drawn between texts transcribed by an amanuensis directly from a subject's dictation and texts over which the writer has complete creative control. In both cases and in all cases in between, it is the writer who holds the pen; it is the writer who does the writing. From the subject's perspective, the contest for authority therefore lies in the extent to which they can influence what is written. Lejeune suggests that this is largely determined by class and social status. He explains that, 'in writing, as elsewhere, authority is always on the side of the one who has the power' (Lejeune 1989: 197).

In his discussion of 'the autobiography of those who do not write', Lejeune (1989) distinguishes two contrasting forms: ghostwriting (185) and ethnobiography (196). In ghostwriting, prominent people employ writers to write on their behalf. Lejeune observes that this originally took the form of secretaryship: 'famous men, politicians in general, using literary people to elaborate or improve their texts, sometimes their memoirs' (Lejeune 1989: 186). This later became a form of paid employment for some professional writers. In contrast, ethnobiography is life writing produced by journalists, historians and other academics based on 'the taped autobiography of the common people' (Lejeune 1989: 196). Here the life of an unknown individual is of interest because it exemplifies life in a certain historical period or life in certain social or cultural settings or situations.

Building on Lejeune's work, Couser (2004) sums up the difference between the two kinds of writing, noting that in ghostwriting, which he calls 'celebrity autobiography', 'subjects typically outrank writers in wealth and clout' (40) whereas in ethnobiography, which he calls 'ethnographic autobiography', writers outrank subjects (40). Couser constructs a continuum between these two extremes, suggesting that:

> At the very center, we would find texts produced by partners who are true peers (e.g., dual autobiographies), in which each partner contributes a separate narrative, and truly co-authored (rather than as-told-to) autobiographies. (40)

The idea of a middle ground is a useful one for this paper. Unfortunately, although Couser's model covers the broad spectrum of collaborative life writing, it explicitly excludes as-told-to life writing.

However, another way of understanding Couser's continuum is to see it, not in terms of social status but in terms of subjects' level of influence. This is how it is understood by Jacklin (2004: 60), who suggests that:

> At one end would be located ethnographic life histories, in which he [Couser] sees the subject holding little power or control over textual production. At the other end would be ghost-written or as-told-to celebrity autobiographies in which the high commodity value of the subjects' story results in their exercising greater power.

Viewed in this light, it becomes possible to envisage an array of texts over which the extent of subjects' influence ranges from great to little, with every possible variation in between. The difference is that, whereas the individuals at the centre of Couser's model function as both writer and subject simultaneously, the individuals at the centre

of this alternative model retain their separate roles as writer and subject. The model is therefore able to accommodate as-told-to life writing.

While subjects' influence may be determined largely by class and social status at the ends of the continuum, other factors come into play in the production of texts closest to the centre. For example, strength of personality may also be significant.

Describing her experience as a ghostwriter, Margot Strickland (1995: 67) observes that,

> the subject, being famous, is likely to be a personality so powerful that he or she can exercise a will that imperils the author's integrity to exclude material damaging to him, or include trivial episodes which vainglorify him.

This is perhaps not surprising with regard to ghostwriting, but powerful personalities are not the exclusive prerogative of those with 'wealth and clout'. Subjects with powerful personalities may be present at any point across the continuum. An example of an ethnobiographic subject with a powerful personality is provided by writer and historian, Lorraine Sitzia (2003). In British society, where a longstanding class consciousness still prevails, Sitzia, as a highly educated middle class academic, had considerably higher social status than her subject, tradesman and unionist, Arthur Thicket (*Seeking the Enemy* 2002). Although Sitzia had originally conceived of the project as one in which writer and subject shared authority, Thicket's personality was so strong and so forceful that he began to take over. Sitzia (2003: 97) reports that, '... as the project progressed, I felt that I gradually lost authority, that Arthur became more and more dominant—in fact bullying—and my own voice seemed to be lost.'

Social status and strength of personality may both contribute to subjects' ability to influence what is written. They may also contribute to writers' ability to resist such influence. However, this is not all there is to it as far as the writer is concerned.

