

How to Read a Biography

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

The reason why biographies make better reading than novels is that the latter are based on fantasy while the former are true stories. A novel is a story spun out of make-believe, while a biography is a story of a life. Every life is a story, a drama acted out from birth to death. Historical novelists try to embellish the truth of the past with exciting fictional devices. Autobiographical novels try to improve on reality and make it more entertaining. Human beings love stories, and that is why thousands of writers all over the globe dream up stories to be published in magazines, or as books, or produced as movies.

Our entertainment industry is, for the most part, a story-telling industry, and the video store has become the great depository of stories. We think of stories as fiction. We think of biographies as nonfiction. Yet, as we all know, truth is stranger than fiction. And that is why biographies can make much better, and even more entertaining, reading than novels.

A novel has to be believable in order to capture and retain the interest of the reader. And that is why it cannot be too fantastic. But true life knows no such limits. Whatever happened happened, regardless of whether or not it is believable.

Every life is indeed a story. An extraordinary life makes an extraordinary story. A good biography usually covers the entire cycle of life—infancy, childhood, education, love, marriage, family, career, profession, achievement, friendships, old age, and finally the end of life. Every biography has a hero, the subject of the book.

In a sense we are all the heroes of our own life stories. We are center stage, and the world revolves around us. That is why so many of us are compelled to write autobiographies or memoirs. Biographies relate memories, and as children we start remembering when we begin to master language.

But autobiographies only tell us what the author wants us to know. We get the author's self-chosen memories. Of late, there have been some exhibitionist type of autobiographies, in which the author reveals deep, dark personal secrets. They are written for their sensationalism, which will help sell books. But they also assure us that others can harbor thoughts and desires as deep and dark as our own, and thus they can be used as a cheap form of home-produced psychotherapy.

Many of us who attended colleges have on our bookshelves our college yearbooks. When we look at them fifty years after graduation, we can imagine what all of those seniors became: how they fell in love, married, had families, divorced, had great careers. Some of them will have already gone to their great reward. We tend to evaluate a person's life on how they lived it and what they achieved.

It is interesting to read the marriage notices in our newspapers and imagine what kind of lives those newly wed couples will make for themselves in the future. Each couple will weave their own story, and perhaps, after a brilliant and adventurous life, one of them will write an autobiography or become the subject of a biography. If you yourself are a budding writer, you might fantasize what a particular newly-wed couple's life will be like. It will be a self-amusing exercise in imagination.

When we are young, we should read the biographies and autobiographies of people we admire. They have a lot to teach us. The lives of musicians and composers often tell tales of great creativity and exertion in order to achieve fame, of disappointments and failures, of happiness and triumph. The lives of great athletes, inventors, explorers, statesmen, writers, and artists reveal worlds of different professions, interests, and obsessions. And it is always instructive to learn how our heroes managed to deal with the great tragedies in their lives. Lives are lived in the dynamic context of other people, and the hero of a biography can be seen as the hub of his or her vital wheel of life.

Our founding fathers were an extraordinary body of men who led lives of great courage, adherence to principle, and dependence on God. And yet they suffered when they took up arms against Great Britain in their great quest for liberty and independence. Where did their dedication come from? What kind of parents did they have? How are our parents compared to theirs? That is an aspect of reading a biography that can have a real impact on our own lives as we compare them to us, that particular individual to our own self.

When you read a biography you learn of mistakes made by others, lessons that can be learned by the reader. It's like getting advice directly from the person who had the experience. We keep hearing that history repeats itself, probably because we must all go through the different phases of life and learn by experience. That is why the young make the same mistakes as previous generations. The young seem to be impervious to the wisdom of the past, unless they have parents who can impart that wisdom in a meaningful way.

But if only the young would read biographies, reviewing the lives of others, they might learn something. Remembering my own youth, I realize now how badly I needed an older and wiser guide in life. And the same can be said for anyone young today. If you can't get that guidance from a living human being, you may find it in a biography that will inspire you.

Biographies also help you sympathize with others. You sympathize with the hero's trials and tribulations. You share their grief when you read of the death of your hero's mother or father, or son or daughter. You will be heartbroken when you read of the death of Edgar Allan Poe or of Alexander Hamilton being killed by Aaron Burr in a duel. And you may suffer your own personal trauma when reading of the tragic end of Amelia Earhart. Almost every life includes a great tragedy. No one is exempt from tragedy and sorrow, because they are all part of life. And so is happiness.

