

Introduction

This is a book about the novel in the twenty-first century. It is about novels that leap over or push through fiction—novels that are often referred to as autofiction. More than anything else, though, it is about Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*, a monumental novel in six volumes and more than 3,600 pages that has become the preeminent example of autofiction and has changed how we conceive of novels.¹ Widely hailed for its heroic exploration of selfhood, compulsive readability, and restless experimentation with form and genre, *My Struggle* provides a sense of authenticity and intimacy that the contemporary novel has long been missing.²

Knausgård, I suggest, diagnoses a crisis in contemporary literature, and in his own life. Fiction has become stale, and his life as a harried father leaves him scant room to work. The remedy he prescribes is to write honestly about himself, not in the form of a memoir or autobiography, but in a novel.³ He consciously engages with, and undermines, a long critical history of equating novels with fiction. I argue that Knausgård decouples the novel from fiction, muddling the boundary between the two. Doing so, he renews and revitalizes the genre.

Autofiction, as I use the term throughout the book, is a subgenre of the novel. It involves a blurring of fiction and reality that would be seen as duplicitous in traditional autobiographies, with the paradoxical effect of suggesting a sincerity widely held to have been absent in contemporary literature. It evokes what Philippe Lejeune calls the autobiographical and the fictional pacts, which he envisions as invisible contracts between the reader and the author determined by genre designations on the cover and by the corresponding attitude of the readers; I join other critics in seeing this blurring as the product of what David Shields calls “reality hunger.” That hunger was already present in reaction to postmodernism, with its

insistence on sincerity and authenticity, and it peaked in the wake of the Financial Crisis of 2008, which revealed a system of exchange based on fictitious evaluations of worth. Autofiction shows that there is a reality and that it matters—albeit in a complex and contradictory manner that simultaneously contrasts and arises from the heightened understanding of postmodern fictionality.⁴

My Struggle is one of many new autofictional novels that make it impossible to maintain the kind of clear and fundamental distinctions between fiction and nonfiction advanced by critics like Dorrit Cohn.⁵ Today, autofiction “is everywhere,” as it was pronounced in the *Guardian* in 2018, while the *New York Times* in 2021 wrote about “the autofiction boom of the last decade.”⁶ Three writers who repeatedly have been named English-language practitioners of Knausgård-style autofiction, Ben Lerner, Sheila Heti, and Rachel Cusk, all of whom I discuss in the book, share Knausgård’s mistrust of fiction in various forms, and like him they experiment with form and genre. But they choose radically different ways to handle what can come off, variously, as skepticism, disappointment, or fatigue with fiction. Heti follows Knausgård, as she tries to slough off the unreal to find what lies underneath, while exposing the difficulties of writing as a woman, and Cusk practices a close attention that becomes a kind of a gendered truth-finding mission. Lerner, on the other hand, embraces the blurring of fiction and reality to play out several possible futures and, ultimately, to further a case for sincerity. *My Struggle* shares many of these concerns and techniques, but it stands apart in its monumental aspect, its omnivorousness, its faithfulness to facts, and what I call its “autofictionalization.”

The term arises from my reading of narrative stance and point of view and reflects how Knausgård fictionalizes his former self by placing the narrative consciousness in the past. While autofiction purports to define a literary genre, autofictionalization, as I define it, refers to this specific narrative technique. It is one of many ways that Knausgård—contrary to what critics who misread *My Struggle* as a “novel without form” suggest—uses and reimagines central tropes from the novelistic genre to manage his literary balancing act, which depends upon modes of reading and writing both fiction and autobiography.⁷ As such, my book is also about reading, where I make the case for a certain way of reading autofiction.

My readings of Knausgård and others move from affect to aesthetics, from feeling to form. The book opens with a backward glance at Knausgård’s career before beginning *My Struggle* and provides a historical and

theoretical account of the rise of autofiction. The first part lays out the groundwork of my argument, exploring Knausgård's commitment to reality and the ways he invokes it, with particular focus on Books 1 and 2. Building on the insights from the early part of the book, I then explore how shame is integrated into the novelistic form throughout all six volumes, before examining the relationship between fiction, form, and trust in the light of *My Struggle's* closing. Toward the end, I extend these insights to a discussion of autofictional novels by Sheila Heti, Rachel Cusk, and Ben Lerner, showing why autofiction has begun to dominate the literary landscape in the early twenty-first century and why *My Struggle* remains the pinnacle of this autofictional trend.

Karl Ove Knausgård ascended into international literary stardom with *My Struggle*. The six-volume novel chronicles Knausgård's life from his childhood, youth, and first marriage into the time of writing and led him to be hailed, among other things, as a "Norwegian Proust." In *My Struggle*, Knausgård, as James Wood wrote in a five-page review in the *New Yorker* when Book 1 came out in English in 2012, rescues things, objects, and sensations that otherwise are "pacing towards meaninglessness" by bringing "meaning, color, and life back to the soccer boots and to the grass, and to cranes and trees and airports, and even to Gibson guitars and Roland amplifiers and Ajax."⁸ Today, phrases like "literary phenomenon" and "Norwegian sensation" are still invoked when the name Knausgård appears in media. And *My Struggle* is referred to as the autofictional novel par excellence that both designated the advent and peak of this new subgenre in contemporary literature.

