Telling the UNTOLD STORY

How Investigative Reporters Are Changing the Craft of Biography

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INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE
From Plutarch to Pathography

CHAPTER TWO
Up from the Newsroom

CHAPTER THREE
Inquiring Minds

CHAPTER FOUR
Telling the Untold Story of Armand Hammer

CHAPTER FIVE
Short-Form Biography: The Art of the Periodical Profile

CHAPTER SIX
The Promise and Peril of Investigative Biography

NOTES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INDEX
into the country inside his stomach began to leak. ("His last meal was worth $30,000 and it killed him.") She has done any number of stories about bodies being discovered in the bay by beachcombers or fishermen or University of Miami scientists doing marine research. ("It's kind of a nuisance when you plan your day to do research on the reef," fumed Professor Peter Glynn, of the university's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science.) Talking to Edna one day about murder cases they had worked on, a Metro-Dade homicide detective said, "In Dade County, there are no surprises left."

Edna would agree that surprises are harder to find in Dade County these days. Still, she finds them. Flipping through page after page of routine police logs, talking to her sources on the telephone, chatting with a homicide detective, she'll come across, say, a shopping-mall murder that might have been done against the background of a new kind of high-school gang, or a murderer who seemed to have been imprisoned with his victim for a time by a sophisticated burglar-gate system. Then, a look of concern still on her face, she'll say, "That's interesting as heck."

CHAPTER SIX

The Promise and Peril of Investigative Biography

These days, sensible investigative biographers write only about persons long dead. Those of us who write about the living or the recently deceased, especially the influential, famous or wealthy, increasingly do so at our peril.

Within the cottage industry of investigative biographers delving into the lives of the living, my experience—while unique in some ways—is all too common in its broad outlines. Armand Hammer—tycoon, philanthropist, citizen-diplomat, sometimes called the most powerful person in Los Angeles—used his influence to shut doors during the five years I researched his life. He told employees and acquaintances to keep away from me. He sued the federal government to stop the release of information to me. He pressured my U.S. and British publishers to kill the book. When that failed, he sued my British publisher and me in London. Only his death in December 1990 halted his unpleasant tactics.¹

A recent book about the craft is titled Biography as High Adventure. The title was apt when the book appeared in 1986, but it has taken on an unfortunate new meaning since then. Lately, the "adventure" too often is arduous—as the subjects of biographies take authors and publishers to court, as judges issue unprecedented restrictions, as custodians of records (including the federal government) withhold more information for longer periods, as subjects or their partisans withhold information, as well-meaning sources provide inaccurate accounts, as uninformedit or venal reviewers dash off hasty criticisms that undermine years of careful research, as biographers receive threats of bodily harm.²

Besides me, biographers of J. D. Salinger, Igor Stravinsky, L. Ron
Hubbard, Anne Sexton, Saul Bellow, Richard Wright, Sylvia Plath, John Connally, Henry Kissinger, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Walter Lippmann, John Lennon, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Howard Hughes, Malcolm X, Sam Shepard, Harry Chapin, John Belushi, J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra, Jacqueline Kennedy Onasis, John Gotti, Katharine Graham, Pete Rose, Martha Gellhorn, Robert Maxwell, H. Ross Perot, Johnny Carson, Jim Bakker, Gloria Steinem, Mikhail Gorbachev, Pablo Picasso, Barbara Walters, Roy Cohn, Lyndon LaRouche, Elton John, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Jack Kent Cooke, Diana Ross, and Lillian Hellman—to name only a small percentage—have come close to shipwrecking on the shoals of modern life-writing.

One result is that book publishers who prefer to shy away from controversy are deciding against contracting with authors for biographies that cry out to be done. Some publishers have watered down, withdrawn, or pulped biographies rather than fight an unhappy subject with deep pockets. This is not a parochial matter. The true losers are readers—and history.

Any discussion about the perils of contemporary biography has to start with the case of reclusive fiction writer J. D. Salinger. His successful attempt to suppress portions of an unauthorized biography changed the rules of the genre.

It happened like this: In 1983, Ian Hamilton, a British biographer, wrote Salinger of his intent to research his life. Salinger, who had not published since 1965 and had refused interview requests since 1953, not surprisingly refused to cooperate. At that point, Hamilton ran through the catalog of doubts besetting any unauthorized biographer with a conscience: “He wanted to be left alone. He’d kept his side of the bargain—by not publishing, by refusing all interviews, photographs and so on.... Didn’t he have the same right to privacy as you and I? Well, yes. But then again, not quite.”

