

## **The Biographical Novel**

by Irving Stone

THE BIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL is a true and documented story of one human being's journey across the face of the years, transmuted from the raw material of life into the delight and purity of an authentic art form.

The biographical novel is based on the conviction that the best of all plots lie in human character; and that human character is endlessly colorful and revealing. It starts with the assumption that those stories which have actually happened can be at least as interesting and true as those which have been imagined. Alexander Pope said that the proper study of mankind is man; the biographical novel accepts that challenge and sets out to document its truth, for character is plot; character development is action; and character fulfillment is resolution.

The biographical novel attempts to fuse not only its parent sources of biography and the novel, but that of its grandparent, history, as well. It must tell the story of its main character, not in the bulk of millionfold detail, but in essence; it must recreate the individual against the background of his times, with all of its authentic historical flavor; and it must live up to the exacting demands of the novel structure.

Let me joyfully proclaim that basically the biographical novelist is a yarn-spinner, and the biographical novel a vigorous medium that has been created in order to tell the fine stories that have been lived. The form is fortunate in its opportunity to utilize the single greatest virtue of the novel: growth of character. This growth may be into good or evil, into creativity or destruction; it cannot be static. There are few joys for the reader to surpass that of watching an interesting story unfold through growth of character and in this field no form surpasses the biographical novel, which by the very definition of its nature is always about people rather than impersonal forces.

The biographical novelist has a greater freedom to interpret than has the biographer, and the reader has a greater chance of coming away with a more personal understanding of human motivation. If there is a tendency to oversimplify, it is in the same fashion that man's memory does as he looks back on his span of time, forgetting nine-tenths of the bulk, remembering only the distillation which has meaning. For the biographical novel is based not merely on fact, but on feeling, the legitimate emotion arising from indigenous drama. Facts can get lost with almost too great a facility, but an emotional experience, once lived, can never be forgotten. Nor can this emotion be artificially induced for the sake of raising the reader's temperature. While a biography can be written purely out of a life's worthiness, with details of important names, places and dates, the biographical novel must emerge naturally and organically from the conflicts of man against himself, man against man, or man against fate. Since an experience shared will remain with one forever, it is the aim of the biographical novel to bring the reader into the very heart of the emotion being engendered so that he will make that emotion his own. For the feelings have a memory and a wisdom of which the mind could well be covetous.

In the fields of straight biography and history, the reader stands on the sidelines. What is transpiring on the page is something that happened long ago, and to other people. When reading

the biographical novel he is no longer a spectator, but a participant. He starts to live the story as though its first incident had its inception at the instant he opened the book. Perhaps the biographical novel has become so popular because the reader is allowed to participate intimately in history, to become one of its prime actors and motivators. Thus all history becomes contemporary, as in truth it is. The old joke about the man who thought he was Napoleon can come true.

In the biographical novel therefore, the reading and the doing, through identification, become synonymous; the reader can live a thousand different lives during a relatively brief span of years. Therein lies the genius of the form, therein lies its enchantment and its hope for a permanent place in the literary heavens.

With the exception of Merejkowsky *Romance of Leonardo da Vinci* and Gertrude Atherton novel of Alexander Hamilton, *The Conqueror*, the biographical novel was unknown and unaccepted in the United States thirty years ago. Yet today it can be found in the catalogue of every major publisher. Now that the biographical novel has come of age, a few ground rules can perhaps be laid down for its practitioners.

The first of these must surely be that history is not the servant of the biographical novelist, but his master. No biographical novel can be better than its research. If the research is deep and honest, the novel will be deep and honest; if the research is sleazy, shallow, evasive or sensationseeking, the novel will be sleazy, shallow, evasive, sensation-mongering.

Not every life will fit into the form of the biographical novel. There are specific dramatic elements that must be present, recurrent themes of conflict and accomplishment woven through its entirety, an overall, perceivable pattern into which the parts can be fitted to make an organic whole. There are many lives, important and significant in their end results, which are nonetheless diffuse, their content and design antithetical to the nature of the novel; others seem to have been lived as though the subject himself were constantly aware that he was creating a dramatic structure.

While the biographical novelist is assuredly licensed to search out and select those lives which make good copy, the basic demonstrable truth cannot be pushed around to serve a plot purpose. The writer who must twist or pervert the historic truth to come out with what he thinks is an acceptable or saleable story is a tragically misplaced person in his field. The biographical novelist, on the other hand, who becomes moralistic or political, turns into a pamphleteer. We have had experiences of American biographical novelists twisting history out of shape and proportion in order to make it conform to a preconceived line. What has emerged has been neither legitimate biography nor authentic novel, but propaganda. Biography is rich in materials which can be used to serve a purpose; and the biographical novel, young as it is, has not been free from those who would use the form unscrupulously. But this is a danger incident to all of the arts, particularly in a time of war for man's mind; our nostrils must become aware of the rancid smell of such books. In the biographical novel, as in all art forms, personal and professional integrity lie at the base of lasting accomplishment.

