

The ABC of Modern Biography

Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders

AUP

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Introduction

Biography may be the world's second oldest profession, but it has recently undergone a tremendous transformation – and expansion. Technology has loosened the world's tongue, both in writing about the lives of real people, and people writing about their own real lives.

As more people produce biography and autobiography, however, there is a corresponding vagueness about what biography *is* today: what the word now implies, its modern rules – or lack of rules ('alternative facts') – and how the genre is changing shape, character and purpose across different platforms, from print to celluloid, and from digital pixels to hip-hop musicals.

No dictionary of biography today, unfortunately, provides an easily accessible map of modern biography. Such dictionaries still earnestly strive to list the names of worthy people who have been the subjects of biography, from President John Adams to General Jan Zizka; they are biographical *Who's Whos*, in other words.

This small book attempts to do something quite different. Written by two practising writers and teachers of biography, *The ABC of Modern Biography* seeks to describe, briefly and cogently, the new compass of modern biography via an ABC – from 'A for Authorization' to 'Z for Zigzagging to the End'. Our aim is not to be definitive – always a mistake for cartographers as well as biographers – but to provide the first simple overview of modern biography as it is understood and practised today, across different media and the globe, 2,000 years after Plutarch.

We hope *The ABC of Modern Biography* will amuse, entertain and inform the curious reader – and clear up a number of fallacies and misunderstandings as it does so. For example, it is extraordinary how many people still imagine a modern biographer needs 'authorization' (see 'A for Authorization') to write the biography of a prominent person, or consider it wrong for a biographer to 'kiss and tell' (see 'S for Sex').

Of all recent trends in our culture, modern biography – now often mislabelled life-writing (see ‘L for Life Writing’) – has become, almost overnight, the most elastic, vibrant, contested, controversial and popular genre, from blogs to biopics. It deserves our attention – and reflection.

In academia, there is new pressure at a number of universities to theorize biography, to help explain what is happening and why. In the meantime, this small work will hopefully pique the general reader’s curiosity about the current (and yet so ancient) phenomenon we still call biography, in many of its contemporary guises, across the five oceans and seven continents of our modern world.

Enjoy – for at least now you’ll have someone to argue with!

Nigel Hamilton
Hans Renders



is for Authorization

What is a 'biography' and what does it mean, today, for a biography to be 'authorized'?

Simply put: a biography is a book written by a biographer about a specific individual. The biography is considered

'authorized' if the subject of the biography has read the text and declared the facts revealed therein to be correct. The same practice exists in journalism, where it is considered customary to allow interviewees to read passages in which they are quoted, prior to publication. The final responsibility for the interview, however, lies with the interviewer who created the interview.

Sometimes an interviewee attempts to stop publication, or the broadcast of an interview, after it has been concluded. Is this right? To help illustrate the answer to this question, let us turn to a well-known British television programme: *Traffic Abuse*.

Without exception, every episode of this reality programme shows at least one individual who becomes irate after being stopped by the police. The fines and tickets are not the cause of all this anger; it is the fact that the cameras are rolling. Nine times out of ten, the people in question make the same objection: 'you can't film me.' This, however, is a misunderstanding. Anyone who is out in public can be seen, filmed and commented on, whether we like it or not. Of course, there are standards regarding good taste and relevance to society, or other such concerns – such as the rise of the paparazzi and 'Gotcha' journalism: the cringe-worthy side of our right to gather news freely. But that is simply the price we pay for this core value: the right to be able to comment on and criticize what we encounter in public life. Art, science and political expression can thrive only in an environment where dissent is tolerated. Criticism sharpens the mind.

Anyone who has ever read police reports will immediately notice how the suspects' confessions are all remarkably similar. The illiterate petty thief uses the same language as the highly-educated fraudster. This is not really true, of course, but it is what happens once confessions are put into writing. A confession is the outcome of a negotiation. The suspect speaks, but the officer's written account uses official phrasing and terminology that can later be linked to legal texts known to the officer, but often not to the suspect. Should the petty thief sign the confession, it becomes canonical, so to speak, even though it is in someone else's words. The same phenomenon also occurs in biography: that is to say, with biographies of living people, or the recent dead, where there are relatives – widows, siblings, trustees of the estate – to deal with.

