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Autobiographical Convergences

A Cultural Analysis of Books by Swedish Digital Media Influencers

Gabriella Nilsson

> I've always wanted to write a book. I don't know why, though, since my dyslexia makes it difficult for me to even read. It feels completely crazy and very exciting with a book that is just about me. At the same time, it is sad that you can write an entire book about your life when you are only 18 years old. I've already been through so much.
>
> *Nathalie Danielsson*[*]

Swedish digital media influencer Nathalie Danielsson, who daily shares her life narratives with over 2 million online followers, explains why she chose to publish her autobiographical book *Jag, Nattid* (I, Nattid). This sentiment and the increasing number of Swedish influencers, mostly girls and young women, publishing autobiographies since 2016, revive issues about the meaning of the autobiographical book in a digitized world. Although the rapid development of digital media is said to have shifted scholarly focus from "big life stories—long, retrospectively written accounts—to small stories—fragmented ongoing interactions" (Calzati and Simanowski 24), the autobiographical book still serves an apparent function, even for those who, on a daily basis, share life narratives in the form of "small stories" via digital media. Consequently, there is an opportunity to study the overlapping use of "big" and "small" stories, and in this article, I analyze autobiographical books written by a variety of Swedish digital media influencers.

It is a common notion that the advent of web 2.0 has granted girls and young women greater agency (Handyside and Taylor-Jones; Formark et al.). Already in 2006 in *Girls Make Media*, Mary Celeste Kearney described how girls had forged a space for themselves as culture makers in digital media. In a "reality hungry" media culture, girls were able to harness a range of digital media tools to enact and represent themselves in various ways (16). As boundaries between online and offline

have become harder to discern, so have the boundaries between private and public lives (McNeill and Zuern xiv). In this media culture, the phenomenon of influencer lifeworlds is developing, as girls and young women in particular transform their private life narratives and self-representations into digital businesses through a range of visibility labor and narrative practices on multiple digital platforms (Abidin; Marwick; Raun).[1] In these worlds of intertwined life and work, influencers both live and make a living from their life narratives, represented in their own content and in their marketing of various products (so-called "influencer marketing"). Julie Rak thus stresses that as scholars of life narratives become interested in online practices, we need to think about "online life as life, and not as the texts many of us are more used to studying." Life narratives should therefore not only be seen as representations of life, in the sense of finished textual products, but also as enactments of living, as incomplete processes of doing and being ("Life Writing" 156). However, the simultaneous production of autobiographical books and of life narratives online suggests that narratives of both *life* and *living* are needed in the life and work of influencers, and that different media may be suitable for different purposes (Poletti).

The practice of digital media influencers writing autobiographical books can be seen as an expression of the convergence culture that Henry Jenkins described in 2006, and which seems to be a precondition for the very existence of influencers. In convergence culture, new and old media clash, and content flows between media platforms and competing media industries. If each medium previously had a distinctive market and function, then the media market today, Jenkins argues, has expanded so that the same content moves between platforms and creates synergies. In the cases considered here, the flow is between life narratives in digital media and life narratives in autobiographical books, which are partly the same in terms of content. I also examine the expansion of the influencer marketing industry to include the book market, and vice versa.

In autobiography studies, the coaxer is "the person or the institution or the cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell their stories" (Plummer 21). With the increased commodification of the book industry, in combination with the reality-culture trend of recent decades, publishers have approached, or coaxed, digital media influencers about publishing their life narratives. Publisher Klas Ekman admits that it would be "stupid not to chase after influencers with hundreds of thousands of fans. A few thousand will buy the book regardless. And if it turns out well, it can even be a success" (Lindell 103). "Chasing after influencers" appears to be a response to the "shock" experienced by the Swedish book market when the definition of an "author" suddenly changed:

> It all started in 2015 when the YouTuber . . . Clara Henry broke the queue record at the Gothenburg Book Fair during a signing of her book. This shocked the book market, which had never understood that those who give "hearts" on Instagram also have access to money. But it was not until the following year, when another

> YouTuber, Therese Lindgren, released the book *Ibland mår jag inte så bra* [Sometimes I don't feel so well] that it all exploded. In five weeks, Lindgren's book sold 100,000 copies and became the bestselling nonfiction book of the year. (Karlsten 31)

Publishing influencers' life narratives in book form thus becomes a way for the book market to profit from digital media, and signals an acceptance that the "celebrity author" is here to stay. The "dual forces of Web 2.0 and 'the age of memoir'" (McNeill and Zuern xiv) have provided strong incentives in recent years to publish books written by influencers. Autobiography is a genre that sells well and is easy to market (Rak, *Boom!*). Marketability is a plausible reason for why the books were written, both from the perspective of the book market and of the authors themselves. Although influencers' main source of income is the digital work they perform online, it is not uncommon for them to launch their own physical products, including bags, jewelry, skin and hair care products, clothing, makeup, or perfume. To launch their own books as well is, therefore, not particularly at odds with their standard work, especially as some influencers collaborate with online bookshops or audiobook companies to market their books. Regardless of the origin of the initiative for the books, or the form of coaxing, convergence culture means that influencers generate economic value for the book market through their preexisting platforms of potential readers. At the same time, the book market generates both economic and cultural value for influencers, which might benefit their future careers. Alexandra Nilsson, one of Sweden's earliest and most controversial bloggers and author of *Hatad och älskad* (Hated and loved), said in an interview:

> I was amazed at how many doors the book opened. I had expected more setbacks, but it felt like people took the story more seriously when it came in book format. People seemed to understand that it was not so easy to become famous at such a young age. It gave me a more serious image. (Lindell 100)

Although autobiography is a multifaceted concept—"a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present" (Smith and Watson 1)—it is rare that the online life narratives of girls and young women are viewed as autobiographical work. In *Girls, Autobiography, Media*, Emma Maguire asks why some texts "get to be called autobiography and others called something else—identity work, play, media-making, self-expression, marginal textual practice." Maguire believes the answer lies in both the marginal nature of digital media, which are not understood as "literary," and the marginal position of their young, female authors (10). Thus, the convergent act of writing an autobiographical book is clearly a strategic achievement in the career of a digital media influencer. But how are their life narratives framed and plotted in the book format to generate value? This paper will analyze how digital living in influencer lifeworlds is described and explained in autobiographical books. How do

influencers tell their living when they write about their lives? Do autobiographical books have a different significance for their master life narratives than the daily narrative practices of digital media? Can this convergence between life narratives online and autobiographical books tell us something about the book's function in the digitized world?

