

Debby Applegate
Independent Biographer

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“An Irreverent Art”? Two Pulitzer Prize-Winners Talk about Biography

Abstract: Debby Applegate and John Matteson, winners of the Pulitzer Prize in Biography in the consecutive years 2007 and 2008, both agree and disagree about the methods, aims, and ethical philosophy of biographical writing. Here, they converse about the negative stereotypes that biographers must overcome; the researching process; the moral nature of humanity; the relative value to the biographer of sympathy and cynicism; and much more.

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John Matteson: I think one of the allures of fiction writing as opposed to biography is that novelists get to create worlds of imagination and shape them however they choose. They get to invent people and places and even use unreliable narrators. As biographers, we also construct worlds, but always within set realms of fact and with a self-conscious need to be reliable.

Debby Applegate: I would say that one of the allures of biography for me is precisely that I don't have to do the intimidating work of making up a world and a story from scratch. Suffering writer's block for a novelist must be terrifying! At least when I feel stymied, I can return to the "facts" and let them stir up my thoughts and stimulate my imagination. That's the game of the biographer and the historian: you are given the game pieces, or more commonly you go out and hunt for the game pieces, and then have to figure out how to build the sturdiest structure you can from what you've found. That's a far more manageable challenge to my mind than the miracle of total invention.

Matteson: You raise an interesting point about biographers and inspiration. I wouldn't be at all surprised if there are people out there who presume that biographers don't *need* inspiration. From the outside, it probably looks like an easy task to gather the facts and string them together. But the truth of it is that we are

storytellers, even if the hard specifics of our stories are determined by a factual record. Interpretation plays a huge role, and so does rhetoric. For instance, Martha Saxton and I have both written lives of Louisa May Alcott, and we understand her very differently. And our Bronson Alcotts are from different planets!

Of course, biographers spend a lot of time paging through old books and archives, figuring out the who, what, and where. But it seems to me that our task comes to life only later, when we are reviewing the material, deducing motives, and creating the narrative. I'm like you in that I stand in awe of novelists who perform "the miracle of total invention." But I like to think that there's a lesser kind of miracle in what we do as well – taking those letters and journals and using them to restore life to the hearts and minds that produced them. It's as close as we ever get to the miracle of "the word made flesh."

You mentioned that you turn to the facts in order to stir up your thinking. How does that process work for you?

Applegate: "The word made flesh" – What a glorious way to capture the art of biography and a great riposte to those who think of biographers as vultures who feed on the remains of other people's private lives. Of course, I agree with you that the true magic comes in resurrecting the carrion into a living, breathing being. I work very hard at that, especially because I have chosen odd and long-forgotten subjects who don't have an automatic audience.

But for me the joy of being a biographer is all in the research, in the hunt through archives, attics, old newspapers, and fading memories to gather the bones and relics. The excitement and suspense of following hunches and making connections and spinning out big ideas from small details, that's the part that keeps me in this crazy profession. I consider writing to be the unfortunate price I have to pay for the privilege of playing Peeping Tom.

So, when I write I try to recreate the feeling of suspense that I felt during the hunt, that feeling of constant curiosity and the satisfaction of pursuing clues, sometimes into paradoxes and blind alleys, but just as often into grand vistas and touching scenes. I follow an axiom suggested by the English writer and composer, Anthony Burgess, who observed that, "A character, to be acceptable as more than a chess piece, has to be ignorant of the future, unsure about the past, and not at all sure of what he's supposed to be doing." I try to strategically withhold and reveal the facts I've gathered to give the illusion the action is happening in the present tense. In the same way, I try to orient the arc of each section around an implied question, to keep the reader's mind in curiosity mode.

As for practical advice about how to use your portfolio of facts to inspire the writing, I am fanatical about compiling detailed chronologies. Virtually every single note I take, on every single aspect, is layered into the chronology – broad

historical context, personal details, public career points, secondary character plots, theoretical observations. That way, when I'm stumped or unsure, I can look and see what is happening across the board at the specific point in the plot where I am stymied. It's amazing, the interpretive connections you can make when you look through the lens of chronological coincidence.