The biographer and the biographical subject (or legal representatives) negotiate over the business of access, as well as permission to quote material. In the case of 'authorized biographies,' however, this negotiation is always suspect. The parties involved may have spoken to each other only four times, or they might have spoken regularly over a period of years. In the end, the subjects declare with their imprimatur that they have not been misquoted or misunderstood. This, in theory, is modern 'authorization.' However, something else often creeps into these authorization agreements, namely the subject's belief that their imprimatur serves to indicate that they agree with what the biographer has written. Things become even more complicated when the subject of a biography demands in advance that the biography can only be published if the entire text has been 'authorized.' This is ludicrous: no serious biography is based solely on interviews, yet here we see the subject demanding the right to 'authorize' *all* quoted documents, letters and diaries, even when they were written by others.

Perhaps not everyone is clear about what a true biography is today; and that is the subject of this ABC. We live in a time of individual self-representation, and set ourselves the goal of gathering as many 'likes' as possible. We 'endorse' others on

networking sites for their fabulous qualities and skills – in the hope that the gesture is reciprocated. This is not a terrible thing; everyone understands that we are selling something on Facebook and other social media sites, and that something is ourselves. This is the new Social Contract; which brings us to what a biography most certainly is *not*.

A good biography is not a book of praise, even though this misconception is perpetuated by the unending stream of so-called ‘biographies’ of stars, athletes, top chefs and other Famous People. These biographies are always ‘authorized.’ In reality, though, we are dealing with texts by ghost-writers hired by Famous People. In both the Netherlands and Britain there appears to be an endless deluge of these books; especially in England, where they are often called ‘memoirs.’ Like pulp fiction, they also exist in the United States. A recent example from early 2015 is the American actor Jon Cryer’s *So That Happened: A Memoir*; in reality, a book of tall tales about his alleged experiences of sex and drugs during his time in the film industry. In a ‘publisher’s note’, the publisher, Penguin, reveals that it is ‘committed to publishing works of quality and integrity’ – thereby washing its hands of the story – the experiences and words being ‘the author’s alone.’ Not even the author’s, as it turns out. Secreted in the Acknowledgements at the back of the book, Cryer admits that the book was written with a ‘collaborator,’ Robert Abele.

A typical example of so-called ‘authorized biography’ is that of *Game of Thrones* actress Carice van Houten, who openly admitted that she had negotiated with journalist Ab Zagt to have her ‘biography’ written. The announcement that the Dutch journalist Maarten Bax, who had previously written the authorized biography of the famous football siblings Frank and Ronald de Boer, would be writing the ‘authorized biography’ of the infamous kickboxer Badr Hari is another example. The press release announcing this book contained a revealing quote: ‘This is the only authorized biography about me, Badr Hari. All others tell untruths, fairy tales. It is time to tell my story, and set the record straight. I have granted sports journalist Maarten Bax

an insight into my life.' For his part, Louis van Gaal, the famous Manchester United coach, announced in a press release that his biography was 'the only biography written by himself! Only too true! But such statements are a sad slur on the profession of serious biography.

