

HANNAH SHEA

## My Metafictional Struggle

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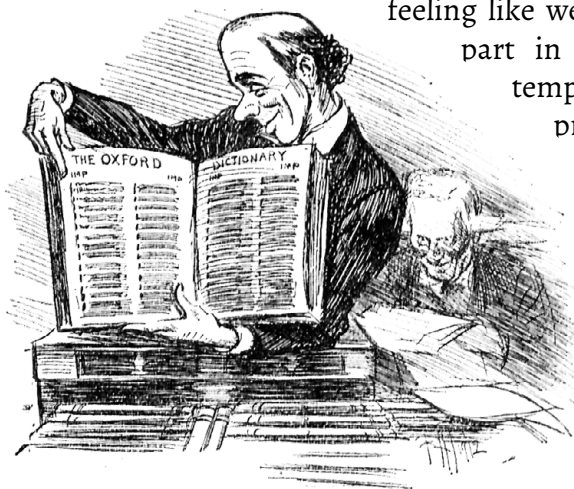
*"Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines itself towards obscurity, not clarity."*

—Elena Ferrante

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For several months, my boyfriend and I traded volumes of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels back and forth during visits, from Jerusalem to DC to Chicago. His mom got in on it too, buying her own copies and out-reading both of us. Somewhere between reading the third and the release of the fourth, that other European multi-volume writer, Karl Ove Knausgård, nudged his way in, his first volume of *My Struggle* making its way from mother to son to girlfriend. There was a period of time while he was visiting Chicago that we read together—at cafes, on the train, by the lake—he with his Knausgård, me with my Ferrante. I couldn't help imagining we looked like a Seminary Co-op window display. I also couldn't help

feeling like we were reluctantly taking part in a battle of gender, or temperament, or degrees of pretentiousness, fought with our choice of sufficiently-literary-yet-highly-addictive novels. At that point, having not yet read Knausgård, I was obstinately loyal to



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Ferrante, and felt there was something to be loyal to.

If I had to divide my life so far into two parts, the first part, much longer than the second, would be my most formative years, and the second part would be the years I came to understand how I was formed. In the first, I grew up with my family in my hometown in the status quo that enclosed that time and place. I had happiness and frustration, intuitions and questions, confusion and general angst, but didn't know how or why. In the second, I was away, at college. I had enough distance and time with different people to understand how my childhood and adolescence had affected me. We were all coming to understand the ways we'd been shaped, and in my eyes the quality that always forgave a person the damages, privileges, quirks, or affectations of their cloistered upbringing was a healthy self-awareness. But

for me, this new layer of self-awareness came with a new, less healthy self-consciousness as well. On the one hand, I started to understand why I didn't know how to tell funny stories, or why I struggled to start conversations with a stranger at a party—and what that had to do with



Marched proudly up the platform with my cheeses

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my past and the person I am. On the other, understanding these formative things didn't mean I could change them; instead, I tended to feel them as an anxious presence, taking up room in my mind. Your self-awareness can quickly surpass your competence, and part of being self-aware is knowing that. (It's like being "well-read"—the more books you know, the more you know you don't). Part of being self-aware is being self-conscious.

So, helpfully enough, I became preoccupied with my own self-consciousness. And in that context, after reading these two memoir-like, intensely metafictional books, I firmly hoped to end up relating to my own life, my own narrative, in the manner of Elena Ferrante rather than Karl Ove Knausgård.

My valuation of Ferrante over Knausgård doesn't have to do with the quality of their writing or the contents of the lives they write about. Rather, I compare them because their books embody two different modes of being in one's mind while engaging in one's life. Each features an authorial character writing a memoir in which his or her past self is also a writer. *My Struggle* can be considered Karl Ove Knausgård's biography, while the Neapolitan novels are not the story of Elena Ferrante's life ("Elena Ferrante" is a pseudonym). However, the relationship of the authorial character of Elena Greco to her past is comparable to Knausgård's. Both separate the Karl Ove or Elena of the past and present into two characters whose minds are exposed for observation. As the older self encounters the younger, we glimpse their reflections, preoccupations, and processes of writing.

These metafictional glimpses in *My Struggle* are filled with philosophical musings on death, art, time, knowledge and how to understand oneself in the world. Right at the beginning, Knausgård lays out his theory: growing up is a process of manipulating the world into just the right position so that we can understand it, and then fix it there. Everything new we encounter we simply fold into this understanding instead of making new meaning of it and letting it reconfigure our perception of the world and ourselves. There are no more mysteries. Later in the book, Knausgård describes the suffocating feeling this growing up produces. The world becomes "tightly enclosed around itself, without opening to anywhere else,"

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even while he knows this to be “deeply untrue, since actually we know nothing about anything.” (Try talking to this guy at a party.) He says this is the reason he writes, to write himself beyond his folded-up world. In the book, his younger self is attempting to do this by writing fiction, but he is failing and knows he will keep failing. So he decides that he should just write from inside of the world he knows—his own consciousness—and find meaning in it, instead of trying to get out.

There’s a scene at the beginning of the book where Knausgård talks about a Rembrandt self-portrait. The portrait becomes a model for what he’s trying to do in *My Struggle*—what he failed to do in fiction. In the painting, Rembrandt is old and Knausgård has the impression he’s staring straight into Rembrandt’s eternal, inner being, the Rembrandt that was Rembrandt to himself and not to others. Knausgård writes that Rembrandt “sees himself seeing while also being seen.” This quality in art moves Knausgård and he makes it an ideal. Later, he talks about this quality in terms of the “distance between reality and the portrayal of reality” when “the world seemed to step forward from the world.” In these moments, he is able to escape his fixed world and feel himself as part of something beyond, hopeful and in awe. Yet these moments of epiphany *depend* upon a disengagement from reality through a Rembrandt-style multi-layered consciousness.

I am compelled to compare *My Struggle* and Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend* because I think the difference between them as literary works depends upon how each authorial character engages with his or her life. Considered this way, they become books about how to live, reflect, and write, and my inclination towards one over the other has to do with the life I’d hope to live, and how I’d hope to think and write about it. Knausgård’s way didn’t offer much hope. In *My Struggle*, I felt Knausgård was writing out of a desperation to find meaning in a self-consciousness that overwhelms his life and stunts his ability to write the fiction he admires. I identified strongly with the division in his book between the events of his life and the existential preoccupations and insecurities that overpower them. But I feared that this division results in disengagement from life, the difference between anxiously viewing it from a distance and

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releasing into the stream of it. I saw a bit too much of myself already in Knausgård's "struggle," and for that reason I don't aspire to it.

Ferrante's work offers something different. The impetus for the Neapolitan novels is the question of how Elena can understand how the course of her life unfolded. There are two types of experiencing and giving meaning to reality that pull back and forth through the books. One is embodied by Elena and one by the counterforce to her life, Lila. While Elena writes everything she knows in order to create order from it, Lila "governs the imagination of others." Lila's strange gift of storytelling and controlling her reality overhangs Elena's whole life, no matter how far she gets from their childhood neighborhood in Naples. Much of the series focuses on Elena's journey out of her impoverished, violent, politically volatile home through college, writing, and marriage, but the fourth book brings her back to that neighborhood. Her writing is a barrier between her and her past. She does not return to the neighborhood to defeat its hold on her, she comes to "to create order" and to "paste one fact to another with words, and in the end everything has to seem coherent even if it's not." Elena's project is this: to tell everything about her life with Lila, and to see what shape it takes in the end when she steps away to look back at it.

We were too  
clever for  
them.

