

Lust, crime, deception, failure, and lice in the hair --biographers in fiction

HAZEL K. BELL

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Michael Holroyd has commented in his *Works on Paper* on 'the number of unflattering portraits of biographers in fiction'. After reading some 26 novels in which characters attempt to research and produce biographies, I have to confirm that verdict. But to judge by most of these portrayals, what racy lives you do appear to lead!

First, there is the amatory experience that seems to be consequent upon researching a biography. In Kingsley Amis's novel, *The Biographer's Moustache*, Gordon Scott-Thompson takes his subject's wife to his bed -- as also does Mr Moon in Tom Stoppard's *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*. Raphael Alter in Celia Gittelson's novel titled *Biography* takes there the mistress (and possible daughter) of his dead subject, Maxwell, regarding her as 'created by Maxwell out of love and madness and given me, his gift'. Mark Lamming in Penelope Lively's *According to Mark* takes to bed the granddaughter of his subject. The hero of Alain de Botton's novel, *Kiss and Tell*, decides to write a biography of 'the next person to walk into my life', duly investigates 'ordinary person' Isabel, and becomes her lover as well as biographer. Phineas Nanson, in A S Byatt's novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, becomes lover of both Vera, his subject's niece, and Fulla, who is assisting him in his research. Julian Ramsay in A N Wilson's *A Watch in the Night* makes love, in the library, to the librarian who has allowed him prohibited access to the diaries of the subject he is researching.

By contrast, the narrator of Henry James's story, desperately seeking *The Aspern Papers*, at first sees only one means to achieve his object, his spoils: 'to make love to the niece'. But when poor Miss Tina virtually offers herself to him along with the papers, he withdraws immediately, 'awkwardly, grotesquely', as he himself writes, leaving her sobbing. He explains, 'I couldn't accept the proposal. I couldn't, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman' -- doubly a cad.

Or biography may lead to crime. Some fictional biographers resort to theft in their researches. Morton Jimroy in Carol Shields' novel, *Mary Swann* steals from a museum one of the only two photographs in existence of the dead poet, and from her daughter the pen she used. The American professor, Mortimer Cropper in A S Byatt's *Possession*, even turns graverobber to obtain the contents of the box that had been buried with his dead poet subject, opening and digging into the grave to get it. On the occasion, Mortimer 'swung his spade with a kind of joy. He felt he was over some border of the permissible and everything was just fine.'

The most sympathetic of these biographical villains is found in the third novel in Robertson Davies's Cornish trilogy, *The Lyre of Orpheus*. Professor the Reverend Simon Darcourt has been commissioned to write a biography of the recently deceased Francis Cornish, an art collector. He is 'determined that the book should be as good and as full as it was in his power to make it', but feels that it has a 'disastrous, abysmal gap in the very heart of it'.

He finds the person who can give him the missing information; her price is some early drawings by Cornish that Darcourt himself has placed in the National Gallery of Canada. 'Darcourt yearned for that information with the feverish lust of a biographer'.

So, clergyman and academic as he is, he `plans his crime -- to rob first the University Library, and then the National Gallery'. Davies writes, `He now regarded himself as a biographer, and the scruples of a biographer are peculiar to the trade. Any hesitation he felt was not about how could he bring himself to steal, but how could he steal without being found out?'

Fictional biographers may even turn murderer, as in A N Wilson's sequence of five novels, *The Lampitt Papers*. In 1947 Raphael Hunter selects as the subject of his proposed biography belle-lettrist James Lampitt. He wrongly supposes Lampitt to be gay, as Hunter himself is, and makes a pass at him. Lampitt, furious, threatens Hunter with exposure and the ruination of his career; whereupon Hunter pushes Lampitt over the railings of his flat to his death. He then purloins Lampitt's papers and produces a biography of him with multitudinous implications of homosexual encounters with apparently all the great and good men of the age, achieving huge popularity for it. Lampitt's family see Hunter as having `filched Jimbo's papers and made out of his essentially innocuous life a scurrilous fantasy'. These implied homosexual encounters are justified in the published biography only by carefully documented, entirely spurious references to Lampitt's diaries, which Hunter renders inaccessible by tricking a millionaire collector into purchasing the Lampitt papers and secluding them in his private archive. When the collector learns of the fraud, and may denounce Hunter, Hunter murders him likewise, and subsequently publishes a biography of him -- his second subject as well as victim.