Matteson: You raise so many important points! I would say first off that the greater joy I find in my work is in the writing, not the research. It's true that I can get engrossed in the digging, and perhaps nothing matches the delight of finding a new fact that transforms our knowledge of a subject. But often, when I'm in a library or archive, absorbing the information, I find I can't wait to get back to writing. I get so eager to dive into the act of creating, and when I feel that I have gotten a paragraph just right, I'm on top of the world.

As to the trope of biographer as literary vulture, I remember being truly shocked when I first read Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman*, which had so many critical things to say about the biographer as voyeur, rummaging drawers and peeping through keyholes. It seemed to me that some of that condemnation came from the fact that she was writing about Sylvia Plath, who always seems to inspire some rather sensationalized reactions. To judge from what you just said, though, you seem to relish somewhat the role of Peeping Tom. I have to say, that position makes me uncomfortable. Contrary to Malcolm's assumptions, I tend mostly to write about people I admire, and I want to hold them up for other people's admiration as well. I don't intentionally sugarcoat, but at the same time, I want to influence readers to understand my subjects' shortcomings, not to condemn or gossip about them. I am drawn to the task of making failure sympathetic and comprehensible.

That negative view of the biographer never fails to surprise me, in part because so few of the biographers I've known express any disrespect at all for their subjects. I've met one or two raging egotists who do what we do, but for the most part I find that biographers are a pretty humble bunch. I think we have to be. I've already made one Biblical allusion, but here goes another one: John the Baptist said about Jesus, "For him to become greater, I must become lesser." And I think a biographer should operate somewhat the same way. We need to accept that readers usually don't, at least initially, come to read our prose. They come because they are curious about our subjects. So I feel that we tend to do best when we slide into that background and remember who's the real star of the show.

But there's this other question about what to do when one's subject does have a salacious or otherwise less than admirable side. I'm thinking of the subject of your great first book, Henry Ward Beecher, a prominent man of God whose legacy is deeply tinted by a very spicy sex scandal. Given that the work we do is always

about interpretation and never simply about telling it like it is, what was your thinking when you decided how to address Beecher's rather spectacular infidelities? For instance, do you ever feel protective of him, or maybe enraged by him?

Applegate: Did I ever feel outraged or protective when writing about Henry Ward Beecher, a celebrity minister who was both famously lovable and sexually inappropriate? You bet! But surprisingly rarely. I approach biography-writing – and the rest of life that matter – with a jaundiced view of human nature that tempers strong responses like those. Humans strike me as poorly designed, at best, riddled with weaknesses, contradictions, and amoral impulses. So I'm usually nonplussed when they behave badly and I'm delighted any time my characters defy those expectations.

(I should add that while I don't think much of human nature, I really enjoy actual people. The problem with following the solitary career of a biographer is that I spend all my time thinking about human nature, but almost no time with actual people.)

Of those two responses – outrage and protectiveness – protectiveness seems the more dangerous to a biographer. I regret the one time I consciously succumbed to it when writing my first book. It was a brief, passage describing how Herman Melville used Henry Ward Beecher as the model for the character Frank Goodman in his novel *The Confidence Man*. In the final scene of the novel, set on a steam ship, a blind old man asks for a life preserver, and Beecher/Goodman offers him a chamber pot, telling him that it should save him. Melville is clearly making a snide scatological pun, comparing Beecher's famous Gospel of Love to excrement as Melville's final word on the subject. I deliberately decided to leave out this piquant, if vulgar, observation from one of the great masters of American literature, because I didn't want Beecher to be associated with, to be blunt, the image of "bullshit."

But as soon as I finished the book and was no longer intimate with Beecher on daily basis I cringed every time I thought of that decision. It was cowardly and prudish. And while it didn't matter much to the overall story, that sort of impulse is a canary in the coal mine. If you are feeling that protective of your subject, you are too close for good judgment. Biography should be an irreverent art.