Saddest of all is the reaction of self-serving stars and their fans when a biography is published that is not 'authorized.' Kitty Kelley, Oprah Winfrey's biographer, experienced this first-hand a few years ago. Kelley had also written a biography of Frank Sinatra. Would we have learned that Sinatra most certainly had ties with the mafia if that biography been 'authorized'? Kelley was the target of withering criticism and suffered many cold shoulders for *Oprah*, in which she showed how Oprah had embellished the story of her successful career and had even lied outright about the identity of her father. In response, Kelley published an article in *The American Scholar*, a quarterly magazine on literature, art, and science, which every biographer of a 'star' should read. Her essay, entitled 'Unauthorized, but Not Untrue,' is very revealing. She mentions how Oprah's management labelled her biography 'unauthorized,' almost as if this were a crime. Since the famed television celebrity had not been involved in the writing of the book, and had not given it her blessing, this was considered grounds for a boycott: potential readers felt they would be betraying their beloved heroine if they read the book. Well-known interviewer Larry King boycotted Kelley so as to avoid endangering his good relationship with Oprah. American talk-show host Barbara Walters proclaimed on the popular *Today* show that 'unauthorized' biographies were only written 'to dig dirt'. She held up a copy of *Oprah*. 'Who do you think knows best?' exclaimed Walters into her microphone, like a demagogue. 'Oprah herself or Kitty Kelley, the biographer?' You can guess the answer. None of the television stations carrying *The Oprah Winfrey Show* invited Kelley onto any of their news or entertainment programmes to talk about her biography...

Another fascinating case-study that is rife with misunderstandings concerns the biography of the world-famous Dutch

composer Reinbert de Leeuw. Newspaper articles revealed how De Leeuw and his biographer, Thea Derks, had discussed in advance how the biography would be written; in fact, De Leeuw had initiated contact with the chosen publisher. Once she was appointed and given access to De Leeuw's archives, Derks got straight to work. Friction arose along the way, however, because Derks did not stick to De Leeuw's version, or vision, of himself. De Leeuw complained that Derks was writing too little about this and too much about that. She had overemphasized the story of his youth, and had made glaring omissions by barely writing about his friendship with the author Harry Mulisch, as well as a certain Piet Veenstra... From remarks made by both Derks and De Leeuw about the whole affair, it is clear both of them fell victim to the misconception that is 'authorization.' The musician had promised, in a written agreement with the publisher, that he would not refuse authorization unless he considered the content 'unreasonable'. This clause effectively limited any criticism of De Leeuw in the biography, since the composer could dictate what was 'reasonable.' In retrospect, it seems incomprehensible that De Leeuw, Derks and the publisher all signed up to this ridiculous agreement. To add to the confusion, the contract stipulating 'authorization' as a condition for publication was written only *after* Derks had noticed De Leeuw was not giving her the freedom to do her professional job. However, in a three-way conflict in which each party had their own agenda, they did have one thing in common: they all authorized the perfect recipe for trouble!

Derks felt censored, even though she had unwisely signed the agreement. De Leeuw was troubled by the fact that his biographer had approached all sorts of people for their opinions and memories. He therefore withheld his 'authorization' of the final product, but was unable to explain fully in public the reasons why – understandably, because he obviously did not want to risk bringing even more attention to things he did not wish to see disclosed in his biography. 'For an authorized biography, this is unthinkable', De Leeuw said in an interview.

The conclusion of the affair was unsatisfactory for everyone. Derks published her book with a different publisher. Reviewers called it 'a wonderful monument,' with 'fitting praise and hal-lalujahs' – but also 'room for real humanity, thank god.'

Oprah could argue that she had not asked Kelley to write her biography, and that she felt pilloried. The same cannot be said of Reinbert de Leeuw and his 'authorization' of a project in which all parties had invested so much time. Why had he not simply written an autobiography or memoir, if he wanted it to be sanitized? The answer: because he knew that a 'biography' would have more status, precisely because it would not be a selfie.

In the United States, biographers are even taken to court for unjustly creating the impression that their work has been 'authorized'. This happened when the son of Audrey Hepburn and the executor of her estate filed a lawsuit against Diana Maychick, due to the latter's biography, published as *Audrey Hepburn: An Intimate Portrait*. According to the legal proceedings, it was not only the title that was at issue, but also the use of the phrase 'full cooperation' in promotional material and the language used on the jacket of the original hardcover. The publishers claimed that she had spent 'countless hours' with Hepburn, but in fact there were only a few phone calls. Maychick was thus creating the impression that her work was authorized – which would hurt the sales of Sean Hepburn Ferrer's *Audrey Hepburn, An Elegant Spirit: A Son Remembers*. Though Ferrer's book appeared more than ten years after Maychick's, the court found in his favour. Maychick was ordered to state, on the cover of a reprint of her biography, that the book was 'unauthorized'. Half of the world's literature has been written because parents and children refuse to understand one other, but the Hepburn case took this to new heights: Hepburn's son was allowed to claim his book was authorized, even though the book's subject had died before the idea for *Audrey Hepburn, An Elegant Spirit* was even conceived!