In William Golding's *The Paper Men* author William Barclay discovers Rick Tucker, a postgraduate student falsely claiming to be a Professor, rifling through his dustbin in search of his private, discarded papers. Tucker persists in his efforts to make Barclay sign authorization of him as his official biographer, pursuing him round the world, even sending his gorgeous young wife to Barclay to do all she can to obtain his consent. Barclay continues to refuse, considering `I was his special subject, his raw material, the ore in his mine, his farm. his lobster pots'. He humiliates Tucker, denouncing him on behalf of all biographers' proposed subjects with: `Think, Rick --- all the people who get lice like you in their hair, all the people spied on, followed, lied about, all the people offered up to the great public -- we'll be revenged, Rick, I'll be revenged on the whole lot of them.' But instead, finally, the would-be biographer Tucker, maddened and enraged by Barclay's treatment of him and continual refusal to allow him to write his biography, shoots Barclay, as he is about to burn all the papers Rick has striven to get for so long.

The relationship of subject & biographer (short of taking them to bed or killing them) is usually presented in fiction as far from a happy one.

Angela Lamb, a novelist in Maggie Gee's *The Flood*, regards her biographer, Dr Moira Penny, as a `daft old bat', `impossible to work with' and the two come to hate each other. But this is mild stuff. Morton Jimroy in *Mary Swann*, described as `a thorough biographer', considers that `writing biography is the hardest work in the world and it can, just as easily as not, be an act of contempt'. For Miriam Oliver in Ruth Brandon's *Tickling the dragon* the attraction of writing the biography of the famous scientist who was her first lover and the father of her unacknowledged child is, `In a word, power'. Having found through her researches that `his private life was a mess, his public persona was founded upon a whole series of lies', she exults, `now I've got him in my power, pinned down like a butterfly on a board. I can make him or break him'.

On the other hand, fictional biographers may feel distinctly and deliberately manipulated by their subjects, even dead ones. In *According to Mark* Penelope Lively

presents a detailed study of the developing relationship. Mark Lamming is writing a biography of a Victorian poet, Gilbert Strong. He feels himself 'Tethered for a period of your life in this curiously intimate fashion to a man you never knew. ... in some eerie way Strong's life had extended into his own. ... Mark became daily more convinced that Strong was holding out on him. ... had been manipulating him right from the start ... I was fully persuaded that he had gone to considerable lengths to frustrate and mislead me.'

An actress in *Wakefield Hall* by Francesca Stanfill 'plans every detail of her posthumous biography from beyond the grave', leaving a packet of papers labelled 'For my biographer' and a trail of clues to her secret, so that the biographer she has nominated will realize that she is her subject's daughter. Likewise, Flora Monk in Hazel Hucker's *The Real Claudia Charles*, after much research, learns that she is the granddaughter of her subject, a woman writer supposed to have been childless. Another outcome of the relationship may be that the biographer inherits the mantle of, or replicates the life of, their subject. Raphael Alter in Celia Gittelson's novel, who takes to himself his deceased subject's mistress, regards him as 'my double, my strange twin -- we are inextricably bound'. Maud Bailey and Roland Michell in *Possession*, researching the lives of two Victorian poets who became lovers, retrace the footsteps of their subjects, and at last find romance together likewise. Polly Alter in Alison Lurie's *The Truth about Lorin Jones*, who researches and writes a biography of this dead artist, eventually moves to live where Lorin last did, with Lorin's last lover, and resumes her own career as a painter -- emulating Lorin.

Rival biographers may prove as antagonistic as biographer and subject. Paul Micou's novel, *The Death of David Debrizzi*, consists of a series of letters written by Pierre La Valoise, one of the two mentors of Debrizzi, a young concert pianist, to the other, who has published a biography of Debrizzi. La Valoise calls this work, 'Your increasingly arrogant and self-serving volume', and writes, 'I have set myself the task of clearing up the errors in your Life' -- and does so, chapter by chapter. Micou's novel is truly a biographical counterblast.