To be honest, I was far more protective of my own nascent reputation than of Henry Ward Beecher's. I knew there were senior scholars who not only didn't agree with my interpretation of Beecher's sexual scandals, but who believed – very strongly – that it was improper for a historian to even suggest an interpretation because they considered the evidence too inconclusive. There were also a few easily offended family members. Since it was my first book, I wasn't eager to pick any fights with anyone.

So I was scrupulous in my research, making sure I was thorough as possible in documenting and vetting my sources. But even more important, I tried to lay out the evidence in a way that allowed readers to come to their own conclusions. Of course, readers want to know what the biographer thinks; you are the expert, after all. But they also love the suspense of not knowing everything at the outset, and of putting together clues and coming to their own solutions to the puzzles of personality.

In my experience, if you give up interpretive control, you gain authority and the confidence of your readers. Your interpretations are most convincing when you reflect the subject through the perspective of multiple characters and historical perspectives, letting each character make their own best case for their own point of view even when they contradict each other.

This requires a sense of humor, a vein of skepticism, and a keen eye for life's ironies. Without a stiff spine of dramatic irony biography is dull and flat. Our characters and our fates are derived from the contradictions between our desires and our outcomes, and the gaps between what we think we know about ourselves and the world, and the fact that so often we don't even know what we don't know. Our failures are drawn from the same well as our successes, and the central mystery of any life is how those outcomes end up apportioned.

But I have the feeling that you probably line up more on the side of the angels than I do. If biographies are essentially case studies in human nature, you must have a pretty well-developed theory of humanity, yes?

Matteson: I'll get to that, but a couple of your words jump out at me. First off, I've never thought of you as "jaundiced," at least not in our face-to-face friendship. You're an incredibly open-hearted person! But perhaps it is natural and necessary for us as biographers to behave differently in our social relations as opposed to how we connect with our subjects. We need to be indulgent with our friends but somewhat coolly distanced with our subjects. You'll notice that I said "somewhat"; I do think that a biographer should also seek a kind of intimacy with one's subject. At least as to the people I have written about, I've tried to hold to the presumption that they meant well and to the impulse to temper my judgments with forgiveness. You don't get a biography written about you unless you spent your life trying very, very hard – to be exceptional, yes, but also often to do the right thing as you saw it. John Ruskin, whom I love, suggests that the two great laws of life should be effort and mercy. But because I want to be forgiving, you will never catch me writing a book about one of history's monsters. If I couldn't proceed from a starting point of sympathy, I am not sure I would have anything to say. And, of course, when one decides to write a biography, one commits to spending years with one's subject. I don't want to share that kind of time and mental space with Hitler.

The other word of yours that struck me is “irreverent.” It’s not a word that I typically like very much, because I associate it with flippancy and a kind of sardonic nihilism that may not be the best thing for a culture. I know those are *my* associations, not yours, but I often find myself wishing that we had more things to revere. It may be that the emotion of deep admiration is even better for the admirer than for the person being admired. I think there is a presumption now that, if you love and respect anyone in history, you haven’t done enough homework, and that feeling that attachment means that you approve of the person’s flaws. But here’s the thing: having reverence for something doesn’t require believing it’s perfect, and reverence should never be a reflex or a substitute for honest, critical thinking. I think we can examine a person or a country or an idea with rigor, acknowledging the faults, but hang onto our admiration. I’m all for skepticism. But I fear an excess of irreverence.

Am I on the side of the angels, as you’ve kindly suggested? That’s a flattering way of putting it. It may be more accurate to say that I am absurdly trusting. I think you know that I started by professional life as a lawyer. One reason I quit was that I came to realize that, one day, I was probably going to seriously fall victim to my naïveté. A kind heart isn’t much help in a poker game.

