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## The Biographer's Craft: Writers discuss the art of capturing lives with words

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# The Biographer's Craft

*Writers Discuss the Art of*

*Capturing Lives with Words*

A few years ago Gregory White Smith '71 was looking around for a new book project. Smith had seen tremendous success with the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, which he wrote with Steven Naifeh.

In the early planning stages of a book about Vincent Van Gogh, Smith and Naifeh checked out possible sources listed in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. "At the end of the article there's a little section called bibliography," Smith said, "and the first sentence of the bibliography was, 'There is no definitive biography of Vincent Van Gogh.' Even with six thousand books written on him."

For biographers, that statement was, in Smith's words, "red meat."

The authors are now five years into their Van Gogh project, which is to be published by Random House in 2009. It's a monumental task, especially given the standard that the best biographers set for themselves: to go far beyond a recitation of facts or a rehashing of what is already known. Smith says one can make a strong case that biography is "the highest form of nonfiction."

*By Frank Bures*  
*Illustration by Dave Curd*

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“I really do believe that it’s as good a look inside the black box that is consciousness and human existence as anything can give us,” he said. “Fiction can do it for the same reason. Fiction allows us to get into somebody’s consciousness. And a good biography should succeed in the same way good fiction does. It allows us to live that person’s life through them, as well as to understand the dates and the importance and that sort of thing.

“There’s nothing like biography to get to the heart of what it is to be human.”

Writing biography requires discipline, organization, and the ability to understand both a person and a time period, Colby biographers say. Doris Kearns Goodwin ’64, best-selling and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and biographer, notes that it’s also essential to choose the right subject.

“When you’re spending as much time with your subject as I do, you’ve got to like him,” said Goodwin, whose last book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, took 10 years to research and write. “You’ve got to want to wake up with him in the morning. I could never write about Hitler or Stalin. Somebody else might write a fantastic biography about them. But I have to feel like I want to live with that person for that long time that it usually takes me.”

Goodwin’s first subject picked her.

It was the spring of 1967 when a young Doris Kearns went to the White House for a ball for newly selected White House fellows. Later in the night, Goodwin stepped onto the dance

floor with President Lyndon Baines Johnson. As he spun her around, she didn’t yet know that he was spinning her into his life, reeling her in. She had no idea that his life would determine much of hers.

After Johnson left the White House and went back to his ranch, he badgered Goodwin to come to Texas and help him with the first installment of his memoirs. Reluctant at first, ultimately she spent many hours at the Johnson ranch, listening to tales of LBJ’s youth and his years in the Senate. “He just talked endlessly,” Goodwin said.

Johnson died in 1973, before he got a chance to write a word of the second or third installment of his memoirs. But Goodwin, who had gotten deeper and deeper into his life, would rescue those details for posterity. She took the things he’d told her and put them together for the story of Johnson’s life, the first of many lives she has recounted.

“It was really that experience of working with Lyndon Johnson,” Goodwin said, “and having him talk to me in a way that he probably wouldn’t have at the height of his power, that made me think about writing about him. And after writing about him it became something where you begin to feel you’re learning a craft. And that sent me into the presidential biography field.”

Whether the subject is as prominent as a president or as obscure as a Civil War soldier, writing a person’s life is a task biographers don’t take lightly. “To be the first person to talk about someone in any significant way means you really have a lot of



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Elizabeth Leonard (history)

responsibility," said Elizabeth Leonard, the John J. and Cornelia V. Gibson Professor of History. Leonard is the author of *Yankee Women*, about three women whose lives were changed by the Civil War, and *Lincoln's Avenger*, about, among others, Joseph Holt, the investigator and prosecutor of Lincoln's assassins.

"I'm now the Joseph Holt person," Leonard said. "I'm one of the few people who's gone into any depth in studying his life."

Leonard set out to not only use Holt—a passionate abolitionist who came from a family that once owned slaves and *bête noire* of President Andrew Johnson—as a window into the time, but to try to portray him thoughtfully and fairly.

"I'm always interested in people who I feel a kind of connection with," said Leonard. "You have to have that sense of wanting to know more to pursue the question and to dig around. You have to be sort of voyeuristic, I guess. You have to want to dig around in somebody else's life."

That attraction, however, makes her more aware of the need for neutrality. "The flip side of this thing that draws you to them," she said, "is this need to remain somehow detached and try to understand them for who they are in their context. I tend to work on people who are at least a hundred and fifty years before my time. That allows you some distance, but you have to remember that they lived in a different time."

Jonathan Weiss, NEH/Class of 1940 Distinguished Professor of Humanities and a biographer, has found that writing about people who are alive (or whose relatives are alive) has its own challenges. Last year Weiss published the first biography of French writer Irène Némirovsky.