My Struggle brought Knausgård to a wide international audience, but by the time it was published, he was already a well-established writer in his native Scandinavia, where his earlier novels lay the groundwork for the experiments in *My Struggle*: the themes, the affects, the narrative tricks, and so on. His first novel, *Ute av verden (Out of the World)*, was published in 1998. The novel is narrated by Henrik Vankel, a man in his late twenties who, in the opening pages, arrives in a small, desolate town in northern Norway to work as a schoolteacher for one year. He becomes obsessed with, and has a relationship with, his thirteen-year-old student Miriam.⁹ In many ways, the book resembles Knut Hamsun's 1894 *Pan*. Both *Pan* and *Ute av verden* focus on their protagonists' memories of northern Norway; both are structured as frame stories; and both feature disturbing obsessions with a girl or young woman (Lieutenant Glahn, the protagonist of *Pan*, lusts after Edvarda, the daughter of a local merchant).

Where Hamsun's interest in the past is embodied in Glahn's unreliable narration, Knausgård's interest extends to a continual and explicit engagement with the questions of time, memory, and truth. In a one hundred-page excursion, Vankel tells the story of his parents and how they met, trying to understand how he ended up as he did: a highly educated intellectual without any actual self-insight. But mostly, the novel—as he sits and looks back at his time in northern Norway, just a few months prior, still longing for Miriam—is dominated by his shame, as he continually hides and suppresses his inner feelings. Toril Moi, in an excellent short essay, called the novel “one long investigation of the phenomenology of shame,” noting that “no one has written better about shame than Knausgård.”¹⁰ A decade after the novel's publication, Knausgård wrote in *My Struggle* about how Hamsun's novel followed him in his earliest youth to a point where he even identified with Lieutenant Glahn.¹¹ Such an identification suggests that the storyline of Knausgård's first novel was autobiographically informed.

Ute av verden became a bestseller, selling thirty thousand copies in Norway alone—an incredible number considering the density of the novel and the fact that it was Knausgård's debut.¹² In one of the national newspapers, a critic referred to the novel as “the sensation of the fall,” arguing that Knausgård was trying to merge the realism of Flaubert and Stendhal with Proust, Dickens with Joyce and Woolf, while another national newspaper declared the novel “a monument on modern man.”¹³ *Ute av verden* was awarded the prestigious Kritikerprisen, the Critic's Prize, an honor that for the past fifty years had never been bestowed for a writer's first novel, and publishers in neighboring countries soon brought the book out in Danish, English, and Lithuanian translations.¹⁴

In 2004, Knausgård published his second novel, *En tid for alt* (*A Time for Everything*). By then, he had moved from his native Norway to Stockholm, Sweden, where he lived with his second wife, the author Linda Boström Knausgård, and their first daughter. The novel opens with the story of the fictitious renaissance scholar Antonio Belloris, whose understanding of angels leads the novel's narrator to rewrite the Old Testament stories of Cain and Abel, Noah, and Ezekiel. The narrator's retellings seem to suggest both that historical perspectives shape our ability to see and that history could easily have unfolded in very different ways.

Some fifty pages before the novel's nearly six hundred pages come to a close, we discover that Belloris has been a fiction, and that all along we have been hearing from Henrik Vankel, the protagonist of Knausgård's first novel. Vankel's father—who was generally distant and authoritarian, and

has recently died—once commented upon the similarities between seagulls and fallen angels. The book is Vankel's attempt to recreate a moment of intimacy with him. As readers of *My Struggle* later discovered, Vankel's story, and especially his vexed relationship to his father, mirrors to a large degree that of Knausgård's. The novel also reflects Knausgård's evolving dissatisfaction with fiction, with Knausgård later, in *My Struggle*, leaving the fictional persona behind.

En tid for alt never made it to the bestseller lists, but it was nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize (Scandinavia's equivalent of the Man Booker Prize), and critics loved it. A Norwegian critic wrote that the novel made it evident that Knausgård had a "unique talent," while a Danish critic assured readers that "Nordic novelistic history" had been written with Knausgård's new book.¹⁵ It was soon translated into even more languages than his first novel—Swedish, Danish, German, English, Dutch, Polish, and Rumanian—and helped expand Knausgård's reputation as a writer.

It took another five years before Knausgård published his third novel, which his publisher announced would come out in six volumes over the span of a single year. *My Struggle*, Book 1, was published in September 2009 in Norway. Book 2 came out in November that same year and Book 3 was released in December. Book 4 followed in February 2010, while Book 5 came out in June. But Norwegian readers had to wait almost a year and a half until Book 6—more than 1,100 pages long—was published in November 2011.

In *My Struggle*, Knausgård writes about his own life as a father of three, living as a Norwegian expat with his second wife, Linda Boström Knausgård, in Malmö in southern Sweden. He describes in painstaking details his ambivalence toward being a parent and how, in the midst of diapers needing to be changed, piles of laundry needing to be washed, and kids needing to be dressed, fed, and taken to and from daycare, he struggles to find time to write. *My Struggle*—a novel where he writes about himself using not only his name but also the actual names of friends and family—investigates how he ended up in that situation.

The release of Book 1 led to a string of controversies in Norway. Half of Knausgård's family publicly distanced themselves from him and his novel, and his uncle threatened to sue both him and his publisher. Newspapers asked lawyers, philosophers, and other experts to weigh in on the legal and ethical issues related to writing about other real people in a novel: Who is allowed to tell whose stories? Where should the line

be drawn when we speak of respecting other people's privacy? Does Knausgård cross that line by revealing intimate details not only about his own life but also about his family, his friends, and his acquaintances? Pages upon pages were dedicated to comparisons between the novel and Knausgård's actual life. The media revealed details that Knausgård had never even touched upon in the novel and waited outside his apartment to take pictures of him as he walked his children to day care, turning some of the ethical questions upside down: now it was the media that controlled the narrative of Knausgård's story, just as he in the novel had controlled the narrative of other real people.