Hamilton and Random House, his publisher, decided to proceed. Many contemporary biographies are unauthorized; in fact, many biographers and publishers believe such versions are more honest and salable than authorized versions in which the subject or the heirs exercise control. Hamilton’s previous experience as a biographer had been with an authorized life of Robert Lowell. The poet’s widow and still-living ex-wife were approving, as were his literary executors. But, Hamilton discovered, authorization “can be a narrow license. I had access, to be sure, to papers and to people. But papers that have not found their way into libraries (and some which have) can often be withheld, and people sometimes tell you lies. With Lowell, I found I almost had too much material—too many eyewitness accounts, too many items passed on to me in confidence, too many special interests.... For all that you enjoyed this magic-sounding right of access, you still had to be endlessly judging and rejudging limits of propriety. And to some extent you were always having to play one witness off against another. There were too many tightropes, too many injurable sensitivities, and later, when the book was done, too many denials and recriminations. Lowell had been loved by several people, but few of these people loved, or even liked each other. And yet all of them believed that their version of the man was the authentic one.”

Because of Salinger’s secretiveness, Hamilton, like other unauthorized biographers, had to be especially resourceful. He located previously unpublished letters written between 1939 and 1961 by Salinger to editors, friends, neighbors, and fellow authors. The recipients of those letters had over the decades donated their personal papers to Harvard University, Princeton University, and the University of Texas. Access to the letters was easy. Like any other researcher, Hamilton signed a form restricting publication of the letters without permission from the library and Salinger. At the time, he paid little attention to the restrictions: “I signed ... because otherwise I would not have been allowed to see the letters. At the back of my mind, though, I was skeptical about the legal weight of these enforced undertakings ... I suspected that in spite of all this bureaucracy it would still be possible for me to use some small amount of the material I’d come to study.”

Until recently, most biographers felt the same way, as I did when I located correspondence between Hammer and former U.S. senators who had donated their papers to New England College, Middle Tennessee State University, the University of Missouri, and the University of Arkansas. I read the legal boilerplate provided by the archivists, and I signed. I assumed that in the end I would be able to quote directly from the letters because everybody involved wanted an accurate, compelling biography.
Notes to Pages 100–144

Chapter Three: Inquiring Minds

Some of this chapter appeared, in different versions, in Washington Journalism Review (October 1990) and in Business Journalist (December 1990).

1. Many of the details and the conclusions in this chapter are drawn from repeated discussions and correspondence I had with Barlett and/or Steele during 1990.
2. The seven-part series appeared during December 1975 in the Philadelphia Inquirer. The entry form was submitted to the Business Journalism Awards at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.
3. Interviews with Barlett and Steele, February 1990.
4. Interview with Barlett and Steele, February 21, 1990.
5. Barlett’s letter to me, February 24, 1990, which is the source for the quotations in the balance of this section as well.
6. The Swedish translation was supplied by Torbjorn von Krogh, a Stockholm journalist; also interview of Barlett and Steele by Jerry Rosen, Business Journalist, June 1989.
8. Steele discussed the project at the June 1976 conference of Investigative Reporters & Editors in Indianapolis. I attended that conference and have relied on my notes as well as a transcript provided by IRE.
10. Ibid.

Chapter Four: Telling the Untold Story of Armand Hammer

An earlier version of this chapter appeared in the IRE Journal, published by Investigative Reporters & Editors Inc., Spring 1990.

1. I sent registered letters to Hammer and called him repeatedly. He never responded directly.
2. Some of the most helpful indexes to periodicals include Business Periodicals


3. To keep up with computer databases, I rely on mailings from specific vendors such as Dialog and Nexis. I also read Online Access magazine. To find industry-specific publications, I rely on the Standard Periodical Directory and the Oxbridge Directory of Newsletters, both available from Oxbridge Communications, as well as various directories published by Gale Research.


Chapter Five: Short-Form Biography

5. Walt Harrington’s profiles have been collected in American Profiles: Somebodies and Nobodies Who Matter. Madeleine Blais has an anthology, too: The Heart Is an Instrument: Portraits in Journalism.

Chapter Six: The Promise and Peril of Investigative Biography

1. See Chapter Four of this book. The lawsuit was in the High Court of Justice, Queen’s Bench Division, Case 1989–3292. It ended when Hammer died December 10, 1990.
2. Biography as High Adventure, ed. Oates.
3. Concerning the long list of other biographers in peril, in each case I have read the book or manuscript, located as much coverage as possible, studied court cases when relevant, and conducted interviews with biographers and/or agents and/or editors and/or attorneys.
4. Ian Hamilton, In Search of J. D. Salinger.