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# Biography, History and Democracy: Contemporary Writing about Australian Lives

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**ABSTRACT**

Biography is one of the most potent arts of democracy because it links the individual to the body politic and to history. It stands in parallel with independent long-form journalism. Whereas independent journalism is under threat, biography is currently one of the most popular and productive genres of publishing, breaking down the stratification of readership associated with almost every other category of writing. In the academy, the status of biography has transformed over the last few decades, with historians embracing the genre, literary studies scholars experimenting with form, and a wealth of new infrastructure embedding biographical inquiry in Australia. The biographical turn in Australia has brought the two disciplines of history and literary studies closer together and enriched their scholarship. David Marr's *Patrick White*, Fiona Capp's *My Blood's Country*, Mark McKenna's *Return to Uluru* and Alexis Wright's *Tracker* are just some examples of the field over the last 30 years. This article considers the principles underpinning contemporary biography and its practice. It reflects on the particular challenges of writing about living subjects, negotiating intimacy and privacy, and the uses of empathic listening in biographical interviews. It also explores the value of collective biography as a genre of current significance.

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## Long-Form Journalism and Long-Form Biography

Nobody will forget the horrific images on television and in the newspapers from 2021, showing dozens of human figures running beside a US military aircraft as it taxied on the airstrip at Kabul, with Apache helicopters diving close to the tarmac to break up the crowds of desperate people. There were men climbing onto the landing gear, others gripping the gigantic wheel frames, and still others, it appeared, attempting to clamber onto anything they could find around the belly of the plane. One of the men was Zaki Anwari, who scrambled onto the landing gear under the right wing of the aircraft. He was 17 years of age. As the plane accelerated, several men appeared to jump off to save themselves, scattering across the runway, but a few, including Anwari, stayed in place. The 140-tonne fully loaded aircraft accelerated to 190 kilometres per hour, and still

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he stayed on. Anwari held tight and was filmed falling to his death seconds later as the plane ascended.

An essay about Anwari in the *Wall Street Journal* described his short life.[1] It was a biography. According to the article, the teenager had phoned his brother from the airstrip. "You don't have a visa or a ticket. Come home," his brother said. The essay portrayed a young man who was terrified of living under Taliban rule. He was a member of the Afghanistan national youth soccer team and had attended a French high school. His adult life had only just begun. On the night the Taliban arrived in Kabul, he had spoken to another friend, one of his teammates: "How will we play football?" he asked. His friend said later: "All our dreams were crushed to dust." Surveying Anwari's short biography in this extended feature article, the reader glimpses what it might be like for the young people of Afghanistan and their fear of authoritarian rule and begin to understand the loss of the basic freedoms prized by those particular teenagers. In other words, through the story of one young man, the reader can see the predicament of the many.

There are, of course, key differences between short biographical essays—such as the one about the life of Anwari—and the longer, full biographies and biographical studies with which this article and the field are chiefly concerned. These relate to the depth of coverage and the ways in which interiority is established, one of the most difficult elements of biographical writing. A full biography requires that the biographer learn as much as possible about the life of the subject in order to write about them, and to convey that person's subjectivity or interiority. In the piece I have referred to, Anwari is portrayed in an essay, and his state of mind is conveyed through the quoted firsthand accounts of his brother and his friend. In sustained biographical works, evidence is cited for thoughts and to develop a sense of the subject's interior life, whereas a subject's speech or conversations are not generally imagined or recreated except when an informant attests to a comment they have made. Recreated speech, on the other hand, is used sparingly in full-length biographies. Diaries and letters offer vital evidence of states of mind in their context and over time. Complications may occur with living subjects in relation to this kind of evidence. These I discuss later when I address the challenges of writing about a living subject. However, before moving into this discussion, I will consider contemporary approaches to long-form biography in Australia within the context of the field more generally, and the emerging field of biographical studies.

## Long-Form Biography

Biography is a critical art form for the body politic because it links the person—the individual—to the body politic, and to history. If we accept Michael Holroyd's argument that "all biographies are group biographies",[2] then the focus on an individual in the collective is axiomatic. As Holroyd suggests, to write about Lytton Strachey, one must also write about the Bloomsbury group because "there are very few people who live in a

[1] Joe Parkinson, Ava Sasani, and Drew Hinshaw, "Afghanistan's Falling Man: The 17-Year-Old Soccer Star Who Plunged from a U.S. Military Jet," *Wall Street Journal*, 24 August 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghanistans-falling-man-the-17-year-old-soccer-star-who-plunged-from-a-u-s-military-jet-11629834591.

