

February 2003

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Camille McCutcheon

USC Spartanburg, CMcCutcheon@uscs.edu

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Recommended Citation

McCutcheon, Camille (2003) "Evaluating Biographies: Scurrilous or Scholarly, What's A Librarian To Do?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4248>

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Evaluating Biographies: Scurrilous or Scholarly, What's A Librarian To Do?



by **Camille McCutcheon** (Assistant Librarian, USC Spartanburg Library, 800 University Way, Spartanburg, SC 29303; Phone: 684-503-5612; Fax: 864-503-5601) <CMcCutcheon@uscs.edu>

Film Star Biographies

One of the purposes of twentieth century biographies is to satisfy the curiosity of the general public regarding the private lives of film stars. Apparently, fans of the silver screen have always wanted to find information on Hollywood movie stars. Information on stars was first disseminated through movie trade publications, fan magazines, and eventually books, such as biographies.

America's fascination with the film colony led to the publication of many gossipy, scathing, and unauthorized biographies written about Hollywood actors and actresses. Three stars in particular, **Jean Harlow**, **Greta Garbo**, and **Marilyn Monroe**, all had scandalous biographies written about them. In 1964, **Irving Shulman** collaborated with **Jean Harlow's** agent, **Arthur Landau**, to write *Harlow: An Intimate Biography*, a scurrilous best-seller which portrayed **Harlow** as a "profane, promiscuous wretch whose kidneys were damaged by a wedding-night beating from her husband **Paul Bern**." *Newsweek* called the book, "A standard by which to measure shoddiness."

Like **Jean Harlow**, **Greta Garbo** also has had gossipy and unsubstantiated information written about her. In **Barry Paris's** *Garbo: A Biography*, the author chastises the exploitation of **Garbo** by **Antoni Gronowicz**, whose *Garbo: Her Story* was published just forty-five days after this film star died. When **Gronowicz's** book was published, it was disavowed by "every living person mentioned in it; the dead could not be reached for comment." Appendix A of **Paris's** book lists all of the factual mistakes, fabrications, and anachronisms contained in **Gronowicz's** biography.

A cottage industry has emerged based on the exploitation of **Marilyn Monroe** after her death in 1962. In his book, *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography*, **Donald Spoto** chronicles the events surrounding one of **Monroe's** strangest fans—**Robert Slatzer**. In 1974, **Slatzer** wrote a biography called *The Life and Curious Death of Marilyn Monroe*. He makes the outrageous claim that he spent the weekend of October 3 to 6, 1952 with **Monroe** in Tijuana, Mexico, where they were married on October 4. According to **Slatzer**, this marriage was annulled a few days later. **Spoto** states that not only was **Monroe** in Los Angeles during that entire weekend, but **Slatzer** also was never able to produce a written record of the union or its dissolution. Since the publication of *The Life and Curious Death of Marilyn Monroe*, there has not been one witness who has come forth to attest to the truth of his alleged marriage. **Slatzer** waited until **Monroe** was dead before he claimed that he had been married to her.

Unfortunately, **Harlow**, **Garbo**, and **Mon-**

roe are just some of the film stars who have been exploited over the years by their biographers. Some biographers have greatly profited by writing biographies filled with gossipy, unsubstantiated information. One of the best known slasher biographers is **Kitty Kelley**, who has written unauthorized biographies about **Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis**, **Frank Sinatra**, **Elizabeth Taylor**, and **Nancy Reagan**. **Joe Queenan**, who reviewed **Kelley's** book about **Reagan**, called *Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography*, states that **Kelley** has written "one of the most encyclopedically vicious books in the history of encyclopedic viciousness."