"She was a pretty much unknown author when I started working on this," Weiss said. "What happened was a friend gave me one of her novels, and I read it and was really interested in the novel—it was pretty interesting. Then I read a book by one of her daughters who had survived the war, about her mother. So I called the

daughter and she and I talked, and I became close to her. And she said, 'You really ought to write a biography of her.'"

At about the time he finished the book, one of Némirovsky's unfinished manuscripts won the 2004 *Prix Renaudot*, making her a posthumous literary star. And her daughter was unhappy with Weiss's conclusions about her now-famous mother. "When you're trying to figure out why a person is the way they are," Weiss said, "you find, or I found, some things that were very depressing. For example, she was very close to the right wing at a time when that was probably not the thing to do."

That was one of several facts the daughter didn't want included.

"It's one thing to do a biography of someone who's dead and with no relatives around," Weiss said. "But if you're doing a biography of someone who died recently, and whose relatives are still there and who have a point of view, it's a little tougher. You're dealing with them all the time. They're helping you and giving you all the information they can. But what if your conclusions are not pleasing to them? That's what I had to deal with. I didn't expect that when I started. I suspected it would be real easy. But that's the way it is. As a writer and a historian myself, I have to call it the way I see it."

Aram Goudsouzian '94 found something similar when he wrote *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon*, first as his dissertation, then as a book that looks at the actor's career and life in light of the civil rights struggles that raged while Poitier graced the screen.

Goudsouzian, a history professor at the University of Memphis now working on a biography of Boston Celtics basketball star Bill Russell, says you can tell a lot about cultural attitudes toward race by looking at Poitier's career in the context of larger events in the 1950s and '60s. "Hollywood sort of creates this character of Poitier as this perfect, middle-class, kind-to-whites, sexually restrained, deferential, polished, intelligent, accomplished character," Goudsouzian said. "And that was sort of the only way they could deal with black people in [that] generation."

# *“The heart of a great biography is really to bring a person era, so that the reader feels*

Digging around, Goudsouzian uncovered back stories for Poitier’s characters that read like ridiculous racial caricatures and symbols. In the film *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, Poitier’s character had a grandfather who was a slave but loved his owner so much that he took his name, for example.

“It’s just very old-fashioned racial politics that played into it, in a way that you sort of read into it on screen, because it is a very old-fashioned portrayal of what white liberals wanted a black person to be. But just to get the concrete evidence of that is really fascinating.”

The problem is that we seldom see ourselves as others do, or as the world does, or, even more rarely, as history will. “I wouldn’t say I paint a negative portrayal of him,” Goudsouzian said, “but it’s not the image that he portrays of himself—the barrier breaker, the man of great morals and all that. Which he is. I don’t dispute anything he says about himself. I just think it’s more complicated than he lets on.”

“I interviewed him over the telephone a number of times,” Goudsouzian said. “Relatively short interviews. I didn’t need that much from him, since he’d written two autobiographies, and it wasn’t that much about his personal life. It was more about his life in Hollywood and the reactions to his films. But whenever I could get him on the phone he was very generous with his time and very generous with trying to answer my questions.”

That changed when Poitier saw

what Goudsouzian’s dissertation had concluded about the actor’s life. “After I wrote the dissertation, he’d asked me to send it to him. And in between dissertation and book, I was making a trip out to L.A. and I tried to arrange an interview with him, hoping the dissertation would help me get bigger access. But no dice. I could never get him on the phone again,” Goudsouzian said.

Committing to paper someone’s life can take a good chunk of your own. Goodwin’s book *Team of Rivals*, winner of the 2006 Lincoln Prize for History, took a decade. *No Ordinary Time*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, took six years. Leonard’s books take her around six years to research and write, with many 12-hour days spent along the way.

For *Pollock*, Smith’s and Naifeh’s research consisted for the most part of interviews, documented on 25,000 index cards spread out on their living room floor. But with the massive amount of material available on Van Gogh, they worked with a software developer to design a program that helps them track, organize, and outline the more than 100,000 virtual index cards they’ve created so far. “We work very long days,” Smith said.

