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# Inside the Secret World of Childhood with *Les Cahiers d'Esther*

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## Résumé

This article examines the acclaimed comic series *Les Cahiers d'Esther* by Riad Sattouf, which tracks the life of a young Parisian girl named Esther from ages 9 to 18. The series challenges traditional understandings of autobiographical narratives by strategically incorporating metatextual devices that invite readers to consider the permeable boundaries between truth and artifice in personal storytelling. Through her collaborative participation and her open reflections on the fictionalized aspects of her portrayal, the series disrupts the traditional autobiographical pact, empowering readers to negotiate the complex interplay between reality and representation. The paper situates the series within the context of life writing, exploring how the graphic medium reshapes our understanding of authenticity and truth in autobiographical narratives. It argues that *Les Cahiers d'Esther* is an (auto)biography. It also suggests that Sattouf can be viewed as a graphic ethnographer, closely observing and presenting Esther's life with care and continuity, offering a subtle yet sharp social analysis through her perspective. Ultimately, *Les Cahiers d'Esther* stands as a testament to the transformative potential of the comics medium in conveying subjective experiences, inviting readers to reflect on their own coming-of-age experiences.

"Je m'appelle Esther et j'ai 9 ans. J'habite à Paris, dans le 17ème arrondissement."<sup>1</sup> These are the opening lines of the first album of *Les Cahiers d'Esther* (2016-2024), created by well-known author Riad Sattouf. It recounts the life of Esther, a real little girl whom Sattouf met at the home of his friends, Esther's parents. The series tracks her journey from the age of 9 to 18 and her outspokenness and volubility have been a huge hit in France. Since the publication of the first volume in 2016, Sattouf has published a series of nine albums with around fifty stories per year, transcribed and drawn by himself, but "d'après une histoire vraie racontée par Esther A. [X] ans", as stated at the end of each story. The publication of each volume lags one year behind the events depicted, meaning that when a volume states Esther is ten years old, she is actually eleven at the time of publication.

The series poses significant challenges to the traditional understanding of autobiographical narratives, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of scholars like Philippe Lejeune, Charles Hatfield, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, this analysis examines how Sattouf's creative choices in *Les Cahiers d'Esther* invite readers to contemplate the permeable boundaries of storytelling and the complex interplay between the creator, the audience, and the narrative. The series' innovative approach to the autobiographical genre further underscores the permeable boundaries between fact and fiction, challenging readers to contemplate the nature of truth and authenticity in personal narratives. Sattouf's strategic use of metatextual comments – the blurring of narrative levels – invites the audience to actively engage with the storytelling process. After describing the

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1. Riad Sattouf, *Les Cahiers d'Esther*, vol. 1 : *Histoire de mes 10 ans*, Paris, Allary Éditions, 2016, p. 3.

different genre conventions that could define *Les Cahiers d'Esther*, I argue, in the second part of the article, that it is an (auto)biography. By using the parenthesis around (auto), I recognize that Sattouf is not a neutral author. In the last part of the article, I will look at how Sattouf depicts the secret world of childhood and the construction of Esther's identity using Erik Erikson's theory.

### Defining Life Narrative Forms

In Greek, *autos* means self, *bios* life, and *graphe* writing; thus, the words *self-life-writing* offer a concise definition of autobiography. In autobiographical narratives, one distinguishes between the narrating I – the self that recounts life events – and the narrated I who is an actor in the story. Philippe Lejeune famously defined autobiography in *Le Pacte autobiographique* as "récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité".<sup>2</sup> In 1986, he extended his definition to include poetry and in 1998, the *bande dessinée* (comic strip) was included by Jean-Pierre Mercier. Lejeune created a formula to define the pact:

On aurait donc les deux formules suivantes : Biographie : A est ou n'est pas N ; P ressemble à M.  
Autobiographie : N est à P ce que A est à M.  
(A = auteur ; N = narrateur ; P = personnage ; M = modèle).<sup>3</sup>

His formula stipulates that in an autobiography, the narrator (N) and character (P) are the same as the author (A) and model (M), signalling a singular identity across these roles. Conversely, in a biography, the author (A) and narrator (N) may differ, while the character (P) seeks to resemble the real-life model (M). If the autobiographical pact implies a nominal identity between author, narrator and main protagonist, it does not always imply resemblance. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that subjects predominantly write about their own lives, often recognizing that their choices of "what to narrate as formative are subjective and idiosyncratic".<sup>4</sup> They highlight the personal and selective nature of autobiographical storytelling.

In contrast, in biography, the writer documents and interprets someone's life from an external perspective. According to Lejeune, "dans la biographie, c'est la ressemblance qui doit fonder l'identité; dans l'autobiographie, c'est l'identité qui fonde la ressemblance."<sup>5</sup> This is because "l'identité est le point de départ réel de l'autobiographie; la ressemblance, l'impossible horizon de la biographie."<sup>6</sup> Specifically regarding biography, Lejeune explains that sometimes, author and narrator are linked by "une relation d'identité" which can be "implicite ou indéterminée" or be explained in the preface but the author and narrator/protagonist are

2. Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 14.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

4. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography Now: An Updated Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2024, p. 10.

5. Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

6. *Ibid.*

not equal.<sup>7</sup> Biographers cannot present their subjects in the first person, except when quoting. For Lejeune, autobiography and biography are referential: "ils prétendent apporter une information sur une 'réalité' extérieure au texte et donc, se soumettre à une épreuve de vérification."<sup>8</sup> Their goal is "la ressemblance au vrai". He clarifies that the narrator can misrepresent the past self through "erreur, mensonge, ou déformation" without compromising the authenticity of the enunciation.<sup>9</sup> He argues that authenticity is rooted in the internal relationship inherent in the use of the first person in personal narratives.

According to Michael Chaney, in all (auto)biographical narratives, there is an implied promise that the life stories authors tell about are "if not verifiably true, at least emotionally truthful to the way they perceive, remember and make sense of their lives".<sup>10</sup> As Leigh Gilmore explains, autobiography "draws from its authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourses of truth and identity, less from reference or mimesis than from the cultural power of truth telling".<sup>11</sup> Gilmore reinforces the idea that autobiographical narratives derive their power from cultural constructs of truth. Thus, life writing is less about factual recounting and more about engaging with broader cultural narratives, redefining authenticity in personal storytelling.

Nevertheless, (auto)biographical narratives inevitably blend the factual and the fictive, even among the most scrupulous authors and this blurring of boundaries presents a challenge that deconstructionists have repeatedly exploited. According to Smith and Watson, one reason the term autobiography has been vigorously challenged is that it privileges "the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement of life writing".<sup>12</sup> Deconstructionists argue that human memory is unreliable and what 'we remember' is often fabrication rather than pure fact. This calls into doubt the credibility and authority inherent in autobiographical accounts, undermining the genre's status as a privileged means of revealing truth about a life. For Timothy Dow Adams, autobiography is a paradox, "a therapeutic fiction-making, rooted in what really happened; and judged both by the standards of truth and falsity and by the standards of success as an artistic creation".<sup>13</sup> Adams underscores the dual nature of life writing, where factual events are interwoven with creative expression. Autobiographies navigate the tension between truth and artistic creation, and the value of these narratives lies in their emotional resonance rather than strict factual accuracy.

How can we expect authors to be faithful to objective truth when such truth does not exist or seems inaccessible? In the end, it is impossible for (auto)biographers to avoid inclu-

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7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

10. Michael A. Chaney, *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, p. 3.

11. Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 3.

12. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

13. Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, Chapel Hill, UNC Press Books, 1990, p. 3.

ding exaggeration, distortion, and omission in their craft. Life writing, in general, cannot be reduced to historical record. Although autobiographical narratives contain information regarded as 'facts', they are not factual history about a particular event, time, or person. Those are the kind of books written by historians who claim to tell the truth about the past through a narrativization of events "that is always a figurative account", as Hayden White argues.<sup>14</sup> Instead, autobiographical narratives incorporate "usable facts into subjective 'truth'".<sup>15</sup> In the end, as Chaney argues, the question of whether any given narrative belongs to fiction or autobiography is "ultimately one that readers must negotiate".<sup>16</sup>

While biographies and autobiographies grapple with the interplay of fact and fiction, biofiction takes this blending a step further by intentionally reimagining real lives. This shift from personal narrative to creative reinterpretation allows authors to explore broader ideological themes. When Alain Buisine coined the term in 1991, he argued that the boundary between novelistic imagination, which allows for unlimited invention, and biographical reconstruction, which is bound by factual accuracy, no longer exists.<sup>17</sup> Buisine states that biography "commence à comprendre que la fictionnalité fait nécessairement partie du geste biographique" and that the autobiographical projections of the biographer are inevitable.<sup>18</sup> Michael Lackey observes that "most authors of biofiction explicitly claim that they are not doing biography."<sup>19</sup> Instead, they "forgo the desire to get the biographical subject's life 'right' and, rather, use the biographical subject in order to project their own vision of life and the world".<sup>20</sup> In a later essay, Lackey asserts:

central to my view of biofiction is that the literary form is more performative than representational – that instead of trying to represent a person's life and therewith the past accurately, authors fictionalize something of major symbolic significance from an actual life in order to project into existence a new, better, and more socially just way of thinking and being in the authorial present and for the indefinite future.<sup>21</sup>

Lackey highlights the transformative potential of biofiction, suggesting that authors use this literary form not merely to depict historical accuracy but to creatively reinterpret real lives, thereby fostering progressive ideologies in contemporary and future contexts.

As biofiction reinterprets individual lives to explore new ideologies, autoethnography – a practice within anthropological ethnography – offers a different lens through which individual narratives can be understood within broader societal frameworks. This approach

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14. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 48.

15. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, *op. cit.* p. 8.