An integrated, successful, first-rate biographical novel can emerge only from a union of the material chosen and the author of the choice; from a free, mutually respectful and frequently self-sacrificing partnership in which the story that has been lived and the author who is recreating that story in print, must be equal, and the final product remain more important than either of the contributing partners. If either one assumes an ascendancy the novel will lack for balance: the material will dominate the author, take directions in defiance of the structure; or the author will dominate the material, make it a creature of his own will and desiring. Few authors are qualified to write equally well or profoundly on all subjects. The wise author waits, or searches, for that meaningful story which he can understand, which moves him, and which he senses he can bring vividly to life. If the author chooses unwisely, perhaps because he does not know his material well enough before he starts, or does not know himself well enough, the result can only be false and fragmentary or at best a dismal regurgitation.

The author has a right to ask, as he looks at the outline of a human life, "Can this story serve my purposes?" -- but only after he has demanded of himself, "Can I serve the purposes of this story?"

Because of the principle of selection, the biographical novel will inevitably end up as much a portrait of the author as of the subject, for the biographical novelist is a distiller, deriving his spirits not from rye, and we hope not from corn; but from the boiling-pot of human experience. It follows that the biographical novel, even though it leans so heavily on biography and history, can be no better than the mind of its author. If the author is dull, the novel will be dull, and neither biography nor history can save him. If the author is cold, the novel will be cold, no matter how flaming the material being handled. If the author is humorless, the novel will be humorless; if the author is narrow in his interests, his novel will be narrow in its interests, no matter how wide a slice of life it may be reflecting. And if the author is dishonest, what emerges from the pages must be a dishonest novel, regardless of the integrity of the character being portrayed.

How is a reader unacquainted with the field to distinguish between the honest and dishonest biographical novel, the complete and the fractional? How can the question, "How much of this is true?" be answered? Only by insisting that the biographical novel must be as complete in its documentation as the most scholarly history and biography, and as honest in its interpretation.

If it takes four years to train a schoolteacher or engineer, five years to train a pharmacist, six a dentist, seven a lawyer, and eight a doctor, is there any reason to believe that it can take less time to develop a qualified and professional biographical novelist?

He must become experienced in the writing of imaginative novels, wrestling with this form in order that he may come up against the challenging complexities of structure, mood, master scenes, dialogue, with its accompanying lyricism of language, the mounting involvement and suspense of the fictional tale. He would be well advised to write a half-dozen plays to absorb the superb economy of the form, and learn how to stage his tale under a proscenium instead of in the wings: for what the reader does not see with his eyes he never really knows.

He must be trained as a biographer, working at the assembling of materials about one man or group of men, mastering the technic of close-knit organization of these materials, the perceiving

and the weaving back and forth of the life theme, evolving a style, personality, and manner of writing by means of which one man's story can be brought to life all over again by black hieroglyphs on white paper: the eternal miracle of literature: for each life has a distinctive face and figure; and this must be captured in order to differentiate this one special story from the hundreds of millions that have been lived.

The biographical novelist must become as scientific a researcher as was Dr. Jonas Salk in his medical laboratories. During the six years that I attended the University of California there were no courses in the fascinating science of research. I had to stumble my way toward a *modus operandi*. Today most colleges give courses in research which make the tools of this exciting trade as available and usable as those in accounting or electronics. The biographical novelist must be as dedicated to his digging as the archaeologist who uncovers ancient cities after years of pick and shovel work; and he must be grimly resolved that there is absolutely nothing in the historic record which cannot be found if one will search for it long enough, arduously enough and adroitly enough. Fresh and daring ideas about where and how to look are as important to successful research as are the extracting of fresh and daring drawings by painters from their own minds. Parenthetically the biographical novelist must be as stout of heart as the most ardent lover, for important new materials are frequently buried deep, yielding their charms and protected virtues only to importunate courtship.

