

BIOGRAPHER'S CLUB TALK:

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Julie Wheelwright

Where the truth lies: An Exploration of the Challenges Biographers and Historians face writing in an unstable genre.'

I'd like to begin by stating that there isn't a definitive answer to the question of my talk but I wanted to raise it because I would really welcome a discussion about what I hope I've identified as a common problem for biographers.

We live in an age when 'truth' in publishing seems to have become an increasingly suspect commodity if the number of recent scandals is anything to go by. In the past three months publishers have been left reeling from memoirs, travel books and histories exposed as fakes and sadly, purporting facts that might easily be checked.

In early March, Margaret B. Jones, the author of 'Love and Consequences' a memoir about an American girl who was taken from her family at the age of five and shuttled between foster homes before she became a gang member in South-Central LA, was exposed as a fake. Jack Begg at the New York Times, discovered that no such person as Margaret B. Jones lived in Eugene, Oregon, as she claimed. Soon her sister was on the phone, blowing Margaret's cover completely.

The previous week Misha Defonesca, aka Monique De Wael, made a public confession that her best-selling book, *Mischa: A Memoire of the Holocaust Years*, owed more to fiction than fact. *Mischa* purported to tell the story of a Jewish girl from Brussels who had walked across Europe during the Second World War. She had even lived in the forest with wolves and murdered a Nazi rapist en route. Published ten years ago despite warnings about its authenticity from scholars Deborah Dwork and Lawrence Langer, the book was made into a feature film, an opera and translated into 18 languages.

In fact, De Wael had been orphaned after her Catholic parents -- members of the Belgian resistance -- were killed by the Gestapo. As she told a press conference, 'the story of Misha, is not actual reality, but was my reality, my way of surviving.'

Even the relatively gentle art of travel writing has recently come under fire with Lonely Planet author Thomas Kohnstamm outing himself last week in his confessional book, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?* Kohnstamm admitted that he'd done a 'mosaic job' in researching his books, relying on the internet and a Colombian girlfriend rather than visiting the country himself. He protested that since he wasn't paid enough and the brief was far too ambitious he had cut corners just as all travel writers do.

The irony for many of these writers is that painful public exposure doesn't necessarily spell the end of their career. Kohnstamm has now made headlines in The New York Times and appeared on CNN and the BBC. Next month James Frey whose memoir *A Million Little Pieces* was exposed on Oprah Winfrey, will publish his novel *Bright Shiny Morning* with Harper and is scheduled to do an eight-city book tour.

Memoir might be a guide to changes in our own field, since it borrows from the conventions of history and biography. The reason I'd chosen to talk about the subject of untruths is that I think we face share some of the pressures that might lead a memoir writer to tweak, modify and downright lie for the sake of their story just as Truman Capote and other writers of the nonfiction novel have done in the past..

We live in an age where authors of factual books must play a sleight of hand. There is a publishing imperative to construct both a narrative for our subjects and to produce a wealth of detail that can force us into a Faustian bargain with De Wael's 'not actual reality'. There is a paradox that at a time when so much more information is accessible through on-line archives, journal articles and data bases, there is less value placed on how that information is processed and analysed. As Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizing*, describes it, 'We are all generating more media than we can consume . . . the cloud of metadata that we are all leaving behind is overwhelming.'

So where in this wilderness of data and demand for storytelling lies the truth for the biographer and the reader?

Historian Jill Lepore recently explored this problem in *The New Yorker* where she argued that, 'History matters but the best novels boast a kind of truth that even the best history books can never claim.' Furthermore, historians and novelists are kin, she says, but they're more like brothers who throw food at each other than like sisters who borrow each other's clothes.' According to Lepore, in the eighteenth century when both the genres of empirical history and the novel saw their debut, their purposes were antithetical. Novels were read (largely by women) for 'truth' and history books (read largely by men), for the 'fiction' of great, usually male, lives.

But Lepore argues that 'historians and critics, readers and writers, haven't given up on truth.' In fact, since the 1970s we've acknowledged the fact that every historical work is incomplete, every biography is written from a particular perspective and we rely on unreliable documents, written by people who were not under oath and cannot be cross-examined. As Simon Sharma writes in *Dead Certainties*, 'historians are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness, however thorough or revealing their documentation.'

Lepore seems to suggest that more than ever before we need the kind of critical thinking and bedrock of research that is at odds with what Lance Morrow calls our world of 'insatiable electronic storytelling [where] real history procreates, endlessly conjuring new versions of itself.' Public life, he adds, 'has become a metaphysical breeder of fictions.'