16. Chaney, *Graphic Subjects*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

17. Alain Buisine, "Biofictions", *Revue des sciences humaines*, n° 224, 1991, p. 10.

18. *Ibid*, p. 11.

19. Michael Lackey, "Locating and Defining the Bio in Biofiction", *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 31, n° 1, 2016, p. 5.

20. *Ibid*, p. 7.

21. Michael Lackey, "Beyond Postmodern Blurring: Epistemic Precision in Writing about a Life." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 36, n° 1, 2021, p. 8.

bridges the gap between personal narrative and ethnographic study, providing a unique perspective on identity and culture. Autoethnography is generally understood as “a method of qualitative research grounded in immersive fieldwork and participant-observation”.<sup>22</sup> Anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay specifies key terms and methods, stating that autoethnography can refer to either “the ethnography of one’s own group” or “autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest”.<sup>23</sup> She defines autoethnography as “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context”, combining personal narrative with cultural analysis.<sup>24</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)...[that] challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others”.<sup>25</sup> In the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, the authors highlight research methods, noting how autoethnography “uses...personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences” and “acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others”.<sup>26</sup>

Building on the cultural insights of autoethnography, autobiographical comics introduce a visual-verbal dynamic that further complicates the representation of personal Narratives and challenges traditional definitions of nonfiction and authenticity. Comics intervene in autobiography’s production of an author who acts, as Gilmore puts it, “as an agent of self-representation, a figure, textual to be sure but seemingly substantial, who can claim ‘I was there’ or ‘I am here’.”<sup>27</sup> In *Alternative Comics*, Hatfield regards comics – with its inherent blend of image and text – as a significant challenge to the traditional concept of nonfiction. He examines the challenges of authenticity in autobiographical comics:

Thus autobiography has become a distinct, indeed crucial, genre in today’s comic books – despite the troublesome fact that comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of ‘nonfiction’. They can hardly be said to be ‘true’ in any straightforward sense. There’s the rub. But therein lies much of their fascination.<sup>28</sup>

Many authors have recognized that what matters is not literal truth but rather the “emotional truth” in the words of Hatfield; the goal being absolute honesty from the author.<sup>29</sup> Later in *Alternative Comics*, Hatfield establishes the concept of “ironic authentication” as a “means of graphically asserting truthfulness through the admission of artifice. Thus defined, ironic authentication gives authors a way of anticipating, answering, and taking advantage of their

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22. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, *op. cit.* p. 24.

23. Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, New York, Berg, 1997, p. 2.

24. *Ibid*, p. 9.

25. Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis, *Handbook of Autoethnography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 273.

26. *Ibid*, p. 1-2.

27. Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 9.

28. Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2009, p. 112.

29. Chaney, *Graphic Subjects*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

own (and their readers') skepticism."<sup>30</sup> It plays a pivotal role in redefining authenticity because it involves the deliberate acknowledgment of the fictional or constructed elements within a narrative, thereby "certifying the genre's truth claims through unabashed false-ness".<sup>31</sup> By openly highlighting the artifice involved in storytelling, authors invite readers to engage with the narrative on a deeper level, prompting them to question traditional notions of truth and authenticity. This approach challenges the expectation that autobiographies must adhere strictly to factual accuracy, instead emphasizing the emotional and thematic truths that resonate with readers. Through ironic authentication, authors navigate the boundaries of fact and fiction, ultimately affirming the authenticity of their narratives by consciously acknowledging their constructed nature. This technique not only enriches the discourse on truth in life writing but also empowers readers to negotiate the complex interplay between reality and representation in personal storytelling.

### Classifying *Les Cahiers d'Esther*

The complexities of autobiographical comics are exemplified in *Les Cahiers d'Esther*, where the interplay of graphic art and narrative invites readers to reconsider the boundaries of truth and fiction in personal storytelling. The ambiguous nature of the form poses several challenges in defining the work, even for media professionals. While it is never explicitly described as autobiographical, some classify it as biographical,<sup>32</sup> but the majority categorizes it as a "roman graphique", which implies a fictional element through the use of the term *roman*. Additionally, many graphic texts are broadly categorized as graphic novels, a term that does not clearly distinguish between fiction and non-fiction, providing an easy way to sidestep the issue of genre classification.

*Les Cahiers d'Esther* represents the everyday life or, as Charles Hatfield would call it, a "quotidian autobiographical series, focused on the events and textures of everyday existence".<sup>33</sup> Through Esther's evolving perspective, the series provides a unique window into the experiences and worldviews of a new generation, touching on themes of family, relationships, education, and adolescence. Though insightful beyond her years, Esther remains an endearing character and avoids any risk of coming across as tiresome or boring. The series was first published by the French magazine *L'Obs* in 2015, and it initially garnered relatively few comments despite the robust critical acclaim for Sattouf's autobiographical work *L'Arabe du futur* (2014-2022).<sup>34</sup> However, *Les Cahiers d'Esther*, released by Allary Éditions starting in

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30. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, op. cit., p. 131.

