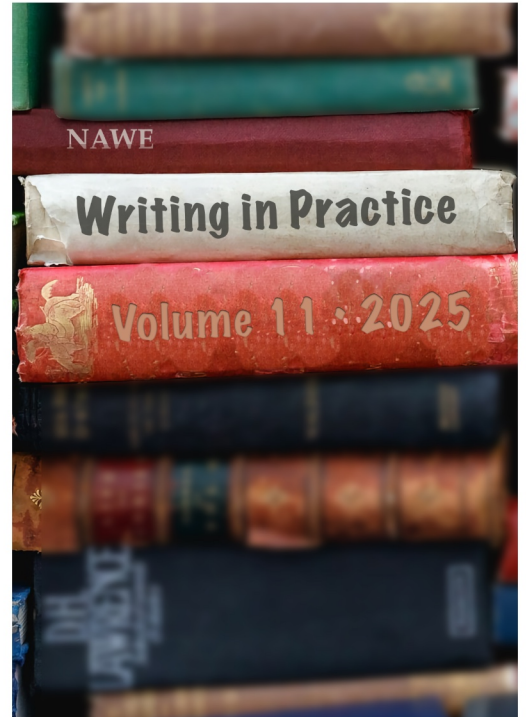




The Autofictional Search for the Writing Self

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Writing in Practice
volume 11, 2025

CrossRef DOI: 10.62959/WIP-11-2025-07



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the question of why writers write autofiction, positing its liminality and self-referentiality as particularly fertile grounds for the examination not just of the self, but specifically the writing self. This is a self altered and fundamentally divided by the creative act. Applying Wayne C. Booth's concept of the Implied Author (IA) to readings of autofictional texts can shed light not just on the experience of being a divided writing self but also the attraction and potential dangers of working in this hybrid genre.

KEYWORDS

Autofiction, Autobiography, Black Wave, Implied Author, Liminality, Memoir, Michelle Tea, Self, Wayne Booth, Writing Self

"An author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two."

Philippe Lejeune (1989 [1973]: 11)

Introduction

When my first book was published, my mother began saying to people, "It's dangerous to have a writer in the family." More than a decade later, this joke still elicits laughter but is also still followed by a side eye from new acquaintances. These side eyes tell me I am being reassessed; no longer am I simply a person standing beside another person, but a new, shifter type of being who writes and publishes. If you know other writers, perhaps you have felt the danger Mother refers to when cracking open their covers, perhaps you have given them the side eye, and perhaps you have been justified in doing so. Often given less consideration, however, is what it is like to be these shifter non-persons and how this too, at times, feels dangerous.

In this paper I present the slippery and often criticised genre of autofiction as distinctly fertile ground to examine the writing self, allowing deeper and more expansive access to it than either fiction or non-fiction. I argue that the act of writing fundamentally divides the writing self, and it is in the liminal territory between the novel and memoir that authors like me find opportunities to acknowledge and confront these divisions. This paper is part of a wider body of ongoing practice-

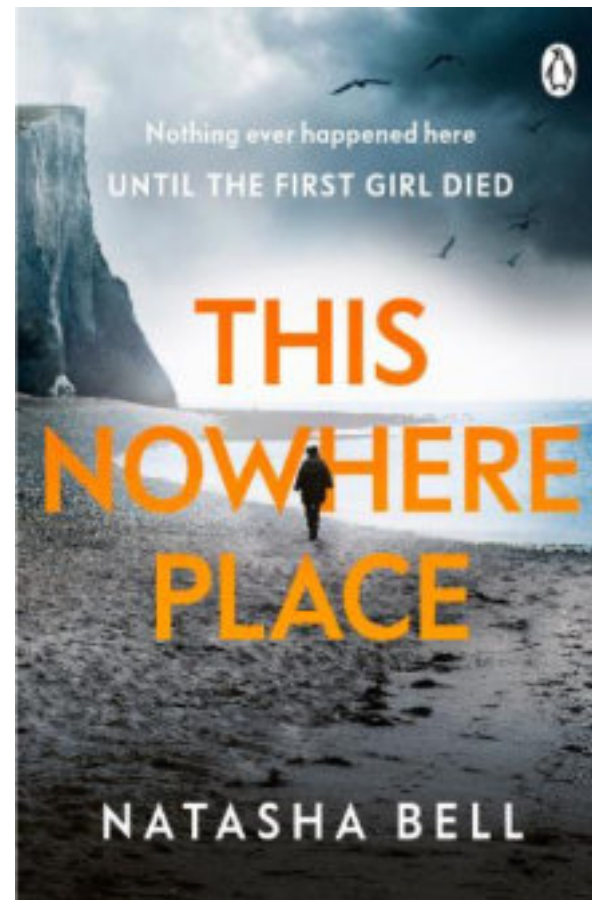
based, fictocritical research, at the core of which is a very personal question: What is my experience when I am telling a story about it? But also, more generally: what is experience when a person is always telling stories? How does the process of storytelling affect the writer's self? And how does it impact our relationships with those around us?