For the writer, authority is not so much about rights as it is about responsibilities, and the contest for authority is not so much about which of the two partners is the strongest, as it is about the strength of the relationships that develops between them.

As-told-to life writing projects usually take several years to complete. Writers may begin with the expectation of maintaining a professional relationship with their subjects, but it is common for this to develop into a relationship of considerable intimacy and emotional intensity.

The emotional nature of the writer-subject relationship has received little attention from literary scholars. Some light is shed by classic biographer and scholar, Leon Edel who, in regard to biography, notes that, 'Between the biographer and his subject there is established from the outset a significant relationship—ghostly though it may seem. It is a relationship deeply intimate and highly subjective' (Edel 1957: 7). While Edel acknowledges, and perhaps romanticises, the intimate if ghostly relationship between biographers and their long dead subjects, he unfortunately does not extend his discussion to include relationships between writers and living subjects. He fails to recognise, perhaps because he was writing in the 1950s, before the proliferation of life writing that followed the advent of the cassette tape recorder, that writers working with living subjects are also involved in a 'deeply intimate and highly subjective'

personal relationship. However, far from being 'ghostly', this relationship is substantial—embodied, situated and interactive.

While this point is largely overlooked by literary critics, it is well understood by oral historians and qualitative researchers and their insights are useful for an understanding of the emotional nature of the writer-subject relationship in as-told-to life writing.

British sociologist Kenneth Plummer (2004: 281-286) develops a 'continuum of involvement' for biographical researchers ranging from what he calls the 'stranger role', through to the 'acquaintance role', the 'friendship role' and, most controversial, the 'lover role'. He notes that researchers taking the 'stranger role' commonly construct a life story from documents and have no personal relationship with the subject. Those taking the 'acquaintance role' might interview subjects for perhaps only ten hours in total. The 'friendship role' arises most often in the production of book-length life writing involving interviews over a long period of time, often several years. Finally, at the farthest end of the continuum, extending friendship into what Plummer describes as the 'erotic dimension', are researchers who take the 'lover role'. There have been instances when the intensity of this relationship has taken people to the heights of passion. People have fallen in love; Blanche d'Alpuget and her subject, former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke (*Robert J Hawke* 1982), are a well-known example. Others have experienced murderous hatred. Social scientist, Harry Wolcott, was beaten up and left unconscious in a burning house by the psychotic homeless youth who was both his lover and the subject of his biographical study (Wolcott 1990: 98). Clearly this is not a relationship to be entered into lightly. The role most commonly associated with as-told-to life writing is the friendship role. My relationship with Ben Yengi may be characterised as a friendship in these terms.

However, the friendship in this context is not completely equitable. Its rationale is the production of the subject's life story and its focus is primarily on the subject. Writers give subjects their undivided attention and encourage them to talk at length about themselves. In response, subjects come to trust and to confide in them. An intimacy develops—but it is largely one-sided.

As the name suggests, as-told-to life writing is based on interviews. The interview is the site for the subject's self-narration which Eakin (1999: 21), drawing on narrative psychology, observes is 'the defining act of the human subject, not only descriptive of the self, but fundamental to its emergence and its reality. Eakin continues to explore this concept in his later work, observing that:

> Talking about ourselves involves a lot more than self-indulgence; when we do it, we perform a work of self-construction ...when it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely about self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part of self (Eakin 2008:.2).

The role of interviewer in this situation is one of considerable responsibility. Self-narration can be a positive and cathartic experience, but it can also be traumatic. Biographical researcher, Gabriele Rosenthal (2004), suggests that when we conduct biographical interviews, we must bear in mind the considerable psychological effects telling one's life story can have. She argues that 'to guide a biographical-narrative

conversation, which is also always an intervention, sound training is necessary' (360). Although it is unlikely that many writers will have had such training, they may certainly find themselves taking on this responsibility as part of the job.