Methods

The development of digital media has accentuated that the writing and sharing of life narratives is not just a literary practice, but a cultural practice as well (McNeill and Zuern xvi). Although this article considers autobiographical books, it is not a literary study. Precedence is not given to the texts themselves, but to the texts in their cultural context. This approach entails an interest in the books as both artifacts and cultural practices, and thus, in their meanings and functions for their authors—that is, their historically and culturally situated authorship. This includes a focus on the various "I"s involved in the practice (Smith and Watson 71): the plotted life-historical "I" about whom the book is written; the influencer "I" who constitutes the strategic vantage point from which the narrative is constructed; and the author "I" who selects, writes, and markets the book. This allows autobiographical books, and their patterns of emplotment in particular (Smith and Watson 92), to reveal something about their authors' worlds—in this case, about influencer lifeworlds, contemporary convergence culture, and digitized living conditions.

I explore these questions through a close reading of autobiographical books about established Swedish digital media influencers. "Established" means individuals who have hundreds of thousands, and in several cases millions, of followers on their various digital platforms, and who support themselves financially on the income generated by their online life narratives. I identified, retrieved, and read about forty books published between 2016 and 2021, from when the phenomenon emerged in Sweden until this study began. In this article, "authors" refers to the autobiographers that the books are about. However, most often, the books were written by ghostwriters who based their texts on repeated interviews with the influencers, and observations of their lives. The ghostwriter Martin Svensson, who worked on several of the books analyzed here, describes his work as based on trust: "We are loyal to the person, it is that person's book. We only help to write it. . . . We don't write books *about* people. We write *for* people. That is a huge difference" (Bielecka). However, Smith and Watson note that in ghostwritten narratives, "multiple levels of coaxing take place, including those of the ghostwriter or cowriter, whose prompting questions, translations of the autobiographer's oral speech, and revisions are often invisible in the final text" (67). On the matter of ghostwriters being either loyal or coaxing, it is plausible that the similar economic incentives of influencers and ghostwriters places the truth somewhere in between these two approaches. Regardless of which, the outcome—the finished books—might be the same.

Of the forty books initially identified, I selected fifteen that were, in my opinion, the most widely discussed, and thus the most influential in the development of the genre.[2] I read these fifteen books closely. Most of the authors are young women, with several in their teens. Four of the authors are young men. All but one of the authors was born in Sweden. Only one has an international influencer career.

My analysis is supported by paratexts in the form of approximately one hundred print-media articles published during the same period, consisting of reviews of the books or interviews in which the influencers speak at length about their lives or their books. The articles were retrieved and coded as data for another sub-study within the larger project (G. Nilsson). Quotations from the books and print-media articles have been translated from Swedish by the author.

The youth of the authors, and thus the brief pasts recounted in their books, do not affect the books' chronologies. Each book has a clear beginning, middle, and end. To varying degrees, the books resemble the linear form of conversion narratives: "descent into darkness, struggle, moment of crisis, conversion to new beliefs and worldview, and consolidation of a new communal identity" (Smith and Watson 91). Often, the narratives begin by revealing personal problems of various kinds, such as exposure to bullying, mental illness, or drug abuse, followed by an intermediate period of hard work in the digital world, only to end at the peak of their careers as successful influencers. The depiction of digital media as a game changer is central to all the narratives. Digital technology is given as much significance as the regular "crisis" in the dramatization of their lives. Their first encounters with a particular digital media platform—the blog, YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram—are described by many as a "salvation," after which the growth in followers, likes, and money found through digital media becomes the solution to their previous problems.

To explicate the narratives of emerging influencer lifeworlds in the autobiographical books, I draw on the work of Donna Haraway, both her influential theorizing of the cyborg some decades ago ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs") and her more recent work on companion species (*The Companion Species Manifesto*; *When Species Meet*). I will argue that the conversions the authors describe are their conversions into cyborgs, and their new worldviews and communal identities are their coevolvance with companion species in the form of digital media followers.

Already in the 1980s, Haraway used the cyborg figuration, a hybrid of machine and organism, as a metaphor for the split human identity, questioning dichotomies such as human/animal, organism/machine, and nature/technology. In one often-cited passage of her "cyborg manifesto," with an emancipatory agenda, she states that in our mythic time "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" ("Manifesto" 66). More specifically, while the traditional Western origin story depends on the myth of original unity and wholeness, the cyborg skips this step and instead "forms wholes from parts" (67). Within research on digital cultures, this aspect of Haraway's cyborg has been utilized to capture "the pervasive hybridity that subjects face if their

construction of selfhood requires the continuous use of digital technologies" (Greene 314). "As digital social media has made the virtual self increasingly ubiquitous and significant," Greene writes, "cyborg embodiment is as much about continually negotiating and existing across multiple realities as it is about being composed of many disparate parts" (315).

