

Book Reviews

Greg Johnson

an excerpt from

*Getting a Life**

To adapt Randall Jarrell's famous remark about the novel, a literary biography may be viewed as a nonfiction work of a certain length that has something wrong with it. Though it's easy enough to speak cynically of such a difficult genre, surely few would contest the notion that biographers, for the past several hundred years now, have made the same conceptual errors, taken the same wrongheaded approaches, and executed their works with the same bizarre mixture of hubris and slavishness again and again. They are fond of their subjects to the point of hagiography (William O'Connor on Walt Whitman), or they are critical to the point of character assassination (Lawrance Thompson on Robert Frost). They are long-winded in the extreme (Joseph Blotner on William Faulkner) or so brief that they produce glancing and superficial work (Linda Wagner-Martin on Sylvia Plath). Each time a new literary biography appears, the publisher is likely to trumpet its virtues with such adjectives as "masterly," "magisterial," and that hardy perennial "definitive," as if each in a long line of works on the writer in question instantly renders all past biographies incomplete and even negligible. Only this new work, expensively bound in hard covers, will do. But alas, it rarely does.

No less a delver into others' lives than Sigmund Freud himself was cynical when it came to the art of biography. "Anyone turning biographer," he wrote, "has committed himself to lies, to concealment, to hypocrisy, to flattery, and even to hiding his own lack

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JOHN DONNE: THE REFORMED SOUL. By John Stubbs. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 565 pp. \$35.00.

BEING SHELLEY: THE POET'S SEARCH FOR HIMSELF. By Ann Wroe. New York: Pantheon, 2007. 452 pp. \$30.00.

THOMAS HARDY. By Claire Tomalin. New York: Penguin, 2007. 486 pp. \$35.00.

EDITH WHARTON. By Hermione Lee. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. 869 pp. \$35.00.

THOMAS WOLFE: WHEN DO THE ATROCITIES BEGIN? By Joanne Marshall Mauldin. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007. 361 pp. \$38.00.

BERNARD MALAMUD: A WRITER'S LIFE. By Philip Davis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 377 pp. \$34.95.

of understanding: for biographical truth is not to be had.” Yet even Freud could not have foreseen our tabloid era, when biography often descends into what Joyce Carol Oates once scornfully termed “pathography”—that is, a biography all too clearly relishing its subject’s flaws and failures (Jeffrey Meyers on F. Scott Fitzgerald, David Roberts on Jean Stafford). For better or worse, we live in an age of such scholarly industry that even minor figures are often given full biographical treatment, but many such books seem hastily written and lacking in much insight, and of more interest to academic specialists than to the average reader.

How does one human being, at a distance of a dozen or a hundred or a thousand years, dare attempt to plumb the essential and true life story of another? Biographers of living or recently living figures often boast that they have interviewed countless family members, friends, and acquaintances of the writer, but is such documentation really dependable, given the ever-shifting fogginess and friability of human memory? Those who write about figures more remote in time speak of years spent pawing through archival collections, but can letters and diaries and other documents, selectively and even arbitrarily quoted, bring to authentic life the unique personality of a human being, especially one possessed of literary genius? Or is a biography really a projection of the biographer’s own unaccountable preconceptions, his or her personal quirks and obsessions?

Keeping such questions in mind, one may say that the art of biography has developed, at least in terms of form and technique, through the centuries, and that, despite all the skepticism voiced above, superb literary biographies do manage to get written. Twentieth-century examples abound: Richard Ellmann on James Joyce; Leon Edel on Henry James; Richard Holmes on Percy Bysshe Shelley; Richard B. Sewall on Emily Dickinson; Jean Strouse on Alice James; both Justin Kaplan and Ron Powers on Mark Twain; both Quentin Bell and Hermione Lee on Virginia Woolf; and many others. More than worthy of mention among this distinguished group are several of the volumes discussed below, suggesting that literary biography, in capable and responsible hands, is continuing to flourish in the twenty-first century as well.