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Evaluating Biographies: Scurrilous or Scholarly, What’s A Librarian To Do?

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Film Star Biographies
One of the purposes of twentieth century biographies is to satisfy the curiosity of the general public regarding the private lives of film stars. Apparently, fans of the silver screen have always wanted to find information on Hollywood movie stars. Information on stars was first disseminated through movie trade publications, fan magazines, and eventually books, such as biographies.

America's fascination with the film colony led to the publication of many gossipy, scathing, and unauthorized biographies written about Hollywood actors and actresses. Three stars in particular, Jean Harlow, Greta Garbo, and Marilyn Monroe, all had scandalous biographies written about them. In 1964, Irving Shulman collaborated with Jean Harlow's agent, Arthur Landau, to write Harlow: An Intimate Biography, a scurrilous best-seller which portrayed Harlow as a "profane, promiscuous wretch whose kidneys were damaged by a wedding-night beating from her husband Paul Bern." Newsweek called the book, "A standard by which to measure shoddiness."

Like Jean Harlow, Greta Garbo also has had gossipy and unsubstantiated information written about her. In Barry Paris' Garbo: A Biography, the author chastises the exploitation of Garbo by Antoni Gronowicz, whose Garbo: Her Story was published just forty-five days after this film star died. When Gronowicz's book was published, it was disavowed by "every living person mentioned in it; the dead could not be reached for comment." Appendix A of Paris' book lists all of the factual mistakes, fabrications, and anachronisms contained in Gronowicz's biography.

A cottage industry has emerged based on the exploitation of Marilyn Monroe after her death in 1962. In his book, Marilyn Monroe: The Biography, Donald Spoto chronicles the events surrounding one of Monroe's strangest fans—Robert Slatzer. In 1974, Slatzer wrote a biography called The Life and Curious Death of Marilyn Monroe. He makes the outrageous claim that he spent the weekend of October 3 to 6, 1952 with Monroe in Tijuana, Mexico, where they were married on October 4. According to Slatzer, this marriage was annulled a few days later. Spoto states that not only was Monroe in Los Angeles during that entire weekend, but Slatzer also was never able to produce a written record of the union or its dissolution. Since the publication of The Life and Curious Death of Marilyn Monroe, there has not been one witness who has come forth to attest to the truth of his alleged marriage. Slatzer waited until Monroe was dead before he claimed that he had been married to her.

Unfortunately, Harlow, Garbo, and Monroe are just some of the film stars who have been exploited over the years by their biographers. Some biographers have greatly profited by writing biographies filled with gossipy, unsubstantiated information. One of the best known slasher biographers is Kitty Kelley, who has written unauthorized biographies about Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor, and Nancy Reagan. Joe Queenan, who reviewed Kelley's book about Reagan, called Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography, states that Kelley has written "one of the most explosively vicious books in the history of encyclopedic viciousness."

Steve Weinberg, in his article, "The Kitty Kelley Syndrome," writes that Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography is "symptomatic of publishing's dirty secret—few nonfiction books are checked for accuracy. Consequently, inaccuracies abound." Since trade publishers are in the business to turn a profit, hiring staff for the purpose of checking facts would cut into profits. Many readers are aware that the National Enquirer is an unreliable periodical, but they have no idea which book publishers are the industry's National Enquirer equivalents. In his article, "Speaking Ill of the Dead," James Atlas adds that "publishing houses, unlike most magazines, with their rigorous fact-checking procedures, make little effort to establish a book's factual accuracy." Weinberg asserts that if authors and publishers can't guarantee accuracy before publishing perhaps they should mimic the step taken by J. B. Lippincott, publisher of David Rurvik's In His Image: The Coming of Man. Lippincott provided readers with a warning:

The account that follows is an astonishing one. The author assures us it is true. We do not know. We believe simply that he has written a book which will stimulate interest and debate on issues of the utmost significance for our immediate future.

He adds that publishers are willing to assume that authors, not themselves, are responsible for finding facts, evaluating information, and drawing conclusions. Traditionally, the contractual burden for accuracy has primarily been the author's. However, authors are frequently unable to get everything accurate.