Although the cyborg had already been seen more as a dynamic process than a definable hybrid of discrete human and machine parts, Haraway made the ongoing processual intertwining even clearer in her elaboration of the post-cyborg entities she calls companion species (not to be confused with pets, which is an anthropocentric category) (*When Species Meet* 16). In her own words, Haraway has "come to see cyborgs as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species" (*Companion Species* 11). She explains: "Cyborgs and companion species each bring together the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways" (4). Haraway often uses dogs and dog-human relations as examples of a wider range of potentialities for constructing a politics of affiliation between humans, nonhuman animals, other organisms, and machines, by demonstrating that the boundaries between them are leakier than previously held. According to this perspective, no organisms possess fixed identities, but rather are in a constant process of identification, always shifting, changing, and incomplete. Companion species, Haraway writes, "is my awkward term for a not-humanism in which species of all sorts are in question" (*When Species Meet* 164). More concretely, her starting point is the nonhierarchal notion that we all, constantly and inevitably, "become with" both other living species and technology—that each species learns from and influences the others, thus coevolving. "Every species," she writes, "is a multispecies crowd" (165), "consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters" (4). The term is thus less a category than an indicator of this ongoing becoming with, "where who and what are is precisely what is at stake" (19). From a digital culture perspective, Deborah Lupton writes that "even as our digital data companion species engage in their own lives, they are still part of us and we remain part of them. We may interact with them or not; we may be allowed access to them or not; we may be totally unaware of them or we may engage in purposeful collection and use of them" ("Digital Companion" 3).

Being the Damaged Other

Writing autobiographical books involves certain challenges for digital media influencers. Unlike traditional autobiographical authors, influencers have often already shared the details of their life narratives with their readership several times over many years. Their followers have already witnessed them growing up in real time

through graduations, apartment hunts, drunken parties, cosmetic surgeries, holidays, illnesses, tearful breakups, birthdays, and childbirths. Publishers therefore assume that the books require a clearer angle than the standard autobiographies—they must fill a certain niche (Lindell 102). Thus, most books begin with the disclosure of an existential problem that preceded the author's popularity and success as an influencer—sometimes a seemingly minor problem, though often more severe. There are narratives about overcoming difficult childhood, homelessness, infertility, poverty, parental divorce, pain, disability, abortion, mental illness, sexual assault, alcoholism, grief, eating disorder, anxiety, and bullying. In an interview, Ida Warg promotes her book *Min egen väg* (My own way) by emphasizing the difficult past that preceded her career success:

> For the first time, she has let go of control. This is a book where she tells the truth behind the perfect surface. "I have always suffered from anxiety, something that has also been shown in the form of eating disorders. . . . When I left the Ballet Academy after three years, I was in constant pain. I cried every day and I could barely walk. I realized I had to give up the dream of dancing." The next few years were a tough period, as Ida was short of money. . . . "I remember how, at one point, I stood outside a restaurant, looking in through the window, thinking: 'One day I, too, will be able to afford to eat at a restaurant.' I was so poor," says Ida. (Strawreberg)

Culminating with a seeming pastiche of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Match Girl," the dramatic image of a destitute girl dreamily looking through an illuminated restaurant window, Ida Warg describes the variety of problems she endured before she could build the seemingly perfect life that she narrates daily in the present via digital media. She may be healthy, wealthy, and successful, with every opportunity to eat at a restaurant, but the book reveals that in the past, she experienced anxiety, pain, eating disorders, and poverty. The revelation of a "darkness" or an "ugliness" behind the glossy surface, literary scholar Cristine Sarrimo writes, promises that the autobiographical book will meet one of the most important criteria—that it is "authentic" and "true" (*Jagets scen* 53).[3] In the quoted interview above, this promise is quite explicit: this is a book that tells *the truth* behind the perfect surface. The uniqueness of the autobiographical narrative is strengthened by the journalist with phrases such as "for the first time she has let go of control" in contrast to, by implication, the daily life narratives Warg shares via digital media. Although this is not quite true—her challenges in life are well-known to her more loyal followers—it is plausible that the autobiographical book offers more dramatic opportunities than various digital media platforms to convincingly describe the overcoming of hardships and to formulate a consistent narrative about a "tough period." I would argue that this narrative is a prerequisite to the influencer appearing authentic and down-to-earth, values sold by influencers, and their

luxurious celebrity lifestyle being seen as legitimate and well-deserved. It also works to position them as worthy autobiographical subjects.

In analysis of two of Sweden's most controversial blog personas, "Blondinbella" and "Kissie," Sarrimo claims that both had to "enter the vulnerable world of provocations before they could reemerge as respectable professional careerists" (*Jagets scen* 226–27). In other words, they needed to hit rock bottom before they, and their careers as influencers, could commence a process of "purification" and "catharsis." Writing an autobiographical book might be the first step in achieving this. Alexandra Nilsson, the individual behind "Kissie," explicitly characterizes her book *Hatad och älskad* as a final statement in her pursuit of closure and her true self:

> [The blog] Kissie.se changed my life. For both better and worse. But now I want to explore another aspect of myself. I want to get to know Alexandra, and learn to love myself. Maybe then I will not seek the attention of others as much. *Hatad och älskad* is my balance sheet; my farewell to the old Kissie. I want to know what my new self is capable of. (143)

The "world of provocations" described by Sarrimo is perhaps at its peak, and thus the need for purification and catharsis the greatest, in Joakim Lundell's book *Monster*. In terms of financial gain and number of subscribers, Joakim Lundell is one of the most successful Swedish YouTubers. In his book, he recounts overcoming a difficult childhood, characterized by abuse and time in various foster homes, to become a multimillionaire and loving father of two children, via the homeless, drug-using, and generally despised YouTube and reality TV persona "Jockiboy." *Monster*, perhaps more than any of the other books, follows the classic narrative of the self-made man: the humble beginning followed by hard work, discovery, and stardom (Sarrimo, "Den medialiserade" 151). With *Monster* and its two sequels, *Du är inte ensam* (You are not alone) and *Vi mot världen* (Us against the world), with his wife, Jonna Lundell, the "Joakim Lundell brand" is intertwined with the "inspiring success story of how to break free from a pitch-black existence and become a voice and friend to hundreds of thousands of people," as one journalist describes it (Lindell 102). For both Alexandra Nilsson and Joakim Lundell, the decision to write an autobiographical book—the "balance sheet," as Nilsson calls it—and the purification expected to follow, is clearly strategic, if not necessary, for the further development of their careers as influencers. They both describe reaching the end of the road as provocateurs, professionally and emotionally, and wanting to change direction in life. The question is whether the books functioned in this way. Upon *Monster*'s publication, one literary critic wrote, in a self-critical tone, that as one of the Swedish cultural elite, no book had ever been so heavy to carry around (Meidell 45), a weight that symbolized the low cultural value of the genre and the author's similarly low value as a person. Lundell himself returns again and again to his frustration at not being accepted as a changed man:

