



The BIOGRAPHER'S

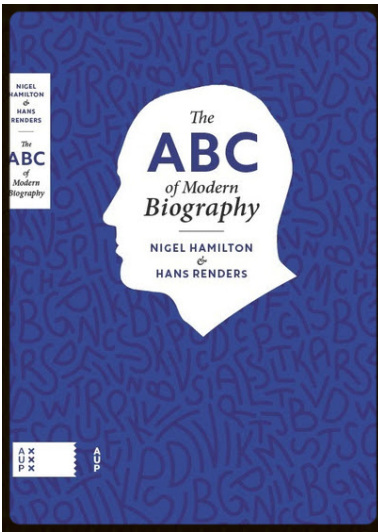
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FOR WRITERS & READERS OF BIOGRAPHY

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ABC's Provide Original and Instructive Approach to Biography



The ABC of Modern Biography

By Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders
Amsterdam University Press, 2018

By Carl Rollyson

“No dictionary of biography today, unfortunately, provides an easily accessible map of modern biography,” the authors claim. Well, I can think of two: my own *Biography: A User's Guide* (2008), reviewed in these pages by Nigel Hamilton, and *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2001), edited by Margaretta Jolly. *The ABC of Modern Biography* does not supersede these earlier books, but that is not to say you

should not attend to Hamilton and Renders *first*. As practicing biographers and scholars of the genre, they have expanded an understanding of the range and significance of biography and approached the alphabet of the genre in an original, instructive, and entertaining way.

You won't find, for example, “C is for Composition” in any other book. The third sentence of this entry explains why biography has suffered from neglect in the literary canon as a kind of second-rate sibling of the novel: “The construction of the biography itself, as a work of craft—its shape, its framing, its narrative arc, the quality of its ingredients from archival discoveries to interviews, its style as prose or composition by the biographer—these are of scant interest to the reviewer or journalist”—and, usually, to scholars as well, except for those benighted few who try to make a go of writing about biography, which has no place in the college curriculum. That one Hamilton/Renders sentence lays out what reviewers and critics should be doing with the time they would rather spend writing about fiction. Because even great writers like Virginia Woolf and Evelyn Waugh have not put in the time on how to write biography, their own biographical productions, Hamilton and Renders point out, are disasters. So ignorant are the literati that they have it coming in another H/R sentence: “Composing a biography, in other words, is much harder than it might first appear.” In the “C” entry, they go on to discuss the issues of framing, composition, narrative voice, and so on, that any neophyte or experienced biographer will find enlightening.

I can't imagine any other book on biography having an entry as brilliant as “X is for Xanadu”: “From the opening sequence—the camera panning over the Xanadu estate, with its ‘No Trespassing’ sign and large ‘K’ welded on the gate—*Citizen Kane* is a kind of homage to the art and *process* of biography, biographers today recognize, as editors in a smoky projection room watch a newsreel summary of Kane's life and are told by their boss, Mr. Rawlston, they need to dig deeper than the myth, not only to decipher the potential meaning of Kane's last word, but to fill in his ‘character.’” Rawlston then asks a series of questions about Kane's motivations and what he was after. That panning camera, I would add, mimics the phases of inquiry the reporters and viewers of the film have to experience in order

to penetrate the elusive Kane. The film never promises full disclosure; it is too honest to do that, for that would make biography stoop to that too-eager-to-please genre: the novel. Only the greatest novels can match great biography, and those novels—by Nabokov and Faulkner, for example—are wise enough to leave something out, the kind of mystery that readers of biography relish.

What sets *The ABC of Modern Biography* apart from its predecessors is its force as both inspiration and instruction. Any first-time biographer is required to read this book. Any experienced biographer can still profit from a refresher course that entries like “E is for Ethics,” “J is for Journalism,” and “T is for Theory” supply. Each entry is followed by a list of sources so that, for example, you can read more about authorized biography in articles and books by Kitty Kelley and Hans Renders. The comprehensive bibliography and excellent index make the book even more useful. This encyclopedic and elegant work, which can be read in digestible parts or swallowed whole without the slightest intellectual indigestion, is a delight and a godsend.

Carl Rollyson is the author of A Higher Form of Cannibalism? Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography, and of two forthcoming biographies, The Last Days of Sylvia Plath and The Life of William Faulkner.