But the novel was not just met with controversy: the feverish coverage of and conversations around *My Struggle* included heaps of critical praise. In *Aftenposten*, Norway's largest daily, the critic Hans Skei wrote: "It should be impossible. But Karl Ove Knausgård gives literary form to something that not only seems personal but almost private. It could have turned out to be self-absorbing and subject to the limitation of self-representation. Instead, it turns out to be artistic writing of the highest quality and a well-composed novel."¹⁶ Other critics agreed. In the tabloid *VG*, Norway's second largest newspaper, Morten Abrahamsen rejoiced that in Knausgård, Norway finally had a writer "at the level of the international top-class," noting that there was "no doubt that *My Struggle* is great literature [*stor litteratur*]."¹⁷

Book 1 far outsold any other of Knausgård's novels. While the first printing was ten thousand copies—a number Knausgård in Book 6 reveals he thought was too high for the kind of book he had written—Book 1 ended up selling more than 140,000 copies in Norway alone.¹⁸ The following volumes each sold a little less, with Book 6 "only" selling around fifty thousand copies. In total, all six volumes have sold close to half a million copies in Norway, a country with a population of just 5.4 million.¹⁹

As the six books rolled out, Knausgård seemed ever present in the Norwegian media. *Dagbladet*, a major national newspaper, printed a special section, "Knausgård for dummies," with a guide to the novel so its readers could, the cover said, take part "in the discussion without having to read 3,000 pages."²⁰ The Language Council in Norway recorded the newly minted verb *to knause*, meaning to tell seemingly insignificant details from your life after reading *My Struggle*.²¹ And in December 2010, more than a year after the publication of Book 1, Norwegian *Elle* named Knausgård the "sexiest man in Norway"—though he had lived in Sweden for the past eight years.²²

After the publication of the first three volumes, the public coverage expanded from enthusiasm about the books, and debate over their ethics, to questions about the literary merits of Knausgård's novel, and whether, indeed, it was a novel in the first place. The occasion was an op-ed by the author Jan Kjærstad, published in January 2010. Kjærstad—a giant in Norwegian literature who was known in the 1980s as the postmodern author par excellence, and whose style the nineteen-year-old Knausgård tries to copy in Book 4 of *My Struggle*—criticized not Knausgård himself but the adoring critics who had compared “Knausgård to authors such as—I pinch myself in the arm, but I am awake—Ibsen and Hamsun and Proust.”²³ What the critics missed, he argued, was Knausgård's immediate context: a trend in contemporary Scandinavian literature in which a number of writers had created a hybrid genre consisting of a mixture of fiction, essay, and autobiography.²⁴ This new trend, Kjærstad continued, was particularly prevalent among writers in Sweden, where Knausgård happened to have lived for the past eight years.

Kjærstad's op-ed is a good reminder that Knausgård did not write *My Struggle* in a vacuum, but at a time when numerous Scandinavian authors had been working in different forms of autobiography. Knausgård himself often singles out the Swedish poet Stig Larsson and his 1997 *Natta de mina* as a book that changed his outlook on literature. Indeed, Larsson integrates his own life in a radical exploration of what literature is, whereby challenging conventional literary forms establishes a literary freedom. In the 1990s, the Swedish writers Carina Rydberg and Maja Lundgren also sparked controversy by using, in their mixtures of fiction and autobiography, the actual names of members of the Swedish cultural elite. In neighboring Denmark, Claus Beck-Nielsen staged his own disappearance and used the media stories that ensued as raw material for the biography *Claus Beck-Nielsen (1963–2001)*, which ends with the death of the author of that name. (He has since published novels using numerous different names.) And in Knausgård's native Norway, in 2002, after three decades writing fictional novels, Dag Solstad published the novel *16.07.47* (the day, month, and year of his birth), in which we follow the character Dag Solstad traveling from Berlin to a school reunion that takes place in his childhood home, and back to Berlin, where he starts writing this novel about his life.

The literary turn toward autobiographical writing also meant that a number of scholars were becoming more interested in the genre, and in what it meant to write from life. One of them was Arne Melberg, a

Swedish professor of comparative literature at the University of Oslo who had published a book on autobiography in 2009, and who responded to Kjærstad's op-ed just a few days later, turning the discussion of *My Struggle* into a question of genre, as Melberg defined *My Struggle* as a "literary centaur: the body of a novel with a biographical head."²⁵ The discussion of genre also spilled into some of the first scholarly accounts of *My Struggle*, where numerous new terms—such as "fictionless fiction" and "performative biographism," to name just two—were introduced to characterize what was at stake in Knausgård's novel.²⁶ Among this early scholarship, Poul Behrendt's pioneering article "Autonarration som skandinavisk novum" ("Autonarration as Scandinavian Novum"), written and published before the release of Book 6, and to which I return several times in this book, stands out for its precise analysis of central narrative features of *My Struggle*.

As the scholarly debates began, sales kept increasing. Just nine months after Book 1 had hit the Norwegian bookstores, it appeared in a Danish translation—and a few months after that, a Swedish translation was published.²⁷ The Italian translation appeared that same year, in 2010, followed by French and German translations in 2011. And in 2012, the first translation of *My Struggle* appeared in English. For Western readers, Knausgård seemed to be everywhere.²⁸

Autofiction: Fiction and Finance

The term "autofiction" has made it into the public imagination fairly recently, serving a perceived need: how to refer to what has seemed a spate of literary projects blurring autobiography and fiction. Several of the authors most often associated with Anglophone autofiction, like Sheila Heti and Chris Kraus, have distanced themselves from the term; Knausgård, for his part, has claimed to know nothing about it.²⁹ Autofiction, however, and as I use it, is a subgenre of the novel that involves a blurring of fiction and reality that has created a new sense of sincerity that suggests a departure from the poetics of postmodernism.