The first challenge when discussing autofiction is establishing a definition, so I begin by attempting to cast an at least functional net around the various and varied works that find themselves labelled autofiction. One of the genre's appeals to me, however, is its playful fluidity and commitment to experimentation, so a fixed definition might be inappropriate. Moreover, I believe the question "what is autofiction?" is a much less interesting place to start than "why autofiction?"

To attempt to answer this, I look at how the autofictional act emerges from the tensions within the writing self, pointed to by Lejeune (1989 [1973]: 11) in this paper's epigraph. "Straddling" the real world and the worlds we create on the page, the writing self is a fundamentally divided self, situated between person and text, fiction and fact. Wayne C. Booth's concept of the Implied Author (IA) offers one explanation for this division and using it as a lens through which to read autofiction can help illuminate both the experience of being a divided writing self and the urge to explore it through this hybrid genre.

Introduced in 1961, the IA refers to the "image" of the author present in a work, sitting between the flesh-and-blood person (FBP) who writes the work and the narrator within it (Booth 1983 [1961]: 70–73). Through a reading of Michelle Tea's (2017) autofictional novel *Black Wave*, I argue that, for some writers, creating characters with their own names and placing them in worlds that look like but are not fully anchored to theirs allows them to examine and confront the "second selves" (Booth 1983 [1961]: 71) they have (willingly and unwillingly) brought into being through writing. In *Black Wave*, the protagonist "Michelle," a writer and alcoholic, works to clean up her life in the face of an impending apocalypse, while the FBP Tea constructs a multi-layered metafictional narrative in which to study her. I demonstrate how considering "Michelle" as Tea's personified IA deepens and further complicates the intimate observations about the writing self this clever book addresses.

In my conclusion, I briefly consider other literary theories that may be useful in understanding the autofictional examination of the writing self, including Michel Foucault's (1969) "author-function" and the psychoanalytical concept of the Double. Ultimately, whatever lens we view it through, I believe this blurry genre frequently dismissed



Cover of "This Nowhere Place" by Natasha Bell

as "narcissistic" (Wood, 2012; Chayka, 2014) in fact has much to teach us about both the dangers and the joys of being self-devoted to story.

About me

As a practice-based researcher it feels important to explain how the thoughts in this paper originate in my own writing experience. I am primarily a novelist, but the first thing I wrote and published – the book that had my mother label me dangerous – was a memoir. I was in my early twenties when I wrote it and will be the first to admit it was a cathartic vomit, but I believed I had a story I needed to write out of myself before I could do anything else. And, having done so, I did in fact feel set free from the truth and ready to move into fiction. Or, at least, that's what I thought.

I spent the following six years writing a psychological thriller about a woman leading a double life – a wife and mother delighted by her domestic bliss only because she had a secret second existence as an artist. I edited and edited that novel, convinced I was crafting a fictional world. Its publication, however, coincided with the end of my first marriage and it was as I was going through my copyedits that I realized I had accidentally woven much more of myself into my fiction than I intended. "I've been happy, but that's not all I've been," I found myself saying to my ex, then two days later reading this sentence

word-for-word from my character on the page. I had not been living the physically doubled life that she had, but both emotionally and creatively, I had been sharing in her divisions for a long time.

This unsettling experience of not being conscious of how much of myself I had revealed through my text thrust me back into exploring a more referential field. Through writing my autofictional novel, *Maybe the World Will End So We Won't Have To* (due 2026), I began more actively exploring the boundaries between my fiction and non-fiction, as well as the ethical limitations of writing about myself and others. This paper presents an argument grounded in this fictocritical research and originates from a deeply personal need to try to figure out what it is I am doing when I write fiction, memoir and autofiction.

Towards a Definition

An uneasy portmanteau, the word "autofiction" draws attention to the gap it erases between "auto(biography)" and "fiction," begging us to linger on the threshold, or "threshold," in between. In architecture, a threshold is a passageway linking places rather than a place or destination in and of itself. In anthropology and performance theory, however, Victor Turner (1969: 95) and Richard Schechner (2006: 67) see this thin space between two things expanding and widening during ritual and performance; the liminal site of the "go-between" becomes the site of the action, while still remaining "between." Autofiction expands a similarly liminal site and, as such, playfully resists attempts at fixed definition. For some, this slipperiness is part of its appeal, while for others it is indicative of wider problems with the genre's existence and popularity.

Though hybrid texts that may retrospectively be considered "autofiction" have been published for centuries, the word was first coined by Serge Doubrovsky (1977: jacket) on the back cover of his 1977 novel *Fils*: "Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement reels, si l'on veut autofiction"; "Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; autofiction if you like" (translated by Gronemann 2019: 241). I believe the ambiguity of this assertion remains helpful today, but at the time in France it led to a division between "strict" and more "general" autofictions (Lecarme and Lecarme-Tabone 1999, cited in Dix 2018: 6). Strict autofictions – those supposedly most faithful to Doubrovsky – create narratives from exclusively referential facts and events, but draw on literary forms, techniques and devices. General autofictions, on the other hand, allow truth and memory to be more loosely manipulated, granting authors licence to use themselves as characters but imagine alternative lives and experiences.