> When Jonna and I won the "Golden Tube" [the major award for Swedish YouTubers] in 2015, people wrote things like "Yuck, I don't understand how you can allow two such social cases to win!" They pointed out that I used to jerk off on my blog and that Jonna and I were white trash and a disgrace to society. They didn't seem to think that you should be given the chance to change as a human being. (*Du är inte ensam* 130)

Although Joakim Lundell has realized the stereotypical Western aspiration of transcending his severe social conditions and achieving excellence to a notable degree, he is clearly not viewed with admiration by the average Swede. Instead, he is seen as damaged and monstrous, a disgrace to society. In her "cyborg manifesto," Donna Haraway recalls that, in the Western sense, the self is positively defined as the one who is not dominated. "To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God," whereas "to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial" ("Manifesto" 96). Lundell is not One, he is still Other, as the title of his book, *Monster*, already indicates. Disclosing his difficult upbringing in the format of an autobiographical book is not enough to escape the aura of disgrace. As Boel Hackman writes, although the autobiography offers rhetorical possibilities for convincing, only some authors stand out as legitimate, and for others, the authority to speak is a constant struggle against a skeptical, distrustful, reluctant, and even hostile audience (176). However, Haraway optimistically offers a way to valorize the monstrous, hybrid, disabled, mutated, and otherwise "imperfect" or "non-whole" bodies (Lupton, "Donna Haraway" 570). Using Haraway's terminology, rather than constantly failing to be God, Joakim Lundell might instead accept and acknowledge that he is a cyborg ("Manifesto" 97).

Discovering a Cyborg World

While these books might begin at the bottom, the intermediate phase, that of rising to the top, is just as significant to the autobiographical narrative. The authors do not dwell in darkness, but through their personal strengths and their entrepreneurial spirits, they achieve success, and as they write their books, they can look back on the hard years from above. What stands out is how these authors' narratives of overcoming their personal problems coincide and are intertwined with, in most cases, narratives of discovering digital media. More specifically, the narrative describes how they overcame their hardships eventually by becoming influencers. Most of the authors describe how they came into contact with digital media during a period when they felt they were at rock bottom. Lisa "Misslissibel" Jonsson, one of Sweden's first and youngest YouTubers, who discloses her experience of severe bullying throughout her school years, describes in *Ni vann aldrig* (You never won) her first encounter with YouTube as a ten-year-old:

> When I was in fourth grade . . . I discovered YouTube. It changed everything. It was like my own world, I was completely fascinated. YouTube was quite new at the time and the content was not so varied. . . . I watched all the "show-my-make-up" videos. . . . It was so many beautiful colors, so much that was beautiful, I just drowned in all that. (17–18)

In a similar fashion, another one of Sweden's most popular YouTubers, Therese Lindgren, describes in her bestselling *Ibland mår jag inte så bra* (Sometimes I don't feel so well) how she discovered blogs and YouTube during a long sick leave for burnout syndrome and panic disorder:

> YouTube made me happy. Particularly, colorful videos about glittery eyeshadows accompanied by ukulele. . . . Makeup blogs also made me happy, they were filled with short texts and lots of nice pictures of shiny lipsticks and shimmery nail polish that you could scroll through in less than a minute. . . . It was a forum that suited me and my "disability," as my doctor called it. (21–23)

Lisa Jonsson and Therese Lindgren both highlight YouTube's unique spatiality to explain its allure: it was a new, uncomplicated, and colorful world. This mosaic space, filled with glittery eyeshadows, became a sanctuary from bullying. The content was tolerable for the burnt-out brain; it was something to "drown" in. YouTube "was a light in the dark," and so the platform offered them, first in their capacity as viewers and shortly after as content creators, the possibility of focusing on something other than the hardships of life, as Jonsson describes it (Abrahamsson 19). In fact, in all of the influencers' books, narratives recur about how the authors were "saved" by the digital platforms, and the internet more generally.

Similarly to Lisa Jonsson and Therese Lindgren—and very much in line with the classic theme of finding "a room of one's own," as described in Virginia Woolf's essay of the same name—many of the influencers refer to digital media in spatial terms and describe how they served as a haven where they could exist on their own terms. One of Sweden's earliest and most famous bloggers, Isabella Lövengrip, frequently describes how her blog became "her own little home" in the absence of a real one (Sarrimo, *Jagets scen* 193). Similarly, Nathalie Danielsson describes TikTok's function as a sanctuary:

> On the other side of my pulled down curtain, eggs were thrown at the window, but on social media I got understanding and a stream of hearts. It was like living in two different worlds. (56)

The metaphor of digital media as a room of one's own does not differ significantly from how traditional diary writing is discussed. The diary has always had the function of a sanctuary, of being an alternative world. In a book about nineteenth-century diary writing, Christina Sjöblad writes that for the constricted

bourgeois woman of the nineteenth century, the diary became a free zone, a spiritual place where they did not have to wear the mask of self-control required in public spaces (182).

