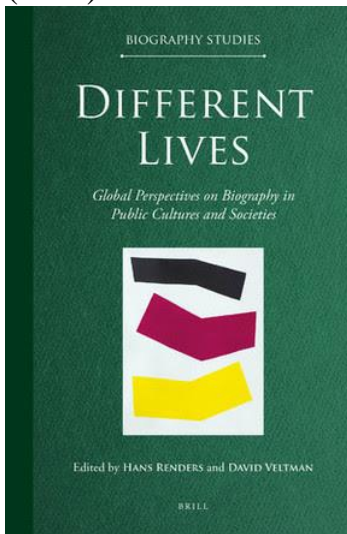




Book Review

Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies

Edited by Hans Renders and David Veltman
(Brill)



By Billy Tooma

Seventeen essays make up *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies*, a new anthology edited by Hans Renders and David Veltman. Spawned from the conference of the same name, this collection should be on the shelf of everyone interested in Biography Studies. These works transcend borders, featuring a look at the history and current status of biography in countries ranging from the United States to the Netherlands, South Africa, Iran, and China, to name but a few. This global take on biography is an important step towards the genre being taken more seriously within academia, especially here in the West.

There are moments within the anthology that show the struggle of how biography combats decades of state oppression. Lindie Koorts writes that in South Africa, “with its history of colonialism, apartheid and lingering inequality, well-documented and well-preserved lives are . . . mostly white lives,” highlighting the uphill battle biographers deal with when trying to tell the life

stories of the marginalized. The question of “where do one’s sources come from when the archives did not deem it necessary to include them?” comes to the forefront.

Biography as a weapon of propaganda is also highlighted. María Jesús González points to the Franco dictatorship of Spain and how “biography [was] converted into a tool for (re)fashioning national-Catholic consciousness,” which saw the genre flourish, but not in a good way. González further writes that Francoism “established a blueprint that was imperial in character, terminally ideological, and hagiographic in tone, becoming indissolubly associated with political, military, and diplomatic history,” and that once the dictator was dead, biographers had to recapture the genre, releasing it from the grip of tyranny.

These essays are not, to be sure, dry and stuffy. There is real passion within each and every one of them, which is indicative of the drive their authors have in wanting to create something that is both an educational tool and a compelling read. *Different Lives* is a welcomed, and much needed, addition to Biography Studies. Its eye-opening lessons on the importance of biography cannot be measured in just a single review.

Billy Tooma is the award-nominated filmmaker behind the documentaries Clarence Chamberlin: Fly First & Fight Afterward and The Black Eagle of Harlem. He is an Assistant Professor of English at Essex County College.