Anglo-American literature has been slower than French and other literatures to develop formal

practices in autofiction, but it is grown steadily in popularity through the 21st century. English-language autofictions tend to lean more towards the "general" category, but without the same 20th century roots such binary divisions make less sense. (Not least because French definitions for "strict" autofiction sound confusingly similar to our understandings of memoir.) Even if English-language autofictions do more freely mix fiction with truth, though, it is not simply or even primarily to imagine alternative lives or to blend memory and imagination. Instead, what appears to unite these works, regardless of their level of referentiality, is the active and ambiguous way they trouble the relationship between writing and living.

For the purposes of this paper, I suggest that what makes a work autofictional is not how much or how little of it is "real" or "made up," but instead its overt and unapologetic liminality. Autofiction occupies a charged middle-ground between memoir and fiction, and autofictional texts exist as such because they directly signpost their position along this ambiguous threshold. The most common signpost of autofictionality is an onomastic connection between protagonist and author. When combined with a seemingly fictional signpost, such as the use of the third person, this creates an immediate and exciting sense of contradiction on the page. It is a simple but effective signal to the reader that "this is me, but not me; not me, but not not me". Other common signposts include explicit truth or fictionality claims, the subtitle 'a novel', acts that cross over between author and character, and a metafictional focus on the writing of the novel we're currently reading. Arnaud Schmitt (2022: 90) makes a compelling case for categorizing these signposts as "primary" and "secondary," where primary elements are "compulsory" to create a sense of autofiction, and secondary ones exist merely to "enhance" it. For Schmitt:

There are only two kinds of primary criteria: onomastic correspondence and similarities in biographical background between author and narrator. I claim that it is inconceivable to consider a work as autofictional if there is not at least one of these elements in place, as they constitute the necessary signal. Secondary elements, which I call 'enhancers,' contribute to the reader's awareness of the necessary ambiguousness of the generic status of the text, but do not create it.

Of all the explanations I've come across, I think this works most successfully to unite the variety of texts that find themselves labelled autofiction, both in English and other languages. There's no specification for how much similarity there must be between author and narrator/character, nor for how many or how prominent the enhancers should be. What's crucial, however, is that, because of the interplay of primary and secondary criteria, autofiction exists as such for both reader and writer.

Rather than definition, then, what I propose is a formula:

This formula may look simple, but the products of it are far from it, in part because they can never be contained by the texts that create them. The complex, ongoing relationships between writer and self, writer and text, reader and text, and writer and reader lift the autofictional event across ontological borders. And, in doing so, I think they can erase many of those borders, expanding and widening the threshold so as to erode the distinctions between fiction and fact/art and life/self and second selves.

The Implied Author

In this paper's epigraph, Lejeune (1989 [1973]: 11) calls into question the personhood of an author, positing her instead as a being "straddling" the separate worlds within and beyond a text, and connecting the two. Autofiction, as I see it, sits at the exact center between the true and the made up, examining this connection and offering writers a unique opportunity to confront these straddling, divided selves.

Wayne C. Booth (1983 [1961]: 70-73) introduced the concept of the Implied Author (IA) in 1961 to address the distance between the real, living writer and the "picture" or "image" the reader perceives of the "presence" that wrote a specific text. For Booth:

"As he writes [the author] creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works."

Seymour Chatman (1990: 76-81) notes that Booth's concept "arose in the debate about the relevance of authorial intention to interpretation" and argues that the IA is a useful concept for denying the "attractive" but "simplistic" assumption that reader and author are ever in direct communication. While the real author may begin with intentions, for Chatman, what a text contains is solely "intent." The IA is the locus of this intent and what is key is that it is located within the text rather than outside with the author.

Chatman qualifies his argument as "strictly pragmatic, not ontological," and like him I do not think it matters if/where the IA exists in the way many have been caught up debating, but more in what we gain from considering the concept. What does exist is the FBP (flesh-and-blood person) stuck on the other side of their work from the reader. Whether the reader approaches their text as an intentionalist or anti-intentionalist, this FBP finds herself being interpreted – as either fully responsible for the text or entirely separate from it. What is useful

is to imagine that the IA holds the discomfort and disconnection of both these interpretations.

Dan Shen (2011: 80-89) argues that what has been frequently missed in the disagreements surrounding Booth's concept is the "fine balance between" the "encoding" and "decoding" of the IA (original emphasis). Shen explains the encoding process involves the FBP donning a mask to write "in a particular manner" and making conscious textual choices, while the decoding process involves the reader inferring an image of the author from all the choices made within the text. The IA, then, is the product of both the encoding and decoding processes and thus created for as much as by us. This, I believe, is what makes it a rich but uncanny concept for authors, and one that finds a unique playground for exploration in autofiction.