By the way, you make an excellent point when you talk about giving up interpretive control. You can point your readers *toward* a given interpretation, but to state your theory about a subject bluntly and conclusively lets the air out of the ball. Biographers need to appreciate Keats’s advice about negative capability and to realize that doubt is often better than certainty. It’s more fun if one’s writing starts a conversation that if it tries to have the last word.

But anyway: my theory of humanity. I suppose it has to do with incompleteness and the search for wholeness and balance. I haven’t taken a survey, but I think most of us have a sense of the voids inside us, and we live our lives in an effort to fill them up. I’m often amazed at the unbalanced things we do in the name of finding our proper balance! Just as heroes in fiction have dramatic wants and needs, so too with biographical subjects, and the tropes and principles that make a good piece of fiction continually turn up in biographies. And that’s *not* because biographers are attempting to fictionalize. Rather, I would argue that our expectations regarding real life are shaped by the stories we tell to one another, from “Jack and the Beanstalk” all the way up to *Ulysses*. Biographies end up feeling novelistic because people live their lives as if they are “writing” their autobiographies with the choices they make and the actions in which they engage. Life and art mimic each other to a fascinating degree.

My point about incompleteness and biography goes beyond the incompleteness that the subject is trying to rectify. Another incompleteness inherent in biography is the incompleteness of historical records. We never know everything we want

to know, and so we have to finesse our way around the gaps. Doing so just might be our greatest artistic challenge, and I really do love it. And there's yet another incompleteness to contend with. Speaking only for myself, I know that I write as I do in order to fill gaps in my own life – to try to fix through prose those chipped and broken corners in my life that no action would ever be able to fix. Filling up one's personal voids with well-chosen words is a superb therapeutic exercise.

But at the same time that writing biographies helps us understand our own lives, it requires us to step out of that life and imagine our way into someone else's. It's always seemed to me that, just as poetry resembles music, biography resembles acting: in a provisional way, we adopt and explore the motivations of a character and translate those feelings into art. Something you and I have in common (and something that relatively few biographers ever attempt) is that we have successfully crossed the gender line. You've written brilliantly about a man, and I've done my best to write about more than one woman. What qualities or experiences do you think enabled you to step that far out of your identity and to enter a male perspective?

Applegate: I fear that I am starting to seem like a curmudgeon and a hopeless contrarian in my replies. So, let me start by saying that I agree with you on the practical matters: I try to be both forgiving and skeptical as I examine other people's choices, I take great joy in experiences of awe and reverence whenever I stumble upon them, and I, too, have been accused of being a tad too trusting on occasion.

That said, I *don't* believe that the general run of people usually "mean well" or are "trying to do the right thing as they see it." I do think that people usually "believe" in what they are doing or saying in the moment – or at least believe that they aren't wrong – although even that isn't always true. Or as I recently heard someone say, with wry compassion: "*Everyone* has their reasons." But that's what fascinates me: the way that people rationalize their conscious and unconscious choices, even when those choices work against their own explicit goals, values and interests, or puts them at odds with conventional assumptions. I often think of myself as a historian of rationalizations, both large and small, and how they change over time. I don't mean that negatively. What else is culture, except the way we rationalize, and thus organize, our relationships to the hard, fundamental realities of existence?

As for the question of reverence, I most certainly would welcome more opportunities to experience the *emotion* of reverence. But the *attitude* of reverence – the inclination to grant authority and superiority to others – seems to me to have brought more trouble than good in the history of the world. In practice, reverence is often an intellectually and emotionally smothering impulse, one that blots out inconvenient details. Whereas I see irreverence as intellectually capacious,

liberating, and democratic in its belief that we are all animals of the same flawed species. Irreverence is not the same as cynicism or even iconoclasm.

