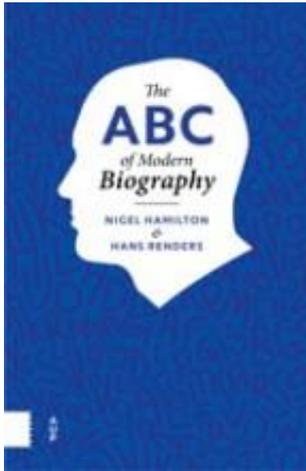


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The ABC of Modern Biography

Nigel Hamilton & Hans Renders

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From *Authorization* to *Zigzagging to the end* the book mainly conveys a laudable recommendation to the readers addicted to biographies and the biographer apprentice: the search for truth... and the impossibility of achieving it.

Nigel Hamilton is an English and American author, as a biographer he wrote 27 works among which *JFK*, *Reckless Youth* (1992), *Bill Clinton*, *An American Journey: Great Expectations* (2003) and [Biography: A Brief History](#) (2007). Hans Renders is a Professor at the University of Groningen (The Netherlands) and Director of the Biography Institute. He published *The Biographical Turn. Lives in History* (2017), with Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma.

26 words for Biography. This essay offers an accurate overview of well-documented ways and rules of practicing biography – mainly written biographies – since Suetonius and Plutarch, frequently quoted, as well as modern surrounding forms, such as films and documentaries. Each chapter ends with a list of the main sources, and the book offers a six-page bibliography at the end. We learn much about the practice and the forms of the genre, the importance of a ‘Turning Point’, the connection with journalism, identity, ethics, authorization, the visual arts..., as well as how to deal with religion and sex in biography. Nevertheless the founding principle of the essay is the idea that a serious biographer has to be

« a quasi-lawyer, presenting evidence to be taken into account by the jury » (p. 153), mostly in a moment of distortion of the truth.

Every chapter's aim is to « amuse, entertain and inform » (p. 7) about the past and current practice of a genre, historically crucial but unfortunately undervalued by the universities and the research for few decades, in the late twentieth century (« an abiding unwillingness within academia to teach or promote the study of βίος », is pointed out p. 101), until a form of revival – a « Biographical Turn », as coined by Hans Renders – in the early 2000's, even in the academical area. It means: « the challenging cultural changes that commenced in the 80s and which swept away the notion of biography as literary backwater » (p. 130). This change was made possible thanks to several societies and centers devoted to the biographical and life-writing studies, now including the *Center for Biographical Research* (in Hawaii, since 1988, <http://blog.hawaii.edu/cbrhawaii/>), the *Biografie Instituut* (Groningen, since 2004, <https://www.rug.nl/research/biografie-instituut/>), the *Biographers International Organization* (in the USA, since 2010, <http://biographersinternational.org/>), the *Biography Society/Société de biographie* (Aix-en-Provence, founded in 2016, <http://biographysociety.org/>), and other important centers in Barcelona, Vienna, Norwich, Shanghai...

The ABC of Modern Biography points out a shortage of rules nowadays, among them ethic rules, mainly in the USA, connected with the 'alternative facts', in other words the 'post-truth'. So the question is « what a true biography is today? » (p. 10). Throughout an alphabetical survey we learn first of all what biography is not for both authors. Its purpose is not to invent facts but to discover things known (p. 26), obviously, this is why the book frequently and strongly criticizes the confusion often made today between biography, 'creative non-fiction', memoir and the « venerable distant cousin » life-writing (p. 104): « Without facts, there is no biography. Only fiction » (p. 51). Biography is characterized by the reliability of facts (p. 36), consequently the biographer is responsible because he must respect an ethical code. Nigel Hamilton precisely coined the expression « biography as corrective » in order to define how the story of a true live allows to focus on new aspects, less known or ignored, and by doing so to reconsider a piece of History, because « one of the important task of biography in a free society is to correct historiography » (p. 66 and p. 201). As a matter of fact *The ABC of Modern Biography* keeps saying again and again how compelling and crucial the respect of true facts is in a 'serious' modern biography, in a World more and more dangerously fostered by the 'alternative facts'. The problem is finding the real enemy. Even if the authors sharply – and rightfully, but far too often, like an obsession

throughout the chapters – emphasize the responsibility of a certain « narcissistic » President (p. 98) in the power of ‘post-truth’ at the moment, how is that they show themselves to be so hard towards poststructuralism and deconstruction, both hastily accused of being a « virus » with negative consequences?

If the major interest of the book dwells basically on the necessary truth and the search of true facts, as the essential purpose and source for the biographer whose strain resembles a patient enquiry, we hardly find any reflection on important questions, to the extent that the reader’s function, the audience plurality, the horizon of expectation, the editorial market (it is a pity not to have unfolded the reflection about « a balance largely defined by the audience, the law and the market », p. 174) are not sufficiently studied. Neither stylistics nor the paratext in biography are paid enough attention. The chapter ‘C is for Composition’ is very interesting because it deals with the frame, the research, the selectivity, the technique, the narrator, and so on, but it does not explain much about a rhetoric and a syntax of the biographical art as a literary genre, that is to say the ‘literarity’ of a biography. Most of the examples listed in the essay are taken mainly from the American and the British output, as well as a particular interest in Dutch History (due to Hans Renders), therefore we hardly know about what happened and happens in other areas of the World, such as Asia, Africa or Southern Europe.

Thanks to this pleasant essay one can understand how important writing, publishing, reading, promoting and obviously studying biographies are nowadays, because « biography can influence society’s knowledge and judgement of a single individual » (p. 137).

The most compelling chapter of the book may be ‘T is for Theory’, because it deals with the complementarity between the practice and the reflection, the definition of thin and complex boundaries between history and literature in writing someone’s life. However, the chapter slides towards a criticism addressed to poststructuralism and deconstruction.

What matters is: « the search for verifiable facts and truth in recording real lives » (p. 183). *The ABC of Modern Biography* leads us to understand many problems linked to telling and writing a life nowadays. By virtue of the format and the composition it is aimed at a large audience because it alludes to many past and present cases of biographies considered as landmarks and great biographers whose lessons are still useful.

As both authors pertinently write: « Biography, *tout court*, is something that is still *done* rather than examined » (p. 17). So, let’s follow their lead and examine biography in earnest, as a fertile and thriving field in education and research.

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