

Nonfiction RA - Biography

What is it?

Per *The Real Story*, it is “a form of literature in which the stories of lives are recorded” (p. 197), with the formats being as varied as the subjects. For RA purposes, it is not curriculum-driven narrative chronologies, especially those written for series (unlike those of Russell Freedman, Milton Meltzer, or Albert Marrin).

Why do people read it? (the appeal factors)

- Character – perhaps more than with any other nonfiction “genre”
- Author engagement with subject can make for good writing and therefore story/plot appeal
- Inspiration, sense of identity

Who reads it?

- Readers of history who want a more personal view
- Fiction readers who like strong characters in their fiction

Genre & Sub-Genre Overview – my personal, idiosyncratic take

Famous/Celebrity – let's face it, we all want to KNOW what goes on

Historical – the vast majority of biographies; often revisionist as time progresses because of societal/cultural views and interpretations and/or availability of new primary sources

Individual – the “great man” theory of history

- McCullough, *John Adams: a life*

Individual – life stories of someone who has some interest, either because of the story or of because how they may have influenced history in a way that has not usually been known

- Ackerman, *The Zookeeper's Wife*
- Todd, *Chrysalis: Maria Sibylla Merian and the secrets of metamorphosis*

Group – discrete chapters

- Bohrer, *Glory, Passion, and Principle: the story of eight remarkable women at the core of the American Revolution*

Group – the sum more than the parts (synthesis)

- Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the struggle for America's independence*
- Roberts, *Ladies of Liberty: Women who shaped our nation*
- Uglow, *The Lunar Men: five men whose curiosity changed the world*
- Moore, *The Other Wes Moore: one name, two fates*

New Ways of Framing the Telling

- Mann, *Parisians: an adventure history of Paris*
- O'Brien, *Mrs. Adams in Winter, a journey in the last days of Napoleon*

- Meacham, *Franklin and Winston: an intimate portrait of an epic friendship*
- Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare, 1599* and Greenblatt, *Will in the World, how Shakespeare became Shakespeare*
- Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior; Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* and Millard, *River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey*
- Skandera-Trombley, *Mark Twain's Other Women: the hidden story of his final years*

Other Recent Biographies of Interest

- Weatherford, *Secret History of the Mongol Queens* (Weatherford)
- Teachout, *Pops: a life of Louis Armstrong*
- Pakula, *The Last Empress: Madame Chiang-Kai Shek and the birth of modern China*
- Gorn, *Dillinger's Wild Ride: the year that made America's Public Enemy Number One*
- Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*
- Dahlberg, *America's Girl; the incredible story of how swimmer Gertrude Eberle changed the nation*
- Shawcross, *The Queen Mother: the official biography Appetite for America*
- Unger, *The Last Founding Father: James Monroe and a nation's call to greatness*
- Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the rise and fall of the Comanches, the most powerful Indian tribe in American History*
- Osborne, *The Bolter: the story of Idina Sackville, who ran away to become the chief seductress of Kenya's scandalous "Happy Valley set"*
- Stannard, *Muriel Spark: the biography*
- Krakauer, *Where Men Win Glory: the odyssey of Pat Tillman*
- Bryant, *The Last Hero: a life of Henry Aaron*

Other Trends

- Use of new sources (for instance, declassified archives), or rediscovery of primary/original ones to find new interpretations
- *Catching a Wave* – two biographies of Ayn Rand in 2009
- Biography series – *Eminent Lives*, *Penguin Lives*

Authors to Know

• Ron Chernow • Antonia Fraser • Walter Isaacson • Mary Lovell • David McCullough

Awards

- Elizabeth Longford Prize for Historical Biography
- Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography
- James Tait Black Memorial Prize
- *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Biography

Resources

- Rick Roche, *Real Lives Revealed: a guide to reading interests in biography*
- *The Real Story*, Chapter 7, "Biography"
- Hermione Lee, *Biography: a very short introduction*
- Suzanne Mantell, "This is Your Life", *Publishers Weekly*, 5/31/04, pp. 37-43.