

# Understanding Biographies

On Biographies in History  
and Stories in Biography



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*Translated from the Danish by Gaye Kynoch*

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# Preface

Biographies fly off the shelves; many will happily be swallowed whole. There are nevertheless those who despise the genre. The history of the biography is as long as that of the world's supposedly oldest profession, and as writers, critics and readers our attitude to biographies is much the same as our attitude to courtesans: we view them with curiosity, attracted and repelled, but we have very little desire to get any closer. All the same, biographies are omnipresent in the modern world, and we simply cannot avoid their gaze or look the other way. The last twenty to thirty years in particular have seen a biographical renaissance. The book trade, the entertainment industry and the electronic media are overflowing with biographies. So there they are – and so we have to discuss them and understand them. However, even though each biography is different to the next, we treat them as if they were the same – we even speak of the biography as a genre.

The biography is indeed a genre, one spanning a number of radically different types of life-storytelling. Biography can be defined as a genre, a narrative form and an analytic field, but it cannot be dealt with in the singular if we are to reach an understanding of what is actually at work between the book covers. The biographies we pick up are like bars of soap slipping through our fingers. Albeit they share the intention of telling the story of a character, they do so in completely different ways within the overall genre. How should a biography be 'read'? Is it the story of someone else? Is it a fictional oil painting or is it a documentary pencil sketch? Is it a picture of the period or is it a study of the personality? Is it a psychological interpretation of human character traits or is it an analysis of a famous person from the past and his or her historical significance? Generally speaking, a biography does not come down to just the one or the other – it can well embrace a little of everything. We think we can pin it down, but we

are loath to define it. Often not even the biographer has specified the type of book that he or she is in the process of writing, or the style in which they are writing the life to be disclosed.

*Understanding Biographies* reasons that biography can be defined in quite straightforward terms, while being a genre full of diversity. There is not just the one, but many ways in which to approach it – and these approaches can be mapped out. Journalists, authors and academics who embark upon writing a biography will quickly discover that the skill required is more complex than might first be thought. They will also realise that the art of writing biography is not a simple and straightforward one, because the task poses more questions than it answers: What is the specific relevance of this specific person that warrants the writing of their biography? Who would find it significant, and why? How shall this life be told? Upon which sources will it be constructed in order to form an authentic narrative?

*Understanding Biographies* is a book about how to search for the answers to such questions. It does not provide a simple answer, because there are numerous ways to work within a genre that is varied, has a long and wide-ranging tradition around the world, is governed by a number of conventions and accomplished in various narrative styles. We devour biographies about all manner of famous people, and yet we are still left with a somewhat vague idea about the genre as such – because as readers we are not sure whether we are judging the biography, assessing the biographer, evaluating the style and form, or passing judgement on the life of the central character.

*Understanding Biographies* provides guidelines to an understanding of the field, guidelines that can be consulted by biographers, readers and reviewers. It shows how we can construe the biography both in a straightforward and in a nuanced way, as a genre and as an analytic field spanning various quite specific approaches. The book tells the story of why the biography is an ancient genre with a gender imbalance – a disproportion the genre has recently tried to re-balance – and how that state of affairs came about. It tells how the genre has its own history and its own well-tried archetypes. The book argues that biographies take



shape according to the person being portrayed, the material used to tell their story, the questions the biographer poses of this material, and the theories applied to the task. *Understanding Biographies* discusses examples of successful as well as less successful biographies, and lays out the critical tools we can use to evaluate a biography. It is not, however, a cookery book with just the one recipe for 'how to write a biography'.

The aim of *Understanding Biographies* is to uncover the essence of biography. Biography should be seen as an important component of our cultural heritage and history, and as a genre it has its own history, critique and ethics – but this total package seems to be something of an enigma, and I shall remove some of the wrapping. There is both a general and a professionally specific perspective to this. Seen in a broad perspective, we have a market abounding in biographies, which readers devour and the media love; seen in a specific professional perspective, however, reviewers and academics still show some disinclination for the genre and might therefore adopt a somewhat patronising attitude. This paradox has sent the biographical genre into a strange disputed theoretical territory. Is biography not a genre? Indeed it is; a genre that can be defined in its own right, and one that differs from the autobiography, the conversation book, the memoir and the novel. This is the contention of *Understanding Biographies*, and I shall therefore concentrate on biography, leaving aside autobiography, memoir and fictionalised biography. I see interest in biography as an element of democratisation in a globalised community. By means of biography we give increasing numbers of individuals a place in history, a voice, visibility and a contemporary response, which can in turn make us think about what we as individuals can contribute to, learn from, live with or change in the culture of which we are a part. The biographical renaissance is completely in keeping with the individualising zeitgeist we have lived with since the recent millennial shift, and it is a logical consequence of the late-twentieth-century collapse of the grand ideologies. Through biographies we take our bearings in the specific human life and longing, success or failure, visions, dreams and hopes. We should therefore also give biography its due respect by defining

and analysing the historical biography as genre and by presenting some devices by means of which to understand its gender, archetypes, narrative traditions, critique and ethics.

*Understanding Biographies* identifies the traditions that have long been applied in international writing and reading of biography, and reflects on the rethinking of biographies during the last thirty years.

In 2015, I wrote *Ind i biografien*, a book in Danish presenting the international genre of 'biography' to Scandinavian scholars and general readers. *Understanding Biographies* is a revised and translated version of that work – and through it and with the ideas presented here, I wish to express my gratitude to colleagues, friends and biographers from many countries for the inspiration they have offered me over the years.