In Tom Stoppard's play, *Arcadia*, we find two rival biographers, of Byron. They squabble with bitter hostility, showing schadenfreude in discovering each other's errors.

The fictional biographers may feel compelled to give up the biography, not to publish their findings. There are various reasons for this. It may be because of a shocking discovery -- Raphael Alter in Celia Gittelson's novel finds that his subject had murdered and buried his second wife. The narrator in Barbara Vine's *The Blood Doctor*, after discovering 'the monstrous pursuit carried out in the name of science' by his ancestor Doctor Henry Nanther, gives up his biography for shame: 'I can't write his life. I can't face other people knowing what my great-grandfather did'.

Or the biographer's findings may be partly suppressed rather than violate privacy -- especially after reading illicit love letters. Penelope Lively's hero, Mark, confesses to his wife, 'I feel intrusive sometimes. Reading other people's letters was one of the things one was brought up never to do ... Biographers are much impeded by a genteel upbringing.' Or third parties, anxious to preserve the secrets of the dead, may deliberately destroy all the papers in the case, as Grandma does in Jan Clausen's *The Prosperine papers*.

Polly in *The Truth about Lorin Jones* discovers incompatible versions of her subject from the varying testimony of those who knew her, and does not know which, what or whether to publish. Stoppard's Mr Moon, who trades as Boswell Inc., has been

formally engaged to act as Boswell to Lord Malquist, 'to record such of my pensées and general observations, travels, etc., fully and fairly', for a fee of two thousand guineas per annum. He abandons the project when the bailiffs move in on Lord Malquist.

So, as Holroyd declared, most fictional portrayals of biographers are unflattering - to say the least. None of the rest of the fictional biographers I have found is favourably presented. In Beryl Bainbridge's *According to Queeney* Queeney Thrale describes Laetitia Hawkins, planning a biography of Dr Johnson, as 'remarkably persistent', making impertinent enquiries 'from a wish to settle old scores'. Carol Shields' other biographer, Judith Gill in *Small Ceremonies*, prides herself on detecting the secrets of her dead subjects, but fails entirely to understand the motives and behaviour of her family and friends. There are evil biographers in the Harry Potter books. Eldred Worpel, in *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*, has written the biography of a vampire, and sees much gold to be made from a biography of Harry. Professor Gilderoy Lockhart in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* interviews and collects the stories of his purported subjects, then magically causes them to forget their experiences and publishes the accounts as his own autobiography, *Magical Me*. He makes all his students in Defence Against the Dark Arts buy the book as a set text, setting them a test on it.

The most seriously presented biographer I have found in fiction is also the saddest: Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator of Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*. He is supposedly researching the life of Flaubert, but references to Braithwaite's wife, Ellen, keep breaking through his narration. We learn that, like Emma Bovary, Ellen Braithwaite told lies, committed adultery, and took poison. Geoffrey is painfully trying to understand why. As he says, 'Ellen's is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I am telling you Flaubert's story instead'. ... 'Books say: she did this because. Life says: she did this. Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't.'

Barnes himself wrote of this novel: 'It's a book about the shiftingness of the past, and the uncertainty and unverifiability of fact, and Flaubert, and love and grief. Love displaced into obsession with Flaubert; a more reliable constant than love for Ellen.' This is biography as desperate sublimation.

To glance finally at fictional autobiographers -- Muriel Spark, in *Loitering with intent*, portrays members of the Autobiographical Association, all engaged in writing their memoirs. These, she tells us, 'had a number of factors in common. One of them was nostalgia, another was paranoia, a third was a transparent craving on the part of the authors to appear likeable. I think they probably lived out their lives on the principle that what they were, and did, and wanted, should above all look pretty.'

Having presented you with so many unhappy, adulterous, failing, lying or criminally inclined biographers, let me conclude with one who is both happy and apparently successful in his work (albeit following theft, recounted earlier). This is, again, Morton Jimroy in *Mary Swann*. Here we find him at work, alone on Christmas day:

'This is happiness, these scrawled notes, these delicate tangled footnotes, which, with a little more work, a few more weeks, will evolve into numbered poems of logic and order and illumination. These disjointed paragraphs he is writing are pushing toward that epic wholeness that is a human life, gold socketed into gold.'