Though research is as fascinating as the resolution of a crossword puzzle or a murder mystery, it is also hard work, thoroughly exhausting and unending in its demands. The researcher sometimes gets lost in his forest of facts. To change the metaphor, the biographical novel must be built like an iceberg, about one ninth of solid substance showing above the literary water line, and the other eight-ninths submerged, but giving a solid base to that which is permitted to appear. If the biographical novelist does not know nine times as much as he reveals, the substance of the print he spreads over the page will be painfully thin: for the eight-ninths which he does not reveal permeates the whole, giving to the pages a discernible bouquet, a subtle emanation which enables the reader to feel comfortable and secure.

For every printed page has a feel and a smell to it, just as surely as does a piece of fruit; it is the research which gives the page of the biographical novel its consistency, which enables the reader to feel that this particular piece of literary fruit is sound at its core, and will not soon decay if allowed to sit on the library table. In the biographical novel, research is the hard firm flesh under the surface skin of the printed page.

The biographical novelist must also be uncrushable in his faith that the truth will out, for when he finds three differing versions of the same happening, accompanied by three different sets of dates and circumstances, he must not become disheartened, but must believe that if he will continue to dig he will find a fourth, authentic version based on irrefutable documents. As Charles A. Beard, one of America's most brilliant historical researchers, told me in his library in New Canaan while helping me with an elusive problem, "Every day I find new source material which controverts something I have believed for thirty years."

To the biographical novelist history is not a mountain, but a river. Even when there are no new facts to be found, there are fresh insights, modern interpretations which can give an old story new

focus and meaning; for the biographical novelist, like the archaeologist, is not just a pick and shovel man. The sweat on the forehead and the callouses on the palm are the merest preparation for the real work to come: interpretation of the uncovered materials which will throw light on a story long since lived.

The biographical novelist must also be a perennial skeptic and challenger of the printed word. My confrere, Robert Graves, recently told me in his workshop in Majorca that his biographical novel *I, Claudius* was born at the moment when, reading Tacitus, he cried out, "That's a lie!"

The number of lies and part-truths still resting comfortably and respectably in history is a constant source of astonishment to me; as I am equally amazed at the whole areas of history, even American history as late as the Civil War, or the turn of the twentieth century, that are inadequately researched, or simply not researched at all. It is here that the biographical novelist has his magnificent opportunity: for the vigor and enthusiasm, and a fresh point of view, he can change "That is a lie!" into "That is the truth!" just as he can throw beams of light into areas of history which have remained dark and damp through sheer neglect and want of a champion to rescue them from oblivion.

It also follows that the biographical novelist must be a fighter. Frequently the best stories, and the most meaningful, are those of the underdog, of the man or woman who has been vilified and traduced. From the body of my own work may I suggest as examples the stories of Eugene V. Debs, Rachel Jackson and Mary Todd Lincoln. All efforts to cut through the jungle of prejudiced print, to find the balanced, sympathetic yet judicious truth will be met not only with opposition but frequently with ridicule: for man is as unwilling to give up his vested interest in his prejudices as he is any other of his possessions.

Lastly, the biographical novelist must believe that first there came the Book; he must love books with an unflagging ardency, for he will spend the greater part of life with his nose inside one volume or another: and some of them will be mighty tough customers. He must be able to survive the eyestrain engendered by tiny type, the headaches brought on by handling crumbling yellow pages, the fading ink of aged diaries and letters; and worse, the bottomless depths of Dead Sea writing which would break the teeth of any man imprudent enough to read it aloud.

I would like to outline some specifics.

Having determined that he is going to write a biographical novel about the life of Leonardo da Vinci or Alexander Hamilton, the biographical novelist must put out of his mind for six months or a year any illusion that he is a writer, and become a library mole. He must read all the books and articles written by his subject, study the works created by him, be they art or engineering, read every findable word that has been written about the man or work. He must read all the letters that have passed between the hero and his contemporaries, as well as his private notes, journals and memoirs; or, in the case of a heroine, those wonderfully confiding diaries that are kept locked in the middle drawer of a desk. If the subject is of recent times, there will be a need to interview or correspond with everyone who has been involved in the drama, no matter how slightly.

Having grasped more fully the outlines of his story, the biographical novelist then takes to the road, seeing with his own eyes the places his hero has lived, the quality of the sunlight, the native earth beneath his feet, the personality of the cities and the feel of the countryside: for only then can he write with the intimacy and knowledgability of tactile experience.

