

## Biographies

The other day I began thinking about biographies, mostly literary, that I have read in the past few years. I was considering Patrick French's study of V. S. Naipaul, Zachary Leader's two-volume biography of Saul Bellow, Blake Bailey's book on Philip Roth, and even the late James Atlas's biography of Bellow, published in 2000 and thus far older than these other studies. In the back of my mind was one of the finest biographies I have read of any figure in the arts, and that is James Breslin's lengthy study of the painter Mark Rothko, which appeared in 1993, some twenty years after Rothko died.

What motives might there be for a living artist or author to work with a biographer who plans to produce a picture of his life over which he has no control? Novelists themselves have taken a decidedly mixed view on becoming the subject of biographies. On the whole, they are skeptical. John Updike hoped (without success) to avoid becoming one. He thought that biographers either got their facts wrong or misinterpreted whatever facts they did command. He concludes an essay

on the subject that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in February 1999 with an appeal for privacy:

Which brings us to my own decided reluctance to be, were I ever invited, a subject of extended biographical treatment. A fiction writer's life is his treasure, his ore, his savings account, his jungle gym, and I marvel at the willingness of my friends William Styron and Joyce Carol Oates to cooperate in their recently published biographies. As long as I am alive, I don't want somebody else playing on my jungle gym—disturbing my children, quizzing my ex-wife, bugging my present wife, seeking for Judases among my friends, rummaging through yellowing old clippings, quoting in extenso bad reviews I would rather forget, and getting everything slightly wrong.

Saul Bellow offered his own thoughts on the subject in an interview with Robert Boyers in 1995, which appeared a few years before any biography of him had been published. (Ruth Miller's study *Saul Bellow: A Biography of the Imagination*, appeared in 1982, but her book focused on his novels and intellectual development rather than on his life.) "Some of these investigators," Bellow told Boyers, "make you feel as if you were being measured for your coffin. The absolute zero of eternity is coming down on your bald spot. . . .The ideal biographer would be a fine artisan; most of the writers are rough carpenters."

Cynthia Ozick is more direct; she once said that “When it comes to novels, the author’s life is nobody’s business. A novel, even when it is autobiographical, is not an autobiography.” She concedes that characters may derive from people living and dead, and that stories can have a factual basis. But they are transmuted by the writer’s imagination into something beyond themselves and belong strictly to the study of the novel and not biography.

W.H. Auden seems to agree with Ozick—with a qualification. “On principle, I object to biographies of artists, since I do not believe that knowledge of their private lives sheds any significant light upon their works.” This remark is offered in a review of Richard Gutman’s biography of Wagner, an essay that Auden titled “The Greatest of the Monsters.” Auden first considers a duet between Fricka and Wotan in *Die Walküre*, and claims that “it is in no doubt based upon Wagner’s reminiscences of marital rows with Minna,” his wife. But he adds that “this does not explain why it is, musically, one of the greatest scenes in all of opera.” Nevertheless, Wagner’s life “is absolutely fascinating, and

it would be so if he had never written a note.” The wretchedness of the man’s character justifies a biography; or so Auden believed.

V.S. Naipaul took a different approach. Speaking at a conference at the University of Tulsa in 1994, he said that “The lives of writers are a legitimate subject of inquiry, and the truth should not be skimmed. It may well be, in fact, that a full account of a writer’s life might in the end be more of a work of literature and more illuminating—of a cultural or historical moment—than the writer’s books.” Patrick French’s superb biography was published near the end of Naipaul’s life, but I don’t know what the novelist thought of it or if he read it at all. I can well imagine that he did not, as a sign of his imperial indifference.

I *have* read that he offered French unflattering stories about his life that his biographer might have overlooked in his research. Naipaul seems to have wanted nothing omitted that would emphasize the nastiness of his character. Most living artists, of course, do the antithesis, by concealing embarrassing news if they’re trailed by a biographer. And it’s testimony to French’s talents as a writer that *The World is What it Is*, the biography, is a model of fair-minded scholarship. I’m not sure why

Naipaul encouraged the production of such an offensive picture, but French offers a clue in his introduction, when he describes his subject's reaction to receiving the Nobel Prize. Naipaul paid tribute to England and India but disregarded his birthplace, Trinidad, an omission that drew an angry reaction from Trinidadians. "I noticed," French writes, "that when he was being rude or provocative in this way, Naipaul was full of glee. Creating tension, insulting his friends, family or whole communities left him in excellent spirits." Naipaul, it seems, not only wanted his biographer to have a wealth of damning information about him; he also wanted readers to know that he had volunteered some of it himself, to shape his reputation in the way that he wanted—doubling down, so to speak, on a plan to prove his indifference to public opinion.