Booth originally conceived of the IA as relating only to narrative fiction, but in returning to it in "Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?" (Booth 2005: 77-81) he expands the concept, identifying that, "In every corner of our lives, whenever we speak or write, we imply a version of our character that we know is quite different from many other selves that are exhibited in our flesh-and-blood world." While continuing to note that the IA's creation may be both "conscious or unconscious" and "constructive and destructive," he suggests the IA is a version of the self that the FBP creates by editing and revising a work to "wipe out those selves that [they] do not like." Thus, for Booth, the encoded IA is not just a persona or masked version of the writer's self, but ideally a better, more "admirable," "superior" version. His example is Sylvia Plath, whom he awards the prize of "FBP With Largest Collection of Contradictory IAs," one of which is the IA able to process the FBP Plath's suicidal feelings and turn them not into action but poetry. In reading Plath's journals, he sees: "we can detect a genuine effort to find and project this or that superior 'self,' and particularly the self that will know how to deal with being not just a woman but – too often – a miserable woman." Encoding, however, is only half the process, and it is in the act of being decoded that the IA reveals itself as separate and, I think, somewhat monstrous in its independence. Even with the best of intentions, the encoding process is only partially in the FBP's control. Booth's insistence on "consciously or unconsciously" is important because we're not always in control of what we encode in our IAs – of what we write. Our attempts to better our selves before sending them into the world may be insufficient, misguided, or simply misinterpreted.

Here I disagree with Shen's claims that the encoding and decoding processes are balanced. While I reject arguments that the author has no bearing at all on the IA or the resulting text, from the position of an FBP, the decoding

process does seem, ultimately, to have a superior role. The IA may start its existence being encoded by the FBP erasing the parts of herself she does not like, but it matures and takes up residence in the decoding process. As Chatman (1990: 84) notes, it "remains only latent or 'virtual' in the text until it is actualized by our act of reading." Meaning: no matter how particular my efforts, once a text is written and published, my IA is beyond me. The encoding process is often long and painful, but it is finite. The decoding process, on the other hand, is ongoing; for as long as my texts have readers, my IAs will be open to interpretation. It is this strange realization of both powerlessness and responsibility, that leads some of us to autofiction. Recognizing that in my attempts to articulate myself I have instead created a "second self" – an IA that is (according to the name on the cover) you, but also open to constant re-creation by your reader – can be deeply unsettling.

Turning to autofiction and establishing a character that shares your name, in a world that looks much like yours, offers a chance to directly confront the relationship between FBP and IA. The IA, which previously sat between the acts of writing and reading, is placed within the text and made the conscious focus of both acts; it is personified. And, by turning the IA into a character, authors also confront their readers' (mis)interpretations of them – their decoded images. Manipulating these IA-characters allows these writers to assert and test the limits of their authorial control, and thus to explore the connections and disconnections between themselves and the selves they have released into the world through writing.

Repositioning the IA as character, however, cannot fully work because the autofictional text always has its own IA, only part of which is consciously encoded by the author. Instead, the autofictional act merely multiplies the IA, because the Character-IA can never fully represent the text's actual IA. Personifying something only implied is also, of course, inherently paradoxical because, once turned into characters, these IAs do (at least partially) become manifest. However, as the personification is never complete, these IA-characters successfully embody this contradiction.

This personification poses a specific challenge to Booth's interpretation of the IA. For Booth (2005: 78-79), the IA is an idealized self; he sees in the "thoroughly cleansed personae" encountered in poetry that "the poetic self has emerged dressed up elegantly, exhibiting a sensitivity to life's woes and blisses that careful readers find themselves longing to possess." He goes on to claim, "Most of the poetry we admire would be much worse if the authors had failed to put on a mask. Shouldn't we be grateful for their cleansing? And should we not admire them for

their ability performing that laundry work?" What I think he overlooks, however, is that FBPs are real, thinking, feeling beings. It is the FBP, after all, who sets out to write, who has the idea, who wants to communicate something. What if Plath did not want to be mistaken for the noble, idealized IA who could turn suicidal feelings into art, but rather wanted to be seen and acknowledged as the very "miserable woman" struggling to cope that Booth dismisses as inferior? If the IA is, as Booth claims, the laundered self, then the writer's turn to autofiction can be seen as deliberately opening the machine mid-cycle and exposing both the laundering process and one's soiled underwear. It attempts to reveal the idealized and idolized IA for what it really is – or at least what it feels like from the perspective of an FBP.

Michelle Tea's Black Wave

Michelle Tea is a poet, memoirist, novelist, blogger, activist, literary arts organizer, and queer literary icon. She grew up in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and moved to San Francisco in the early 90s, where she built a following for writing candidly about her childhood, family, sex work, queerness, class, trauma, and alcohol and drug use. *Black Wave* (Tea 2017) is her 11th book. It opens in San Francisco's Mission district in 1999, where we are told, "Michelle was a poet, a writer, the author of a small book published by a small press that revealed family secrets, exposed her love life, and glamorized her recreational drug intake" (2). For those familiar with Tea's biography and work, this looks at first like another memoir, albeit in the third person. In the opening chapters, we see Michelle trying crack cocaine for the first time in the back of her friend Ziggy's van, then slipping into regular heroin use while chasing women and telling herself she is not an addict. This book is about many things: the 90s, queerness, addiction, love, betrayal, gentrification, climate change and more. At its heart, though, is the topic of what it means to be a writer, and the book's complicated form finds a clever way to show us.