This is the first and direct line of attack. The second is equally important: the biographical novelist must now begin the study of his hero's times, its fads and fancies, its majority and minority ideas as well as the prevailing conflicts in religion, philosophy, science, politics, economics and the arts; in short, the overall social, mental, spiritual, esthetic, scientific and international climate in which his characters lived and evolved their codes of conduct. He must read the source books of the period in order to absorb its background, the old newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, the novels, plays and poetry of the times, in order to learn the uncountable thousands of illuminating details which he must have at his fingertips in order to recreate the period: what people wear, the architecture of their houses as well as the fabric on their furniture, how they heat their homes, cook the foods they eat at the various hours of the day; what they are buying in the shops and why, how much it costs as well as how it tastes and smells and feels; what ailments they are suffering and how they are treating them; what colloquialisms they are using to enrich their conversation; what their preachers are preaching on Sunday morning and their teachers teaching on Monday morning.

If the biographical novelist has any feeling for his job he will eventually find emerging out of this seemingly vast and inchoate mass of material certain recurrent patterns, strains of character and action that provide a dominant motif and rhythm for the story he will tell, even as the dominant strains of a symphony are enunciated early. Above all, the biographical novelist is looking for those interwoven designs which are perceivable in every human life: for nearly every life works out its own tightly-woven plot structure. Any action forced upon the participants which does not arise indigenously, which arises instead from the author confusing motion with direction, tears the fabric of the story.

Yet by the same token the biographical novelist must be the master of his material; the craftsman who is not in control of his tools will have his story run away with him. For after his research labors, the biographical novelist must then expend as much time and energy as the writer of fiction to create a novel structure which will best project his material, and be unique to the particular story to be told.

And all this new knowledge must never come between the reader and the narration. In the biographical novel a basic tenet is that the author must stage his story as though it were happening right now; he may not emerge at intervals to inform the reader of what will happen two or twenty or two hundred years later. The reader may never be in possession of information which is not available to those who are acting out the day-by-day passion of their lives. The story must unfold for the reader even as the pageant of events unfolds for the participants. There are few soothsayers; the biographical novelist may not turn himself into an a posteriori prophet. Whatever the reader may divine about what lies ahead must arise from his own perception, and not from the biographical novelist fudging on time sequence. If there be wisdom in the author (and God grant that there may sometimes be!) it will emerge from the nature of the story he wants to tell, from his selection of materials within the framework of that particular story, from

his understanding of what motivates his people, and from the skill with which he shapes the unassimilated raw action of human life.

Perhaps a glimpse of my own approaches and technics from *Lust For Life* through *Immortal Wife* and *Love is Eternal* may shed further light on this still nascent form. I first stumbled across the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh when taken to an exhibition by insistent Parisian friends. Seeing a whole room of Vincent's blazing Arlesian canvases was an emotional experience that I can liken only to my first reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*. I left the exhibition hall determined to find out who this man was who could move me to such depths. I read all the fragments I could find about him in English, French and German; when I returned to New York and to the writing of my plays, I would spend my evenings at the public library at Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, reading the three volumes of Vincent's letters to his brother Theo. I had no intention of writing about Vincent; I was only trying to understand him. But slowly over the months the Van Gogh story took possession of me; I found myself waking at three in the morning, writing dialogue passages between Vincent and Theo, or describing Vincent's death scene at Auvers sur Oise. Vincent's ordeal became for me one of the world's most meaningful stories. At the end of a year, when I found myself unable to think of anything else, I decided that I would have to write Vincent's story if for no other reason than to clear it from my mind.

My background for writing such a story was inadequate, for I had grown up in San Francisco where art was a portrait of two dead rabbits hanging by their feet. My first task then, was to read all the books I could find about art and modern painters, and then to search out the canvases that were available. I returned to Europe with a rucksack on my back and followed the trail of Vincent, going down into the mines of the Borinage where he had descended, living in his bedroom at Madam Dennis's bakery, writing notes in the parsonages where he had lived with his family in Holland, and going to the south of France to work in the Yellow House, to live in the asylum at St. Remy where he had been incarcerated, and finally to sleep in the same room and bed in the little hotel in Auvers on the fortieth anniversary of his death.

Since I did not know how much I did not know about the writing of a biographical novel, I sat down to my first morning's work with a little calling card in front of me on which I scribbled four strictures: 1. Dramatize. 2. Plenty of dialogue. 3. Bring all characters to life. 4. Use anecdotes and humor.

It is somewhat chastening to me, these many years later, when I write myself fifty pages of notes on precisely how the new book must be written and, collaterally, how it must not be written, to find that I emerge with a product which a lot of people feel is no better than *Lust for Life*. I sometimes wonder if I have spent the past twenty-five years enunciating intellectually the things I knew intuitively at the beginning.

It is also a source of considerable astonishment to me that I waited through three biographies to get back to the form in which I had achieved such a happy result; and that only a fortuitous accident pushed me back into the field.