The positive attribution of both the diary's and digital media's spatial functions as sanctuaries recalls Haraway's view of the cyborg world. For her, "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are . . . not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" ("Manifesto" 72). It is a world where "intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (99). I would argue that the digital media where authors opened the door and discovered a colorful wonderland in which they could "drown" themselves could be seen as such a cyborg world—a new world where everything was forgiven and forgotten, or rather, a world where it was technically possible to control expressions and impressions. To continue with Haraway's terminology, Lisa Jonsson, Therese Lindgren, Nathalie Danielsson, and the other influencers might be defined as cyborg writers: "Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (94). Many of the influencers describe how seizing digital media tools allowed them to retain their "normal selves," despite bullying and other problems in the physical world. In *Känn ingen skam* (Don't be ashamed), Lina Rask writes:

> When my friends disappeared, I disappeared into the world of social media. There I could be myself and pretend that everything was as usual. I could spend hours at the computer. (184)

The internet has almost always been associated with air and lightness through metaphors such as cyberspace or the cloud, which might be part of why being in the digital world is described as more accessible and uncomplicated than being in the physical world. The Swedish novelist Bodil Malmsten, who started writing a blog at some point in her career, said that the blogging format was "easier, more airy, it is written in air not on paper, it is not printed, bound, numbered. It has no covers" (qtd. in Sarrimo, *Jagets scen* 144). Haraway makes the same analogy when she writes that in the real world, "people are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence" ("Manifesto" 70). Both Isabella Lövengrip and Lisa Jonsson describe how they were saved by their (cyborg) personas, "Blondinbella" and "Misslisibell" (Sarrimo, *Jagets scen* 193). Jonsson says:

> Misslisibell is like an alter ego, you could say. It's a bit like going into a role. I am myself, it's not like I'm pretending, but as Misslisibell I dare more. Lisa Jonsson doesn't go on a stage. That won't happen. I'm pretty shy. (Abrahamsson 19)

Similarly, Alexandra "Kissie" Nilsson emphasizes the feeling of freedom, courage, and excitement offered by a digital media persona:

> Blogging started as a form of escapism for me: with the computer I could enter a dramatic world. In the blog, I could be someone else, and that role became bigger and more real with time. You always have a role in the digital world. With it, I filled my boring life. (12–13)

For Haraway, the technological parts of the cyborg can be likened to potential outgrowths of damaged bodies. Contrary to the sentimental longing for rebirth, regeneration based on damaged conditions is a subversive act (Eleonorasdotter 272). Haraway likens this subversive transformation to the regeneration of a salamander's tail:

> For salamanders, regeneration after injury, such as the loss of a limb, involves regrowth of structure and restoration of function with the constant possibility of twinning or other odd topographical productions at the site of former injury. The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth. ("Manifesto" 100)

Accordingly, in this study, the authors' computers, blog personas, or YouTube accounts are likened to digital outgrowths of their ill, bullied, or otherwise abused bodies. With regenerated digital body parts, they were able to accomplish things they could not have imagined doing before. For example, Lisa Jonsson would never get up on a stage, but Misslisibell could. Nellie Berntsson, who suffered from severe stuttering from an early age, describes in her book *Jag är Nellie* (I am Nellie) how writing a blog became her way of expressing herself, her voice: "On paper or a computer, I didn't stumble over words. I got to say what I wanted to say without being ashamed" (10). She and several others use the metaphor of a "valve" to describe digital media's cyborg function: "The blog became my way of getting all the words I had locked inside out of me. It became like a vital valve" (19).

Becoming with Digital Media

The influencer authors describe how discovering digital media led to major life changes: fame and popularity, economic stability or even great wealth, and freedom from health problems, substance abuse, and bullying—to mention just a few of the existential hardships they overcame. In Haraway's terms, Many of the authors indicate that a particular life-changing and career-defining digital media event regenerated their damaged conditions and transformed them into functioning cyborg writers in the world of digital media. Linda-Marie Nilsson, the author of *Så lärde jag mig att älska min kropp* (How I learned to love my body) who continually struggled with being overweight while growing up, returns again and again in her book and interviews to the event that changed her attitude towards her own body in a substantial way:

> When I was 20 years old, I posted a picture on Facebook showing myself on the beach in a bikini, and then everything got a whole new twist. The picture got 80,000 likes overnight and I was suddenly in all the newspapers and morning programs. I was flown to London to be photographed for *The Sun*. But the only thing I had done was to be on the beach and look the way I do. There is nothing unique about my body—there are a lot of people who look like me! (Henriksson 116)

This is the narrative of how, in a radical change in her life and her career, a single viral picture transformed Linda-Marie Nilsson into a cyborg, constituted as a combination of her lifelong "damaged" body image and the digital effect of her Facebook post. The difference from similar pre-internet "overnight sensations" is the opportunity offered by digital media to utilize even the smallest "sensation" to grow, both mentally and financially. Though many "look like her," Linda-Marie Nilsson, for some reason, could seize the opportunity to transform a day at the beach into a life-changing event, namely through cyborg writing. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway moves away from the notion that the cyborg is the result of a transformation, and instead focuses on our constant and ongoing "becoming with" both technology and nonhuman species. She describes how we all come to be only as continuous entanglements; the human and nonhuman are intertwined and inseparable. From this perspective, it could be argued that Linda-Marie Nilsson was someone new—namely, a person with a different body image than before, when she became with the 80,000 people who "liked" her Facebook post, the flight to London, and the glossy newspaper reproductions of her picture in the tabloid *The Sun*.