31. *Ibid*, p. 126.

32. Laetitia Gayet, "Bande dessinée : *Tout ou rien* & *Les Cahiers d'Esther* quand les auteurs parlent d'eux ou des autres", Radio France, [www.radiofrance.fr](http://www.radiofrance.fr), 16 June 2021.

33. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, op. cit., p. 109.

34. This graphic novel has been recognized with prestigious awards, including the Best Album prize at the Angoulême International Comics Festival (2015) and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in the graphic novel category (2016).

2016 quickly became bestsellers, with the first eight albums selling over two million copies.<sup>35</sup> A television adaptation of the first three albums premiered on Canal+ in 2018. This success aligns with a broader trend in contemporary comics, as noted by Hillary Chute in *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*, where she argues that girls have become the new superheroes in the graphic novel world starting in at least the early 1980s with Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* (1982) and Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* (1995). She states: "They are the action stars, the focal point, the figures whose backstories, ideas, inclinations, struggles, and triumphs are presented with detailed attention in autobiography and fiction alike."<sup>36</sup> Esther embodies this trend, with her complex character and experiences resonating strongly with readers. Sattouf wrote a total of nine volumes, tracking the protagonist annually up until she reaches the age of 18 in June 2024. The consistent bestseller status of each volume underscores the enduring appeal of girl-centered narratives in contemporary comics and the particular charm of Esther's story.

At first glance, the series appears to be a straightforward autobiographical account. It is called *Les Cahiers d'Esther* and the first sentence of each album consistently begins with "Je m'appelle Esther et j'ai [X] ans." Furthermore, details about Esther's grade level, attendance at an upper-class school, and residence in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris contribute to the sense of an authentic, lived experience. The narrator uses the first-person singular voice and tells stories about her life, further reinforcing the autobiographical impression. For Lejeune, any first-person text implies that the protagonist is "en même temps la personne qui produit la narration".<sup>37</sup> Lastly, "D'après une histoire vraie racontée par Esther A., X ans" at the end of each page signals the genuine nature of the stories. It is not just a decorative element.

However, according to Lejeune, the author, narrator, and protagonist must be the same person. Here, the author/cartoonist is Sattouf, while the narrator and protagonist are both Esther. So, according to Lejeune's definition, the series cannot be considered an autobiography since the author, narrator and protagonist are not the same person. This disconnect calls into question the autobiographical nature of the series and Sattouf's unique approach to the project further complicates the genre boundaries. His creative process appears straightforward: he has weekly calls with a girl named Esther – her experiences delivered in a stream of consciousness, which he emphasizes – and he then faithfully converts these conversations into trichromatic panels. This intimate, yet indirect, method of storytelling blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction. Especially because, while Sattouf presents the stories from Esther's point of view, his distinctive graphic style and sense of humor are instantly recognizable to his audience. Esther, as narrator/protagonist is just "une 'marionnette de papier' entre les mains du monstateur", to use Thierry Groensteen's arguments on the role of the cartoonist.<sup>38</sup> He states that the "monstateur" is the one who decides

35. Laurent Turpin, "Zoom sur les meilleures ventes de BD du 15 novembre 2017", *BDZoom*, [bdzoom.com](http://bdzoom.com), 25 January 2016.

36. Hillary Chute, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*, New York, Harper, 2017, p. 275.

37. Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, op. cit., p. 39.

38. Thierry Groensteen, *Bande dessinée et narration*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2011, p. 109.



on the layout and the content of the album because he “reste ‘maître dans sa partie’ libre d’interpréter le récit du narrateur actorialisé”.<sup>39</sup> However, according to Lejeune, *Les Cahiers d’Esther* should not be described as a biography, because the narrator uses first-person narrative. The series presents a compelling challenge to the traditional understanding of biographical narratives.

While Sattouf emphasizes its authenticity, which the media often highlights as the primary quality of the series, his creative choices complicate the notion of truth and transparency within the hybrid, visual-verbal nature of (auto)biographical comics. In addition to his distinctive graphic style and sense of humor, Sattouf never conceals the fact that he changed many details to protect the anonymity of the “real” Esther. In interviews, he frequently mentions that Esther is a pseudonym and not the real name of his childhood friend’s daughter. The only person who has met the actual girl behind the stories is journalist Arnaud Gonzague from *L’Obs*.<sup>40</sup> In his article, he highlights Sattouf’s protective stance:

J’avais envie de faire entendre ce que pense une fille de son âge, de sa génération, avec ses mots à elle et des anecdotes tirées du réel. Mais, en même temps, je veux la protéger : l’exposer médiatiquement serait l’empêcher de raconter ce qu’elle pense, ce qu’elle voit. Perdre la magie de ce qui nous unit autour de cette BD.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Esther’s real name is not used, she has a sister instead of a brother, and her father is not a strong coach at the gym. It is crucial to remember that the series began when Esther was only nine years old, and although her parents found the project engaging, her mother emphasized, in the article, that they preferred to keep her out of the media because of her young age.<sup>42</sup> Since Sattouf alters some facts, the question arises whether the series can be described as a biofiction. I do not believe this to be the case because, although he changed her name and modified some details about her family dynamic, Sattouf is not reimagining her life to “to project into existence a new, better, and more socially just way of thinking”.<sup>43</sup> He is also not projecting details of his own life into the story, rather he is telling the story of Esther’s life. Jan Baetens studied the collaboration in autobiographical bandes dessinées and he wonders, “on peut ainsi se demander [s’il] est possible de confier un récit autobiographique, racontée par un auteur scénariste à quelqu’un d’autre, qui le dessine, sans que le récit en question, cesse d’être pleinement autobiographique, sans qu’il perde aussi en authenticité ?”<sup>44</sup> However, he concludes by saying: “rejeter comme inauthentique la collaboration entre deux narrateurs différents, le premier chargé du récit, le second chargé du dessin, sous-

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39. *Ibid*, p. 110.

40. Esther recounts the encounter in *Histoire de mes 11 ans* (vol. 2, p. 19).

41. Arnaud Gonzague, “‘Tout est presque vrai’ : rencontre avec Esther, l’héroïne de Riad Sattouf”, *L’Obs*, 25 January 2016.

42. *Ibid*.

43. Lackey, “Beyond Postmodern Blurring”, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

44. Jan Baetens, “Bande dessinée et autobiographie : Problèmes, enjeux, exemples”, *Belphégor : Littérature Populaire et Culture Médiatique*, vol. 14, n° 1, 2004.

estime, je pense, les possibilités de 'fusion' qui peuvent se produire lors d'une collaboration réussie."<sup>45</sup>

That's why I argue that *Les Cahiers d'Esther* remains a genuine and insightful (auto) biographical account of Esther's life because it is the story of a real person about her own existence and her life is the focus of the story'. As a child, she would have been incapable of producing such a successful and nuanced series on her own. The alterations made by Sattouf to protect Esther's identity, such as changing her name and modifying certain details about her family, do not fundamentally alter her story. Moreover, Lejeune argued that error, mistake and deformation are expected in an autobiography. These are merely peripheral details that do not undermine the authenticity of the narrative but were done to ensure that she could share her thoughts, experiences, and perspectives freely without the distraction or pressure of media exposure. And by openly discussing those modifications, Sattouf certifies "the genre's truth claims through unabashed falseness" as argued by Hatfield when discussing ironic authentication.<sup>46</sup> However, the autobiographical pact is not fully respected since author and narrator are two different entities and that is why I added the parenthesis around (auto). I do not want to undermine the role that Sattouf played in the series. By shielding Esther's true identity, Sattouf was able to create a space where her authentic voice could come through, unobstructed by the scrutiny that would accompany her being publicly identified. As such, Sattouf's changes serve to preserve the integrity of Esther's autobiographical account and allow the reader to engage with her story on a genuine level.

### Challenging the Boundaries of Autobiography

*Les Cahiers d'Esther* explores how graphic art reshapes our understanding of fidelity in personal narratives, underscoring the evolving complexities of authenticity. As the series progresses, Esther and Sattouf reveal more details about the process and how he alternates between truth and self-critical sincerity, implying claims to truth. In *Histoire de mes 15 ans*, she is on her bed reading the freshly released volume and reacts to it, explaining in the *récitatif* that "en fait les histoires sont assez différentes de ma vie, enfin, c'est pareil mais différent, chais pas comment dire..." (vol. 6, p. 42). On the right of the panel, in a black background, it is written in white "c'est vrai mais différent mdr." On the left of the panel, the reader can just see the top of her face above the new volume. Her eyes express a sense of apology with her eyebrows drawn down. Does she feel bad that there are some fictionalized elements in the book? When looking at the whole page, this panel stands out because of the black background (the only panel like that). The other panels that stand out are the last two at the bottom of the page because there are no lines to delimit the frames. In the penultimate panel, she explains in the *récitatif* that, in real life, she varies her hairstyles and her clothes. Sattouf colors in green three different Esthers dressed and with her hair styled differently each time. There is a metatextual comment written next to each silhouette. In the next and

45. *Ibid.*

46. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, op. cit., p. 126.

last panel, she asks the readers “et si on changeait ma tête pour les autres albums? Ça serait drôle.” At the bottom of the two panels, Sattouf writes “D’après une histoire vraie racontée par Esther A., 15 ans” as he does on each page. It seems that Sattouf is playing with the form fully aware of what he is doing.