And, of course, we learn much history by reading biographies and autobiographies. For example, if you want to find out what life was like in Elizabethan England, you should read the biographies of Queen Elizabeth, Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth's treasurer Lord Burghley, Sir Walter Raleigh, Francis Bacon, the Earl of Essex, and James I. For starters!

You can use the same strategy in studying early American history. Read biographies of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry. Each one of them led remarkable lives, interacted with one another, and helped create the greatest Republic on earth.

The Civil War almost destroyed the great Republic created by the founding fathers. How could that enormous tragedy, in which a half-million soldiers died on our own soil, been permitted to take place? Read biographies of Abraham Lincoln, James Buchanan, Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Ulysses S. Grant, and others involved in that great conflict, and you will see how that horrible catastrophe was able to befall this Christian nation.

Not all biographies are written by the subjects' admirers. Biographies of Hitler, Stalin, and other great tyrants have been studies in human pathology. The biographer may want to know what made a particular tyrant tick. What makes a particular human being such a purveyor of evil? Such tyrants are capable of destroying millions of lives. From where do they get their diabolical power? Biographers are always trying to answer these puzzling questions about human nature.

One of the most interesting subjects of biography during the last 300 years or so has been none other than William Shakespeare, the greatest dramatist in English literature. The trouble with Shakespeare is that, even though he is credited with writing 36 of the greatest plays ever written, there is no documentary evidence that he was a writer. There are documents indicating that he was a businessman, an actor, a part owner of a theater, but none about his being a writer even though his name appears on the First Folio as author. This has led many discerning critics to believe that Shakespeare was not the writer of the works attributed to him. But if he wasn't, who was?

In 1955, a journalist by the name of Calvin Hoffman wrote a book, *The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare*, claiming that Christopher Marlowe was the true author of the works attributed to Shakespeare. In 1997, Joseph Sobran wrote a book, *Alias Shakespeare*, claiming the true author to be the Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere.

So what is the truth in this fascinating case? Many biographies of Shakespeare have been written on the basis of his authorship, and many students have studied and read Shakespeare on the assumption that his authorship was firmly established on reliable documentation. But such is not the case. All of the biographies about Shakespeare are based more on fantasy than fact.

Apart from his name appearing on the publication of nine plays during his lifetime, and his name appearing on the First Folio published after his death, there is no evidence that establishes him as a writer. Even Shakespeare's will written before he died in 1616 makes no mention of any books, or plays, or poems. He didn't even mention the existence of 20 unpublished plays, which later wound up in the First Folio of 1623.

Mark Twain wrote about Shakespeare's will:

It named in minute detail every item of property he owned in the world—houses, lands, sword, silver-gilt bowl, and so on. It mentioned not a single book. The will mentioned not a play, not a poem, not an unfinished literary work, and not a scrap of manuscript of any kind. Books were much more precious than swords and silver-gilt bowls, and when a departing person owned one he gave it a high place in his will.

And so, we are left with a mystery, which may never be solved about the life of the greatest writer in English literature. Solving this mystery might become a great challenge to a homeschooled reader who would like to play literary detective.

In short, truth is indeed stranger than fiction, which is why biographies and autobiographies can be the greatest source of literary fascination we have.

Letters are another sort of autobiographical writings. Before the coming of the computer, people wrote letters, long involved letters that gave us immediate glimpses into the minds and activities of the writers. As the art of letter writing has just about disappeared, it's useful as well as entertaining to regale oneself on the great letter writers of the past and learn once again how human beings used to communicate with one another. There was nothing like receiving a letter in those days, written by hand, and later saved as a precious possession. Those were the days when readers pressed rose petals between the pages of a book.

That's an experience our present and future generations may never be able to enjoy. I don't imagine we shall ever see a book entitled, *The E-mails of So and So*. But who knows? I know that some e-mail writers are quite capable of writing some very good, long e-mails, since I've been the recipient of some. But they don't add much to a biography or autobiography. Yet, e-mail capability allows us to write brief messages—often just one word—easily and quickly. But unless they are printed out, they disappear in the ether of deleted matter. But many a written letter has also been lost in the annals of time.

Letters between husbands and wives tell us much about married life, and thus are to be treasured. You may find some great specimens of that genre in an antiquarian book shop. The 18th and 19th centuries were a time of great letter writing and also the publication of great biographies and autobiographies. Visit the antiquarian book shops in your area and browse. You never know what you will find. You might also use the facilities on the

Internet for book hunting: Abebooks and Amazon.com are just two great Internet sources for books available to anyone with a computer.

As a reader, you have at your fingertips the entire world of the written word. That is the priceless legacy we inherit from all of those who wrote books in the past and gave us their life stories that enrich us today and will enrich others tomorrow.