Steve Weinberg, in his article, "The Kitty Kelley Syndrome," writes that *Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography* is "symptomatic of publishing's dirty secret—few nonfiction books are checked for accuracy. Consequently, inaccuracies abound." Since trade publishers are in the business to turn a profit, hiring staff for the purpose of checking facts would cut into profits. Many readers are aware that the *National Enquirer* is an unreliable periodical, but they have no idea which book publishers are the industry's *National Enquirer* equivalents. In his article, "Speaking Ill of the Dead," **James Atlas** adds that "publishing houses, unlike most magazines, with their rigorous fact-checking procedures, make little effort to establish a book's factual accuracy." **Weinberg** asserts that if authors and publishers can't guarantee accuracy before publishing perhaps they should mimic the step taken by **J. B. Lippincott**, publisher of **David Rorvik's** *In His Image: The Coming of Man*. **Lippincott** provided readers with a warning:

The account that follows is an astonishing one. The author assures us it is true. We do not know. We believe simply that he has written a book which will stimulate interest and debate on issues of the utmost significance for our immediate future.

He adds that publishers are willing to assume that authors, not themselves, are responsible for finding facts, evaluating information, and drawing conclusions. Traditionally, the contractual burden for accuracy has primarily been the author's. However, authors are frequently unable to get everything accurate.

Atlas adds that

Legal indemnification clauses in authors' contracts vary; most publishers carry a standard insurance policy that protects them and their authors in case of a law suit. Biographies are read carefully by in-house lawyers for libel if the subject is alive (you can't libel the dead), but the final source of verification is the author.

Implications For Librarians

Most libraries add biographies to their collections on the basis of reviews in a few standard sources, such as *Booklist*, *CHOICE*, and *Library Journal*. In *Living with Books*, **Helen Haines** noted that "the profusion of biographies entails constantly more thorough sifting, more careful discrimination and comparison in current selection; for though work of high quality... may be found in rich abundance, there is also a mounting deposit of books that are trivial, shoddy, or superfluous." **William Robinson**, in his article "Adult Biographies Reviewed by *Library Journal* in the 1960s and the 1980s" insists that using published reviews helps in eliminating the published biographies that have been determined to be unreliable. Only those biographies that are reviewed are ones thought to be of general interest or likely in demand.

Ann W. Moore in, "A Question of Accuracy: Errors in Children's Biographies," remarks that

errors and inaccuracies in biographies seem to reflect a potentially dangerous attitude held by many authors, editors, and publishers: that it's OK to make mistakes, to be a little careless or sloppy; that it's OK to trust writers and researchers to the extent that their statements and sources are automatically accepted with no checking; that it's OK to rush books on topics of current interest through so quickly that the results are slipshod.

She points out that there are several alternatives for librarians to follow:

contact authors and publishers asking them to account for books that fail to measure up; demand more in-depth reviews that point out specific omissions and inaccuracies; refuse to purchase poorly written books, even if they are on a popular topic or would fill a gap in the collection. Instead, use magazine and newspaper articles, encyclopedias, and almanacs.

Authors and publishers know that there is a need for factual accuracy. Until librarians take a stand on this issue, publishers will not take their concerns seriously. Librarians can ensure that error-free books are purchased by setting higher standards and by analyzing, examining, critiquing and even discrediting unreliable materials.

How can librarians combat the spread of misinformation that runs rampant in these salacious works? They certainly cannot be

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purged from libraries. The **Library Bill of Rights** states that

books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

Furthermore, *The Whole Library Handbook 2* says that


describing or designating certain library materials by affixing a prejudicial label to them or segregating them by a prejudicial system is an attempt to prejudice attitudes and, as such, is a censor's tool; such practices violate the **Library Bill of Rights**. A variety of private organizations promulgate rating systems and/or review materials as a means of advising either their members or the general public of the contents and suitability or appropriate age for use of certain books...or other materials. For the library to adopt or enforce any of these private systems, to attach such ratings to library materials, to include them in bibliographic records, library catalogs, or other finding aids, or otherwise endorse them would violate the **Library Bill of Rights**.

For academic libraries, book selection is largely based on standard review sources, which would identify the scholarly biographies and filter out those with the inaccurate information. On the other hand, librarians in public libraries recognize that their patrons want libraries to purchase thoroughly researched biographies along with slasher biographies by such authors as **Kitty Kelley** because these titles are popular reading materials. If libraries refused to purchase the slasher biographies, based on the premise that these books contained unsubstantiated information, this practice would be considered censorship. Placing labels in the catalog record or on the spine of the book designating these library materials as "unreliable" would also be a violation of the **Library Bill of Rights**.