Similarly to Linda-Marie Nilsson, Therese Lindgren describes how a breakup with her boyfriend Anders was the turning point in her influencer career:

> When Anders broke up with me, in desperation I did something I had never done before: I turned on the camera, disclosed without script or actual reflection what had happened, and clicked PUBLISH. Unlike my previous videos . . . I invited my viewers in real time. Here and now, completely naked, raw and without filters. I went through my most difficult time in life right before their eyes and I invited them to be a part of my private life. In just a couple of days, the video received half a million views, which at the time was enormous. (134)

The decisive event described is when Therese Lindgren is becoming with digital media. In the change from an ordinary make-up YouTuber with a burnout diagnosis to a superstar among Swedish digital media influencers, Therese Lindgren's experience of clicking "PUBLISH," "completely naked, raw and without filters," is crucial. Her becoming with her viewers in "real time," "right before their eyes," and without "actual reflection" is evoked as an instantaneous transformation or displacement that echoes classic stories, such as Cinderella, the Phoenix that rises from the ashes, or the arrival of naked cyborgs in the Terminator movies—or for that matter, Haraway's experiences of becoming with her dog, Cayenne (*When Species Meet*).

For Therese Lindgren and several other authors, this kind of turning point is described as launching a trajectory from the bottom to the top that could be measured numerically in likes, followers, and money. Rachel "Yoga Girl" Brathen and Joakim Lundell, respectively, write:

> When, as if from nowhere, I had reached 50,000 followers, I could hardly believe it was true. That was half the population of Aruba! I could not believe that so many people were interested in following my journey. I was grateful and continued to share my life through social media every day. (Brathen 118)

> The money from YouTube continued to come and, for the first time, Jonna and I had a savings account, where there were now SEK 19,000. . . . We started working in a completely different way than before. That was a big change. (Lundell, *Monster* 212)

Common to both is an experience of becoming with digital media, although at first their modest successes convinced Brathen and Lundell that finally they were on the right track in life. By seizing their new digital limbs, in the sense of Haraway, they could mark the world that had marked them as other and attain the power to survive ("Manifesto" 94). As digital media cyborgs, they could accomplish new things. For Brathen, increasing numbers of followers meant that her personal interest in yoga, which she pursued to escape emotional scars from a difficult upbringing, could be used to inspire others, as well as to support herself and her family. For Lundell, the benefits were even more significant: revenues from YouTube meant that he could permanently escape homelessness, counteract a destructive lifestyle, and finally open a savings account. He uses the term "revenge" to describe the possibilities offered to him by his new cyborg existence, and he reveals his obsession with finetuning the new opportunities in his life:

> YouTube is my revenge and a way to find my way back to my own dignity. I don't want to slow down. I want to make it go even better. . . . I am totally fixated on accounting and I am trying to do as perfect a job as possible. The money becomes like an obsession. I'm going to pay off my debts. One month, we earn almost SEK 1,000,000 before tax. The goal of becoming debt-free is getting closer and closer. (Lundell and Lundell 78)

In a digitized, neoliberal era, the entrepreneurial spirit of the individual is celebrated. When individuals "damaged" by experiences of bullying, drug abuse, anxiety, or hierarchical social categorizations like gender or class narrate how they managed to regenerate their damaged bodies and become financially successful in a cyborg world, this can be seen as an adaptation to the neoliberal ideal. In this cultural context, for Lisa Jonsson and Nathalie Danielsson, both teenagers, their income from digital media offered a legitimate excuse for dropping out of school and escaping their bullies:

> A couple of months before graduating ninth grade, I decided not to start high school. . . . I felt that I would not survive another three years in school. . . . In addition, I had a sensible alternative. I had a job that I loved that also paid well. (Danielsson 61)

> Over the years as a YouTuber, I have reached a certain position in social media, and it would be foolish to throw that away. . . . I love doing YouTube and I want to keep doing it for as long as possible. (Jonsson 118–19)

But what does it mean to be "wired in" like this for the long term, and to exist only with the help of digital limbs in a cyborg world? Isla Ng writes that constant cyborg practices, in the sense of using digital media to compensate or approximate limitations caused by physical or mental disabilities (translated in this study to terms of life and marginalized identities more broadly), requires the acceptance of existential instability and alienation from the body. It forces cyborg individuals to transmute themselves in a way that causes a permanent schism between online and offline life. As one subject in Ng's study, Melissa Broder, formulates it: "Once a cucumber turns into a pickle, you can't turn it back into a cucumber. And I've been pickled by the Internet for a long time" (168). In other words, is there a return from being a cyborg? As mentioned, Haraway has moved away from the notion of the cyborg existence as a permanent transformation, and instead sees becoming with technology or other species as an ongoing process—that all organisms are always in a process of identification (*When Species Meet*). This would suggest that a pickle, hypothetically, can return to being a cucumber (for example, by moving away from absolute proximity to a glass jar). More specifically, Lisa Jonsson and Nathalie Danielsson could always return to school later in life, and perhaps eventually, Nellie Berntsson may be able to overcome stuttering "in real life" too.

Followers as Companion Species

Haraway introduces the term companion species to describe the inescapable relationships of humans, not only with other species, but also with technology (174). As Lupton writes, "Humans are companion species with the nonhumans, alongside which they live and engage, each species learning and influencing the other" ("Digital Companion" 2). Although certain domestic animals, particularly dogs, play the starring roles in Haraway's work, the concept of companion species is not a limiting category. It is "a permanently undecidable category, a category-in-question that insists on the relation as the smallest unit of being and of analysis" (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 165). "'Species,'" Haraway writes, "includes animal and human as categories, and much more besides; and we would be ill advised to assume which categories are in play and shaping one another in flesh and logic in constitutive encounterings" (164). In fact, according to Haraway, "many categories of beings, including technological assemblages and college students, count as 'species'"

(281). Many authors describe either the internet in general, particular social media platforms, or their specific digital devices as friends in an abstract sense. I would argue that these digital "friends" could be defined in Haraway's sense of companion species: technology with which they are coevolving. Nellie Berntsson writes, "When the blog came, it became my best friend. Someone who listened and understood" (10). In a similar fashion, Lisa Jonsson describes that when she "talked to the camera, it was a bit like I had a friend, someone to talk to after school" (18). Given their ages when they first encountered digital media—in Lisa Jonsson's case as a ten-year-old—Nellie Berntsson and Lisa Jonsson learned many social practices that are part of growing up with the help of, and through, digital devices and platforms. They learned to talk to friends by talking to the camera or writing on a blog; they grew up by becoming with digital media.