[2] SchAdvStudy, "Stephen Spender Research Seminar—New Life in Life Writing," YouTube video, 1:37:46, 30 May 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnT-0XF9zJM.

vacuum".[3] Biography is founded on one of the principles of democracy: that political legitimacy and knowledge is based on the experience of ordinary human beings.[4] This fact, of course, does not preclude biographies of dictators, autocrats and despots whose lives eschew democratic values. However, these biographies strive to understand the individual in their own political setting, historical period and context. But such biographies, like instant celebrity biographies, can sometimes also fall into exploitative modes that make them more like tabloid products than serious life studies or works of history.

Democracy is a belief in freedom and equality between people that is expressed through political systems and in civic life. It is predicated on a system of government in which power resides with the people. In scholarship, civic life can be usefully explored through both individual and collective biography. Richard Holmes refers to a phenomenon he calls the "biographic vision", stating that "the universal significance of the individual life story, has steadily established itself both as a source of genuine knowledge and of popular human drama".[5] Hans Renders and David Veltman's edited collection of essays demonstrates the widespread impact and appeal of biography in a range of cultures from Iran to Denmark. These essays offer a picture of what Renders calls a "globalizing biographical tradition" as well as revealing the variation in biographical traditions around the world, and the way they are imbricated with public culture in different settings.[6] They reveal the contrasting culture of the form in some countries, especially where the excesses of individuality may be frowned upon, such as in China, leading to a tradition in which biographical subjects are explored in relation to social contexts.[7] Certainly, the degree to which individuals exert agency has always been contested by Marxist historians in favour of class, and the material conditions of a person's life as the key determinants in their life course. Debby Applegate argues that "the primary strength of biography as a historical genre is its ability to depict the interplay of the intimate and the aggregate, or unique personal experience and broad historical trends", and that for both readers and historians, the genre of biography allows an exploration of "the question of how much control individuals have over their identity, environment and personal outcomes".[8]

The scholarly study of biography is a relatively small field, although it has grown enormously in the last 20 years alongside the biographical turn in history and other disciplines. In Australia, the publication of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* since 1996 has provided a focus for biography—as has the National Centre for Biography at the ANU, which oversees this large collective enterprise. More recently, the *Australian Journal of Biography and Histor*y has provided another boost to the field. Overseas journals such as *Biography* have been operating for at least 40 years. Hans Renders usefully defines biography as a genre that blends "history, literature, journalism and other

[3]SchAdvStudy, "Stephen Spender Research Seminar".
[4]Susan McWilliams Barndt explains that "the collective experience of ordinary human beings is the solid ground of political legitimacy and knowledge" in a review of *The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and American Democracy* by Nolan Bennett. See *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 2 (2020): 590–91.
[5]Richard Holmes, "Introduction," in *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures*, ed. Hans Renders and David Veltman (Boston: Brill, 2020), 1.
[6]Hans Renders, "Different Lives in a Global World," in Renders and Veltman, *Different Lives*, 4.
[7]Renders, "Different Lives," 5.
[8]Debby Applegate, "From Academic Historian to Popular Biographer," in *The Biographical Turn*, ed. Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 189.

auxiliary disciplines".[9] For him, the primary discipline is history, necessitating that it is concerned with its own methods and the theoretical framework that supports the narrative about the subject. The other important point that Renders makes about research in biography relates to the significance of the form in the making of public opinion.[10] He cites an example from the Netherlands, where pressure was brought to bear on the government to release documents after the publication of a biography of a former prime minister, Joop den Uyl, in which bribes were said to have been paid to a member of the royal family by Lockheed Corporation.[11] Renders also argues that in the Netherlands, biography "often mirrors—and is fuelled by—investigative journalism, a feature prevalent in many other countries today".[12]

As he says, biography sometimes provides a corrective in the analysis and understanding of an individual that may change public attitudes, in that it offers "forensic research" that serves "historical and democratic understanding".[13] In the Australian context, we might look to Chris Masters's biography of radio personality Alan Jones, *Jonestown* (2006), as either a corrective or an illuminating work that casts new light on the power of the man, or to that of Paul Barry's *The Rise and Fall of Alan Bond* (1990). The fact that both biographers are investigative journalists demonstrates the potency of the investigative biography and its capacity to affect the reputation of key public figures and their influence on politics. Like free, independent long-form journalism, biography must be independent. And as Renders argues, this is so it can serve "the functioning of a transparent, democratic society".[14] Renders likewise insists: "A biography has to be independent, free from outside influences and devoid of ideology."[15] This independence can be difficult to sustain, and censorship, pressure, defamation and other legal difficulties can become the enemy of biography, or at least curtail it, particularly biographies of living and recently deceased subjects. The extent to which biography must grapple with pressures from vested interests highlights its importance in public culture.