The term first appeared in print in English in 1972 in a review in the *New York Times* by novelist and critic Paul West. Four years later, in 1976, West introduced the term in a scholarly context in a *New Literary History* article where he used it to describe how fiction can often be read "as a mode of tethered autobiography, or *autofiction*."³⁰ The following year,

the French author Serge Doubrovsky described his novel *Fils*, on its back cover, as “fiction, of strictly real events and fact; *autofiction*, if you like.”³¹ Since Doubrovsky spent the coming decades championing the term with more volume and frequency than West ever did, his usage of it has been much better remembered, and he is almost always mentioned in discussions of its origins.³² In the span of his career, he defined autofiction “at least three different ways,” as Hywel Dix argues: stylistically, sociologically, and historically.³³ What’s more, it was in his native France that, in the ensuing decades, the notion of autofiction caught on among a group of authors that included, most notably, Annie Ernaux and Christine Angot.³⁴

In French and Francophone studies, Karen Ferreira-Meyers writes, autofiction has been “described, discussed and debated at length” with Doubrovsky remaining “one of the main contributors to the fine-tuning of the genre.”³⁵ Two contradictory definitions of autofiction emerged from these discussions. In one, advanced by Philippe Gasparini, autofiction is a genre wherein the events are true and the fictive is limited to “the very form of the narrative,” or how the author shapes the facts into a story.³⁶ In the other, advanced by Gérard Genette, autofiction is seen as “authentically fictional,” a genre in which “I, the author, am going to tell you a story of which I am the hero but which never happened to me.”³⁷

In Scandinavia, autofiction became popular in the wake of *My Struggle* and other celebrated autofictional novels. But the popularity mostly extended to the public imagination, as only a few Scandinavian scholars embraced and started studying the term systematically. Scholars in the Anglophone world were also late to pick up the term, but by the 2010s, critics and readers were deploying it with some frequency. In the anthology *Autofiction in English* from 2018, a number of scholars show “that various recent developments in research about life writing have brought the field of autofiction to a moment of effective emergence in English in both theory and practice,” as the editor of the anthology, Hywel Dix, writes in his introduction (7). The anthology gives evidence of the sprawling and emerging scholarship on autofiction, though the individual contributors don’t seem to agree on what autofiction is or whether it is a contemporary phenomenon.

According to Marjorie Worthington, in her 2018 book *The Story of “Me,”* contemporary American autofiction is the result of a trend that started in the 1960s. Autofiction is the result of how the poststructuralist notion that “all writing by its very nature merely [is] a representation of reality and, therefore, a fiction”³⁸ has been accepted by mainstream

audiences. As such, contemporary autofiction is essentially a postmodern genre, Worthington argues. Central to Worthington's argument is that American autofiction is mostly "written by write men" (19). As feminist literary theory began challenging the notion that an author necessarily is male, the white male writers of literary fiction turned to self-conscious writing to promote their masculinity.³⁹

In contrast to Worthington's argument about autofiction mainly being written by men, Hywel Dix points out that many practitioners of autofiction are women and suggests that autofiction as we see it today would not have been possible without the heightened status of women's writing. Many female writers, he asserts, have in autofiction found a "freer and freeing experimentation" where the new form has helped to represent women's experience in the twenty-first century.⁴⁰ Accordingly, autofiction has deliberately steered these writers away from postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Worthington's and Dix's conflicting arguments can be attributed to their different definitions of autofiction and its history. Where Worthington reads autofiction as a postmodern genre that spans the past fifty years, Dix is interested in autofiction as a recent twenty-first-century phenomenon that tries to move beyond the aesthetics of postmodernism. Yet, on the final pages of his anthology, Dix lists a "Select Bibliography of Primary Texts" of autofiction in English. Of the seventy-one works of autofiction listed on this eclectic list only a little more than a third is by female writers.⁴¹ It is also hard to ignore the fact that the author of a novel hailed as the pinnacle of contemporary autofiction is a white, Norwegian man whose nominal distinction between fathering and literature on the one hand and politics on the other is steeped in male privilege, as evidenced when he, for instance, in Book 2 of *My Struggle*, continually mocks the gender ideal of equality in Sweden and in the Swedish welfare state.⁴²

Worthington's second charge—that autofiction in essence is a "white" genre—is not easily qualified.⁴³ Indeed, in an essay in the *New Republic* from 2020, the novelist Tope Folarin asks, as the headline of the essay reads, "Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction?" Folarin opens his essay by asking what names come to mind when we hear the term autofiction. "Let me guess," he continues, "you are probably thinking about Rachel Cusk, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Ben Lerner, and Sheila Heti, among a few others"—all of whom have in common "that they are white."⁴⁴ Listing a number of novels by people of color that by all accounts would qualify as autofiction, including Michael Thomas's *Man Gone Down*, Zinzi Clem-

mons's *What We Lose*, and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*, Folarin points out that when critics have addressed the autobiographical aspect of these novels "it is simply described as being, well, autobiographical." To be sure, Folarin's own 2019 novel, *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, written, as he says, "under the influence of autofiction," was never described as such by critics but instead seen as an immigrant novel and a bildungsroman.