John Berryman, whose poetry was nothing if not autobiographical—the same is even truer of his posthumous and unfinished novel, *Recovery*—had this to say on the subject. The remarks appear at the beginning of his essay on Christopher Marlowe, the first piece in *The Freedom of the Poet*:

Shakespeare and Ben Jonson apart, only of Christopher Marlowe among the playwrights of the first Elizabeth is enough known personally to make feasible an exploration of those connections, now illuminating, now mysterious, between the artist's life and his work, which interest an increasing number of readers in this century, and the existence of which is denied only by very young persons or writers whose work perhaps really does bear no relation to their own lives, *tant pis pour eux* [so much the worse for them].

A close friend of Berryman's, Saul Bellow, is an interesting example of this, in part because of the innumerable interviews he gave over decades of a public career. The University of Mississippi Press in the 1980s inaugurated a series of paperbacks that assemble in a single volume interviews that novelists and poets gave in the course of their careers. Under the title *Conversations with . . .*, Mississippi published collections of interviews with Toni Morrison, John Cheever, Philip Roth, David Wagoner, Bellow, I.B. Singer, Katherine Anne Porter, and many others. Of the volumes I've seen, the one devoted to Bellow is easily the longest, nearing 300 pages. The last interview in the volume is from 1994, eleven years before he died. Bellow agreed to plenty of other interviews, including a session with the Romanian author Norman

Manea that runs to an extraordinary eighty pages. A second edition of *Conversations with Saul Bellow*, should one appear, will easily top 400 pages. By contrast, I seem to recall that the volume devoted to Malamud comes to about 150 pages, and interviews with the famously inaccessible Cormac McCarthy would hardly fill up a brochure.

The casual interviews Bellow gave to journalists went straight into print. For the longer ones that appeared in literary quarterlies, Bellow retained (like many other writers) the right to review and edit his answers before publication. It might be that his fame and immense success account for the length and number of interviews, but I can't help wondering if there isn't another motive at work, namely, a desire to make himself understood, and a consequent need to talk to more people than he would have otherwise. I suspect that most successful novelists would agree that reviews and studies of their work, even favorable ones, miss the mark, sometimes badly. *More Die of Heartbreak*, a late Bellow novel from 1987, was, like most of his novels, widely reviewed. In July Bellow wrote his friend Karl Shapiro, expressing dissatisfaction with the reviews he had read, along with his reaction to readers who wrote him.

“We weren’t brought up, you and I, to feel superior. The idea of giving the entire USA a Rorschach test in the arts is horrifying.” To Ann Malamud, widow of the novelist, he wrote in August that she was “lucky to have read only one review [of the novel]. The full picture is appalling.” (Since I think Bellow read my own review, which was published in a Chicago paper, I’ve always feared that I was classed among the dunderheads.)

Seeking to be understood is a natural desire, of course, and there is nothing unusual about it. But I have wondered if he didn’t feel the need more acutely than others. This might explain—and now I return to the subject of biography—why Bellow agreed to work for a number of years with James Atlas, when the latter was researching his biography of the author, the first to appear. This was a decision Bellow came to keenly regret. I mentioned earlier that Ruth Miller, a literary scholar in New York and a childhood friend of Bellow’s, produced a study that focused on the author’s books and intellectual development. But even so, the galleys of the study provoked a few detonations. Bellow read them when the book was well underway in its production schedule, and a small part



of the text dealing with his sex life drew a sharply disapproving reaction: He threatened to sue the publisher if the offending material weren't removed. Miller seems to have agreed to this with little debate.

There is yet another text to consider, but one that was never written. The novelist Mark Harris befriended Bellow in 1961, and in the mid-sixties proposed to the author that *he* write a biography, and with his approval and support. Bellow, in a spell of equivocation that occasionally marked his relations with people, said neither yes nor no, and ultimately left Harris to his own devices. But a fragment of the proposed work that appeared in *The Georgia Review* in 1978 offended Bellow, and brought relations between them to an end. Harris contented himself with writing a memoir of their friendship and its eventual unraveling; no biography ever appeared. The memoir is worth reading, but its reviews were often hostile, and in a note to the novelist William Kennedy, Bellow said "I rather enjoy the pummeling he's getting in the press."