In *Histoire de mes 18 ans*, Esther’s voice becomes particularly pronounced as she offers a reflective analysis of Sattouf’s creative choices. First, she points to a story from *Histoire de mes 10 ans*, where her youthful dreams of fame involved an audition using a song by Black M – a creative liberty taken by Sattouf that contrasts with her actual musical taste: “et la chanson de Black M, c’est une idée de Riad j’écoutais pas ça, c’était plus mon frère. Moi c’était Balavoine mon style” (vol. 9, p. 28). Her thoughts on fame and becoming a public figure through the series, even if it’s a version of her that’s been tweaked for the story, are honest and introspective: “ça l’a un peu fait avec *Les Cahiers d’Esther*, c’est devenu célèbre remarque. Mais c’est pas vraiment moi...” To symbolize this moment of truth, Sattouf breaks away from his typical 3x3 or 3x4 panel layout, choosing instead to feature a single, large drawing from the first volume. Here, Esther’s character is depicted unrestrained by the usual panel borders, her figure sprawling across the page. The absence of conventional structures implies a freeing from narrative restrictions, following a more genuine depiction of her character.

In a later story titled “La célébrité”, Esther shares eleven lesser-known facts about herself and the series, each panel dedicated to a different revelation (vol. 9, p. 35). It demonstrates Esther’s sophisticated understanding of her role within the narrative, as she acknowledges the crafted nature of her portrayal. For instance, she divulges, “2 – Riad change plein de trucs pour que je reste cachée”, “4 – oui il y a des choses complètement fausses dans *Les Cahiers d’Esther* et non par contre je dirai jamais lesquelles mdr.” The first fact that she shares is even more striking, as she states in a text box, “j’existe réellement, mais mon personnage aussi. Il me fait un peu le même effet que certains rêves, quand on croise une personne et que c’est la personne, mais pas VRAIMENT elle.” Esther is sitting inside a large and disembodied hand which appears to be enveloping her, with the fingers curving around her protectively. The background is white and devoid of any details placing all emphasis on the hand and Esther as a symbolic metaphor of Sattouf protecting her but also of his role in shaping her narrative.

By allowing Esther to openly discuss the fictionalized aspects of the series, Sattouf reinforces the notion that *Les Cahiers d’Esther* is not a straightforward autobiographical work. Rather, it becomes a collaborative exploration of the tensions between truth and fiction in personal storytelling. Sattouf’s willingness to incorporate Esther’s metatextual commentaries suggests that he is actively engaged in challenging the boundaries of the autobiographical genre, using the medium of comics to create a unique and layered narrative. As Janet Varner Gunn argues, the truth in an autobiography “lies not in the ‘facts’ of the story itself but in the relational space between the story and its reader”.<sup>47</sup> In the case of *Les Cahiers d’Esther*,

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47. Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 1982, p. 143.

the reader enters into complicity with the artifice necessarily employed by Sattouf, challenging the notion of objective truth.

This approach of deconstructing and reassembling Esther's stories invites us to re-examine the relationship between storyteller and reader, enriching the discourse on the nature of representing reality through art. Sattouf includes a page of "truth" in each album where Esther comments on the freshly released album. In a sense, these stories assert truthfulness through falsity. These visual metatextual commentaries allow her to step outside the usual confines of the comic's structure, reflecting a more authentic depiction of her character. Thus, Sattouf confirms the power of comics to convey something like the truth. Merle Brown differentiates between the fictive and the fictitious: a story may be fictive yet truthful, insofar as it "implies as part of itself the art of its making".<sup>48</sup> On the other side, a story (autobiographical or not) that does not acknowledge its own making is merely fictitious. Sattouf is actively engaged in challenging the boundaries of the autobiographical genre, using the medium of comics to create a unique and layered narrative. Moreover, through these pages of revelations, the series highlights the concept of Hatfield's ironic authentication by simultaneously challenging and affirming the autobiography's regard for truth. Esther's self-aware statements about the fictionalized elements underscore Sattouf's skilful navigation of the visual-verbal tension inherent in the comics form, inviting readers to critically engage with the nature of truth in personal narratives.

### The Secret World of Childhood

In 2017, journalist Quentin Girard described Sattouf as "un magnifique ethnographe de la vie ordinaire".<sup>49</sup> It is true that Riad Sattouf can be considered an ethnographer: his work is grounded in the close observation of a single individual, Esther, whose stories reflect broader trends in contemporary French society. Much like an ethnographer who uses a representative case study to explore cultural norms, Sattouf portrays Esther as a voice of her generation. Her life experiences, opinions, and interactions serve as a lens through which readers can understand the values, behaviours, and contradictions of today's youth. Moreover, his process is deeply rooted in the collection of authentic testimony so he could be called an "autoethnographer" because, as explained earlier, his process reflects an "autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest".<sup>50</sup> He makes sure to preserve Esther's vocabulary, expressions, and tone. This makes his storytelling feel raw and spontaneous, and it resembles ethnographic field work, where researchers carefully document the voices of their subjects without altering them. Through Esther's eyes, Sattouf offers a subtle yet sharp social analysis. Topics such as racism, gender stereotypes, social inequality, family life, school dynamics, and the influence of social media all surface naturally in her narration. By letting her speak freely, he avoids moralizing and instead reveals how children absorb, reproduce, and question the

48. Merle E. Brown, "The Idea of Fiction as Fictive or Fictitious", *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 6, n° 1, 1973, p. 62.