The character Michelle has published one book, just as Tea had in 1999, so it is in this moment after publication, where she is grappling for the first time with being an FBP who has created and set free an IA, that we find her.

In the first half, we see her struggling to come to terms with having shared so much of herself through memoir. She recalls the discomfort of telling an anecdote about her parents and being interrupted by someone saying "Yeah, I read that in your book" (Tea 2017: 74; all emphases in quotations from *Black Wave* original), and wonders about moving to Los Angeles to try writing a screenplay because continuing with memoir feels "impossible" (Tea 2017: 81). She is persistently drawn, however, to this impossible thing. She understands that her impulse to document her life often hurts other people, but

she still wants to write another memoir and goes back and forth about how to proceed:

Could she write about herself without mentioning other people? That seemed impossible. She could fictionalize things but this ruined the point of memoir, frustrated the drive to document, to push life through your eyes and out your fingers, the joy of describing the known, the motion of the book ready-made. It had happened! It was life! Her job was to make it beautiful or sad or horrifying, to splash around in language until she rendered it perfect. (Tea 2017: 81–82)

Memoir is impossible for Michelle because of a tension between this deep "drive to document" and the discomfort of the gap between her FBP and IA, both of whom now exist in the same place and time. Standing before someone who has read her book means standing before someone who has interpreted her writing self – and more often than not been pissed off or hurt by that writing self. When her girlfriend, Andy, breaks up with her after Michelle's slept with an 18-year-old slam-poet, Andy shouts "Don't you ever fucking write about me!" (Tea 2017: 59). As Michelle notes, this is Andy being "resentful in advance" (Tea 2017: 81). Within the narrative, Michelle has not yet written about Andy, but Andy is already angry at her because of Michelle's perceived identity as someone who might. Andy has decoded something in Michelle's IA that the FBP Michelle never (consciously) encoded. For the reader, of course, there is another layer to this scene. The parallels between Michelle the character and Tea the author make us assume Andy is based, at least partly, on a real person in the real Tea's life. And the real Tea has now written about her. For Tea, then, this scene appears to act as both confession and justification, finally offering (the real) Andy reason for her premature resentment. *Black Wave's* IA is thus identified as the type of person who would betray someone who explicitly tells them not to put them in a book.

A little less than halfway through the book, Michelle does abandon San Francisco for LA, driving there with her married lover, Quinn. This transition from one city to another also marks the novel's transition from (seeming) autobiography into much more obvious fiction, and specifically metafiction. Tea amps up the drama by pulling a pending environmental apocalypse into stronger focus (no longer is it dismissible as metaphor, instead it arrives as a literal shit cloud assaulting their noses as they cross the landscape), and simultaneously destabilizes that drama by undermining the novel's realism. The first line of the second section reads, "I just cannot open my screenplay with a scene of myself smoking crack in Ziggy's van, Michelle thought, and deleted twenty pages of text from her desktop" (Tea 2017: 139). Suddenly the narrative we are reading is a text within the narrative, and we watch as Michelle

struggles to figure out how to make her / this story "universal" (Tea 2017: 140). She understands that her gender, class, queerness and drug-use make her a difficult protagonist to relate to. On top of that, she is haunted by Andy's instruction not to write about her. She decides instead to begin "a screenplay based on Quinn's relationship with her husband" (Tea 2017: 140). Quinn has not told Michelle not to write about her, so this seems fair game.

However, Michelle is interrupted by Quinn glancing at the screen and saying, "I'd rather you did not write that. [...] And why would you give me long hair? I have never had long hair. Not even when I was a kid" (Tea 2017: 141). There is a particular pleasure here for the reader as we contemplate the mise-en-abyme of the real Tea writing a scene that may or may not be based in reality in which her avatar sits with her short-haired girlfriend writing a scene based in their reality involving a long-haired version of that girlfriend. "Sorry!" Michelle says, "I Was Trying To Make You More Universal. And Plus It's Not Really You. She's Based On You, But She's Different" (Tea 2017: 141). This, for the reader, inevitably conjures Tea also saying, "It's Not Really Me" (and, by extension, the autofictional double-negative, "It's Not Not Really Me") into the mirror reflecting the mirror, and so on.