The simple truth is that a biography has to be independent, free from external influences and devoid of ideology. A biography

does not exist to express the established view that the subject has of himself or herself: that is what autobiography or memoir is for.

Take it from us, then: no biographer should enter into an 'authorization' agreement lightly. Such an agreement will *always* involve giving up one's independence. The true biographer's only responsibility is that to his or her own sense of professionalism. Is the biography asking the right questions? Are the sources justified? Is the book well written? People can ultimately judge for themselves whether or not such aims have been accomplished. To those who have little faith in the professionalism of biographers, we therefore recommend that you write your own autobiography, rather than agree to a so-called 'authorized' one. The true biography will come after your death.

Sources: Kitty Kelley, 'Unauthorized, But Not Untrue. The real story of a biographer in a celebrity culture of public denials, media timidity, and legal threats', in: *The American Scholar*, December 1, 2010; Sean Hepburn Ferrer, *Audrey Hepburn, An Elegant Spirit: A Son Remembers* (New York: Atria Books, 2005); Diana Maychick, *Audrey Hepburn: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: Birch lane, 1993); Hans Renders, 'Biography is not a selfie: Authorisation as the creeping transition from autobiography to biography', in: Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (eds), *The Biographical Turn. Lives in History* (London: Routledge, 2017), 159-164; Carl Rollyson, 'Authorized biography', in: Carl Rollyson, *Biography; A User's Guide* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008), 10-17.



is for Biography

Biography is the study of the real individual. It is a generic term, covering the multitude of ways in which we record individual human lives, past and present. How we seek to make sense of them: the

course of their life's journeys on this earth; their development as individuals; and what 'happened to them.'

Biography responds to this fundamental human curiosity in a way that helps define us as *homo sapiens*. Elephants have long memories and are known to mourn; only humans translate lamentation into memorials – memorials that have evolved over time into more and more sophisticated, artistic and searching reconstructions of an actual individual's life story.

Biography is a field of human interest ultimately dissatisfied by myth or fiction. It is one that seeks answers to our abiding curiosity about humankind by presenting and exploring examples of verifiable women and men who have lived and died, or will die. For death – real death – is the ultimate reality of biography, as opposed to fiction: the stone that Dr. Johnson famously kicked to demonstrate the reality of reality ('I refute it thus,' he dismissed Bishop Berkeley's theory of the non-existence of matter).

We may dress up 'life' for our entertainment, insight and enlightenment in fiction, but the reality is that every actual life eventually comes to a real end – and biography speaks to that awareness.

Biography is not 'a biography.' This misunderstanding has fooled a lot of people over the years; it may explain, indeed, why we study every conceivable aspect of modern culture from Sports History to Gender in our universities, yet rarely, if ever, biography – despite its interdisciplinarity, its popularity, its significance in

our society. Biography, *tout court*, is something that is still *done* rather than examined.

This is sad, since biography not only has a long history deriving from ancient funeral rites – the ‘commemorative instinct,’ as Sir Sidney Lee called it – but today has a reach that extends into every medium and technology, from print to digital media, television to radio, film to art galleries.

Who could imagine a more stunning example of the biographical imperative, as we might call it, than the centenary exhibition of the life and work of Piet Mondrian that was held in The Hague in 2017? In room after room – in drawings, paintings, etchings, letters, photographs, film, hats, ephemera and the like – the extraordinary artistic and human development of one of the pioneers of *De Stijl* was presented, from his early dark Dutch landscapes to his ultimate geometric diamond painting, left tantalizingly unfinished upon his death in exile in New York in 1944.