Of course, you've spent a good deal of your career among the American Transcendentalists, who really do mean well and are trying to do their best. Reverence comes a lot easier if you are dealing with the great sage Ralph Waldo Emerson, rather than his colleague, the popular pragmatist Henry Ward Beecher. Or, worse yet, my new subject, the infamous Manhattan madam of the Jazz Age, Polly Adler. There's nothing like seeing the era's "great men" patronizing brothels when taking a break from do-gooding, to make anyone wonder how they rationalize *that*.

Regretfully, I must continue my contrariness in answering your last question about the experience of writing about someone of what used be called "the opposite sex" and what now might be described as writing about someone "of a different sexual and/or gender orientation." To be candid, in my first book, I spent far more time trying to put myself in the shoes of a Calvinist than I did wondering about what it was like to be male. Perhaps that is a function of living in a society arranged by and for men; by necessity, women often know a great deal more about how men live than men do of women. But I also believe that we are all victims of what philosophers and psychologists call "the availability heuristic"; we tend to give disproportionate attention to the few things that catch our eye, or can be easily recalled, or seem important to us for our own reasons, which prevents us from seeing the myriad phenomena that shape our choices. Sex, gender, race and wealth are like red flashing lights that can leave a lot of other critical, shaping factors in the dark. I say, look at all the existential furniture, and don't presume you know which items are the one that are most important at the outset.

I'm not discounting the role that gender identification plays, however. In fact, with both Henry Ward Beecher and Polly Adler, I struggled for a long time to answer my own question of why a man would bother to get married if he wanted to have the freedom to have sex with woman at will. I felt foolish when I finally realized that in some ways it was as simple as wanting to have one's cake and eat it too. The chronic philander wants to possess the material comforts and conventional respectability of marriage while also enjoying sexual freedom. And that pointed me right back to the question of what it meant to be a man throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries: only a man would believe he could have his cake and eat it too without paying a price. Women were rarely, if ever, so blithe and confident in the expectation that they could have all of their hearts' desires, no matter how contradictory. On the other hand, not all men took advantage of the freedom afforded them, so that became the more interesting question to me: why are some men willing to grab all they can get while others feel more constrained?

Allow me to close this dyspeptic diatribe by saying that while I may not have chosen to dwell among the angels in my work, I do enjoy their company and wish there were more of them walking the earth.

Matteson: Well, the waters here got very deep, very fast. You're not dyspeptic, by the way. Just to get started, I think there may be more complexity in the emotions that underlie infidelity than you seem to suggest, but those complexities can remain unexplored precisely because, when it comes to the more sensitive aspects of human behavior, we – and by that pronoun I mean both biographers and the population at large – either will not or cannot come face to face with them and truly examine every stick of what you've sagely called the existential furniture. And because we can't see that far, we tend to fill in the gaps with suppositions – and suppositions are almost never as interesting as the actual truth. It's handy, I suppose, to presume that an unfaithful husband has no more complicated desire than to “grab all he can,” but I'd really be surprised if that were always the case. You've been writing about some pretty seamy characters, for whom the infidelity is all about the physical gratification. I understand how that research could fuel some pretty potent cynicism. But that's only one kind of behavior, and it hardly describes the entire spectrum of motivations. People have myriad needs and desires, only some of them physical, and it's not a good bet that one other person can supply all of those needs throughout a lifetime. Men, being human, want to feel and to express love. They don't always get enough of it or the necessary kind of it from the person who is under contract to provide it. If I may try to sound clever for a moment, I might argue that the man whom a hastily categorizing world might accuse of trying to “grab” another source of affection may earnestly feel he is grasping at a straw. Mind you, I'm not trying to defend anyone, and I have utter contempt for the bullying selfishness of the sexual harasser. But I am trying to *understand*, and of course understanding is a huge part of our job.