The reason for this, Folarin argues, is a literary landscape "dominated by white editors, white critics, and white readers" in which writers of color rarely are seen as "innovators who might establish trends that permanently shift literary culture writ large." While white writers share the privilege that their lives "are worthy of being transformed into literature regardless of how prosaic and boring they might be," writers of colors whose work could qualify as autofiction are placed in "literary categories—e.g., immigrant literature—that read as "exotic," even if their subject matter is utterly normal to those writers and the people for whom they are writing."⁴⁵ The result, Folarin insists, is that writers of colors aren't understood to be capable of the same artistic and creative freedom as white writers and that the genre of fiction misses a "fresh infusion of perspectives and ideas and talent."

My study of contemporary autofiction is undeniably very white, but I agree with Folarin that his novel, as well as those he mentions in his piece, are also autofictional; I would also add to his list Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ayad Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies*, and Brandon Taylor's *Real Life*—books that have at least been referred to as autofiction, though critics, as Folarin claims, seem to have focused more on their content than on their place within a contemporary autofictional landscape.⁴⁶ All of these novels were published a few years after the novels I discuss in this study, and they form what I would argue is a second wave of contemporary autofiction well worth attending to. I focus here on the first wave of autofiction by Knausgård, Heti, Cusk, and Lerner in order to explore, among other things, how their formal features have led them to be grouped together, and how they have shaped our understandings of what autofiction is today.

Autofiction has also been criticized as a commercial genre, tailored to satisfy "the marked need for 'relatable' protagonists while at the same time appearing to offer a new mode through which to deliver content," as Sarah Wasserman opines.⁴⁷ This view is shared by Lee Konstantinou, who sees autofiction as "an aesthetic gesture or practice or mode (or whatever you want to call it) that takes place at the intersection of genre and

marketing.”⁴⁸ The critic Christian Lorentzen turns to Doubrovsky’s blurb on the back of the novel *Fils* to express a similar sentiment, arguing that autofiction “came to us as part of the language of commercial promotion, a way of marketing as new something almost as old as writing itself: the blending of the real and the invented.”⁴⁹ Autofiction, Lorentzen warns, allows writers to stand “at a distance from the world—the ethics and the politics—on display in their novels, as far or farther than authors of fictions that aren’t autobiographical at all.”

In this criticism we find a tacit perception that autofiction is a gimmick and, above all else, about selling books. While Doubrovsky’s early definition of the term was in the form of a blurb on a novel, it was, as I discuss in chapter 2, also a direct response to the theoretical writings on autobiography by his friend Philippe Lejeune. To be sure, autofiction has been theorized and discussed in academia for decades by a host of mainly French scholars, though these discussions only sporadically have made it to the English-speaking world.⁵⁰ In Book 6 of *My Struggle*, Knausgård refers to the publication of his novel in numerous volumes as “a gimmick” and as such a shortcut to literary value premised upon emptying out the literary (6.67). But he also writes that neither he nor his publisher thought the book would have “any major impact,” though the first print of Book 1 was, after Scandinavian standards, an impressive ten thousand copies, presumably mostly due to Knausgård’s name recognition among Norwegian readers. In addition, none of the novels examined in this book were promoted as autofictional when first published. In fact, the term autofiction was applied to these novels by critics, not by the publisher or the writers themselves, often long after their initial publication.⁵¹

In recent years, objections about the mere notion of autofiction have become a default gesture among a number of US-based scholars. Some seem to dislike the term itself; others, the idea that autofiction offers anything new.⁵² Certainly, the term autofiction is not perfect. But Fredric Jameson’s description of the term “postmodernism” as “internally conflicted and contradictory,” but nevertheless a term so popular that “we cannot *not* use” it, seems applicable to autofiction too.⁵³ Autofiction designates an important development of the twenty-first-century novel, and however contested it might be, the term—as Jameson reasoned with the term postmodernism—provides “something to call it that other people seem to acknowledge by themselves using the word” (xxii).

To understand my embrace of the term autofiction, I turn to autobiography myself, and more specifically, the 2012 University of Frankfurt

symposium where I met Knausgård. I had been invited to give a talk on the history of pan-Scandinavian literature, and I included a final section on Knausgård, whose six-volume novel I had started reading a few weeks earlier but still had not completed.⁵⁴ Arguing that *My Struggle* had shown the emergence of a new pan-Nordic literary public, I prefaced my remarks by declaring how I read the book: “And perhaps I should start by saying that I read *My Struggle* as a novel, with an emphasis on the word ‘novel,’ with a protagonist and narrator named Karl Ove who might share the same name and identity with the author, but also that this is not what makes it interesting.”⁵⁵ And then I turned my attention to the novel’s criticism of the Nordic welfare state.

At the lunch following my talk, I was confronted with a different reality—literally. I was at a table with the hosts and other speakers at the symposium, and was talking with the Finnish author Monika Fagerholm, when Knausgård, who had been invited to the symposium too, arrived. He had missed the morning sessions because his flight had been delayed but made it in time to read from Book 2, which had just been published in German, later in the afternoon. Now, he politely shook hands with everyone in our little group, sat down next to me, and joined our conversation. It turned out that Knausgård and Fagerholm already knew each other, and soon the two of them were engaged in conversation.⁵⁶ As I sat there listening to the conversation, adding a comment here and there, I started thinking about the relationship between the man sitting next to me and the protagonist by the same name in *My Struggle*. I recognized traits in him that I knew from what I had read of the novel, such as when he spoke of how nervous he had been when his flight was delayed. This recognition was unnerving, as though I knew more than I should, but it was accompanied by the opposite feeling: that I, in fact, did not know anything about the man sitting next to me. The feeling came about as he talked his way through the events of the day that seemed vastly different from those described in his novel and I realized the person next to me did not fit the mold of the novelistic character by the name Karl Ove Knausgård. As a result, I could not get myself to bring up *My Struggle* in my conversation with him, although in the past I had often talked with writers about their work. Somewhat shaken, I realized that I had been wrong in my reading of *My Struggle* that morning: that it certainly, but in a complex and ambiguous interplay between the two, matters that the author of the novel is the same as the character—and that this is, in fact, part of what is most interesting about it.

