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The Problem of Writing Biographies

The problem with writing biographies is that in order to write about someone, you have to know the person. And if you are writing about someone you know, then they also know you and what you're doing. They'll know if you publish something about them. If you know them well, you care how they feel about you. You don't want to offend them and lose their friendship. So you can't very well publish something about them without asking their permission. And they might say no.

Someone I know well and who has a wonderful life story absolutely refuses to have me write her biography. Or any essay about her life. She tells me her stories, and I squirrel them away in my mind. But write though I may, I can't publish the stories, and I can't show her what I've written, either. I may not even be able to publish this, since it's about her! If I write my own life story, I'll just have to leave her out of it. It's that serious.

I wrote an essay, ostensibly about milk delivery, but really about my friend, and because I liked what I had written, I wanted to publish it. Or try to publish it. But I had previously worked up the nerve to ask my friend how she felt about me writing about her, and she said she did not want a biography. It wasn't her cup of tea, and she'd die if I wrote one. So, I knew that I could be making a grave mistake in trying to publish the milk essay without her permission.

I sent it to her. She wrote back saying "no, no, no, nothing biographical." I was disappointed by her response, because I wrote the essay, in part, to honor her, and I hoped that she would like it. Now I know how she feels. I know I can't publish any writing about her. It's good that she made it clear, so that I don't have to ask again or feel on-the-fence or waste my time trying to disguise her in my stories. The easiest way to deal with her answer is to stop writing about her. But that's easier said than done.

Just as it's hard to get an idea and not use it (for example, hard to develop the physics of atom splitting without creating the atom bomb),

it's hard to write something and not want to publish it. It's a slippery slope from writing to publication. But writing, like formulation of an idea for a scientist, is hard for a writer to resist. Thoughts are spontaneous things. And writers record their thoughts. Once a thought is there in the mind, in other words, it's on its way to the printing press. I could say that I will write about my friend but not publish. But that will be hard to resist, if I keep writing. The best advice would be to stop now. For what could happen next is exploitation and betrayal of a dear friend.

To write about something spoils it a little. At least, writing about something changes it. Sartre said something like that in *la Nausée*. That I wrote about my friend, even before I told her what I was up to, changed my relationship to her. I love my friend, and I love knowing about her life, and I love knowing it so well that I can recreate it in my imagination and capture it in writing. Once I started writing about her, though, I asked her questions I would not have thought to ask if I hadn't been writing down her stories. The questions were spoken out of curiosity, but also were intended to fill gaps in the story I was writing. I took advantage of her chatty nature and her interesting life as I recorded the story.

All writing is somewhat exploitive. Writers write for themselves because they like putting words together. Other people and situations give them the material to use in writing. I think novelists often use people they know in their stories, or use their own lives in their stories. After all, there are sections in creative-writing guides about how to write true stories and pass them off as fiction. The example that comes to mind is the advice of Anne Lamott in her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*: to write about someone and make sure he doesn't sue you, change his name and give him a small penis.

The strongest example of literary exploitation is the field of journalism. It is an uncomfortable truth that the journalist depends on the news, some good, some bad, for a job. How difficult it must be to gather information for a story at a disaster scene rather than providing immediate aid to the victims. If your job is to report on murders, robberies, and shootings, you are exploiting those who are murdered, robbed, and shot! The same could be said about happy stories, as well. The writer always exploits his

subjects. ¹

To write a biography about someone with their consent is exploitation. Get close to someone, then use them to your advantage. To write a biography of someone against their will or without their permission is treachery. Get close to them, then betray them and use them to your advantage.

The movie *Capote* portrays the novelist-traitor at his worst. Writer Truman Capote corresponded with a murderer on trial and, later, on death row, in order to write a bestseller about him, the book *In Cold Blood*. He wanted to write a book about a man who had committed murder from the perspective of the murder himself. To gather the stories he needed for his book, Capote visited an accused murderer in prison, then corresponded with him for quite a while during his trial up until his execution. As the movie portrays it, Capote corresponded in the voice of a friend but didn't, as a friend would, try to help the accused or prevent his execution. Instead, Capote led him on, kept him talking, then wrote a book that depended, for its ending, on the man's death.

At one point, Capote stopped writing to the accused. It is implied that Capote stopped writing because his book was almost done. All that remained was the ending.

Really, in order for the story to end, the accused had to die. The book could not be published after the man's release from prison, could it? Capote needed that execution in order to publish his book. After not writing for months, Capote visited the accused before his execution. The way it was portrayed, Capote made the visit not to comfort the man but in order to finish his book. Capote's book is the story of the murderer. But behind it is the story of the Capote himself, portrayed in the eponymous movie as a novelist who takes advantage of a jailed man's misery and, later, his death, in order to publish a book.

The only person one has complete authority to write about is oneself.

¹ That's not to say that journalism doesn't also benefit its subjects at times, even as it exploits them. The journalist who took notes at a disaster scene instead of lending a hand may bring hundreds of volunteers by putting a compelling story on the front page of a big newspaper.

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/3

There's a lot of leeway in that statement. But respecting the wishes of a friend is much different from respecting the meaning of a phrase. One might try to argue that my friend, as part of my life, is "mine" to write about. But thirty seconds of consideration about how my friend would feel about that, and the argument is dismissed.

What will it take to end this essay? A birth, a death, a marriage? A message to stay tuned for my unwritten autobiography? In the end, I want to tell the reader that, complicated as the essay might make it seem, the problem of biography is crystal clear as a gut feeling. When it comes to respecting a friend, there's no problem at all.