Development is an important word for those interested in biography. Historians study the ‘revolutions’ of kingdoms and empires, as Samuel Johnson memorably noted, but biographers study the rise and fall of real *individuals* – and in that evolution, for good and ill, we secretly see reflected our own. It was for that reason that Dr. Johnson despised hagiography – he felt that it was fatuous to present only pure lives, when human beings are impure. In a biography, he urged, the ‘most artful writer’ is tasked with presenting both ‘beautiful *and* base,’ and embracing both ‘vice *and* virtue.’ As he told his biographer James Boswell, ‘If a man is to write a *Panegyrick* he may keep vices out of sight, but if he professes to write a *Life* he must represent it really as it was.’

Thousands of biographical works, large and small, are produced every year across the world – yet still we neither teach it, nor examine it in our universities, save a brave few, such as Groningen, Hawaii, Norwich, Aix and Vienna. Why we produce biographies so prolifically, despite our lack of study of the genre, of biography, is

the stuff of modern theory.* What we can say is that, like religion, biography is part and parcel of human civilization – but that, unlike religion, it is also closely tied to democratic society. First established as a genre of literature and history in the time of the Greeks and Romans (in the works of Xenophon, Plutarch, Suetonius and other authors), it took off. Since then it has remained an integral manifestation of the way we portray ourselves and our forebears: each generation researching, examining, recording and narrating the life stories of past and present real-life figures, great and small.

Why, we may well ask? Why is that pursuit still so important to us today, after more than 2,000 years?

One clue lies in the *symbolism* inherent in biography. In the same year that aficionados of modern art flocked to The Hague, a new national reckoning took place in the United States regarding memorials – sculptures, for the most part – dedicated during the post-Reconstruction period (i.e., post-1870) to the ‘heroes’ of the Confederacy: the treasonous, slave-owning southern States that had attempted to secede by force from the Union. The removal of these memorials from plinths and places of public honour in the South provoked a veritable storm of controversy and demonstrations, even fatalities.

Memorializing, in other words, is a political as well as a commemorative act. It can also be artistically controversial – as when a Vietnam National Memorial, destined for the capital of the United States, was chosen in 1981. The memorial was to honour US soldiers who had fallen in the Vietnam War, but its winning design was criticized by many people, including surviving veterans, as ‘a black gash of shame.’ The young designer, Maya Lin – a Chinese-American undergraduate at Yale University – had decided to use highly polished black granite, quarried in India, on which would be etched the names of each fallen individual, as in so many French village memorials to the fallen of World War I. Considered insufficiently symbolic of their courage and service, an ‘anonymous’ but figurative and symbolic memorial was therefore also designed, cast in bronze and placed alongside

the Lin wall, near the Lincoln Memorial in the Mall, Washington DC, where it stands today.

Another example of this duality – the difference between naming and symbolizing – can be witnessed in Westerbork in northern Holland. There, where 107,000 individual human beings (including Anne Frank) were sent in train wagons from the railway transit camp to the extermination camps of Auschwitz, Sobibor, Bergen-Belsen and Theresiënstadt during World War II, a museum and a reconstructed hut, iron rails, wooden ties and a cattle-truck have been erected as a memorial, symbolizing the enormity of the crime against humanity. In a less well-known act of remembrance and atonement, however, local people and visitors line up and read aloud the full names and ages of every single individual transported to their deaths, once a year.

The memory of an individual life, *en bref*, can be both important in itself and symbolic of others, even millions of others. That is the *dialectic of biography*, we might say: the thing that gives biography both its substance and its reflection.

Given its 2,500-year-old history, where is biography going today? In 1988, a group of British academics and practising biographers asked the same question, entitling their deliberations *The Troubled Face of Biography*. It seemed to one of them, Professor Lord Skidelsky (biographer of the economist Lord Keynes), that too much time was being spent on the ‘private lives’ of modern biography’s subjects, and too little, he cavilled, on their ‘achievements.’

Doubtless this was so – but how could it have been otherwise, in the wake of the Sixties: of the Stonewall Riots, the Feminist Revolution, Woodstock, or the cries of Egalité, Liberté, Sexualité in Paris in May 1968?