Through my chapter on John C. Frémont in *They Also Ran*, the story of the men who were defeated for the presidency, I once again came across the woman with whom I had fallen in love

in college, and in whose image I married: Jessie Benton Frémont. Jessie's story came to possess me, even as Vincent's had.

In the spring of 1943 I wrote myself a list of sixty-two specifics for *Immortal Wife*. I should like to read a few of them as samples of how one biographical novelist sets the boundaries and dimensions of his task.

I quote directly from my notes:

*The story must flow swiftly, smoothly, lyrically. It is a story of people, not history. People come first, history follows. It must be at least half dialogue. Jessie's interior monologue and thinking must be quietly done, understated. Everything must be seen through her eyes. All characters must be brought sharply and vividly to life. Every scene, every word, must be contemporary. Every reader must identify himself with Jessie. Panorama of a changing world: 1840, 1900 through one woman's eyes. Nothing described for description's sake, only as seen by Jessie and as important in her life. No fact for fact's sake, everything human. Material constantly new, refreshing, yet fitting into life pattern. Humor as constant leaven. Patience in developing and revealing major themes. Must be primarily a love story. Constantly changing nature of their love, yet fundamentally same. Always the third dimension of failure, error, human failing. The fourth dimensions of mysticism: faith in each other and the world, undying hope as wellspring of human life. Thorough and penetrating job on love and marriage. Keep language universal. Never the whole story; always the essence. No skimping of material; no overblown presentation. Vivid imagery of detail of times, rich contrast of changing scene: Washington, St. Louis, Mariposa. Use interesting mechanisms for history, not just plumped down. Should embrace the whole of a life, one life, as symbolic of all.*

Seven years later, when I came to the formulating of *The President's Lady*, I wrote myself advice under the heading of "What devices can be used to get inside Rachel?" some of which may prove germane at this point:

*We must react to situations with her mind. We must see people through her eyes, our sense of values must be her sense of values. We must suffer from the things that disturb her, and want (at least for her) the things that she wants. We must share her love for Andrew, endure with her the long terrifying loneliness. The form of our anxieties must be identical with the form of her anxieties; we must evaluate all events through the focus of her needs. We must cling to, and love, the friends and relatives she does. We must want fame and greatness for Andrew, and yet fear them terribly too. We must turn religious, need and justify that religion when she does. She must be the stage upon which history is acted out. We must tremble, then rejoice in her few social triumphs, and die when she dies, acknowledging the lethal blow. We must like Rachel, care about her, understand, sympathize with her. We must enjoy her life from inside her mind and heart.*

*This can be achieved by warmth of approach; by the author liking her, himself. By a simple, honest directness of storytelling, by understatement, so that the reader builds up his own emotions. By keeping her clear; by moving her swiftly through events, almost too swiftly for her. By finding and portraying the illuminating detail about her. By finding in her the universal*



*elements of suffering in love and marriage. By discerning the basic structure of her life, and sticking to that; by particularizing her, distinguishing her from all other women. By making her a tool and victim of fate; as we all are. Yet proving that her story has never been lived before; or since.*

At the end of eighteen months of work, just before beginning the penultimate chapter, I also wrote a five-page note asking "What is the cement that holds this book together?," reviewing the whole meaning and purpose of the book to make sure that nothing that had been enunciated at the beginning had gotten lost in transit, and saying to myself, "This book doesn't have to prove anything but doesn't it have to illuminate a great deal?"

I had been interested in the Lincoln story for many years, and had read rather widely in the field, but had never been able to achieve a point of departure, for I had always said to myself, "Poor Abraham Lincoln, married to Mary Todd." After some ten years of incubation (most biographical novels come out well only if they have been incubating at least five years) while I was doing a magazine article about the Lincoln marriage, I came across some obscure source material which threw the marriage and its daily workings into high relief, particularly in relation to Mr. Lincoln in his role as a husband. I found myself exclaiming, "Poor Mary Todd, married to Abraham Lincoln." From that moment of understanding of the truly equal nature of the marriage I was able to begin work on the thesis which Abraham Lincoln inscribed inside the wedding ring he purchased in the square on the Sunday morning of his wedding, "Love Is Eternal." A little of the detail I sought before starting Chapter IV, just after the Lincoln marriage, may give an idea of the tens of thousands of questions a biographical novelist must ask: for his curiosity must be insatiable:

*What changes have taken place in Mary, in Abraham Lincoln? How much time does Abraham spend with her? Where is Mary's room located in hotel? Front, back, side, corner? Does it get some sun? Is it warm or cold? Does she rearrange the room, or leave it as it was? (Rearrange to make it her own?) What are the dimensions? What does it look out over? Is it painted, or wallpapered? How much time does she spend in her room, in the parlors? Does she ask for special things, i. e., reading table; buy a few little things, i. e., lamps? How does she occupy her time in the mornings? Reading, sewing, writing letters? What kind of service is available? How does she arrange her money affairs? Does A give her money for incidentals: drugs, materials, etc. Does she have any money of her own? Does she pay at stores, or do they have credit accounts? Since Abraham wants to live economically, does she spend, or follow his wishes? Does she have visitors at hotel? Family, friends to dinner and supper? Is it expensive? She is later accused of being stingy, but if so, does she learn economy from A? Where is dining-room of Globe? How big is it? How decorated? Does Lincoln suggest they eat with others at big tables, or do they have the same table for two? Who was next to, or across from the Lincolns? We know of Bledsoes -- what kind of piano, and what pieces, would Mrs. Bledsoe be playing? Would she invite Mary to play?*

As I was preparing the last two chapters, I wrote myself a long, stern directive, of which the following lines are typical:

*Let's get simple, and stay simple. Do only symptomatic scenes; step up pacing and speed; in perspective distant scenes are always foreshortened. Don't fight the entire Civil War, only those elements that come into the White House. Avoid name-calling, side -- taking, prejudice, bitterness. Awaken no hatred, only pity and compassion. Underwrite the grief, underplay the emotion. Don't stack cards, either for or against Mary. Keep the author out, let the story tell itself.*

But beyond the specifications for any one particular book, I found the following obiter dicta to be essential to all biographical novels:

*No use of names because they later become important elsewhere. No asides, or smart whisperings. No fixations, or prejudices carried over from past feelings or readings. No harpings, or preconceived "theories, into which all history and happenings must fit." No name-calling, let the reader call the proper names. No fiery passions, for or against; they cloud judgment. No assumptions as to the reader's tastes, opinions, ideas, education. No writing for any one class, age or geographic group. No condemnations of people or events; give them their rightful place in the story, and let God judge them. No seeking the sensational for its own sake; and no philosophizing. No concealing of important evidence, no lies, cheating or defrauding the reader. No dullness; throw out the slow, meaningless passages. No striving for effects, no manifest anger or hatred, no browbeating. Watch comparative materials and balance them; no disproportions about materials where I happen to know more. No inheriting of other people's prejudices, hatreds, blindness. No details that illuminate little but themselves. No posturing, no exhibitionism: "See what I know!" No striving for novelty for its own sake. No doctrinairism, or fitting material into one school or pattern. No destructivism, nor defeatism. No pugilism or blind spots. No lethargy. No weasel phrases; all space is needed for direct lines. No meandering down pleasant paths. No use of material that does not tie into focal core of book.*

Because of the tender youth of the biographical novel there has as yet been little discussion of its particular character, of its strengths as well as its limitations. Is it a history, a biography, or a novel? Is it none of these? Or perhaps all three? If in this paper I presume to provide a beginning critique, standards of judgment against which the biographical novel may be viewed, it is done with the happy reassurance that all such strictures will be altered, expanded and materially improved by later practitioners of the craft.

Professor Carl Bode of the University of Maryland recently wrote in the magazine *College English*, in the first serious study of the biographical novel to be published, "In the last ten years several prominent people have been doing their best to make an honest woman of the biographical novel. Considerable progress has been made, but not quite enough. The biographical novel still goes its bosomy way, its flimsy clothing tattered and torn in exactly the wrong places." "Sometimes powerful and often picturesque, it deserves much more attention than it has received from the critics."

When Professor Bode speaks of the biographical novels going their bosomy way, their flimsy clothing tattered and torn in exactly the wrong places, I am afraid he is concerned with such books as *Forever Amber* or *Kitty*, whose writers took the license of combining sensational material from a hundred different sources, letting their fictional fancies run wild, a privilege not

accorded to the biographical novelist, who must remain inside the confines of the life he is writing about. They are certainly not biographical novels, and I doubt very much that W. R. Guthrie or Robert Penn Warren would consider them historical novels.

If anything, the biographical novel has suffered from an excess of good taste and respectability, perhaps because the biographical novelist has been awed by the fact that his characters once actually lived, and hence were endowed with certain inalienable rights, not of concealment, but of privacy and decorum. Bedroom scenes of which critics complain in the lurid, so-called historical novels are not to be found in the biographical novel, a sometime limitation to the sale of the genre, but one which calls forth the subtlety of the biographical novelist if he is to convey to the reader the all-important love and sex life of his subject.