Karl Ove Knausgård exists.⁵⁷ Claiming that he does not—or that he is purely a literary character indistinctive from any fictional character, as several other scholars have suggested and as I myself once wanted to believe—is ridiculous. That the character shares his name with the author inevitably informs our reading of the novel. It forces us to ask what the relationship is between these entities. I ask this question not historically or biographically, which would involve collating sources to examine similarities and differences, but formally, in terms of how this relationship obtains and signifies in his novel. How does *My Struggle*, through autofictionalization, make the past seem present? How does it blur the difference between fiction and reality? How does it simultaneously evoke both the autobiographical and the fictional pacts? Knausgård's insistence on the shared identity of character and author seems imperative for any reading of *My Struggle* to consider.

For other autofictional novels, too, we cannot—or at least, we should not—ignore the reality that they embrace. But it does not follow that we cannot simultaneously read them as novels. To this duality *My Struggle* serves both as a testament and a validation. In addition to employing the autobiographical pact, *My Struggle* invokes the novelistic pact and uses formal features typically associated with fiction. Using these features does not turn all of *My Struggle* into a fictional novel. Instead, it reinforces how we are dealing with a trope that involves two otherwise contradictory ways of reading. And that is precisely what I experienced in Frankfurt and what came to inform my approach to reading *My Struggle*: the uncanny feeling that Karl Ove Knausgård—the author I sat next to during lunch—was simultaneously identical to and different from the Karl Ove Knausgård I had met in *My Struggle*.

In this book, I use the term autofiction to distinguish those novels whose authors, as Annabel L. Kim puts it, use “the strategy of playing their biographical, or real, identities against their thinly disguised autobiographical protagonist in ways that enchant and frustrate readers” from traditional, memoiristic life narratives.⁵⁸ Autofiction, as Kim observes, is not autobiography; it is a subgenre of the novel. It involves a blurring of fiction and reality that would be a detriment in a traditional autobiography of, say, a former president or well-known athlete. It is, as Alison Gibbons writes, an “explicitly hybrid form of life writing that merges autobiographical fact with fiction.”⁵⁹ Autofiction often employs tropes that are rarely found in autobiography, including metafictional passages, digressions, and what Myra Bloom lists as “metatextuality, fragmentation,

formal experimentation, and narrative hybridity.”⁶⁰ I add to this list the technique I call “autofictionalization,” where Knausgård narrates his former self as if it were a fictional character.⁶¹

Bloom asserts that autofiction’s methods “are cribbed from the post-modern playbook.” But, she continues, the “earnest existential and ethical investment” of autofiction signals “a renewed faith in the possibilities of personhood.”⁶² Indeed, autofiction is a far cry from a postmodernism that, according to Jameson, is characterized by a lack of depth, a waning of affect, and a departure from an inside/outside dichotomy.⁶³ Instead, a belief in depth, affect, and the dualism of the inside/outside dichotomy is precisely what describes many of the novels often labeled as autofiction, including *My Struggle*.⁶⁴ Following Jonathan Sturgeon, we might say that autofiction reveals that “the postmodern novel is dead.”⁶⁵ In its place, autofiction in its current iteration has injected a sincerity and sense of authenticity that otherwise seem to have been missing in contemporary literature, part of what Alison Gibbons refers to as an “affective turn” in contemporary autofiction.⁶⁶ Where autofiction was often associated with postmodernism in France in the 1980s, contemporary authors blur fiction and nonfiction to evoke a reality that helps their novels engage readers. And by narrating their own genesis in what Johannes Voelz, in relation to autofiction, has coined the “*making-of* novel”—albeit with explicit considerations of truthfulness, unreliability, and faulty memories—these novels paradoxically develop a sense of authenticity.⁶⁷

The desire for such authenticity—or as David Shields called it in a 2010 manifesto of the same name, “reality hunger”—is itself a product of postmodernity. Knausgård identifies this desire when, in Book 2 of *My Struggle*, he diagnoses a crisis of contemporary literature in which we are “totally inundated with fiction and stories.” Literary fiction, he suggests, has lost its value because of its fictionality: “Wherever you turned you saw fiction” (2.561). Sheila Heti expresses a similar fatigue, telling one interviewer that she has become “less interested in writing about fictional people, because it seems so tiresome to make up a fake person and put them through the paces of a fake story.”⁶⁸ David Shields, for his part, writes that he finds it “very nearly impossible to read a contemporary novel,” before denouncing the entire genre: “The novel is dead. Long live the antinovel, built from scraps.”⁶⁹

To Shields, the novel has become too outdated and boring to seriously reflect the ever-changing and chaotic world we live in today. We have turned, he says, from novels to reality TV, documentaries and

mockumentaries, sampling and celebrity DJs—work that in some way or other invokes reality as its raw material. Where literature is concerned, he hails the memoir, the lyric essay, and collage (“an evolution beyond narrative”) as the genres best suited for a new artistic movement. This new movement, he says, consists of “a burgeoning group of interrelated but unconnected artists” who are “breaking larger and larger chunks of ‘reality’ into their work.” Shields frames his own book, plundering and fragmentary, as the movement’s *ars poetica* (3–5).⁷⁰