49. Quentin Girard, "Esther, un cas d'école", *Libération*, 17 March 2017.

50. Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography*, op. cit., p. 2.

world around them. This mirrors the goal of ethnographical work: to explore culture from the inside out. Moreover, Sattouf's project spans a long period, allowing him to chart her intellectual and emotional growth. This long-term perspective is rare in comics and aligns closely with ethnographic research conducted over extended periods. It helps him capture not only the changes in Esther herself but also in the society that shapes her.

First, Esther emerges not as a static figure – bound by unchanging features and moral characterization often attributed to a series character – but as an evolving entity, weaving a life path through the fabric of time. One only needs to glance at each album cover to be convinced: Esther teetering on a curb's edge (vol. 1, vol. 9), jumping into the air (vol. 3), balancing precariously on a metro handrail (vol. 5), or dancing at a party (vol. 6, vol. 7). Her dynamic poses across the various covers convey a sense of whimsical energy and youthful freedom as she navigates the adventures of daily life. Each album highlights a different colour, but they are always vivid, reinforcing Esther's enthusiasm. This kinetic visual approach aligns perfectly with the lively, first-person storytelling that characterizes Sattouf's style. The author invites readers to witness her journey *in medias res*, allowing us to see "se dessiner sous nos yeux toute une société en action, tous ses mécanismes en construction" as sociologist Catherine Monnot observed in *Petites filles d'aujourd'hui*.<sup>51</sup> If Monnot was talking about the school playground at the time, she could have had the same reflection about *Les Cahiers d'Esther*. Beyond the captivating visuals and narratives, the series offers nuanced commentary on contemporary French society as well as the complexities of growing up and forming one's own identity.

Identity is fundamentally relational and develops through a long series of dynamic interactions between the individual and their broader context. This continuous process requires the daily renewal of one's identity, as it is tied to both self-perception and the way one is perceived by the environment. Although the terms 'self' and 'identity' are often used interchangeably, they denote distinct concepts: 'self' refers to an individual's inner sense of being, while 'identity' encompasses the roles, attributes, and beliefs that define how one is perceived by others and how one relates to society.<sup>52</sup> Throughout the series, Riad Sattouf shows how Esther's self-image and others' perceptions of her shape her place in society. Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's groundbreaking work on identity development has profoundly influenced our understanding of how individuals come to understand themselves, particularly during the critical stage of adolescence. In *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, he presents identity as a multifaceted construct involving a sense of individual uniqueness, continuity across time, and belonging to shared ideals. He describes it as "a feeling of personal unity (sameness) and historical continuity", highlighting that identity depends both on one's internal sense of coherence and on recognition from others.<sup>53</sup> These foundational concepts have shaped

51. Catherine Monnot, *Petites filles d'aujourd'hui : l'apprentissage de la féminité*, Paris, Autrement, 2009, p. 22.

52. Harke Bosma and Coby Gerlsma, "From early attachment relations to the adolescent and adult organization of self", in Jaan Valsiner and Kevin J. Connolly (eds.), *Handbook of Developmental Psychology*, London, Sage, 2003, p. 450-488.

53. *Ibid*, p. 17.

subsequent theories and research on identity formation, providing a framework for understanding the complex process of self-discovery and personal growth. But those are especially helpful to understand and see how Esther, and more generally girls her age, navigates life.

Second, the narration faithfully captures the way children her age actually speak, with their slang and syntax, often involving the translation of the vernacular language, or 'street language', into standard speech: "Il était vénère (ça veut dire 'énervé')" (vol. 1, p. 41); "scotchée la daronne (ça veut dire 'mère')" (vol. 2, p. 46); "Je goleri! (ça veut dire 'je plaisante')" (vol. 3, p. 3); "J'ai dit que ceux qui voulaient boire de l'alcool devaient ramener leur sson-boi ('boisson' en verlan)" (vol. 6, p. 9). Sattouf frequently includes examples of *verlan*, a form of slang that inverts syllables. This attention to linguistic authenticity in the characters' speech patterns is, as Chute argues, a key factor in making autobiographical comics feel "so vital and authentic".<sup>54</sup> The inclusion of these translations raises the question of the intended audience, since young readers may already be familiar with the slang. It is possible that Sattouf included these translations to accommodate older readers or that they represent Esther's transcription explaining the words she uses to Sattouf. Or they might be intended for a broader audience who may not be as well-versed in these expressions because they are from other French-speaking countries, for instance. Regardless, his goal was to be faithful to her telling of her stories while also highlighting the intergenerational dialogue that the series fosters. After all, Sattouf originally wrote the books for adults who wanted to understand the secret world of children. This process not only validates the use of the vernacular but also illustrates the fluidity of language and its accessibility across generations and continents. Young people, often at the forefront of cultural shifts, play a crucial role in transforming language and societal norms through their adoption and reinterpretation of trends. Esther's character exemplifies this dynamic, showing how youth culture can shape public discourse and challenge established norms. Thus, her interactions offer insight into the impact of the younger generation on communication and cultural identity, emphasizing the need to acknowledge and value the vernacular as a dynamic and integral part of contemporary society's fabric.