Unsurprisingly, Quinn objects, and Michelle turns back to her computer saying:

Fine. I Won't Write About You. I Won't Write About My Life Because No One Wants To Be In My Story. I Won't Write About My Family Because They're Fucking Over It. I Should Just Give Up And Get A Job At Taco Bell Then 'Cause This Is It, This Is All I Know How To Do, Write These Glorified Diary Entries And Now I Can't Even Do That Because Everyone Is So Fucking Sensitive. (Tea 2017: 141–42)

This is the central conflict of the book: the FBP Michelle needs to write about herself to make her art, but having done so – and, crucially, having published her memoir and been confronted with other people's misunderstandings of the relationship between her and her IA – she does not know how to continue. "There was perhaps no way out for Michelle," the narrator observes, "[...]Quinn was only the latest to protest her inclusion in Michelle's story – which, basically, felt like protesting their inclusion in Michelle's life" (Tea 2017: 142–43). Here again we see the mirrors reflecting one another and sense the gap between character and author narrowing. If this is Tea speaking as much as Michelle, both seem to be saying that it feels unfair as an FBP to be blamed for harm they never intended to cause through their IAs. Writers, when writing at least, are the biggest intentionalists of all; we

would not begin in the first place if we did not want to be understood, seen, or, in Mark Freeman's (1993: 184) words, "made/known." But the act of being published and decoded changes us. If Michelle had full control of her IA – if the encoding process was all that mattered – then none of this would be such a problem. But her growing awareness of the weight of the decoding process forces her to self-reflect:

She'd grown weary of feeling like her writing hurt the people closest to her. She'd become more attuned to their feelings. She'd grown older and read wider and had begun to question how singular and important her story even was. Was she a war orphan, a refugee? No. She was a skinny, white, marginally attractive female living in the United States, where even poor people have MTV. What did she think was so important about her pain? (Tea 2017: 143)

For readers familiar with Tea and her previous work, it is hard not to read this as Tea's voice as well as Michelle's and to hear in it an apology. The forty-seven-year-old Tea who has published 10 other books about her life and those around her is, it seems, sorry for having done so. This is an apology, however, that she is only able to make through her younger, less experienced and more fumbling avatar. Tea has been decoded over and over and finally understands what that means, so she has placed a personified version of her first IA into this book to deliver an apology for not understanding sooner. This message needs to be delivered by that IA because it comes from an IA. What is this sorry Tea if not Booth's "cleansed" version of the FBP Tea who will (and has) continue(d) to publish memoir despite all this understanding?

Even coming from the book's IA, though, can we believe the apology? Haven't we just read about Quinn and Andy, both of whom said they did not want to be written about? Don't we still presume they are more or less real characters ("She's Based On You, But She's Different")? Hasn't *Black Wave's* IA already betrayed more people to get us to the middle of this book in order to apologize for betraying them?

No, because unlike Michelle, Tea seems to have found a way out. And she told us what this was earlier in the novel when Michelle wondered, "Could she write about herself without mentioning other people?" (Tea 2017: 81). Michelle decided she could not, but Tea accepted the challenge. There have been hints along the way, but this is mostly revealed in the biggest, most playful metaleptic twist of the novel. The section after Quinn's objection to her inclusion in Michelle's screenplay begins, "In reality, Quinn and Michelle were not scheduled to meet one another for over a decade" (Tea 2017: 143). As if sensing we might no longer believe any claims she makes about "reality," Tea spends two pages describing that more-than-a-

decade-later scene in which the "real" Quinn comes into the "real" Michelle's life and threatens her now eight-year-long sobriety. The scene is compelling and believable, but should we believe it? We now have three versions of Quinn within the narrative (the long-haired version in the script, the short-haired one who just drove to LA with Michelle, and this future, supposedly "real" version who meets the "real" Michelle later on). It's also unclear still if the "real" Michelle is Tea or merely another character created by Tea. The overt and contradictory signposts towards both truth and fictionality in this section place both reader and characters squarely in the book's rapidly expanding autofictional threshold. Appropriately enough, the short-haired Quinn says, "Wait, I'm really confused [...] What do you mean we have not met?" (Tea 2017: 145). And now Tea really begins to play:

This, Michelle told Quinn, Is My Memoir. Memoirs are true, Quinn, also a writer, pointed out. This One Is Part True And Part False. All That Stuff I Just Said, About When We Dated, Is True.

Again, do we believe her? Who is saying this? Michelle or Tea? Quite rightly, Quinn asks:

Did I tell you you could write about me? No, Michelle said, But You Didn't Tell Me I Couldn't. The Person I Really Came To Los Angeles With Is Lucretia. I Actually Wrote The Whole Book With Her In It. Our Whole Story. Eight Years, Five Hundred Pages.

Lucretia is the name of the 18-year-old slam-poet Michelle slept with in the first half of *Black Wave*, but Michelle divulges to Quinn here that the "truth" was more complicated:

She Didn't Want Me To Write About Her But Our Breakup Was So Shitty And Awful I Just Really Needed To Tell The Story. You Know How A Story Needs To Get Told? Quinn did. It was one of the reasons Michelle brought her into the book. Quinn was a poet and knew the feeling of writing bubbling up inside her, like a pot coming to boil. (Tea 2017: 145–46)

The narrator explains that in 2011, "more than a decade after the world ends in *Black Wave*," Michelle read from her 500-page novel at a bookstore and, following the reading, she and the "real" Lucretia had a "tremendous fight," after which Michelle agreed to remove her from the book (Tea 2017: 146–47). While this may be the most metafictionally playful part of the novel, and despite questions about what to believe earlier on, this account of writing and then discarding an entire 500-page novel to remove an ex-girlfriend from it is so artistically tragic that it feels, to me at least, like one of *Black Wave's* rare sincere truths. In offering it at

the same time as she dismantles any remaining shreds of realism that might have allowed us to maintain a suspension of disbelief and simply enjoy the story, Tea brings her FBP, IA and character as close to one another as she possibly can. This is Tea trying to speak directly to her reader, to show exactly what it is like to be a writing self – that the only way she can do so is by asking us to contemplate multiple ontological layers speaks to the complexity of that writing self.

