

Depression Memoirs between Vulnerability and Resilience  
A Genre in German and Anglophone Literature of the 21st Century from a Cultural  
Narratological Perspective

This dissertation project examines representations of depressive and bipolar disorders in German and Anglophone memoirs of the 21st century. Despite their prevalence, these life-threatening disorders are almost invisible epidemics in contemporary western societies. In the instances when they are represented in social, media, or political discourses, reports often oscillate between misinterpretation, stigmatisation, and sensationalism. This is different with contemporary depression memoirs, which from insider perspectives seek to elucidate and destigmatise (manic) depressive states. My goal is to comparatively work out the narrative, rhetorical, and stylistic strategies that authors of such memoirs employ to understand the causes and consequences of their suffering. I will analyse texts such as Sally Brampton's "Shoot the Damn Dog" (2008), Merle Leonhard's "Als meine Seele dunkel wurde" (2011), Linda Gask's "The Other Side of Silence" (2015), Matt Haig's "Reasons to Stay Alive" (2015), Thomas Melle's "Die Welt im Rücken" (2016), or Benjamin Maack's "Wenn das noch geht, kann es nicht so schlimm sein" (2020) amongst others. Such authors trace mental disorders in their individual life stories, thereby rebuilding resilience.

By narratively integrating the symptoms into their sense of self, authors of depression memoirs not only collect but also create and deliberately convey personal knowledge about the disorders that complements the "objective" insights of the life sciences. They translate their self-reflexivity into a diagnosis of the present by deconstructing sociocultural conditions in order to understand their individual suffering. Moreover, while attempting to find an adequate form to translate their suffering psyche into words, several authors self-reflexively comment on genre choices, classifications, and characteristics in meta-narrative text passages. Thus, they extensively discuss affordances of the memoir genre and critically reflect on related concepts and, more generally, on motivations for writing and reading literature. With a cultural narratological approach and the concepts of vulnerability, agency, and resilience as heuristic lenses, I seek to comparatively explore the representational forms of the mental illnesses and to gauge their performative individual and cultural functions. The analysis not only promises valuable insights into the narratology of (depression) memoirs in the 21st century. It furthermore helps to better understand both the particular aetiologies and pathologies of mania and depression as well as the sociocultural constructions of normalcy, (dis-) order, and mental (ill-) health.