On top of following the linguistic trends, Esther also follows consumer culture. She is not depicted as a rebel, but rather someone who aligns herself with the consumption patterns.<sup>55</sup> Sattouf emphasizes her eagerness to blend in with her peers by embracing a particular style that is considered fashionable. The pressure she feels to conform to social norms is illustrated in the first volume in the story "Les 10 ans" where she received a winter coat for her birthday, "exactement celui [qu'elle] voulait" (vol. 1, p. 16). The white coat with vivid pink flowers is immediately apparent on the dull page. Her boyfriend Louis and his friend

54. Chute, *Why Comics?*, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

55. While in the kids' comics, the social dictate came through the mouths of the secondary characters and the hero managed to distance himself from them by trapping them in their own way, this series, on the contrary, never ceases to highlight the formatting of the little girl's thoughts and behaviour. Far from Mafalda "the protester", as Umberto Eco nicknamed her, who deconstructed the language and habits of everyday life to question the dominant thought, Esther seems to adhere to all the linguistic, cultural or consumerist trends (Annie Conethe, "*Esther ou les mystères des 'cahiers'*", *La Cité Internationale de la bande dessinée et de l'image*, [www.citebd.org](http://www.citebd.org), January 2019).

make fun of her coat at recess and Louis does not come to her birthday party. When she learns that he is at a different party, she is sad. Sattouf draws her face in a close-up with wavy eyes to highlight that she holds back tears. Breaking from his 3x4 layout, the last panel of the story covers half the page. The reader sees that she has discarded her coat on the street but all she says in a metatextual comment is: "évitez de dire à ma mère que j'ai fait ça", looking at her coat from the window. Thus, as early as the sixteenth page of the album, the reader understands how important it is for Esther to be accepted, to feel part of the group, even if it means getting rid of something she really wanted. She desires to be popular, not outcasted.

Six years later, another story provides insight into the values and societal pressures that affect the younger generation, particularly regarding materialism and the need to belong. In *Histoire de mes 16 ans*, she finally achieves "le look que je rêvais d'avoir à 14 ans" as she says in the *récitatif* (vol. 7, p. 19). Sattouf places Esther, whose body is coloured in yellow, against a white background with arrows pointing to her expensive clothing items. The yellow colour represents gold and money and emphasizes the importance of these material possessions and their high cost. Describing her outfit, she confirms: "Doudoune noire North Face (vaut une blinde : un Noël). Et EarPods sa mère. Baskets Air Jordan (une blinde aussi : mes baby sittings). Oui j'ai l'air d'une bourge." At the beginning of every new album, she explains that she attends an expensive private school but stresses that her family is not rich and that she receives scholarships. By saying "j'ai l'air d'une bourge", she suggests that she finally feels part of the group. If, in the first album, she could get rid of her coat, being poor in a rich kids' school is not something she can easily overcome. However, this outfit is not unique to her. In the next panel, Esther's appearance is identical to that of two other girls, underscoring the uniformity of the trend among her peers. Ultimately, she is just a "mirror image of every other" to quote Chaney's words.<sup>56</sup> In the *récitatif*, she is aware of her conformity: "en fait, oui je sais, toutes les meufs de mon lycée s'habillent comme ça, mais ça me détend de pas me faire remarquer." Although she blends in, she is still different from her peers because she had to work hard and wait to afford *the* look. As Chaney argued for Marji in *Persepolis*, "difference despite mirror-like reflection, identity despite individuality".<sup>57</sup> It is almost ironic that Esther feels the need to belong when she is an "I-con" in France: the past six albums have all been bestsellers, and there is a lot of merchandise with her effigy, such as agendas or notebooks.

## Conclusion

The (auto)biographical series *Les Cahiers d'Esther* by Riad Sattouf demonstrates how the graphic novel can redefine autobiographical storytelling. Through metatextual strategies, Sattouf encourages readers to question notions of truth and authenticity in self-representation. By letting Esther comment on the fictionalization of her story, he breaks the traditional

56. Michael A. Chaney, "Terrors of the Mirror and the Mise en Abyme of Graphic Novel Autobiography", *College Literature*, vol. 38, n° 3, 2011, p. 26.

57. *Ibid*, p. 29.

autobiographical pact and reconfigures the boundary between fact and invention. This dialogue between reality and representation shows the medium's ability to express subjective experience.

Sattouf's approach also challenges the idea of the autonomous, authoritative narrator and expands the possibilities of life writing. Beyond questions of form, the series *Les Cahiers d'Esther* offers insight into what it means to grow up as a girl in contemporary France. More than a humorous or touching work, it is a vivid chronicle of a child's developing consciousness. Through careful observation and continuity, Sattouf acts as a graphic ethnographer, transforming everyday life into visual anthropology.

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