What you've said has made me think of Occam's Razor, the philosophical premise that we should prefer the simplest explanation to more convoluted ones. It seems to me that the biographer's principle has to be very different. We need to look for *more* complicated explanations, and not just because they make for more interesting stories. Isaiah Berlin says something about how the wood from which human beings are carved is never straight. There are always twists and knots and needs and irrationalities that don't necessarily meet the eye. The complex explanation is more often the true one. In fact, this may be the core frustration of biography: that the most revealing and instructive motives of a subject may seldom if ever get into a letter or a journal. A biographer may be pretty confident that she or he can read between the lines. But if we do, even if we're actually right,

the critics stand ready to howl “Speculation!” and our reputations risk plunging into oblivion.

Your point about women having to be more circumspect in their behavior and having to be astute observers of male psychology is well taken. It’s evident to me that women are compelled to develop an awareness that looks a lot like DuBoisian double consciousness. Men do occupy a privileged position in which seeing things from the other side is not so much of a necessary tool. But, of course, we also have our insights and subtleties.

Again, you may be right: maybe I’ve gravitated toward well-intentioned subjects because I am myself fundamentally naïve. Overly sympathetic, too, perhaps. I don’t agree with that theory outright, but I don’t think I know myself well enough to discount the possibility. But I think our conversation today *does* help to prove something that I have believed for a long time: that, if you know how to look, you’ll find that biographies reveal the characters of their authors, far more than the writer’s interviews or cocktail conversation. It’s interesting, I think: we tell ourselves that we need to be objective and scientific and keep our subjectivity out of the work. But finally we can’t do it – not, at least, if we want to hold an audience, or if we want to be true to our understanding of life. The subjects we choose, the evidence we emphasize, the motives we ascribe to them – all of these come from our very personal ideas about what life is and what it should or should not be. A fully realized biography expresses heart as well as head. I suppose people can disagree about what, if anything, feelings have to do with scholarship. It seems to me that one should be aware of one’s emotions and predilections and keep them in check, but I also think that the appearance of cold rationality is frequently nothing more a pose and a pretense.

Applegate: The subtlety and sympathy of your musings on adultery makes me feel like a blowhard and a hopeless cynic! What I meant to point out in bringing up the example of my puzzlement over why a man might contract for monogamy and then pursue a life of sexual promiscuity (why not just stay single and enjoy an easy conscience?) was that I had to shake off my demand for logical explanations and consistent behavior and embrace the messy, unavoidable contradictions of human desire. I was the one who was naïve.

A final thought about your last observation that subjects we biographers choose reveal a great deal about ourselves. While it is not entirely flattering to me, given my how many seamy characters I spend time chronicling, but I think you are totally right. I have been drawn to subjects who might be seen as scoundrels and sinners, but who are also singularly broadminded in taste and generous in spirit, who are curious, sharp-eyed, good-humored and resilient, with a keen appreciation of life’s ironies. Or as Polly Adler once quipped: “I can only say that

I am one of those people who just can't help getting a kick out of life – even when it's a kick in the teeth.”

It is no accident that I find these to be the signal traits of most of the biographers I know. In my experience, you won't find a more sharp-eyed and good-humored cohort anywhere else in the world of letters.

Matteson: It's a shame that we've already reached the time for “final thoughts.” I feel as if we could go on fruitfully for quite some time. I think, for instance, we could say a lot more about the role of subjectivity in biographical writing – our need to be both in and out of our work, balancing our emotional input with our scholarly detachment. You, know, Debby, I haven't written a single book that hasn't taught me something valuable about myself. I do sometimes worry whether those personal epiphanies bleed into my observations about my subjects, and whether such bleedings might result in my distorting things. But it does seem to me that we are supposed to communicate both what is distinctive about our subjects *and* how they can resonate with a modern consciousness. I knew a Shakespeare scholar once who said there's no way for us to get the plays right, but we can get them wrong in interesting ways. The same is probably true of a biographer and her or his subject. And, before I get myself into more trouble, I think I will make that *my* last word!

Debby Applegate is an American historian and biographer. In 2007, Applegate published *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Her second book, *Madam: The Biography of Polly Adler, Icon of the Jazz Age*, an account of the life and times of the notorious Manhattan brothel-keeper Polly Adler, was published in November 2021.

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