

Ideas from Jill Ker Conway's book on Women's Autobiography: *When Memory Speaks*

Like epic or lyric poetry, drama, the novel, and biography, autobiography constitutes a genre, or type of literature, with specific conventions, or patterns and techniques. Foremost among these conventions is the practice that the author speaks about him or herself. Secondary to this, the autobiography uses one of several *basic plot structures*: that of the spiritual journey, or conversion from one way of life to another, such as St. Augustine's *Confessions*; of the quest or odyssey, in which a hero(ine), a (wo)man of greater stature than those around him, accomplishes a great deed and returns to claim his rightful place in the land of his birth; the financial and political version of this, such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, which details his rise to wealth by means of self-control (a version of the *exemplary life*); of the romance, in which a woman finds happiness and definition by marrying a prince and has little if any agency, and variations of these. Conway suggests that a key theme, and hence pattern, of late 20th- and 21st-century autobiographies may be that of the inadequate family, because of the high rate of divorce, among other social problems. (Subgenres include the marginal viewpoint (such as slave or captivity narrative), romantic rebel, or artist's life. Some autobiographies give views of those who knew great men; these are called memoirs.)

The *reliability of the author* and the *breadth of perspective* are other features of autobiography worth noting: whether the author seems well-informed, aware of a range of views and facts, clear or blind in vision, and wide or narrow in the range of evidence included in the life story. For example, someone who writes about the difficulties of growing up in a wealthy family but never being valued may seem ignorant of the constraints facing most people if he/she fails to mention the advantages conferred by money (and perhaps class and education). This raises the issue of *selection* of events included in a life story: the choice of what matters and what illuminates the individual life. Franklin mentions his wife and child(ren) twice—suggesting the unimportance he felt they had in his (a) life story.

Another characteristic lies in attention to the *formation of identity*: the social, historical, and psychological forces that influence the development of the individual in society. Typically, autobiography concerns men and their development and lives. Recent autobiographies of women turn attention more to domestic and emotional spheres and present other implicit theories of development as they dismantle myths about a basic feminine (and maternal) identity that attends mainly to the needs of others. One distinction between male and female autobiographies, and among autobiographies in general, is the concept of agency: society has expected men to have and exercise more agency than women do. Agency includes ambition, drive to succeed in the world and to attain power over others as well as recognition for one's talents and accomplishments.