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The World of Female Biographies!

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Hyperbole and a Half is a visual autobiography of Allie Brosh. As a female writer in the twenty-first century, Brosh embraces new concepts and ideas in the book. Her emphasis on isolated identity, her dynamic narration with both child and adult characteristics, and her choice to use blogging to present all set her apart from traditional female writers and autobiographers. In this essay, I will address why Brosh should be considered a pioneer in breaking old rules and biases in the field of female autobiography and on the presentation of autobiography in general.

In order to fully appreciate the contribution Brosh has made on the possibility of female autobiography, we need to first look at the history and tradition of female autobiography. As Carolyn Heilbrun points out in *Women's Autobiographical Writings: New Forms*, until very recently, women have lived in a "preautobiographical era in human history," and their portrayals of themselves have shown that "the singularity of each individual life has not yet evolved" (Heilbrun 16). Female autobiographers have been more likely to choose to emphasize more on the the events that happen to them than the people that experience the events. Heilbrun also points out that in female autobiographies, "the important unit is never the isolated being" (Heilbrun 16). Her argument sounds reasonable when we think about how the protagonist of female autobiographies are presented as a role in the society. The person is used to reflect the situation rather than the other way around. Male autobiographers, on the other hand, have focused on the people as early as St. Augustine's *Confession*. It is a diary-like book that presents his individual thoughts and ideas, with life events serve no more than to broach another reasoning of himself. Even when female authors try to turn their eye on identity, they nevertheless have been largely dependent on situation and on people around them: "The self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other'" (Heilbrun 18-19). It is not until the past two decades that more female autobiographers have attempted to tend to their identity.

In *Hyperbole and a Half*, Brosh steps into this relatively new territory of isolated female identity without hesitation. For example, in Identity Part One, readers see Brosh talking about her internal conversations and conflicts. She lists struggles between the wonderful image she views herself as and the five disagreeing elements which also stem from her self: impulses, effort, selfishness, other people's identities, and even her identity itself. The brutal realization of the existence of those disagreeing and disagreeable elements then drives her depressed. In her explanation of each of those conflicts, Brosh uses stories only to demonstrate how her two conflicting thoughts are fighting against each other. From page 340 to 342, with pictures of the television screen and herself on a sofa one after another, Brosh vividly describes how her inner thoughts are triggered by that television interview. As the marathon runner talks about his running for charity, Brosh sits on a sofa, eats chips, and is angry about how "shitty" she is "compared to the way these better people are able to be" (Brosh 340). Then regarding that thought, she checks herself and realizes "how petty [she is], which is also something [she doesn't] like to think about" (Brosh 341). These train of thoughts are daringly internal and self-reflective. Furthermore, Brosh fully uses the visual part of the book to clarify this seemingly boring and hard-to-express incident that happens in her head. In the pictures of herself, thoughts are written in the margin and swear words are included. Her emotional response also manifests on her facial expression. As the only character in this story line, Brosh proves that female identities can be represented in autobiographies as independent, complicated, and intriguing units.

Exploring identity is far from the only challenge Brosh takes on. It is necessary to note that, while Brosh does put effort into improving the lacking element in female writings, she is not someone who blindly follows the male autobiography standards just to cater to some biased critics and loses the unique voice of women. Through the success of *Hyperbole and a Half*, Brosh backs a certain female writing style and refutes the criticisms on female writings. When it comes specifically to graphic autobiographies, female writers are considered to be the ones who tend to "make forceful use of the multilayered narrative techniques enabled by the comics form, such as the copresent of child and adult narrators and the dialogic relationship of word and image" (Chute 6). Certain critics, unfortunately, see this overlap unfavorably because they are used to and thus automatically expect a consistent writing style. They "[misunderstand]" this feature "as merely 'childish'—as merely compulsive, even as repulsive" (Chute 6). Critics view this dynamic combination in female visual autobiographies as a flaw instead of a novel and creative expression.

We see in *Hyperbole and a Half* how Brosh masters using that very "childish" feature both to express her understanding of the world and to arouse empathy and interest among readers. In the whole chapter of *Dogs Don't Understand Basic Concepts Like Moving*, Brosh humorously narrates her two dogs' reactions, as the family move from Montana to Oregon, with comical pictures and language. A major method she uses in the chapter is the juxtaposition of wild imagination and serious languages. On page 183, for instance, she emphasizes the opposite reactions of her dogs. There are two funny pictures featuring her helper dog and simple dog immersed in their illusions. Between the two pictures is this message: "Over the ensuing few days, [the helper dog] slowly descended into psychological chaos. The simple dog remained unfazed" (Brosh 183). The use of serious language with funny depictions appeals to readers as they realize that Brosh is able to convert the usual and mundane incidences in life into fun and worth-telling anecdotes. Instead of sounding "childish," "compulsive," or "repulsive," the whole chapter is empowering. For readers, she encourages them to celebrate, instead of being ashamed of, their wild imagination as adults. For herself, she emphasizes the coexistence of her childlike imagination and her mind of an adult, which enables her to present a more accurate description of her experience. Brosh thus dismisses the criticism and insists upon using her own voice.

Besides her contribution to setting new grounds for the standard of female autobiography, Brosh also makes full use of modern technology and explores a new form of publishing that completely alters the traditional author-reader relationship. Traditionally, it takes at least a year before a finished book is presented to the public. In Brosh's case, however, it was instantaneous. As the chapters of *Hyperbole and a Half* were originally published online as her blog, the book belongs to the category of "journal comics" (Mazur & Danner 306). *Comics: a global history, 1968 to the Present* describes this new form of publishing as "valuing the immediate and the spontaneous over revision or craftsmanship," and this "immediacy [is] key to the success of many comics" by "[allowing] devoted readers to feel that they [are] privy to the creators' day-to-day lives and free to offer support and advice (or criticism) in the forums that often [accompany] these comics" (Mazur & Danner 306). That immediacy is exactly what Brosh offers. In the chapter *This Is Why I'll Never Be an Adult*, Brosh describes her inner struggle to be responsible like an adult before finally rebelling against that illusion and surfing the Internet for a long time. On her blog, this very chapter now has 848 comments below it, with "I just did this" and "I do the exact same thing" occurring over and over again as one scrolls through the comments. Her confession is apparently appreciated by readers who are just like her. More astonishingly, when I check the time of the blog and each of the comments, I realize that the first blog was posted 5 minutes after Brosh updated this chapter. Brosh posted the chapter on June 16th, 2010, 12:55pm, and the first comment is posted on June 17th, 2010, 1:00pm, followed by numerous comments posted at 1:01pm, 1:02pm... There is almost an intimate relationship between Brosh and her readers, which satisfies the readers as they feel how close they are to the author. It also benefits Brosh a lot, for she receives feedback at once and has a clear grasp of her audience and their expectations. Those comments pave a good anticipation of reception for her future writings.

In her writing, drawing, and presenting of *Hyperbole and a Half*, Allie Brosh successfully establishes herself as a pioneer for contemporary female autobiography and autobiography in general. It is vital for us to appreciate and be receptive to techniques used by contemporary writers like Brosh. These writers are willing to command new inventions like the social media and new ideas like feminism. They are adding insights to the dynamic realm of writing.

Works Cited

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