## Contemporary Australian Biography and Democracy

The case of historian and Whitlam biographer Jenny Hocking in *Hocking v. Director-General of the National Archives of Australia* in the High Court case of 2020 is instructive. This case led to the release of letters from the Queen to the Governor-General, revealing breaches of neutrality at the time of the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975, in spite of the argument that the letters were "personal" in nature. Using crowd funding and pro bono legal representation, Hocking won the case, forcing the National Archives to release more than 200 letters that had been kept secret for 45 years. Future historians will judge whether this case has an impact on the course of Australian republicanism. In the meantime, there is no denying the significance of the case for democracy in

[9]Renders, "Different Lives," 6.
[10]Renders, "Different Lives," 6.
[11]Renders, "Different Lives," 6.
[12]Renders, "Different Lives," 7.
[13]Renders, "Different Lives," 7.
[14]Renders, "Different Lives," 8.
[15]Hans Renders, "Biography Is Not a Selfie," in Renders, de Haan, and Harmsma, *The Biographical Turn*, 162.

Australia, or the strong connection between the work of biography, biographers and democratic life that it demonstrates.[16]

Hocking's two-volume biography of Whitlam or Judith Brett's on Alfred Deakin offer a way of reading about political history with a forensic lens. Political biography provides the most potent way of immersing the reader in the microhistory of an individual against the backdrop of their time. However, biographies of cultural figures can also achieve the same depth in relation to cultural, literary, art or theatre history. For example, Hazel Rowley's *Christina Stead* (1997) and Darleen Bungey's biography of Arthur Boyd (2008) offer portraits of their subjects and the individual's creative life and their times. My own biography of Barry Humphries, *One Man Show* (2010), seeks to portray the performer in relation to his time as a figure who transformed the popular theatre in Australia, brought Australian humour to the world, revolutionised the television chat show, and contributed to a crushing of the cultural cringe.

One significant fault line in the theory and practice of biography that has been exposed over the last 40 years or more is the shift by some practitioners to an acceptance of speculation and imaginative elements in biography, or what might be called the incursions of life writing. Renders decries the destructive effects of biographies in which the "literary form" becomes a "camouflage" for the absence of research.[17] Serious biographers eschew invention, defending the form as non-fiction, predicated on verifiable facts. As Nigel Hamilton argues in his discussion of biography over the last 30 to 40 years, "truth remained a red line: a boundary that extended all the way back to classical times".[18] And as the Australian historian Brenda Niall states, "For me: The binaries of fact and fiction matter … Facts matter; nothing can be done without them."[19] Following Niall's logic, to ignore the ethical, legal and historiographical problems of substituting fiction and speculation for facts and evidence is unacceptable. This is not to diminish autobiography and memoir as literary genres in their own right, and as potential sources for biographers, but it is important to recognise them as sources to be weighed against other sources in the construction of biography, and as separate forms, properly categorised under the heading of life writing, and distinct from biography.

There is no doubt that biography is currently one of the most important and most popular modes of writing history. The biographical turn in the humanities and social sciences, as Barbara Caine describes in her book *Biography and History*, and as Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma explore in *The Biographical Turn*, has well and truly come into its own.[20] Key historians and social scientists in Australia now write biography, and the form is accepted in history and literary studies, as well as in political science, despite widespread resistance from the disciplines and the academy that occurred over a long period.[21]

[16]Jenny Hocking, *The Palace Letters: The Queen, the Governor-General and the Plot to Dismiss Gough Whitlam* (Brunswick: Scribe, 2020).
[17]Hans Renders, "The Deep-Rooted Fear of Theory among Biographers," in *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, ed. Hans Renders and David Veltman (Boston: Brill, 2022), 22.
[18]Nigel Hamilton, "Biography as Corrective," in Renders, de Haan, and Harmsma, *The Biographical Turn*, 16.
[19]Brenda Niall, *Life Class: The Education of a Biographer* (Melbourne: MUP, 2007), xii.
[20]Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (London: Red Globe Press, 2019), 1.
[21]Melanie Nolan points to a paradox, arguing that "biography has been at the centre of most historians' writing since Carlyle". See "The Great Individual in History: Historicising Historians' Biographical Practice," in Renders and Veltman, *Fear of Theory,* 88.

