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## The Study of Biography Today

When he set out years ago to establish a field of study in biography, moderator Nigel Hamilton said he “had no idea of my ignorance” in how to successfully root that field in today’s academic environment. The United Kingdom at the time “was woefully behind other countries in this regard.” And even now, teaching biography in universities is still hit and miss.



From left to right, panelist Hans Renders, moderator Nigel Hamilton, and panelists Billy Tooma and Linda Leavell.

Photo by John Grady

Hamilton is the author of a three-volume biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt during World War II, among other books. He said that where he fell down panelist Hans Renders, his co-author of *The ABC of Modern Biography*, succeeded. Renders heads the Biography Institute at Groningen University in the Netherlands. But getting the school interested in biography as an academic topic wasn’t easy. Renders put it bluntly, “I bring this [idea of teaching biography] to the history department; they need something to spit on.”

As to how he became interested in biography, Renders said, “I used to work as a journalist writing stock obits.” What became important to him in that work

and carried through into pursuing biography was recognizing “there must be a turning point in a public life” and building from there.

Linda Leavell said that although she holds a doctorate in English Literature, she “actually went to biography school” to help her begin her work. But it was “school” in a different way. Leavell is the author of  *Holding on Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore*. What brought her to write about Moore was hearing that there needed to be a new biography of the poet, but the prospect “seemed very daunting.” Leavell said she dreaded looking for an agent but eventually the agent “taught me all I didn’t know.” And she agreed about the academic disdain for biography. She said English departments are ignorant that “biography is a work of imagination.” The departments do not recognize that it “could be an art form as much as a sonnet.” The key to achieving this is to “be true to the facts and integrate them in many different ways.”

Billy Tooma, who also holds a doctorate, said, “We swept biography under the rug” as part of the basic curriculum and a way to instruct students. Tooma, who teaches at the college level and is a filmmaker specializing in biographical documentaries, said that the overlooking of biography in elementary and high schools is tied to the demands of the 180-day academic year and ignoring the reality that students “can learn through biography.”

Tooma said his interest in the form came from reading a biography of J. R. R. Tolkien as a middle schooler, and it has carried through into his career. He realized that biography doesn’t have to be told only through books, and today his students at Essex Community College in New Jersey “get it” when it comes to visual biography. It’s something that interests them, and they want to experiment with and learn researching, storytelling, and some video craft from the experience.

But biography in book form certainly has its place in the classroom for Tooma and the other panelists. Both Tooma and Leavell agreed that using biography should be part of a larger effort to teach students how to read nonfiction as a matter of cultural literacy. Rendens said, “You need a good story especially. Students are attracted by good stories.” Tooma said, “Biography humanizes the sciences, that’s something other genres can’t do.”

Leavell noted, “like other genres, biography has evolved” in the late 20th and into the 21st century. “Our expectations of biography have changed.” For

example, the concept of “genius” is “an idea that has become very unfashionable” in describing a subject. “Now we see the political, social, and economic circumstances” surrounding that person. Biographers are also now focusing on different things, she said. “Gender makes a difference,” and so does class.

Renders had this tip for teachers looking to use biography in the classroom: “With students, try to get them to understand . . . that reading biography is fun.” He suggested having them “read two biographies of the same person” to see the different approaches to a single subject.

—*John Grady*

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