I'd now like to cite myself in this problem of attempting to satisfy the demands of narrative and truth telling in this shadowy world of biography. Among our ghosts these days is the sceptre of the capricious sacrificing of historical truth for the sake of drama, colour and story that might tip the balance until fiction. The irony is that while 'metadata' makes the historical project more possible than ever it may have given readers/publishers unrealistic expectations about our ability to reconstruct the past.

FIRST I'd like to tell you briefly about the subject of my current book, Esther Wheelwright. Esther (I'm related to her through her elder brother) was taken captive in a raid by French officers and Wabanaki warriors on Wells Maine on 7 August, 1703. The daughter of a prominent Puritan English family, she lived with her captors as an adopted daughter, was converted to Catholicism and within a year was completely assimilated into Wabanakis culture. Five years after the raid her ransom (probably a birch bark roof or an Indian boy who had been taken captive by the English) was negotiated by the Jesuit Superior in New France, Father Vincent Bigot. In 1708 Esther was sent to live with the governor of New France, the Marquis de Vaudreuil and educated at the prestigious Ursuline school. After only 18 months she decided to take her vows as a nun, against her parents wishes and in 1713, just before the Treaty of Utrecht ended the Seven years' War, her noviciate was shortened by an unprecedented 18 months. In 1759, after British forces defeated the French in Quebec, she was elected as Mother Superior and served an unprecedented three terms before her death in 1780.

In my research I encountered problems that will be familiar to any eighteenth century historian. While there were surprisingly good sources for Esther's early life including eye witness accounts of the raid on Wells, good sources for the Wheelwright family in New England and later the wonderful Ursuline archives, there were very big archival holes indeed. Although Esther lived at a Jesuit mission with the Wabanakis and Father Bigot wrote a potted biography of her time with the 'savages', the Indians left no written record. There was also precious little written by Esther herself except for a wealth of letters and administrative documents from her three terms as Mother Superior.

So in my attempt to turn this story into a narrative history, I based every event in Esther's life on the source material at my disposal. I also undertook what Antonia Fraser calls 'optical research' visiting Wells, journeying north to Norridgewock, up the Kennebec to the St. Lawrence and to Quebec. For the Wabanakis I drew on hundreds of anthropological accounts, other captive accounts, government records, the Jesuit Relations and visited the Wabanaki reserve in Quebec. En route I also presented a programme about Esther for BBC Radio Four and a television documentary for a Canadian broadcaster.

My attempt at using that sleight-of-hand I mentioned earlier was to indicate with words like 'perhaps', 'might have', 'maybe' where I was speculating. I was attempting to satisfy my job as historian, what Shama calls, 'offering an authorised view of events, to tell you that this is the way it really was,' without telling untruths. But my editor has taken issue with this and put a line through these speculative phrases; he worries that such admissions might lead a reader question to my authorial role as an expert.

My conundrum is that if I claim to know exactly what happened to Esther Wheelwright at moments crucial to the narrative but are based on sketchy evidence, then what sort of story am I telling? But if I present only those 'facts' that are absolutely verifiable, Esther's story would stretch to not much more than an article.

So how then to find the middle ground without giving up on the historical truth?

My attempt at resolving this problem has been to look for clues in the huge amount of contextual material that surrounds her including the gifts that Esther exchanged with her New England family over the years; a careful reading of the Ursuline's institutional history illuminate Esther's role within their community. I am also re-reading contextual material to understand the shifting worlds of three separate peoples who all made up her family; the English Puritan colonists, the Wabanakis converts and the French Ursulines.

This summer I'm going to take one last trip to Quebec and New England, this time as a journalist, taking notes on the landscape, interview the remaining Wabanakis on the reserve in Quebec and, I hope, the nuns in the Ursuline convent due to close. I hope to find through their oral history a better sense of the daily life of a *soeur converse* which hasn't changed radically since the eighteenth century. In other words, I'll attempt to inhabit her skin.

Despite these efforts and my confidence that Esther, as a character in what is so blatantly my story with my own personal history attached to it as her indirect descendent, I feel a sense of disquiet. The problem of 'perhaps' lingers and the mystery of Esther's life cannot possibly be fully revealed. I feel strongly that I should be honest about this with my readers. Her life is, in many senses, beyond reconstruction. I am aware that it is only my power of imagination and my empathy with her poignant story that will bring it to life. Esther is there, but she's not there. She remains hidden and that, for me, is part of her great attraction.

I'd like to end with the thoughts of biographer Anne Wroe who described how she faced the challenge of researching Perkin's life by 'float[ing] around the personality, real or perceived . . . The human soul is an extraordinarily elusive thing. People hide themselves, even when they appear to be laying their hearts bare.'

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