Many leading Australian historians and political scientists have been working in this field for some time: Judith Brett, Jenny Hocking and Mark McKenna, for example, all work in biography. These scholars are engaged profoundly with biography and have reached large audiences with their work. In fact, they have made Australian history much more appealing to a broader audience. The embrace of biography by historians has been significant for the academy, and the rigour and depth of research in their biographical projects is noteworthy. Biography, it must be said, is literary in many ways—by necessity and by nature—but its research methods are, as Caine notes, those of the historian. The problem this historical foundation gives the biographer is frequently misunderstood and often never fully appreciated. Michael Benton notes: "Biography sits uncomfortably between history and literature primarily because of its hybrid nature … while biography is an empirical discipline concerned with the factual content of knowledge, it also entails the aesthetic shaping of this knowledge in the very act of exercising this discipline. The twin challenges to every biographer are ones of authenticity and representation."[22] However, the aesthetic shaping of historical writing is no less of a challenge than it is for biography. Michael Holroyd puts the sequence of biography succinctly when he says, "I am a researcher first. As a researcher the writer goes to sleep. Then I am a writer later recreating and solving the problems."[23]

Another democratising trend in biography currently visible in Australia is that of the interest in biographies of Indigenous or First Nations individuals. One of the most interesting recent biographies in this category is Alexis Wright's *Tracker*: S*tories of Tracker Tilmouth*—a biography described by Wright's publisher as a "collective memoir", which does indeed rely explicitly on the actual testimony and voices of others as well as Wright's own interpretive voice.[24] It exposes its methods, reporting the words of informants in full and in detail, while also offering a biographical account in Wright's voice and detailed descriptions of her own dealings with the subject.

Her way of solving the dilemmas of the biographer is remarkable in this book. In the introduction to her lengthy biography, Wright writes: "Always at the centre of what was happening, Tracker (also known as Bruce Tilmouth) epitomised Aboriginal thinking at some of this country's highest levels of political manoeuvring, for land rights, native title, and economic development. Tracker always looked at the bigger economic picture, larger than the actual reality for Aboriginal people, which he frequently called *the vision splendid*."[25] Wright goes on to explain: "A western-style biography would never do for Tracker. It would never have been a wise move for any biographer, or the correct way to attempt to remember somebody like Tracker, who tried with just about every breath he drew to manufacture enormous change."[26] She points out that Tracker did not leave "a trail of paperwork", meaning that the stories she collects are vital to remembering and understanding the man.

Wright also states that Tracker "knew full well his mob either couldn't, didn't want to, or wouldn't read. They worked in the oral tradition of making story-memories as the

[22]Michael Benton, "The Aesthetics of Biography and What It Teaches," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49, no. 1 (2015): 1–19, 2–3.
[23]SchAdvStudy, "Stephen Spender Research Seminar".
[24]"Tracker," Giramondo Books, https://giramondopublishing.com/books/tracker/ (accessed 1 March 2024).
[25]Alexis Wright, *Tracker* (Sydney: Giramondo, 2017), 5.
[26]Wright, *Tracker*, 7.

method of achieving outcomes".[27] Tracker himself "read quickly, comprehended content on a breathtaking catalogue of interests, and had a photographic memory for the written word in the same way that he observed people, and read the country … In using storytelling as communication, he was able to engage even the most important listener".[28] Wright affirms that "*Tracker* attempts to follow an Aboriginal tradition of storytelling practice for crossing landscapes and boundaries, giving many voices a part in the story".[29]

Mark McKenna's recent book, *Return to Uluru*, brings together the biography of a policeman working in Central Australia in the 1930s, Bill McKinnon, and the life of an Indigenous man he killed at Uluru in 1934. This man's name was Yokununna. McKenna navigates a path through a brutal history, working with McKinnon's family and that of Yokununna to discover the truth about the killing and the lives of those involved. McKenna eventually discovers McKinnon's log book in a large archive stored in the garage of McKinnon's daughter's home in Buderim, Queensland. The account of the events that led to Yokununna's death is thorough and differs from the evidence McKinnon gave to the Board of Enquiry into the incident in 1935. As McKenna explains, it shows that McKinnon lied during the inquiry and had fired his gun at Yokununna by "taking careful aim, intending to do him maximum harm, and he had kept the evidence hidden for the rest of his life".[30] The aesthetic shaping of this biographical work reveals a difficult investigative journey and a subtle knowledge of the sensitivities of parties on both sides of the case.

## Contemporary Australian Biography in the Cultural Sphere

These recent biographies published by Australian historians are remarkably coherent as a set—in method, style and approach. They adhere to the principles we associate with writing in history. Evidence is adduced, and they proffer interpretations closely based on source material. Australian biographies in literary studies, on the other hand, are not quite as homogeneous, although the methods are the same. It is obvious that there is more variety of approach in literary studies and more experimentation with form. For example, Fiona Capp's *My Blood's Country* takes a less conventional approach to exploring the life of Judith Wright in that it does not seek to document every stage of Wright's life, and the approach is one of a personal discovery of Wright's family, sources of inspiration in place, and her imaginative sensibility. While purists such as Max Saunders advocate caution in any insertion of self by the biographer, he concedes that it can be done effectively. But overall Saunders considers that biography should not be about the biographer.[31]