As I noted earlier, the first full biography was prepared by the literary journalist James Atlas, whose book appeared in 2000. Before its

publication, Bellow was, in the words of a later biographer, “terrified.” Atlas writes in his introduction that it was Philip Roth (among others) who encouraged him to undertake it. Atlas had been preparing a study of Edmund Wilson, but found his subject so antipathetic that he abandoned the effort after a few years of work. When Roth suggested Bellow as an alternative, the subject struck Atlas as a natural choice—both were Jewish and raised in the Chicago area, Bellow on the West Side, Atlas in Evanston. Relatives of Atlas had even sold property to one of Bellow’s uncles decades before. And Bellow was favorably inclined when he broached the possibility of a book. After graduating from college, Atlas had prepared an accomplished biography of the poet Delmore Schwartz, who died in miserable poverty in 1966. Bellow and Schwartz had been close in the 1950s, when Bellow’s career was taking off and Schwartz’s was in decline; he had also been interviewed by Atlas when the latter was preparing that biography. The picture Atlas produced of Schwartz was sympathetic and sensitive, depicting the life of a greatly gifted literary talent who fell into sterility and madness in the last decade of his life. No less a figure than Philip Roth, who read the book, sent Atlas a

fan letter, calling it “a beautiful act of sympathy and understanding.” (His reaction to the biography of Bellow was very different.) Bellow was an infinitely more successful author, and I think he agreed to work with Atlas because he expected equally sympathetic treatment, which might influence other biographical studies that he knew were sure to come.

He was badly mistaken. The Atlas biography was about as hostile as Bellow began to fear it would be, and perhaps worse. (He broke off relations with Atlas some years into his research, when he began to question his biographer’s motives.) It offers what seems like a roughly accurate chronology of Bellow’s life and career, the multiple marriages, the numerous affairs, and the nonstop philandering that Bellow would have preferred to keep out of print. It was less the unflattering factual material than the derogatory tone of the book that offended Bellow’s readers and supporters. Bellow is seldom given the benefit of the doubt in his dealings with women, wives, friends, publishers and critics, and explanations of events in his life emphasize the negative.

We learn some pertinent facts about Atlas's research from Zachary Leader. He produced an excellent two-volume biography of Bellow that appeared about a dozen years after the Atlas study. Leader reports that while conducting his research, Atlas allowed himself to be influenced by Edward Shills, a University of Chicago sociologist who had once been close to Bellow. After a falling out, he became sharply critical of Bellow, his character and his novels. Shills died of cancer some years before the Atlas biography was published, and before his death he rejected Bellow's appeal for a reconciliation. Had the novelist known what Shills was saying to Atlas, I doubt that he would have wanted one.

In his memoir of working as a biographer, *The Shadow in the Garden*, Fupd reports his own experience of conducting research and working with Bellow before their relations fell apart. The novelist, who deprecated psychology in his published work and interviews, saw a number of therapists over three decades, and some of them appear in his fiction. Chester Raphael, Paul Meehl, and Albert Ellis were prominent figures in their fields; Meehl had been president of the American Psychological Association while teaching at the University of

Minnesota. Bellow's last therapist, Heinz Kohut, was perhaps the most illustrious of all: A former president of the American Psychoanalytic Association and the founder of an influential school of psychotherapy, he was also a neighbor of Bellow's in the 1970s when they lived in Hyde Park. Atlas writes: "I had interviewed the first three, all of whom were willing, no doubt out of vanity, to violate patient/doctor (or psychologist) confidentiality. Kohut was dead but I suspect he alone would have honored the contract the others were so cavalier about. He took his vocation seriously. . . ." (All of which raises the question regarding the ethics of interviewing therapists who should not be talking at all.)

Roth himself enters the world of biography when he sought a means of defending himself against the accusations of his former wife, Claire Bloom, who published a memoir of their marriage some years after their divorce. What interests me here is Roth's decision to seek out a biographer and cooperate with him in his research and to encourage others to do the same. The incentive to do this came from the defaming quality of the Bloom text and the need to correct its qualities.

