BIO Conference Preview

The Past, Present, and Future of Feminist Biography

By Anne Boyd Rioux, Moderator

This panel grew out of a desire to consider how the gender politics of our current moment will affect the field of biography. In an era when women’s voices and perspectives are arguably being heard like never before, it is worth taking stock of how feminism in its many forms has impacted, and will continue to impact, biography.

Feminist approaches to biography emerged in the 1970s and 80s as feminist historians and literary scholars sought to adapt the biographical form, which had focused primarily on heroic male politicians and military leaders, to tell the stories of women’s lives. This inevitably raised the question of which women’s lives were suitable for biographical treatment. Nancy Milford’s biography of Zelda Fitzgerald (1970) inaugurated a tradition of writing about the wives (or sisters) of famous men whose success may have been built on the suppressed talents of their female counterparts. Jean Strouse’s biography of Alice James (1980) was equally influential. Considering how completely Alice had been overshadowed by her famous brothers, William and Henry, Strouse made the case for documenting a life that would appear to be wholly insignificant. As Strouse wrote in her introduction, “Her private quest for a sense of her life’s integrity offers a special, personal angle of vision on the past. Not the past of great men and historical events, nor the past of unknown masses who left no record of their thoughts, but the past of a sentient, articulate person whose particular history makes vivid the ideas, personalities, and social conditions of her time.” Milford was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and...
ABC’s Provide Original and Instructive Approach to Biography

The ABC of Modern Biography
By Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders
Amsterdam University Press, 2018

By Carl Rollyson

“No dictionary of biography today, unfortunately, provides an easily accessible map of modern biography,” the authors claim. Well, I can think of two: my own Biography: A User’s Guide (2008), reviewed in these pages by Nigel Hamilton, and Encyclopedia of Life Writing (2001), edited by Margaretta Jolly. The ABC of Modern Biography does not supersede these earlier books, but that is not to say you should not attend to Hamilton and Renders first. As practicing biographers and scholars of the genre, they have expanded an understanding of the range and significance of biography and approached the alphabet of the genre in an original, instructive, and entertaining way.

You won’t find, for example, “C is for Composition” in any other book. The third sentence of this entry explains why biography has suffered from neglect in the literary canon as a kind of second-rate sibling of the novel: “The construction of the biography itself, as a work of craft—its shape, its framing, its narrative arc, the quality of its ingredients from archival discoveries to interviews, its style as prose or composition by the biographer—these are of scant interest to the reviewer or journalist”—and, usually, to scholars as well, except for those benighted few who try to make a go of writing about biography, which has no place in the college curriculum. That one Hamilton/Renders sentence lays out what reviewers and critics should be doing with the time they would rather spend writing about fiction. Because even great writers like Virginia Woolf and Evelyn Waugh have not put in the time on how to write biography, their own biographical productions, Hamilton and Renders point out, are disasters. So ignorant are the literati that they have it coming in another H/R sentence: “Composing a biography, in other words, is much harder than it might first appear.” In the “C” entry, they go on to discuss the issues of framing, composition, narrative voice, and so on, that any neophyte or experienced biographer will find enlightening.

I can’t imagine any other book on biography having an entry as brilliant as “X is for Xanadu”: “From the opening sequence—the camera panning over the Xanadu estate, with its ‘No Trespassing’ sign and large ‘K’ welded on the gate—Citizen Kane is a kind of homage to the art and process of biography, biographers today recognize, as editors in a smoky projection room watch a newsreel summary of Kane’s life and are told by their boss, Mr. Rawlston, they need to dig deeper than the myth, not only to decipher the potential meaning of Kane’s last word, but to fill in his ‘character.’” Rawlston then asks a series of questions about Kane’s motivations and what he was after. That panning camera, I would add, mimics the phases of inquiry the reporters and viewers of the film have to experience in order
to penetrate the elusive Kane. The film never promises full disclosure; it is too honest to do that, for that would make biography stoop to that too-eager-to-please genre: the novel. Only the greatest novels can match great biography, and those novels—by Nabokov and Faulkner, for example—are wise enough to leave something out, that kind of mystery that readers of biography relish.

What sets *The ABC of Modern Biography* apart from its predecessors is its force as both inspiration and instruction. Any first-time biographer is required to read this book. Any experienced biographer can still profit from a refresher course that entries like “E is for Ethics,” “J is for Journalism,” and “T is for Theory” supply. Each entry is followed by a list of sources so that, for example, you can read more about authorized biography in articles and books by Kitty Kelley and Hans Rinders. The comprehensive bibliography and excellent index make the book even more useful. This encyclopedic and elegant work, which can be read in digestible parts or swallowed whole without the slightest intellectual indigestion, is a delight and a godsend.


**Shorts**

**Biographers Fight for Credit for Their Work**

Citing growing instances of film and television producers not crediting biographers and other writers for the use of their research in movie and TV programs, the London-based Society of Authors has published guidelines meant to ensure its members receive fair treatment. Both *The Guardian* and *The Bookseller* reported on the society’s concerns. *The Guardian* wrote about Lyndsy Spence, who wrote the first biography of Doris Delevingne, the subject of a Channel 4 program called *Secret History: Churchill’s Secret Affair*. The program’s producers turned to Spence to verify material, answer queries, and locate photographs, in return for a “special thanks” in the credits. When the program aired, Spence said, “sure enough, there was my research . . . [but] there was no credit. I asked why, and [the program’s researcher] said, oh it must have been an oversight.” *The Guardian* also cited the example of Hallie Rubenhold, whose 2005 book *The Covent Garden Ladies: Pimp General Jack and the Extraordinary Story of Harris’ List* served as a source for the ITV program *Harlots*, but she did not receive credit until she publicly complained. Her case, in part, spurred the Society of Authors to issue its guidelines, which it intends to remunerate the author for their contribution. “In a sign that the issue of proper crediting of biographers is not limited to the UK, the Norwegian media reported on the release of a new biopic about Roald Amundsen. The film drew upon new information about the explorer’s personal life first revealed in a biography by Tor Bomann-Lars, but his work was not credited in the film. As of February 15, 2019, Bomann-Lars’s publisher was considering legal action.

*by Christy Fletcher at Fletcher & Company*

**Benjamin Runkle**

*Generals In The Making*  
(Genero Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, Douglas MacArthur, and their peers)  
sold to Stackpole  
by E. J. McCarthy at  
E. J. McCarthy Agency

**Patrick Radden Keefe**

Untitled biography of the Sackler family  
sold to Doubleday  
by Tina Bennett at  
William Morris Endeavor

**Harley Rastad**

*Lost in the Valley of Death*  
(Justin Alexander Shetler)  
sold to Harper  
by Stuart Krichevsky at  
Stuart Krichevsky Agency

**Jim DeRogatis**

*Soulless: The Case Against R. Kelly*  
sold to Abrams Press  
by Monika Woods at Curtis Brown

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