Capp's biographical work on Wright offers a major achievement in biography because it illuminates some of the most difficult elements of Wright's early life and positions her imagination in New England with insight. Wright's mother died when she was only 12. Capp talks about this early loss, and its expression in the poem "Train Journey", published in *The Gateway* in 1953, in which the speaker presents the experience of travelling

[27]Wright, *Tracker*, 9–10.
[28]Wright, *Tracker*, 10.
[29]Wright, *Tracker*, 13.
[30]Mark McKenna, *Return to Uluru* (Carlton: Black Inc., 2021), 170.
[31]SchAdvStudy, "Stephen Spender Research Seminar".

by train back home to the High Country of New England. The poem is multilayered, revealing a magical re-seeing of the country of childhood. Later, as Capp describes looking out from the hill on Fairburn Road outside Armidale, she imagines Wright doing the same, and seeing "not only her much-loved countryside but a fragile motherland: 'your delicate dry breasts, country that built my heart'".[32]

Capp argues that the speaker in the poem "urges the trees to hold on, to extract all they can from the rocky earth, in the same way that poetry brings the 'unliving' to life through language. The urgency of the poem is a measure of the helplessness she felt. She had no control over what was done to the land she loved—only her brothers inherited the family properties. All she could offer were her words".[33] Here Capp deals with this major, formative loss in Wright's life in a compelling manner. She offers an ambitious reading of loss in Wright's poetry, and one that may lead readers to rethink the poems, and to understand them in a way they may not have done without Capp's interpretation as she explores all of Wright's childhood places.

In contrast, David Marr's celebrated biography of Patrick White is more conventional in its approach, style and scope, but it is no less powerful. Unlike Capp's portrait of Wright, Marr offers a full and more traditional biography, beginning with White's forbears and documenting the history of the two families from which White is descended. This history is vividly conveyed. But it is the portrait of White as an outsider in this family and as an artist that distinguishes the work. For example, the description Marr offers of White weeping as he completed the final draft of his manuscript for *Riders in the Chariot* captures the extreme emotion of the writing process: its passion, commitment and harrowing effect on the author. In other words, he captures the interiority of his subject at a critical, creative moment. This achievement is intimate and significant because it shows how writing actually takes place for this author and its effects on him. It is a potent paragraph in the biography, which was based on a letter White wrote to Marr. He writes:

> As usual he worked far more quickly on the final draft than he first expected; and as usual he suffered a terrible crisis of confidence as he neared the end. Would anyone be interested? Was he speaking a private language? Should he, even at this late stage, throw it away? Yet in the final moments, even as those doubts gathered, he was entirely swept up in the writing. As Alf Dabo died of TB, having at last painted his image of the chariot blazing across the sky, White found himself coughing blood. He wept as he finished, and that was always an omen of success.[34]

Another sub-genre of literary biography in Australia sits astride the shorter professional biographies that are more commonly published on the lives of politicians and the longer, more traditional biographies such as Marr's on White or Rowley's on Stead. Works in this sub-genre are more akin to biographical studies and are often heavily influenced by the family of the subject, or the subject themselves (because that subject is still living). Two examples of such works are Bernadette Brennan's biography of Gillian Mears and her biographical study of Helen Garner, *A Writing Life: Helen Garner and her Work* (2017).

[32]Fiona Capp, *My Blood's Country* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010), 61.
[33]Capp, *My Blood's Country*, 25.
[34]David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney: Vintage, 1992), 374.

## Writing about the Living Subject

One of the most difficult challenges in biography is writing about a living subject. The weighing of evidence and interpretation of facts is no different from the task of writing about a subject who has died, but the living subject can and sometimes does exert some control over the content of the biography, depending on the jurisdiction in which the biography is to be published, and the agreements made with a living subject about the biography (if any). Many biographers of living subjects show their manuscript to the subject to seek their views, and to prevent legal difficulties later on, which is not to say that the subject's view always prevails. Writing about living subjects is particularly complex because of this negotiation. The biographer must deal with the subject on their own terms and respect their moral and legal rights. Inevitably, the biographer makes compromises about content—so many compromises, some would argue, that the biography of a living subject itself is fatally compromised.

As with the writing of any biography, one of the most difficult decisions relates to Edel's principle that the biographer needs to discover the right form to portray the life. The biographer is then a historian and psychologist as well as a writer, engaging by necessity with a literary form and a being whose self may be difficult to find. The biographer of the living subject confronts the performative self and strives to gain an honest sense of the whole person when the natural instinct for the subject is to try to steer the biographer away from weakness, failure or conflict in their lives, even unconsciously. Performance of the self does not preclude the usefulness of thinking about a self, or even the possibility of a unified self. In dealing with a living subject, the performative self may create numerous challenges for the biographer. Edel's principles for writing biography, particularly in relation to recognising the subject's mask, are valuable here.[35] They do not exclude a more open approach to understanding of the self. A unified self may still have contradictions, may evolve and may be difficult to pin down, but it is still a self.

