



American Biography

Carl Rollyson

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This collection of reviews, selected from Rollyson's New York Sun column, is as much about the romance of biography as it is about the American lives. Certain concerns resonate throughout the book: the American left's failure to reckon with Communist subversion, McCarthyism, and Stalinism, the problematic nature of authorized biography, the history of American biography, definitive biographies, literary biography, the differences between autobiography and biography, the importance of interviews in biographies of contemporary figures, the differences between history and biography, comparative biographies, the virtues of short biographies and of biographies for children, the tendency of biographers to fictionalize and of novelists to biographize, psychology and biography, Rollyson's own experience as a biographer, and the way biographers treat one another's work. Too many biographers, he believes, evince no interest in the biographical tradition. Concerned only with possession of their subjects, their proprietorial attitude deforms not only their biographies but also the genre itself. If biography is reviewed badly (receiving hardly more than a summary of the subject's life with a perfunctory nod to the biographer), it is because the biographical tradition has been disregarded or discounted. This book, in other words, has been written on the behalf of biography, a genre that still awaits a full vindication.

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From reader reviews:

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