It is not surprising that Shields’s book has often been invoked in discussions about autofiction as well as readings of *My Struggle*.⁷¹ Shields, Günter Leypoldt writes, “provided resonant concepts,” and Knausgård gave “these concepts a new life by providing a compelling readable example.”⁷² *My Struggle* certainly affirms Shields’s diagnosis of how we “yearn for the ‘real’” and “want to pose something nonfictional against all the fabrication” (81). When Knausgård was asked about *Reality Hunger* in an interview, he answered that he “didn’t read David Shields until I was done with these books [the *My Struggle* series]” but that he “related to his views in many ways.”⁷³ He did not offer further details, but it seems safe to say that Knausgård does not want to join the movement Shields describes: Shields advocates for even more, and shorter, fictions, which Knausgård wants—in a series of sprawling tomes—to move beyond.

Shields advances his cause via a discussion of the controversy surrounding James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. In 2005, Frey appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to discuss his memoir, which he presented as the true story of his way back to sobriety after a decade of drug and alcohol addiction.⁷⁴ Soon after, the website *The Smoking Gun* revealed that large chunks of the book were fabrications. At first, Oprah Winfrey defended Frey, but a few weeks later she invited him back on her show for what Shields refers to as a “whipping.” Frey profusely apologized for misleading both Oprah and his readers. But he should not have apologized, Shields writes: “I’m disappointed not that Frey is a liar but that he isn’t a better one. He should have said, *Everyone who writes about himself is a liar. I created a person meaner, funnier, more filled with life than I ever could be*” (43, original italics). Suggesting that Frey should have insisted that every autobiographical account necessarily is fictitious, Shields implies that our reality hunger can never be satisfied: every new attempt to write about ourselves and engage reality cannot help but be a fiction. Rejecting any notion of authenticity, Shields offers “advice” to Frey that is not even his own, but a quote he plundered, without in-text attribution, from an

unpublished manuscript by the memoirist Alice Marshall.⁷⁵ Shields's quotations suggest a view of language as a prison house that we can never escape:⁷⁶ because a signifier only refers to other signifiers and never to the signified, language itself is a kind of fiction, pointing only to itself, never to some other, deeper, "real."⁷⁷ "If this is right," says Toril Moi about Shields's reading of Frey, "everything in *My Struggle* would be fiction."⁷⁸ In Shields's account, all autobiographical attempts are fictional and all pursuits of authenticity illusory.

I too find Shields's prescription—that is, for more fiction—wanting, but his description of a condition of "reality hunger," in which we "yearn for the 'real'" and want to "pose something nonfictional against all the fabrication," is convincing. It helps us understand and name the attempts to engage reality in our culture generally, and in autofiction specifically, even though he pays scant attention to causes—which is to say, history.⁷⁹

To understand what caused a reality hunger so deep that numerous authors simultaneously started writing about their own lives in the form of a novel around 2010, we must turn to recent history. Here, the notion of post-truth that has dominated politics in the Western world for the past decade offers one model of explanation, as we, in the words of Ralph Keyes, "live in a post-truth era." Post-truthfulness, he asserts, exists in an "ethical twilight zone" because it allows us to justify dishonesty if the truth conflicts with our values.⁸⁰ Though the term was coined as early as 1992, it became a dominant theme in discussions of politics in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, when, in a speech to UN Security Council, then–secretary of state Colin Powell infamously presented the "facts" of the case against Saddam Hussein—facts that turned out not to be facts at all. In 2016, the election of Donald Trump, as well as new paradoxical terms as such "fake news," "truthiness," and "alternative facts," marked a culmination of this tendency.

It would be tempting to see contemporary literature's insistence on a reality of sorts as a response to this development where political discourse has been divorced from reality. But that the divorce of political discourse from reality is only a symptom of a larger historical development of the 1990s and the early 2000s, in the course of which it became increasingly clear that capitalist society rests on what Marx called "fictitious capital," was made explicit by and peaked with the advent of the Financial Crisis of 2008.

Knausgård started writing what eventually became *My Struggle* in February 2008, just a few weeks after the word "subprime," referring to the subprime mortgage crisis, had been voted "Word of the Year" by the

American Dialect Society. In Scandinavia, most major news outlets had been covering the credit crisis since the summer of 2007, with newspaper articles explaining subprime loans.⁸¹ Over the course of the year, the debt that continually had accumulated in the previous decades defaulted; two of the world's largest investment banks went bankrupt; the housing market crumbled; and unemployment soared.⁸²

Suddenly, the world faced a major financial crisis. Initially, this seemed like a wake-up call for finance capitalism, with Alan Greenspan, the former chair of the Federal Reserve and a lifelong champion for deregulation and neoliberalism, admitting that he had made a “mistake” in assuming that banks were “best capable of protecting their own shareholders and their equity in the firms.”⁸³ But, as history has shown, that wake-up call was greeted with another snooze.

The halt in predatory lending practices was temporary: finance capitalism continues at full speed, with subprime loans continuing under a new name, “non-prime loans”; they make up an increasing share of mortgages taken out.⁸⁴ But the crisis exposed what critics had long claimed: that our whole financial system, based on “fictitious capital,” has, in Fredric Jameson's phrase, taken a “dialectical leap from quality to quantity, and a transformation so central to the system—and so momentous in its consequences—as to be considered a historically new phenomenon in its own right.”⁸⁵ Consequently, Jameson's assessment of our current financial system suggests that we have moved beyond the economic conditions that were reflected in the aesthetic of postmodernism as he had defined it.