Frequently, biographies are written by authors who can offer their specific understanding of the subject's world: their profession. For example, John Lahr, the esteemed American theatre critic who grew up in the theatre (the son of Bert Lahr), writes biographical essays and full biographies about theatre makers of all kinds, especially playwrights and performers (mostly living subjects), writing from a position of insider knowledge. This is even more probable for biographers writing about a living subject. Ethically and practically, it is important to begin with the living subject as source because the focus of the enterprise is on that person, and their story is the principal source narrative. It has to be, but this reality generates a number of problems.

As I mentioned in the introduction, establishing interiority is one of the most difficult challenges for biographers. Diaries and letters provide source material for evidence of states of mind, attitudes, fears and the subject's own sense of self, often in the context of an overarching interpretation of the personality. In his biography of Tennessee Williams published in 2014, John Lahr puts forward a general hypothesis concerning the way the playwright went about exploring feelings in his plays that could not be expressed in his family life. During the years of research I conducted between 2002 and 2010 on the

[35]Leon Edel, *Writing Lives: Principia Biographia* (New York: Norton, 1984), 25–31.

life of Barry Humphries, I developed a thesis about his personality through evidence. Critical to this process were early letters and diaries in addition to interviews with Humphries himself and with family, friends and colleagues.

Prior to publication of my biography, Humphries read the manuscript. He expressed some reservations about my thesis and denied experiencing the feelings that I had cited from an early diary. When I pointed to the source of my interpretation, he did not persist with his view, and my original thesis stood, but his comments about it caused me to rethink the evidence in light of his initial misgivings. It is difficult to reconcile a subject's own comments on their earlier life with the historical record, and we can conclude only that it is common for a person's sense of themselves to alter completely over the years, and for them to revise their own self-narration, making the challenge for a biographer of a living subject even more difficult.

In a large study of established actors in Australia that I conducted between 2012 and 2018, I undertook what we might call "life interviews". One of my objectives was to find the actor in the acting, and to explore the lives of actors who had contributed to Australian theatre, television and film over a 50-year period, given that actors are often left out of theatre history in favour of playwrights and directors. The biographical interview is a key method with live subjects because the individual is the main source on their own life. One of the difficulties is that the intimacy engendered in an extended biographical interview may result in a conflict between empathy and critical distance. How does a biographer maintain empathy and critical distance? What is affective or critical distance in the biographer–subject relationship? How does a biographer know they have achieved it?

In my study, investigating the lives of some 80 Australian actors—all of them living—the actors were both subject and primary source informants. Of course, they were not the only informants or sources for the biographies. The emotional texture of these subjects' narratives provided me, the biographer, with a guide for the treatment of sensitive material; the detailed narrative provided by the subject of their own life in an interview or series of interviews offered me cues for balancing empathy and critical distance in the published portrait—and for creating a shape for the narrative of the life that offered an authentic sense of that person's interior world.

## Empathic Listening, Affective Distance and Following the Subject's Lead

Empathic listening is a central feature of the biographical interview. During interviews of this nature, empathic listening means that the biographer in many instances becomes more like a clinical listener, although that is clearly not the biographer's role. In many interviews, I listened to actors telling me about the most significant and most disturbing events in their life over the course of a five-hour or two-day session and often over multiple sessions. They revealed myriad experiences such as assault and abuse in their family and at work in the theatre, episodes of mental illness, and all manner of other occurrences and circumstances. These revelations can provide a lens for establishing interiority and personality for the biographer, irrespective of whether the particularities of the trauma are published. I learned from at least four subjects about critical traumatic incidents that affected their early lives. But none of those subjects wanted me to include details of those incidents in the published biographical essays.

One of the most memorable accounts was by the esteemed actor Julia Blake, who told me about episodes of mania she experienced over a long period and their effect on her acting. In this case, she did allow me to publish details of her experiences. She told me about eventually being diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder and particularly how this diagnosis affected her work and her personal life in the short and long term.[36] While university ethics licences provide a framework for ethical conduct during research, such revelations present a number of difficulties with regard to intimacy and affective distance. There are no rules for biographers negotiating intimacy, and the biographical project would be dull and meaningless without some level of intimacy in the portrayal of a subject, especially as the intimate details of a life are key to understanding interiority and self-understanding. The goal is to understand and interpret lives, not merely to document them. But intimacy is both precious and dangerous for biographers, precisely because they are not clinicians. Nor is the work of biography akin to therapy.

