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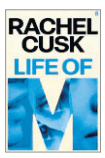
The actress who must not be named

Rachel Cusk's novel is rumoured to be a fictional portrait of Natalie Portman. It's far richer than that

By Rachel CONNOLLY

LIFE OF M
by Rachel Cusk

192pp, Faber, ☎ £16.99 (0330 173 5030), RRP £18.99, ebook £12.99
★★★★★



"Autofiction" has become a silly word. I see it misused all the time, and in a tone that feels like the written equivalent of an eye-roll. As a concept, it has been around since the late 1970s, but now it's used to describe any fiction written in the first person. This is daft. Often, too, the label seems to imply that fiction that draws on the author's life lacks imaginative demands. But everyone who has ever written fiction, in any genre, has used observations gleaned from their own life: a human creates characters who hopefully possess some recognisably human essence. That's just what fiction is.

I see autofiction narrowly. To me, it's writing that, first, explicitly interrogates the process of a writer taking material from their life, and, second, directly invites the reader to interrogate that process too. Only a small group of writers are doing this; perhaps the best-known of these is Rachel Cusk. And I've never encountered autofiction as rigorous as Cusk's 13th novel, *Life of M* – a thrillingly unique and startlingly intelligent work.

Cusk leaves much of the detail deliberately, and invigoratingly, ambiguous. But the gist of it is this: the protagonist is a middle-aged writer, who's never named. She's struggling because her husband is in hospital with a mysterious illness. She visits him in hospital every day, and finds herself waiting anxiously to leave. Cusk's descriptions of the writer's emotional landscape are entirely unsentimental, and almost unbearably moving: "Walking out through the doors I was temporarily safe from my own love and need for another person."

In the midst of her personal crisis, this writer meets a very famous actress named only as "M". Many of this novel's readers, and most of the literary world, will know that Cusk and Natalie Portman have, in recent years, spent time together, collaborated on panels, and more. (We'll come back to this.) The narrator comes to feel compelled to write something: a text that explores M's experience of her own fame and life, and explores what film-making has done to M's relationship with reality.

The narrative form then changes. There will be no more "I" until the very end. Instead, we read sections narrating episodes from M's life that demonstrate the artifice and strangeness around her – whether on film sets, or during industry meetings, or at strange spas – and M's corresponding "project" to retain a grip on reality. "Her cultivation of normality is an attempt to retain a lost inner world, or something that looks like one."

Cusk revisits an idea again and again: that M is always acting. And many of the sections about her begin with elaborate descriptions of the environments she inhabits, as if to underline the idea that her world is just one giant set. "It is a hotel room in a foreign city. The hotel is a luxury hotel and the room is a large long rectangle with tall smoked glass windows." (In fact, I found that these sections reflected the strangeness not just of being famous, but of being a person. From corporate "fun" days to dates, we all enter settings organised to evoke our learnt idea of how things should be.)

But even this isn't the whole form of Cusk's book. Those sections alternate with passages featuring a stranger narrative construct, a "we", some of whose experiences are universal, some of which are deeply specific and describe the experiences of a female writer: "Concentration is like a white field into which we levitate, leaving ourselves behind in time… When our children were born this presented the greatest possible threat to our concentration."

I came to read *Life as M* as Cusk telling the story of the writer's life, now subsumed into the life she's writing for the character, M, that she's making out of the actress. I read the "we" as a comment on what writing fiction is, too. The act of constructing a character can be a release from the self, something we sometimes need: a parachute out of the "I", into a "we". And I saw the "we" as poking at a vague complication I've often felt about writing fiction, but had never articulated to myself. As a novelist, you take the knowledge you've gleaned, as yourself, from your life, and then you reframe it in the form of invented characters, as a quantity separate to the self. I started to see the "we" as a comment – actually, I read it as a joke – about the attempt to do this, to declare your own personal observations as something universal. In short, the "we" made me think a lot.

What I didn't do, despite the gossip, is read *Life of M* as an exploration of acting or celebrities. I admit I initially approached the book with a salacious interest in Portman's inclusion; but I found I forgot about the connection entirely. If you're reading it with an attentive mind, I suspect you will too. With enormous skill and restraint, Cusk curates an ambiguity in all the details, which repeatedly forces the reader to think about and decide for themselves what things mean. It's hard to tell what's Cusk, what's M, and what's you.

At the end of the book, the writer and the actress have a confrontation about the way the actress is presented. "You've made it seem like I lack humanity," says the actress. I do think there's an inhumanity running through this book, but it isn't in M's character: rather, the world's treatment of the actress is utterly dehumanising. (And her response seems entirely human. I liked M a lot.) The last line of the book – ambiguous to the end – is a question. M asks the writer: "Are you a guy or a girl?" It might sound odd, but it asks the reader to question the empathy of Cusk's project. Early on in the book, a male friend of the actress sent her a script about someone resembling herself. The actress hated it, it felt exploitative. I didn't read *Life of M* that way. There is a vulnerability, a realness, at its core. To me, the answer is: Girl.

> With enormous skill and restraint, Cusk curates an ambiguity in all the details

Rachel Connolly is the author of the novel Lazy City

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