I am going to take the liberty of quoting Professor Bode's analysis of my own work because I believe he has drawn an architectural blueprint for me, and for other biographical novelists, to follow in the future. Speaking of my own five biographical novels that followed the story of Vincent Van Gogh, he writes:

*Each volume showed the advances in novelistic technique. The scholarship deepened too, though less steadily. The peak for the present day biographical novel was approached with the publication of Stone's book on Mary Todd Lincoln and her marriage. The scholarship is just as sound, according to a leading Lincoln specialist, as it is in the recent and respectfully reviewed biography of Mrs. Lincoln by a trained historian. It deserves to be called meticulous. Many an example can be found of Stone's deep scholarly concern with the life he was writing. He painstakingly prepared a floor-plan of the White House of Lincoln's day -- one has never been reconstructed before -- as a piece of independent research, and he created most of his dialogue out of skilled paraphrases of historically accurate source material. Furthermore, the handling of the data is judicious. Mrs. Lincoln is always a controversial figure, and Stone could be excused if he slanted his information one way or the other. But he does not. Rising above his declared intention to vindicate her, he portrays her bedeviled neurotic character with fairness. She and Abe emerge as memorable human beings, one great and the other not, but human beings both. The minor characters are carefully differentiated, very seldom are they mere historical names. The scenes are well handled, with pace and suspense to some of them in spite of the fact that historians already know how they come out . . . The descriptions give rich color to the picture Stone creates . . .*

The aim behind the best writing of this kind is a noble one. It is to see beneath the surface reality of facts and to reveal the true reality to others. It is to use historical data more daringly but more penetratingly than the professional historian can.

Samuel E. Morison, professor of history at Harvard University, writes in an essay called "History As A Literary Art": "The historian can learn much from the novelist. The best writers of fiction are superior to all but the best historians in characterization and description. When John Citizen feels the urge to read history he goes to the novels of Kenneth Roberts or Margaret Mitchell, not to the histories of Professor this or Doctor that. Why? American historians have forgotten that there is an art of writing history. In this flight of history from literature the public got left behind. American history became a bore to the reader and a drug on the market."

It is to this mournful state of affairs that the biographical novel addresses itself.

It is important, too, to set down the discernible differences between the biographical novel, the fictional novel, the historical novel, and the straight biography.

A few years ago when I was visiting with Ernest Hemingway in Key West, we discussed the approaches to our two novels in progress. Hemingway said, "There is no such thing as fiction. Everything we write is based on the lives we have lived, and other lives we have observed." Yet the fictional novelist has the opportunity to regroup and rechannel experience, to combine portions of a dozen different lives, to imagine a better world, or a more evil one, if that suits his temperament, and of conjuring up varying resolutions to the human situations he has evoked.

The biographical novelist is a bondsman to the factual truth; yet he will succeed very little if he remains a mere reporter. As Robert Graves said to me, "The biographical novelist who does not have strong intuitions about his subject, and later finds from the documents that his intuition has been substantiated, is not likely to get far in understanding his subject."

Inside the skeletal outline imposed on him, the biographical novelist is free to soar to any heights which his own inner poetry and perception will allow him. There are few if any differences of structure between the two types of novel; with the biographical novel the reader asks, "Did this happen?" and with the fictional novel, "Could this happen?" Therein lies the major distinction between them. Credibility lies at the base of both. A chance reader, unacquainted with the material, setting and character of the two stories, should not be able to tell them apart; he should be able to think that the fictional novel actually happened somewhere, or that the biographical novel was invented by the author. I remember with considerable satisfaction the day in September 1934 when Mrs. Stone asked the telephone operator in her office how she had liked *Lust for Life*, and the girl replied, "Fine, but why did Irving have to kill off the poor man?"

The historical novel is the closest to the biographical novel in its nature and scope; again the difference is not of form but of approach. In the biographical novel all of the characters have lived; in the best historical novels, such as *War and Peace*, only the history has actually happened, while the characters are invented, or built up by accretion, and then set in the authentic framework of the period and the action being written about. The main characters of the historical novel become the apotheoses of their times; they are true in that such characters did live in this particular period, and this dramatic series of events did take place, but to other people, perhaps half a hundred of them, in modified form and sequence. Sometimes the historical novel will be so close to the biographical novel, such as with *All the King's Men*, the story of Huey Long, that little is changed except the names of the characters and a few incidental pieces of personal action. In H. G. Wells' *The World of William Clissold*, Clissold and his various loves were imaginary, but the protagonists were called by their right names, and once again put through their roles in history. In still another type, roughly half of the characters are real people who act out their own historicity, while the other half, more often than not the "heroes" of the tale, are invented.