Perhaps the biggest surprise was that biography, as a genre, largely evaded the predations of the deconstruction movement started by Jacques Derrida. Derrida had taken a playful but insidious wrecking ball to the relationship between text and meaning in a 1968 essay titled *Speech and Phenomena: And Other*

Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs. It certainly proved a sign of things to come. Significant swaths of academia fell under the sway of linguists, philosophers, psychologists and literary critics – Chomsky, Derrida, Lacan and Barthes among them – to the point where almost no academic paper could pass peer scrutiny unless filled with the jargon of deconstruction.

Mercifully, biography appeared completely unaffected – mostly because ‘biography’ was not studied in academia! Thus, although the ‘death of the author’ had been proudly announced by literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes, biographers merely continued writing regardless. *Le grand récit*, as exemplified in multi-volume biographies by writers such as Robert Caro, Edmund Morris, Blanche Wiesen Cook and Lyndall Gordon, proceeded unmolested. Deconstructionist writers and essayists, by contrast, failed to write a single biography that was readable, let alone informative or entertaining.

By eschewing deconstruction, biographers in fact did the opposite: they spread their wings, extending their work into every modern medium, from television to the Internet, in a massive popular expansion perhaps without parallel in cultural history. Moreover, this biographical proliferation was driven, in part, by the desire to extend the new life-cover, so to speak, being offered by the actuaries of biography. Life-cover was now accorded to large numbers of minority or hitherto marginalized individuals, from Australian aborigines to hermaphrodites: real individuals who had never before been represented, honoured or recorded, coming from every stratum of modern society.

Thus, rather than torturing their field into total incomprehensibility in fear of reading the wrong ‘sign’ or ‘signifier,’ biography blossomed. It even began borrowing from the latest tropes and narrative techniques of fiction, from flashbacks to inverted chronology – although those methods were applied to well-researched real lives. At one extreme, such works became even more scholarly than histories, exhibiting deeper, more forensic, more heavily-footnoted research skills than historians (‘Biography as Corrective’); at another, they began chopping

individuals' lives into smaller, more discrete periods ('Partial Biography'), to elicit a clearer picture of human agency or true turning points.

In investigation, in stylistic expression and in sheer compass, modern biography thus began to display vastly different features from a mere generation before. The quality of such work – as in every art and every science – was variable, to be sure, but no cultural sociologist could deny the burgeoning individual-symbolic dialectic. There seemed to be an ever-growing fascination in Western society with real lives – something not only evident in the public preoccupation with celebrity and fame, but a trend evinced by the increasing number of fiction writers who focused their novels on real individuals (so-called 'biofiction': e.g., Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George*, (2005), T.C. Boyle's *The Women* (2009), Carlene Bauer's *Frances and Bernard* (2013) and Curtis Sittenfeld's *American Wife* (2008)).

Ironically, given biography's concern with the actual rather than fictional individual, the very *form*, trope or structure of modern biography even began to impress historians – especially historians of things. The title of *Cod: The Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*, published in 1997, may have borne an exaggerated claim, but the book certainly helped change the world of objects as objects of study. It became a harbinger of dozens of such works, even biographies of cities. Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Tel Aviv and Antwerp all attracted biographers, the writer Peter Ackroyd going so far as to envision England's capital city as a body with dreams and complexes in his *London: The Biography* (2000). Although biographers might smirk, imitation was indeed flattery.

The extension or crossing of one boundary, however, has come to cause practitioners of biography to feel a deep sense of anxiety: the matter of fact.

In fact, the growing war on fact.

This war crept up on biography and history, like a delayed and unintended time-bomb left by the long-departed deconstruction movement. In future decades, historians will seek to pin down

the reasons. In terms of biography, however, it first became visible in a certain blurring of the borders between fiction and non-fiction – often referred to as ‘faction’, a sort of no-man’s land.