That we are witnessing a “historically new phenomenon” might be the reason numerous attempts to understand autofiction in the context of postmodernism, including Jameson's own attempt, seem inadequate. Jameson, in a review of Book 6 of *My Struggle*, focuses solely on Knausgård's itemization, arguing that in postmodernism all there is left is “to list the items that come by.”⁸⁶ But Jameson, whose reading of Knausgård I discuss in chapter 2, is far from alone in his attempt to insist on understanding autofiction in a postmodernist context. Sarah Wasserman asks why it is that “autofiction has so many scholarly admirers” and answers that it is because it “satisfies the desire for something new, and the need for a humane ethical position that can be articulated through writing itself.” The problem, however, is that when we try to “diagnose the newness of contemporary fiction by engaging with rhetorical and genre innovations and variations,” we do so “while insisting that the global economic order” that helped solidify and diagnose postmodernism “remains operative”

(578, 580). As such, Wasserman asserts, the real question to ask when it comes to autofiction is: “How new, how contemporary is it, really?” (580).

To Lee Konstantinou, autofiction is a gesture or mode that “takes place at the intersection of genre and marketing” and reveals the “internalization of marketing into literary form.”⁸⁷ Autofiction, he continues, confronts the reality “that under neoliberalism, the individual is increasingly charged with the job of managing his own portfolio of human capital.”⁸⁸ This is the very reason writers of autofiction supposedly are obsessed with “the process of publishing and the mechanics of the writer’s life” because they “must, like any independent firm, hire and fire agents, editors, and publishers and must navigate personal and professional relationships.”

Anna Kornbluh historicizes autofiction by turning to what she calls the “macroeconomic structures” and the restructuring of work with deindustrialization, privatization, and deskilling of labor from the 1970s to the present.⁸⁹ The intensification of work with an “omni temporality and the 24/7 workday” is “exerting a lot of pressure on circulation” with demands of “rapid exchange, fluent and direct messaging, and instantaneous logistical management,” to name just a few of these infrastructures of “instant contact and rapid relay.” This provides the context for explaining an aesthetic mode of “self-emanation, disclosure, and no filter, the kinds of modes of manifestation that are often very stylized but with the pretense that they have no style: the author is the character, the self is without boundaries.”

What these accounts have in common is a desire to situate autofiction in the context of neoliberalism and postmodernism. But while their cultural and economic analysis is both fascinating and seductive, it also makes it difficult to distinguish between a bestselling memoir or autobiography from the 1980s and an autofiction novel from the 2011, as both are considered symptoms of the same historical conditions. With this comes a rejection of the reality claim that is central to many autofictional novels as nothing but a style or a fiction, thus invoking the proposition that it is impossible to move beyond the fictional. Such a proposition not only seems archaic here in the twenty-first century; it also ignores how writers of autofiction deliberately position a thinly veiled protagonist against their actual identities.

Some of these attempts to understand autofiction in the context of postmodernism seem more interested in rejecting or belittling a certain literary genre than in trying to understand it. In a discussion of autofiction, Mitch R. Murray, for instance, goes to great lengths to inform us that he thinks “often and with bitter resentment” about Elif Batuman’s 2017

novel *The Idiot* because his “experiences as an undergraduate and graduate student look nothing like Batuman’s.” This leads him to conclude that the reason autofiction “is a very vocal and well-promoted niche, at least within literary critical circles” is that it offers “a comfortable narrative about what universities are supposed to [do]: produce educated, successful, upwardly mobile, white-collar neoliberal subjects.”⁹⁰ He supports this claim not with analysis of other novels, but with a ranking of the universities attended by eight autofiction writers, including Knausgård, Heti, Cusk, and Lerner. (Murray conveniently ignores that the scholars who work closely on autofiction rarely are products of or work at elite American institutions, while the deriders of autofiction—many of whom are mentioned earlier—are and do. Indeed, the four scholars whose work on autofiction my definition of the term derives from—Alison Gibbons, Myra Bloom, Arnaud Schmitt, and Stefan Kjerkegaard—are all employed and trained outside the US.⁹¹ In contrast, Lee Konstantinou received his PhD from Stanford University, Sarah Wasserman from Princeton University, and Anna Kornbluh from University of California–Irvine, while Murray received his PhD from the University of Florida and currently is a postdoctoral fellow at Emory University.) In a similar tone, Sarah Wasserman dismisses autofiction as a “critical darling” that presents “its exploration of the self with enough novelty to seem experimental, even when it is formally conventional.”⁹²

The rejection of autofiction by these scholars should not come as a surprise. In an essay on *My Struggle*, Toril Moi writes that applying “conventional criteria” to understand *My Struggle* will predictably lead to the conclusion that it “is a complete failure.”⁹³ But a literary critic could choose another path: “she could try to figure out how to read this novel in new ways, drawing on completely different criteria for good writing. Instead of looking for symbols, she could consider the text’s authenticity, passion and integrity, the quality of its descriptions, its capacity to convey reality, or its world-building abilities, just to mention some options.” In this book, I attempt to follow Moi’s path.

In recent years, a number of scholars have offered a host of new terms to describe what comes after postmodernism. Several of these accounts point to the centrality of the financial crisis and a few even suggest a correlation between the crisis and autofiction. Arne De Boever and Paul Crosthwaite both paint a picture of the complex ways contemporary literature confronts its inevitable participation in a financialized economy by mobilizing the tension between reality and fiction. The former explores in *Finance Fictions* (2018) how contemporary novels, including Ben Lerner’s