"Sometimes It Feels Like A Mental Illness," Michelle says to Quinn, "Being A Writer. Being This Kind Of Writer" (Tea 2017: 148). According to D.W. Winnicott (2005 [1971: 88-89]), Michelle's way of living might be recognized as psychiatric illness. Despite general subscription to "a belief that living creatively is a healthy state," Winnicott notes it is the balance between creativity and compliance in relation to external reality that dictates an individual's mental health or ill-health. For Winnicott, there is "no sharp line" between the two and "for many individuals external reality remains to some extent a subjective phenomenon" (original emphasis). Part of healthy psychological development involves reckoning with the fact that the world has been created for us and demands compliance, but pushing the boundaries of that compliance through creativity and play. Those who push too hard, however, and see the world as entirely subjective or malleable, hallucinating "either at certain specific moments, or perhaps in a generalized way" are referred to psychiatrically as "schizoid":

We know that such persons can have value as persons in the community and that they may be happy, but we note that there are certain disadvantages for them and especially for those who live with them.

Might feeling "writing bubbling up inside [you], like a pot coming to boil" (Tea 2017: 146), trying "to push life through your eyes and out your fingers" (Tea 2017: 81), splashing "around in language until" you think you've "rendered it perfect" (Tea 2017: 82), and feeling driven to document despite others' objections, be edging towards that end of the spectrum? If so, *Black Wave* can be read as Tea's attempt to face her own condition. Being a writing self, specifically a memoir-writing self, is as much of an illness for Michelle as her alcoholism, which takes center stage in the second half of the book.

After Quinn leaves, Michelle starts hanging out at the Zen Center and concludes that, in repeatedly telling the same stories about herself, she is "cementing [a] false idea of self harder and harder in her psyche" (Tea 2017: 152). Although the tone of the narration here is mocking, Tea explained in an interview that learning about Buddhism did make her feel more "destabilized" about memoir:

Writing a memoir is basically the least Buddhist thing you can do. You're cementing this one perspective in time. You're deciding that it is true. If there's not even a 'you,' really, you're just nurturing the wounds and resentments of this person who's perceiving everything incorrectly. (Lawlor 2016)

These thoughts are extended in *Against Memoir*, where Tea (2019: 324) cautions, "Times change and people change, perspectives shift and new information comes to light" (324). Memoirs are static time-capsules not just of the events they record but also of the versions of the beings that write them. Shen (2011: 91) argues (and argues that Booth also argues) that it is the IA that writes a text, not the FBP, which perhaps helps us understand Tea/Michelle's feelings about this problematic cementing process. In memoir, the IA, once encoded, is then decoded not just by the reader but also by the FBP herself. This is one way in which writing about the self seems to change that self; we as FBPs may come to believe the versions of ourselves that our IAs have written. As such, memoir can feel like a trap our own IAs have set for us.

The narrator of *Black Wave* tries to disentangle both Michelle and Tea from this trap by continuing to hold multiple levels of reality in place as the story continues. While the main narrative takes over after this central rupture, following Michelle further into the apocalypse and her alcoholism, we are repeatedly reminded of its instability through asides telling us how things "really" happened with Lucretia and how impossible it is to completely remove her from the novel. The hope seems to be that if there is no fixed version of Michelle, Tea/we cannot be tricked into believing in it. In these moments it feels like we are looking into all the mirrors at once, glimpsing Tea's FBP (or at least the IA she has encoded and we are now decoding) alongside her personifications through the multiple possible Michelles.

In one place, Tea (2017: 239) further blurs ontological distinctions by possibly slipping into the first person: "If I take Lu out of the story there is no one to chase Michelle down when she runs away." This "I" may be read as a continuation of Michelle's direct thought in the previous paragraph, but the lack of attribution (which the previous paragraph does have), and the rareness of this type of directly quoted thought, make it strikingly ambiguous. If this is the until-now-extradiegetic narrator suddenly becoming intradiegetic, are we to read it as Tea herself (or her IA), or another character existing on some other narrative level between Tea and the various Michelles? This is just one of the questions that start to pull the book apart.

The next chapter begins, "You really cannot tell half the story. People wrap around each other like trees planted so close that they fuse together" (Tea 2017: 241). The project of writing

Black Wave, a memoir in which Tea makes up everything and everyone except herself, is, at least within the story of *Black Wave*, impossible.