Initially this was discernible in memoir, where authors sought to ‘dramatize’ real-life experiences by conflating individuals in their stories, in order to maintain a tight focus and increase the dramatic power. Thus, for example, Primo Levi’s classic memoir* *If This Is a Man* (1947) – his harrowing account of surviving Auschwitz – harked back to the famous speech of Shylock, the Jew in Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*: ‘Hath not a Jew eyes? If you prick us, do we not bleed?’ Yet even Levi later acknowledged he had, either unintentionally or from false memory, simplified his account. The trend soon shifted into biography, however. For example, the biographer of the Dutch historian Jaap Meijer, Evelien Gans, found that she had no information about Meijer’s life in the concentration camp Westerbork, where he had been incarcerated. She therefore took out a similar description from the biography from another Dutch Jewish historian, whose wartime experiences were similar, and inserted this description into the biography of Meijer. More famously, Truman Capote made the adjustment openly, in his biographical account of a brutal murder in America, *In Cold Blood* (1966), calling his account a non-fiction novel.

Narrative non-fiction* thus began to bridge fact and invention in the service of narrative art and the imagination. In doing so, however, it inadvertently contributed to the increasing sense of immunity to lies in civilized Western democratic society – and not always inadvertently. The growing popularity and commercial, even prize-winning, success of memoir led to some uncomfortable truths, as when the supposed authors of true-life memoirs turned out to be frauds – as convincingly described in Stefan Maechler’s *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth* (2001). Likewise, Enric Marco, another imposter, was only unmasked in 2005, years after he had published his invented Holocaust memoirs and won exalted Catalan government honours.

Along with their other tasks, in other words, biographers have had to become guardians of truth in 'non-fiction narrative' and memoir; not to spoil novelists' fun or display of imagination, but simply to ensure that we do not lose sight of what is, in literal fact, the truth.

Anyone who contests this need only consider the results of the 2016 presidential election, where a similar 'imposter' went largely unexposed by the media and a huge television audience that wished to be entertained rather than informed. Within two months of taking office, *The New York Times* was claiming that the 45th US President, the most powerful individual in the world, had said 'something untrue, in public, every day for the first 40 days of his presidency' – aided and abetted by a White House that dismissed all critical comment or analysis by the media as 'fake news,' and moreover asserted the right to broadcast 'alternative facts.'

Alternative facts? 'Facts' that were excused, ignored and forgiven by tens of millions of Americans? The threat was, and is, serious. In mid-2017, one cultural critic was led to wonder whether it was America's destiny 'to unravel in this way'? 'Or maybe,' he posited, 'we're just early adopters, the canaries in the gold mine, and Canada and Denmark and Japan and China and all the rest will eventually follow us,' *pace* Lewis Carroll, 'down our tunnel.' A tunnel, he wrote, in which the majority of Americans could no longer distinguish between 'true and untrue.' An Orwellian novel, *1984*, had come to life, 33 years after 1984.

Fact* *matters* in biography, as it also does in history.* And in politics, perhaps most of all – as twentieth-century dictatorships taught the world. It matters enormously. Without fact, or respect for fact, biography for its part morphs into something else, ranging from fiction to downright deceit and lies. Biographers beware! You are the guardians of a genre and a biographical imperative that go back 2,500 years and more.

Can biography survive the current war on fact? Time will tell. Biographers across the world hope that it will, and that truth

will win: that in the hard and patient work of a biographer, in a great variety of media, there is not only artistic and intellectual personal fulfilment, but also a vital public good. That however controversial it may seem at times, biography makes us ponder myths and the life experience of real individuals, anchoring us to truth-telling about ourselves and about others – real others – rather than lies; without which anchor, as social beings, we cannot survive.

Sources: Eric Homberger and John Charmley (eds), *The Troubled Face of Biography* (New York: St Martin's, 1988); Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (eds), *The Biographical Turn* (London: Routledge, 2017); Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Kurt Andersen: *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire* (New York: Random House, 2017); Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in: *Aspen* (1967) 5-6; Carl Rollyson, *A Higher Form of Cannibalism? Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005).