But, even more commonly, influencers describe their more or less anonymous followers or subscribers as friends, and thus, I argue that they form the companion species. Ida Warg writes: "My followers are like my very best friends, I really care about them and share not only my successes but also my wounds and sorrows" (95). Similar to how Haraway describes how she and her dog coevolve during agility practice, Therese Lindgren elaborates on how she and her followers coevolved in a particular situation:

> When I published the video "Anders broke up with me," the relationship with my viewers changed. I think for the first time they could relate to me on an emotional level and I felt for the first time that I needed them, that they fulfilled a function in my life. They openly told me in the commentaries what they themselves had been through, gave me tips and were there for me. When I peeled off my facade, they did the same thing. They stopped being a faceless audience and became people who care for me. (137)

Here, Therese Lindgren narrates her story of ongoing and deepening becoming with her followers. Before this moment, her followers had been a faceless audience, as a pet, from an anthropocentric perspective, is just a pet; when she peeled of her façade, the story goes, she realized that her followers were her companion species. Entanglement with companion species is further elaborated by Rachel Brathen, who writes:

> Reading people's comments helped me remember what I already knew: We all feel the same things. Just not all at once. We all go through difficult trials at some point in our lives. We are all humans. I was not alone. (176)

Although Brathen uses the phrase "we are all humans" to describe her positive experience of coevolving, the followers are not a group of friends in the sense that all parties are involved in each other's lives. They are not even a group of people, but more precisely digital companion species, already coevolving with the digital

platforms and their algorithmic preconditions. This is not to say that they are irrelevant. "As ordinary knotted beings," Haraway writes, "they are always meaning-making figures that gather up those who respond to them into unpredictable kinds of 'we'" (*When Species Meet* 5). Lupton argues that, with Haraway's concept companion species, a new set of questions arise:

> What are our affective responses to our digital data companion species? Do we love or hate them, or simply feel indifferent to them? How do our lives intersect with them? What do they learn from us and what do we learn from them? How much can we domesticate and discipline them? How do they domesticate and discipline us? (*Digital Companion* 4)

As Therese Lindgren communicates, and in similar narratives by other authors, in many cases influencers respond to their followers with gratitude and warmth. Joakim Lundell describes his followers almost as surrogate parents, in the absence of real ones: "It was my followers who helped me grow up. . . . I have been able to ask them about things that I have not had anyone else to ask about" (Lundell and Lundell 141). In fact, followers are not uncommonly described as serving an educational, or even explicitly disciplinary function in the lives of influencers. As Ida Warg explains it: "When I do something wrong, they present in a sensible way how I should think differently next time. Then I listen to them in the same way as in a conversation with a friend" (96). Therese Lindgren takes almost a submissive position in relation to her followers, writing that "the absolute best thing about being a YouTuber is that my viewers challenge me" (91). She discloses in an interview:

> Thanks to my YouTube channel, I have gained so many insights and become much more educated. My followers have taught me—a super-privileged, white woman of normal weight—about minorities, structural problems, and gender norms. They have let me know if I say things that hurt. (Sjöström 22)

This raises the question whether all companion species are equal, in Haraway's view, or digital media companion species are more like parasites. As Haraway notes, "Nothing about the multispecies relationships I am sketching is emotionally, operationally, intellectually or ethically simple" (*When Species Meet* 281). Perhaps one explanation for why the influencer authors being considered chose to write autobiographies is their wish to escape the followers' constant "challenging."

Becoming One—Finally?

The autobiographical books analyzed here contain two interwoven but somewhat contradictory narrative themes: the authors' depictions of the world of digital media and their individual, chronological life histories. I will suggest here a distinction between narratives of living and narratives of life, the same distinction

that can be found between life narratives online and autobiographical books more generally.

The narratives of living are the authors' similar depiction of the influencer lifeworlds where their intertwined living and working take place daily. In the books, the similarity of descriptions of digital media and its significance are notable. The authors all seem to agree that digital media is a colorful world, a haven, a sanctuary, a valve, a room of their own, a home, and a friend. I have analyzed such a depiction of digital media as a cyborg world that enables the authors to seize digital opportunities to create the functional mode of living denied them in the physical world. As part of this conception, descriptions are included of the authors' coevolution with both technology and their followers, with various companion species, and how this brings about their success. In a deeply positive and coherent narrative, their alternative mode of living is presented as attractive, and the authors' lifestyles are justified—lifestyles frequently exposed to strong criticism from the offline world (G. Nilsson). Perhaps the dramatic possibilities of digital media seemed insufficient for narrating this self-justifying narrative, and an autobiographical book was required.

The other narrative theme, the narratives of life, is the influencers' individual chronological life histories, plotted to fit the genre of the traditional autobiography: the "big life stories" in the form of "long, retrospectively written accounts" as opposed to the "small stories," the "fragmented ongoing interactions" that they engage in daily life (Calzati and Simanowski 24). The autobiographical book narratives begin with existential problems that eventually the authors overcome. At the end of the books, the authors look back on their difficult years from an elevated position, and reflect on their accomplishments. This involves a certain amount of self-reflexivity, such as when Therese Lindgren, upon publishing her book, describes in an interview that previously she "was a naive, spoiled, and selfish prankster who did not make a single conscious choice before [she] turned 25" (Sjöström 22). But self-contentment and satisfaction are also important parts of the dissolution. Ida Warg writes:

> When I think about it, this is really something I'm proud of in my life. I have gone from zero to a hundred and have not received anything for free. . . . I have never given up, but fought hard to realize myself. (89)