Atlas adds that
Legal indemnification clauses in authors' contracts vary; most publishers carry a standard insurance policy that protects them and their authors in case of a law suit. Biographies are read carefully by in-house lawyers for libel if the subject is alive (you can't libel the dead), but the final source of verification is the author.

Implications for Librarians
Most libraries add biographies to their collections on the basis of reviews in a few standard sources, such as Booklist, CHOICE, and Library Journal. In Living with Books, Helen Haines noted that "the profusion of biographies entails constantly more thorough sifting, more careful discrimination and comparison in current selection; for though work of high quality...may be found in rich abundance, there is also a mounting deposit of books that are trivial, shoddy, or superfluous.”

William Robinson, in his article “Adult Biographies Reviewed by Library Journal in the 1960s and the 1980s” insists that using published reviews helps in eliminating the published biographies that have been determined to be unreliable. Only those biographies that are reviewed are ones thought to be of general interest or likely in demand.

Ann W. Moore in, “A Question of Accuracy: Errors in Children’s Biographies,” remarks that
errors and inaccuracies in biographies seem to reflect a potentially dangerous attitude held by many authors, editors, and publishers: that it's OK to make mistakes, to be a little careless or sloppy; that it's OK to trust writers and researchers to the extent that their statements and sources are automatically accepted with no checking; that it's OK to rush books on topics of current interest through so quickly that the results are slipshod.

She points out that there are several alternatives for librarians to follow:

contact authors and publishers asking them to account for books that fail to measure up; demand more in-depth reviews that point out specific omissions and inaccuracies; refuse to purchase poorly written books, even if they are on a popular topic or would fill a gap in the collection. Instead, use magazine and newspaper articles, encyclopedias, and almanacs.

Authors and publishers know that there is a need for factual accuracy. Until librarians take a stand on this issue, publishers will not take the concerns seriously. Librarians can ensure that error-free books are purchased by setting higher standards and by analyzing, examining, critiquing and even discounting unreliable materials.

How can librarians combat the spread of misinformation that runs rampant in these salacious works? They certainly cannot be continued on page 51
For academic libraries, book selection is largely based on standard review sources, which would identify the scholarly biographies and filter out those with the inaccurate information. On the other hand, librarians in public libraries recognize that their patrons want libraries to purchase thoroughly researched biographies along with slasher biographies by such authors as Kitty Kelley because these titles are popular reading materials. If libraries refused to purchase the slasher biographies, based on the premise that these books contained unsubstantiated information, this practice would be considered censorship. Placing biographies in the catalog record or on the spine of the book designating these library materials as "unreliable" would also be a violation of the Library Bill of Rights.

Hopefully, reading book reviews and writing to the publishers about the lack of end notes, bibliographies, etc., are ways in which librarians can address this issue of combating unreliable biographies. In order to not censor materials in the library, the decision whether to read the trashy biography or the scholarly one ultimately rests with the patron. Librarians need to take a strong role in educating their patrons about biographies, either at the reference desk or with the reader’s advisory service. Librarians teach patrons how to evaluate Internet resources, why not teach them how to evaluate biographies?

What can librarians do to educate their patrons about evaluating biographies? I do not have any definitive solutions, but here are a few suggestions to ponder. Since readers must think about the issue of subjectivity, they should read several biographies of the same subject in order to gain multiple perspectives on the person’s life. To encourage this, librarians could create bibliographies of biographies of a particular individual that the library owns. Signs stating that some books contain more reliable information than others could be placed in the biography section of the library. These signs could refer patrons to the reference desk or the reader’s advisory desk where they could receive more information about the actual books. These are just a few suggestions that may assist in raising patrons’ awareness that some biographies are better researched than others.

Perhaps, evaluating and reading biographies would be easier if all biographers would heed the advice of Catherine Drinker Bowen who said, “in writing biography, fact and fiction shouldn’t be mixed. And if they are, the fiction parts should be printed in red ink, the fact parts in black ink.”