Hopefully, reading book reviews and writing to the publishers about the lack of end notes, bibliographies, etc., are ways in which librarians can address this issue of combating unreliable biographies. In order to not censor materials in the library, the decision whether to read the trashy biography or the scholarly one ultimately rests with the patron. Librarians need to take a strong role in educating their patrons about biographies, either at the reference desk or with the reader's advisory service. Librarians teach patrons how to evaluate Internet resources, why not teach them how to evaluate biographies?

What can librarians do to educate their patrons about evaluating biographies? I do not have any definitive solutions, but here are a

few suggestions to ponder. Since readers must think about the issue of subjectivity, they should read several biographies of the same subject in order to gain multiple perspectives on the person's life. To encourage this, librarians could create bibliographies of biographies of a particular individual that the library owns. Signs stating that some books contain more reliable information than others could be placed in the biography section of the library. These signs could refer patrons to the reference desk or the reader's advisory desk where they could receive more information about evaluating biographies. Handouts or fliers with easy ways that patrons can determine the reliability of a book, such as whether there is a bibliography and/or end notes, could be created and made available in the library's biography section or at certain service points such as the reference desk or the reader's advisory desk. Finally, copies of book reviews could also be made available to patrons so that they could read the reviews before deciding to read the actual books. These are just a few suggestions that may assist in raising patrons' awareness that some biographies are better researched than others.

Perhaps, evaluating and reading biographies would be easier if all biographers would heed the advice of **Catherine Drinker Bowen** who said, "in writing biography, fact and fiction shouldn't be mixed. And if they are, the fiction parts should be printed in red ink, the fact parts in black ink." 



Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Moving From Librarianship to Entrepreneurship: How Different Is It?

by **Peter McCracken** (Co-founder, Serials Solutions)

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Senior Vice President & Head Bibliographer, YBP Library Services, 999 Maple Street, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 800-258-3774 x. 3251; Fax: 603-746-5628) <rnardini@ybp.com>

I inherited the "library gene" from my grandmother and her sister. My grandmother was a librarian, perhaps the university librarian — I haven't done the research yet — at the **University of Tulsa**. My great-aunt was a long-time branch director in the Memphis-Shelby County public library system. Both traveled from rural Tennessee to New York City, to attend **Columbia's** library school in the early 1930s. The gene clearly expressed itself in me: when I started attending library school, I realized it was what I enjoyed doing, and I looked forward to working in a library for many years to come. In just a few years I have worked in some great libraries and with colleagues that I deeply admire, I published articles and did some neat research, and, I believe, did a good job as a librarian. So when I decided to resign my position as a

reference librarian last April to work full-time at my company, **Serials Solutions**, it was a significant occupational move for me. I now spend two hours a week working in the library, and know more about the business world than I ever thought I would, but I think I'm still making a useful contribution to library services. The view from the other side of the exhibit booth has been eye-opening, to say the least.

While I cared a great deal about the successes and challenges of the libraries in which I worked, and the much larger systems of which they were a part, I didn't experience the ups and downs that I now imagine a library director must undergo. The state-funded libraries in which I worked were constantly beset by budget challenges introduced by the actions of state voters or legislators. Sure, I

could worry about these budgetary issues if I wanted to, but luckily it wasn't my responsibility, and wasn't in my job description.

When I started **Serials Solutions** with my two brothers and a high school friend, however, our budget suddenly became a serious issue. We didn't pay full salaries at the very beginning, all of us had second jobs, and even our first full-time employee (who later became one of the directors of the company) had to start flipping burgers for a while to make ends meet. Luckily for us, those times are over. We still need to be incredibly careful, though, as those times could always return in a hurry. And unlike the university libraries where I used to work, there's no guaranteed income — despite how small it might seem — from a state legislature.

Being so closely tied to the growth and de-

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