Like other biographers, practitioners of as-told-to life writing are responsible for the way the subject is portrayed in the text. Writers such as Susanne George-Bloomfield (2003: 15) and Hazel Rowley (2007: 29) liken this to having a subject's life in their hands. Even when the subject is long dead, ethical dilemmas can arise from the tension between writing the subject's story and protecting the subject's reputation. Such dilemmas have prompted a number of biographers, including Phyllis Rose (1996: 136), Ian Hamilton (1990: 21) and Cassandra Pybus (1999: 5), to give up writing biography altogether. Pybus explains:

> I believe the writer has an ethical responsibility to consider the human frailty of those who would be exposed and hurt by the secrets of the dead. Yet at the same time my writerly integrity is bound up in the veracity of the tale I am able to construct out of the vagaries of memory and the treacherous detritus left behind … These twin horns of ethical responsibility present me with a disconcerting and disagreeable dilemma. For my next project I prefer to leave the graveyard to the dogs. (5)

This 'disconcerting and disagreeable dilemma' is even more acute in as-told-to life writing where writers have a personal relationship with the subject. As they are trusted with intimate disclosures and confidences, as they find themselves facilitating subjects' self-examination and identity construction, writers may begin to assume a responsibility, not only for the textual life of the subject, but also for the subject in real life. This second responsibility includes a concern for the subject's reputation, as Pybus suggests, but also for the subject's psychological wellbeing in a more immediate sense. The deeper the writer's level of emotional involvement with the subject, the more difficult it becomes to balance these dual responsibilities.

As mentioned earlier, Ben Yengi and I were engaged in an ongoing contest for authority over textual content. Generally, our differences of opinion were relatively minor and we resolved them through processes of give and take, compromises, small triumphs and occasional capitulations. For example, we disagreed about where to start the story. I wanted to start with a description of Ben, at about three years of age, clambering up into the mango tree with his cousins to learn traditional Sudanese drum rhythms. I thought the image of a tree full of ripe mangos and small naked boys making music was an appealing opening. Ben wanted to start with the story of his birth. On that occasion, I won the argument, but when he wanted to include what I thought were rather boring descriptions of some of his later committee work, he won out. Generally, there was nothing especially controversial in Ben's story and I was able to maintain a reasonable balance between my responsibilities to both text and subject.

Others have been less fortunate. There have been cases when writers have felt compelled to make a choice.

Under these circumstances, some have opted for the text and have been sharply criticised for their choice. Examples include Janet Malcolm's (1990) criticism of Joe McGinniss's *Fatal Vision* (McGinniss 1984); Will Self's (1999) discussion of Gitta Sereny's *Cries unheard: the story of Mary Bell* (Sereny 1998); and Rachel Donadio's (2007) criticism of Ronald Suresh Roberts's biography of South African novelist, Nadine Gordimer, *No Cold Kitchen* (2005). In each of these cases, the writers are condemned for having betrayed the trust of their subjects.

In other cases, writers have made the opposite choice, opting to give a higher priority to their responsibility for the subject. An example is Michael King (2001) who, with regard to his biography of Janet Frame, explains that:

> One is aiming at what I would call 'compassionate truth': a presentation of evidence and conclusions that fulfil the major objectives of biography, but without the revelation of information that would involve the living subject in unwarranted embarrassment, loss of face, emotional or physical pain, or nervous or psychiatric collapse. (4)

This choice, too, may be condemned by some as morally indefensible, being seen as complicity or collusion. King notes with some irritation the comments of one reviewer who suggested that he sat on Frame's knee 'like a ventriloquist's dummy and voiced only those aspects of her life which she alone wanted to show the world' (2).

It seems that no matter which way they turn, writers engaged in the production of as-told-to life writing are faced with conflicting responsibilities. King sees the process as 'analogous to walking a tightrope' (4).

In summary, it has been my argument that authority in as-told-to life writing is experienced differently by subjects and writers. For subjects, authority is about rights and the contest for authority takes the form of a struggle with the writer over the right to make decisions concerning textual content. For writers, authority is about responsibilities and the contest takes the form of an internal struggle between competing responsibilities, where the best ethical outcome can only ever be one of maintaining a balance.

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