In *The Good Story*, a "conversation" between John Coetzee, the eminent Adelaide-based Nobel Laureate, and Arabella Kurtz, an English psychotherapist, the question of a biographer's truth, or what we might call historical truth, is of primary importance. This is not what is important to a psychotherapist or to the patient, as Kurtz makes clear in this volume.[37] The skills of clinical listening are relevant and useful to the work of biography, but the aims and uses of the biographical interview and the clinical interview are different, and we cannot afford to confuse them. On the other hand, empathic listening is a form of listening that is extremely important for a biographer to learn, and it is a skill that takes some development and practice over a long period.[38]

Critically, however, the information obtained in the biographical interview is not for therapeutic use. A biographer must balance information from the subject with that obtained through other informants and sources. Deirdre Bair, the celebrated American biographer of Samuel Beckett and Simone de Beauvoir, in researching her biography of Beckett would verify her facts through some five informants, and she would go back to Beckett and tell him what others had said to give him a chance to comment.[39] Her vigilance, in my view, meant she was setting herself an almost impossible task. Also, she risked breaking the trust of her many other informants. One of the keys is establishing rapport and trust, but also keeping some professional distance and conducting research beyond that of the subject themselves.

Again, there is no formula for achieving a balance when working with a living subject. Of course, the intimate revelations that inevitably emerge will inform the biography and contribute to a biographical portrait that is ultimately offered up to the public, but the dangers of revealing too much (both morally and legally) are real and must be carefully negotiated with the subject. During the research for my large actors' project, in many cases the subject explained a situation to me in which they were a victim of violence or abuse but maintained it was purely informational and could not be used in the biography. The difficulties of this "negotiation" can ruin a biographical project and a

[36]Anne Pender, "Portraits of Actors: Elspeth Ballantyne, Julia Blake and the Challenges of Biography," *About Performance* 13 (2015): 211–29.

[37]John Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (London: Penguin, 2016).

[38]I learned the fundamentals of empathic listening and clinical interviewing from psychologists Carol Gilligan and Meg Turner as a student in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University in 1990–1991.

[39]Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

biographer–subject relationship. Biographies are equally problematic where it is apparent that the biographer is guessing, speculating or misinterpreting evidence about cause and effect in a person's life, as I indicated earlier in this discussion.

Another key principle in conducting life interviews is allowing the subject to lead the discussion and take it in the direction they choose. This means that the biographer holds off on asking a set of questions until that self-narrative has been told. This method is effective because it demonstrates to the biographer the shape the subject gives their life story, the moments they leave out, and the way in which they understand cause and effect. This method relies on the biographer already knowing the key facts, outline, high and low points of the subject's life and career (to the extent that this is possible), and also on a true privileging of the subject as a key informant on their own life.

For example, when I first met Barry Humphries, he led the discussion by talking about his first encounters with the work of Samuel Beckett. He spoke about discovering the work of Beckett as a teenager and then performing in the first production of *Waiting for Godot* in Australia. The fact that he chose to discuss this in our very first meeting was instructive for me as biographer because it gave me a strong understanding of his theatrical impulses at an early stage of his development. It does not mean that a biographer ignores archival information, or information others provide; however, it offers primacy to the individual themselves. Even so, it is important to verify and discuss events with other informants. One of the difficulties of this approach, though, is that a biographer and subject may have different views about the high points of a person's career, for example, and different views of cause and effect in understanding a person's life. These factors must be negotiated and can lead to difficulties. Evidence must always take precedence in this situation.

A problem I experienced in one particular biographical project relates to decisions I made about the aesthetic shape and scope of an extended biographical portrait, and the emphasis I placed on the main parts of the subject's career when the subject was very much in the public eye as a younger man and in middle age. The subject wanted me, I believe, to put an equal weight on the latter part of his career, which in my view was less important to his career and to theatre history in Australia, as well as being less interesting. Susan Tridgell talks about this challenge in her book *Understanding Our Selves: The Dangerous Art of Biography* (2004).[40] Tridgell carefully identifies the problems of writing about the subject as an older person, who is not engaging as they did with the public earlier in their life, and how that is treated in biography: the problem of pacing, narrative, time and truncation of biography. This is a major challenge in that the biographer must shape the life they are writing about: they cannot simply recite every event. Yet in doing so, the biography risks an implicit diminishing of the subject as an older person. This challenge also reinforces the difficulties of sustaining a sense of the subject's interiority and the literary challenge of shaping the life for a reader.