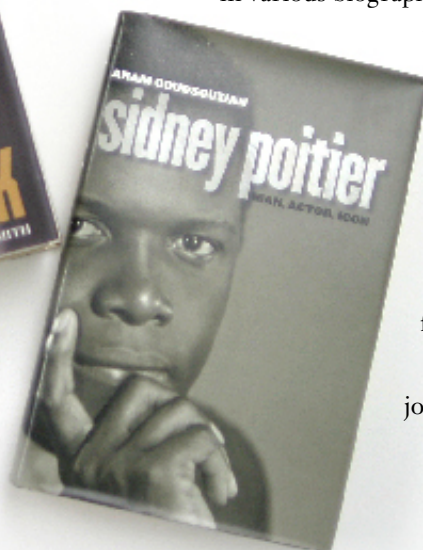
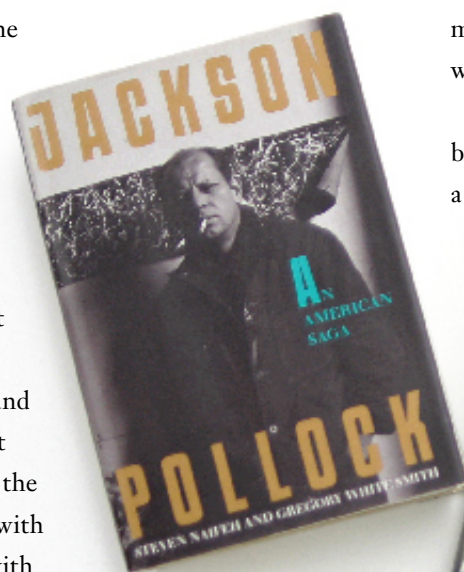
Alan Taylor ’77, L.H.D. ’97 is the author of one biographical book, *William Cooper’s Town*, and several works of history, including a new book, *The Divided Ground* (see review, P. 38), which weaves

in various biographical strains. For him, much

time is spent trying to fill in the holes in his subjects’ lives.

“My research is eclectic and tries to be thorough,” he said, “which usually means getting beyond published materials into handwritten documents found in archives.”

Letters, diaries, travel journals, store accounts, court



# *to life again for a reader in another almost like they've gone on a journey back into time. . ."*

Doris Kearns Goodwin '64

proceedings and depositions, probate inventories—Taylor said he looks for “anything that will provide insight into the lives I hope to reconstruct.”

It's crucial that the documents exist, Colby biographers say. “Find an interesting character and good archival base to work with,” Leonard advises anyone thinking of doing biography. “It's so crucial to have the papers.”

For her latest book, in addition to reading hundreds of books on Lincoln, Goodwin hit the archival jackpot and spent years looking through documents she found in libraries in New York, Ohio, Philadelphia, and Virginia, and in the Library of Congress.

“The sources that I so loved in the Lincoln story,” said Goodwin, “were these letters that the cabinet members were writing to their families or to each other or their diary entries.” The letters gave her surprisingly complete pictures of what happened on specific days and in specific meetings.

“For an historian it is the best possible source,” she said “You wonder if anyone would have time today. I mean here they are running the Civil War during the day and they come home and write eight-page letters to their wives and children.”

Sometimes, as Weiss found, there aren't enough documents, so you have to look elsewhere.

“In the case of Irène Némirovsky,” he said, “the documentation that I could find was really insufficient to give me a full picture of who she was, because a lot of it was destroyed in the war. So I turned to her literary work as a way to look into her mind.”

And that, he feels, is the point of biography.

“I think the goal of a biography,” Weiss said, “is to ask the important questions of a person's life. What made them tick? What inspired them to write if they're an author? I think [the goal] is also to ask the hard questions. Why did [Némirovsky] not leave France when she could have and escape persecution? Why did she love France so much? . . . For me that's what the biography was about:

Trying to figure out why a person acts the way they do.”

Goudsouzian agrees. “I think the best biographies give you a real sense that you know the person,” he said, “but at the same time, it really is more about painting the era around them and how they shape it and how they reflect it. Finding that right balance between the human being and his times. To me that's what marks the best biographies.”

Once, Lyndon Johnson called Goodwin and complained that Carl Sandburg's book about Lincoln just didn't bring the man alive. He worried that if a writer like Sandburg couldn't bring a great man like Lincoln to life, there was no hope that anyone would ever truly remember *him*.

What Johnson didn't know was that he was talking to the woman who would prove able to do that, not only for Johnson, but for Lincoln as well. His words must have hit home, because even today that's what Goodwin feels is the first task of the biographer.

“The heart of a great biography,” Goodwin said, “is really to bring a person to life again for a reader in another era, so that the reader feels almost like they've gone on a journey back into time and are walking side by side with the subject, so they understand both the era in which the subject lived and the strengths and weaknesses of the character and the people around them.”

After her dance with LBJ, and her dance through his life in *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, Goodwin kept to the path of writing lives. Next she tackled America's royalty in *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, then Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt in *No Ordinary Time*, and most recently Lincoln.

She's found wisdom in those lives and times.

“When you live closely with a subject,” Goodwin said, “it does make you think about what were their strengths, what were their weaknesses, and how does that have echoes in the present, if you're looking at the present leadership. Or even at your own life.”