Traditionally, the autobiographies considered best are written by autonomous, "unique individuals" whose memories, at the peak of their lives, provide context and coherence (Sarrimo, "Den medialiserade"). As part of a feminist and postcolonial critique, the unique individual has been disclosed as a privileged subject, and criticism has been directed at the fact that life narratives not fitting the genre are not seen as "real" autobiographies (Smith and Watson). For the influencers in this study—who are "multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial" cyborgs (Haraway, "Manifesto" 96)—writing autobiographies appears

contradictory, not least in relation to the other narrative theme, which so strongly values digital living. However, their narratives of life are, more than anything else, coherent and chronological wholes. To that extent, autobiographical books written by influencers do not differ significantly from other autobiographies. The authors clearly have the desire to create order, find patterns, seek causal explanations, and correct their images (Sjöblad 17). I would argue that it is this in particular that distinguishes their life narratives in the book format from their daily life narratives online.

Life narratives online provide fragments of life spread over time and across different digital platforms; they lack chronology. Stories and videos on Instagram and YouTube, or for that matter, a written blog, are seemingly chronological, meaning that a chronology may be discerned but is illusory, since followers consume digital content otherwise (Sarrimo, *Jagets scen* 140; Sorapure). On the other hand, convergence entails encouraging consumers to compose content by combining narratives from different platforms (Jenkins). More specifically, digital media is a participant culture where content producers and consumers interact and coevolve, a relationship analyzed here in terms of companion species, thus forming a "database model of identity" (Sorapure). Additionally, digital platforms are characterized by content fed automatically and continuously. The term "feed" indicates that everything is literally moving, and what pops up is (more or less) out of the control of the content producer, since the feed is maintained by algorithms attuned to the consumer. Altogether, this means that in the end influencers themselves cannot control what life narrative is composed by their followers from the various fragments made available via different digital platforms. Their cyborg lives are mosaics put together by the followers into a whole that is meaningful to them. In her autobiographical book *Your best life*, Margaux Dietz describes this as somewhat problematic:

> If you do not know what decisions and difficulties a person has experienced, single events give only parts of the truth. That is why I want to share what is deeper in my life, what has shaped me into who I am today. (7)

Ever since Haraway introduced the cyborg metaphor in the 1980s, and increasingly after the acceleration of digital development in the 2010s, human life may be characterized by the disintegration of dichotomies and the entanglement of lifeworlds. To posthuman thinkers, such as Donna Haraway, the self is split, and the body is multiple in a positive, emancipatory sense. However, Greene writes that "enactments of the cyborg body are fraught with an acute awareness of multiplicity and of the possibility of falling apart. Consciousness of the need to constantly coordinate the body multiple is in itself part of how the cyborg body comes to be enacted" (325). What if "coordinating the body multiple" in the form of an autobiographical book is a strategy to avoid falling apart? To Margaux Dietz, writing an autobiographical book is motivated by a wish to compose—and to control—her

own life narrative. In comparison to the "ether-like" cyborg writer, the autobiographical subject is stable, and a physical book could make digital existence less volatile. I would argue that the physical book has a different significance for master life narratives than daily narrative practices in digital media. In general, books may play a role in stopping the constant feed of fragments in time and constructing wholes in a digitized world. Valuing digital media appears to be a way of valuing the influencers' own lifestyle and life choices, but the chronological narrative, and writing a book more generally, suggests a way to counter the fragmentation assumed in the cyborg world. It is a way of holding together a life narrative that is otherwise a coproduction by influencers, their followers, and algorithmic conditions. However, this makes the two narrative themes almost contradictory. Entering the cyborg world, and accumulating digital limbs, is described as the prerequisite of a happy ending. But the dissolution of the book also provides a means for many of the authors to problematize their digital lives more generally. Ida Warg writes in her autobiographical book,

> The limit of how much I can idealize my life has passed, I want to be myself and no one else. . . . Now I can be true to myself and others, and even if it means I reduce the chance of gaining millions of followers, I'm happy. Who wants millions of followers if it requires me to exploit my body and walk away from my personality? (99)

Now, as adults and authors who have written autobiographical books, influencers seem able to make informed decisions about their activities in the cyborg world. Perhaps soon they may no longer need their digital limbs.

Notes

*All of the autobiographical books by Swedish influencers considered here were originally written in Swedish. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Swedish are my own.

1. This essay was written as part of "Influencer Lifeworlds: New Work in a Changing Time," a project financed by the Swedish Research Council, 2020–2024. Within the project, the term "lifeworld" is employed to mean the online lives, the offline lives, and the travel and interrelation between these two parallel worlds and identities.
2. The fifteen books include *Jag, Nattid: Om livet, kärleken, mobbingen och kändisskapet* (2019) by Nathalie Danielsson; *Ibland mår jag inte så bra* (2017) by Therese Lindgren; *Monster* (2017) and *Du är inte ensam* (2018) by Joakim Lundell; *Så lärde jag mig att älska min kropp* (2019) by Linda-Marie Nilsson; *To love and let go: En berättelse om kärlek, sorg och tacksamhet* (2019) by Rachel Brathen; *Vi mot världen* (2019) by Joakim Lundell and Jonna Lundell; *Jag är inte perfekt, tyvärr*: *Om ångest, oro och konsten att vara snäll mot sig själv* (2016) by Michaela Forni; *Jag är Nellie* (2016) by Nellie Berntsson; *Min egen väg* (2019) by Ida Warg; *Hatad och älskad* (2016) by

Alexandra Nilsson; *PMS-kossan* (2019) by Jonna Lundell; *Your best life* (2019) by Margaux Dietz; *Vem fan är han?* (2017) by Daniel Redgert; *Känn ingen skam* (2018) by Lina Rask; *Ni vann aldrig: så tog jag mig levande genom högstadiet* (2018) by Lisa Jonsson.

3. See also Lejeune 19.

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