Roth's second wife, Claire Bloom, published *Leaving the Doll's House* in 1996, a text that excoriated Roth. Adultery, fits of bipolar depression that sent him raging out of control, his expulsion of her daughter from their London home, sundry other charges, including abusiveness: The book, in all, is a thoroughly damning portrait of the author. Some of these claims were apparently true, others, including the claim of bipolar disorder, were patently false. Roth considered suing his former wife for defamation, and his lawyers felt he had a definite case. But he rejected the option, concluding that a suit would be time-consuming and draining. Publication of the Bloom memoir remained a severe blow, however, not least because so many reviewers accepted Bloom's account of the marriage without questioning its accuracy. And it is possible that the book did lasting damage to Roth's reputation. He claimed to have gotten over the shock, but Bailey argues, with some evidence, that he never ridded himself of the incubus of the text. "You know what Chekhov said," Roth remarked to him years later, "when someone said to him 'This too shall pass'? Well, '*nothing* passes.' Put *that* in your fucking book"—i.e., the biography Bailey was writing.

Roth achieved a settlement out of court, so to speak, when he published *I Married a Communist* in 1998. The target of the story is obviously Claire Bloom and her daughter Anna Steiger, and all of the gossips who spread news of her book in reviews and prepublication reporting. It is also the least successful of the books Roth published in the 1990s. The story depicts the lives of Eve Frame, an ageing actress whose career is on the skids, and her daughter Sylpyid; the two are modeled on Bloom and her daughter, and gossip appears as a running thread throughout the book. The career that is ruined in the novel is “Iron Rinn” Ringold’s, a radio broadcaster who gets tarred as a communist when his former wife, Eve Frame, publishes a memoir of their marriage—*I Married a Communist*. As the reader might guess, the setting is the 1950s, Eisenhower’s America, and the age of McCarthy. The title seals the identification of McCarthyism with the loose attacks that appeared in the 1990s on “predatory males” guilty of “misogyny” and other misdeeds, a topic Roth treats more effectively in *The Human Stain* and *Sabbath’s Theater*. I think it was Alan Dershowitz, the Harvard law professor, who coined the term sexual McCarthyism, the

raucous movement that targeted Bill Clinton (actually his client then) during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. That erupted at about the same time *I Married a Communist* (Roth's novel) was published. As I mentioned, Bailey himself was destined to undergo a similar experience himself after publishing his biography of Roth.

But Roth wanted more than a novel—his own—to challenge the picture of the marriage that Claire Bloom presented in her memoir. He also wanted a biographer who would restore his reputation and offer something resembling “his side of the story.” His original choice was Ross Miller, a University of Connecticut scholar he met in the 1980s and with whom he developed a friendship. Miller was the nephew of Arthur Miller, the playwright, and seemed interested in the assignment. But for unknown reasons, he never pursued it with any diligence. Roth tried to guide his research so that Miller would draw from interviewees the answers he wanted; he also made it clear there was some urgency to the project: By the late 1990s, relatives and friends who had valuable memories to share were nearing the end of their lives; they would have been important sources for any biographer. But Miller remained dilatory



to the point of indifference, and the interviews he managed to conduct betrayed an inexplicable hostility to Roth. So Roth dropped him as a biographer and responded favorably in 2012 when Bailey recommended himself as a replacement.

I don't want to repeat all of the criticisms I made of the book when I reviewed it a year ago. (The piece can be found on my website in a May 2021 addition to "Essays and Reviews.") The text is baggy and seems to me loosely written and loosely edited, which may reflect an urge to rush the manuscript into print. The study is not remotely up to the standard Bailey set in his biography of John Cheever, a model of biographical scholarship. On the other hand, it is thoroughly researched and provides valuable background material for Roth's novels. Anyone with a serious interest in his books, his life, and his literary milieu will want to read it. (When Bailey found himself accused of sexual harassment and even rape just after the book was published, Norton, his publisher, suspended production and sales of the biography. (Skyhorse Publishing quickly picked up the rights.)