Although it took Tea several more publications and a decade and a half longer than her character to make the journey, what *Black Wave* provides for those willing to endure its complicated metaplay is a perfect illustration of how autobiography's inability to account for the complexities and divisions within the writing self paves the way for autofiction. Tea's marginalized intersecting identities as a queer, working-class, non-college-educated woman seem to have been at the heart of her drive to examine and authentically communicate something about her self from the very beginning. In an autobiographical context these identities often looked like roadblocks, as they do to Michelle when she seeks to shed them in her search of a "universal" story. In the autofictional context of *Black Wave*, however, they turn her into her own multitudinous, multi-dimensional heroine.

Towards the end of the book, a teenager Michelle has only met in dreams shows her a piece of paper detailing her statistics and biography, both up to and beyond the pending apocalypse. Naturally, this is Tea's biography. The teen asks Michelle to come with her "to the other life where the world does not end," but Michelle refuses, saying, "This Is Just – I Write Memoir. It's Weird To Read My Story Before I've Lived It" (Tea 2017: 293–94). The IA-character Michelle is being offered a chance to cross over and become an FBP, but chooses to retain her right to write her story over saving her own life. This is how we know Michelle is intrinsically an IA. On the last day on earth, she sits down to write a novel, starting with the first line of this novel, as the world comes to an end.

An apocalypse is the only appropriate conclusion to this narrative. We need Michelle's world to be destroyed and the metaleptic portals to close for Tea's (and our) world to be restored. As with much self-reflexive fiction, the unravelling and collapse of realistic storyline risks raising questions about the stakes and, ultimately, the point. We know the Michelle whose world is destroyed is not real, so why should we care? It is because of those metaleptic portals and the links we have seen between the real Tea and the various Michelles that we, in fact, care very much. Tea has successfully shown us a little of what it is like to have created IAs and to exist in the world as second (and third, fourth, fifth...) selves. She has helped us understand what it means to be a writing self.

Conclusion

I have posited autofiction as a threshold, or thresholds, whose position between the firmer locations of fiction and autobiography grants authors unique opportunities to both explore

and communicate the divisions at the heart of the writing self. By viewing this threshold through the lens of Booth's Implied Author and examining Michelle Tea's personification of her IA in *Black Wave*, I have shown how autofiction's indeterminacy between truth and fiction provides a uniquely malleable space for authors to examine our own indeterminacy between living and writing.

I began here because I believe Booth's IA is particularly fruitful for demonstrating autofiction's opportunities to explore the experience of being a self that is created and communicated as a second self through a particular text. It has limitations, however, such as when it comes to considering the divisions of selfhood encountered through the creation of wider bodies of work.

For further research into this, I suggest it might be better to turn to Michel Foucault's concept of the "author-function," introduced in his 1969 lecture, "What is an author?," which draws our attention to the relationship between an FBP and her wider public interpretation. Like the IA, the author-function bridges the gap between writer and work, and Foucault also refers to it in relation to a writer's "second self" (Foucault 2009 [1969]: 307). However, while the IA sits between the author and the narrator within a text, the author-function refers to the entire extra-textual representation of the authorial image. It is the cultural perception and categorization of all the texts that writer has written, and as such exists separate from both the author and any individual work.

As with the IA, this separation can be deeply unsettling for a real author, especially if her initial intention was to write about her (real) self. However, authors like Rachel Cusk – whose *Outline* trilogy (Cusk 2015; 2016; 2018) presents the figure of the writer as a "shape" that remains "blank" while everything around her is filled in (Cusk 2015: 240) – have found inventive ways to use the liminality of autofiction to confront not just themselves but also their broader public and cultural identities.

Looking at autofiction through the lens of either the IA or the author-function highlights the sense of multiplicity at the core of the writing self, and both approaches, I think, point to autofiction as a form of doubling. Split between being and text(s), intention and interpretation(s), all writers live a double life; and this, of course, is where my mother's fear of the dangers of having a writer in the family stems from. In autofiction, though, we get to turn our divided writing selves into simultaneously duplicated selves, and manufacture encounters with our own doppelgängers. Like us, these doppelgängerstraddle the boundaries between text and reality, so the horror, disequilibrium and "Unheimlich" traditionally associated with the

literary device of the double also have the potential to transgress those limits. In 1919, Sigmund Freud (2003 [1919]: 124-134) expanded on Ernst Jentsch's (1906) analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's (2016 [1816]) short story "The Sandman," which features multiple doubles, to identify the Unheimlich as a specific type of fear derived from something simultaneously known and unknown.

Most often translated as "Uncanny" but literally translatable as both "un-homely"/"unfamiliar" and "un-secret"/"unconcealed," this dual meaning and simultaneous effect of the Unheimlich is at the heart of what makes autofiction such an unsettling, yet also important, genre for both writers and readers. For those of us living with these divisions and dualities, and for those who live alongside us, understanding the writing self can be crucial for navigating the difficulties and dangers within that self.

This can make it an unsettling genre for both writers and readers, but also an intensely important one. For those of us living with these divisions, and for those who live alongside us, understanding the writing self can be crucial for navigating the difficulties and dangers within that self.

BIOGRAPHY

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