## Collective Biography and Democracy

Another vibrant sub-genre of biography at present is the collective biography or group biography. This kind of biographical project is important in presenting the political

[40]Susan Tridgell, *Understanding Our Selves: The Dangerous Art of Biography* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004).

significance of groups of lives, however loosely or tightly bound they may be, and offers more capacity to examine the individual as a group member. One recent Australian example that demonstrates the power of collective biography is *Half the Perfect World* (2018) by Tania Dalziell and Paul Genoni, which portrays a group of writers, painters, musicians and "drifters" (including Leonard Cohen and Marianne Ihlen) who congregated together on the Greek island of Hydra at a time when the rents were exceptionally low, and the island was only just beginning to be discovered by tourists.[41]

Dalziell and Genoni spent some five years researching the lives and work of the artists who lived on Hydra between 1955 and 1964. This study of a disparate group of individuals and their struggles to create art on Hydra, connect with the locals, and make lives for themselves and their families offers a major contribution to biography, Australian literary studies and modernist studies. It documents the work of many artists in a constellation around Charmian Clift and George Johnston, who were central figures in the expatriate community. *Half the Perfect World* analyses the work of artists on Hydra at a specific moment of mid-century transition and change. It contributes substantially to an understanding of modern literary life and its artistic contexts and conditions. One of the ironies of the lives of Johnston and Clift is that they longed, for years, for success as writers of literary work, and eventually left Hydra when Johnston was on the brink of achieving it with his best-known novel, *My Brother Jack* (1964). Clift took her own life in 1969 and in 1970 Johnston died of tuberculosis. Two of their three children (Shane and Martin) also died by their own hand. The tragedy of their suicides is often the lens through which Clift and Johnston are viewed, and this emphasis can lead to an unbalanced or overly reverential approach to their lives. But this collective biography does not work in that retrospective manner and is all the more powerful for it. The biographers do, however, establish a strong sense of interiority and subjectivity in relation to each member of the group, but it is particularly strongly rendered in regards to the key protagonists: Clift and Johnston. In addition, this work offers a panoramic view of the two writers and the effect they had on others, while also offering perspectives and interior lives of the other group members.

Collective biography comes with its own problems, however, not least the sheer challenge of portraying the lives of many individuals in equal measure within the one volume. But it nonetheless has a significant place because of the way it can illuminate writers, literary movements and artistic circles from different viewpoints and as politically significant collectives. It also comes in many forms and often captures the lives of groups of people who all experienced the same conditions or phenomena, even if these range over time. For example, several collective biographies have been published on the experiences of expatriate artists from Australia living in the UK. Stephen Alomes's *When London Calls* (1999) documents the lives and work of actors, artists, musicians and writers who left Australia in the 1950s to further their careers. Peter Morton's *Lusting for London* (2011) explores the lives of young Australian writers who travelled to Britain before and after Federation. And Ian Britain's *Once an Australian* (1997) focuses on just four cultural figures in this category who contributed to the transformation of both British and Australian culture. My own collective biography of Australian

[41] Paul Genoni and Tanya Dalziell, *Half the Perfect World: Writers, Dreamers and Drifters on Hydra 1955–1964* (Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing, 2018).

writers living in the UK—*Britain from a Distant Shore* (2013)—examines the experience and achievement of some 60 authors who left Australia to live there between 1820 and 2012. These volumes investigate the phenomenon of expatriatism and explain the impact of it on Australian and world literature and the relationship between Australia and the UK from diverse perspectives. The range of works on this topic demonstrates the problem-solving dimensions of collective biography in illuminating significant migratory patterns of Australian artists, writers and musicians and their challenge to the prevailing orthodoxies of history that regarded Australia as primarily an import culture.

## Conclusion

The development, acceptance and diversification of biography over the last 30–40 years has made it a much more appealing, democratic and powerful form of writing than it has ever been before. Long-form biography has also risen to become an academic field of study in its own right with journals and multi-authored books tackling major issues of the genre with regularity and rigour. The genre in Australia is evolving rapidly and has transformed the academy. Australian biography is vibrant and powerful at present and is bolstered by infrastructure that supports and critiques the form. It is much more than simply micro history or social history, providing a range of contributions to democratic life that include surgical, investigative correctives to public understanding of powerful living figures, fully researched portraits of politicians, writers and artists, and wide-ranging collective biographies of circles of artists or groups of workers in their historical setting. It is a multifaceted genre that unites disciplines, particularly literary studies and history, but also ranges freely into psychology, contributing substantially to democratic culture and history. Biographies of artists, writers and performers contribute to an understanding of the sources, processes, material conditions and effects of creative activity on the artists themselves, and their audiences. Biography is politically salient in its scope and reach. It is not anti-theory or anti-literary; rather, it embodies theory and is to a greater or lesser extent literary by nature. It is essential to the understanding of the individual, their legacy and the sociocultural meaning of their life.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).