It isn't possible to know how Roth would have responded to the study, because he died three years before it appeared. My own guess is that he would not have been altogether approving. The editorial deficiencies of the text are one thing, the sexual details are another. I simply don't think Roth would have wanted to see them in print, and I wonder if Bailey felt freed by his subject's death to include as many as he did. Certainly the myriad young women Bailey interviewed felt few inhibitions in reporting details of their relations with Roth. What evidence we have on the subject of Roth's skittishness are the instructions he gave to Miller when he started the project. The subject was how Miller should present the yearslong affair Roth maintained with a married physical therapist, a woman to whom Bailey gives the pseudonym "Inga Larsen." Bailey has this to say about Roth's preferences:

As for the ticklish subject of his sex life: Roth suggested (another word belonging in quotes) that Miller might steer clear of the whole Inga Larsen can of worms, and concentrate instead on "philosophical" aspects—indeed, he insisted that Miller needed to write a discrete essay, prior to the biography, about the "meaning" of sex in Roth's life, devoid of any concrete

“instances,” which could wait until the biography per se.

In his discussion with Miller, Bailey quotes Roth as referring to the sex lives of other authors, including Henry Miller, D.H. Lawrence, and Collette. “Why shouldn’t I be treated as seriously as Collette on this?” he asked Miller. “She gave a blow job to this guy in a railway station. . .Why did she like that? It has a meaning!” That may all be true, but the “meaning” of Roth’s ravenous sexual appetite is never presented in Bailey’s book.

There is at least a second hint—perhaps more than just a hint—as to how Roth would feel about a biographer dissecting his sex life. The publisher Knopf obtained from Roth a blurb for the second volume of Zachary Leader’s biography of Bellow. Like Bailey, Leader does not go out of his way to emphasize the matter, but it is impossible to write a biography of either novelist without describing their sex lives at length. The subject figures too prominently in their lives and work to do otherwise. So Roth’s endorsement begins with oddly equivocal language. “As a friend of Saul,” he wrote, “and as an awestruck admirer of his astonishing work, I was not always at ease reading this painfully

intimate biography.” The encomium concludes with conventional laudatory language, but it suggests that Roth, had he lived a few years longer, might have read his own biography with considerable anxiety.

He himself anatomizes what might be called hysterical sexual need in *Sabbath's Theater*, and went so far as to tell Bailey that the central figure—Mickey Sabbath—was modeled on himself—“the nearest I’ve come in all of my fiction to drawing a realistic self-portrait,” in the words Bailey attributes to Roth. In my review, I chose not to take the claim too seriously, but it occurs to me now that Roth might have been offering his biographer an important clue. To the extent that it’s true, the “meaning” might be traced to a feeling of aliveness that can only be attained (for some) with sex. Still, the idea that a biography should be preceded by an essay that identifies “the meaning” of sex in the life of the subject seems to me odd, almost apologetic. It’s as though Roth did not want his sexual obsessiveness—which is what I think it was—dismissed as mere unconstrained appetite. But that is the way it appears in Bailey’s biography.

My interest in this piece has been to look at a few books that deal with commissioned biographies where the biographers were given editorial control over the book they produce. It sometimes escapes, not surprisingly, the control of the subject, who might not be pleased with the results of their biographer's research. For those who knew the subjects, in this case Bellow and Roth, the experience of reading a biography is distinctly odd. I was among those who knew Bellow as a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1980s, and attended the seminars he taught with Allan Bloom. I would drive down to Hyde Park, the South Side home of the university, and park on the Midway Plaisance, which was designed by Frederick Law Olmstead about a century before. I would walk over to the Social Science Research Building and make my way to our small, ground-floor seminar room. After a year, the university moved our class to the top of the five-story building one door to the east. That had been a women's dorm when Bellow was a student there in the 1930s.

A reader like myself (and there are surely others) has the experience of knowing only one aspect of the life of a person who is the

subject of a biography—in this case, the visible life Bellow was leading as an instructor when I knew him. (To a degree the same is true of Allan Bloom, an important figure in Bellow’s life and also in the *Leader* and *Atlas* biographies.) And then is the wider life Bellow maintained beyond the view of students. And I can’t disregard the telescoped outcome, of seeing Bellow (in the biographies) as a much older man, stricken with dementia, a greatly aged figure asking his fifth wife--my former classmate Janis Freedman, to add to the oddity—to place telephone calls to friends who had been dead for years and sometimes decades. It is as though I were back in the classroom on the edge of the campus, but also seeing the life that Bellow led beyond the classroom and, at the same time, the conclusion this life would have twenty years later. A deeply uncanny experience.

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