I would like at this moment to interject, with less bitterness than puzzlement, I hope, the question of why the historical novel, with its accurate background but fictional characters, should have

been more acceptable to the academicians than the biographical novel, which is accurate not only in background but in the people involved? The answer to this riddle has remained a mystery to me.

The differences between the straight biography and the biographical novel are considerable, not in substance, since both draw their nourishment from the same source, but in structure, manner, attitude, and relationship between the author and the reader.

The biography has traditionally been in indirect discourse, a chronicle told by a second party, the writer, to a third party, the reader. The biographer, for example, relates what his principals have said; the biographical novelist enables the reader to listen to the conversations as they develop. The biographical novelist, in order to recreate a character, must not only understand his every motivation, but must write of it from behind the eyes of his protagonist. Only then can the reader feel everything that he feels, know everything that he knows, suffer his defeats and enjoy his victories. The biography has been expected to be objective; too often it has been written in cool blood. The biographical novel must be written in hot blood.

Even so, the form of biography is changing, and perhaps the wide public acceptance of the biographical novel has had something to do with this change. The biographies I read in school contained as many footnotes as lines of text, while the quotations were indented in small type in the center of the page, presenting a pedagogical, dull and fatiguing sight to the eye as well as to the emotional interest of the reader. When in 1937 I wrote *Sailor on Horseback*, I put my quotations from Jack London on a continuing line with the main text, separated only by a comma and a quotation mark, so that there would be no break in the reading mood and the typographical page would remain unified and interesting. When I received the first half of the galleys from my then publisher in Boston, all the quotations had been centered in tiny typeknots in the middle of the page. In answer to my anguished telephone call, the proofreader said that he had set my manuscript according to the standard form, since I obviously had not known how to do so. At that point the editor broke into the conversation and ordered the manuscript reset as I had written it. By now the practice has become almost universal.

Up to recent times it was not permitted in biographies to stage dialogue sequences, even when such dialogue was completely documented, evidently on the grounds that recreated dialogue might be less true, or might lead the reader to think he was reading a novel instead of a biography, and hence not believe that what he was reading was factually accurate. This never appeared to me to be a tenable point of view, and, in 1940, when I wrote *Clarence Darrow For the Defense*, I staged, as though they were being acted under a proscenium, all of the conversations that seemed interesting and important; at the back of the book I listed my documentation for every spoken word. I feel sure they had considerably more emotional impact than if I had related at second hand what the conversations had been about.

When I was growing up, few except scholars read biographies. It is my opinion that the biographical novel arose, and has become popular, because of this failure of the biography to reach a reading public that was hungry for authentic human stories. It is also my opinion that the biography will continue to learn from the biographical novel, and lean on its technics. A book is written for purposes of communication; it does an author no service whatever to have his book

unreadable and hence unread. It must also be said that the biographical novel will be eternally indebted to the straight biography, for it has learned from it the science of research and the organization of materials.

The biographical novel, like all living creatures, was born in pain. It was called a bastard form, the result of an unfortunate indiscretion on the part of its otherwise eminently respectable parents, biography and the novel.

What are the criticisms that have been and still are, in some unconvinced corners, levied against the biographical novel? It is said to debase the biography and the novel, discrediting both and adding to the stature of neither. Allegedly it mines biography without regard for the verities, strains history through the author's personality, reshapes that history to fit the novel form, oversimplifies, prevents the reader from separating fact from fiction, chooses only those subjects which allow for a lively sale, violates the privacy of people long dead, and makes character the victim of plot.

All of these criticisms have sometimes been true, and probably a good many more of which the critics happily have not yet thought. But to decide that any art form is untenable because of its weakest example or its potential for error is similar to saying that the human race should be obliterated because of the shortcomings of its least admirable percentage. I find that in the course of my twenty-three years in the field most major critics have become reconciled to the fact that the biographical novel is here to stay. The more courageous and perceptive of them now welcome it to the literary boards; by the same token they insist that each volume achieve standards of literary and historical excellence. Instead of categorically damning the form without bothering to read the book, they are judging each succeeding biographical novel on the basis of its writing, research, storytelling, perception.

One of the assets of the human race is said to be that it can learn from experience; history and biography constitute the greatest mine of lived experience; and it is the fond dream of the biographical novelist to bring the wisdom of that experience to the problems and complexities of the modern world.

My own biographical novels have had two motivations: I have hoped to feel deeply about simple things; and I have wanted to tell the story of man, against obstacles, for man.